FUTURE PERFECT

PAST IMPERFECT SERIES – BOOK III

FLETCHER DELANCEY
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AUTHOR’S NOTE

This is the third book in the Past Imperfect series.

For more in the series,
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OTHER BOOKS BY FLETCHER DELANCEY

Past Perfect Series
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No Return
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Without A Front: The Warrior’s Challenge
Catalyst
Vellmar the Blade (novella)
Outcaste

To learn about the world of Alsea,
immerse yourself in the Chronicles of Alsea site: alseaworld.com
For Maria, who taught me that real love need not be limited to fiction.
Alison Necheyev let out a slow breath, resting her head on the back of her seat. Her personal hovercraft sped away from the Denver skyline, heading for her home near Boulder. She planned to go home, program in a security lockout, and allow no access for the entire weekend. She’d purposely planned the press conference for Friday afternoon in order to give her two days of peace before all hell broke loose over her head.

The conference had gone about as well as she’d expected. After an initial shocked silence following her announcement, she’d been bombarded with questions, most of which she’d deflected. Sworn to secrecy, there wasn’t much she could say to explain the Hamilton Foundation’s sudden shift in mission.

And yet, as nasty as the press conference had been, she knew it was nothing compared to the storm that was coming. Today’s announcement would literally rock the Federation, and had repercussions that could well ripple across the entire quadrant. For hundreds of years, Earth’s government, and later the Federation, had been in the unique position of not having to fully budget for the space program. With the Hamilton Foundation footing the bill for most of the space exploration budget, including propulsion theory and development, the Federation was able to divert an enormous amount of funds to defense, social programs, and environmental reclamation and conserva-
tion. No other government in the known quadrant had such a sweet deal, and it gave the Federation a distinct advantage over its rivals and enemies.

Unfortunately, Starfleet and the Federation had long since become dependent on this happy situation. It had never occurred to anyone that the arrangement would not continue indefinitely. But with today’s announcement, Alison had ended the Hamilton Foundation’s support of any space exploration project except those related to faster-than-warp travel. She had essentially pulled the financial rug out from under her government. And all she wanted to do now was hide before her life turned to complete shit in exactly two days.

“Autopilot disengaging in five minutes,” her hovercraft informed her calmly. She sat up and prepared to take over the controls. The scenery had changed while she was resting, and a welcome calm settled over her as the hovercraft soared above the heavily wooded lands surrounding her private holdings. Soon she took the controls and guided the sleek craft to a landing in front of her house, a contemporary three-story structure built on clean, open lines. She’d used an architect known for his ability to blend a building into its surroundings, and to maximize light and space. The result, though not cheap, was a home that always welcomed her with its airy warmth.

She walked in the front door and immediately turned to her security panel, arming both the house and the property’s perimeter. There would be no visitors this weekend, though she knew the press would make every attempt to get in. Well, they could try. The system was as impregnable as any such system could get. It had been designed by a brilliant, if odd, Starfleet engineer recommended by her friend Deanna Troi.

The enormous kitchen opened directly off the entry. She’d specified that design, since the kitchen was nearly always the first place she stopped upon coming home. She dropped her briefcase on the table in the breakfast nook, opened the door of her small refrigerator and took out a jug of freshly squeezed orange juice, a luxury item for which she cheerfully paid exorbitant amounts of money. With a happy sigh she poured a glass, drank it in one long gulp, and refilled it.

Turning around, she scowled at the kitchen terminal, which was currently displaying a list of twenty-six messages. Considering that her home system was programmed not to accept transmissions from anyone
but family and a few close friends, that meant that practically everyone on her “accept” list had called. Even as she read the list of calls, a beep alerted her to yet another incoming transmission. She automatically straightened up as the name appeared on screen. This one she would have to take sooner or later; might as well get it over with now. She keyed the terminal.

“Hello, Aunt Alynna,” she said.

The thin, Slavic face regarding her looked disapproving. Then again, Aunt Alynna usually looked that way.

“Alison,” said Admiral Necheyev by way of greeting. “What in the name of hell is going on? I just returned from the Nantara Sector twenty minutes ago and walked into chaos. A chaos created, apparently, by my own niece.”

Alison sighed. “I’m sorry, Aunt Alynna, I can’t tell you. Everything I’m free to say has already been said.”

“Which was just enough to turn Starfleet completely on its ear. Not good enough. I want to know why.”

The Admiral’s complete disregard of her prior statement didn’t surprise Alison, but she had long since grown past the point where she could be intimidated.

“I said, I can’t tell you. I meant what I said.”

“You always do. And so do I. This is more important than company policy, Alison. You know damn good and well what the repercussions could be. You owe it to me to give me a little more. I’m going to be fighting hell’s own battle down here, and I need information.”

“Well, I’m sorry, but you’re going to have to fight that battle with the same information everyone else has. This isn’t just company policy, it’s my word of honor, my reputation and my job. I can’t tell you any more. Not until I’m given permission to do so.”

The Admiral narrowed her eyes. “Given permission, I see. So you have been given orders. Which means this comes from the Board.”

“Well, of course it comes from the Board. Who else would have the power to change Foundation policy and the mission? Stop trying to read things into what I’m saying. And if that’s your only reason for calling, then I’m afraid I must go. I’ve got a busy weekend ahead”—doing nothing at all, she thought—“and it starts right now.”
“Don’t be rude. Has it occurred to you that I might want to know how you’re doing? This has got to be a strain for you.”

Alison looked at her aunt suspiciously. That narrow face rarely gave away any emotion, and she could never tell when the Admiral was playing her or not. It was generally safe to assume that, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, she was indeed being played. Still, she had been raised properly and could not behave rudely to her elder.

“I don’t mean to be rude,” she said carefully. “And yes, it is a strain. It will be much more of a strain on Monday, so I plan to spend this weekend enjoying the last two days of peace that I will probably get in my life. So please, Aunt Alynna, let me enjoy them.”

For just a fraction of a second, she thought she saw sympathy in her aunt’s eyes. But it might have been the light.

“All right, I’ll let you go. Just answer one question for me.”

“What?” said Alison warily.

“When were you ordered to make this policy change?”

She examined her aunt’s face for any clue as to why she wanted to know the date. As usual, the Admiral was impassive. She considered the question, and couldn’t see why that bit of information would make a difference. And if it would get the Admiral off her back, all the better.

“Tuesday,” she said.

“I see. Well, I’ll let you enjoy your weekend. The rest of us here at Starfleet won’t be so fortunate. Goodbye.”

The transmission ended before Alison could respond. She shook her head, drank her orange juice, and headed upstairs.

Not ten minutes later, as she was pulling her comfortable old sweater over her head, the terminal in her bedroom beeped at her.

“Goddammit!” She’d have to set the thing to reject all transmissions for the weekend. Who was it this time? Tugging her sweater down, she walked to the screen and stared at the name. Fleet Admiral Necheyev, Starfleet. Shit.

“Yes, Aunt Alynna,” she said after activating the terminal.

Her aunt looked at her with her usual impassive face, but there was a glint to her eye that only those closest to her could perceive. Alison knew immediately that she was on to something.

“This is about Voyager, isn’t it?” said the Admiral.
It was only through years of boardroom experience that Alison kept her surprise off her face. God in heaven, how had she figured that out?

“I can neither confirm nor deny that,” she said evenly. “Guessing won’t do you any good.”

“I’m not guessing,” said her aunt. “I ran a news search after our last conversation. The only reason that the Hamilton Foundation would divert its entire research fund to faster-than-warp propulsion is if there’s something in another quadrant that it wants. So I checked, using the date you so kindly gave me as a limiting parameter. Turns out that on Monday, something rather important happened in the Delta Quadrant. Voyager was finally reached in live communication, via the MIDAS array. Something that, for some unknown reason, Admiral Paris forgot to notify me about.”

Her mouth twisted into a frown, and Alison felt sorry for Admiral Paris. There was no love lost between those two.

“I find it to be too much of a coincidence,” continued the Admiral, “that the day after contact was made with Voyager, the Hamilton Foundation Board ordered you to alter the Foundation’s mission to exclude all research save that for faster-than-warp propulsion. The Foundation wants to bring Voyager home. Not that I have any objection to that goal, but it still begs the question of why. What is on Voyager that the Foundation wants?”

Alison shrugged. “This is all total conjecture on your part. So I can’t answer your theoretical question.”

The Admiral almost, almost smiled. “I’ve taught you well,” she said. “And if I’ve never said it before, Alison, I’m very proud of you.”

Caught completely flat-footed, Alison knew she hadn’t managed to hide her surprise this time. Praise from the Admiral was nothing less than earth shaking. She had never heard those words before, and never thought she would. Would Aunt Alynna really stoop that low to dig information out of her?

As it turned out, she didn’t need to.

“I had a little chat with Admiral Paris,” said her aunt. “And I found that Voyager has taken on new passengers: another ex-Borg and a Human female. Now, I can easily see how the Foundation would want to get its hands on two ex-Borg, though I think they rightfully belong to Starfleet. But I suspect what interests the Foundation more is the Human, Lynne
Hamilton. Interesting name, don’t you think? And even more interesting birth date.”

Alison said nothing. There was nothing she could say. They stared at each other in silence for what seemed like minutes, before Admiral Necheyev sighed.

“Alison,” she said in an entirely different voice, “I am greatly concerned. Perhaps I’ve been dealing with Cardassians and the Dominion for too long, but my belief in altruism is not what it once was. The Foundation may be doing everything it can to bring Voyager home, but I can’t believe that the Board officers will happily welcome the one woman who could take everything away from them.”

You have no idea, thought Alison. She kept silent, but it was growing increasingly difficult; over the last week she had been getting more and more worried about that very thing. There was a truly mind-boggling amount of money at stake, and she well knew what that sort of incentive could do. She’d already heard a few nasty rumors. Someone at their confidential meeting had talked, and it hadn’t been her.

“If you ever need my advice or assistance,” her aunt continued, “just know that I’m here.” She gave Alison a small smile. “I’m your aunt; it’s my job to look after you.”

They looked at each other, a silent understanding passing between them.

“Thank you, Aunt Alynna,” said Alison. “I appreciate your kind words, and I’m…truly honored by your praise. I promise I’ll keep in touch.” It was all she could say, but she knew the Admiral would get the message.

“I am never kind,” said the Admiral crisply, “and my praise is never given unless it is earned. You, unlike many others, have earned it. I trust you will continue to do so.” She paused. “And Alison—be careful.” The transmission ended.

Alison stared at the Starfleet emblem on the screen. “Holy mother of God,” she murmured. She reached out, keyed her communications system to reject all transmissions, and shut the terminal down. Turning for the stairs, she headed towards her kitchen. It was time for more orange juice—just enough to dilute the vodka.
Captain Kathryn Janeway added her authorization to the PADD in her hand and dropped it with a satisfying clatter onto the pile scattered across one side of her desk. Glaring at the neat stack of PADDs still waiting for her attention, she accused, “Why haven’t you gotten any smaller?” She’d been at this for half an eternity already, and there was no end in sight. She pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed. “Tell me again,” she asked no one in particular, “why I ever thought I wanted to be a captain?”

Wearily, she picked up another PADD and activated it. Two paragraphs later her entry chime sounded and she dropped the PADD as if it were on fire. “Come,” she called. At this point she didn’t care who it was, she was just glad for the excuse to take a break.

When her visitor stepped in, her relief turned to genuine happiness. “Revi! What can I do for you?”

Doctor Revi Sandovhar walked to Janeway’s desk, her smile gleaming against her dark skin. “You always ask that,” she said. “As if you haven’t already done enough.”

Janeway stood up. “And been well repaid, too. Join me for a cup of coffee?”

At Revi’s nod, she led the way to the upper level, going straight to the
replicator to order their coffee. Returning to the couch with her trademark silver coffee pot, she poured the steaming brew into two cups, handing one to Revi before settling back with her own. The first sip was heaven. Ahh, yes, she’d needed this.

“You didn’t give me an answer,” she said. “What can I do for you?”

Revi put her cup and saucer back on the table. “Well, I did come to ask you for a favor, but I thought I’d make some small talk first and soften you up.”

Janeway couldn’t help her grin; this was typical Revi-style informality. The woman just didn’t do formal. She acknowledged the command structure, but didn’t let it influence her manner. It was the same “this is who I am, deal with it” attitude that Lynne had, and in turn it gave Janeway the freedom to be herself, rather than just the captain.

In the two months since the ex-Borg had come aboard, they’d formed an easy friendship that far surpassed anything she’d ever had with another officer. Part of it may have been due to their unorthodox meeting, but a lot of it was just Revi’s personality. She’d insisted that Janeway call her by her first name, even on duty unless other crew were present, and after a while Janeway had asked her to do the same. Having Revi call her “Captain” just hadn’t sounded right anymore. She respected and admired Revi; her dedication to duty was unquestionable and yet she managed to perform her duties with a humanity and easy acceptance that had most of Voyager’s crewmembers flocking to her.

Five weeks after Revi’s arrival, Voyager had run into a nest of pirate ships. Individually they were no match for Voyager’s armaments, but seven ships working as a cohesive unit had done considerable damage before the Starfleet crew had destroyed three of them. The other four had fled, leaving Voyager victorious but damaged, with a sickbay full of casualties. Revi had responded to the crisis as if she’d been born to the role, and had soon become the doctor of choice for nearly all of the injured crew. When it came to choosing between the Doctor’s acerbic lack of bedside manner and Revi’s warm, nonjudgmental personality, most patients opted for Revi. And Janeway was planning to address that situation very soon.

She took another sip and put her cup down. “Okay,” she said. “Small talk it is, though you have no chance at all of softening me up. How’s Ensign Delaney’s arm?”
“Well, it might be another day or so before she can go back to the Captain Proton scenario, but she’s healing nicely. I don’t think Mr. Paris will recover as quickly.”

Janeway nodded. Jennifer Delaney had torn a ligament in her arm while saving Tom in a Captain Proton holonovel, and although Tom hadn’t been injured physically, seeing the ensign’s injury and owing her for his rescue had hurt his ego considerably.

“You’re right about that,” she said. “He spent the entire shift yesterday feeling small and showing it. I’m not sure which he’s sorrier for, that Ensign Delaney got hurt or that she saved his ass in the process. He’s supposed to be the hero in those stories.”

Revi chuckled. “You’ve known Tom longer than I have, which do you think was harder for him?”

They looked at each other and said in unison, “Saving his ass,” then laughed heartily.

“What is that program, anyway?” asked Revi. “Tom explained it to me, but I still don’t get it.”

“Pray that you never do,” said Janeway. “Tom loves anything to do with the twentieth century, and that program comes from an old adventure series set in that time. It’s hopelessly anachronistic and ridiculously sexist, and Tom just adores it. He sucked me into it once, and believe me, once was enough.”

Interest lit up Revi’s face. “Oh really? Who did you play?”

“I was…Arachnia,” said Janeway, looking anywhere but at her. “Queen of the Spider People.”

Revi didn’t even try to restrain her laugh. “Please tell me that there are holophotos.”

Janeway did look at her then, her glare threatening immolation. “Trans-dimensional aliens had mistaken the holocharacters for real individuals, and were conducting their own little war on our holodeck. It was endangering the ship. The only way we could stop it was for me to take on a role in the story.”

Revi shrugged off the glare, still smiling broadly. “I’m sure it was completely selfless on your part. But I repeat: where are the holophotos?”

“There aren’t any and if there were, do you think I’d ever show them to you?”
Revi sipped her coffee. “Probably not, more’s the pity. That would fuel me for months.”

“Aren’t you supposed to treat me with a little more fear and respect?” Janeway asked, pretending a grumpy tone.

Revi’s expression became completely serious. “Respect, absolutely. Fear, never. You’re too good a captain for that, Kathryn. And you’ve given me too much.”

“You mean a job and your own quarters? I’d have done that for any highly qualified Starfleet officer who happened to drop in and had skills I was desperately in need of.”

“I meant a second chance,” said Revi.

Janeway dropped her light tone. “You deserved it. And you’ve done a wonderful job. I hadn’t hoped you’d be up to full time so quickly, and I’ve heard nothing but rave reviews from the crewmembers you’ve treated. They really appreciate you.”

Revi’s smile was brilliant. “That’s good to hear. Thanks for sharing that with me. They’ve really been far more accepting than I expected—so far there have only been a few who preferred not to be treated by an ex-Borg. I think Seven did a lot to blaze that trail already.”

Janeway picked up her cup and took another sip, eyeing her friend over the rim. Revi appeared to be a different person from the often withdrawn, emotionally battered woman she’d met on Dakmor two months ago.

“You look happy,” she said, setting her cup down. “It’s nice to see.”

“I am happier,” conceded Revi. “More than I ever thought I would be.”

Janeway knew her well enough by now to know that she was playing semantics. “Happier, but not happy?”

Revi was unruffled. “I’m not of the philosophy that happiness is a universal guarantee. Nobody has a birthright to it, and in fact I think true happiness is pretty damned hard to find. If a person manages to actually find it in spite of all the crap floating around in our lives, then they’re extremely fortunate. But I don’t think that’s the norm, and I certainly don’t expect it for myself.”

“I don’t think it’s that rare at all,” countered Janeway. “God knows if I can find it, anyone can. And it took me until now to get there. Don’t count yourself out.”

“Ah, but you deserve all your happiness and then some. Not everyone does.”
“Don’t tell me you’re saying that you don’t deserve it.”
Revi reached for her cup. “Okay, I won’t tell you.”
“Someday I’m going to get a different answer,” said Janeway with a sigh.
Revi raised her eyebrows as she sipped her coffee. Lowering the cup, she swallowed and said, “This bothers you far more than it bothers me, you know. I don’t feel cheated. Quite the contrary, I’m pretty content right now. Two months ago I would have been thrilled to have one person look beyond my Borg past, and now I’m actually practicing medicine again, on people who see me as mostly Human. And the Doctor is there to handle those who can’t deal with what I was, so I don’t have to worry about my past preventing people from getting proper medical care. As far as I’m concerned, it’s an ideal situation.”
“What do you mean, ‘mostly Human’?”
“Oh come on, Kathryn. You’ve been one of the most accepting, but even you have to acknowledge that I’m not fully Human. There are certain things that no one can look past, not even you.”
“Such as?”
“This.” Revi thrust her cybernetic arm right in front of Janeway’s face, servos whirring and the clamp snapping open and shut. Janeway flinched despite herself, and Revi lowered her arm, a fleeting look of hurt crossing her face. “You talk a good game, but even you can’t prevent a natural reaction to something so obviously Borg. I understand that.”
Angry with herself for her lack of control, and not a little irritated at Revi, Janeway jumped up from the couch to stand over her startled friend. “That was a cheap shot, Commander,” she growled, jerking her arm back as if to backhand her across the face. Revi’s eyes went wide and she turned her head slightly, instinctively anticipating the blow. But she made no move to defend herself.
Calmly, Janeway dropped her arm and retook her seat. “You flinched. Even you can’t prevent a natural reaction to something so obviously Human.” She held up her hand for emphasis. “I guess that means you can’t look past my humanity.”
Revi let out a breath and shook her head. “Touché. You certainly know how to make a point.”
“If the arm bothers you so much, why not get rid of it? The Doctor can perform the operation. He did a beautiful job on Seven’s implants.”
“Yes, he did,” Revi agreed. “I reviewed her records when she asked me to take over her medical care, and I’d have to say his work is excellent. If I ever make that decision, I’d trust him to do it. But this arm is very useful in medical operations. I’m a walking sickbay with it.”

“As long as it’s working,” said Janeway, remembering their time in the Dakmor prison.

“Dakmor is the only time it has ever been out of commission. Now that I’m regenerating regularly, it would take something extremely powerful to knock it out.”

“How many tools would you have to carry in a medkit to equal what you have on your arm?”

“Six, but that still wouldn’t equal what the arm can do. It’s designed for cybernetic, machine and electronic repairs as well. I’d have to carry a whole toolbox to equal this arm.”

“You know,” said Janeway, “for someone who hates the Borg connotations of that arm, you’re certainly defending it.”

“True. I have a love/hate relationship with it.”

“Do you love it for what it does for you personally or professionally?”

“That’s a rhetorical question, isn’t it?”

“Maybe. Or maybe the real question is which is more important to you, your personal happiness or your professional potential.”

Revi groaned. “Oh, gods, not this again. Didn’t we just finish this conversation?”

“No, we didn’t. We were interrupted by your little impromptu demonstration, which brings me to another issue. You didn’t defend yourself. Would you have just let me hit you?”

Revi shrugged. “Well, as you said, I did take a cheap shot at you.”

“Revi!” Janeway was aghast. “Yes, you did, and I was a little irritated, but I could be mad as hell and I still would have no right to strike you or any other crewmember. You do understand that, don’t you?”

Again there was that shrug. Janeway knew the signs; Revi was starting to withdraw. She leaned forward and grasped both Revi’s organic hand and her cybernetic arm, willing her to reconnect. “Stop that,” she said. “You’re thinking like a guilty ex-Borg, not a Starfleet officer. Just step back for one second and really think about it. Do you have the right to strike a crewmember?”
Wide brown eyes met hers. “No, of course not!”

“That’s right. Why would I have the right to strike you?” Revi’s eyes dropped again, and Janeway sighed. “Please tell me it’s not because you think you deserve it.”

That got her a tiny smile as Revi said, “Okay, I won’t tell you.”

“Dammit.” Janeway let go and sat back against the couch with a thump. “What am I going to do with you?”

The smile on Revi’s face grew as she met Janeway’s gaze. “It’s all right, Kathryn. I just got a bit lost there for a second. Sometimes it’s hard to remember that I’m Starfleet again.”

“I hope the time comes when you find it hard to forget,” said Janeway. “That tendency of yours to think like a guilty ex-Borg is the only qualm I have about offering you the post of Chief Medical Officer.”

The smile vanished. “What? No way. Gods, I just went full time last week; don’t push me. I’m not ready for that, and I don’t know if I ever will be.”

“I know you’re not. I’m not offering you the position.” She watched the obvious relief cross Revi’s face, and added, “Yet.”

The glare aimed at her was really quite potent, Janeway thought. She glared right back, and eventually Revi’s face softened into a rueful expression.

“You’re never going to give up, are you?”

“On you? No, never.” Janeway picked up her coffee cup. “Lynne told me once that I remind her of a breed of dog from her time called a pit bull. She said they were often trained as protection dogs, and she saw pit bulls that would clamp their jaws on a target and never let go, even when their entire bodies were lifted off the ground so they were hanging by their teeth. Determined and stubborn to the very end, she said. Can’t imagine why she sees a resemblance.”

“Oh no, neither can I,” said Revi with a slight eye roll. “So tell me, do those charming traits have anything to do with the fact that pit bulls are no longer with us today?”

“I have no idea,” said Janeway. “Why, are you trying to imply something?”

“Of course not. I value my life these days.”

The humor in that was a little too macabre for Janeway’s tastes. She
could hardly fathom how Revi could make a joke out of her near-suicide. “I value it too. And I don’t want to push you into something you’re not ready for, but the fact is, you did an exemplary job as CMO of the Rendez-vous, and you’re eminently qualified for that role on Voyager. The Doctor has done a fine job, but he was never designed to work continuously, nor was he designed to fill the role of CMO. And while it’s true that he has exceeded his programming, between the two of you I would still choose you for the position. Thanks to your time with the Borg, your medical knowledge exceeds his in many areas, and your Human ability to empathize enables you to treat the patient as well as the medical issue. A CMO needs to be more than just technically excellent. It needs to be someone like you.”

“You’re putting a lot of faith in me.”

“I put my faith where it’s deserved.”

“You’ve only known me for two months. How can you be so certain about where your faith is deserved?”

“That’s why I’m the captain.” She dared Revi to argue that.

“Kathryn…” Revi ran her hand through her long black hair and sighed. “You say you don’t want to push me, but you are. And you have since I came on board.”

Janeway refused to acknowledge the twinge of guilt. “That’s also why I’m the captain. Part of my job is seeing potential and making sure it’s properly used. Your potential is nowhere near being fully used. And although I freely admit to pushing you into sickbay in the first place, I’ve let you go your own pace since then. You’re the one who told me you were ready to go full time. And I’ll try not to push the CMO post on you. Ideally, sometime soon you’re going to come to me and tell me you’re ready. But if you don’t, if it takes too long, then yes, I’m going to push you again. Both for your sake and that of the ship.”

They looked at each other in silence. Sometimes Janeway regretted the necessity of her position, when she had to set aside friendship and be a captain. She knew that Revi understood it better than most, but that didn’t make it any easier.

“Pit bull is right,” said Revi at last, breaking the tension. “I think I have teeth marks.”

Janeway let out a surprised laugh. “If you walked out of here with teeth marks, Lynne would hunt us both down.”
“And she’d have every right. So how are the wedding plans going?”

It was a blatant change of subject, but Janeway decided she’d gone as far as she could. “Not so well at the moment. We can’t seem to come to an agreement on the when and where.”

“Well, those are fairly important decisions. What’s the problem, if I may ask?”

“You may, and you’re just about the only one who can.”

Revi smiled warmly, and she knew the message had been received. The captain had withdrawn from the conversation; this was just two friends talking about their lives. She appreciated Revi’s graceful acceptance of the necessary and changing dynamic of their relationship.

“The problem is that after dragging her feet over the whole thing, once Lynne decided to propose to me, she was ready to go. As in, right now.”

Revi nodded. “And you’re not.”

“No, I am, but Lynne’s still out in front. Hell, I’m still adjusting to the fact that she accepted me at all. This is a big change to both of our lives, so I’m willing to spend more time planning this. But the biggest issue is that I’d like to figure out some way to include as many members of the crew as possible. I’m fully aware that my marriage isn’t just my own. My position means that something like this belongs to everyone, not just Lynne and me.”

“I don’t think that’s true. You have every right to sneak off to the holodeck and elope if that’s what you want. Your crew would understand.”

“They’d understand, but they’d also be a little demoralized. Morale is critical in our situation. I can’t overlook the fact that my wedding can do a lot of good.”

“Kathryn, your wedding is not a political tool.”

“Of course it is. If we were home it wouldn’t be, but we’re not home. We’re still thirty-plus years away, and I have to use everything at my disposal to keep this crew happy and hoping.”

Revi shook her head. “Have you had this discussion with Lynne?”

“God yes. Many times. She’s ready to get married in a holoprogram with only the requisite witnesses. She says she understands my concerns, but that doesn’t mean she has to be happy about them.”

Chuckling, Revi said, “I can actually hear her saying that.”

“Come to my quarters for dinner tonight and you can hear it for real.”
“Is Seven invited too?”
“Sure, I was planning to ask—”
“No need. She says yes and wants to know what time.”

Taken by surprise, Janeway stumbled. “Uh, how about eighteen thirty?”
“We’ll be there.”

Janeway shook her head. “I don’t think I’m ever going to get used to that interlink.”

Revi’s expression was enigmatic. “I don’t think I could ever get used to not having it again.”

There was a long silence. Finally, Janeway asked quietly, “What’s it like? Seven hasn’t talked much about it.”

Tilting her head to one side, Revi thought for a while before answering. “Well, imagine that right now, right this very instant, you were condemned to finish your journey alone in a shuttle.”

Janeway wrinkled her nose. “I’d rather not.”

“Believe me, I know. Now imagine that, after a few years of solitary confinement on that shuttle, you suddenly found yourself on Voyager again. Except this Voyager is different—it’s more comfortable, the air is fresher, the food is better, and after those years of solitude, suddenly you have Lynne. And she’s with you all the time—not in an obtrusive manner, but just there for you whenever you need her, for any reason. You can talk to her when you want, not talk when you want, but you know she’s there, you know what she’s doing, and oftentimes you know what she’s feeling. From solitude to constant company.”

“So you don’t always listen actively?”

“Yes, but only if I actively listen.”

“That requires a different analogy. It’s kind of like if you and I were at a party together. We’re in the same room, we’re even within hearing distance of each other, but we’re each engaged in conversations with other people. If I were to stop talking and listen, I’d hear everything you’re saying, but if I want to hold up my own conversation I can’t devote that attention to you. The analogy isn’t entirely accurate because Seven and I both have cortical implants that allow us to focus on several different things simultaneously, but you get the idea. When I’m engaged
with you, or working in sickbay, I’m only listening with partial attention to Seven’s thoughts. If I hear something that intrigues me, I’ll pay more attention. Otherwise it’s more like I’m just monitoring. So in answer to the question you didn’t ask, no, we don’t know absolutely everything about each other. It’s not that kind of link. There’s no pressure, there’s no sense of crowding; just a warm, welcome connection that’s there whenever you reach out. It’s the ultimate sense of community and belonging.”

“It sounds like heaven.” Janeway’s voice was soft. “I had no idea.”

“Nobody does,” answered Revi in an equally quiet voice. “I have every reason to hate the Borg, but the gods know they did leave me with at least one incredible gift.”

“But how much of a gift would it be if you weren’t compatible with the person, or persons, you’re connected with?”

“Fortunately, I can tune out individual frequencies. My transceiver, like Seven’s, would always be open to general Borg information channels, but as a repair drone I was required to reach single drones who weren’t receiving those channels. So my transceiver is designed to access any frequency, enabling me to localize the individual frequency of a disabled drone. When I finished the repair I’d tune that frequency out again. It came in handy at the colony, because there were a few people whose thoughts I really didn’t want to hear.”

“Do you ever tune Seven out?”

Revi shook her head. “Never. I would if she asked me, but she hasn’t. It’s a great comfort for both of us to have that presence in our minds.”

“You explained it beautifully,” said Janeway. “I think I have a much clearer idea of how this works. But I’m curious about your use of Lynne in your original comparison. Are you saying that Seven is to you what Lynne is to me?”

“No, I’m not saying that at all!” Revi’s voice was a little louder than necessary, and she immediately adjusted it. “I was just trying to create a picture that would resonate with you. Seven and I are very compatible; our shared Borg experiences allow us to understand each other in ways that nobody else can. In addition to that she’s incredibly intelligent, she’s got a great sense of humor that’s still finding its way out, and she has one of the most gentle and caring hearts I’ve ever had the pleasure to know. But we’re not in love.”
Janeway was having a hard time hiding her grin. “Okay, you’ve
convinced me.”

Obviously her tone wasn’t as even as she’d hoped, because Revi
turned a glare on her. “Kathryn, stop.”

Janeway raised her hands in a placating gesture. “I’m not doing
anything except agreeing with you.” The glare didn’t alter, and Janeway
lowered her hands. Her next words were completely serious. “Just—be
careful.”

Revi’s face instantly softened. “I will. The last thing in the world I
want to do is hurt her.”

Janeway nodded. “I know. And the last thing in the world I want is to
see either one of you hurt.”

The room was quiet again, until Janeway remembered that they’d
never gotten around to Revi’s original intention for coming.

“So what was the favor, anyway?”

“Oh, right. It’s about my quarters,” began Revi.

“What’s wrong with them? Not big enough?” Janeway teased. The
only quarters larger than those of the CMO were the captain’s.

“Gods, no. They’re huge.” Revi wasn’t taking the bait. “I was just
wondering if a small addition might be made.”

“Such as…”

“Well, as you so brilliantly demonstrated earlier, I’m more Human
than Borg now. And as much as I appreciate having access to a regenera-
tion unit, I’m not nearly as appreciative of the fact that every time I regen-
erate, I’m on display for anyone who wanders into the cargo bay. Would it
be possible to move one of the alcoves into my quarters?”

“Of course. I apologize; you shouldn’t have had to ask.” Janeway
couldn’t believe that she hadn’t thought of it. “I’ll make it a priority for
B’Elanna.”

“Thank you. And there’s no need to apologize; it really didn’t bother
me at first. There’s not much room for privacy or modesty when you’re
Borg, and it took me a while to realize that I even had another option. But
Kathryn…” Revi locked eyes with her. “Seven is more Human than
Borg, too.”

It took Janeway several seconds to find her voice. “She’s never said
anything.”

“She’s been in the same frame of mind that I was at first, except that
since her entire life had been Borg, she really didn’t realize she had other options. But knowing that I’m planning to permanently move out has changed her mindset. She’s going to ask you for her own quarters soon. I wanted to give you a heads up so that you’d have some time to deal with it before she comes to see you.”

“What do you mean, deal with it?”

Revi’s expression was oddly sympathetic. “I mean, deal with the fact that you won’t be able to watch over her anymore. She knows, Kathryn. We both do. Regeneration isn’t like sleep.”

Shock rooted Janeway to the spot. She felt her face burning as the shame swept over her. Seven had known all this time? Jumping up, she stalked to a viewport, staring unseeing at the star streaks as her mind reviewed all of the times she’d watched Seven regenerate, taking advantage of the only time that she could look at her beautiful face and body without reservation, though not without guilt. In the early months, when she and Seven had fought so frequently, watching Seven regenerate was the only time she could be near her and have peace. Once they’d moved past their constant battles, she had continued to watch over her, feeling a strange mixture of responsibility, affection, and something else that she’d never dared define to herself. Over the last year her visits had gotten less frequent, but she still stopped in now and again, a guilty indulgence that she’d never been able to deny herself. She’d even watched over Revi and Seven together, marveling at their differences, their similarities; wondering what their chances were for happiness and what it might mean for her own relationship with Seven.

And all this time, Seven had known. Revi as well. And they’d never said anything.

She felt Revi’s presence next to her just before a warm hand settled on her shoulder. Without looking up, she said, “I’m sorry. I have no excuse.”

The hand squeezed gently, but Revi said nothing. Finally, when Janeway could stand it no longer, she turned to meet Revi’s eyes.

And found no accusation, no judgment; just understanding and sympathy.

“You don’t need an excuse,” said Revi gently. “Seven never said anything to you because she was afraid that if she did, you’d stop coming.”

Janeway couldn’t even form the words, she was so stunned. But Revi
nodded. “She valued those times. It made her feel that you cared about her. It made her feel special.”

Turning her head away to hide the sudden tears filling her eyes, Janeway managed to speak. “She is special.”

“Then maybe when she comes to ask you about her quarters, you should tell her that.”

The laugh that came out of Janeway’s constricted throat sounded harsh to her ears. “Maybe I should.” She looked up. “You know, don’t you?”

Revi nodded again. “I have the advantage of seeing through Seven’s eyes as well. But I don’t think she’s ever interpreted it in the way you’re thinking. She doesn’t have the experience yet. So don’t worry, your secret is safe with me.”

“With you and Lynne.”

“Lynne knows?” asked Revi, startled.

“She has for a while now. In fact, she told me right before I met you.”

“And she…has no issues with it?”

“She said it made her happy to know that if anything ever happened to her, I might have a second chance with Seven.”

“Holy gods,” murmured Revi. “That woman is something else. I think you should marry her.”

This time Janeway’s laugh was normal. “I think you’re right.” She looked into Revi’s eyes, such a deep brown that they were almost black. “I also think that the time of me having a chance with Seven is fast slipping away. And that’s a wonderful thing.”

A mask crashed down over Revi’s face even as she watched. “And I think you might be getting ahead of things.”

Janeway let it drop. “You know,” she said, “I seem to recall that when you walked in here, you said something about softening me up. When does that part happen?”

When Revi laughed, she knew they were okay.

Fifteen minutes later, Revi left and Janeway walked back to her desk, where the pile of PADDs had unfortunately not shrunk in her absence. Settling in her chair with a sigh, she picked up the PADD that had been dropped earlier and resumed reading. In moments her brow furrowed. “Damn,” she said. She slowly shook her head as she continued to read. Then her head movement stopped and her face smoothed out, taking on a
thoughtful expression. Gradually she began to nod, a smile curving her lips. Signing the report and dropping it on the “done” pile, she turned to her computer terminal and composed a quick set of messages. Then she leaned back in her chair and picked up the next PADD, looking very satisfied.
A hiccup in the electronics of one of the bridge stations had kept Janeway after her normal shift, and she’d been in her quarters just long enough to program in the meal, change clothes and start on a glass of wine when Lynne walked in.

“Hi, love,” she said, coming over and giving Janeway an enthusiastic hug and kiss. She looked fantastic in a green shirt that matched her eyes and the snug brown synthetic leather vest she’d taken to wearing lately.

“Hi yourself,” Janeway said, looking up into her face and knowing instantly that Lynne was in a great mood. She was practically crackling with energy. “What’s got you so happy?”

Lynne grinned. “Tuvok and I had a sparring match today. And I finally, finally took him down.” She twirled around, pumping both fists skyward and whooping. “Yes! Yes!” Her spin brought her back to face Janeway, who was amused at her partner’s antics. “I’m a little hyped up, can you tell?”

“I can tell.”

Lynne nodded, apparently not noticing the teasing tone in Janeway’s voice. “So I’ve been burning off some excess energy before dinner, but it’s not quite gone yet. I was listening to some classic rock before I left my quarters; mind if I turn it on here?”
“No, go ahead.” Janeway rarely got to see Lynne this excited, and was thoroughly enjoying it.

Lynne caught her in a short hug, let go and called out, “Computer, play Peter Gabriel, So. Track two.”

A flute-like sound filled the room, and Janeway met Lynne’s eyes, wondering why she’d chosen this track. Moments later, however, the brass section and thundering rhythm came in, and at Lynne’s order the volume quickly rose to chest-throbbing levels. Janeway was glad she’d had the extra sound-proofing installed in her quarters, though this wasn’t why she’d thought it necessary.

Lynne stepped away and beckoned to Janeway, who smilingly shook her head and made a ‘go ahead’ motion with her hand. Lynne shrugged, moved to the center of the room, and began dancing with total abandon, apparently picking up where she’d left off in her own quarters. Janeway sipped her wine and watched, mesmerized by the graceful form of her tall partner. On occasion they’d danced together, but always to a slower rhythm—she’d never seen Lynne move like this. The dancing wasn’t overtly sexual, but the things Lynne’s body was doing to the rhythm of the music had Janeway thinking distinctly impure thoughts. It didn’t take long before merely watching wasn’t enough. She put her wine glass down and stepped up to her lover, who beamed at her, turned her by the shoulders so her back was to Lynne’s front, and began gyrating their hips together. Janeway quickly got into the rhythm, enjoying the sensation of their bodies moving together to the beat. She twisted in Lynne’s grasp and put her hands on her partner’s hips, guiding their movements while she looked into laughing green eyes. They danced face to face for a while, until Lynne broke away, dancing around Janeway so that they ended up back to back and butt to butt. Janeway laughed out loud; it was a bit tougher to match their moves this way, but a hell of a lot of fun. Since it precluded being able to watch Lynne, however, she soon changed position and put herself in front of her lover, thoroughly enjoying the view. Lynne gradually moved them over to the table, and when the song ended they collapsed into chairs, grinning at each other. Lynne lowered the volume as Janeway pushed the second glass of wine toward her.

“That was fun,” Janeway said as she caught her breath. “I’ve never seen you dance like that.”

Lynne took a healthy swallow of wine, her breathing already back to
normal. “Well,” she said, “I normally reserve that kind of dancing for when I’m alone. And when I’m really happy.” She unleashed a brilliant, full smile and Janeway couldn’t help but smile back. When Lynne was happy, she showed it so openly that it was contagious.

“So,” Janeway asked, “were those lyrics as suggestive in your time as they are now?”

“Absolutely. Probably more so; I mean, do you even have sledgehammers now?” Apparently, Lynne still had some energy to burn. Without waiting for an answer, she jumped up and put her hands on the arms of Janeway’s chair, leaning in close and giving her a look that would have been predatory if her eyes hadn’t been twinkling. “Kathryn,” she said in a low, sexy voice, “I’m feeling very macha right now. Want to take advantage of it?”

She did, but shook her head regretfully. “Seven and Revi will be here in—” she checked her chronometer—“fifteen minutes. We don’t have time, much as I’d like to. And what does ‘macha’ mean, anyway?”

Lynne pulled Janeway’s shirt up, taking her bra with it. “We have plenty of time,” she growled, “and I’ll explain ‘macha’ later.” Bending down, she kissed the underside of a breast before taking an instantly stiff nipple into her mouth. Janeway inhaled sharply and dropped her head back. “Lynne...” Her protest died as Lynne barraged her with nips, kisses and suckling designed to bring her to full arousal in record time. It worked. She didn’t resist as Lynne unfastened her pants, and even lifted herself up to facilitate their removal. In a heartbeat Lynne had her pants down to her ankles, and with no further foreplay Janeway felt her knees spread and a very talented tongue touching her most sensitive skin.

“Oh, god,” she gasped. This was the very definition of a quickie, and it felt fantastic. She looked down when Lynne paused, and was further aroused by the expression of raw hunger on her partner’s face.

“You’re so wet already,” Lynne said huskily, as she slid a finger in without breaking eye contact. Janeway closed her eyes at the welcome sensation, and was not happy when it ended almost immediately. But the withdrawal had only been to add a second finger, and soon she gave herself up to the expert ministrations of her lover. In no time at all she was arching her back and crying out as the orgasm flashed through her body. Lynne kept going, however, and Janeway knew she was trying for a second one. She started to push Lynne’s head away, to tell her that they
didn’t have time, but Lynne refused to move and a few moments later it didn’t matter anyway. She could feel the familiar sensations of another buildup, and was soon thrashing in her chair as a second, much stronger orgasm swept over her. This time Lynne slowed, placing gentle kisses on Janeway’s inner thighs before rising up on her knees.

“You are so beautiful,” she whispered. “Sometimes I can’t believe that I’m the one you chose.”

Janeway put her hands on either side of Lynne’s face. “It wasn’t a choice,” she said. “It was a necessity. And I love what you do to me, but right now I’ve got to get cleaned up so that Revi and Seven won’t know what a sex maniac you are. I have to protect your reputation.”

Lynne laughed as she stood, offering her hand to help Janeway up. “I don’t think my reputation is the one you need to worry about, Captain.”

Janeway shot her unrepentant lover a glare, but was too busy hauling up her trousers and hurrying into the bedroom to give that comment the response it deserved. Lynne dashed into the bathroom to wash her face and hands, making it back out just as the entrance chime sounded.

“I’ll stall them,” she said as she passed Janeway, who was rushing toward the bathroom with a change of clothes.

Janeway jumped into the sonic shower for a sixty-second, teeth-gritting cleanup, then got dressed hurriedly. She would have vastly preferred a hydroshower, but that would have taken too long and besides, the last thing she wanted was to greet her guests with wet hair. She shook her head as she tucked her shirt in and fastened her pants. Turning to the mirror, she saw that her face was still flushed and her lips were slightly swollen. To her eyes, it was patently obvious what they’d been doing, but hopefully their guests wouldn’t pick up on it.

She walked out to find Lynne, Seven and Revi standing in the living room, sipping from wine glasses and discussing music.

“That’s true,” Lynne was saying, “but I think you’ll find just as much going on mathematically in some rock music as you do in classical. I’ll agree that most rock is pretty simple, but some of the artists in my time put out extremely complex music.”

She smiled as Janeway came up, and held out a glass of wine. “Hi, love. Sorry I got you so sweaty during our dance. We’ve got to work on your fitness level so you don’t get so hot.” She winked.

Janeway took the wine and smacked Lynne in the abdomen at the same
time. “My fitness level is fine, thank you very much. I just danced harder than you did.”

“Hey!” Lynne protested. “Leading is just as difficult as following.”

“I beg to differ,” said Janeway. “Following is by far the more strenuous position.” She turned a meaningful look on her partner and added, “Next time we dance, I’ll lead, you follow, and we’ll see how you feel in the end.”

Lynne looked momentarily surprised at Janeway’s audacity, but then smiled rakishly and raised her glass to her. “You got yourself a deal. I look forward to the lesson.”

Janeway couldn’t let this go any further—Seven might not pick up on the double entendres, but Revi certainly would. Turning to her guests, she said, “I see Lynne has been trying to convince you of the finer points of rock music.”

“It’s not an area of music that I’ve studied,” said Seven. “I briefly examined it earlier in my research, but dismissed it as a genre. It didn’t interest me.”

“That’s because you weren’t listening to the right artists,” said Lynne.

Janeway rolled her eyes and met Revi’s amused gaze. “Here it comes,” she said.

Lynne wasn’t to be deterred. “You need to check out the good artists, and that doesn’t necessarily mean the ones in the database. I’ve got a whole new library from my visit to Earth that you should really look into. And the very first artists you should check out are Peter Gabriel, Sting, Kate Bush, and Bel Canto. Listen to them and then tell me if you still think rock is too simplistic to be worthy of study.”

Seven looked doubtful.

“Okay, I can see you’re going to require some hard evidence,” said Lynne, who was always eager to introduce new people to her favorite music. “Check this out. Computer, play Bel Canto, Shimmering Warm and Bright.” She cocked her head as the music came on. “You’re going to love this.”

“I was not under the impression that ‘love’ was an appropriate descriptor for an appreciation of music,” said Seven. “Is that not reserved for the emotions of one individual for another?”

“Love can mean a lot of things, Seven,” said Janeway as she led them all to the table. “I can use that word to describe how I feel about Lynne,
Voyager, coffee, and a good poem. In each case the word means something different.”

“That is inefficient,” said Seven as she sat across from Revi. Janeway and Lynne brought the food from the replicator and took their own seats.

“On the contrary,” said Revi, “it’s very efficient. How much more efficient can you get than to have one word to describe multiple things?”

Seven wasn’t convinced. “It’s inexact. There’s too much potential for misinterpretation.”

“Actually, I think Seven’s right.” All heads turned to Lynne, who shrugged. “It’s really just laziness on our part, isn’t it? I’ve gotten in trouble for saying I loved something when in reality, I was really just quite fond of it. It can come back and bite you in the ass.”

Revi laughed. “I know exactly what you mean.”

Janeway took the opportunity to begin serving, and soon the four women were eating and discussing recent events. The main topic of interest, of course, was the communication they’d had with Starfleet the prior week. Lieutenant Barclay of the MIDAS lab had figured out a means of utilizing an itinerant pulsar as an amplifying energy source, enabling the creation of a micro-wormhole that acted as a data conduit. The downside was that MIDAS only came within range of the pulsar once a month, so their communication was limited.

But it was still communication, and it changed everything. Even though they were no closer to home than they’d been before, it felt closer. And knowing that they would now have regular access once a month brought home that much nearer. Nearly everyone on Voyager was thrilled at the opportunity to get letters from home and to write their friends and family. Janeway had already written letters to her mother and sister and put them in the queue, where they waited for the next data transfer. The time lag was going to be hard to handle—three weeks before her letters could be mailed, and another month before she could get a response—but after waiting nearly six years she figured another two months wouldn’t kill her. She looked across the table at Lynne, smiling as she thought about her family’s reaction to her news. Then her smile faltered as she remembered that Lynne would have no letters coming. Well, she could change that. She’d pull her letters off the queue and add a paragraph to each, asking her mom and Phoebe to write Lynne as well. She contemplated the very frightening concept of her sister writing her fiancée. That
would be something, wouldn’t it? God, imagine Phoebe and Lynne in the same room together!

As the conversation flowed around her, she watched Seven and Revi. Her data transfer during last week’s communication included all of her records and reports to date, which meant Revi’s “MIA, presumed dead” status would now be updated. Her family would be notified that she was alive. Revi must have known this, but she hadn’t said anything about her family and she wasn’t bringing it up now. Did she have anyone waiting for her on Earth? Did Seven? She was aware that Seven had an aunt living on Earth, but would she contact her? Or would she want nothing to do with her Borg niece?

It occurred to her then, as she watched these women, that for two of them and possibly all three, Voyager and her crew were truly home and family. How many others on Voyager were in this situation? She had always said her crew were a family, but it occurred to her now that the term might actually be literal. Which made her own actions that much more important—she wasn’t just a captain, she was the head of a family. She almost laughed at the thought. Now that’s something they never taught us in command school—Starfleet Guidelines for Parental Command. And to think I never wanted to have children.

After commenting on the physics involved in creating the MIDAS communication, Seven tilted her head as she directed more of her attention to the music. “This is intriguing,” she said, looking at Lynne. “There are multiple rhythms overlapping one another.”

“Syncopation,” said Lynne. Seven nodded.

“Yes. You’re correct, this is more complex than the rock music I had examined earlier.”

“Uh oh, there they go,” said Janeway to Revi. “Lynne’s found a new mark.”

Revi smiled. “Seven’s not a mark. She’s completely fascinated and enjoying the analysis. It’s fun for me to feel it.” She glanced across the table at Seven, who was already engrossed in a discussion of the music with Lynne. Janeway didn’t miss the look of affection on Revi’s face.

“I’m afraid you won’t be hearing what I promised when I invited you,” she said.

“What was that?”

“Lynne’s commentary regarding my opinions about our wedding.”
“Oh, right. Too bad, I was looking forward to that.” Revi’s grin was conspiratorial. “So why don’t I get to hear it?”

“Because,” said Janeway, “right after you left my ready room I solved the whole problem. I just haven’t had a chance to tell Lynne yet.”

“Tell me what?” asked Lynne, who had looked up at the mention of her name.

“That I’m ready to set our wedding date for as soon as possible,” said Janeway, enjoying the surprise on Lynne’s face.

“What? What brought that on? And why didn’t you tell me?”

“I would have, sweetheart, if you hadn’t distracted me with your… dancing.” The pause was just enough to get Revi’s attention, and the amused smile on her face let Janeway know she was taking chances, but she was in too good a mood to care. Besides, Revi was a friend.

Lynne had the grace to look slightly abashed. “Oh. Well, I’m all ears now.”

“No, you’re not,” said Seven. “Your ears comprise only zero point three percent of your body mass. You’re being inexact again.”

Lynne shot her a look, and Seven raised her eyebrow.

“Fine,” said Lynne. “What I meant to say was, ‘You have my full and complete attention.’ Is that better?”

Seven shook her head. “Now you’re being redundant. That is nearly as inefficient as being inexact. You can give Kathryn either your full or your complete attention. Not both.”

“Anyone ever tell you how completely annoying you are?”

“With great frequency.”

Lynne grinned. “Yeah, me too,” she said. Seven nodded, but the slight curve to her lips gave her away. She was getting better at teasing, and Janeway loved watching it.

“If you ladies are done…” she said in her captain’s voice. All heads swiveled her way, but she locked her gaze on Lynne. “What I meant to tell you was that Voyager is due for a systems overhaul that will require landing her. Normally I despise these kinds of repairs, because this ship is never so vulnerable as when she’s grounded, but it occurred to me that in this instance I could make good use of the time.” She paused. “How would you feel about an outdoor wedding?”

Lynne’s intake of breath was audible to all of them. “You mean it? God, yes!” With a whoop she was up and out of her chair, flying around

**Future Perfect**
the table toward the captain at an alarming rate of speed. Janeway stood up out of self-defense, and was immediately swept off her feet by an extremely enthusiastic lover. Lynne twirled her around, set her back down and planted a kiss on her that quickly moved beyond the bounds of propriety. Janeway gently pushed her back and whispered in her ear, “We can finish this later, sweetheart. We still have guests.”

“Sorry guys,” said Lynne happily. “Hope you didn’t see anything that shocked you.” She winked at Janeway, who rolled her eyes, and they both returned to their chairs.

Revi was laughing, and even Seven had a small smile on her face. “Well, I for one am extremely shocked,” said Revi. “I never imagined that anyone could physically pick up the captain without suffering major consequences. Electrocution at the very least.”

“See,” said Janeway to Lynne, her voice accusing. “You’ve already ruined my reputation and we aren’t even married yet.”

“Don’t worry,” said Revi. “I’m sure it will only get worse from here.”

Seven was looking at Janeway. “Kathryn, I believe that I have located a viable planet for this event. When I received your orders today, I was simply scanning for a planet that would satisfy the defensive parameters you outlined. But the planet I located may also satisfy certain aesthetic requirements as well.”

Janeway had just picked up her napkin, and now she threw it on the table. “Let’s see it, then,” she said. “You can call up the file on my terminal.”

Chairs scraped as the women stood and made their way over to Janeway’s terminal. Seven sat in front of it with her usual rigid precision, fingers flying over the control panel. A moment later the scans of the suggested planet appeared onscreen, along with a visual.

Three heads bent forward as Janeway, Lynne and Revi all examined the data. Janeway was the first to straighten.

“Temperate climate, no recent signs of shipping activity, well out of normal shipping lanes—Seven, I think you’ve found the site of our wedding. What do you think, Lynne?”

Lynne wasn’t even looking at the scans. Her eyes were locked on the visual of the planet itself—an uninhabited M class planet, with two major land masses on an otherwise oceanic world. The green vegetation of the continents was easily visible, as was the white spine of a moun-
tain range snaking its way down the center of the northernmost land mass.

“Oh yeah,” she said, not taking her eyes off the visual. “Kathryn, can we go climbing on our honeymoon?”

Janeway looked at her partner. The energy Lynne had radiated upon her arrival that evening had returned, and she seemed mesmerized. Putting her arm around Lynne’s waist, Janeway bent over so that their heads were side by side.

“Do you promise not to kick my ass?” she asked, looking straight ahead at the screen. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Lynne turn to look at her, and she turned her head as well. The unfettered joy in Lynne’s eyes, she thought, would probably be worth every sore muscle she knew she’d end up with. Probably.

“I promise to take total care of you,” said Lynne in a low voice. And Janeway knew she would.

“Then yes, on one condition,” she said.

“What’s that?”

“That we spend the other half of our honeymoon doing what I want to do.”

“And that is?”

Janeway smiled, her thoughts centered on a warm beach, a good book, an ice cold drink, and no one but her and Lynne for a few thousand kilometers in any direction. “Absolutely nothing,” she breathed.

Lynne didn’t look nearly as ecstatic at this possibility, but she nodded, closing the tiny distance between them and giving her a quick, soft kiss. “It’s a deal.”

They both straightened and turned to their guests. Revi was trying unsuccessfully to hide her smirk, and Janeway just shook her head at her. Then she looked at Seven, still sitting in front of the terminal.

“Seven, how far is this at warp six?”

“Four point three days,” answered Seven promptly.

“Right,” said Janeway, thinking out loud, “and B’Elanna said that repairs and upgrades would take five days. That has to be finished before we can do this, Lynne. I’m not about to release the crew for our wedding unless we can get them back on board and get Voyager into space at a moment’s notice.” Lynne nodded. “So,” continued Janeway, “that means our wedding will take place in ten days. I’ll be swamped with landing
preparations beforehand, and then I’ll be heading a repair team once we land. So I’m not going to have much time for planning a wedding. How would you feel about taking that on?”

“I’m okay with it,” said Lynne. “If you’ll make sure Tuvok gives me the time.”

Janeway nodded. “That’s not a problem. You’ve earned some leave.” She hesitated, then turned and put a hand on Seven’s shoulder. “Seven,” she said, “Lynne and I have talked a lot about who we’d like to have at our wedding. And now that it’s coming up, we need to start asking people. So I’m asking you now: would you do me the honor of standing up for me?”

Seven’s shoulders moved as she prepared to rise from the chair, but then she stopped and shot a look at Revi. Returning her gaze to Janeway, her face changed from her normal impassive expression to one of wonder.

“You wish me to be a member of your bridal party?”

“We’re not having bridal parties,” said Janeway, looking into the clear blue eyes of this extraordinary young woman who meant so much to her. “We’re just choosing one person each to stand by us. I would like you to be that one person. It’s traditional to ask a family member or a close friend, and you’re both to me.”

Seven said nothing, and Janeway was just beginning to wonder if she’d somehow made a misstep, when the most astonishing thing happened. A tear slid down Seven’s cheek, and at the same time her face split into the largest smile anyone had ever seen on the ex-Borg. “I would be honored,” she said as she stood. “I am...stunned that you would ask me, but thrilled as well. Thank you.” And then she astonished Janeway for the second time in as many minutes when she stepped forward and embraced her.

Janeway wrapped her arms around Seven’s slim form and hugged her fiercely, feeling Seven’s arms tighten as well. They stood there for a long moment, basking in a closeness that would once have been unimaginable, and Janeway thought that if she never managed to get Voyager home, she could still point to this moment as proof that her life had counted for something. The caring young woman holding her right now would have been permanently lost to the Borg had Janeway not changed her destiny. And changed my own right along with it, she thought.

Eventually Seven’s arms loosened and they stepped back from each other. That amazing smile was still transforming Seven’s face as she
turned to Revi. They looked at one another for just a moment, and Janeway would have given a great deal to know what they were saying.

Lynne stepped forward then, capturing both of Seven’s hands in her own and holding them loosely between them. “Seven,” she said, “I want you to know that I was planning to ask you to stand up for me, but Kathryn put dibs on you first. We nearly came to blows over it.”

Janeway rolled her eyes. “I think you all know that’s not true,” she said.

“Okay, we didn’t, but it’s quite true that we both wanted to ask you. You’re part of my family too, you know, and I love you like the sister I never had.” Lynne smiled at Seven, who stood motionless. “So can I have one of those hugs, too? It looked great.”

Seven simply nodded, apparently speechless once again. Lynne pulled her in by their linked hands, and they held each other in a sweet, intimate hug. As Janeway watched, she was certain that she’d never before felt this contented. She was surrounded by dear friends and people she loved. No, she amended. *I’m surrounded by family.* She glanced away from the two women and caught Revi watching her. As soon as their eyes met, Revi nodded her head, an expression of warm approval washing over her face. Janeway returned the nod, understanding immediately. *Yes, Revi, she is special. And now she knows it.*

Lynne and Seven separated, each surreptitiously wiping tears off their faces. Then Lynne laughed shakily, reaching out and brushing a gentle hand across Seven’s cheek. “Guess there’s no shame in crying if we’re both doing it,” she said.

“There’s no shame in crying, period,” said Revi. “I could give you all sorts of medical reasons why it’s good for you. Or I could just tell you to stop worrying about your reputations and go with what’s natural.”

“Oh, I’m not worried about my reputation,” said Lynne breezily, shooting a loaded glance at Janeway.

“Come on, ladies,” said Janeway in an effort to deflect the conversation from potentially dangerous ground. “We still have dessert to get through.”

They made their way back to the table, everyone pitching in to clear dishes and carry dessert back.

“Tiramisu,” observed Seven with a note of satisfaction in her voice. “I have come to greatly appreciate this dish.”
“Around Kathryn you hardly have a choice,” said Lynne. “I thought we could serve something else, but you’d think I’d suggested flying Voyager straight into a star. With the shields down.”

“That is not true,” protested Janeway. “I’m amenable to alternatives. I just didn’t see any reason for an alternative tonight.”

Revi laughed. She might only have been on board for two months, but she already knew all about Janeway’s coffee addiction, which had translated itself into an equal love for the coffee-flavored dessert. “It’s fine by me,” she said. “What I can’t figure out is why you like it, too, Lynne. Don’t you hate coffee?”

“Yes, but I love chocolate,” said Lynne happily, forking a sizable chunk of the dessert into her mouth.

Revi looked at her plate. “But there’s hardly any chocolate in this.”

“There’s enough,” Lynne said with her mouth full.

“Lynne,” said Janeway, “you never did tell me about Tuvok.”

All eyes swung to Lynne, who stopped chewing, looked around the table, and then swallowed. “Well, we had our usual sparring match today, and we were practicing a couple of new moves that Tuvok taught me last week. And then I threw something at him that he’d showed me several months ago, but that we haven’t used recently. I guess it took him by surprise, because I actually took him right down to the mat. It was the proudest moment I’ve had in a long time.”

“You defeated Commander Tuvok in a sparring match?” asked Seven.

Lynne held her hand up in front of her, shaking her head. “Oh no. No, no, no. I just took him down, which is something I’ve never been able to accomplish before, unless he wanted me to. I don’t have the skills yet to keep an advantage like that over him, and the day I do is the day Kathryn awards me Grand Master Kick The Shit Out Of Anyone status. Because at that point I’ll be some kind of goddess. I don’t think anyone on Voyager could defeat Tuvok.”

“I could,” said Seven in a matter-of-fact voice. That silenced the room. Both Lynne and Janeway could vividly recall Seven’s ordeal when she’d been captured and forced to fight in a Tsunkatse arena. Her tutelage under a Hirogen veteran had been extremely effective, though Seven herself had been devastated by her reawakened ability to injure and kill.

“I guess you could at that,” said Lynne at last. “I’m just glad you’re both on our side.”
Seven looked at them. “I’ll always be on your side,” she said.

“Amen to that,” said Janeway, holding up a forkful of tiramisu in salute. Her toast seemed to break the solemn moment, and soon the four women were off on another discussion. The tiramisu vanished, to be replaced by two cups of coffee, one of tea and one of hot chocolate. Ever since Lynne had introduced Seven to hot chocolate, the ex-Borg had it at every opportunity. She’d taken some teasing about it, but refused to be baited. Seven had found her drink and that was all there was to it.

“Kathryn,” said Seven suddenly, “I am aware of the Human regard for anniversaries. Has it occurred to you that if you wait one more day, your wedding will take place on the one year anniversary of Lynne’s arrival on Voyager?”

Janeway and Lynne stared at each other. Plainly Lynne hadn’t thought of it, which made Janeway feel better about her own ignorance. “No, it hadn’t occurred to us,” she said without breaking their gaze. “What do you think, Lynne? Shall we put it off for one more day?”

Lynne nodded, beaming. “It’s perfect,” she said. “That day last year marked the beginning of my new life, quite literally, and this year it will mark the beginning of a figurative new life.”

“And a literal one,” added Revi. “Because I can’t imagine that your life will ever be the same after getting yourself legally attached to Kathryn. Have you written an escape clause into your contract?”

Janeway made a rather rude gesture, which broke up both Revi and Lynne and caused Seven’s eyebrow to shoot clear into her hairline.

They moved to the couch and chairs, sipping their drinks and keeping up two separate conversations. Seven and Lynne were once again immersed in music, with Lynne happily playing more of her beloved Bel Canto for the purposes of technical dissection. Janeway and Revi were discussing a book that Revi had recently finished, after borrowing it from Janeway’s collection. Their conversation came to a halt, however, when Seven began to quietly sing along with the music.

Lynne listened for a minute and then held up a hand. “God, Seven, your voice is gorgeous. You’ve got perfect pitch, too, which is really unusual. But you’re being too—well, too exact.”

“Explain,” said Seven.

“You’re singing each note separately. Listen to how the vocalist is changing from one note to the next.”
All four women listened intently.
Seven nodded. “She’s not completing one before starting the next.”
“I’m not an expert by any means,” said Lynne, “but I think that’s called sliding the note. Listen.” And she began whistling along with the melody, exaggerating the slides. After listening for a few bars, Seven joined in, her own clear, pure tones blending with the vocalist’s. She missed a few times, but soon was sliding her notes like a professional. Janeway and Revi were riveted.

Watching Seven, Lynne gradually backed out of the song, leaving Seven’s vocals to stand alone. When the song ended, both Janeway and Revi applauded spontaneously.

Seven’s face was lit with the excitement of learning something new. “That was…fun,” she said, obviously trying out a new entry in her vocabulary. “I have never before attempted to match an existing vocal track; it’s much more satisfying than singing alone. May I do another?”

Lynne looked at Janeway.
“Don’t worry, you’re not bothering us,” said Janeway.
“Gods, no,” added Revi. “I had no idea we’d be treated to a private concert. Do go on.”

Lynne looked back at Seven. “Okay. Which song?”

Seven thought for a moment, then named a track. Lynne nodded and cued it up on the computer. A moment later Seven’s clear voice filled the room, and Janeway wished she could record it. She thought, as she leaned back against the couch and watched, that life simply could not get any better than this.

“Kathryn?”
“Mmm?” Janeway was nearly asleep.
“Did I thank you for solving our wedding problem?”
Slightly more awake, Janeway snuggled further back into Lynne’s warm body. “Actually, I think you thanked me in advance.”

She felt Lynne’s stomach move as she chuckled. “I guess you could look at it that way.”

Suddenly Janeway was reminded of something. “What does ‘macha’ mean, anyway?”
“Oh yeah, we never got around to that, did we? Do you use the word ‘macho’ anymore?”

“No. At least, I’ve never heard of it.”

“Wow, it really is a better world.” Lynne shifted a bit. “It originally came from ‘machismo,’ which was a term to describe the belief of Latin American cultures that men should be in control, in charge, strong, tough, and irresistible to women.” Janeway snorted. “Then it made its way out of Latin America and into North America, where it was used to describe any man who showed those traits. So out of self-defense, a lot of women changed the masculine ‘o’ to a feminine ‘a’, and took the word for themselves. So when I’m feeling macha, I’m feeling strong and tough—"

“And irresistible to women?”

The arm that was draped over her waist moved, and a gentle hand cupped Janeway’s breast. “Well, to one woman, I hope.”

“Good answer,” said Janeway, covering the hand with her own. “I can’t be responsible for my actions if you act macha around other women.”

They lapsed into a comfortable silence, and Janeway was getting drowsier.

“Kathryn?”

She jerked a little as she came awake. “What?”

“Have you noticed that Seven is using more contractions?”

By now she was well used to Lynne’s non sequiturs, which seemed to occur most frequently at night. She gave the question due consideration, recalling Seven’s part in that evening’s conversation.

“No, I hadn’t, but now that you mention it, you’re right. She is.” Janeway marveled at the realization. “I wonder if that’s just a natural progression of her growth, or if her interlink with Revi has anything to do with it?”

“Maybe it’s both. I know she was actively studying language usage before Revi came along. She told B’Elanna and me that she was using us, and you, as models.”

“I can only imagine how B’Elanna felt about being a language model.”

“Actually, she kind of preened over it,” said Lynne. “But I don’t remember Seven using contractions as much until this last month. Whatever her inspiration, it’s pretty cool.” She paused. “Have you ever seen her cry before?”

Janeway didn’t have to think about that one. “Just a few times, during
her first days on board. Since then, only once, right after we brought Revi on board. Tonight shocked the hell out of me. I’ve seen Seven in some desperate situations, including one that had me in tears—but she didn’t cry. If she did, it was where no one saw. And you know what?”

“What?”

“I think that when the time comes when I have to account for everything I’ve done, the fact that I caused Seven’s first tears of happiness is going to weigh pretty heavily on the good side.”

Lynne’s arm moved to Janeway’s waist and squeezed. “I think when that time comes, you’ll have nothing to worry about.”

Janeway shook her head. “I’ve got a lot to make up for, Lynne.”

“Hey.” Lynne pulled Janeway onto her back and leaned over her, looking intently into her eyes in the dimness of the starlit room. “Everyone has things they have to make up for.”

“Not like mine.” Janeway knew what Lynne was trying to do, but she also knew her partner couldn’t really understand the burden she carried. Most of the time she managed to push it back in her mind, but every now and then it jumped out at her.

“You’re in a position where your actions happen to affect a lot of people. So don’t focus on just one side of it, Kathryn. Because when you do good, you do it on a big scale. Everyone on this ship owes you their lives, several times over from what I’ve read. I’m also aware of at least one entire civilization that owes its ongoing existence to you. So knock it off, okay? If there is some sort of cosmic weighing of scales, you’re going to make the good side hit bottom so hard they’ll have to recalibrate it after they finish with you.”

Janeway couldn’t help but laugh. She wrapped her arms around Lynne’s neck and looked into eyes that glittered from reflected starlight. “I appreciate your faith in me. When that time comes, I hope you’re there to represent me. I don’t see how I could go wrong with a cheerleader like you helping to tip the scales.”

Lynne kissed her, then settled down with her head on Janeway’s shoulder. “I hope I’m there too, because I don’t want to be here if you’re not.”

Startled, Janeway squeezed her tightly and kissed the top of her head. She wasn’t quite sure what to say to that. But Lynne didn’t seem to expect a response. She snuggled in, wrapping an arm around Janeway’s waist. “Goodnight, Kathryn.”
“Goodnight, sweetheart.” It wasn’t long before Lynne’s breathing evened out, while Janeway was wide awake, her thoughts whirling.

Goddammit. And she’s the one who woke me up. I hate it when she does this to me.

She moved her hand lightly up and down Lynne’s smooth back, reveling in the feel of solid muscles just beneath the skin. On the other hand, it wasn’t very often that Lynne snuggled like this. Usually they spooned, her back to Lynne’s front, and she was enjoying the chance to hold her partner this way.

Oh well. If I have to be awake, I can’t think of a better place to be.

Five minutes later she was asleep.
It had been a fairly quiet morning on the bridge, and Janeway was finally bored enough to head for her ready room. She still had a few reports to go through from the previous day, and there wasn’t enough action on the bridge to give her a good reason to stay away from them. Naturally, she couldn’t start on the reports until she’d prepared her coffee, looked out the viewport for a while, thought about the events of the prior evening, and generally earned herself a gold star in Procrastination 101. When she finally seated herself behind her desk, she was given an unexpected reprieve as the entrance chime rang.

“Come,” she called, and was somewhat surprised to see Commander Tuvok enter. He’d been on the bridge with her all morning and hadn’t said a word beyond what was called for in the course of performing his duty. If he’d been waiting for her to leave the bridge, then this was serious. Or personal. Or both.

He took up a position in front of her desk. “Captain, I have a matter of some importance to discuss with you. It concerns Ms. Hamilton.”

Instantly worrying, she silently indicated that he should sit down. “Go ahead.”

“As you know, Ms. Hamilton has been training with me for seven and a half months. For much of that time I have either tutored her or directed her training through holodeck programs. In addition to the regulation
security curriculum, we have worked with Vulcan meditation techniques and martial arts.”

“And I know she’s enjoyed it, especially the martial arts. Is there some problem I need to be aware of?”

“Quite the contrary. She has accomplished something of considerable significance. Yesterday in our sparring session, she momentarily gained an advantage over me.” He looked at her expectantly.

“She said she knocked you to the mat. What’s the significance of that besides the obvious?”

“No student at her level has ever done that before. Not unless I allowed it as part of the lesson, and in this instance, I did not allow it. This was not a tuck-and-roll fall, nor was it planned in order to channel the force of her move against me. It was, quite simply, a complete loss of advantage. For a moment Ms. Hamilton held the upper hand in our match. She has been improving at a very rapid pace, and I expected this to happen eventually. I am...surprised, however, that it occurred this early in her training. Such progress necessitates that I take the next step.”

Janeway was beginning to get suspicious. “There’s more going on in this training than I’ve been aware of, isn’t there?”

Tuvok inclined his head. “In the beginning of our lessons together, I was simply attempting to impart basic self-defense skills. But Ms. Hamilton quickly established herself as a talented and determined student. For several months now I have been training her with a specific task in mind. Yesterday she proved to me that she is ready for that task. What I have yet to ascertain, however, is whether you are prepared to accept her into the position.”

The suspicion had turned into a full-scale alarm. “And what position is that?”

“Your personal security escort.”

Janeway stared. Whatever she might have thought was coming, this wasn’t it. Straightening in her chair, she said, “I do not need a personal security escort. And if I did, it wouldn’t be Lynne.” It had taken her months to come to terms with Lynne going on any away missions at all, and even then she’d managed to make sure that none of those were likely to be dangerous. She’d be damned if she’d allow Lynne to accompany her on all of her away missions.
“I expected initial resistance. But I respectfully request that you hear out my logic.”

As if there could be anything logical about Lynne becoming a full-time personal security escort! Janeway glared at Tuvok, who simply waited. And she knew he’d wait forever if necessary. At last she sighed, giving into the inevitable. “All right, I’m listening.”

“Thank you. Captain, I have long been concerned about your tendency to leave the ship unescorted. You have a documented…distaste for security escorts of any kind.”

“Documented?” Despite her instant fear for Lynne, Janeway was amused by this statement. The only one who would document this would be Tuvok himself. And how like him that would be.

“Yes. It is my duty to ensure the security of the captain, and if the captain herself will not allow me to fulfill my duty, then I have no choice but to document the circumstances. At some point in time, I may be required to stand before a board of inquiry and explain why neither I nor any of my staff were with the captain when she was killed.”

That set her back on her heels. In all the times she’d refused an escort, she’d never thought of what it would mean for Tuvok’s position should she die on an away mission. He was right, he would be seen as failing in his duty unless he could prove otherwise.

Tuvok pressed the advantage. “When Ms. Hamilton’s talents became apparent, as well as the nature of her relationship with you, I began to consider a somewhat…unorthodox solution to the problem. I believed you would be more inclined to accept Ms. Hamilton as a personal escort than any other member of my staff, provided that you could be convinced of her professional capability. With that in mind I redirected her training. As of yesterday, she has reached a point at which I am ready to demonstrate that capability to you. Ms. Hamilton is currently more qualified than anyone on this ship, save Seven of Nine or myself, in protecting you from physical harm.”

Janeway couldn’t believe she was hearing this. Lynne had never given her any reason to believe that she was at that level of advancement! Nor had Tuvok, for that matter. “How is it that I have not been kept informed of Lynne’s progress—or the altered goal of her training?” she demanded.

“I have consistently reported that her progress was satisfactory,” he said, unaffected by her tone. “I did not inform you of the altered goal
because there was no reason to do so unless or until Ms. Hamilton showed herself capable of accomplishing that goal. I do not inform you of my expectations for any of my staff. I simply report to you when they have fallen short, or when they have fulfilled them and are ready for promotion or reassignment.”

Goddammit, she was being snowed under with Vulcan logic. She could argue that Tuvok should have reported more than satisfactory progress, which would at least have given her some warning. But then he’d simply say that his expectations for Lynne were higher, based on her talent, and therefore her progress was indeed satisfactory to those expectations. With an inward sigh, she conceded the point.

“All right. If you say she’s that good, then she must be. However, I’m not convinced of the necessity of reassigning her.” There’s no way in this universe or any other that I will knowingly take her into danger.

“Ms. Hamilton is a goal-oriented individual. She will not be satisfied indefinitely with her training and the occasional away mission. As her supervisor, it is my duty to provide for her ongoing professional development, and in my opinion she is ready for reassignment. Failing that, I predict she will become bored and disaffected. You and I both understand the consequences of stagnation to a member of any Starfleet crew. Such consequences are magnified for this crew, due to our situation, and even more so for Ms. Hamilton, due to her displacement in time.”

Janeway narrowed her eyes. “This feels remarkably like Vulcan manipulation.”

“It is simply a statement of fact. Ms. Hamilton has a greater need for a sense of worth and belonging than almost any other member of this crew. Therefore, should that need be denied, the negative consequences will also be greater. Obviously the final decision is yours, but my professional opinion is that the danger to Ms. Hamilton is greater if you do not allow this, than if you do.”

They stared at each other in silence for what seemed like minutes.

“Tuvok,” said Janeway at last, “I understand what you’re saying, but I’m sure we can find some other way of keeping her challenged without putting her in danger.”

“Due to her training and her capabilities, she would have less chance of being harmed than you do.” He paused, letting that sink in. “And I suspect that, were she here, she would argue forcefully for this opportu-
nity. She may not be Starfleet, but she is a contributing member of this crew, whose services can be of great use.”

Janeway took a breath to respond, but Tuvok beat her to it.

“Captain, it is not logical for us to continue this discussion in the abstract. I believe that a visual demonstration is the only effective method for convincing you of Ms. Hamilton’s capabilities. Therefore, I have arranged a test for her at 1600 today. I respectfully request your attendance.”

“What sort of test?” asked Janeway warily.

“A sparring match between her and myself. In addition, your presence will present an opportunity for me to test her in a different way than I have been able to do before.”

“Meaning…”

“I will be able to directly test her ability to protect you. She has never before had to fight with you watching. It is necessary to determine whether that will affect her performance. If it does, she may not be suitable as your personal escort.”

Suddenly Janeway had an urge to attend this test if only to distract Lynne in any way she could. After all, if Lynne failed the test, it would take this whole mess right out of her hands. She crushed the thought almost as soon as it registered. Lynne deserved her support, not her selfish hindrance.

“All right. In the training center?”

“No. The center is always in use; tests are conducted in private. I have reserved time in Holodeck Two.”

Janeway nodded. “Holodeck Two, sixteen hundred. I’ll be there.”

“Thank you, Captain.” He rose from the chair and walked out, leaving Janeway with a pile of reports on her desk and a mental state entirely unsuited to any form of concentration whatsoever. She walked to the upper level and ordered another cup of coffee. It was going to be a long day.
Chakotay watched Janeway vanish into the turbolift, her face set in a stern mask. After nearly six years he could read her body language very well, and he knew something was up. As usual, she hadn’t seen fit to share it with him. He’d noticed a growing trend over the last two months regarding Janeway’s reluctance to share her thoughts, speculations and concerns with him. She was as professional as ever, but the more personal aspect of their working relationship had faded. And he knew why, too. Dr. Revi Sandovhar was a regular visitor to the ready room these days, and socialized with the captain fairly often after hours. It was obvious to him that the ex-Borg had worked her way into a position of influence over the captain, just as she had with Seven of Nine. He’d been watching, and although no one else seemed to notice her maneuvers, he did. It wasn’t a coincidence that Sandovhar had been accepted almost immediately in both the captain’s ready room and her social circle.

The turbolift doors opened, revealing none other than the object of his thoughts. Sandovhar walked across the bridge and pressed the entry chime to the ready room, obviously expecting Janeway to be inside.

Chakotay didn’t hesitate. Rising from his chair, he turned the conn over to Ensign Kim and walked up behind Sandovhar.

“Come on in, Doctor,” he said, reaching around to activate the manual control. The door swished open, and he gestured for her to enter first. She
gave him a look of curiosity, but walked inside without a word. Stepping past her, he pulled out the chair behind Janeway’s desk and sat down. “What can I do for you?” he inquired with as courteous a tone as he could muster.

She looked around the ready room and back to him. “I’m sorry, the computer said that Captain Janeway was here. I must have just missed her.”

“By about thirty seconds,” he agreed. “She said she wouldn’t be back on the bridge before the end of the shift. But I’m sure I can help with whatever you needed.” Let’s see you come up with a good reason for being here.

Sandovhar flashed him a smile that he knew was completely insincere. “Thank you, Commander, but I’ll just wait until I can speak with the captain directly. I’m sorry to have bothered you.” She turned to leave.

“Sit down, Doctor.” His tone was no longer courteous.

Slowly, she turned back. When their eyes met, it was plain that any pretense of tolerance between them had been dropped. Crossing her arms over her chest, she said, “I’ve been sitting for the last several hours. I’d prefer to stand to hear whatever you obviously need to say to me.” Her face was carefully blank.

“Suit yourself. I simply wished to remind you that, as first officer, my job is to act as liaison between the captain and the rest of the crew. I’ve noticed that you tend to bypass me and go directly to the captain. Of course, it has been a while since you were aboard a starship, so perhaps you’ve forgotten protocol.” His voice hardened. “Which is, you report to me. The captain doesn’t have time to deal with every crew member directly. She has undoubtedly been giving you some leeway, due to fact that you’ve been...adjusting to being back in Starfleet. But I think two months is plenty of time, don’t you? I suggest you begin complying with regulations, Doctor.”

Her gaze didn’t waver. “I’m aware of regulations, Commander. I’m also aware that senior medical staff are not required to report to the first officer.”

“But you aren’t senior medical staff, are you?”

She regarded him silently.

“All right, Commander,” she said at last. “Why don’t we take off the gloves? You’ve made no secret of your dislike for me, and now you’re
trying to block my access to Captain Janeway. Why? What do you think you’ll gain?”

“Now you see,” he said conversationally, “that’s the difference between you and me. Just because your actions are motivated by personal gain, you assume the same of me. But I’m motivated by concern for my captain and my crew.” He dropped the friendly tone and allowed his loathing to show through. “I don’t trust you as far as I can throw you, which, given the Borg implants you’re still covered with, isn’t very far.” He saw her eyes narrow and congratulated himself on landing a blow. “I’ve been watching you, Sandovhar. I know you hooked Seven into a Borg interlink the moment you stepped on board. Did she have a choice about that? Oh, I forgot, you don’t make a habit of giving people choices. And now you’re getting to Captain Janeway, too. But you’re going to make a mistake somewhere, and when you do, I’ll be ready.” He leaned back in his chair. “I just wanted you to be aware that not everyone is falling for your act. Some of us still see you for what you really are.”

She eyed him and then shook her head. “Obviously you’re waiting for me to ask you what I really am, but since I’m quite aware of that myself, I’ll decline. Thanks for letting me know where you stand, Commander. And just so the air is clear between us, I haven’t been watching you. I’ve got more important things to do with my time.” Before he could respond, she wheeled and marched out.

He stared at the closed door and went over their confrontation in his mind. Frowning, he acknowledged that she’d gotten a pretty good blow in, too. The score seemed to be even. But it felt good to have come right out and told her. She’d have to be more careful now. And he was damned if she’d get anything over on this crew on his watch.

\[\text{The holodeck doors parted to reveal a muhok, a Vulcan martial arts center. Traditional stone walls enclosed a spacious room, lit by brilliant sunlight that streamed through the numerous windows and skylights. There was no furniture save for a single low table at one end of the room, on which a Vulcan prayer lamp burned. Both Tuvok and Lynne, dressed in matching rough white tunics and pants, knelt before the table. Janeway paused at the threshold, feeling a bit like an intruder. This was a place of} \]

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ritual and respect, and even though she’d been asked to come, she knew enough of Vulcan culture to understand that further progress would require invitation.

Tuvok rose from his position and turned. “Greetings, Captain. We thank you for your attendance. Please enter.” He indicated that she should stand at one end of the room.

Janeway stepped onto the padded floor of the muhok, which absorbed the sound of her boots. By the time she reached the end of the room and turned, Lynne and Tuvok were standing in the middle of the practice floor, facing each other.

“Ms. Hamilton, are you ready for your test?”

Lynne nodded. “Yes, Savensu,” she said, using a Vulcan term that roughly translated as ‘honored teacher.’

“Do you understand why the Captain is here?”

Lynne shot Janeway a glance, then returned her gaze to Tuvok. “I can only assume that she is here as a witness.”

“That is partially correct. She is also part of your test.”

Lynne’s brow furrowed. “I don’t understand.”

“We have trained with distractions before, but you have never had an emotional connection with them. This will be a standard shin zu’tin match. Prepare yourself.”

“Yes, Savensu.” Lynne bowed deeply from the waist. Tuvok acknowledged the bow with a nod. Both combatants slipped in their mouth guards and stepped apart to assume defensive stances. Another nod from Tuvok, and they began circling each other. The match was on.

Janeway, for her part, was getting over her shock at seeing Lynne behave in such a subservient manner. Her partner was many things, but subservient was most definitely not one of them. It had taken her months to even acknowledge the chain of command, and she certainly hadn’t hesitated to jump right off it when she felt the need to do so. Yet here she was, treating Tuvok with a level of respect that Janeway wouldn’t have thought her capable of. Apparently, her training with Tuvok was a whole world that Janeway hadn’t known about.

The slow dance of the combatants ended when Tuvok suddenly attacked. Janeway couldn’t even keep track of the lightning fast exchange of blows, kicks, blocks and parries. There was no immediate difference in the abilities of the two identically dressed fighters; had it not been for
Tuvok’s dark skin and Lynne’s braid, Janeway would have been hard pressed to keep track of who was who. She was stunned by the display, which had started out at a furious pace and only paused for brief periods before continuing at the same speed. They were moving all over the practice floor in their efforts to best each other, and Janeway winced at the occasional thump and slap of blows that hit their target. Several times Tuvok landed blows that should have sent Lynne flying, but each time she channeled the force into either a spin or a tuck-and-roll, always coming back with renewed energy. Tuvok himself hit the floor twice, both times for a mere moment and in a manner that seemed planned.

As she watched the furious battle, Janeway suddenly understood the import of Lynne’s accomplishment yesterday. And she also realized that although Lynne was not winning, neither was Tuvok.

*My god. How did this happen without me knowing? Why didn’t she tell me?*

The fight went on for nearly ten minutes—a phenomenal amount of time for hand-to-hand—before Tuvok suddenly stepped back. Both fighters were drenched with sweat and breathing hard. Janeway knew that she herself would have been flat on her back long before now. This was a level of fighting that far surpassed standard Starfleet training.

Removing his mouth guard, Tuvok said, “You have successfully completed this match. Take five minutes to rest and rehydrate.”

Lynne bowed again and pulled her own guard out. “Thank you, Savensu. May I speak with the captain?”

He nodded, and they both walked to the low table to retrieve their water bottles. Lynne took a long drink and then came over to Janeway, bottle in hand.

“Hi, love,” she said, still breathing hard. She wiped a sleeve across her face with little visible effect; the sweat continued to pour off her. “Tuvok knocked my socks off when he said you’d be here. Thanks for coming; it means a lot to me.” She gulped down more water, never taking her eyes off the captain.

Janeway felt instantly guilty that she’d never come to watch before now. “You’re welcome,” she said. “I had no idea you were this good. It seems like only yesterday you were just learning the basics of self-defense.”

Lynne grinned. “It was.”

Janeway tapped her lover on the chest. “You, my sweaty friend, are
very good at keeping secrets. Why on earth didn’t you tell me you were at this level?”

“I don’t know what level I’m at, Kathryn. Besides holodeck opponents, I’ve only ever fought Tuvok, and he’s unbeatable. I’m getting better at holding my own, though.”

Janeway shook her head. “You never fail to surprise me. Do you know that Tuvok says you’re better than anyone on Voyager except himself and Seven?”

The expression on Lynne’s face answered her question. “He said that?”

“Yes. And based on what I’ve seen so far, I plan to never piss you off again.”

Lynne laughed. “Can I quote you on that?”

“Absolutely not.”

The moment was interrupted by Tuvok’s arrival. Break time was over. With a final look of affection, Lynne turned to follow Tuvok back onto the practice floor. They had only walked a few paces, however, when Tuvok stopped and turned.

“You did well in the shin zu’tin,” he said. “It is time to increase the level of difficulty.” He looked at Janeway. “Captain, in this next test it will be Ms. Hamilton’s task to protect you from me. I am an enemy combatant attempting to reach you; Ms. Hamilton will be working to prevent this.”

Janeway nodded her understanding. This would make things much harder for Lynne; her movements would be greatly restricted by the necessity of keeping herself between Janeway and the “enemy.”

Tuvok looked back at Lynne. “This match will be shin na’shon,” he said. “Do you accept?”

Lynne paused, a startled look crossing her face before she nodded. “Yes, Savensu.”

Janeway had no idea what that meant, but Tuvok caught her eye. “The match will end in one of two ways: I break Ms. Hamilton’s defense and touch you, or she yields.” He stepped back, reached into his tunic and pulled out a wicked looking knife. “Prepare yourself.”

Lynne slipped in her mouth guard and assumed her defensive stance. This time there was no circling; Tuvok attacked immediately.

Janeway was speechless. That knife was no dummy blade. What the hell kind of sparring match was this? Yet Lynne hadn’t seemed fazed by the knife at all, which meant they’d done this before. A moment later she
kicked it out of his hand, sending it halfway across the *muhok*, and the battle began in earnest.

Watching the furious exchange of blows, Janeway could see the differences between this match and the one before. The previous bout had been more ritualistic, while this seemed to be no-holds-barred, anything-goes fighting. Lynne was taking more hits due to her inability to move around Tuvok, though that didn’t seem to be slowing her down. Then a strike slipped under her block, snapping her head back, and Janeway felt ill at the sight of the blood flowing from her nose. She stepped forward and then stopped herself. What would she do, call an end to the fight? If Lynne wanted it to end, she’d yield. And her lover showed no sign of even noticing the injury. Janeway stepped back again and watched, fascinated, as the two combatants rained blows on each other. Lynne crouched, sprang up and delivered a kick to Tuvok that spun him around. Before he could finish the spin, she landed back in a crouch and swept her leg under his, knocking him off his feet. Tuvok landed on his back, and Lynne was over him in a flash, driving a foot toward his throat. He caught her foot and twisted it, sending her down to the floor as well. He started to rise, but found his legs entangled in hers. She flipped her body over, using the leverage to bring Tuvok crashing down again, and then both combatants were back on their feet. Lynne was still in position between Tuvok and Janeway.

Tuvok paused for a moment, pulling out his mouth guard. “Well done,” he said, nodding in approval. Then he moved in again and the momentary lull was over.

Janeway was getting tired just watching them. They weren’t slowing down, and Tuvok was using every opportunity to land a blow on Lynne. She was returning the favor, and it wasn’t long before the practice mat was splattered with droplets of both Human and Vulcan blood.

Tuvok dropped back for a moment and then came back in, his body twisting as his leg flew through the air. Lynne blocked the double-kick combination, but she hadn’t expected the third, which came out of nowhere to land hard on the arm she threw up at the last second. Janeway felt her heart clench at Lynne’s sharp cry, and knew the arm was broken.

“All right, that’s—” Janeway’s outrage was stopped in its tracks when Lynne spit out her mouth guard and held up her unbroken arm.

“Kathryn, I’m fine,” she said without turning around.
“You’re fine,” repeated Janeway in disbelief. “He just broke your arm and you’re fine. I don’t think so. This match is over.”

Lynne still wasn’t looking at her. “Savensu, may I speak with the captain for a moment?”

Tuvok nodded and walked across to his water bottle. Lynne finally turned around, cradling her broken arm at her side. Her breathing was labored and she was obviously in a world of hurt as she closed her eyes. Janeway stepped up to her, wanting desperately to take her in her arms but knowing she’d only cause more pain.

“You don’t have to do this. You’ve proven yourself already,” she said urgently.

Lynne’s eyes opened and bored straight into hers. “Kathryn, I don’t have much time to explain this so please listen to me.”

Startled, Janeway could only nod. “I’m listening.”

“The longer I last in this match, the higher I score. If you make me quit now, you’re taking away my chance to prove myself to Tuvok. Do you think I can just quit if I get hurt in real life? Part of my training has been learning to deal with pain. It’s just a signal from my body, telling me that something is wrong. Well, I know that something is wrong, so I don’t need that signal anymore. I’m going to put it away and not listen to it. I have to go on. I want to. Please don’t interfere.”

Janeway understood the pain blocking principle; it was standard instruction at the Starfleet Academy, though not everyone mastered it. She also realized that Lynne’s training had obviously gone much deeper into this concept; her lover was already looking better. But still…

“I won’t interfere if you really want to keep going. But what’s the point? Haven’t you already shown what you’re capable of?”

Lynne shook her head. “No. I haven’t. We’ve never fought a shin na’shon match before. Tuvok doesn’t know how long I can last, and neither do I. But I do know that I want to show him my absolute best. Please, Kathryn. This is what I do now. It’s the only thing I have to offer.”

“It is not the only thing you have to offer.” Janeway was prepared to argue her lover’s mistaken notion, but she stopped at the look in those green eyes.

“Can we discuss this later?”

Janeway nodded and watched helplessly as Lynne took a deep breath and turned to walk back onto the practice floor.
“Savensu,” she called. Tuvok looked up. “With your permission, I’m ready to continue.” Tuvok came back to stand in front of her, and with no fanfare at all the battle resumed.

Janeway’s heart was in her mouth. This was no longer a test of Lynne’s fighting skills; it was now a test of her endurance. There was no doubt who would win. Tuvok was showing no mercy and even seemed to be targeting Lynne’s injured arm, forcing her to twist and block again and again. Janeway was getting more upset with every passing second; twice she stepped forward to stop the match, and twice she swallowed her fear and worry and stepped back again. Lynne was putting up a valiant fight and showing no sign of her pain, but Janeway knew it had to be excruciating.

The match went on longer than Janeway would ever have expected. But Lynne was slowing down; her hampered movements were making her work much harder and she was running out of energy. Her fatigue made her just a little too late to block a kick that connected on her good side and sent her flying. She twisted in mid-air, trying to land on her back, but there wasn’t enough time and Janeway watched in horror as she landed heavily on her broken arm. No amount of mental discipline could block that kind of impact, and Lynne’s scream of pain echoed through the room.

In a flash Janeway was standing over her, warning Tuvok off with a lethal glare. “That is enough!” she snapped. “Stand down, Commander.”

Tuvok pulled out his mouth guard and nodded. “The match is finished, Captain. But the test is not.”

Janeway couldn’t believe her ears. “What?”

Tuvok looked at Lynne, who was lying on the floor and gasping for breath. “Would you have yielded, Ms. Hamilton?”

“Tuvok,” Janeway growled. She was half a second away from throwing her chief of security in the brig for abuse of rank.

“No,” gasped Lynne. Janeway wheeled around in astonishment. Lynne’s face was white and she looked like she’d been hit by a shuttle, but her determination was plain to see.

“What was your next move?” Tuvok was calmly quizzing his student, as if they were all sitting in a classroom instead of watching Lynne fighting to breathe through her pain. The situation was surreal, and despite every instinct telling her to get Lynne to sickbay now, Janeway
hesitated. By the look on Lynne’s face, she didn’t want help or interference. This was still between the student and the teacher.

“Bring my knees up…” Lynne took a wheezing breath, “wait for you to stand over me...turn onto my back.” Another breath that made Janeway hurt just to hear it.

“You correctly anticipated my next actions,” said Tuvok, sounding satisfied. “Where would you have targeted your kick, groin or throat?”

“Throat...if I could. Needed...to incapacitate.” A shuddering breath.

“My last move.”

“Excellent,” said Tuvok. “Can you stand?”

Lynne was using her good hand to keep the broken arm tight against her side. She shook her head. “Not...on my own.”

Tuvok stepped around Janeway, who watched in amazement as he gently slid his hands under Lynne, careful not to jar her, and lifted her to her feet. That amazement changed to outright astonishment as he stood back and bowed deeply from the waist.

“I salute your courage,” he said. “You are a most worthy opponent, and a superior student.”

Lynne’s eyes were huge as she stared at him. “Thank you...Savensu.”

“Do not thank me. My respect is not a gift. You have earned it.

Computer, transport Lynne Hamilton directly to sick bay. Authorization Tuvok theta nine six one.”

Lynne vanished, and without her labored breathing the muhok was oppressively quiet.

With her lover safely away, Janeway let go of her worry and fear for the moment—which made room for her overwhelming anger. Settling a cold glare on Tuvok, she said, “Do you use such sadistic methods with all of your staff, Commander, or just Lynne?” Her use of his rank was a clear warning sign.

“With respect, Captain, it was necessary.”

Janeway stepped into his personal space. “That was not security training. That was torture. And I want an explanation, right now.”

Tuvok inclined his head. “Ms. Hamilton’s training has gone well beyond the normal curriculum. I have been instructing her in traditional Vulcan martial arts methods, including meditation and mental control techniques. A shin na’shon match is part of this tradition. It allows the student to prove herself beyond any parameters the instructor might set.
Ms. Hamilton had the option of ending the match when she felt it necessary; obviously, she did not feel it necessary."

“So it’s traditional,” Janeway nearly spat out the word, “to break your student’s bones and then target those injuries in a fight?”

“The injury was not intentional. However, once inflicted it did indeed become a target. That is prescribed by the traditions of a shin na’shon. Ms. Hamilton is not being trained for competition bouts. She is being trained for combat. Rules, referees and fair play concepts are not a part of real-world combat.”

“I’m well aware of that, Commander. I’m also well aware that there are other methods of training for combat that do not involve the kind of suffering I just witnessed. Perhaps you can enlighten me on why you chose not to use more humane methods.” She was seething, and he actually took a step back from her palpable anger.

“Ms. Hamilton’s training has been conducted within the framework of traditional Vulcan martial arts by her own request,” he said. “She knew what to expect. She knew the risks involved in the test we just completed, and she accepted them. My error was in not ensuring that you understood these same risks. For that I apologize.”

Her fury abated slightly at the rare apology from her security chief, but she was still ready to cause serious injury. “If you had bothered to explain it, I would never have allowed this travesty to take place.”

“Then you would have done Ms. Hamilton a grave disservice,” he said calmly.

“I would have done her a disservice! Please, Commander, do enlighten me. What was so very useful about the suffering you just put her through?”

“It brought her to an understanding of her own capability,” he answered. “Such an understanding cannot be reached by any means other than actual experience. Today Ms. Hamilton earned something that she has sought since she began training with me.”

“And what is that?”

“The respect and acknowledgment of her savensu, manifested in the awarding of her new title. As of this moment she is ta’nek. Had you prevented this match you would have denied her the opportunity to earn her ranking.”

Ta’nek! Stunned out of her rage for a moment, Janeway shook her head.
“She’s been working with you for less than eight months! How can she have gotten that far that fast?” She didn’t know much about Vulcan martial arts, but she did know that most students took two to three years to reach their ta’nek.

The expression on Tuvok’s face was almost one of pride. “She began with a native talent,” he said, “and combined it with an intense determination. She has spent an average of four hours per day honing these skills, in addition to her standard security training. Ms. Hamilton is motivated by a need to succeed, Captain. It is her greatest strength. It is also her greatest weakness. Failure is not something she can accept.”

The anger was draining out of Janeway’s system as she listened to Tuvok explain the inner workings of her own fiancée. She knew this about Lynne, but it was starting to sound as if she hadn’t been providing her partner with an appropriate outlet for that need. Tuvok had. Goddamn it all to hell anyway! She stared into his calm eyes, knowing she was very likely in the wrong and not wanting to admit it.

“I need to get to sickbay. But this conversation is not over.”

He nodded. “Will you give her a message from me?”

“What’s that?”

He quirked an eyebrow. “Please tell her that her savensu will require a considerable amount of time with the dermal regenerator.”

For the first time, Janeway noticed the blood and bruises on Tuvok’s face—Lynne had inflicted quite a bit of damage. She felt a savage glee and immediately suppressed it.

“I’ll tell her.”
The sickbay doors parted to reveal Revi standing over an unconscious Lynne, moving a bone knitter over her lower arm. She looked up at Janeway’s entrance and immediately held up a calming hand.

“Slow down, Kathryn. She’s all right. It was a minor fracture of the radius.”

“Then why is she unconscious?” asked Janeway, looking down at her lover’s bruised face.

“Because I sedated her. And right before that I gave her a lecture, which I’m now going to share with you. I know she’s been training with Tuvok, but I think she’s forgotten she’s not Vulcan. She can’t keep up with him no matter how hard she tries; her body simply lacks the physiological capacity. She needs to slow down, or at least give herself some rest. And since I was fairly certain she wouldn’t listen to my excellent advice, I enforced it.”

“She hasn’t complained of any physical issues.”

Revi gave her a look of long-suffering patience. “Do you think Lynne would ever admit to physical frailty?”

Janeway shook her head. “I’d have said yes before now, but after what I just saw I think she’d have to be missing a limb before admitting to anything at all. How long will she be out?”

“Two, three hours. Not enough, but it’s a very deep sleep. It will help.”
“So will a honeymoon.”
“If you weren’t planning to climb a mountain, I’d agree.”
“That’s her week. For my week we’re lying around on a beach doing nothing.”
“Good. That will help.”
Janeway watched Lynne’s face, letting the hum of the bone knitter soothe her frayed nerves. After a while Revi spoke again. “She took quite a beating. How does Tuvok look?”
Try as she might, the smile got away from her. “About the same, minus the arm.”
Revi smiled as well. “Good for her. I want her on my side in a fight.”
Janeway looked at the ex-Borg, whose remaining implants—particularly the cybernetic arm—made her one of the more physically imposing individuals on the ship. Shaking her head, she returned her gaze to her sleeping lover. Her lover, who had just established herself as one of the top three fighters on the crew.
“Me too,” she said. And relaxed, for the first time since Tuvok had come into her ready room.

Janeway felt no guilt at utilizing a site-to-site transport for a non-medical situation. She could have left Lynne sleeping in sickbay, but there was no reason for her to take up space in sickbay when someone else might need it, was there? It just made sense to transport her to the captain’s quarters, where Janeway made sure she was resting comfortably in her bed before moving into the living area. After replicating a small dinner and a glass of wine, she sat in front of her computer and called up all the information she could find on Vulcan martial arts, focusing on shin na’shon matches and ta’nek status. Two hours later she rose, refilled her wine glass and took it to the couch. Sitting and staring out at the star streaks, she felt a depression settle around her.

Her research had made one thing very apparent: she should have looked up that information months ago. Vulcan martial art training was an entire culture, involving mental discipline and behavioral requirements as well as physical training. Lynne had been spending a significant part of her life engaged in a world that Janeway hadn’t known anything about.
Certainly she had shared the high points of her progress, but she hadn’t gotten into much detail and Janeway, to her eternal shame, hadn’t asked. Now she admitted to herself that she hadn’t wanted to know. When Lynne had first come to her, asking for permission to take part in combat training, Janeway had been appalled at the very thought. She’d agreed only after Lynne had backed her into a corner with a very logical list of reasons why such training was appropriate. And as soon as she’d agreed and made the training part of Lynne’s daily duties, she’d put the whole thing out of her mind. She didn’t want to know the details of how her lover was learning to fight and kill.

But it had happened regardless of her involvement, and her attempts to deny the whole thing had only resulted in a complete lack of support for Lynne. Not to mention that she’d looked like an uninformed idiot in front of Tuvok.

She sighed, leaning her head back on the couch. While she’d been busy not acknowledging Lynne’s training, her lover had gone ahead and reached one of the higher skill levels attainable in Vulcan martial arts. Today Lynne was a ta’nek. And she’d earned it no thanks to her partner and captain, who on her very first attendance to a bout had tried to step in where she’d had absolutely no business interfering. The computer files had made that abundantly clear. The whole point of a shin na’shon match was that it gave total control to the student. It was a pivotal moment in a student’s training: the moment when the rigid teacher-student relationship changed, with the teacher stepping back and the student taking on the responsibility of dictating the length of the match. Tuvok could not have ended that match no matter how many broken bones Lynne sustained. Not until Lynne herself yielded. And, of course, she never had. Janeway had stepped in first, ending the match by default and denying Lynne the control that she had earned.

And then I made it even worse by ripping into Tuvok when I’m the one who was in the wrong. She owed Tuvok an apology. It wasn’t his fault that she hadn’t taken the time to learn anything about Lynne’s training.

Well, she’d no doubt have the opportunity to apologize tomorrow, when Tuvok brought up the topic of Lynne’s transfer. And what was she going to do about that? She recalled Tuvok’s arguments in her ready room, and her own admittedly feeble counterarguments. She thought about how much effort Lynne had put into earning a place on away team
rotation, and what such a duty might do for her psyche. Then she thought about taking Lynne with her whenever she left the ship, and smiled as a few pleasant possibilities occurred to her.

The soft sound of rustling blankets brought her out of her thoughts, and she looked over to see Lynne come padding out of the bedroom, rumpled and sleepy. Without a word, she sat down on the sofa, tucking her legs beneath her and leaning her head on Janeway’s shoulder. Janeway held her close, supporting her as Lynne closed her eyes. For long minutes they stayed in this position, until Lynne finally raised her head.

“I’m a ta’nek,” she said softly. “Can you believe it?”

“Only because I was there to see it,” said Janeway. “Lynne, I am so proud of you. I had no idea.”

“I didn’t either. Tuvok just told me I was making satisfactory progress. He never gave anything away. God, Kathryn, I thought I’d lose it when he bowed to me.”

Her eyes shone with unshed tears, and Janeway squeezed her tightly. She now knew, thanks to her research, that Tuvok’s bow had been the formal acknowledgment of Lynne’s new status. A savensu did not bow to a student, but Lynne was more than a student now. She was not yet an equal, and would not be for a long time to come, but she had earned the respect of her teacher and had demonstrated the abilities necessary to become a ta’nek.

“Thanks for not stopping the match when Tuvok nailed my arm,” said Lynne. “I know that was hard for you to watch.”

“That’s an understatement,” Janeway said. “But I’ve been doing a bit of research while you were asleep, and I understand a lot more about what you just accomplished. Lynne, what you did—what you’ve been doing all this time—is truly amazing. I’m so sorry that I haven’t been more involved. You deserved more than that from me.”

“It’s all right—”

“No, it’s not,” Janeway interrupted. She didn’t want Lynne to be understanding and forgiving. Not until she confessed the full extent of her failure. “I didn’t want to know. I didn’t take the time to learn about something that was important to you, because I wanted to keep thinking of you as separate from the part of my life that deals with combat and risk and death. I wanted you to be safe and protected and to never be in danger, and in the process I never really acknowledged what you wanted; what
you’ve been working toward. And today I went one step further by stop-
ping your shin na’shon match when I had absolutely no business interfer-
ing. That was your moment, and I sabotaged it. I am so sorry. Forgive me?”

“You’re really beating yourself up over this, aren’t you?”

There was no answer to that; at least, not one that Janeway wanted to
give. She just looked into Lynne’s eyes and waited.

Lynne scooted back so that she was leaning comfortably against the
arm of the couch, her legs draped over Janeway’s. “Okay,” she said. “First
of all, there’s nothing to forgive regarding your stopping the shin na’shon. If
I saw you get hurt that way, you’d better believe that I’d do everything I
could to stop it. If I’d known in advance that Tuvok was going to call a shin
na’shon and that you’d be there, I would have warned you of the possibili-
ties.” She paused. “No, on second thought, I would have asked you not to
come at all. All bets are off in a match like that, and as soon as Tuvok
asked me if I accepted the challenge I knew I was probably going to get
hurt. I didn’t want you to see what you saw today, Kathryn. And I don’t
blame you at all for reacting the way you did. You acted out of love and
concern for me, and I appreciate it.”

Janeway couldn’t believe that she was letting her off so easily. “But the
whole point of the shin na’shon is that you had total control for the first
time. You worked hard for that, and I took it away from you. I had
no right.”

“No, you didn’t have the right. But you didn’t know that at the time,
did you?”

“No.” Janeway was ashamed. “But I should have.”

“Why? I didn’t explain it to you.”

“Because…” Janeway felt like she was fumbling. “Because it was
important to you. I should have taken more time to find out what it was
that you were doing.”

Lynne lifted her legs off Janeway’s and shifted so that she was resting
her side against the back of the couch, their faces just centimeters apart.
“If there’s fault here, and I’m not convinced there is, then it’s shared. I
certainly had the option of telling you more, and I didn’t because there
were some aspects of my training that I really didn’t want you to know
about. Don’t do this to yourself. I’m not mad at you.”

Janeway looked at her disbelievingly. She’d been so busy castigating
herself for her lack of knowledge that she couldn’t quite accept Lynne not doing the same.

“Why not?” she asked.

Lynne blew out an exasperated breath. “Why on earth would I be mad at the woman who protected me when I was hurt? I appreciated what you did. It wasn’t really the right time for it, but your instincts came from loving me. I can’t fault that. And neither should you.”

Janeway stared into her eyes, finding nothing but understanding there. It was hard to let go of her guilt, but Lynne wasn’t giving her a reason to hold on to it. At last she nodded, reaching up to brush the backs of her fingers against Lynne’s jaw.

“You’re a rare woman, Lynne Hamilton,” she said. “Thank you.”

Smiling, Lynne said, “Rare? Hell, I’m one of a kind. See any other four hundred-year-old women walking around here?”

Janeway knew she was trying to defuse the seriousness of the conversation. It was working, too—a warmth filled her chest, driving out the depression she’d been sinking under. She caressed Lynne’s face and leaned in for a gentle kiss. “No,” she said as she pulled back, “I don’t see any others. But if you see any, send them my way. I have a special place in my heart for four hundred-year-old women.”

“Ah, your secret is out. I’ll keep my eyes open, but luckily for me there shouldn’t be too much competition.”

“Exactly none,” agreed Janeway. “Luckily for me. I really don’t think I could handle more than one of you.” She suddenly remembered. “Oh, I have a message for you from Tuvok.”

“What’s that?”

“He said to tell you that he would require a considerable amount of time with a dermal regenerator. You really did a number on him.”

To her surprise, Lynne looked regretful. “This is the first time I haven’t done the regenerating for him.”

Janeway wasn’t sure what to think of that. “Do you have to patch him up very often?”

“I’m not sure what you’d call ‘often,’ but yes, healing each other afterwards is part of each training session if blows are actually landed. Sometimes we just practice form. But when we’re going full-out, we end up with lumps and bruises and occasionally a bloody nose. And before you ask, no, I’ve never broken anything until now.”
“So how is the regeneration part of a training session?” Janeway hadn’t run across this in her reading.

“Vulcans believe in balance,” said Lynne. “If I land a strike on Tuvok that causes damage, I’m obligated to heal it afterwards in order to keep things in balance. Believe me, when you see the results of your moves up close and personal, it really sinks in exactly what you’ve done. In Vulcan martial arts it’s impossible to forget the physical cost of combat, because you’re faced with it after every match. A muhok is always equipped with tissue regenerators.”

Janeway was fascinated. “Healing someone is such an intimate act. It’s the opposite of hurting them.”

“Exactly. Balance.”

Janeway ran her fingers through Lynne’s unbound hair while she thought about what she’d learned. Lynne leaned her head back, eyes closed and practically purring, and Janeway knew her partner wouldn’t move a centimeter as long as she kept up her caresses.

“Amazing,” she mused. “Here sits one of the most skilled fighters on the ship, and I can render her immobile with this simple move.”

“Mmm hm.” Lynne didn’t open her eyes. “It’s my greatest weakness. Don’t tell.”

Unbidden, Janeway heard Tuvok’s warning. Ms. Hamilton is motivated by a need to succeed. It is also her weakness. And in that moment, she made her decision.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “I don’t want anyone else to have this kind of control over you. I reserve that for myself.”

Lynne’s lips curved in a smile. “Control, huh?”

“Well, I have to keep you in check somehow. This is my failsafe.”

“Okay. I don’t mind.”

They stayed that way for some time, while Janeway basked in the security and happiness that always came from these quiet moments with Lynne. But there were still things left unsaid, and tonight was the night for it. After months of avoiding the topic, she’d finally come to a resolution. Now she needed to know whether or not she’d have to act on it.

“Lynne, what do you want?” she asked.

Lynne’s head came up and she looked at Janeway in confusion. “What do I want? With what?”
“With your life. You’ve been working nonstop to acquire combat skills that you don’t really need. What is it that you want to do with them?”

“Well…I guess I just want to be useful,” said Lynne, who was clearly unprepared for the question.

“You could be useful scrubbing out the waste reclamation sump. Is that what you really want?”

“No,” Lynne admitted. “I, um…” She ran a nervous hand through her hair. “God, I hate it when you do this to me.”

Janeway said nothing. She’d been with Lynne long enough by now to know that sometimes, the best strategy was simply to wait. Eventually she heard her sigh, and knew that the real story was about to come out.

“I feel like an idiot saying this out loud, but—I want to be the best, Kathryn.” Raising her head, she pinned Janeway with an intense gaze. “Or if not the best, one of the best. I want to be one of the people everyone else looks to when they need someone to get the job done.” Her eyes softened. “Does that make sense?”

“Perfectly,” said Janeway, who understood this concept quite well.

“It’s what I’m used to,” Lynne continued. “It’s what I lost when I came here. Remember our discussion about the concept of macho?”

Janeway nodded, trusting that the seeming non sequitur would soon make sense.

“Well, I spent my life in a field where the macho culture was very much alive and well. It was a man’s game. Women weren’t supposed to be good climbers, you know. We’re too weak, we don’t have the endurance, we can’t be counted on in an emergency, we can’t be trusted to anchor a rope, we wimp out when the going gets tough, et cetera ad nauseum.” Lynne’s curled lip told Janeway exactly how she felt about that concept. “So in order to gain any kind of acceptance in the climbing community, I had to be not just as good, but better than the guys I was climbing with. It improved a lot as more women started climbing, but in the early days it was bad. I mean, I had a lot of guys who thought my purpose on a climbing team was to provide a piece of ass for their enjoyment. I actually had to hurt a few of them.” While Janeway bristled at the very thought of it, Lynne got a rather evil smile on her face. “If I’d only known then what I know now.”

“Please tell me none of them ever…hurt you,” Janeway said, unable to actually verbalize the thought.
Lynne took Janeway’s hand in her own. “No,” she said. “I’m not a small woman, as you may have noticed, and even though I didn’t know the moves I do now, I sure knew how to use my weight and strength to hit certain vulnerable areas. You only have to kick a guy’s balls into his throat once before he gets the idea.” She shook her head. “But not all women climbers were as fortunate. I had a few friends who paid a very, very high price for doing what they loved.” She squeezed Janeway’s hand and let go. “Anyway, my point is that when I got zapped off Denali, I was at the peak of my profession. I was known throughout the international climbing community as one of the best. And then I came here and that was all gone. Not only was I not the best, I was hardly able to even be useful. You know how hard that was on me.”

Janeway nodded, remembering the efforts Lynne had made to keep busy and make some kind of contribution. She also remembered, very clearly, how much Lynne’s personality had changed the first time she’d gone on an away mission.

“Yes, I do,” she said. “And you became a whole different person after Tuvok put you on point for going into that cave.”

Lynne flashed a brilliant smile. “Oh yeah,” she said. “That was spectacular. It was the first time I really felt like me again.” She rested her elbow on the couch back and propped her head in her hand. “But that turned out to be such a once-in-a while thing, you know? I needed more. So I talked to Tuvok, and he was kind enough to take me on as a serious student. And when you made combat training part of my duties, that just opened the door. I had something to work towards, something truly viable and useful. I felt like I had control of my life again. And I, um…” She paused, looking at Janeway warily. “I hoped if I got good enough, you’d have to put me on away mission rotation. Full-time, not just the ones where nothing can possibly go wrong. Those are too few and far between. I want to see more, and do more.”

Here we go. Despite the decision she’d made minutes ago, part of her had still hoped that somehow, Lynne wouldn’t ask. She knew it was a hopeless notion, but since when did logic and emotions go together?

“I’ve been dreading this conversation,” Lynne said. That makes two of us. “Why?”

“Because this is the end of the line for me.” Lynne tucked an errant strand of hair behind her ear. “Up until now, I could tell myself that if I
just worked hard enough, I could do anything I wanted. But that’s not true anymore. I’ve hit the wall.”

“And I’m the wall.” The truth of it didn’t lessen the sting.

Lynne reached out for her hand. “I didn’t mean it like that. When I came back from Earth, I did it knowing that I was giving up total control of my life. And I thought I’d be okay with that, given the rewards that came with it.” She gently squeezed Janeway’s hand, rubbing her thumb on its back. “But we haven’t had any conflicts of interest since then, so it hasn’t been put to the test. I haven’t had to pay the price for my decision—until now. That’s the wall I’m talking about. This is the part where I have to suck it up and live by whatever decision you make.”

Janeway put her hand on Lynne’s, stilling the motion of her thumb. “I think you’ve been paying the price for that decision every day.” She saw the brief flash of pain before Lynne covered it with a half-smile.

“Point taken. But you know what I mean.”

“Yes, I do. But I want you to understand that I pay the price for that decision every day, too. I know what it cost you to stay here. And I got hell’s own preview of what it would be like to lose you. So I’m torn between giving you what you want, in order to make that price you pay worth it in some small way—and keeping you as safe as I can, to make sure that preview I got never becomes my reality.” Lynne opened her mouth to speak, but Janeway put two fingers on her lips, gently shushing her. “Please let me finish. I’ve been thinking about this all day, and I made my decision before you asked. And no,” she added in response to Lynne’s startled expression, “I didn’t know you’d ask. Tuvok came to me with a proposal before your match. That’s why I was there.”

“What kind of proposal?”

“He seems to think I need a personal security escort. Someone to be with me every time I leave this ship. And it appears he’s been training you for the job.”

Lynne’s eyes widened to the size of dinner plates. “What did you tell him?”

“I said I didn’t need one, and if I did, it wouldn’t be you.” Janeway watched her slump, and held up a hand. “Wait. That’s what I told Tuvok before your match. It’s not what I’m telling you now.”

Lynne sat up so straight Janeway could almost hear her vertebrae crack. “What are you saying now?”
“I’m saying that Tuvok would never have proposed it if he didn’t think you were completely qualified. And if he thinks you’re qualified, then you most certainly are. I know how important this is to you, and if I stand in your way simply out of fear for your safety, then I’m letting my selfish needs interfere with what’s best for you—and possibly what’s best for the ship. Which is unacceptable. So…how would you feel about being my personal security escort?”

There was a heavy silence in the room while the two women stared at each other. It lasted several seconds before being shattered by Lynne’s whoop of joy. Janeway found herself with an armful of a very happy woman, who then leapt off the couch and did an impromptu victory dance with her clenched fists raised over her head.

“Yes! Thank you, Tuvok!” Lynne dropped her arms and came back, leaning over Janeway and resting her hands on the back of the couch. “And thank you, Kathryn. I can’t tell you how happy this makes me.”

“There’s a condition,” Janeway warned.

The grin slipped off Lynne’s face as she sat down. “There always is.”

“I’m not offering you the position yet,” Janeway continued. “Not officially. I have to review Tuvok’s full request tomorrow first, but before I even think about transferring you, I need you to make me a promise.”

“Okaaay,” said Lynne slowly. “This sounds serious.”

Janeway nodded. “You have to promise me that you will never, under any circumstances, defy or even question my orders. Because the first time you do will be your last. Do you understand?”

“Kathryn, I’m not an idiot. I’ve never questioned Tuvok’s standing as my supervisor; why would I question yours?”

“Because you’ve already done it once. And you publicly questioned Chakotay when he was in charge of the ship. Like it or not, you have a history. I need to be sure that it stays in the realm of history and doesn’t bite me in the future.”

“Jesus, Kathryn, you make it sound like I got caught stealing supplies.” Lynne was offended. “Two times I took a stand when someone’s life was at stake, and one of them was yours. You can’t honestly expect me not to open my mouth if I think you’re putting yourself in danger.”

“Yes, I can,” said Janeway evenly. “I can expect you to give your opinion if I ask for it, and to abide by whatever decision I make.” She held her hand out to indicate her quarters. “In here, and in your quarters, you
can question me and argue with me all you want. It’s one of the things I value in our relationship. But out there you can’t. Period. That’s the condition. Take it or leave it.”

There was a long silence while they stared at each other. Finally Lynne quirked an eyebrow.

“Tell me, Kathryn, as your personal security escort, would my primary duty be to protect you?”

“Yes.” Janeway was instantly suspicious.

“So if you gave me an order that I felt would result in danger or harm to you, I would be duty-bound to question or even reject that order, wouldn’t I?”

Ah. Should have expected that one.

“Nice try. I’m the highest authority on this ship. Questioning or defying any order of mine, regardless of whether it conflicts with your primary duty, would be placing your authority above mine and that’s just not possible.”

“Tuvok does it. So does Chakotay.”

“Tuvok is my chief of security and Chakotay is my first officer. They’ve earned the right to occasionally question my decisions. But even they will only do it to the point where I make it an order.”

Lynne sat back. “Then I leave it.”

“What?”

“You said take it or leave it. I’m leaving it. I can’t accept a job where my boss can order me to do something in conflict with my primary duty. I won’t be your personal security escort if you can just disempower me whenever you feel like it. Either I protect you, or I don’t, but I won’t do this in-between shit.”

In all her agonizing over whether or not to offer the transfer, not once had Janeway considered that her lover might turn it down. She was so surprised she almost missed Lynne’s next words.

“However,” Lynne continued, “If you want a guarantee that I’ll never question orders except those that I feel put you in personal danger, that I can do. So I guess it’s a question of what you really want: full-time security or none at all. Part-time security isn’t an option. At least not with me.”

Lynne had just given her the perfect way out. It was almost too easy.

“I appreciate your honesty,” she said. “And in answer to what I want... well, I’ve gotten along with what you’d call part-time security—and often
none at all—for a long time now. I don’t see any problem continuing that way. I can’t accept your condition.”

Lynne nodded. “Fair enough. In that case I want full-time away team rotation. I’m requesting an immediate transfer.”

Checkmate—and Janeway hadn’t seen it coming. By offering Lynne the post of personal security escort, she had already acknowledged that her partner’s qualifications exceeded those required for away team rotation. But that rotation meant that Lynne would often be off the ship while Janeway sat on the bridge, worrying herself sick. The alternative required her to accept Lynne’s condition, which was impossible. And either way, Lynne would be working in potentially dangerous situations. The only choice left to Janeway now was whether Lynne would be facing danger with or without her, and she found herself growing increasingly annoyed at her partner for forcing her into this decision.

“You know exactly what you’re doing, don’t you?” she said.

“I’m not doing anything. You’re the one who set the original condition.”

“The innocent act won’t work. I don’t like being manipulated, Lynne.”

“Hey, don’t get upset with me. I offered you a choice, just like you offered me one. I’m not manipulating you into anything.” Lynne paused, visibly relaxing against the sofa. “And even if I were, you should be proud of me. I had the best of teachers.”

“Are you saying I’m manipulative?” Annoyance was morphing into the beginnings of anger.

“Of course you are,” Lynne replied calmly. “Are you saying that’s a bad thing?”

The response collapsed Janeway’s anger like a punctured balloon. She opened her mouth to answer, paused, then sat back and shook her head. “Only when I’m not the one doing it.”

Sometimes, she thought, Lynne’s smile really could light up a room.

“Truce?” Lynne asked.

Janeway nodded. “Truce. But I still don’t like being manipulated.”

“And I don’t like being told that I don’t have the right to do everything I can to protect the woman I love. Surely you can understand that.”

Janeway saw a familiar determination in her. “Yes, I can,” she said. It occurred to her that Lynne had only asked to do what she herself had done for months—except that her partner had been completely up front
about it, while she’d been...well, manipulating events to protect Lynne. And she was about to do it again. “I’ll notify Chakotay tomorrow that you are now on active away team rotation.”

Lynne would have made a terrible poker player, she decided. Her surprise was obvious.

“Damn. I didn’t think you’d say that.”

“Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“Well...yes, but...” Lynne stumbled to a halt. “No, it’s not what I want. I’d far rather be with you. I want that escort post.”

“It’s still available. You know the terms.”

And now Lynne was the one with no good options. She’d admitted her real objective—a fatal mistake in negotiations—and had no cards left to play. The look in her eyes said that she knew she’d lost, and it only took her a few seconds to concede.

“All right. I accept your terms. But I don’t have to like them.”

“No, you don’t. You just have to live by them. And you need to be aware that your safety will be one of my highest priorities. I don’t order my crew where I’m afraid to go myself, and I don’t leave a danger zone until I know my crew is safe. So don’t get any ideas about staying behind again. If you’re in danger, I’ll be there with you.”

“Well, that kind of defeats the purpose, doesn’t it?”

“It might defeat yours. It doesn’t defeat mine.”

Lynne lifted her chin, eyes narrowed in understanding. “In other words, you’re giving me the job but you’re not going to actually let me do it.”

“In other words, I’m going to let you do your job right up to the point where you get any ideas about sacrificing yourself for me.”

The ensuing silence was so loud that Janeway was pretty sure she could hear the fibers in her carpet degrading as they aged.

“Kathryn,” said Lynne at last, “has it occurred to you that your life just might be more important than mine? And that’s why you’re the captain, and I’m the security escort?”

Janeway sighed. “Tuvok tried to convince me of that right after Dakmor. And I’m sorry, but I just can’t accept that. I can do the numbers—that one life is less important than saving ten or fifty or one hundred others—but I can’t place your life in a position of less importance than mine. It’s just not an option.”
Slowly, Lynne nodded. “Okay,” she said. “I give. I guess I shouldn’t have expected you to do something so completely against your nature.”

Janeway reached for her hand. “Thank you. And I admire your attempt to do what you thought was best. But you really need to know something.”

“What’s that?”

“Don’t ever bluff unless you’re prepared to lose the pot.”

That got her a smile and a squeeze of the hand. “Thanks for not giving me the other advice.”

“And that is?”

“If you can’t run with the big dogs, stay on the porch.”

Janeway laughed. “You’re calling me a dog?”

“The biggest.”

“I can live with that.”

Lynne smiled at her. “Are we okay?”

“We’re okay.”

“Good, ‘cause I’m starved.” She started to get up and immediately dropped back to the cushions, her head between her knees.

“Are you all right?” Cautiously, Janeway rested a light hand on her bent back.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” Lynne sat back up, her face flushed. “Just got a bit dizzy for a second. Stood up too fast, I guess.” Carefully, she stood again.

Janeway glanced at the chronometer. “When did you last eat?”

“Lunch time, but I didn’t have much. Sparring on a full stomach is not a good idea.”

“Well, that might have something to do with it. Come on, let’s feed you. And while we’re at it, why don’t you fill me in on your training. In detail this time.” She gave Lynne a look laden with meaning.

Lynne got it. “Okay, but I really need a shower first. I’m surprised you can stand being this close to me.”

“Well, you do smell a bit like a targ, but not commenting on personal hygiene is one of the first things they teach you in diplomacy training.”

“Oh, you’re hilarious. You should take that act on the road.”

Janeway smirked, patting Lynne on the butt as she turned toward the bedroom. Lynne cast a playful warning look over her shoulder just before vanishing around the corner.

Janeway watched the empty doorway for a moment, then walked to the
replicator. Soon a pasta dish and wine sat on the table, along with a few flickering candles, and Janeway stood at the viewport while she waited. Lynne was taking a hydroshower, one of the amenities that she swore she simply could not live without. Janeway had once commented that she knew she’d get Lynne to move in eventually, if only for the shower.

Gazing at the star streaks, she felt oddly at peace. Maybe it was because what she’d spent so many months trying to avoid had finally happened, in spite of her efforts. She no longer carried the burden of trying to prevent it.

Right. Now you just have to worry about what happens next. A small smile curved her lips. But at least whatever happens, she’ll be with me. It wasn’t an option she had ever considered before this morning, and the more she thought about it, the more she liked it.

The water was turned off, and a few minutes later Lynne came into the living area barefoot and wearing a silk robe, her wet hair slicked back. Janeway took in a breath at her appearance and felt a rush of warmth right down to her toes. God, this woman was gorgeous. Not that she was in any way prejudiced, but she was certain that Lynne got more beautiful every day. And that robe did a wonderful job of showing off her assets. Janeway had given it to her a few months ago, but she freely admitted that she’d done it for her own benefit.

“What?” said Lynne as she took her seat. “You’re looking at me funny.”

“I’m just appreciating the fact that the most beautiful woman on the ship is here with me,” said Janeway. She enjoyed the ensuing blush far too much.

“All I have to do is look across this table to know that isn’t true,” said Lynne. “But I’m glad you think so, because your opinion is the only one that counts with me. Thanks for making dinner,” she added.

The rest of the evening went by quickly, as Lynne ate and told Janeway all about her training. Some of the things she spoke of weren’t taught to Starfleet security staff until their third year at the Academy, and quite a few things, so far as Janeway knew, weren’t taught to Starfleet staff at all. Lynne had made remarkable progress in seven and a half months, and Janeway told her so.

“Well, if you think about it,” said Lynne, “I’ve been doing almost nothing
but training. All day long, five days a week. I mean, most martial arts students in my time put in a few hours a week. I do more than that in one day. The same goes for the weapons, tactical and investigative training. And on top of that, I’m not in a classroom situation where the pace of learning is limited to the slowest student. I’ve been either learning from Tuvok one-on-one, or else using his holodeck training programs, which he modified specifically for me. So I don’t think it’s that surprising that I’ve been on a steep learning curve.”

Janeway shook her head. “Modesty is a positive trait, sweetheart, but in this case I’d have to say you’re just not seeing the truth. You’ve got a real talent for this. An average student, even in the accelerated program you’ve been in, wouldn’t have gotten this far this fast.”

“An average student might not have the incentive I do,” said Lynne.

The conversation turned to Tuvok’s instruction techniques, and Janeway finally had to ask about something that had bothered her.

“When Tuvok pulled out that knife, you didn’t seem surprised at all. Have you fought with real blades before?”

“Um…yes,” said Lynne. “That’s one of those things I sort of didn’t mention to you. I thought you might have kittens if you knew.”

Even after a year, Lynne still came up with phrases that were unfamiliar to Janeway. This one, though, she could figure out by context.

“You thought right. Starfleet training uses dummy blades for live opponents, and holodeck safeties for holoprograms. I’ve never seen a naked blade used in a training match before.”

“And you want to know why.”

Janeway nodded, relieved that she hadn’t had to formulate a diplomatic way of asking.

“It’s part of Vulcan martial arts training. The belief is that it’s better to learn how an injury feels in a safe, controlled setting than to feel it for the first time in a combat situation. And I have to agree. The first time I missed a block and Tuvok sliced my side open, I just dropped my guard and stood there like an idiot. I was so stunned by the knife cut that I forgot all about fighting. Tuvok wasted no time demonstrating that I would have been instantly dead if I’d done that in a real fight. The next time I got cut it wasn’t so surprising, and after a couple more I learned how to deal with them and didn’t let them affect my concentration. And that’s when I stopped getting cut, for the most part. I had the same
learning curve for taking kicks and strikes. The first time Tuvok actually hit me was shocking. Now it’s not.”

Janeway’s brain was still scrambling to catch up, having gotten stalled on the image of Tuvok knifing her partner. She stared at Lynne, trying desperately to think of something to say that wouldn’t reinforce all of the reasons why Lynne hadn’t wanted to tell her this in the first place.

“It’s okay, Kathryn,” said Lynne, reading her facial expression. “It was always in a safe environment. The muhok is designed for this. It has a full complement of powered healing devices, and sensors that constantly monitor our life signs. If it detects a dangerous drop in any of the life signs, it’s programmed for direct medical transport.”

Janeway nodded stiffly, trying to be supportive and not succeeding. Finally she gave up. “I’m sorry, but I’m having homicidal thoughts here. It’s just a bit difficult for me to think of Tuvok cutting you with a fucking knife.”

Lynne laid a reassuring hand over hers. “Please don’t think of it that way. It’s all part of the training, and I always have the choice of whether to keep going or not. And if it makes you feel better, I’ve sliced Tuvok a few times, too. Which, believe me, is heartbreaking. But it’s all about balance, remember. I’ve got to experience both sides to fully understand what I’m doing.”

“Balance, right, I’ll try to—” She stopped as the realization hit her. “He’s desensitizing you.”

“What?”

“He’s desensitizing you. Both to feeling pain or injury and to causing it. He’s trying to separate you from the emotional response you would normally feel in those situations. Oh, how very Vulcan, goddammit, he’s turning you into a machine.” She was getting up a full head of steam.

“Hey!” Lynne’s sharp voice cut right through it, and Janeway looked up to see real anger in her partner’s face. Her jaw was clenched and she spoke stiffly. “I am not a machine. Tuvok has never tried to turn me into an unfeeling person, or a pseudo-Vulcan. He’s just trying to teach me to be as effective as I can, and I choose this method of instruction. I could have gone the regular Starfleet route. But I wanted the Vulcan training. And it was the right choice, because I’m not the same person I was when I started. I’m better. And you have no right to judge my savensu.”

Too late, Janeway realized that she’d stepped on the relationship
between student and teacher, a bond that she didn’t really understand but knew from her research could be extremely strong. She initiated an immediate tactical retreat.

“I’m sorry,” she said, holding up her hands. “I don’t mean to be judgmental. It’s just…” She trailed off, looking at her lover across the table. Lynne was so beautiful, and she’d never wanted her to know about the ugly side of life. Then she thought about the manner in which Lynne had arrived in this time, and the things she’d already seen and done since then, and had to laugh at herself. Kind of like shutting the bay doors after the shuttle’s out, isn’t it?

Sliding her hand over Lynne’s, she said, “It’s just that one of the things I love most about you is the sense of wonder you bring to everything you see or do. You have an innocence about you that I think is partly due to your temporal displacement, and partly just who you are. And I never want to see that taken away from you. But here you are, talking about getting hurt and hurting others and how you’re learning to adapt, and I can’t help but think that it’s already happening.”

Lynne’s expression softened as she turned her hand to link their fingers. “I think a little bit of that is going to be unavoidable, love. But I’m not turning into someone else. Remember the balance. I can’t get jaded about causing injuries when I’m the one who has to heal them afterward. I really believe in this.” She paused. “You’ve done a lot of training on the holodeck, right?”

Janeway nodded.

“And how do you feel when you kill or incapacitate an enemy in one of those programs?”

After a moment’s thought, Janeway said, “Satisfied would probably be the best word. Because it means I’m accomplishing my objective.”

“You don’t feel any kind of guilt or remorse?”

“No. They’re not real.”

“Right. My point exactly. I don’t feel bad about killing a holocharacter either. Now that’s desensitizing, don’t you think? But when I do something that hurts Tuvok, you bet I feel it. He bleeds, Kathryn. And I have to see it up close and personal afterwards, when I heal it. There’s a connection between my actions and the consequences that I just don’t get on the holodeck.”

She was so earnest that Janeway almost smiled. This was Lynne at her
best, when she felt passionately about something and would move heaven and earth to make Janeway feel it too. And it usually worked.

“The same thing goes for my getting hurt,” Lynne continued. “I once took a bat’leth to the throat in the holodeck. It pissed me off because I’d let my opponent bluff me into a block that left me exposed. And then I realized that if this had been real, I wouldn’t be pissed off, I’d be dead. In the holodeck, you have to intellectually make the connection between the cause and the effect, because the actual effect isn’t what would happen in the real world. When Tuvok and I spar and he gets through my defenses, I don’t have to make that intellectual connection because it’s real. It hurts. Am I making sense?”

“Yes,” said Janeway. “Very much so. I’ve just never come across these techniques before, and it’s taking a little getting used to. Especially when we’re talking about you. Just give me a little time to adapt, okay? You’ve had months to think about this, and I just learned about it today.”

“And you’re handling it much better than I expected.”

“Thanks a lot.”

Lynne flushed. “I meant that in a good way.”

“It’s okay,” said Janeway, smiling at her flustered partner. “It’s not like I haven’t given you every reason to worry about my reaction. I’m trying, Lynne.”

Lynne pushed the chair back and stood, pulling her up by their linked hands. “I know you are,” she said, wrapping her in an embrace. “And I love you for it.”

Resting her head on Lynne’s shoulder, Janeway was surrounded by the scent of lavender soap and warm, clean skin. She tucked her nose in the opening of Lynne’s robe and basked in the familiar scent. It smelled like home.

Lynne pulled away and dropped a kiss on her forehead. “Come on.” Leading the way to the couch, she sat with her back to the armrest and her legs apart, an arm extended in invitation. “Have a seat.”

Janeway wasted no time fitting herself in her favorite spot. Lynne’s arms came around her waist, pulling her in, and they spent several minutes just enjoying their physical connection.

“There’s something else I wanted to talk to you about,” said Janeway at last.

“What’s that?”
She ran her hands down the long legs resting against her torso. “I know you wanted to wait until we were married before you moved in, but now that we’re only a few days away, I wonder if you might be willing to move your schedule up a bit.”

“Why?”

“Because Revi gave me a hint yesterday that Seven is planning to ask me for her own quarters. I’d like to be a step ahead. Your quarters are a little bigger than any of the empty ones, and—”

“Yes,” interrupted Lynne. “Absolutely. I’d love for Seven to have my quarters. Maybe she’d even like to keep some of the things that won’t fit in here. And we can help her move in.”

Janeway smiled at her instant enthusiasm. “I think the biggest issue is going to be installing her alcove. Other than that, it’s more a matter of replicating what she wants and having it delivered.”

“What fun is that?” asked Lynne indignantly. “No beer and pizza? No moving party with all her friends, to put boxes in the wrong place and generally make more work than they save? Come on, Kathryn, this is tradition. Seven should have the whole experience.”

Laughing, Janeway said, “I’m getting the sense that moving is a different thing in your experience than it is here. Starfleet personnel travel light. And Seven has even less than the rest of us.”

“Never bring more than you can carry out in one box, running,” said Lynne.

“What?”

“A bit of advice I read once, regarding taking a job in a volatile market. Sounds like it applies here, too.”

“Normally it would,” agreed Janeway. “Voyager’s a little different, though. We’ve had more time to accumulate things.”

Lynne squeezed her. “That just means we’ll have more cool things to show off when we get home. Not everyone in Starfleet can boast Delta Quadrant souvenirs, you know.”

“You’re always looking on the bright side, aren’t you?”

“Well, for me there isn’t any other side,” Lynne pointed out. “Voyager is my home now. I’m not as invested as everyone else in getting back. Earth doesn’t mean the same thing to me that it does to all of you. And unless you’re there, it means very little at all.”

Janeway turned in her arms until she could look into her eyes. Lynne
gazed back, lifting an eyebrow in question. “What?” she asked. When no reply was forthcoming, she began to fidget. “What?” she demanded.

Janeway leaned in and kissed her. “Nothing,” she said, settling back into her original position. “Just...don’t ever change.”

“Okay.” Lynne was obviously confused, but she wasn’t asking any more questions. They fell silent, enjoying each other’s warmth. For the moment, their physical connection was telling them all they needed to know.
Seven activated the entry chime at precisely 1800 hours. Lynne hadn't said why her presence was requested, but Seven assumed it had something to do with the upcoming wedding ceremony. They were only two days away from planet Bliss, as the crew had begun calling it—a reference she did not understand until B'Elanna explained the concept of “wedded bliss”—and she knew that Lynne was beginning to feel the stress. She would help in any way that she could.

At Lynne’s call, she entered and surveyed the scene before her in some surprise.

The quarters were very different from when she had been here last. Lynne was normally an extremely tidy person, but today a pile of packing totes took up space in the center of the living room. Looking around, Seven noted that several of the framed pictures had been taken off the walls and were now stacked on the floor, and most of the plants had joined the pile in the center of the room. Lynne herself stood by the pile, pushing a lock of hair out of her face and smiling at Seven.

“Hi, Seven, thanks for coming. Don’t worry, I didn't ask you here to help me move.”

Seven stepped into the room, allowing the door to swish shut behind her. “You said you would not move until after the wedding.”

“I wasn’t going to, but it turns out that Kathryn needs these quarters
for someone else in the crew. It’s only a few days until the wedding anyway, so I don’t have a problem moving a little early. Actually, it works out better this way. Now when Kathryn and I get back from our honeymoon, I can just settle in without having to deal with moving.”

Seven felt a pang of disappointment. She had planned to ask the captain for her own quarters, but had decided to wait until after the wedding and honeymoon before approaching her. She knew Kathryn was extremely busy, and did not wish to burden her with one more issue. It appeared that her consideration had cost her. She had thought that once Lynne and Kathryn joined their living quarters, it would be perfectly logical for her to move into Lynne’s old quarters. And now someone else had established prior claim. Obviously, being considerate was not always the best choice.

She looked at Lynne, who was still smiling at her. “If you did not wish for my assistance, why did you ask me here?”

“Because I wanted to speak with you.” The low voice was instantly recognizable, and Seven looked behind Lynne to see Kathryn emerging from the bedroom, carrying a tote. She deposited it on the pile in the center of the room, then straightened to meet Seven’s eyes. “Has Lynne given you your dress yet?”

Confused, Seven glanced from one to the other, not understanding why Lynne had such an amused expression on her face. “You are referring to the dress I’ll be wearing at your wedding?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve seen the specifications, but I haven’t yet replicated it.”

“I thought so,” said Kathryn. “You don’t have anyplace to hang it in the cargo bay. So I thought maybe you’d like to hang it here instead, in your quarters.”

Seven blinked. This was so unexpected that she actually had to replay Kathryn’s statement in her mind before responding. “You’re offering me Lynne’s quarters?”

Kathryn gave her one of her rare full smiles, the ones that always made Seven feel a little thrill down her spine. She had never understood how such an instant physiological response could result from a simple smile.

“Only if you want them. But I hope you’ll accept. This has quite a few advantages over the cargo bay.”

Seven stepped forward, looking around the space with an entirely
different perspective. Her quarters. Hers. She had never claimed anything as hers, not since before her assimilation. It was a novel concept.

Her attention was drawn back by Lynne’s loud whisper. “She’s not saying anything, Kathryn. Maybe she doesn’t want them after all.”

“No! I…I mean, yes, I would very much like to live here. I accept your offer, thank you. You’ve anticipated my request—I had planned to ask you about acquiring my own quarters, but did not wish to burden you until after the ceremony and honeymoon.”

Kathryn stepped closer. “I appreciate your consideration. But just so you know, you wouldn’t have burdened me. I’m only sorry that it’s taken me this long to realize you’d gotten to this point. I thought you were perfectly happy in the cargo bay.”

Seven almost asked her what had corrected her impression, but before the words reached her mouth she knew.

: Revi. :

There was a pause before Revi responded. When she did, Seven could hear a sheepish tone to her thought.

: Yeah, it was me. I’m sorry if I overstepped my bounds, but I saw a chance to drop Kathryn a hint for you. I never expected her to act this fast—that was only two days ago. :

Seven looked right at Kathryn while she sent her next thought. : When you’ve known her longer, you’ll expect it. Thank you. :

: You’re welcome. You’re not angry with me? :

: Of course not. :

By now both Kathryn and Lynne were looking a bit quizzical, and Seven knew her mental conversation had taken too long. “I was confirming a suspicion,” she explained.

Lynne’s look of confusion didn’t change, but Kathryn’s did. “Don’t be too hard on her, Seven. She meant well.”

“I understand that. I just told her I wasn’t angry.”

Lynne looked back and forth between them. “Somebody want to tell me what’s going on?”

Kathryn met Seven’s eyes, and by her silence Seven understood that it was up to her to answer. “What is ‘going on’ is that I suspected Kathryn’s sudden realization regarding my wanting new quarters was due to Revi’s interference. I just asked Revi and she confessed.” She lifted an eyebrow. “It’s difficult to keep secrets for long in an interlink.”
“Whew,” said Lynne. “I can see where that could be both good and bad.”

“I see nothing negative about it,” said Seven. “Such complete understanding is a welcome change for me, compared to the Human interactions I’ve experienced.”

“Yeah, well you’ll see the negative the first time you don’t want Revi to know something.”

This was bewildering. “Why would I ever wish to keep anything from her?”

Lynne opened her mouth, thought the better of it, and shook her head. “I hope you never do. But enough of that. The real reason I asked you here, besides giving Kathryn the chance to surprise you, was to ask you if you wanted any of my things. This pile right here is all I’m taking with me to Kathryn’s quarters. Before I recycled the rest I thought you might want to take a look at it.”

Again Seven was taken by surprise. Having never had her own quarters, she’d never given any thought to what she might wish to have in them. Looking around the walls, she said, “I believe I will enjoy choosing my own art, so I will not require any of these.”

Lynne nodded. “Not surprising. Art’s a personal thing. We just don’t have room for any more pictures than I’m taking. How about the furniture?”

Seven frowned. She was always more comfortable standing, so there didn’t seem to be any reason to keep the couch and chair. “I do not believe I’ll need those,” she said, pointing.

“You might want to think twice about that,” said Kathryn. “I know you’re not a fan of sitting, but others are. If you ever plan to have guests over, you have to think about their comfort as well as your own.”

Ah. She hadn’t considered that. “You’re right. In that case I shall keep them. Should I keep the bed for the same reason?”

Lynne coughed, and Kathryn appeared to find something fascinating in the carpet. After a moment Kathryn looked back up, a flush receding from her face. “I guess that would depend on whether you’re expecting your guests to require a bed.” She held up a hand, stopping Seven’s response. “And that’s not any of my business. But aside from the issue of company, there’s also the issue of your own journey toward humanity. You might just find that you’ll enjoy learning how to sleep versus regeneration, and
there’s nothing like a bed for that.” She snapped her fingers. “Which reminds me, I had B’Elanna check into installing your alcove here. And I’m sorry to say that it’s not possible. The energy needs of the alcove exceed the power supply to the living quarters, and installing a new conduit on the deck would take more resources than I can justify for one person. I had to tell Revi the same thing today.”

“I understand,” said Seven, realizing that her friend felt this to be a failure of some sort. “I’m more than happy to have the privacy of my own quarters; going to the cargo bay when I require regeneration will not be a hardship.”

“Well, I’ve got a work crew in the cargo bay tomorrow, installing a partition to block off your alcoves. The alcove space will require an entry code, so no one other than you, Revi, Chakotay, Tuvok and myself will have access. You’ll have privacy there, too.”

Seven stared at her, feeling a warmth suffusing her chest. Kathryn had altered her perception of their relationship two days ago, when she’d asked her to be in the wedding. And now she was going out of her way to ensure Seven’s privacy, taking action as soon as she’d realized that there was an issue. Seven was beginning to understand that while Kathryn did not always communicate her feelings verbally, her actions could be seen as a type of communication as well.

Reaching out, she grasped Kathryn’s hand. A momentary surprise flickered across the captain’s face, but she squeezed Seven’s hand in return.

“You have made me feel that I’m important to you,” said Seven earnestly. “Thank you for that. It means a great deal to me.”

Kathryn’s expression softened. “You’re welcome. It means a lot to me to be able to give this to you. It seems small repayment for the friendship and trust you’ve given me over the years.”

They held hands for a few moments longer, then let go. Seven looked around the quarters once again. “Should I keep any other items?”

“How about this?” Lynne walked to a small table, picked up a framed holophoto, and brought it back to Seven.

Intrigued, Seven examined the photo. She immediately recognized the setting; it was at a party twenty-six days ago in honor of a holiday that she was certain Neelix had invented. The photo showed herself, Revi, Kathryn, Lynne, B’Elanna and Harry holding drinks up and smiling for the
camera. She remembered the Doctor insisting on recording the party “for posterity,” and despite audible expressions of distaste by most of the individuals in the photo, they had all posed obligingly. All but one, she realized now. Revi’s head was slightly turned, her gaze focused on Seven rather than the camera. The knowledge that she was the focus of such a look made Seven unaccountably happy. She had not witnessed it at the time, but for once she was in agreement with the Doctor’s insistence on taking holophotos. If he had not taken this one, she would never have been aware of this moment.

“You do not wish to keep this?” she asked.

“It’s not mine. We had it made for you.”

Seven looked up from the holophoto. “I don’t understand.”

“It’s called a housewarming gift,” said Kathryn. “Among Humans it’s customary to celebrate the acquisition of new quarters by giving a gift. This is our gift to you. We thought you might enjoy having a holophoto of your collective.”

The word brought Seven up short. It was true that in the past she had referred to Voyager’s crew as her collective, but that no longer seemed an appropriate term for the women in front of her. Two days ago both Kathryn and Lynne had referred to her as family; the first time in her conscious existence that she was part of any such thing. Her preassimilation memories of her parents were vague and carried little emotional resonance, although on three occasions Revi had helped her access memories that now carried far more import. The recovered memories evinced different emotions than those she was feeling now, however.

“Thank you,” she said. “However, I believe your terminology is inaccurate. While B’Elanna Torres and Harry Kim would be considered members of my collective, that term is no longer sufficient to describe my relationship with the two of you and Revi. You are my family.” She looked at the holophoto again, running her finger along its base. “Until two nights ago I did not realize that one may choose one’s family. I thought the term defined only genetic relations. Your choice of me is a gift.” She raised her head, frustrated by her inability to fully express her feelings. “But I don’t know how to convey the personal importance that gift has for me.”

“Yes you do,” said Kathryn, a soft smile on her face. “In fact, you just did. And you’re very welcome.” She stepped forward, and Seven found
herself cradled in what was becoming an increasingly comfortable—and desirable—physical closeness.

“I have grown to appreciate this activity,” she said happily.

“Me too.” Kathryn’s voice was soft and right next to her ear. Then she was released, only to have Lynne step into Kathryn’s place.

“I want one too,” she said. “You give great hugs, Seven.”

“I do?” Seven had never considered that she might have an aptitude for an activity that was still so new to her.

“Oh yeah,” Lynne said, squeezing her gently and then pulling away. “Plus you’re tall. We fit perfectly.”

Kathryn put her hands on her hips. “And what does that make me?”

“Short,” said Lynne. She pulled Kathryn into her arms, though Seven noted that Kathryn’s body was rather stiff. “But you fit perfectly, too. I love being able to tuck you under my chin.”

With some interest, Seven noted Kathryn’s body relaxing at Lynne’s words. A moment later the captain pushed away and gave Lynne a look that Seven recognized. When it was turned on her, it usually meant she was in trouble.

“You’re lucky we’re in Seven’s quarters,” Kathryn warned. “Or you’d be paying for that short remark.”

“Take notes, Seven,” said Lynne. “Honesty is not always the best policy.”

“I believe,” said Seven, “that in this instance, silence is the best policy.”
Kathryn Janeway rushed back into her bathroom, cursing to herself. She didn’t have anything left in her stomach, why was it insisting on rebelling? A few minutes of crouching over the toilet and producing nothing left her exhausted and thoroughly pissed off.

Seven appeared in the bathroom doorway, looking stunning in her classically cut silk dress. A long, straight silver skirt and matching jacket enhanced her height and slender build. Her hair was loose about her shoulders, softening her face and giving her normally austere beauty an accessibility that changed her appearance entirely.

Walking to the sink with brisk efficiency, Seven wet a washcloth with cool water and knelt behind Janeway, wrapping one arm around her waist and using the other hand to hold the cloth against her forehead. “It’s all right, Kathryn,” she said quietly. “Revi says this is normal and to be expected.”

Janeway briefly considered fighting off her hold, then gave in, leaning back against the warm body behind her and breathing hard after her latest bout. “How can this be normal?” she complained. “We’ve been engaged for two months; planned the wedding for a week and a half. I’ve been counting the days. I was looking forward to this. Hell, this was my idea!”

“Revi says it’s because no matter how long you have been planning this, the fact remains that you are irrevocably changing your life. And for
such a...for a person whose life is as ordered as yours, that change is frightening and can produce physical repercussions.”

Sick as she was, Janeway could still smile at the obvious editing. “A person whose life is as ordered as mine, huh? What did she really say?”

Seven’s voice was somewhat subdued. “She said ‘control freak.’”

Janeway laughed weakly. “Tell her it takes one to know one.”

It had been an extremely busy week; once they’d arrived at the planet now officially named “Bliss” and confirmed its suitability for landing, they’d brought Voyager down and the repairs had begun. Planetside repairs always carried a certain urgency with them, because no starship crewmember really liked seeing their ship on the ground. It was too vulnerable there; a graceful aerial predator brought down to earth. As nice as it was to have real sunlight streaming through their viewports, everyone on Voyager was anxious to get her back into space. Janeway had thrown herself into the repairs as well, happily rolling up her sleeves and using her engineering skills. They’d completed all of the repairs, overhauls and upgrades in the five-day time frame that B’Elanna had projected. Voyager was now in the best shape she’d been in for some time, and was ready for relaunching at a moment’s notice.

But her crew wasn’t on board. Except for a skeleton crew, everyone else was standing in the luxurious grass carpeting the valley floor where they’d landed. Waiting for the wedding to start.

Waiting for her and Lynne.

“Is Lynne ready?” she asked.

“B’Elanna said she’s been almost as sick as you. But yes, she’s ready. It’s time, Kathryn. I’m sure you’ll feel better as soon as the ceremony is over.”

Janeway nodded, knowing this was true but wondering how she’d ever get through the ceremony itself. “God, Seven, I don’t understand this. I’ve negotiated treaties, fought my way out of ambushes, hell, I even convinced the Borg to introduce me to you! But never in all of those times did I feel anything like what I’m feeling now.”

Seven tightened her arm around Janeway’s waist. “Never in all of those times were you giving your heart to another in front of one hundred and twenty witnesses,” she said. “I believe the circumstances are somewhat different.”

“Thanks for reminding me,” Janeway groaned.
“Kathryn.” Seven’s voice was firm. “You must stand up. You just need to move beyond this waiting stage. It’s time.”

“I know, I know. God, you make it sound so easy.”

With help, she managed to make it back to her feet. Sending Seven out, she brushed her teeth for the third time that morning, touched up her lipstick and straightened out her dress uniform. Looking in the mirror, she saw no signs of the confident, beautiful woman that Lynne insisted she was.

But Lynne was counting on her, and she’d die before she’d let that woman down. Lifting her chin and putting her shoulders back, she walked out with a firm step and was graced with Seven’s clear approval as she entered the living room.

“Much better,” said Seven. “You will...knock her dead.”

Janeway laughed. “You’ve been spending too much time with Lynne.”

“Is my usage incorrect?”

“No, not at all.” Janeway took a moment to fully appreciate her appearance. “But I suspect there are more at mortal risk from you than me.”

“I did not dress for them,” said Seven in a matter of fact tone. “I dressed for you and Lynne.”

And one other, thought Janeway.

Lynne had wanted Seven’s outfit to compliment Janeway’s dress uniform, and had gotten an idea when Janeway had shown her a holophoto of Seven in her original silver biosuit. Both of them agreed that the color was stunning on her, so Lynne had searched the database and come up with the dress and jacket Seven was now wearing. They were solid, shimmering silver except for a wide band of color running from the left shoulder to the right waist on both front and back, giving the appearance of a sash. The band was the exact color of Janeway’s red dress uniform, and contrasted with the silver to striking effect. The outfit, combined with Seven’s loose hair, created a picture that no one on Voyager would soon forget. The first time Lynne had seen Seven in it, she’d reported back to Janeway that there was no way the brides would be the center of attention in this wedding.

Looking at Seven now, Janeway understood exactly what Lynne had meant. The woman she’d known for almost three years had undergone so many changes that sometimes she felt she was barely keeping up. Now
she saw a confident, assured beauty who could tear the heart out of anyone she chose.

She smiled, momentarily forgetting her own nervousness. Seven had no idea of her own power. Oh, she was well enough aware of her intelligence and physical strength, but she still didn’t understand the power she carried by virtue of her appearance and the personality that shone through it. Her physical beauty alone had long attracted various crewmembers, but over the last two months, the caring personality that had once been visible only to her closest friends had begun to be apparent to others, causing a rash of unrequited love to break out. Janeway kept her ear to the grapevine, and she heard the rumors. Half of the men on board—and not a few of the women—had suddenly begun to view Seven as someone who might actually be attainable. Seven herself was oblivious to the way people had begun jockeying for position, readying themselves to make the approach.

What none of those crewmembers knew was that her heart had already been given to another. She hadn’t said as much, but Janeway and Lynne both agreed it was a done deal. The only problem was that the recipient of that heart didn’t seem to be aware of it. Lynne was of the opinion that once Revi saw Seven in this outfit, she’d have to admit her own attraction. Janeway wasn’t so sure. She had a suspicion that Revi had already admitted her attraction, but was denying herself the right to pursue or even accept it. And she had no idea what could be done about it.

Seven gestured toward the door. “Shall we?”

Janeway took a deep breath, straightened her uniform jacket one more time, and nodded. “Let’s do it.” She strode out of her quarters, hearing Seven speaking quietly behind her.

“Seven of Nine to B’Elanna. We’re on our way.”

“Acknowledged. We’ll be right behind you.”

“And thank god for that,” came Lynne’s voice. “The wait’s taken five years off my life span.”

“Fossil! You’re not supposed to—”

The comm line was cut off, and Janeway chuckled as she walked down the corridor. “I think it’s all right if I hear her. I’m just not supposed to see her.” She stopped in front of the lift and pressed the call button.

“I disagree,” said Seven. “I researched this tradition thoroughly, and it
was established long before voice communications existed.” The doors opened, and she followed Janeway in. “The intent was that the involved parties should have no contact until they met at the ceremony.”

“Deck fifteen,” said Janeway. “There were a few other intents to those old traditions, too. I guess I should count myself lucky that you and B’Elanna didn’t try to keep us apart last night.”

“Had either of you been a virgin, we would have,” said Seven. “But it was much too late for that.”

Janeway looked at her suspiciously. “Was that a joke?”

A tiny uplifting of one side of her mouth was the only sign of Seven’s amusement. “Did it distract you?”

“For about two seconds, yes.” The lift stopped, releasing them into the empty corridors of Voyager’s lowest deck.

“I wonder how nervous you would be if you had that to anticipate as well,” said Seven thoughtfully.

Instantly Janeway’s mind transported her to the night she and Lynne had first made love. She had never expected the evening to turn into that—in fact, she’d even tried to put a stop to it in a misguided attempt at protecting Lynne. Who, she recalled, had been extremely unimpressed with her chivalry. The thought brought a smile to her face, which lasted all the way until they arrived at the head of the gangplank.

Seven stepped onto the ramp, then turned and looked back. “According to tradition, I’m required to tell you that you look beautiful and that Lynne is a lucky woman. But the first is self-evident and the second is only half of the truth. I would prefer to say…I’m very happy for both of you.”

Janeway’s breath caught in her throat. “Thank you, Seven. That means a lot. And it means a lot to both of us that you’re standing with us today.”

Their gaze held until the music began. Seven had been spotted on the gangplank, and this was her cue. The ceremony was officially underway.

At the bottom of the ramp, a walkway passed through the watching crewmembers. For obvious reasons there was none of the normal division between guests of the two partners, so people had simply arranged themselves according to what space was available and where their friends were. The end result was fairly even on both sides of the walkway.

Seven’s destination was the raised platform that had been constructed for the ceremony. Waiting on that platform, resplendent in dress uniform, was Acting Captain Chakotay, who had received official command of
Voyager earlier that morning. He would remain Acting Captain for the next two weeks, while Voyager orbited the planet. A general shore leave had been accorded the crew, in conjunction with Lynne and Janeway’s honeymoon. It was a much-needed break for everyone, and crew morale was at an all-time high today.

Janeway thought back to her discussion with Revi less than two weeks earlier, when the doctor had insisted that her wedding was not a political tool. Looking down on the happy crew standing in the field, she knew that Revi had been wrong. This wedding meant much more than her joining with Lynne. It meant that life was going on, despite their situation. It meant that joy and celebration were still part of their lives. And it meant that pairings had been formally sanctioned. She fully expected that in the next few months there would be a flurry of requests for her services as the only person aboard who could officiate at weddings. This would only be the first.

Seven moved down the walkway, apparently oblivious to the murmurs of appreciation that reached Janeway’s ears. Nobody who saw the ex-Borg could help but react to her pure beauty, all the more irresistible because she was so unaware. She reached the platform, stepped up to the level one step below Chakotay, and turned back toward Janeway.

Ensign Kim and his band, situated to the side of the guests, changed the tempo of their playing. That was Janeway’s cue, and she walked down the gangplank to step onto the pathway. Purposefully slowing her normal stride, she took her time walking to the platform, acknowledging as many of the crew as she could with a smile and a nod. Her leg muscles were quivering and threatening to give up altogether, but she was determined that no one would see it. With all outward indications of confidence, she mounted the steps to the platform and stood next to Seven, turning toward the ship.

What an amazing view, she thought. It wasn’t often she got the chance to see Voyager from the outside, and even less often that she was able to see it on the ground. She felt a surge of pride, looking at this beautiful, sleek ship and knowing that it was hers. Voyager stood firmly on her struts, gleaming white against the backdrop of heavily forested mountains. She looked like a dangerous bird of prey, crouching with wings half out, moments away from launching into the sky.

And then her attention was drawn to the motion at the top of the
gangplank, as well as another change in the music. There was B’Elanna in all her finery, beginning her walk down. Janeway smiled, remembering how honored her chief engineer had been when Lynne had asked her to stand up for her—and how she’d disguised her feelings with a barrage of jokes and commentary that fooled no one. Like Seven, B’Elanna had shed her normal uniform for a dress that completely transformed her. Hers matched Seven’s in general style, except that the jacket was short-waisted. The color was a deep bronze, complimenting her skin tone, and the color bands in the front and back were a dark green.

It seemed to take no time at all before B’Elanna joined Seven and Janeway on the platform, standing two meters away and winking at the captain before turning to face the ship. The music changed one last time, and Janeway felt her mouth go dry when Lynne appeared at the head of the gangplank.

Her partner had chosen to wear the same dress she’d worn at the Tsian banquet, with the addition of a matching short-waisted jacket. The green of the dress matched the green in B’Elanna’s ensemble. More than that, Janeway knew, it matched Lynne’s eyes. And she waited with great impatience to see those eyes up close and personal.

Gracefully, Lynne moved down the gangplank to the walkway. Her height and athletic build made for an arresting appearance, and her hair was piled on top of her head in a classic formal style. The shimmering fabric of her dress draped beautifully as she walked, and the sunlight sparkled off the earrings Janeway had given her months ago.

Janeway smiled. You were wrong, Lynne. Seven’s stunning, but you’re still the center of attention. At least for me.

Lynne turned her head from side to side, acknowledging the greetings of her friends in the audience, but before she’d gotten halfway to the platform her gaze was riveted on Janeway. For her part, Janeway was aware of nothing else as the better part of her heart walked up and stopped on the step below her, putting them at eye level. They stared at one another for several seconds before Lynne took the final step to stand next to her. Janeway reached out and took her hand, surprised to find it trembling. She squeezed it comfortingly, her own nervousness vanishing without a trace. Now that she was holding Lynne, now that they were actually here, she couldn’t wait to make this official. She wanted everyone in the
universe to know that this woman was hers; that she was utterly unavailable.

They both turned to face Chakotay, who smiled broadly at them, cleared his throat, and began the ceremony.

\[\text{Future Perfect}\]

\textbf{Seven of Nine} stood just behind her friend and captain, watching the ceremony with fascination. The symbolism and traditions were interesting, but what she found most riveting was the emotion that flowed between Kathryn and Lynne. She had never thought of herself as sensitive to emotion, but either she’d become more sensitive or the emotions present at this ceremony were stronger than normal. She suspected the latter. After all, it wasn’t often that Kathryn’s voice trembled as it was right now, while she recited the vows she’d written for Lynne. And Lynne’s expression projected a happiness and love that even Seven could easily read. They had chosen each other as family, and something more.

As Seven’s understanding of the varieties of Human relationships increased, so too did her need for terms of definition. Gradually, after her severance from the Borg, she had come to accept the crew of \textit{Voyager} as her new collective. But there had always been one individual for whom that term was insufficient. It wasn’t until nine months and six days after her separation that Kathryn Janeway herself had provided the required definition. They’d been in the brig of Arturis’ ship, minutes away from assimilation by the Borg, and Kathryn had said, “I’m your captain. That means I can’t always be a friend.” Seven had not understood at the time, but later examination had brought a startling realization: not only had Kathryn defined their unique relationship, but her use of the present tense indicated that she had considered Seven a friend prior to the incident on Arturis’ ship. How much prior, Seven could not guess.

Lynne’s arrival on \textit{Voyager} had been the catalyst for another shift in the relationship between Seven and Kathryn. At first Seven had fought it, resenting any intrusion into her only friendship—and, for that matter, the only long-term emotional connection she had known since being taken from her parents. She’d had an intense emotional connection to One, of course, but it had been abbreviated by his death, and had resulted in such pain that she preferred not to think about it.
But to her complete surprise she had found that the change Lynne brought was a positive one, resulting in a new friendship and a stronger connection with Kathryn. Over time she had even added B’Elanna Torres to her short list of friends, an event which she would formerly have classified as highly improbable. And her relationship with both Kathryn and Lynne had gradually changed to something different: more than friendship, but beyond her capacity to define it.

Then Revi had joined their collective, bringing with her yet another layer of personal interaction for which Seven had no definition. It had all of the instant mental connectivity of the Borg, with the emotional depth and resonance of Human friendship. Revi had, with no apparent effort, joined Kathryn and Lynne in that new and amorphous category of “more than friends,” and Seven could only consider the three women a unique sub-unit; special in a way that she did not fully understand.

Once again it had been Kathryn who provided her with the knowledge she craved. Only eleven days ago she had called Seven her family, and Seven had immediately reclassified the sub-unit of Kathryn, Lynne and Revi using this new term. It felt right, and she had been content.

Yet now, as she stood on the dais and watched Kathryn and Lynne publicly claim each other as lovers and life partners, she realized that her understanding had remained incomplete. Family was not the deepest level of Human emotional connection; there was one more. She was seeing it now: a connection in which two individuals chose each other as partners, with whom they could freely share thoughts, beliefs, doubts and fears. A choice that brought to each partner the security inherent in knowing that she was the only one; she was unique. In Seven’s studies of Human romantic interaction she had pursued knowledge in an objective fashion, without any true understanding of where it could lead. Now that understanding came to her with a stunning intensity. She, too, wished to make a choice, and to be chosen by another.

Turning her head, she scanned the guests facing the platform. It took her three point nine seconds to locate Revi, and less than that to make her choice. It had been building from the moment she’d met Revi, but only now did she realize exactly what it was that she had been feeling. She wanted to redefine their relationship. She wanted them both to stand on a platform just like this one, and speak words of commitment like those she was hearing right now. She wanted a promise of forever to replace the one
she’d lost when she’d been separated from the Collective. “Family” was no longer a sufficient term for the role she wished Revi to take in her life. Kathryn and Lynne were close friends, her family of choice, but Revi had become more than that.

What was she to Revi?

As she watched, Revi’s head turned slightly, and their eyes met with an almost physical jolt. And just for a moment, before Revi clamped down on her shields, Seven felt her emotion. She saw it cross Revi’s face as well, and was startled by the force of it. But it wasn’t love, or happiness, or anything like what she was sensing between Kathryn and Lynne. It was fear.

Revi broke their eye contact, and Seven stared at her, willing her to turn back and face her. When that didn’t work, she reached out through their link.

: Revi, what’s wrong?:
: Leave it alone, Seven. :
: No. You were afraid. I wish to help you. What were you afraid of?:
: You can’t help. Please, leave it alone. :

And that was all Revi would say. She remained stubbornly silent in their link, focusing her thoughts solely on the ceremony, until Seven gave up her attempts and refocused her full attention to the ceremony as well. Kathryn and Lynne had completed their vows, and Chakotay was now ending his speech. With a flourish, he announced that the two women were now joined, and commanded them to seal the contract with a kiss. With faces nearly split by enormous smiles, Kathryn and Lynne did just that, to the shouts, hoots and whistles of the audience. After several seconds, the newly joined couple drew apart, but to Seven it was obvious that they neither heard nor saw anything but each other. A touch from Chakotay drew their attention, and they turned toward the crew, holding their clasped hands up between them. A deafening roar rose up, joined by thunderous applause that echoed off the mountain slopes behind them. Kathryn and Lynne smiled at each other again, then stepped off the platform and walked back through the crowd. At the base of the gangplank they walked beneath the gleaming belly of the grounded ship, toward the reception area that had been set up on the other side.

B’Elanna nudged Seven, and together they followed the new couple.

Future Perfect
Seven knew they had one duty left—to give the toasts—before the party could truly begin. Then she would find Revi.

As she moved out from the shadow of the ship, she saw the tables laden with food and drink. One table was fairly bristling with champagne flutes, and Neelix held court behind it, happily pouring drinks for Kathryn and Lynne. He motioned B'Elanna and Seven over with tremendous enthusiasm.

“Isn’t this just fantastic? Have you ever seen two more beautiful ladies?” he asked, motioning toward the newlyweds. “Of course, the two of you are hardly less lovely,” he hastened to add. B'Elanna rolled her eyes.

“Stuff the flattery and just give me the bubbly, Neelix. I want to get this thing moving.”

For once Seven agreed with her friend. She had no patience for Neelix at this moment.

“Certainly, certainly. Here you go.” He handed a full glass to B'Elanna. “Annd...” Reaching beneath the table, he brought another glass out with a great flourish. “Here you go, Seven. One glass of sparkling cider.”

Seven accepted the glass. “Thank you.”

They followed Kathryn and Lynne to another platform, which would raise them above the crowd for the toast. Then would come the formal first dances, and after that the party would begin in earnest. Kathryn had warned Seven that it might go on for hours, but stated that her obligation ended after the second dance. “I know this kind of socializing isn’t your favorite thing,” she’d said, “so if you want to leave after your dance, it’s all right.” Seven had appreciated her consideration then, and even more so now. She knew that once Kathryn and Lynne got on the dance floor, her opportunities to spend time with them would be minimal at best. She would enjoy socializing with B’Elanna, and hoped that she could convince Revi to dance, but other than that she had no desire to “party all day,” as she’d heard several of the crew referring to it.

As the crowd surrounded the drink table, a few people stepped behind it to help Neelix with pouring duties. Soon the platform was surrounded by an expectant crew holding their drinks, and the noise of dozens of separate conversations died down as if by general order. When the silence was total, B'Elanna looked at Seven.
“Guess it’s time. Kahless, I hate public speaking. How did I ever let Lynne talk me into this?”

“Is that a rhetorical question?”

“Shut up, Seven.”

B’Elanna stepped forward and spoke in a voice that was designed to carry over the sound of a pulsing warp core. It worked equally well for addressing a crowd of one hundred and twenty people. The skeleton crew still on Voyager would be watching on viewscreens when they were able.

“Not many of you are aware that when I first met Lynne Hamilton, I invited her to step out in the hallway with the intention of pounding her into the ground. Our relationship has improved some since then.” A laugh swept the crowd, many of whom were all too familiar with B’Elanna’s temper.

“The strangest thing about that meeting,” she continued, “was the fact that Lynne won that fight without ever lifting a hand. She won it with a few well-chosen words, and I knew then that this woman was devious and too intelligent for her own good. In other words, she was the perfect match for Captain Janeway.” Another, louder laugh.

“It’s been a year since then, and my first impression has been proven right over and over again. She is devious. She is the perfect match for our captain. And she is my very good friend.” She smiled at Lynne before turning her attention back to the crowd.

“Lynne has taken me on adventures, shown me things I’d never seen before, pissed me off, made me laugh, and saved my life. I know that many of you here have been touched by her special brand of kindness, her thoughtfulness, and her humor. Now it’s our chance to touch her in turn, and wish her the best in what is bound to be the most difficult—and the most rewarding—journey she’s ever taken.”

She turned toward Lynne. “May this joining bring you the family and the home that you deserve, and may you find with Captain Janeway all that you thought you left behind.” Holding up her glass, she shouted, “To Lynne!”

“To Lynne!” came the thunderous response, followed by silence as everyone downed half their drinks. The applause was loud and sustained, and Seven saw Lynne duck her head and wipe her eyes before mouthing the words “thank you” to B’Elanna.

Once the applause had died down, Seven stepped forward. Scanning
the crowd, she saw Revi standing near the back and once again felt a jolt down her spine. Revi smiled at her.

: Go on, Seven. You’re going to be fantastic. She’ll love it. :

Reassured by the connection, Seven smiled back. Whatever had distressed Revi earlier was no longer in evidence; her thoughts were focused on the ceremony in general and Seven’s toast specifically. She’d helped Seven write it, and had encouraged her to use Kathryn’s first name instead of her title, given the personal nature of the ceremony. Seven had been grateful for her assistance, particularly given the fact that her toast would also serve as a means of expressing a complicated set of emotions that she hadn’t yet been able to verbalize. She wanted Kathryn to know what her support had meant over the last three years.

Taking a deep breath, she straightened her shoulders and began.

“When I first heard that Captain Janeway was involved in a romantic relationship, I assumed that the information was incorrect. This was based partly on the fact that the source of my information was Mr. Kim.” There was a general round of laughter at Harry’s expense, and Seven was pleased that her humor had been well-received. Harry laughed as well, raising his glass to Seven in acknowledgment. Seven nodded, and prepared for the more serious part of her speech.

“My assumption was also based on an erroneous view of Kathryn Janeway. I saw her as my captain and my mentor, but not as a Human being with Human needs and emotions. For that I am ashamed, because it was Kathryn who first recognized my own humanity. It has taken me too long to return the favor.

“Three years ago, Kathryn separated me from the Collective, and stood by me as I began a new life. I was not always appreciative of her efforts, and I believe that more than a few of you were witness to the birth pains of that life.” There was a small wave of chuckles as various crewmembers remembered the spectacular arguments that Seven and Janeway had been known for in those early months.

“But she never gave up on me, even when I gave up on myself, and what I am today I owe largely to her. And because the universe tends toward symmetry, it is appropriate that I now stand by her as she embarks on a new life of her own.”

Seven turned from her audience and met Kathryn’s eyes, which were shining with emotion. “Kathryn,” she continued, “may your new life bring
you all the joy, the discoveries, and the perfection that you seek. All of us who have benefited from your leadership, your friendship, and your unique individuality wish you the utmost happiness in this union.” Without breaking eye contact, she raised her champagne flute to the crowd. “To Kathryn. My captain, my mentor, my family and my friend. She holds a place in my heart that no other will ever fill.” She saw tears spring to Kathryn’s eyes just before she turned back to the audience. “To Kathryn!”

“To Kathryn!” The response was a roar as a forest of champagne flutes were thrust into the air. The echo of the shout rang off the mountain slopes as the toast was drunk, and then the clapping began, swelling into a thunderous applause as the crew of Voyager told their captain, in the only way some of them ever could, how much she meant to them.

Seven drank the rest of her sparkling cider and had barely pulled the glass away from her lips when she felt her arm taken in a gentle grasp. Looking down, she saw Kathryn smiling up at her, a single tear sliding down her cheek.

“Kathryn…” Seven was concerned, and reached out to brush away the tear. “I apologize. I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

“Don’t you dare apologize for that toast, Seven.” Kathryn’s voice was throaty. “I have never been so proud of you, and so grateful to have you for my friend, as I am right now.” She plucked Seven’s glass from her hand, set it on the platform, and stepped in for a hug. They held each other for long moments before Kathryn loosened her grip, but instead of stepping back she rose up on tiptoe and brought her mouth close to Seven’s ear.

“I love you, Seven of Nine,” she whispered. “Just remember that. You hold a unique place in my heart as well, and it will always be there for you.” Gently she kissed Seven’s cheek before drawing away.

Stunned, Seven put her hand to her cheek and stared at her friend. She had no idea how to respond to this statement, but fortunately there was no need. The external sound system came to life with a slow song, and Kathryn turned to take Lynne’s hand. Together they walked down the steps and through the parting crowd to the dance floor, where they smoothly moved into a waltz. Seven watched, a strange ache in her chest, until the music ended and her attention was drawn by a tap to her shoulder.
“I think I’m supposed to dance with you now,” said B’Elanna with a smile.

“Do you wish to?”

B’Elanna tilted her head slightly. “Well, yeah. When else will I get the chance?”

“I didn’t realize you were waiting for a chance,” said Seven with some confusion.

“Seven, just shut up and dance with me.” She grabbed Seven’s hand and pulled her down the steps. The crowd moved aside, and soon they stood on the dance floor. Seven looked down at B’Elanna and raised an eyebrow.

“Do you wish to lead or follow?”

“Oh, now there’s a loaded question,” said B’Elanna. “We’ll let the height factor decide this one. You lead.”

Seven was grateful for the Doctor’s lessons as she easily adjusted her posture for the leading position. Waiting for the beat, she stepped forward and guided them into the dance. Except for Kathryn and Lynne, they were alone on the dance floor and Seven felt slightly self-conscious.

“Seven,” said B’Elanna after several circuits of the dance floor, “don’t get any ideas about me going soft on you, but I have to tell you that you look completely stunning today.”

Seven nearly stumbled, but her cortical implant kept the mathematical rhythm intact despite her surprise. B’Elanna had never complimented her on her appearance before. Her engineering skills, occasionally and grudgingly, but never her appearance.

“Thank you,” she said politely. “You are beautiful as well, B’Elanna.”

“Do you really mean that?”

Seven’s lips curved. She did so enjoy it when opportunities to tease the fiery half-Klingon presented themselves.

“I meant it empirically, yes.”

“Oh, so I’m not subjectively beautiful?” B’Elanna caught on immediately.

“I am certain that to Tom Paris you are.” Seven deliberately side-stepped the question. To her surprise, however, B’Elanna did not take the opening to pursue their teasing conversation. Instead, the smile on her face vanished.

“Yeah, well, I wish I could be so certain of that.”
Instantly Seven felt alarmed and trapped. She could sense an emotional conversation on its way, and knew herself to be utterly unqualified for it. Employing the most efficient solution, she angled their steps to intersect with Kathryn and Lynne. The song was coming to its end, and if she timed it perfectly she would end up right next to the people who were most qualified to deal with an emotional B'Elanna.

“It does not sound as if Tom is communicating with you,” she said. “Perhaps you might wish to speak with Lynne about it?”

B'Elanna looked at her in some surprise as the music ended and they came to a stop. She turned to see Kathryn and Lynne mere centimeters away, and gave Seven a toothy grin.

“Oh, you’re good,” she said. “Don’t think I don’t know exactly what you just did. But thanks.” With that she stepped over and asked Lynne to dance. Seven could see the crowd pouring onto the dance floor, and knew that if she didn’t approach Kathryn now she might not get another chance this day.

“Kathryn,” she said, “Will you dance with me?”

Kathryn smiled up at her. “I’d love to.”

This time she didn’t ask who would lead, simply assuming that B'Elanna’s solution would apply here as well. Kathryn responded without question, and they swung off on the next beat.

Seven held Kathryn a little closer than she had B'Elanna, but still kept a careful distance between their bodies. Kathryn, however, had other ideas and settled in, resting her head on Seven’s shoulder. They danced in comfortable silence for thirty-eight seconds before Seven concluded that she needed more information.

“Kathryn.”

“Hmm?” Kathryn raised her head and met Seven’s eyes.

“I require clarification. You said…” She hesitated before continuing. Speaking about it aloud was entirely different from considering it in her own mind. “You said you love me, but I don’t know exactly what that means. Certainly it is different from the way in which you love Lynne. How many varieties of love are there?”

“Ask me an easy one, why don’t you?” Kathryn was smiling, but Seven knew from the look in her eye and the way she was tilting her head that she was giving it serious consideration.

“I don’t think your question has an answer,” she said at last. “It has
inspired generations of philosophers and poets for precisely that reason. Some say there are as many types of love as there are people who love. But I’m guessing that what you’re really asking is, how is my love for you different from my love for Lynne?”

Seven nodded, relieved that Kathryn understood.

“Believe it or not, that’s not much easier to answer than your first question. What I feel for you is…complicated. You’ve been like a daughter to me at times, though that’s changed as you’ve regained your humanity. Other times you’re my contemporary and my close friend. Sometimes you’ve been my opponent. You don’t fill any easily defined role in my life—you’re a lot of different things all rolled up into one. The only one you’re not is my lover.”

“And that is Lynne.”

“Yes. Though she’s also my friend, and has on occasion been my opponent as well. She’s not easily categorized, either.”

Nodding again, Seven led them through a spin and said, “My feelings for you are complicated as well, and I am unable to fully categorize them. But if I were certain that what I feel is love, I would inform you immediately.”

Kathryn smiled. “You already did.”

This was bewildering—the captain’s memory was rarely this inaccurate. “That is incorrect, Kathryn. I have said no such thing.”

The music ended and they came to a stop in the center of the floor, their bodies still close.

“Yes, you did,” said Kathryn. “At the end of your toast, when you said I had a place in your heart that no other would ever fill. Why else do you think I almost cried?”

Seven opened her mouth to correct Kathryn’s error, but closed it again as she considered the implication. She had meant to use the toast as a way of expressing her emotions. Had Kathryn heard what she really meant, even if she herself hadn’t been able to define it?

A few crew members were walking toward them, and Kathryn pulled Seven in for a tight hug. “Walk me off the floor,” she whispered. “I need a break.”

Seven put her arm around Kathryn’s waist and led them to the refreshment table. If anyone had thoughts of asking the captain to dance, the expression on the ex-Borg’s face stopped them in their tracks.
At the table they selected a few vegetables and pastries, then moved away from the crowd to eat in a quieter area. As they stood in companionable silence, Seven observed Lynne on the dance floor with B’Elanna and wondered how that conversation was proceeding.

“Kathryn,” she asked, “do you feel different now that you’re married?”

“Do you have any easy questions for me?”

“I apologize. I did not realize…”

“No, it’s okay.” Kathryn waved a hand in dismissal. “Frankly, Seven, I’m not sure how I feel right now. I guess ‘overwhelmed’ would be an applicable term.”

This was not a satisfactory answer. “I meant, do you feel differently about Lynne now that you have completed this ceremony?”

“Ah.” Kathryn put her empty plate in a nearby receptacle and turned back to Seven. “My feelings for Lynne haven’t changed because of this, but I think I feel a little differently about our relationship.”

“Explain, please.”

“I knew you’d say that. I’m not sure I can. I guess I feel more confident about us now, because we’ve made a public and legally binding commitment. We’ve just promised each other that we’ll work out any issues, rather than letting them come between us. That means a lot, and we probably would have anyway, but the ceremony makes that commitment stronger. Also, I can’t help but feel a little relieved that Lynne’s off the market.” She laughed at Seven’s raised eyebrow. “I mean, everyone knows that she is no longer available in any way. She’s my wife now.”

Seven did not understand. “Were you concerned about competition for her love?”

“Not from anyone on Voyager. But who knows what will happen in the years to come? I just feel more secure having staked my claim, so to speak. Lynne belongs to me now, and I belong to her. I know that sounds hopelessly primitive, but it’s a very common and very Human feeling.”

Their conversation ended as the first of the well wishers came up—even Seven’s presence could not deter them any longer. In moments Kathryn was surrounded by happy crew members, all wanting to speak with her, and Seven quietly moved away. She wished to locate more sparkling cider and Revi, in that order. A quick check with their link showed that Revi was conversing with Tom Paris, though where, she did not know. She would procure her drink and then ask Revi for her location.
Her journey to the drink table was interrupted by Lynne. “Hey, Seven,” she said cheerfully. “I’m the only one in our little group you haven’t danced with yet. Will you do me the honor?”

She could delay finding Revi for a few minutes longer. “Of course,” she said. “But we are the same height. Which of us will lead?”

“Got a coin to toss?” Lynne grinned. “Actually, I think I should lead. It might be my only chance to push you around.”

“If that is your method of leading, then I believe your lessons were severely lacking.”

“Well, why don’t you come down and find out?”

They walked to the dance floor and took but a moment to fit themselves together. Lynne’s lead was very different than the Doctor’s or Lieutenant Chapman’s, the only other individuals Seven had ever followed. Her frame was tighter and she spun them around more often, making for a more active dance. Seven found herself enjoying it, until something very unexpected happened: her link with Revi suddenly ended. She was so surprised that she stopped dancing.

“Seven? Is something wrong?”

“I don’t know. Revi has just entered a regeneration cycle. But it’s not her time.”

Lynne frowned. “Don’t you two have the same regeneration schedule?”

“Yes. And we are not due for our next cycle until 2200 today.” Seven frowned; it had been nine weeks since she’d felt the silence in her mind. She hated it. Even when Revi was not sharing her thoughts directly, she was always there and Seven had become very accustomed to that presence. To have her completely absent was extremely unsettling.

“I must go,” she said.

“Do you want me to come with you?”

“No. Thank you for your offer, but this is your wedding. I have accomplished all that I wanted, except to say goodbye and wish you well on your honeymoon.”

“Thank you. Go on, I’ll tell Kathryn. But if there’s anything wrong you’ll let us know, right?”

Seven agreed, and after a farewell hug she strode toward the gangplank. With every step the sounds of the reception faded, until she was enveloped by the silence of Voyager’s empty corridors. None of the
skeleton crew were visible, and for all that her external senses could
determine, Voyager might as well have been entirely abandoned. She shiv
ered, remembering all too clearly her time in the Mutara nebula, when the
crew had spent a month in stasis while she and the Doctor—and then she
alone—had operated the ship. Never had she felt so desperately alone and
frightened as she had then.

But I am not alone, she reminded herself as she stepped into the turbo
lift. Or was she? “Alone” meant something different now than it had even
two months ago. After her experience in the Mutara nebula, she had rede
fined the concept of “alone” to include the physical absence of others. But
the arrival of Revi and the creation of their interlink had been a vivid
reminder of how alone one could be inside one’s own mind, even while
surrounded by others. And right now, with the link inactive, she felt aban
doned. Why had Revi left without a word or a thought? What had she
been afraid of earlier?

She walked into Cargo Bay Two and straight to the entry of the alcove
unit, which opened at her approach. The unit had been erected in a very
efficient manner, and Seven was pleased with the result. Having been
unconcerned with privacy until recently, she found that it was becoming
increasingly important to her. Or perhaps, she thought as she stopped in
front of Revi’s alcove and checked her regeneration program, it was Revi’s
privacy that had become important to her.

The program was normal and she stood back, giving her full considera
tion to this new concept. She had never cared about crewmembers seeing
her in her alcove, and had even enjoyed knowing that Kathryn sometimes
stayed with her—but the idea of anyone watching Revi regenerate caused
feelings of irritation and protectiveness.

You do not mind when Kathryn watches her, she thought, staring at Revi’s
still form in the alcove. Immediately she began to unravel the contradic
tion. Why would she find Kathryn’s presence in the alcove unit accept
able, but not that of other crewmembers? Because she was a friend? But
Harry Kim could be considered a friend as well, and Seven had been
displeased when he had spent time in the cargo bay during their regenera
tion cycle eight days ago.

Perhaps, then, because she was more than a friend. Kathryn was
family. This solution was acceptable until she began considering her reac
tion to other crewmembers who had recently spent time in the cargo bay.
The presence of several had displeased her, but Ensign Samantha Wildman had been near their alcoves for nearly an entire regeneration cycle, and Seven had not minded. Yet Ensign Wildman was not family. What did she and Kathryn have in common that would exclude them from Seven's protective feelings toward Revi?

Ensign Wildman was married. As of today, so was Kathryn, and before this date she had been publicly committed to the bonding. They had, in Kathryn’s words, “staked a claim” on the partner of their choice, and both were unavailable for other partnerships.

She drew the inescapable conclusion. Kathryn and Ensign Wildman were not competition, therefore Seven did not mind that they watched Revi. Other crewmembers who were not in exclusive partnerships were, by definition, potential competition. And Seven did not appreciate their eyes or thoughts on Revi in any way.

Kathryn’s words, which had been of academic interest before, suddenly blazed a path through her mind. She now understood them on an emotional level, and with that understanding came a desire for action. She wanted to “stake a claim” on Revi. She wanted them to enter an exclusive partnership, and for knowledge of that partnership to be made public.

As always, she felt at ease upon reaching an understanding of her own emotions and deciding on a course of action. As soon as they came out of their regeneration cycles, she would speak with Revi. On one occasion, Revi had acknowledged a slight romantic attraction to her, and although she had never pursued it or allowed the emotion to surface again, Seven knew for a fact that her friend was not romantically interested in anyone else on Voyager. So far as she could judge from the evidence at hand, she was better positioned than anyone else in the crew to enter into a monogamous relationship with Revi.

Satisfied with her conclusion, she stepped up into her own alcove. If Revi chose to regenerate before it was necessary, she would as well. She would not subject herself to this silence of the mind any longer than she had to.
Janeway sat in her reclining camp chair, looking out over the spectacular view before her. Their Starfleet shelter was positioned on the edge of a sheer fault block mountain, 2,000 meters high, with an endless vista of rolling, desert landscape stretching to a mountain range at the horizon. Behind her was a lush forest which carpeted the flanks of a second mountain range and ended at the cliff face where she sat. A nearby waterfall provided a constant, soothing background noise, punctuated now by a shout of laughter from Lynne. Janeway turned her gaze from the scenery to her wife, who had just unwrapped a wedding gift.

“I should have known Johnson and Slater would do something like this!” Lynne said gleefully, holding up a square white object.

“What’s that?”

“A toaster oven!”

That didn’t clarify anything at all. “Okay, keep going. What’s a toaster oven?”

Lynne set the object on the grass, still chuckling. “It was an appliance that every household had in my day—it toasted bread horizontally, versus toasters, which did it vertically. It was also a traditional wedding gift. Back when I was spending hours with Johnson and Slater, telling them everything I could remember about my time, we got into a discussion about social traditions and I told them about this one. Toaster ovens were such a
common wedding gift that sometimes newlyweds got more than one. A friend of mine got five of the little suckers. Frankly, I'm surprised those two didn't give us a vase, too. Or a fondue pot.”

Janeway smiled, enjoying Lynne's happy mood and feeling more relaxed than she could ever remember. She could hardly believe that she was sitting here, literally in the middle of nowhere, with nothing to do but spend time with Lynne. And open wedding gifts.

They had decided to divide their honeymoon in half: one week spent in the mountains for Lynne's benefit, and one week on the beach for Janeway's. Shore leave for the rest of the crew was limited to the southern continent; Janeway and Lynne had the entire northern continent to themselves. For two people who lived on a 344-meter ship, such privacy was nearly incomprehensible.

“Well, that's useful,” said Janeway.

“No it's not,” Lynne said, laughing again. “And it wasn't all that useful in my time, either. We'll send it back to the ship for recycling—it was just a joke. And it worked.”

“Apparently so.” Janeway loved the sound of Lynne's laughter, and anything that brought it on was a success in her eyes.

“I'll have to give some thought to how to pay those two back,” said Lynne as she rummaged through the pile of wrapping to locate the few remaining gifts. “You ready for your next one?”

Janeway stretched luxuriously and held out a hand. “Mm hmm. Hand it over.”

“It'll take two hands, love. This one's a monster. It's from Seven.” She held up a flat object nearly one meter square.

Pulling herself upright, Janeway accepted the package and laid it carefully on her lap. “It's something framed,” she said, feeling around the edges.

“Uh oh. We already have more art than wall space.”

Janeway ripped off the wrapping paper and stared for several seconds in silence. “We'll find space,” she said at last.

“Let me see.” Lynne got up and stood behind her. “Oh, my god. That's gorgeous, and I'm not even a fan of abstract art.”

Janeway said nothing, her mind going back to the first time she had tried to interest Seven in the creative arts. She'd been in Leonard Da Vinci's studio, sculpting a bust, and encouraged Seven to take part. It had
been...less than successful. Subsequent efforts had yielded only marginal results. She’d eventually given up, deciding that Seven’s logical mind simply had no creative output. At least, not that she could find.

Obviously, she’d been wrong. She held the picture up, wanting to view it from a different angle. It was a marvel of geometry, drawing the eye toward its center, from which an explosion of shapes seemed to originate. To Janeway, the picture appeared to pulsate with color and life. It was ordered and logical in that it consisted solely of lines creating shapes, and colors to fill them, but the sum total of those lines, shapes and colors was an absolute riot of energy. It was ordered chaos, logical intuition. It was Seven.

“Hey, what’s this?” Lynne plucked an envelope out of the back of the picture, where it had been tucked into the frame. She opened it and pulled out a sheet of paper.

Janeway waited while she read, but soon grew impatient. “Well?”

“Here.” Lynne handed her the paper.

TO KATHRYN AND LYNNE:

Lynne, I am aware of your appreciation for photorealism, but Kathryn once told me that “variety is the spice of life,” so I decided to introduce spice into your décor. You cannot look at this and see just one thing, as you do with your representational art. Because it is the result of a series of mathematical formulas, it can be seen in a nearly infinite number of ways. I am quite certain that what you see in this will differ from what I see.

Kathryn, I well recall your disappointment at my inability to join you in your creative efforts. I want you to understand that it was not a result of any failure on your part to teach me, but rather a lack of understanding on my part as to what comprised creativity. Since then, I have learned that I can be creative within the framework of mathematics. This print is formed from vectors; I produced it by initiating a series of equations and allowing them to resolve themselves. I believe this is similar to the process you used with me: you initiated a series of codes, morals and principles, and then allowed me to resolve them in my own way. (Though to be accurate, I believe this allowance occurred after you were convinced that I would not resolve them in any other way.)

I have learned that our lives and our choices can never be entirely predicted, regardless of how well we understand each other as individuals. I understand the
equations underlying these vectors, but I could not predict their end result. Nor can I predict the end result of your marriage, but if it is not one of deserved happiness, then the universe is far more random than I ever imagined.

Seven

“DAMN,” whispered Janeway, folding up the letter.

“I know.” Lynne took it from her hands and tucked it back in the frame. “This is a treasure.”

“The letter or the picture?”

“Both. And Seven, too.”

Janeway nodded, never taking her eyes off the beauty she held in her hands. “You know what?”

“What?”

“I don’t think I know Seven anymore.”

“What? Of course you do. You know her better than anyone on this ship.”

“I don’t think so. She’s changed, Lynne. A lot. If I were to use her mathematical analogy, I’d say she’s been growing at an exponential rate, and in the last two months she’s jumped to another power. She’s embracing her emotions and thinking in an entirely different manner than she used to. Revi has been so good for her.”

Lynne kissed the top of her head. “I agree. But I also think that Revi is building on a solid base that you helped to create. Don’t forget that Seven was already exploring some of those emotions before Revi even arrived. And Kathryn, you most certainly do know Seven. You’re just having to adjust your prior conceptions of her to keep them accurate. We all have to do that with the people we know, because nobody stays static.” She paused. “Well, nobody interesting, anyway.”

Kathryn chuckled. “And by god do we know a lot of interesting people. So what else is in that pile?” She carefully leaned Seven’s print against her chair.

Lynne stepped back toward the pile of wrapping and pulled out a small box. “I saved this one for last because it’s from B’Elanna, Tom and Harry. They pooled their replicator rations so I figured it had to be something spendy.”

“Open it, then.” Janeway settled back in her chair.
It was the work of but a moment to tear off the wrapping, revealing a burnished, gleaming metal box. Lynne carefully lifted the lid, stared a moment, and then began laughing.

“What in the hell do they expect us to do with this?” she asked, holding up a tiny phallus no more than ten centimeters long. “It’s not even big enough to be a butt plug.”

“Could you be any more crude? Those of us who don’t talk like dock-workers would call that an anal probe.”

“Oh please, anal probes are what the aliens used on the Humans they kidnapped.” Lynne froze and turned a look of horror on Kathryn. “Oh my god, I hope that particular story wasn’t as true as the others turned out to be.”

“You’ve lost me.”

Lynne replaced the miniscule phallus in the box and sat heavily in her chair. “Well, the same papers that printed stories about aliens kidnapping Humans—which I never believed until you told me I was one of the kidnapped ones—also printed stories about the ‘experiments’ that were performed on these Humans. Sexual ones. And the stereotype that everyone laughed about was that they used anal probes.” She looked a little ill. “Yuck.”

“How did the papers know about these experiments?” asked Janeway.

“Supposedly they interviewed the survivors.”

“Lynne, you saw the logs from the away mission on the Sumak ship. Do you honestly think the Sumak were the type of aliens to perform experiments and then return their subjects unharmed? They packaged you up for a long-term visit, sweetheart. I think you can safely assume that those ‘survivor’ stories were just stories.”

Lynne tilted her head for a moment and then breathed a sigh of relief. “You’re right. Thank god.” Her momentary disgust forgotten, she held up the little phallus again. “Which brings me back to my original question: What the hell are we supposed to do with this?”

Janeway knew. “Let me see it.”

Lynne handed it over, and Janeway nodded as she examined the toy. “Is there a control in that case?”

Eyebrows scrunched together, Lynne rummaged around the box. “Oh. Yeah, there is.” She held out a small control pad.
Janeway struggled to control her rising mirth. This was going to be good. “So your objection to this is that it’s too small, correct?”

“Yeessss…” said Lynne suspiciously.

Janeway pressed a key on the control and barely managed to hold on to the phallus as it instantly grew to an impressive size. Now a startlingly realistic copy of a Cardassian penis, it was thirty centimeters long and over six centimeters wide, slightly flattened and edged with scaly plates down each side that made it seem even thicker.

“Is that big enough for you?” she asked.

Lynne’s eyes were the size of saucers. “Holy shit! What the fuck is that?” She actually sounded alarmed, and Janeway couldn’t hold herself back any longer. Dropping the huge phallus in her lap, she dissolved in a fit of laughter.

“You should see your face!” she sputtered, laughing even harder as Lynne’s look of alarm changed to annoyance.

“I’m so glad I could amuse you,” Lynne said icily. “Give me that.” She reached for the phallus. “Jesus. What is it?”

Janeway wiped her eyes, chuckling. “Right now it’s a Cardassian penis. But the answer to the bigger question is that B’Elanna, Tom and Harry kicked in their replication rations to buy us a rather adaptable toy. That’s a Risan joystick; the nicest one I’ve ever seen.”

Now Lynne laughed. “A joystick? Oh, that just figures.”

“Why?”

“Well, that particular word meant something else in my time. Joysticks were a control input for computer games, most of which were played by pimply teenage boys whose brains were pretty much focused on either games or sex. So it’s more than a little ironic to find the same term applying to this, four hundred years later.”

Janeway gave her a mock glare. “Mention pimply teenage boys one more time on our honeymoon and it’s over, Lynne.”

“Sorry. So tell me more about this…toy. Those Risans know their stuff, don’t they? Great sex music and now this. So obviously it can be either too small or way too big. Is there a happy medium somewhere? And where’s the harness?”

“The harness?”

“You know, to hold it in place.” Lynne held the joystick at her crotch and then yelped as it moved in her hand to attach itself with a slight
hum. Wild-eyed, she jumped up in alarm. “Jesus Christ! Get it the fuck off me!”

Janeway couldn’t stand it. She slid out of her chair and collapsed on the ground, laughing helplessly. The expression on Lynne’s face—combined with the erect Cardassian penis jutting up from her crotch—was just too much to bear.

“Oh, great.” Lynne’s voice was laden with sarcasm. “I’ve just been taken hostage by a giant cock and you’re laughing at me. Kathryn, I’m about to get pissed off here.”

Janeway looked over, saw Lynne tugging ineffectually at the phallus, and laughed harder. She rolled onto her side, clutching her stomach in an effort to keep it from hurting while she gasped for air. Oh god, this was priceless. Every time she thought she was done, she’d get a mental image of Lynne and the joystick and she’d break up all over again. Finally, though, her laughter slowed and she was able to uncurl her aching body, still shaking with the occasional chuckle.

Suddenly she was pulled onto her back and covered with the warm weight of her wife. An insistent pressure at the apex of her thighs stopped her laughter immediately, and she looked up into amused green eyes.

“I thought that might shut you up. You know,” said Lynne conversationally, “I’m starting to see some of the advantages of this little toy. And I’m thinking I’d like to use it on you.” She illustrated her point with a gentle thrust of her hips. “But I’m also fairly sure that you don’t want me to use it in either the microdick or the megadick sizes, so you’d better tell me right now how to adjust it to what you want.” A few more leisurely thrusts and Janeway capitulated.

“All right, all right!” She pushed on Lynne’s shoulders. “I will, but we’ve got to find the instruction manual first.”


Janeway rose and began searching through the pile of wrapping. “There damn well better be a manual here somewhere. If they gave us this joystick without it, I’ll reassign all three of them straight to the Waste Reclamation Unit.” She brushed aside some brightly colored foil and found a thick, sealed envelope. “Ah. Here we go.”

The envelope contained a small PADD and a card. Opening the card, she said, “It’s from B’Elanna. She says…” Janeway read for a few
moments in silence and then laughed. “She says Tom and Harry had no idea what their rations were spent for, and she planned to tell them after we left for our honeymoon. Those poor fools; they’re going to be in agony until we get back and tell them they’re not going to be tossed out an airlock.”

“And why would we tell them that?” asked Lynne.

Janeway looked at her wife, sitting nonchalantly on the ground as if she didn’t have a scaly thirty-centimeter penis sprouting from her crotch.

“I like the way you think,” she said. “B’Elanna was right, you are devious.”

“I believe what B’Elanna said was that I’m devious enough to be a match for you, love,” said Lynne. “Now about that manual?”

Janeway let the card fall to the ground while she accessed the PADD. She knew what she was looking for, and within a few moments had read enough. “All right,” she said as she moved to Lynne’s side, “the first thing we do is get this off you. There’s a recessed control right...here.” She pointed to a slight indentation near the base. “Press that and it will detach.”

Lynne pushed the indentation, waited, then pushed again a great deal harder. A quiet hum warned her and she barely caught the phallus as it dropped off. “Wow! This thing doesn’t mess around.”

“Not by itself it doesn’t.”

Lynne rolled her eyes. “Oh, that was bad.”

“I try.” Janeway shot her a grin.

“To my eternal dismay. So how does the attachment work?”

“The base senses body heat and attaches through a type of reverse force field, which is why it fastened on to you when you held it there. You can wear it anywhere on your body; it’s not limited to just your crotch. Though I’ve never quite figured out where else you’d put it.”

“You mean you’ve never used a...never mind.”

“A what?”

Lynne looked embarrassed, which was a little odd considering what she was holding in her hand. “A thigh harness.”

Janeway raised her eyebrows. “No, I can’t say that I have. Though my experience was admittedly limited before I met you. A thigh harness, hmm?”

“Yeah. It, um, gives you a little more flexibility in choosing positions.”
“I see.” Janeway was thoroughly enjoying Lynne’s unexpected shyness. “I take it you have experience with this?”

“A little.” Lynne looked down at the joystick. “So how do we resize it?”

Janeway let the obvious subject change go, picking up the control from where she’d dropped it earlier. “These buttons select for preprogrammed species: Klingon, Ferengi, Vulcan, Human, Betazoid, Cardassian, Bajoran and Risan. And this one here is for fine-tuning the size in length and diameter.”

Lynne took the control from Janeway’s hands and played with it, watching in total fascination as the phallus morphed into wildly different shapes.

“Well!” she said at last. “That was a crash course in Alpha Quadrant anatomy. We sure didn’t have anything like this in my time.” She looked up, a speculative gleam in her eyes. “So tell me, Kathryn, how exactly do you know so much about this?”

Janeway grinned. “Did you think that all we did at the Academy was study?”

An incredulous smile washed over Lynne’s face. “As a matter of fact, yes I did! Do I get to have co-ed fantasies about you now? Come on, tell all!”

Laughing, Janeway shook her head. “Sorry, I wasn’t nearly as…active as you’d like to imagine. But I had friends and roommates who were, and I picked up a few things from them. Like how to use certain toys. None of us could afford one like this, though. Ours were usually designed for just one species.” She picked up the joystick, which Lynne had left in the Ferengi mode, and contemplated its short, curved shape. “Uh, Lynne, do you think you could change it back to Human? I’m finding this to be a serious turnoff.”

“Tell you what, why don’t you give me that…” Lynne stood up and took the phallus out of Janeway’s hand, pulling her upright at the same time, “…and I’ll work on getting you turned back on.” She tugged gently, and Janeway allowed herself to be led to their shelter.

Made of a transparent aluminum roof, corner posts and floor, with force-field walls that were currently deactivated, the shelter was nearly invisible. The large bed sitting in its center seemed to sprout from the forest floor and glowed in the sunlight filtering through the trees. Off to one side, their travel totes, a portable replicator, and a miniature sonic...
shower made up the rest of their gear. Upon their arrival the night before, Lynne had commented that if camping in her time had been anything like this, everyone would have done it.

They walked hand in hand to the bed, where Lynne dropped the joystick and control pad. Smiling, she ran her hands down Janeway’s arms and held her fingers in a light grip.

“Do you know what turns me on?” she asked.

“Is this a rhetorical question?” Shaking her head, Lynne said, “Let me rephrase. Would you like to know what you just did in the last five minutes that turned me on?”

A quick mental review revealed no obvious answers, so Janeway nodded.

“You laughed.”

“And that turned you on? I thought you were pissed.”

“No, I just said that for effect.” Lynne’s expression became earnest. “I love to hear you laugh. You have a number of different types, you know, from chuckles to good laughs to that out-of-control, total belly laugh you just did. And I love them all, especially the last one. You’re beautiful when you really let go and laugh; it’s like your rank and responsibilities drop away for a moment and all I can see is the funny, loving, sweet woman that you are underneath the other layers. That woman totally turns me on.”

Janeway stood unmoving, momentarily stunned by Lynne’s words, while her wife leaned in and began brushing soft kisses along the length of her throat. When she came back to herself, she gripped Lynne’s shoulders and pushed her away enough to look into her eyes. “That’s one of the most incredible things anyone has ever said to me. Honestly, the fact that you see me for who I really am is one of the most precious aspects of our relationship. It’s so rare for me.”

“Then you’ve been hanging out with the wrong people.”

“No, I’ve been hanging out with people who couldn’t be allowed to see anything but the captain. And maybe that wasn’t entirely necessary, but I thought it was. I didn’t even realize how much it was costing me until you came along. Then I saw what I was missing—how much of myself was missing.”

Lynne’s voice dropped to a sultry tone as she let her eyes roam
Janeway’s body. “Believe me, Kathryn, you aren’t missing anything. It’s all there, and it’s all beautiful.”

And the most amazing thing about that, thought Janeway as their lips met, was that she did believe her. Lynne never flattered, and she didn’t have the patience to say what people might want to hear. She said what she thought, which meant she really did think Janeway was beautiful. And that was the biggest turn-on of all.

It wasn’t long before their clothes were scattered around the room and they were on the bed, exploring each other’s skin and lips, finding the sensitive places they both knew so well. There was no sound save the breeze through the forest and their own soft murmurs.

“Kathryn,” Lynne whispered into her ear, “I want to make love to you. I want to use our new toy. Will you let me?”

For an answer, Janeway gently pushed Lynne off her and sat up. Reaching out for the joystick and the control pad, she said, “Only if you’ll let me put it on you.”

Lynne nodded and sat back on her heels, giving Janeway easy access. Adjusting the toy to a dimension she knew would work for her, Janeway settled it in place. Humming briefly, the phallus locked itself down, and Lynne gasped. “Whoa. That feels different on bare skin.”

Janeway dipped her head to hide her smile. “You haven’t seen anything yet, sweetheart.” Surreptitiously she hit the control panel again, setting the sensitivity of the phallus to seventy-five percent. Lynne had no idea what she was in for.

*I never thought I’d be doing this again,* she thought as she bent down and gently took almost the entire length of the phallus into her mouth.

“Oh…my…fucking…god,” Lynne breathed. “Kathryn…”

Janeway intensified her suction and pulled back, hard.

“Jesus Christ!” shouted Lynne as her body jerked involuntarily, breaking Janeway’s hold. Panting and wide-eyed, she stared at her. “What the hell was that? My god, it felt like you were…I was…god, Kathryn, I almost came!”

Janeway tried, she really did, but once again the expression on Lynne’s face was more than she could stand. She fell to one side and dissolved in mirth. In a few seconds she heard Lynne laughing with her.

“Okay, I can see you were planning that one,” said Lynne. “Care to
explain the details that I’ve obviously missed? This thing is really attached to me, isn’t it?”

Janeway sat up again, wiping her eyes. “Yes, it really is. It ties into the nerves of your clitoris. It’s essentially an extension of your own body. You can set the sensitivity, from zero to one hundred percent. I set it for seventy-five. You’ll feel everything.”

Lynne looked down at her “extension,” obviously considering the implications. A very large smile spread over her face. “Everything?” she asked.

Janeway nodded. “Everything.”

The smile became a lascivious grin. “Oh, yeah.” She reached out for Janeway and pushed her down, settling herself on top. A slow seduction of kisses, nips and caresses followed, as Lynne ratcheted Janeway’s arousal to a fever pitch—all the while slowly moving her hips so that the tip of the joystick just barely brushed soft, glistening skin.

Janeway stood it as long as she could, but the sensation of the phallus contacting her entrance without ever going further was maddening. Finally she grabbed Lynne by the back of the neck. “Inside. Now,” she ordered.

Lynne gave her a cocky smile. “Yes, ma’am,” she said, and without breaking their eye contact she entered with a single, agonizingly slow thrust. Janeway groaned at the sensation, so incredibly satisfying, and watched as Lynne’s eyes closed. For a moment there was total stillness, total silence, and then Janeway saw a tear slide down Lynne’s cheek.

Lifting a hand, she gently wiped it away. “What’s wrong?” she whispered, bewildered.

Lynne’s eyes opened. “Absolutely nothing,” she breathed. “God, Kathryn, it’s incredible. I can feel you. It’s such a gift. I feel totally connected to you. I never want this to end.”

“Neither do I,” said Janeway, “but if you don’t do something I’m going to explode.” She cupped Lynne’s buttocks and pulled their bodies closer together.

Lynne dropped down on her forearms, covering Janeway’s face and neck with gentle, reverent kisses. “I love you,” she said, beginning a slow stroking motion with her hips. “So much.”

Janeway tilted her head back, exposing more of her throat to Lynne’s ministrations. She wanted to answer Lynne’s avowal, but speech was
patently impossible at the moment. The sensation of Lynne on her and inside her was too overwhelming, and she gave herself entirely over to it.

Lynne left her throat and blazed a trail down to a breast, to which she attended with a touch so loving that it bordered on worship. She paid devout attention to every square centimeter of the breast before finally taking the nipple into her mouth and bathing it with a warm tongue.

Janeway arched into the touch, and Lynne responded by rocking her hips away and then thrusting, hard, driving herself as far in as she could. The phallus was long enough to brush Janeway’s cervix, and she cried out at the sensation—it was exquisite pleasure, teetering on the edge of pain.

“Are you all right?”

Janeway opened her eyes and saw the concern on Lynne’s face. “God, yes,” she said. “Do that again.”

The creases in Lynne’s brow smoothed instantly. “Okay. You just sounded like that hurt.”

“No,” Janeway reassured her. “Almost, but not quite. Just enough to feel incredible.”

“What do you mean, ‘just enough’? So it does hurt?” Lynne was worried again.

Janeway stifled a sigh. She appreciated the concern, but dammit, she wanted to get on with it!

“Lynne,” she said very clearly, “shut up and fuck me.”

The wide-eyed expression on Lynne’s face would have made her laugh if she hadn’t been so sexually charged. As it was, she barely had time to register it before the tenor of their lovemaking changed completely. Lynne complied with her command, repeatedly pulling nearly all the way out and then slamming back in with considerable power. Janeway could only hang on for the ride, the force of Lynne’s thrusts pushing her body up the bed. She couldn’t control her vocalizations, either, the groans tearing out of her with each stroke.

Abruptly, Lynne pulled all the way out, silencing Janeway’s protest with a kiss. “Don’t worry, I won’t leave you hanging,” she said. “It’s just that I can barely control myself, and I don’t want our first experience with this to end with the female version of premature ejaculation. I need to slow this down or it’s going to end before we get started.”

“Fine,” Janeway grumbled, eliciting a chuckle from Lynne. “I was perfectly happy, just so you know.”
“Well, let’s see if I can keep you happy.” Lynne slid down her torso and with no warning at all took her clitoris in her mouth.

“Oh, Christ!” Her head slammed back on the pillow. Lynne knew exactly where and how she liked to be touched, and she was making good use of her knowledge. Janeway’s hips moved in a timeless rhythm, her hands holding Lynne’s head in place just in case she got any ideas about going anywhere else.

In keeping with her apparent theme for the day, Lynne pushed her right to the edge and then pulled away again. This time Janeway didn’t even have time to protest before Lynne repositioned herself and buried the phallus to its full length, making both of them gasp at the sensation. As her body rocked under the renewed thrusts, Janeway’s arousal took a sudden leap when she realized that Lynne was nearing orgasm herself. She could hear it in her occasional groans and shortened breaths, and she wanted Lynne to come inside her. Lifting her head, she latched onto one of the breasts that had been swaying temptingly above her and suckled hard, raking the nipple with her teeth before letting go. “Come on,” she growled. “I want to hear you.” Then she wrapped her lips around the other nipple and gave it the same treatment.

“Oh god,” Lynne groaned, “don’t do that, I don’t want it to be this soon...” Her thrusts became more forceful, and Janeway had to give up her attentions to Lynne’s breasts. She simply couldn’t hold herself up under the intense assault, instead wrapping her hands around the rail on the headboard and using her arm strength to counter Lynne’s movements and keep her body from being pushed up the bed.

Suddenly Lynne stopped her motions, dropping her head and breathing heavily. Janeway closed her eyes in frustration. Dammit. She’s going to kill me.

Lynne’s head came back up and she gave Janeway a knowing look. “Nice try, love, but amazingly enough I still have a little control left. I think we need to change positions.” Janeway let out a disappointed sound as she felt Lynne pull out again, but her wife simply brought her knees up under herself, sitting upright and back on her heels, then pulled Janeway up by the hips and reentered her. “Don’t worry, I’m not going anywhere. And neither are you.” She picked up Janeway’s left leg and lifted it straight up, holding it there as she rubbed her cheek against the calf. “Anyone ever tell you you’ve got great legs?” She turned her
head and began nibbling and kissing the calf muscle and ankle. It felt fantastic.

“I’ve got short legs,” said Janeway a little breathlessly, watching Lynne’s ministrations. Who knew a leg could be such an erogenous zone?

“So? I love these legs. They’ve got perfect curves. Perfect thighs…” She drew her fingertips from the very apex of Janeway’s thigh to her knee, then bent her head to lick the back of the knee. “Perfect calves…” Her tongue traveled upward from the knee to the ankle. “And such cute little feet, which I’d love to play with, but you’ve been walking around barefoot. I think this is tree sap, but I’m not taking a chance.”

Janeway couldn’t help herself; she laughed. Lynne had such a way of blending earthy humor and pure sexuality in their lovemaking. “So no toe sucking then?” she asked.

“Not until you take a shower. Then we’ll talk.” Lynne ran her fingers lightly over Janeway’s foot, a delighted grin lighting her features as Janeway squirmed. “Ooo. That feels interesting. Let’s make you do that again.” Gentle fingers tickled her sole, and Janeway let out a very uncaptainlike giggle.

“Stop it!”

Lynne grinned down at her. “Okay, but that means I’ll have to start something else.” She pulled her head back as she passed the leg in front of her face, bringing it as far to the other side as their current positions allowed. Then she leaned forward and planted her hands on either side of Janeway’s torso. “Bring your bottom leg between mine, love, and come onto your side.”

It took her a few seconds to figure out what Lynne had in mind, but eventually she found herself on her side in a surprisingly comfortable position. Lynne stayed in place, merely lifting one leg to allow Janeway’s to pass under, and they’d never lost their connection through the maneuver.

Now Lynne began caressing her front and back simultaneously. “You are so stunning,” she whispered. Her hands worshipped Janeway’s spine, buttocks, shoulders, breasts and stomach, and Janeway closed her eyes once again, this time in pure pleasure. Lynne made her feel like a goddess.

Her eyes opened when a hand pushed gently on her shoulder, and she allowed herself to roll slightly toward her back as Lynne leaned forward and brought her lips around the one nipple she could reach. Her hips
began a slow, shallow thrusting as she suckled, and Janeway instantly decided she’d just found her new favorite position. This was incredible. Now if only Lynne would start moving those hips a little faster! She reached out with her top arm, running her hand through Lynne’s hair and along her spine, matching the earlier caresses she’d enjoyed so much. Gradually she let her touches become firmer, until she dropped her hand as far down Lynne’s back as she could reach and gave it a strong tug toward her. The signal was unmistakable, and Lynne pulled back from her breast to smile at her.

“Some people have no patience,” she said. “I could do this all day.”

“I could too,” said Janeway, “but we have this new toy to use and you’re not doing much with it.”

Now the smile became pure evil. “Kathryn, you really shouldn’t taunt the one in charge.” Janeway’s eyes narrowed at that, but before she could say anything Lynne continued, “Don’t you know why I chose this position?”

_Uh oh. “No, why?”_

“So I could do this.” Lynne suddenly thrust in hard, and Janeway’s head went back as the phallus drove inside her, firmly impacting her cervix. Never had she felt such deep penetration; the sensation was intense and completely overwhelming. Lynne kept up her thrusts, every single one going so deep that it wrung a cry out of Janeway. She flung a hand up to grasp the headboard, trying to hold her body still, but she’d never been so out of control as she was right now. She couldn’t believe how different this position made their intercourse feel. She wasn’t one to have vaginal orgasms, but god, this might just be a first.

Lynne varied her tempo but not the depth, and soon Janeway was clawing at anything within reach, searching for something but not knowing what. Her entire existence narrowed down to the sensations that were overwhelming both her mind and body, and she didn’t even notice when her fingernails raked four parallel lines across Lynne’s back.

The thrusts increased suddenly, then just as abruptly slowed as Lynne threw her head back, gasping out her name.

“Kathryn…god…” Eyes tightly shut, she moved slowly inside Janeway, her body jerking as the orgasm rolled through her muscles. Finally the taut line of her throat relaxed, her eyes opened, and she looked at Janeway in total amazement. “Oh, Jesus. Is that what men feel? My god, no
wonder they’re such assholes sometimes.” She collapsed on top of Janeway, breathing hard.

Janeway reveled in the feel of Lynne’s body draped so bonelessly atop her own, though their positions made it impossible for her to hold her partner. She also knew she wouldn’t last long under the weight, not on her side. Usually Lynne was very careful to keep her full weight off her smaller partner, but every now and again she simply didn’t have the strength. Janeway always loved those times. It was so rare that Lynne lost all control that way, and she couldn’t help but feel a bit proud whenever it happened.

As usual, Lynne recovered before Janeway could begin to feel crushed. Pushing back up on her hands, she began to pull out. Janeway immediately wrapped one arm around her back, holding her in place. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“I said I wouldn’t leave you hanging.”

“And you won’t. You’re going to stay right where you are and let me finish things.” Janeway’s body was thrumming with arousal, and she did not want Lynne to move. She slid her hand down into her own folds and began a dance she knew very well—five years of celibacy had made her very proficient in pleasing herself. She’d never done it in front of Lynne before, but the way she felt right now made her usual boundaries seem inconsequential.

Lynne watched her motions in fascination, her face showing signs of renewed arousal. She raised her eyes to Janeway and said in a near-whisper, “That is so hot. God, you’re sexy.”

The combination of her own motions, the fullness inside her, and Lynne’s obvious enjoyment ratcheted Janeway’s arousal to a whole new level, but the downside to this position was that it stretched out the tissues around her clitoris, making her goal just a little too difficult. She paused long enough to push on Lynne’s shoulder. “I need to roll onto my back.”

Lynne obliged, picking up Janeway’s leg and reversing their earlier motions, and Janeway settled onto her back with a happy sigh. She loved the way they could do this without losing their connection. Her hand slid back down...oh, much better. It felt divine, and watching Lynne watch her was indescribably sexy. Soon she was unable to keep her eyes open any longer, focusing solely on the sparks shooting through her lower body and
making her muscles twitch. The orgasm began to build, and she was almost there when Lynne pulled back minutely and then pushed in again, setting up a mild rhythm designed to increase Janeway’s pleasure without interfering.

It worked. Gasping incoherently, Janeway rose halfway off the bed as the orgasm raged through her body. Lynne continued her slow, small thrusts, drawing out the orgasm until Janeway finally grabbed her shoulders. “Enough!”

Lynne stopped instantly, holding herself perfectly still as she stared down with a look of joyous wonder. “I felt you,” she whispered. “I felt you come. Incredible…god, Kathryn, it’s such a gift! Thank you for giving that to me.”

Janeway pulled her down and met her lips in a ferocious kiss. That last burst of energy drained her reserves, however, and she dropped her arms to the bed with a groan. “I don’t think I’ll ever move again.”

“I have to,” said Lynne. “My hips are killing me. Are you ready?”

Janeway nodded, biting her lower lip as Lynne slowly pulled out. Then the phallus was gone and her body went totally limp. “I hate that part,” she said.

Lynne rolled onto her back and heaved a sigh. “Me too. I mean, I remember hating that part. It’s been a year since I felt it.”

“I still can’t believe that.”

“What, that I haven’t had sex with a man in a year? You should know, love.”

Janeway rolled to one side and regarded her wife, who turned her head and smiled at her. “You do that on purpose.”

Lynne’s smile widened. “Uh huh. And you hate it.”

“No, not really. I’d prefer to say that you inspire me.”

The smile changed to a look of suspicion, which was justified a moment later when Janeway pounced, raking her fingers along sensitive ribs and causing an immediate explosion of giggles.

“Aaahh! Stop! You’re killing me!” Lynne curled up in a protective ball, which did nothing to stop Janeway’s questing fingers. Shaking with helpless laughter, she straightened back out and grabbed Janeway’s hands, holding them in an unbreakable grip. “That was cruel!” A few more giggles escaped. “I was happily enjoying my post-coitus haze, and you just destroyed it.”
“Oh, my poor sweet...annoying, exasperating, intentionally provoking baby.” Janeway tried to pull her hands free, to no effect. “Let me go.”

“Do you promise not to tickle me?”

Janeway contemplated the question long enough for Lynne’s brows to draw together. Only then did she smile. “I promise. Besides, you look ridiculous enough as it is.”

“What do you mean?” Lynne followed Janeway’s gaze to her crotch.

“Oh. Hey, you weren’t complaining a minute ago.”

“A minute ago I couldn’t see it. Now I can, and this really needs to come off.” Janeway freed her hands, reached for the recessed control and detached the joystick. “Here, hold this.”

Lynne took it automatically, crinkling her nose. “Now what do we do with it?”

“Just hold on to it.” Janeway got up and walked outside. The case was sitting where she’d left it, and she scooped it up along with the instruction PADD. Returning to their bed, she smothered a laugh at the sight of Lynne sitting there, holding the phallus as if it were venomous.

“All right,” she said, settling cross-legged next to Lynne. “Time to clean.” She picked up the control and showed Lynne the all-important reset button. “This makes it revert to its original size...” She plucked the now-tiny phallus from Lynne’s hand and dropped it into the box. “…and then you just close the lid.”

A faint hum issued from the box, and Lynne looked askance at it.

“What was that?”

Janeway opened the box again and held up the clean phallus. “That was the automatic sterilization.”

“No way! Really?” Lynne made a grab for it. “Wow! Okay, it’s official. This is my new best friend. We really didn’t have anything like this in my time. I can’t tell you what a pain it was to clean toys then.”

“How did you do it?” Janeway was curious.

“For most we used hot water, or we’d just put a condom on it. The expensive ones, the ones made of silicone, you could clean with soap and water or sterilize by boiling.”

“Boiling?” Janeway was continually astonished at how primitive some things were in the twenty-first century. “Are you sure you didn’t live in the Dark Ages?”

“Sometimes I think I did.”
Janeway retrieved the joystick. “Well, let me show you something else you probably didn’t have then.” She swiftly attached the toy to herself, hit the “Human” button, and then programmed in a lower sensitivity and a size she thought was about right. Raising her head, she pinned Lynne with a gaze that made her wife gulp.

“Is this the right size?” she purred, advancing on Lynne and pushing her down to the mattress.

“Um…yeah. Could be a little bigger.”

“Bigger, huh? Your wish is my command.” Janeway increased the length and girth proportionally, then looked at Lynne for confirmation. When Lynne nodded, she quickly checked the instruction PADD, smiled to herself, and said, “Now close your eyes.”

After a pause, Lynne capitulated. “Okay, but I’m trusting you not to turn that thing into a Cardassian penis. That was scary.”

Janeway shuddered at the thought. “Don’t worry. I’m just going to treat you to a little something that’s going to send you straight to the stars.”

Lynne smiled, her eyes still shut. “You sound pretty confident there.”

Janeway punched in the code that transformed the phallus into something no Human male could ever hope to emulate. “Oh yes,” she said, looking down at the bumps and ridges that had appeared. “I’m confident.”

Lowering herself onto Lynne’s long body, she began a slow exploration of all her favorite sensitive places. It wasn’t long at all before Lynne was running her hands up and down her back, murmuring encouragements and small sighs. Janeway took her time before ever touching a breast, enjoying the way Lynne’s body unconsciously offered them to her in a silent plea. Once there, however, she focused on them exclusively, not even aware that her hips were rocking of their own volition. It was brought to her attention when Lynne answered with her own hips, sliding her hands down to her buttocks and pulling her down firmly.

“Kathryn,” she said in a raspy tone, “if you’re going to do something, now would be good.”

Reaching down, Janeway ran a finger through soft folds, finding an abundance of moisture. “So impatient,” she said, nuzzling Lynne’s neck and gently biting the tendon. “I thought I was doing something.”

“Kathryn…” Lynne’s voice promised dire consequences if she didn’t get satisfaction soon.
Janeway’s response was nonverbal. She pushed up onto her hands, balancing on one while using the other to guide the phallus into Lynne’s opening. As soon as the tip made contact, she closed her eyes at the instant heat that was transferred to her own nerves. A slow thrust pushed it halfway in with ease, and she stifled a gasp at the sensations racing through her body. Gently she pulled out to spread the lubricant, then buried herself to the hilt.

“Whoa!” Lynne’s eyes shot open. “What is that?” She propped up on her elbows and looked down.

“Like that, do you?” Janeway was just a little smug as she continued her slow thrusts, making sure each one went all the way in. She knew Lynne was feeling every ridge. In addition, with each full thrust a cleverly designed bump near the base of the phallus contacted Lynne’s clitoris and provided a tiny vibration. The fact that she felt the vibration as well was just a happy side benefit.

“God, yes! That and everything else…aahHH!” Lynne fell back as Janeway pushed in with considerably more force, grinding her hips in a slow rotation while pressing down firmly. When the vibrations got to be almost too much she pulled back and paused, breathing hard and struggling for control. She hadn’t set the sensitivity all that high, but feeling herself inside Lynne was pushing her dangerously close to the edge. If she moved much more, she’d come, and she desperately wanted to draw this out longer.

Holding herself in place, she waited until Lynne’s eyes opened again. As soon as they did, she began a very slight, very slow motion, making sure that each thrust activated the vibrating bump. “You are so beautiful,” she breathed, watching Lynne struggle to stay focused on her. “I look at you and I get so turned on that I can barely control this.”

Lynne raised a hand to cup her cheek. “I love you. I can’t even describe what it feels like to know that it’s you inside me.”

“You don’t have to.” Janeway turned her head to kiss Lynne’s palm. “I know exactly what you’re feeling. But I didn’t know it could be like this on the other end. You were so tight when I first went in, and now you’ve relaxed just a bit… I can feel your heat, and the way you’re holding on to me; it’s like nothing I’ve ever felt before.”

“I should hope you’ve never felt it before,” said Lynne. Her attempt at lightening the mood was rewarded with a powerful thrust that sent her
head back to the pillow. Janeway settled herself on her forearms and began a series of long, hard strokes, watching in satisfaction as Lynne’s body jerked with each one. The telltale sounds of impending orgasm warned her in time, however, and she slowed her strokes once more.

“No...” Lynne groaned. “God, I was so close.”

“I know,” whispered Janeway. “You didn’t think I’d let it be that easy, did you?”

Lynne covered her eyes with a forearm. “You know, just because you always have to take the hardest path doesn’t mean I have to.”

Janeway pushed up onto her hands, giving herself the leverage she needed to answer properly. Pulling nearly all the way out, she slammed the phallus home with a force that wrung a choked cry from Lynne. Leaning forward to keep herself as fully buried as possible—and trying to ignore the vibrations that were dancing along her nerves—she said, “You don’t have any say in this, sweetheart. Deal with it.”

Lynne gave her a look that could have frozen lava. Janeway nearly laughed—questioning Lynne’s control over any situation was always a surefire way of raising her ire. She understood it because she was the same way. Their mutual need for control was what made their lovemaking so incendiary at times, and she’d just lit a flame under her wife.

Sure enough, Lynne’s hands came up towards her shoulders, and Janeway knew she was going to try to flip them over. In one fluid motion, she pushed her weight back onto her knees—which caused the phallus to pull out entirely—caught Lynne’s wrists, and let her body fall forward again. The force of her falling weight pinned Lynne’s arms to the mattress; the phallus had also slipped back in and was buried to the hilt with all of Janeway’s weight behind it. The cry that came out of Lynne had her momentarily worried; that last thrust had been unintentional. She pulled back slightly, opening her mouth to ask if Lynne was all right—but then Lynne’s eyes opened, and the glaze of lust in them was anything but pained.

Janeway felt the bunching of muscles beneath her; Lynne was gathering herself to either buck her off or roll them over. She immediately pushed back in and pressed hard, maximizing the vibrations as she slowly rotated her hips. Briefly she retreated, only to return almost instantly and resume the pressure. The combination of quick strokes and longer periods of vibrations soon took all the fight out of Lynne, and Janeway felt her
own arousal nearing the top of the scale. There was something about mastering Lynne, even if it was only for a few minutes, that sent her right to the edge. She gave up any attempt at drawing out the encounter, instead allowing her own needs to take over. All finesse went out the window as she repeatedly thrust in, deep and hard and with increasing speed as her own orgasm built and suddenly swept over her. Her strokes slowed as she shuddered, letting her head fall back and reveling in the dazzling sensations. It was indescribable, this feeling of coming inside Lynne. She hadn’t known it could be like this.

As the last shivers chased down her body, she looked down to see a smoldering green gaze staring back at her.

“Don’t you dare stop,” Lynne said in a choked voice, panting. “Not now.”

Janeway briefly considered pulling out and torturing Lynne for a while before giving her satisfaction, but the heat in that glare soon changed her mind. Letting go of Lynne’s wrists, she settled back onto her forearms and resumed her strokes, watching in fascination as the signs of orgasm painted themselves across swollen lips and flushed skin. It didn’t take long before Lynne closed her eyes and gave the long, keening cry that signified a tremendous orgasm. And Janeway felt it—a fluttering of the vaginal muscles that nearly sent her over the edge again. She gasped at the sensation, so incredibly intimate, and watched Lynne’s face at the ultimate moment of passion. When Lynne’s rigid body finally relaxed, Janeway covered her face in gentle kisses. “You’re perfect,” she whispered.

A tired laugh answered her. “Sure, you say that now.”

“Lynne, I love you. Thank you for marrying me.”

The serious tone of her voice pierced Lynne’s fatigue, and she opened her eyes. “If I could move my arms,” she said, “I’d give you a big hug. But since my bones and muscles have completely liquefied, I’ll just say you’re welcome. And thank you for having the courage to ask first. God only knows how long it would have taken if it’d been left up to me.”

“Oh, I think you would have gotten around to it.”

“Mmm.” Lynne was fading again, and Janeway watched fondly as her eyes fluttered shut and her breathing slowed. She didn’t think she was at all biased in judging Lynne beautiful just after orgasm; her lips were red and swollen and her color was high, making her eyes seem even more green than normal. When they were open, that is.
“I’m not looking forward to you pulling out,” said Lynne a minute later. She was coming around. “Those ridges felt incredible a few minutes ago, but I’ve got a feeling I’m not going to like them so much now.”

“Not a problem,” said Janeway. Careful not to cause any movement within Lynne, she pushed up, reached behind her for the control and swiftly reduced the joystick to its default size. Lynne hardly even felt her withdrawal.

“God, Kathryn, I should have done that for you. Why didn’t you say something?” Lynne was now fully revived and looking guilty.

“Because I was temporarily brain dead from that orgasm and I didn’t think of it.”

“Oh. Well, now I know. It won’t happen again. There are a lot of advantages to not having a real penis, aren’t there?”

There was a moment of silence as their eyes met.

The peace of the surrounding forest was shattered a few seconds later, as two women gave themselves over to uncontrollable laughter.
The moment Seven opened her eyes, she knew Revi had already departed. Stepping forward, she accessed the controls and found that the doctor had left only six minutes earlier. She frowned. That wasn’t like Revi; usually if their cycles were only a few minutes apart, the first one out waited for the other. Perhaps she’d been called away.

: Revi. :

: Sorry, Seven, I had to get to sickbay. Ensign Golwat has contracted the Bolian flu, gods only know how. :

Seven immediately felt much better. : I hope she recovers quickly. Is that zoonotic? :

: Yes, and it’s nasty. Fortunately, I think everyone was well away before she hit the contagious stage. But she’s in for a hard time, so I’ll be in sickbay for a while. :

: Will you have time for lunch with me? :

There was an uncharacteristic pause. : What time? :

: Your convenience; I have no current demands on my time. I would like to take this opportunity to experience a Human custom I’ve read about, called a “picnic.” But they are best shared, I’m told. :

: A picnic! You’re on. I haven’t done that since I was in school. Shall I just beam to your coordinates at 1330? :

: That would be...good. : Seven was trying to curb her tendency to use the word “acceptable.”
: All right. I’ll be there. Can I bring anything?:
: You may bring yourself. I look forward to your company.:  
: And I to yours. See you in a few hours.:  

Seven smiled. Revi sounded normal; she had been worrying for no reason. Inefficient. She exited the alcove unit and walked across the cargo bay to the replicator on the wall, planning her menu for the afternoon.

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The site Seven had chosen for her picnic showed the influence of her friendship with Lynne. Never one to spend time admiring terrestrial scenery, she had developed an appreciation for certain landscapes featured in Lynne’s holoprograms. Now she was standing in a verdant meadow, surrounded on all sides by rolling hills. A river bisected the meadow, providing a break in the grasses that were nearly as tall as Seven’s head. Its banks were edged with large boulders, and it was on the flat top of one of these that she spread her blanket. Immediately one shortcoming to picnics became apparent, when the slight breeze flipped up the corners of the blanket. Seven weighted them down with small rocks, watched for verification of their efficacy, and when satisfied laid out her picnic. Her preparations complete, she sat on the blanket, observing the sunlight sparkling off the water and considering the various wavelengths of light to be seen planetside versus on a starship. Through their link she could hear Revi making her preparations to leave sickbay, and she waited with a tingle of anticipation.

A hum heralded her friend’s arrival, and Seven felt a smile coming unbidden to her lips. As she watched, Revi’s form solidified and she tilted her face to the sun.

: Gods, that feels fantastic! I’ve missed having the sun on my face.:  

While Revi enjoyed the sun, Seven took pleasure in watching her. Her friend’s face was highlighted by the sunlight, throwing the sharp planes of her cheekbones in relief and accentuating the mahogany highlights in her black hair. She was beautiful, even more so than Kathryn Janeway, who had been Seven’s previous standard for the definition.

Revi opened her eyes and smiled. If she’d heard Seven’s thoughts, she gave no indication.
: Is there room on that rock for two? :

: Yes. I have all of the ingredients for a picnic, as defined by popular literature. Cold chicken, potato salad, bread and cheese, grapes—and I substituted a bottle of sparkling cider for the wine. :

: Sounds great! I’m famished. : Revi walked over to the boulder, settling down on the blanket with a sigh. : Ensign Golwat is one very unhappy woman. And I don’t blame her. It’s just cruel to be sick during shore leave. :

: I have observed various crew members incapacitated, or at least rendered extremely inefficient, by disease. It is a strange concept. :

Revi looked up from her plate, which she had already piled high with chicken. : You’ve never been sick? She shook her head almost before the thought had manifested itself in Seven’s mind. : No, of course not. I keep forgetting that you were assimilated as a child. :

: And there are many advantages to that. While I have been required to learn things that others take for granted, I have also been spared such things as disease or physical failure. : A memory surfaced in her mind, and she amended her statement. : With one exception. But that was an introduced virus, a biogenetic weapon. :

Revi continued to load her plate. : You’re good for me, Seven. I tend to think of the Borg in terms of what they took away from me, but you’re a reminder of the things I received as well. It is nice to be disease-free. And free of most signs of physical aging. :

: And to be stronger and faster and longer lived than full Humans, : added Seven, : as well as housing the knowledge of thousands of species in our cortical implants. And to be able to communicate mind-to-mind as we are now. :

Revi took a bite, raised her eyebrows and smiled. : This is great, Seven. Thanks for arranging this. So tell me, oh She Who Is Grateful For Borg Gifts, do you miss it? :

She didn’t have to explain. Seven knew that she was referring to the hive mind, the connection to billions of minds that they had experienced as Borg—and a connection whose loss had rendered Seven nearly nonfunctional. She could easily recall the anger, fear and hatred she’d felt for Kathryn at the time, but now it seemed as if those emotions had belonged to a different person altogether. It was difficult to reconcile that individual with who she was today. :

: I did. It took me a very long time to adapt to the silence. But I have not missed it
since you came on board. Our connection has filled that need for me, while providing an entirely new level of communication that I had not known was possible. For that I have been very grateful. :

: I’m the one who should be grateful to you, Seven. Your friendship has been a true gift. :

: As has yours. : Seven raised her glass of cider. : Shall we drink to friendship? :

Revi flashed her a smile, raised her own glass, and nodded. : To friendship. A concept the Borg will never get, and which will long outlast them. :

They quietly consumed their picnic, watching the light playing off the river waters and discussing whatever came to mind. Seven learned that Revi and the Doctor were alternating their days off, having each given up half of their shore leave to deal with Ensign Golwat and any other medical needs that might arise. This led to a discussion of why Revi should be required to give up her leave for the Doctor, who was after all not an organic life form with a psychological need for time off planetside. Seven’s argument against it was, admittedly, colored by her desire to have Revi available to her for the next two weeks. Revi responded by saying that Seven of all people should acknowledge the rights of a sentient inorganic life form, since she herself bore more than a passing resemblance to a computer given the presence of her cortical implant and other remaining Borg hardware. Seven immediately showed Revi her memories of an argument she’d had with Kathryn about the Doctor, in which she’d used that exact logic—but added that this was not a question of rights, it was a question of needs. And Revi had a greater physiological need for non-recycled air and leisure time.

Revi grinned at her. : Oh, first it was psychological, now it’s physiological. Your logic is shifting, Seven. :

: Not shifting. Merely expanding. :

Revi was a worthy opponent in an argument, and Seven delighted in their exchange. She had never known another individual with whom conversation came so easily.

When the food had been consumed and the containers packed away, Seven concluded that it was time to make her statement. She had deliberately not allowed herself to think of the decision she’d made the night before, not wanting Revi to see it before she was prepared to present it coherently. This was one disadvantage of sharing thoughts. Sometimes,
they could be seen before they were quite ready, still unformed or even uninformed. But Seven had learned a new type of mental discipline since Revi’s arrival and had become more proficient at the mental compartmentalization required to keep such thoughts internal.

Now she was ready. Shifting her gaze from the river to the deep brown eyes of her friend, she allowed her thoughts to surface.

: Revi, I asked you here for more than a sharing of nutrients. :

Puzzled, she watched as Revi suddenly straightened her posture, all semblance of relaxation ceasing immediately. : I suspected as much. But I hoped I was wrong. :

Seven looked more carefully into Revi’s thoughts, and understood there was no need to bring her wishes to the forefront of her mind. Revi had already seen them. What she did not understand was why her friend was reacting this way.

: You knew at the wedding. Is that why you left to regenerate without contacting me? : Another thought struck her. : Is that why you were afraid? :

: Yes. : Though Revi was blocking her emotions as usual, her face was tense. : I’ve seen this coming for a while. You’ve grown so much in the time I’ve known you, and you’re poised at the brink of a huge leap in your emotional growth. You’re at a vulnerable time, just discovering some of the most complex emotions that Humans are capable of. Given our link and the things we have in common, it was only natural that you would focus those on me. But I’m just a crush. It’s your first time of feeling these things, and eventually you’ll move past them. I was hoping you’d move past them without ever saying anything to me, because I never wanted to hurt you. :

Seven, who knew very well that Revi harbored no intentions of harm toward her, struggled to comprehend her friend’s reasoning. : You were afraid at the wedding…of causing me harm? :

: Yes. :

: I don’t understand—I know that you would never hurt me. Where then does your fear originate? :

: From the knowledge that I can’t return your feelings. :

She had considered this possibility, of course, but not quite as thoroughly as she had examined and prepared for more welcome possibilities. Obviously she should have given it a great deal more thought, because she was very much unprepared for the pain that swept through her.
And just as obviously, Revi felt that pain. She shook her head before fixing Seven with a gaze that was full of sympathetic understanding.

_Do you believe you might be able to return my feelings in time?_: Seven needed some measure of hope to aid her through this. The thought of Revi’s answer being permanent and unalterable was simply too difficult to process.

But Revi was not going to oblige. _I’m sorry. I would if I could. You are a rare and beautiful mind, and anyone would be honored to be the object of your heart. As I am honored. But I can’t accept it. I can, however, offer you my continuing friendship and my willingness to be there for you, no matter what happens._

Unable to meet Revi’s eyes, Seven turned her head away, staring unseeingly at the river. A gentle hand touched her shoulder, and she felt an instant desire to shake it off. The next moment she wondered about her reaction. Until now, she had welcomed and even initiated physical contact with Revi.

_Seven, what you’re feeling is very normal. I understand it, but please don’t let it affect our friendship. You mean too much to me. Please believe that I never wanted to hurt you and I would have given anything to avoid this situation. I treasure our connection—you know how much. I just can’t be what you need me to be._

And suddenly, Seven was angry. She didn’t want Revi to perceive her emotions, not if she didn’t return them. She felt hurt, vulnerable and powerless. It was intolerable that Revi should see her need, her desire, her hopes—and especially her pain—when she herself was only allowed to see what Revi wished to show her. Which was insufficient, had always been insufficient, and now that she thought about it, their mental link was far too unbalanced for her comfort. There was more flowing from her to Revi than was ever returned, and while she hadn’t objected at first, she certainly did now. Her emotions were _not_ temporary. She may have been a novice at understanding and defining them, but that did not lessen their strength. She had done enough research to understand what Revi meant by a “crush,” and her feelings had a far greater depth than was indicated by that term. To have Revi constantly privy to her weakness was simply unacceptable.

Slowly, she turned her head and looked first at the hand on her shoulder, then into Revi’s eyes. Swallowing audibly, Revi withdrew her hand. _I’m sorry_—:

“Teach me to block my emotions,” said Seven. The sound of her voice
jarred their senses after an entire afternoon of mind-to-mind communication, and she watched as Revi physically drew back.

“What?”

She knew Revi had heard her. She didn’t bother to repeat herself, instead waiting for something worth responding to.

“Seven…please don’t do this. What you’re feeling right now is overwhelming, but I promise it will get better with time. Please don’t make any decisions now that you might regret later.”

“I won’t regret it. I have already let this continue for too long. You can prevent me from seeing your emotions; why would you not want me to have the same skill? Or have you enjoyed holding the position of strength?”

Revi looked as if she’d been struck. “It’s not a competition! We’re friends. There is no position of strength, or weakness for that matter!”

“Then you can have no objection to teaching me.”

They stared at each other for several seconds in a silence that was both verbal and mental.

“All right,” said Revi at last. “I’ll teach you, and I would have no matter when you’d asked, so don’t accuse me of trying to maintain an imbalance in our relationship. I am your friend, no matter what you think right now, and I will be your friend for as long as you let me.”

Seven nodded. “I wish to begin now.”

“This might not be the best of times. It will be easier for you if your mind is…calmer.”

“Did you not just say you would teach me no matter when I asked?” Seven was ready to find another reason to add to her anger.

“Oh, for—” Revi stopped herself, but Seven could clearly hear the end of her sentence. It only served to harden her heart when Revi asked, “Have you not heard anything I said before that part?”

“I heard everything,” snapped Seven. “Did you not hear my previous question?”

She felt a hollow sort of satisfaction at the expression of resignation on Revi’s face.

“If you really want to, we’ll start now. It’s just going to be more difficult, that’s all.”

“That is irrelevant. Proceed.”
Revi sighed and reached out through their link, sending images to illustrate a technique that could not be taught through words.

And Seven, who had anticipated spending her shore leave exploring her new emotions, instead spent it learning to block them. She was an excellent student.
Janeway slid down the length of the tree trunk and collapsed in a heap at its base. It was fortunate that the bark was so smooth, or her naked back would have paid a heavy price. As it was, she felt nothing but a welcome coolness, in contrast to the warm arms that had supported her slide and were now wrapped around her.

A chuckle sounded in her ear. “Good to know that I’ve still got it,” said Lynne.

“What, you were afraid you’d lose it in two weeks? I hope we last a lot longer than that.”

“I wasn’t afraid I’d lose it. I was afraid it would wear out.”

Janeway laughed. Lynne had a point—they’d certainly taken maximum advantage of their honeymoon. Two weeks of having an entire continent to themselves had been nothing short of paradise. They’d taken a day to recover from the wedding—and a second day to recover from their recovery—and had then begun ascending the mountain Lynne had picked out while they were still in orbit. Janeway snuggled into Lynne’s body, thinking about that climb and the new depth it had brought to their relationship.
It was an enormous physical challenge, but Lynne had been the most solicitous and safe partner she could ever have wished for. She’d learned a number of new skills on that climb, and when they’d reached the top...well, as Lynne would say—wow. She’d been unprepared for the incredible sense of accomplishment, the pure emotions that she’d felt as she stood there. Pride, certainly, but a different sort than she normally experienced. This was a basic, bare-bones pride in her body and her ability to push it; so different from the pride she took as a captain and an explorer. If she’d been forced to define the difference, she would say that one was physical and the other more cerebral.

And then there was a pure, giddy happiness that she couldn’t ever recall feeling before. Lynne felt it too, and made it obvious by dancing in circles at the summit, whooping with elation. Janeway couldn’t quite bring herself to such a display, but she understood why Lynne did it, and even she couldn’t stop herself from laughing out loud in sheer, unadulterated joy. She felt...free.

They’d sat at the summit, looking at the incredible scenery, for hours. Mostly in silence, though there was some discussion about Janeway’s perception of the experience. It was elemental, Lynne told her. A mountain stripped you of all pretense. Mountains weren’t fooled by clothes, gear, money or status. They took you as you really were, and if you didn’t measure up you paid the price.

She had measured up—with a lot of help and encouragement from her wife—and she had felt supremely content, sitting there on top of the world. It was with a very real pang of loss that she had finally consented to begin their descent. She’d never wanted to leave. Ironic, given that her presence there had been solely due to the compromise she’d made with Lynne over how they’d spend their honeymoon. Now she wanted to do it again. At last she understood the power that drew Lynne to her beloved mountains, and her only regret was that she hadn’t figured it out before this.

But the greatest gift that mountain gave to her, she thought, was Lynne herself. On the night that Lynne had proposed, she had also made a promise to open up more, to improve at sharing her thoughts, emotions and fears. In the last two months she had made a concerted effort to fulfill her promise, but Janeway could see how difficult it was for her. There had been no magical moment when their communication suddenly became
effortless. Lynne had gotten better at answering direct questions, at responding more openly, but she still wasn’t volunteering information. Janeway had refrained from asking some of the more difficult questions, preferring to wait and hope that someday soon Lynne would feel comfortable enough to open up that final measure.

She had. On the evening of their first day on the mountain, when they crawled into bed in their Starfleet shelter and Janeway was sure she’d never move again, Lynne offered to massage her sore muscles. Not being a fool, Janeway had immediately agreed. She’d relaxed in their soft bed, luxuriating in the feel of her wife’s hands. And there, in the warmth and darkness of their shelter, Lynne had begun to talk. She told Janeway stories about growing up in the mountains of Colorado, about her relationship with her parents, about how much she missed them. Janeway had closed her eyes and simply listened to Lynne’s low voice, afraid that if she said anything, anything at all, the moment would end. When Lynne finished her massage and lay down beside her, Janeway had snuggled in, kissed her gently, and thanked her.

On the second day of the climb, Lynne told her more stories as they made their way up the mountainside. In return, Janeway related a few childhood and young adult tales of her own.

“How could I have known you for a year and not known that you studied sign language?” Lynne had been astonished.

“Because it never came up, sweetheart. But it can be very handy.”

“Show me.”

So they’d spent a wonderful afternoon practicing, and Lynne had proved to be a quick study. One of the first things Janeway showed her was a version of I love you that she had created. “There are two main variations,” she’d said, demonstrating both. “But I never liked them because they’re so overt. It’s like shouting your feelings to the world. So I use this one—” she made the hand sign with her palm out and thumb, forefinger and pinky extended—“but I do it over my heart.” Reversing her hand position, she held the sign against her heart. “Same concept, but closer to the vest.”

“And very you,” Lynne had said with a smile. “You never like to advertise.”

That night in the shelter, Janeway received another massage—and another night of emotional intimacy. For the first time, Lynne spoke of her
fears of returning to Earth, and her worries about the expectations that the Hamilton Foundation would impose on her. She admitted her pain at leaving her parents, and how difficult it had been to suffer that pain alone. She hadn’t shared it with Janeway because she didn’t want her to feel guilty about her decision. When Janeway rolled over and took her in her arms, Lynne had buried her face in her neck and quietly cried. And they had talked, finally talked, about the decision that had cost them both in such different ways.

On the morning of the third day, they’d made the summit. And there she’d seen Lynne dancing in pure joy, bringing tears to her own eyes. It actually hurt to see her so happy, knowing how much loss and sorrow her wife carried inside. The contrast cut into her heart like a fine, narrow blade.

The descent had taken two more days, and each night the same pattern played out. Lynne would massage Janeway’s tired muscles and talk, her low voice filling the shelter with an intimate rhythm. Janeway would listen in the dark, her heart feeling too small to hold so much love, and her throat closing on the things she wanted to say. But these moments were too rare to risk, and so she listened in silence, at times with an aching heart.

The first night of their descent, Lynne had recalled her terror of losing Janeway’s love the day she returned from the Tsian home world. She spoke of how overwhelming the fear had been, and of her certain knowledge that she could not survive the loss. Not after losing everything else. And then she described the bliss, the joy, the nearly incapacitating relief of learning that Janeway still loved her…and there, in the darkness of their Starfleet shelter, her voice had fallen silent as their bodies slid together and they made a slow, reaffirming love that felt like a benediction.

On their last night, Janeway had insisted that Lynne relax and let her give the massage. All through it Lynne uttered no sound save quiet little murmurs of contentment, and Janeway had felt a deep pang of disappointment. She suspected that Lynne’s openness was related to their presence on the mountain, the one place where Lynne was truly in control; where she felt safe. And she worried that when they left the mountain behind, this intimacy would be lost as well. When the massage ended, she’d slipped under the sheets and closed her eyes with a sigh. The moonlight
streaming in through the transparent ceiling seemed cold and remote, and Janeway could feel a slight depression settling in.

But Lynne had just been waiting. She rose up to straddle Janeway’s body, and this time, as her warm hands sought out tight muscles and coaxed them to relax, she spoke of Dakmor. Of how the full impact of her first kill hadn’t hit her until weeks after the fact; how she’d sought solace in meditation; how she had come to accept the truth of Janeway’s words—that she’d crossed a line that could not be uncrossed. And how Janeway’s total acceptance of her made her own journey toward acceptance easier. She knew that she still had a long way to go, but she would get there eventually. Then she’d leaned down to gently kiss Janeway’s spine, and told her that she had also come to accept the fact that she would not hesitate to kill again if Janeway’s life were in danger—or that of any member of the crew. They were her family and she would not lose family again. She’d crossed the line.

Janeway had rolled over to look at her, watching the determined expression on a face that seemed regal in the silver moonlight. She’d opened her arms and welcomed Lynne into them, holding her tight and eventually hearing her breathing even out and deepen. And she had prayed to whatever deity might be out there, to bring Voyager home and spare both of them from further loss.

Upon arriving at the foot of the mountain, they’d packed up and transported to a lovely beach for the second half of their honeymoon. The warmth, the opportunity to simply lie around and do nothing—and most importantly, having no one for thousands of kilometers in any direction—had liberated Janeway to a previously unimaginable extent. She’d relaxed so much that by their second day, clothing had seemed too much to bother with, and for the first time in her life she had no tan lines anywhere on her body. Well, that wasn’t quite true—on a starship one tended to have a uniform skin tone as well, but that was due to a lack of sunlight. Now she was bronzed all over, and she reveled in the freedom of strolling down the beach in nothing but the suit she was born in. It didn’t hurt that Lynne was similarly unconcerned about clothing, and Janeway knew she’d never get tired of watching that body on display.

They’d played in the warm surf, the white sand, and the crystal clear waters of a river that ended its long journey at their campsite. Lynne
pointed out that the river’s headwaters were on the very mountain they’d climbed, which made it all the more special to Janeway’s eyes.

And of course they’d made love. A lot. In every conceivable way, position and manner, though Janeway had noticed that over the last two days their lovemaking had become extremely gentle. Games, toys and power plays were very fun, but as they neared the end of this priceless time together, the fun had segued into a need to quietly communicate the depth of their love, in the last bit of time left to them before their normal roles and responsibilities came crashing back down. It was not something Janeway looked forward to. These two weeks had been the most rejuvenating break she’d had in six years, and now, on their last day, she was certain that it hadn’t been long enough. Hell, two months wouldn’t be long enough.

Lynne stirred at her side, dropping a kiss on her throat and giving her a loving squeeze. “My back’s killing me, love,” she said. “I need to lay down.” She pulled away and sprawled full length in the sand. “Ahhhh. Much better.” After a long and luxurious stretch, she regarded Janeway with a sultry gaze. “Can we take that tree back with us?”

“I wish we could.” Janeway craned her head back, looking up into the tropical foliage that rustled quietly in the gentle breeze. “It certainly holds some very fine memories for me.”

“This whole place holds fine memories for me,” said Lynne. “If anyone had ever told me that I could be happy sitting on my ass for an entire week, doing nothing but reading books and having occasional sex, I would have laughed in their faces. I think I’m getting old.”

Janeway threw a handful of sand onto Lynne’s bare stomach. “Old my ass. And the sex has been anything but occasional. You’re relentless.”

Lynne sat up, the sand flowing off her body in thin white streams. “Me! I beg to differ, oh insatiable one. Whoever said that a woman’s sex drive peaks at thirty-four hadn’t met you. Or maybe you did peak at thirty-four, in which case I’m glad I didn’t meet you until now. I wouldn’t have survived.”

They grinned at each other, the argument having already become a
tradition between them. But their grins faded, and their expressions became much more somber.

“It’s time to pack, isn’t it?” Lynne sounded hopeful that maybe, just maybe, Janeway would say no.

But she couldn’t. “Yes, it is. I want to stay as much as you do. This has been a priceless moment in time, and one I’ll never forget. But unless we want to colonize the planet, we’ve got to get moving.”

“I’m up for colonization. Dibs on this continent. We can always go visit the others if we want company.” Janeway simply raised her eyebrows, and Lynne sighed. “I know. So, do you think we should get dressed? And how weird is that going to feel?”

“Weird.” Janeway laughed. “But somehow I don’t think I could effectively command a starship in my current attire.”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Lynne licked her lips. “I’d obey any command you gave me, that’s for sure.”

Janeway got up on all fours, leaned over to drop a quick kiss on her wife, and then stood up. “You already have, sweetheart.” She held out a hand.

Lynne allowed herself to be pulled up. “True,” she agreed cheerfully. “But if you ever say anything I’ll deny it.”

Janeway snorted. “Somehow I don’t think that’s going to come up in conversation any time soon.”

After one last dip in the ocean, they took less than an hour to dismantle the shelter and pack their totes. The sun was setting, and by unspoken agreement they stayed to use every last minute of their time on Bliss. Standing hand in hand, they silently watched the sun slip beneath the water, its final rays lighting up the high clouds in a riot of orange and red.

Lynne squeezed Janeway’s hand. “You know, that’s something I never got used to in our whole two weeks here,” she said.

“The sunset?”

“No, the fact that the sun looks twice as big as ours. It’s the only thing about this planet that’s truly alien to me.”

“You get used to it eventually,” said Janeway. “After a while you stop noticing that the sun, satellites and stars are different. You know what will be totally alien to me? Seeing Sol again, and the Moon, and the constellations from Earth.”
“You have been out here too long.”
“I know.”
Lynne tugged her hand again. “You’ll see them again, Kathryn. I know we’ll get there eventually.”
Janeway met her eyes, loving the way they glowed a brilliant green in the last rays of the sun. “Then we’d better get started.” Without breaking their gaze, she activated her comm badge. “Janeway to *Voyager*. Two to beam directly to the Captain’s quarters.”
She felt the familiar tingle as they left Bliss behind forever.
One of the few things that made leaving easier, thought Janeway the next morning, was the anticipation of what she was about to do. She and Lynne had plotted this out, and she was looking forward to it with a rather un-captainlike glee. The small box concealed in her hand was going to cause quite a stir in a few minutes.

The turbolift doors opened, and she stepped onto her bridge for the first time in two weeks.

“Captain on the bridge!” called Harry, and her entire crew stood at attention. Janeway stopped for a moment, taken aback at the formal gesture of respect. Then she strode to her chair and settled happily into the indentation in the seat cushion; the one made by her and for her alone.

“As you were. Status report, Chakotay.”

His smile was huge and completely incongruous to the command, but since Janeway was smiling just as much it didn’t seem to matter. “All systems are optimal and we are on course for the Alpha Quadrant.”

Optimal. Not just “go,” the shorthand term for “functional,” but optimal—meaning in tip top, absolutely perfect condition. The way she always wanted her ship to be, but so rarely saw in reality.

“Excellent,” she said. She slowly looked around the bridge, making a show of her inspection. “I like what you’ve done with the place.”
Everyone on the bridge laughed, and they settled in to work. Chakotay and Janeway spent a few minutes catching up on news, and when the immediate concerns were resolved, she winked at him and stood up. “Ensign Culhane, take the helm,” she said in her best commanding voice. “Mr. Kim, Mr. Paris—in my ready room.” Without waiting for a response, she turned and left the bridge. By the time Harry and Tom made it into her ready room, she had slipped the box behind her terminal and assumed a rigid posture in her chair. Responding to her earlier command and her body language—and perhaps a well-honed sense of guilt—both men stood at attention in front of her desk. Janeway let them stand for a few moments in silence before speaking.

“You know,” she said in a low voice, “I’ve taken a great deal of pride in the way this crew has forged itself into more than just the sum of its parts. We’ve become a family, and I’ve deliberately relaxed some of the normal protocols between captain and crew in order to facilitate this. But I certainly haven’t relaxed all of them. So what on earth made you think your wedding gift was even remotely appropriate?”

She waited, curious to see if either of them would save their skins by pointing the finger at B’Elanna. They certainly had the right to, since they’d truthfully had no idea what the chief engineer had planned to do with their rations. But to her quiet satisfaction, neither man chose that option.

Tom, as always, was the first to speak up. Staring straight ahead, he said, “We’re sorry, Captain, if our gift caused any…” He stopped, and Janeway could practically see him casting about for a word that wouldn’t get him thrown in the brig. “Uh, I mean we’re sorry that you felt it was inappropriate. We just wanted to get you something special.” He cringed as the last word came out of his mouth.

Harry tried to save him. “Yeah, we, uh, we just wanted you to know how much we respect you and Lynne, and…” he stuttered to a halt as Janeway fixed him with a glare.

“Somehow,” she said, “I think ‘respect’ was the furthest thing from your mind.” She looked at Tom, who wouldn’t meet her eyes. “Mr. Paris, you’re dismissed.”

Startled, he looked at her for the first time. “Captain?”

“I know you weren’t the one who came up with this brilliant idea. Now if you don’t mind, I’d like a word with Mr. Kim. Alone.”
“But Captain, Harry didn’t—”

“Dismissed, Mr. Paris. Don’t make me say it again.”

Tom looked from her to Harry in obvious distress. “Yes, Captain,” he said unhappily, and left the room.

As soon as the door shut behind him, she got up from her chair and paced around her desk, watching Harry’s posture grow even more tense as she approached him. She stopped in front of him, resting a hip against her desk. “At ease, Ensign, before you sprain something.”

He began to assume the military at ease posture, but then stopped and looked at her in confusion, obviously making the connection. She’d said those exact words to him the very first time they’d met on Voyager’s bridge, at Deep Space Nine.

She smiled. “You’re not in trouble.”

“I’m not?” It came out as a squeak, and he immediately blushed and cleared his throat. Janeway managed not to laugh, but it was touch and go for a moment.

“No. That little performance was just for Tom’s benefit. Even if this wasn’t his doing, he’s been involved in enough scams, jokes and general bending of regulations that a little disciplinary scare can only be good for him. And now he’s on the bridge, sweating over what dastardly punishment I’m inflicting on you.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “I’m planning to let him sweat for a bit longer. Besides, I really did want to speak with you alone.”

Harry relaxed. “What about, Captain?”

“About you.”

His eyes showed an instant return of nervousness, and she shook her head. “After six years, Harry, do I still scare you that much?”

“When you come back from a two-week honeymoon and the first thing you do is call me on the carpet? Yes.”

This time she did laugh. “Fair enough. But I’ve been thinking about those six years. When I first met you, you were so green I really was afraid you’d sprain something. You’ve come a long way since then. You’ve made a few mistakes, but you always learned from them. Your loyalty and honor are above reproach. And you’ve made some tremendously valuable contributions to our mission and our journey.” She reached behind her for the box and added, “I think it’s time that I recognized your contributions with something more substantial than a thank you.” Opening the box, she
displayed the lieutenant’s pip nestled inside, and watched Harry’s eyes go wider than she had ever seen them.

“That’s…that’s a full lieutenant’s pip,” he said in wonder.

“Under normal circumstances you would have been promoted to lieutenant junior grade long ago, Harry. I didn’t do it because I had no place to promote you into. By now you should be a full lieutenant, given your service record. And I still have no place to promote you into, but I’m no longer so concerned about that. You understand that this promotion does not entail a change in duties or responsibilities?”

“Of course, Captain.”

“Then, Lieutenant Kim, I’d say you’re underdressed.” She took the pip from the box and carefully affixed it to Harry’s collar. When she stepped back, she could have sworn he’d grown six centimeters. His pride was a palpable presence in the room.

“Computer, note in log. Due to his exemplary performance of duty, his innovation, and his increasing value to this crew, I am promoting Ensign Harry Kim to full Lieutenant, with all of the privileges that rank implies. Authorization Janeway Gamma nine eight one three.”

“So noted,” said the computer.

“Congratulations, Harry,” she said more softly. “You’ve earned it.”

“Thank you, Captain.” He still sounded as if he couldn’t quite believe it. But then a grin came over his face. “Hey, I outrank Tom now.”

“Yes, you do. Enjoy it. Tom’s due for a promotion to full lieutenant too, but you’ve got some time to lord it over him.” Lynne had lobbied to promote both of them at once, but Janeway felt that a little humility would do Tom a world of good. He’d matured a great deal since she’d stripped his rank, and his growth had continued after she’d reinstated it nearly a year later. But he was still a bit too cocky for his own good sometimes, and having his best friend outrank him would force him to alter his thinking a bit.

“Believe me, I will.” Harry’s grin faded. “Uh, Captain? Are any of us in trouble over that gift?”

Janeway appreciated his tact. What he was really asking was whether B’Elanna was in trouble, and she knew he’d jump to her defense if given the opportunity.

“No,” she said. “Despite the nature of the gift, what I choose to remember is that all three of you donated a large number of replicator
rations for it. You were all very generous, and we appreciated the thought.”

“Oh.”

Janeway patted him on the shoulder and walked back around her desk. As she sat in her chair, Harry asked the million-latinum question. She would never have thought he’d have the guts. Tom, yes, but not Harry.

“So does that mean the gift was okay?”

Keeping her face completely blank, Janeway said, “You’re dismissed, Lieutenant.”

He instantly turned red, knowing he’d gone too far, and mumbled an apology before beating a hasty retreat. Janeway waited until the door closed before giving free rein to her amusement.

Harry, if you only knew!

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With the exception of the uproar created when Harry’s new pip was first noticed, the rest of the day had been resoundingly uneventful. Janeway could hardly believe that things had gone so smoothly for two entire weeks. And because those weeks had included a ship-wide shore leave following a total ship overhaul, there wasn’t even any work for her to catch up on. She wondered, as she took the turbolift back to deck three, if they shouldn’t have stayed for a month. Except for those casualty reports, of course. Statistically, a starship was more likely to incur casualties from shipwide shore leave than from away missions. Of course, the injuries were usually less severe, but what they lacked in severity they made up for in number. There was something about releasing an entire crew to outdoor activities that brought out the risk-taker—and sometimes, she thought ruefully, the idiot—in all of them. The Doctor and Revi had been busy for the last two weeks. She had already sent them both authorization for additional leave, since they hadn’t enjoyed the same length of shore leave that the rest of the crew had.

Walking into her quarters, she stopped just inside the door and stared, a smile breaking over her face.

“Hi, love,” said Lynne, who was sitting on the couch with a book in her hand. She tilted her head to one side. “Is there a reason you’re just standing there?”
“Mm hmm. I’m taking a moment to look at the most amazing thing in the quadrant.”

Lynne made a show of looking to each side and then behind her, turning back to smile at Janeway. “And where is this amazing thing?”

“Right in front of me,” said Janeway. She crossed the floor and stood between Lynne’s legs. “I’ve had a fantasy for some time now of coming home from my shift and finding you waiting here. In our quarters. This is the first time it’s happened since you moved in.”

Lynne reached up and pulled her down for a kiss. “I’ve had that fantasy too,” she said when they broke apart. “But there’s only one of me, so I guess I’ll never get to see it come true.”

Janeway shook her head and walked into the bedroom, where she wasted no time stripping off her uniform and putting on more comfortable clothes. When she came back into the living room, Lynne raised an eyebrow.

“Well, the honeymoon really is over, isn’t it? Baggy pants and a t-shirt? Tell me, do you have an old ratty Starfleet Academy sweatshirt with holes ripped in it? ‘Cause that would complete the look.”

Janeway flopped onto the couch with an exaggerated lack of grace. “Yes, but I’m saving that for later. I thought I’d start the decline gradually at first.”

The grin she received made her warm all over. God, she was happy. “Well, just so you know,” said Lynne, “you look better in baggy clothes than anyone has a right to.”

“Oh, so the honeymoon isn’t over.” Janeway lifted her shirt to just beneath her breasts, teasing Lynne with a flash of tanned skin. “Maybe I got dressed too soon?”

Lynne dropped her book, leaned over and placed a series of very soft kisses on the exposed stomach. Just as Janeway was melting into a puddle, she felt fingernails raking down her ribcage and nearly exploded off the couch.

“You wench!” she shouted, laughing and catching her breath. “There will be paybacks!” But before they could get into a full tickle fight, the entry chime rang. They froze in place, looking at each other.

“I guess we’re back,” said Janeway. They drew apart, straightening their clothes out before she called, “Come.”

The door opened to reveal Seven of Nine. “Kathryn, Lynne.” Seven
stepped across the threshold and nodded her greeting, but did not move beyond the doorway.

“Seven! Please, come in. It’s so good to see you!” said Janeway, smiling as she stood to greet their guest. She’d missed Seven.

“Thank you. It is good to see you as well.” Seven walked in and stopped in the center of the room. To the untrained eye she appeared cool and poised as usual, but Janeway could see that she was distressed. It showed in her eyes, the line of her mouth, and the too-erect stance. “I apologize for coming here so soon after your honeymoon,” she said. “But I have no one else to speak with and I…I am in need of a philosophical discussion.”

Over the years their “philosophical discussions” had ranged from dispassionate debates of philosophy to all-out raging arguments, but in the last year the phrase had come to mean that Seven needed advice. Janeway was instantly concerned; she could only imagine one thing that might disturb Seven this much. She glanced at Lynne, who had risen from the couch and looked as worried as she was.

“You don’t need to apologize,” she said. “Our door is always open for you.” She took a step closer and reached out for Seven’s hand. “What’s wrong?”

Seven stared at their linked hands. “I am having...difficulties adapting to my current emotions,” she said in a small voice. With her thumb she touched Janeway’s wedding ring, apparently fascinated with it. When she finally looked up, Janeway caught her breath at the naked pain in her face. Purely on instinct, she pulled Seven in and wrapped her up in a hug, feeling her rigid body eventually relax as Seven allowed their bodies to mold together.

“Is it Revi?” she asked, and felt a nod, even as Seven took in a quick, tiny gasp of air. This was followed by another, and then another, and Janeway realized to her horror that Seven was crying. She tightened her arms around the slender body and began a slight rocking motion, wondering what the hell she was going to do. She’d been so worried about this, but Revi had assured her...dammit! For a moment she was overcome with a hot anger toward the doctor, but quickly buried it. Enough time for that later if it were warranted; for now she needed to be there for Seven.

With her head resting against Seven’s shoulder, she watched as Lynne
went to the replicator and called up three steaming mugs on a tray. Turning with the tray in her hand, Lynne met her eyes and tilted her head toward the couch.

Janeway gave Seven a final squeeze and carefully pulled away. Seven immediately wiped her cheek and sniffled. “I am not pleased to have reacquired this particular Human trait,” she said distastefully. “It’s inefficient and seems to serve only as a means of enhanced mucous production. I don’t see the benefit.”

“It’s supposed to make you feel better,” said Janeway. When Seven frowned she quickly added, “but I’ve never found that to be true. I usually just feel stuffed up and uncomfortable.”

Seven nodded, her brow smoothing out. “Yes, that’s what I feel. What is the purpose of occluding the nasal passages?”

“I don’t know, I’ve never figured out any sort of biological advantage to it. Come and sit with us.” She tugged Seven toward the couch, intentionally holding onto one hand to keep a physical connection. Seven seemed to appreciate it; at least, she didn’t pull away. Janeway sat down, pulling Seven with her, and a moment later Lynne arrived with their drinks. As Seven looked up toward her, she saw for the first time the new art that hung on the wall opposite the couch.

“My gift,” she said, startled. “You’ve displayed it in a highly visible location.”

“Of course,” said Janeway. “We love it. We wanted to put it in a place of honor, where anyone who came to our quarters would see it.”

If she didn’t know any better, she’d think Seven actually looked shy.

“I had not anticipated that it would be in such a public place,” she said.

“Do you not want others to see it?”

“No, it’s...a surprise. A pleasant one.”

“Well, the gift was a pleasant surprise to us,” said Lynne. “I think it’s amazing, even if it’s not photorealism.” She smiled at Seven as she handed her a mug. “Here. One property of hot cocoa I forgot to mention to you earlier is that it’s comfort food.” At Seven’s raised eyebrow, she explained. “It comforts me when life’s a little too much to handle. Different people have different comfort foods; hot cocoa is mine.” Passing a cup of coffee to Janeway, she added, “When I’m really in need of comfort,
I call it a two-cocoa night. So if you need another one later on, just say the word.”

Seven sipped at her mug, looked up, and said, “What word?”

Lynne paused in the act of picking up her own mug. “I think that would be ‘please.’ But you know what? I’m not really sure. Anyway, just let me know if you want another.”

“What is your comfort food, Kathryn?” asked Seven.

Janeway smiled to herself. No matter how distressed Seven might be, she was still motivated to assimilate new information.

“Well, it’s not quite as healthy as Lynne’s,” she admitted. “When I need comforting, I call up a whiskey and soda. The synthehol helps.”

“It comforts you to impede your mental processes?”

This time Janeway’s smile showed on the outside. “I know it’s hard for you to imagine, but sometimes I don’t want to think clearly.”

“That’s not difficult for me to understand at all. I can appreciate the appeal of such an outcome. If it were possible for me to dull my mental processes right now, I would do so.”

Now she was really worried. She brought one bent leg up on the sofa, the better to face Seven. “What happened?”

Although Seven’s words were matter-of-fact, her tone was not. “I expressed my wish to Revi that we share a publicly acknowledged monogamous relationship. She did not share that desire. And now… I don’t know how to stop feeling these emotions.” She looked at Lynne. “In all our discussions of dating and romantic attraction, you never spoke of the possibility of unrequited love. I now find myself in an untenable situation. Had I known this might be the outcome, I would never have begun exploring these concepts. It’s too… painful.”

Lynne leaned forward and put her mug down with a click. “Are you telling us that Revi said she’s not attracted to you?”

“She said that she was ‘just a crush’ and that she could not return my feelings.”

Lynne looked at Janeway, her face hardening. “Son of a bitch!” she exploded.

“Lynne,” warned Janeway. Lynne threw her hands up in the air and slammed back into her chair, arms crossed over her chest. Janeway could feel the anger rolling off her, and didn’t blame her a bit. She was pissed too, but now was not the time to show it.
Seven tilted her head. “Are you referring to Revi?”

Lynne shot another angry glance at Janeway and uncrossed her arms, making a visible effort to calm down. “Yes, I am,” she said. “I’m sorry, but I think Revi’s being an idiot. Anyone with eyes can see she has feelings for you.”

Seven shook her head sadly. “I wish that were true. But it’s not possible to lie through a Borg interlink; therefore, if Revi said she could not return my feelings, then indeed she cannot.”

But Janeway, who was well versed in the art of talking around the truth and using semantics to hide the misdirection, saw exactly what Revi had done. She also knew that Seven would not respond to any intuition on her part regarding Revi’s feelings. She’d have to use pure logic to lead Seven to the right conclusion, and for that, she needed all the details.

“Seven,” she said, “I think Lynne and I are a bit behind on the chronology here. When we left for our honeymoon, you and Revi were still just friends. What happened between then and now?”

“During your wedding ceremony,” said Seven, “I experienced a sudden understanding of emotions that had been occupying my mind with increasing intensity since shortly after Revi’s arrival on board Voyager. I had already informed her of my romantic attraction—”

“Whoa, wait,” said Lynne. “When did you do that?”

“Stardate 53902.6,” answered Seven promptly.

Janeway’s eyes widened. That was only one week after Revi’s arrival.

“What did she say?” she asked.

“She asked to look into my mind to verify my assumption, then agreed that was indeed what I was feeling.”

“Did she indicate her own feelings on the matter?”

“She said she could hardly believe that my attraction was directed at her, because I could have anyone I wanted. She felt she wasn’t good enough for me. I asked her why she would feel unworthy.” Seven frowned.

“She did not answer. Instead she indicated that our mind-to-mind communication was difficult for her because she cared what I thought about her. She said that if I judged her, it would hurt. I reminded her that I had not judged her, and she said I hadn’t yet, but I also did not know her that well.”

Janeway caught Lynne’s eye, and a knowing look passed between
them. Seven saw it and raised her eyebrow. “You have drawn a conclu-
sion,” she stated.

“I think Lynne and I have both come to the same conclusion. But you
haven’t finished your story yet. You said that you’d come to a sudden
understanding during our ceremony.”

Seven nodded. “While listening to your vows, I was able to define the
emotions that have been associated with Revi. In addition to the romantic
attraction, I was feeling a sense of incompleteness; a desire for an intimate
relationship similar to that which you have. I then understood that when I
am fully connected with Revi, when our link becomes fully active, I feel
complete. I require her presence in my mind and my life to be…happy.”
She frowned slightly, as if the term did not quite apply to her. “I wished
for Revi and I to choose each other as partners, and I envisioned the two
of us in a joining ceremony of our own. Of course, Revi was aware of
these thoughts. When I looked at her, her emotional shielding slipped and
I felt her fear. I asked her what she was afraid of, and she would not
answer. During my toast, however, she seemed normal. I anticipated
further discussion of this situation, but before I could locate Revi at the
reception, she left and entered a regeneration cycle. I found this odd,
given that our normal cycle did not begin for another nine point three
hours. The next morning I invited her to a picnic lunch, and there I
expressed my desire for a monogamous relationship with her. When
she…rejected me, I became angry. She told me that my feelings were
normal, and I found myself wishing that she could not read my emotions.
I therefore asked her to teach me to block my emotions from our inter-
link. She agreed, and we have worked on the technique for the last two
weeks. I’ve become proficient at it.”

“So she can’t tell what you’re feeling right now?” asked Lynne.

“Currently she’s regenerating,” said Seven. “While she can no longer
sense my emotions, she can still hear my thoughts, and I did not wish her
to be privy to this conversation.” Her voice faltered. “I’ve altered my
regeneration schedule so that we are no longer synchronized. When she
first came on board, our interlink brought me such relief that I couldn’t
bear to be active when she was regenerating—the silence was overwhel-
mimg. Yet now, at times, I seek that same silence. It is…difficult.”

Janeway leaned forward and put her hand on Seven’s knee. “It’s diffi-
cult for anyone in your situation, and believe me, what you’re feeling is
not uncommon. Actually, I think it happens more often than not. Most of the time, two people just don’t feel the same things for each other at the same time. But that doesn’t mean your relationship with Revi will stop at this point. It also doesn’t mean that Revi isn’t attracted to you.”

“It doesn’t?”

“No. She is attracted to you. Very much so, and openly enough that both Lynne and I have seen it. But I don’t think she recognizes it herself, or if she does, she won’t let herself act on it. That fear you felt at the reception—it was her fear of your hopes and emotions. Revi is afraid of letting herself feel the same way. She’s afraid of letting you get too close to her emotionally.”

Seven shook her head. “I appreciate your efforts to give me hope, but they are not necessary. I prefer to deal with reality over fantasy. In fact, I’m surprised that you would speak this way in view of the facts. It is counter to your usual methodology.”

“I’m not dealing in fantasy here. I’m simply pointing out that you don’t have all the facts.”

For a moment she thought Seven might get angry; certainly the flash in her eyes indicated that she was not pleased to hear such an assertion. “Kathryn,” she said in a somewhat cool tone, “you do not share an interlink with Revi. I do. And I assure you that I know precisely what Revi thinks and what she means. She is not romantically attracted to me, not in the way I would wish, and she cannot return my feelings. She made that very clear.”

“And it’s impossible to lie through a Borg interlink.”

“That is correct.” It was a statement of pure Borg faith.

“But is it possible to not tell the whole truth?”

The question took Seven by surprise. Blinking, she said, “I…I suppose it would be possible. But I can’t imagine a circumstance in which it would be necessary.”

“Can’t you? Didn’t you choose to come here now, during Revi’s regeneration, so she couldn’t hear what you’re thinking? Wasn’t that choice a means of denying her access to the whole truth of your thoughts?”

Several seconds of silence passed, which for a conversation with Seven was a very long time. At last she nodded. “I didn’t view my actions in those terms. I only wished to prevent Revi from seeing my weakness.”

A small sound caused both of them to look toward Lynne, who
appeared somewhat guilty at interrupting their intense exchange. “Sorry,”
she said, “but it just kills me to hear you say that. You are not weak
because you have feelings for Revi. You’re one of the strongest people I’ve
ever known.”

“But if I require something of Revi that she does not require of me,
then an imbalance of power occurs,” Seven said. “In this instance, it is a
weakness.”

Before Lynne could respond, Janeway stepped back in. “I think Revi
just wants you to believe she doesn’t share your feelings. It’s not
the truth.”

“Then what is the truth?” Seven appeared to be at the end of her
patience. “And how has she concealed it from me?”

“By telling you part of it,” said Janeway. “It’s an old diplomatic trick; I
use it all the time myself. Tell someone part of the truth, and chances are
pretty good that they won’t look any further for the rest of it. Revi told
you that she could not return your feelings. What she didn’t say was that
she did not return them.”

Seven stared at her, and Janeway knew she was going over every
conversation she and Revi had ever had on the topic. Eventually the real-
ization shone in her eyes. “She has never said that. She has never
expressly denied experiencing a romantic attraction toward me.”

Seven was visibly stunned. “I had thought that mind-to-mind commu-
nication made such prevarication and misdirection impossible. I believed
that when our thoughts were one, we would know everything about each
other and there would be no misunderstanding. And now you tell me that
she has intentionally caused just such a misunderstanding.” She paused,
and when she spoke again her voice had become very quiet. “Did she not
realize that it would hurt me?”

Janeway felt her heart break into several pieces. It was the question of
a bewildered child who could not understand why she had been treated
cruelly. But Seven was no child, and Revi certainly hadn’t been intention-
ally cruel.

Lynne had been equally affected, and now rose from her chair, coming
around to sit on the coffee table in front of Seven. “I don’t think Revi ever
wanted to hurt you,” she said. “But sometimes we hurt the people closest to us, intentionally or not. I can’t know what’s going on in her head, but I do know that you mean a great deal to her. It may be that she honestly doesn’t realize how much she means to you. If she thinks she’s just a crush, then she may believe that whatever pain you felt when she turned you down would be temporary. That you’d get over it quickly and move on to someone else. And now you say you can block your emotions, so maybe she doesn’t know how much you’re still hurting.”

“Perhaps,” said Seven slowly. “But I still do not understand why she would label my emotions in such a manner. She could see them; surely she knows that what I feel is stronger than a crush.”

“When you shared your emotions, did she just see them? Or did she actually feel them, as you feel them?”

“I don’t know. I’m unsure if what I experience in our link is indicative of what she experiences. But when she is not shielding her emotions, I sense them in a manner that has more depth than seeing, but less than actually feeling.” A look of frustration crossed her face. “It is most unsatisfying to use words to describe this. I can’t convey the actual experience.”

“That’s okay,” said Lynne. “You’ve told me what I need to know. So when you’re feeling Revi’s emotions, it’s not a direct transference, right? You still have to interpret them in some way.”

“To a degree, yes.”

“Then if Revi has to interpret your emotions, and for some reason she doesn’t want to believe that you have strong feelings for her, it seems logical that her interpretation would reflect what she wants.”

Seven plainly did not welcome this logic. “Another way of saying that our link is more subjective than objective. But your theory has not resolved the question. Why would she not want to believe the truth of my feelings?”

“Actually,” said Janeway, “Revi already answered that.” Seven looked up sharply. “Stardate 53902.6,” she continued. “When she told you that she couldn’t believe your feelings were directed toward her. When she felt unworthy. And when she said that if you judged her, it would hurt. She’s afraid of being hurt.”

Seven considered this a moment before her expression hardened. “That does not excuse deliberate injury, particularly one caused by misdi-
rection. If she is capable of such an action, then she cannot be capable of the type of relationship I desire. Perhaps my emotions are misplaced.”

“Relationships aren’t that simple,” said Lynne. “It’s possible to love someone and still hurt them, accidentally or on purpose, by withholding the truth or even deliberately saying things that you know are going to cause pain.” She sent Janeway a look of apology and added, “I’ve hurt Kathryn in just that way.”

Seven stared. “That is difficult to believe. Your relationship is perfection. My goal in pursuing emotional intimacy with Revi has been to attain a relationship similar to yours, and now you wish me to accept that you have intentionally injured your partner?”

Janeway wasn’t going to let Lynne take this on alone. “Believe it,” she said. “And she isn’t the only one. I’ve hurt Lynne the same way. It’s perfectly normal, Seven. What makes or breaks a relationship isn’t whether you hurt each other; it’s how often, the reasons behind the injury, and how you deal with it afterwards that matters.”

Seven looked back and forth between them. “Do you often cause such injury?”

“No,” they said simultaneously. They smiled at each other, and Lynne gestured for Janeway to continue.

“We try very hard not to, and I think we’re pretty successful at it. But you need to know that it’s possible to hurt someone without even knowing it. And sometimes one person hurts another out of self-defense, which is what I think happened with you and Revi.”

“But I have never harmed her!”

“I’m not saying you did,” Janeway said gently. “But she’s afraid you will someday. So she made sure it couldn’t happen by preventing the relationship from becoming more emotionally intimate. If you’re not close, then you don’t have the power to hurt her.”

“You’re saying that she hurt me in order to prevent a theoretical pain that she believed I might cause her?”

Janeway and Lynne both nodded. “Believe me,” added Janeway, “hurting someone before they can hurt you is a fairly common Human behavior.”

“Stupid and immature,” muttered Lynne, “but common.” Janeway shot her a quelling look, but Lynne ignored it.
“If that is indeed her reasoning,” said Seven, “it’s very illogical. I would never judge her, and I have already assured her of that.”

“Seven,” said Lynne, “remember the day you and B’Elanna and I discussed your dating project? And I said that your Borg logic was not going to apply?”

Seven nodded. “You said that dating had nothing to do with practicality.”

“Yes, well, emotions don’t have anything to do with practicality or logic either. You can’t expect Revi to always be reasonable where her emotions are concerned. And when people are afraid of being hurt, they’re the most unreasonable of all. You may have told Revi you wouldn’t judge her, but that doesn’t mean she believed you.”

Seven contemplated that for a moment. “If I view her statements and actions with the assumption that she did not believe me, they become logical. Self-preservation is one of the strongest motivating forces of any organism.” She brightened. “Then I must simply convince her of the truth. The situation is not nearly as difficult as I had thought.”

Janeway groaned internally. God, she hated to throw cold water on Seven now. “That’s not a good idea,” she said.

Sure enough, Seven’s face instantly settled into a wary expression. “Please clarify.”

Choosing her words carefully, Janeway tried to explain. “Revi is in a very difficult place right now. She’s not ready to deal with you on that level. Even if you somehow convinced her that you would never judge her—which, in reality, you can’t guarantee—I don’t think it would help. That still doesn’t address the issue of her own feelings of being undeserving, and no one can talk her out of that but herself. Believe me, if Revi were ready to think about a more intimate relationship, she would have welcomed the knowledge that you were attracted to her. Instead, she put you off, even at the cost of hurting you, which I know must have been very difficult for her. She’s hiding. And if you confront her now, before she’s ready, then you’ll make it even worse.”

Seven’s posture relaxed marginally, which for her was the equivalent of slumping her shoulders. “She will view it as a potential danger and withdraw further. Self-preservation.” She looked up sadly. “Do you think she will ever be ready?”

Ask me an easy one. Janeway took a leap of faith, and hoped Revi
wouldn’t let her down. “I think she will. You’ll just have to be patient and wait for her.”

Slowly, Seven nodded. “I will wait,” she said. “For as long as is necessary. Knowing that she has not actually rejected me will make the delay easier to bear.”

“Seven,” said Lynne, “only a complete fool would reject you. And Revi has never struck me as a fool.”

“But you just characterized her as ‘stupid and immature,’” Seven reminded her. Lynne winced.

“Okay, so she’s been acting like a fool. But that doesn’t make her one. She just needs to get some sense knocked into her.”

Janeway heard the implied threat and gave her a sharp look, but Lynne wouldn’t meet her eyes. And then Seven was thanking her, and telling her that she had not meant to take up their first evening back with her concerns. Janeway and Lynne both assured her that she was always welcome, and soon the conversation turned to stories about their honeymoon, a topic that seemed to fascinate Seven. It was another hour before she said she needed to depart. All three of them rose as goodbyes were said and hugs were shared, and when the door closed behind their guest, Janeway felt much better about Seven’s state of mind.

But then there was Lynne. She turned to face her wife, who met her gaze evenly this time.

“I’m going to kill her,” said Lynne before she could get a word out.

“Lynne, you can’t—”

“Okay, fine, I won’t kill her.” Lynne paced around in a tight circle. “I’ll just bounce her off a few walls until she gets the idea.”

Janeway crossed her arms over her chest. “Please tell me that the captain’s wife is not announcing her intent to commit assault on one of the highest-ranked officers on this ship.”

“Can I just give her one good shove?”

“No. I understand your feelings, but you can’t go off half-cocked like this.”

Lynne rounded on her. “She made Seven cry!”

“I’m well aware of that. In case you hadn’t noticed, I was the one holding her at the time.”

They stared at each other for a few tense moments before Lynne turned and stomped back to the replicator. “Gin and tonic, two shots,” she
said. Drink in hand, she walked over and dropped into the chair, putting her feet up on the coffee table and looking much like a sullen and pissed-off teenager. Janeway sighed and walked back to sit on the couch, waiting until Lynne looked up.

“Converting to my concept of comfort food?” she asked, indicating the drink.

“It's not about comfort anymore.”

Janeway nodded, watching her take a healthy gulp. “Lynne, it’s going to work out,” she said softly. And quite unexpectedly, Lynne’s eyes filled with tears.

“Remember the day we all sat in here and planned our wedding?” she asked.

Janeway nodded. It seemed like much longer than three and a half weeks ago.

“You said you’d rarely seen Seven cry before. Not from sadness. And knowing some of what she’s been through, I thought that was an amazing thing.” Lynne pulled her feet off the table and leaned forward in her chair, her voice growing steely. “Seeing her cry tonight just tore my heart right out of my chest. If Revi had been in the room I don’t know if I could have stayed civil. But I’ll tell you one thing, she and I are going to have a little chat. She needs to know what the hell she’s done. I won’t let her hurt Seven this way.”

“Funny,” said Janeway, “and here I thought I was Seven’s self-appointed guardian.”

There was a long silence while the import of that statement settled. Janeway watched the emotions cross Lynne’s expressive face, until she finally sat back in her chair with a muted thump. “Well, fuck. You must be feeling even worse than me, yet you’re still the voice of reason.”

“I can’t say I didn’t have my own moment of anger. But I know a little more about Revi’s state of mind than you do. I think that if you actually did knock her around, she’d stand there and let you. And she’d think she deserved it.”

“Yeah, well, she does,” grumbled Lynne.

“No, she doesn’t.” Janeway’s voice was sharper than she intended, and she took a moment to regroup. “Revi is one of the most troubled souls I’ve ever come across. It’s hard to see Seven hurt because of that, but we can’t assume that Revi isn’t hurting just as badly. In fact, if I know her as
well as I think I do, she’s probably torn to pieces over this. Think about it from her side, Lynne. She was alone for a long time before she came here. And suddenly, not only was she no longer alone, she had the inside track to Seven’s mind and heart. An intimacy that you and I can’t even imagine. Then she had to give Seven the ‘let’s be friends’ speech, which I’m sure she never wanted to do, and what happens? Seven immediately asks her to teach her to block her emotions. Revi lost something that day, just as Seven did. Not only did she lose it, she had to teach Seven how to take it away.”

Lynne hung her head. “I hadn’t thought about it that way. God, this is awful all the way around.”

“Yes, it is. And there’s not much we can do about it right now.”

“What do you mean? Aren’t you going to talk to Revi?”

“I can’t. Unless this affects her job performance, I have no reason to approach her as her captain. And I can’t talk to her as a friend for the same reasons I gave Seven. I have to wait for her to come to me, or I could just make things worse.”

With a sigh, Lynne retrieved her drink. “I hate this. I just wish they could be as happy as we are. As happy as they deserve to be.”

“Oh, so now you think Revi deserves to be happy? A moment ago you were ready to throttle her.” She watched with interest as Lynne played with her glass, an abashed expression on her face.

“Okay,” admitted Lynne, “so I was being a little overprotective. Yes, I think Revi deserves to be happy. She’s my friend too, you know.”

Janeway got up and came around the table to sit on the arm of Lynne’s chair, resting her arm on its back and leaning in for a quick kiss. “I know. And that loyalty of yours is one of the things I love most about you. Even if it does make you behave like a macha idiot at times.” That earned her a glare, and she pasted on a look of concern. “I’m sorry, was that an inappropriate use of ‘machia’? I thought I got it right.”

“So we’re back to the honeymoon is over,” said Lynne. “Home for one day and you’re already insulting me.” But Janeway could see she was trying hard not to smile.

“No,” she said, “home for one day and I’m already wondering how I survived for so long without having you here.”

“Even when I’m a macha idiot?”

“Especially then.”
Given the events of the previous night, Janeway was surprised when Revi contacted her early in her shift and requested an appointment. She set their meeting for after lunch, and had Revi’s tea ready and waiting for her when the door chimed.

“Come,” she called.

Revi stepped through, smiled at her and came right up for a hug. “Kathryn! It’s great to see you. I really missed your company.”

Janeway didn’t know what she’d expected, but it wasn’t this. Nevertheless, she returned the hug happily. “Would you believe me if I said I missed yours as well?”

“Nope,” said Revi, letting go and accepting her cup of tea. “If you missed anyone on this ship, then Lynne and I need to have a talk. You were supposed to be far too busy having fun to think about us.”

As they sat on the couch, Janeway winced at the idea of Revi and Lynne having any kind of talk right now. “Actually,” she said, “I can’t remember when I had that much fun. Or relaxed that thoroughly. It was like stepping out of my life, and Lynne said I turned into a whole different person. I believe her, especially since she became someone else as well.”

“Really? Who did she turn into?” Revi sipped her tea.

“Someone who opened up completely. I heard things from her that I’d
never heard before. And I hope to heaven we didn’t leave that person behind on Bliss.”

Revi nodded. “Tell me about your adventures,” she said. “The ones you can talk about, I mean.”

“That doesn’t leave much.”

They grinned at each other, and Janeway felt a wash of gratitude that, regardless of what had happened between Revi and Seven, her friendships with both seemed to have survived intact. She gave Revi an overview of their mountain climb and their week of beachside relaxation, and Revi listened carefully, as she always did.

“Sounds like it was just what the doctor would have ordered for you,” she said when Janeway finished her story. “If she’d had the power, that is.”

“Well, normally I think doctors have far too much power in Starfleet, but I wouldn’t have had a problem with an order like that.”

“Bullshit,” said Revi with a disarming smile. “I don’t believe for a second that you would be happy to take orders of any kind, including orders to relax. The Doctor is full of stories of your vaunted stubbornness—I heard you even turned down a therapeutic massage. You said you didn’t have time.”

“I didn’t,” said Janeway, who was less than pleased to know that the Doctor was gossiping about her. Even if it was to another doctor. “And the Doctor could probably use a lesson on discretion.”

“Don’t be too hard on him. He’s been programmed with a towering belief in his omnipotence, and you’re a constant reminder that not everyone shares that belief.”

“I know an excellent holoprogrammer,” Janeway said. “Perhaps it’s time to adjust that towering belief down a few notches.”

Revi tilted her head to one side. “I can’t tell if you’re being serious or not.”

Janeway sipped her coffee and let Revi sit in silence for a few seconds before flashing a smile. “I’m not,” she said. “But it’s good to know that my command mask is still up to par even after a two-week vacation. By the way,” she added, “what are you going to do with your leave? I felt bad that you had so little opportunity to get out on Bliss.”

Revi set her teacup down and leaned back. “That’s part of what I
wanted to discuss with you. Can I hold that leave in reserve? I don’t really want to take it right now.”

“Of course you can bank it. It’s yours whenever you want, circumstances allowing. Is there a reason you don’t want it now?” She suspected she knew the reason, and was hoping she could draw Revi out. But the answer was not at all what she expected.

“Yes, and that’s the other part of what I wanted to discuss with you. Three and a half weeks ago you said you hoped I would come to you and ask for the position of Chief Medical Officer.” She paused. “I’m asking now.”

“I see.” Janeway put her own cup down and assumed an intentionally relaxed posture. Their conversation had just become official. “This is quite a change from your earlier attitude.”

“I know. I wasn’t ready for it then, but I am now. My skills and training were never in question—my mental readiness was. And three and a half weeks is plenty of time for that to change. I’m ready for the responsibility, and I’d like my old job back.”

Janeway said nothing, watching her face for any signs of doubt. There weren’t any; the dark eyes that looked back at her were resolute. With an internal sigh, she realized that her personal and professional lives had just collided. “You’re quite right about your skills and training not being in question,” she said. “But I’m going to need some convincing about your mental readiness. Revi—” She hesitated, trying to think of any way to phrase this more delicately. “The post of CMO is not the place to hide from personal issues.”

Revi’s face went still, and she looked exactly as she had when Janeway had first met her—remote and unapproachable.

“I knew she’d spoken with you,” she said after a long silence, and her tone was icy. “I didn’t realize that it would affect your opinion of my professional capabilities.”

“It doesn’t. I’m not questioning your capabilities. Just your motives.”

Revi stood up. “Then I’ve obviously waited too long to speak with you. Apparently I should have come yesterday, but I wanted you to have a day to settle in. I’m sorry to have wasted your time, Captain.” She turned to leave.

“Sit down, Commander.” Janeway’s voice had an edge of command to it. Though she kept her expression neutral, she was both hurt and angry.
at Revi’s implication. More important, however, was her intuition that if she let Revi leave now, their friendship might never recover.

Revi turned back and, with obvious reluctance, sank onto the couch. When their eyes met once more, Janeway said, “What have I done that would make you think so little of my professional judgment?”

Revi’s mask of indifference slipped. “Captain, I—”

“And,” interrupted Janeway, “can I assume that whatever I did is also the same thing that has apparently cost me your friendship? Because last time I checked, we weren’t quite so formal with one another. You used to know me well enough to know I’d never play favorites, or base a professional decision on personal circumstances. Did all of that change just because Seven came to see me last night? Why would you assume that I would take sides?”

“Because I know what Seven means to you!” Revi burst out. “And I know exactly what I’ve done. I’m sorry, but I couldn’t do it any other way. But my motives aren’t what you think they are. I swear I’m just trying to do the right thing.”

“Wait a minute.” Janeway held up a hand, confused. “Which motives are you talking about? I was talking about your motives for requesting the post.”

“You—” Revi stopped. “You were?”

“I think we need to rewind this conversation,” said Janeway.

“Oh, gods.” Revi rubbed her forehead. “I think I need to rewind the last two weeks.”

Janeway’s momentary anger vanished as she watched her friend. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“What is there to say? I saw it coming and I couldn’t stop it. Kind of like flying a shuttle right into a star, when you know you can’t change course, and you can’t change the consequences.”

“Those consequences aren’t nearly so big as you think they are,” said Janeway, but Revi looked at her in disbelief.

“I’ve lost Seven’s friendship and now I’m not sure about yours,” she said. “Maybe those aren’t big consequences for you, but they are for me.”

“They’d be huge to me—if they actually happened. But you haven’t lost Seven’s friendship. And you certainly haven’t lost mine.”

The expression that appeared on Revi’s face was painful to witness—an almost desperate need to believe, warring with a doubt so strong
that Janeway went with her first impulse and scooped her into an embrace. “Don’t you dare call me Captain,” she said. “You’re still my friend.”

Revi held on, her body much too stiff. “Am I?”

“Yes. I don’t give up on my friends that easily, you know. I think I should feel insulted that you’d assume I would.” The last was said in a light tone, but when they separated she could see that Revi had taken her seriously.

“You told me to be careful with her. And I was, gods, so careful that I was second-guessing almost everything I did. But it wasn’t enough. I’m sorry, Kathryn. I tried.”

“I did tell you to be careful. But I didn’t say that just for Seven’s sake. If you remember, I also told you that the last thing I wanted was for either of you to be hurt. Have you spent the last two weeks believing that what you had to say to Seven would automatically take you out of my life as well?”

Revi shook her head. “No. Actually I didn’t think that until just now, when you said you questioned my motives. Then I thought the deck had dropped out from under my feet.” She slumped back against the couch, all of the rigidity draining away. “You scared me for a minute there. I don’t even want to imagine how hard it would be to lose your friendship. It’s been bad enough watching Seven pull back.”

As usual, Revi’s body language was telling a deeper story than she’d admit to. The profound relief now showing in every line was a testament to just how frightened she’d been, and it jarred Janeway to know that she was responsible for that fear. She had never realized how easy it would be for her to hurt Revi—badly.

With that thought came a flash of understanding. Revi’s fear of intimacy with Seven might not be due solely to a fear of being hurt. In fact, given the doctor’s compassionate nature and the burden of guilt she carried, she was probably far more afraid of having the power to seriously hurt Seven. With her past, she’d consider such an outcome to be inevitable, so in the best tradition of medicine, she’d used a small pain to prevent a larger one. And now she thought she was paying the price, by losing Seven altogether—and for a moment, Janeway as well.

What a tangled mess.

“Just for the record,” she said, “what happens between you and Seven
won’t affect our relationship unless you intentionally set out to hurt her. And I know you’d never do that.”

“Of course not! But it doesn’t matter, does it? She’s hurt anyway, and now everything has changed.”

“She’s still your friend. And I can say that with some authority, having spoken with her last night.”

“I don’t think so. You don’t know what it’s like, how different it is. She’s closed herself off to me emotionally, and she’s very good at compartmentalizing her thoughts. What I get through our link now is so different from what it was before. She’s so…cool. Professional. It’s exactly what I was afraid of.”

“And you think this is a permanent state of affairs?”

Revi looked at her sadly. “I can’t change the situation that caused this. So yes, I think it’s permanent. I don’t see Seven setting herself up for additional trauma, do you? She’s protecting herself; it’s perfectly natural. I expected it.”

“But you hoped it wouldn’t happen.”

For a moment she thought Revi might cry, but the doctor pulled herself together. “I don’t have so many close friends that I can afford to lose any of them.”

“And I already told you, you haven’t lost Seven. If you asked her whether she still considers you a close friend, I’m quite sure you’d get a positive answer.”

“I’m glad you’re so sure,” Revi mumbled. “I’m not.”

“Then ask her. Right now.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because—” Revi made a gesture of frustration. “We don’t have that kind of connection anymore. I can’t just break into her thoughts and ask her a question like that. It implies a depth of connection that simply isn’t there.”

“Let me get this straight. You can’t ask her about your friendship because you’ve already assumed it’s gone? What kind of logic is that?”

“For the gods’ sake, Kathryn, I’ve spent the last two weeks teaching her how to block her emotions from me! At her request! She doesn’t want me to know how she feels, she’s limiting our conversations, she’s completely closed off every part of our friendship that requires trust. Now
you tell me: what kind of friendship can we have without trust? Not a close one, that’s for sure. When you take trust out of the equation, you’re left with…with…an acquaintance. A colleague.” She sighed, the momentary burst of emotion gone. “A shipmate,” she finished quietly.

Janeway was stymied. Revi had already closed the door in her mind, her own negative expectations blinding her to any possibility of change. And Janeway had no idea how to combat those perceptions without betraying Seven’s confidence. Part of her wanted to just throw her friends into a small room and lock them in until they got themselves straightened out.

The mental image that produced gave her an idea, and she looked toward the ceiling. “Janeway to Seven of Nine.”

Revi sat up in horror. “Don't you dare—”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Private conversation, Seven.”

“One moment.”

In the ensuing silence, she met Revi’s furious glare. “If you won’t ask her, I will,” she said.

“You are the most interfering, obnoxious, frustrating—”

“Go ahead, Captain.”

Revi fell silent, though her body language spoke volumes. Janeway kept their eyes locked as she said, “I have Revi here in the room with me, and she seems to be under the impression that you no longer consider her a close friend. I wondered if you might clarify your position.”

To Seven’s credit, there was barely a pause before she responded. “Of course. If it would not be rude, I would prefer to address her directly. Mind to mind.”

“Go right ahead.” Janeway smiled at a fuming Revi. “Have at it,” she said in a quieter voice. But Revi held her hand up, her eyes already slightly unfocused. Janeway had seen the look often enough to know that Seven was “talking” to her. She waited while an entire conversation apparently took place, and a slow smile gradually spread over Revi’s face. When her eyes refocused, Janeway knew that the two women had resolved at least part of their estrangement.

“You were right,” Revi said, almost in wonder. “We’re okay—or at least as okay as we can get, considering the situation.” She took in a deep breath of air, as if she’d been holding it until this moment. “Gods, I feel better than I’ve felt in weeks.”
Janeway waited, but nothing more was forthcoming. “So you’re friends again?”

Revi nodded. “Seven says we never stopped. We just have to redefine our friendship to account for the new parameters.”

If that wasn’t Seven-speak, Janeway didn’t know her Astrometrics officer. “Are you all right with those new parameters?”

“Of course. I’m the one who set them. I just didn’t know until now that Seven was all right with them. She’s obviously adapted, thank the gods.”

Which answered another question, and Janeway knew well enough to drop the subject. Revi wasn’t ready, not by a long shot. Whatever was keeping her from seeing Seven as more than a friend was not going to change today. “I won’t say I told you so,” she said, “but I will say that I’m very glad the two of you have come to an understanding.”

“It’s okay, you can say it,” said Revi. “I’ll even concede. You were right, and I won’t hold it against you.” Her smile put Janeway more at ease; it looked as if they’d gotten over the worst of this. Which meant it was time to address the next issue.

“Then I just have one more question for you. Do you still want the job?”

After a slight pause, Revi said, “I suppose I deserve that. Yes, I still want the job. I’ll admit I was partially motivated by the desire to bury myself in a new challenge, but the fact is, that just gave me the impetus I needed to really start thinking about this. The last three months have been a great warm-up, but I’m ready for more.” Her gaze was even as she repeated, “I am ready, Kathryn.”

They looked at each other in silence until Janeway slowly nodded. “I agree. So you can consider yourself a CMO again. Though it won’t be official until I can speak with the Doctor.”

Revi’s eyes widened, as if she hadn’t really expected a positive answer. “Thank you. I won’t let you down.”

“If I thought you would, I’d never give you the posting. Revi, you need to understand that I don’t allow personal considerations to impact my decisions regarding what’s best for this ship and her crew. You’re qualified and you’re ready. If I didn’t think you were, you’d never have gotten this far, no matter how much I like you personally.”

“I know that. I never meant to imply otherwise.”
Janeway needed her to be very clear on this. “You may not have meant to, but you did. You were ready to walk out, assuming the worst and not even giving me a chance to explain. I expect more of you, and I certainly expect more of my CMO.”

“What do you want me to say? I misinterpreted you, and I’m sorry about that. It won’t happen again.”

“Can you really promise that?”

Revi closed her eyes briefly. “That I won’t misinterpret you? No. But I can promise that I will listen to what you have to say before drawing my own conclusions. You’ve never given me any reason not to believe in you, and I’ll do my best not to forget that again.”

“That’s what I want you to say. Part of it, anyway. I need you to believe in me—but I also need you to believe in yourself.”

“And now we’re back to that,” said Revi in resignation. “Exactly how am I supposed to quantify that to your satisfaction? I can live up to job requirements and performance expectations. I can provide progress reports and account for research and treatments. But I don’t know how to give you what you’re asking for.”

She had a point. But Janeway had one too, and she was going to hammer on it until Revi got the message. “Just remember this: I don’t give my respect or my friendship easily. Neither does Seven. Lynne’s quicker to give friendship, but just as careful with her respect. And yet you’ve earned both from all three of us. Even the Doctor has grudgingly admitted that you’re quite capable in sickbay. So either we’re all blind, optimistic fools or you’re worth believing in. I want a CMO who knows that about herself.”

“I think there’s a compliment in there somewhere, but it still felt like a castigation. And you’re still asking me to provide something that has no place in a job description. If I’m good at my job, what does it matter how I feel about myself? Why do you care?”


“I mean as a captain. If you were any other captain you wouldn’t be asking me this.”

“Are you saying that I’m expecting more from you because of our friendship?”

Revi looked caught. “That’s not—” she began, then stopped and
sighed. “Do you know, it feels like I haven’t said one right thing since the
day after your wedding.”

Janeway took pity on her. “This isn’t about your personal life. As your
friend I care a hell of a lot about that, but as your captain it’s none of my
business. What I’m talking about is the intersection of personal and
professional. I need a CMO who stands up under pressure. Not just the
pressure of the job, which you’ve already proven you can handle, but
personal pressure on the job as well.”

“Now wait just a damn minute,” said Revi, suddenly bristling with
indignation. “Are you worried that my lack of belief, as you’ve termed it,
will extend to my ability to advocate for patient care or appropriate
medical protocols?”

“I’m just asking for your assurance.”

“Then you need to know that who I am as a doctor is very separate
from who I am as a person. Much like you, I’d suspect. I know I haven’t
recovered from my time with the Borg, and I probably never will, even
with you making me your personal project.” She quirked an eyebrow at
Janeway, who acknowledged the truth of the gentle accusation. “But that
has nothing to do with my performance as a doctor. Yes, it had everything
to do with my not wanting this position in the first place, but the moment
you and Seven forced me into it—”

“We did not—”

“Yes, you did.” Revi had a full head of steam now. “You pushed me far
beyond my comfort zone and you kept doing it, and now you’re seeing the
results. I’m not afraid to be a doctor. I know I can help people, and I know
I have the skills you need. I may be fucked up in my personal life but I am
good at what I do. And if we ever butt heads over patient care, you’d better
be prepared for a fight. That means all patients, including you. I’m not
afraid to use the authority you just gave me.”

“Excellent!” said Janeway with a delighted smile. “That’s exactly what
I want. I’ll look forward to it.” And she did. Not for the fight, but for the
chance to see a confident, commanding Revi. She’d seen glimpses before,
and was being treated to one right now, but her end goal was for some-
thing more permanent. She wanted Revi to become the formidable doctor,
and woman, that Janeway knew she had been before her assimilation.

“Then we understand one another?”
“We do.” Janeway raised her coffee cup in a salute, and watched as Revi visibly calmed.

They sipped from their cups, the silence between them not in the least uncomfortable.

“So will you be talking to the Doctor soon?” asked Revi.

Janeway nearly snorted her coffee. “A little anxious to start your new job, are you?”

“Well…” Revi looked sheepish. “Yes, actually. Working under the Doctor has reminded me of something I’d forgotten.”

“And that is?”

“I really like being the one in charge.”

This time, Janeway couldn’t hold back the laugh.
Seven stood at her station on the bridge, watching the main viewer along with everyone else. She didn’t understand the need for her presence here. Her assigned task—that of initiating and monitoring the data transfer through the micro-wormhole that was due to open in one point six minutes—would be more efficiently accomplished from Astrometrics. But Kathryn had asked her to work from the bridge.

“Got your letters all written?” asked Chakotay, leaning toward the captain’s chair and displaying what Seven considered a truly remarkable ability for banal conversation. If Kathryn didn’t have her letters written by now, it was far too late to correct the error. Therefore, what was the point of asking the question?

“Well, I had to rewrite a couple,” Kathryn said. “There was a little matter of a wedding that I thought I should include. Along with some video. I’m reasonably certain that my mother is going to, as Lynne would put it, have kittens.”

“I’m sure she’ll be thrilled to hear about it,” said Chakotay, and Seven resisted the impulse to roll her eyes. Instead she checked her board, glad to have a reason to interrupt a conversation that she had no wish to hear more of.

“Captain, I’m detecting the formation of a micro-wormhole,” she said.
“It is precisely at the expected coordinates. Starfleet has been most efficient.”

“A compliment of the highest order,” said Kathryn, and Seven knew from her vocal tone that she was in a very happy mood.

“The wormhole is increasing in size,” she reported, watching the data stream across her board. “It will be stable and ready for transmission in nineteen seconds.” She waited as the seconds counted down, and then said, “Initiating transmission...now.”

Simultaneous with her pronunciation of the word “now,” Harry Kim spoke up. “Captain, I’m receiving a Starfleet transmission.”

“Well, put it on, Mr. Kim.”

Unlike the previous month’s communication, this one was clear from its inception. “Starfleet Command to USS Voyager.”

“This is Captain Kathryn Janeway of the USS Voyager. Admiral Paris, is that you?”

“It certainly is. It’s good to hear your voice, Captain Janeway. For some reason, this last month has seemed longer than the last six years combined.”

“I know what you mean, sir.”

“We’re sending you every bit of data we could find on new propulsion theory and anything else we thought might speed things along for you. There’s also a communication packet which is taking up a great deal of bandwidth. I’m sure you can imagine the response from your families when we contacted them.”

“Admiral—” and Seven detected a very slight crack in Kathryn’s voice —“I know I speak for everyone on Voyager when I say that not only can we imagine it, but we’ve spent untold hours thinking about it. We’re looking forward very much to those letters. And we’re sending our own packet to you as we speak, along with last month’s logs and records.”

“Very good. Lieutenant Barclay is here as well, and has some information for you.”

“Hello, Lieutenant, how are you?”

“F...fine, Captain Janeway.” The lieutenant’s voice was nervous. “I have some theories on improving our communication to more than the few minutes allowed by the alignment of the MIDAS array. They’re being sent in the transmission, coded ‘MIDAS Plus.’”

“Very good, Lieutenant. I’ll put my best people on it immediately. Thank you in advance for your efforts. If these theories are as good as your last one, we’re in great shape.” Kathryn nodded at Seven and Harry,
and Seven returned the nod. She would access the file as soon as she completed the breakout of the communication packet.

“Captain Janeway.” Admiral Paris was back on line. “Your transmission has been received in full. Can you confirm receipt of ours?”

Seven had already done so, and nodded once again at Kathryn. In her peripheral vision she could see Harry doing the same; they were both monitoring the signal in case anything should go wrong with one of the stations.

Kathryn smiled at Seven. “Transmission confirmed, Admiral.”

“Excellent. In that case, since all of our housekeeping has been taken care of, there’s someone here who would like to speak with you. She happened to be in the area, so I didn’t think you’d mind if I put her on.”

“Hello, Kathryn.”

Kathryn was still looking at Seven when the new voice came over the speaker, and her eyes widened before she quickly turned her head away.

“Mom?”

“I’ve waited a long time to hear that name again. You know Phoebe never calls me that.”

Kathryn cleared her throat. “Is...is she still being Little Miss Formal?”

A rich laugh sounded. “Always. I never thought she’d be the one. Somewhere I swear you and she got your wires crossed.”

Seven regretted the news that she had to impart. “Captain, the wormhole is beginning to degrade. You have approximately twenty seconds.”

Kathryn nodded. “We don’t have much time left, Mom. Are you and Phoebe all right?”

“We were all right from the moment Starfleet told us you’d made contact again. There are a lot of families keeping candles burning in the window for your safe return. I know you’ll bring your ship home.”

“I’ll do my best. I have an exemplary crew to work with. Mom—”

“The wormhole has collapsed, Captain.” Never had Seven wished more for the power to control cosmic phenomena.

Kathryn straightened her shoulders. “Thank you, Seven,” she said briskly. “Breakout of the Starfleet files is top priority, followed by personal communiqués. And as soon as you’re done with distribution, I want you and Harry to analyze Lieutenant Barclay’s file on communication theories. Have a report on my desk as soon as possible.”
“Yes, Captain.” Seven shut her board down and entered the turbolift. As the doors closed, she heard Kathryn say, “Resume course, Mr. Paris.”

Sandrine's was hopping. The arrival of the first scheduled packet of letters from home was cause for celebration, and when Neelix had proposed a party, Janeway had gladly authorized the replicator and computer usage. Gamma shift had been there since mail call, and most of alpha shift was there as well, many of them still in their uniforms. Janeway hadn’t changed out of hers either, having remained on the bridge with Tuvok to give the beta shift bridge crew the chance to attend the party with their alpha and gamma shift peers. It wasn’t often the three crews had the opportunity to mingle, and she was happy to provide it for them. Besides, it gave her the chance to helm Voyager, if only for a few hours.

She stood just inside the door, watching her crew as they talked excitedly about the latest news from Earth. The roar of conversation almost overwhelmed the music, and the bar was charged with the happy energy of a crew that had just gotten a good dose of morale. However, she noted a few crew members who sat hunched over their drinks, speaking in low tones to each other or, in some cases, tucking themselves into corners and saying nothing at all. The sad reality was that mail call always brought bad news to someone, and she knew from experience that it was much harder to deal with your bad news when everyone around you was elated.

Once again she wished for a ship’s counselor. There was very little that she could do for these quiet members of her crew, other than to make sure she dropped by each of their tables tonight, just to be there for them in case they wanted to talk. They rarely did, usually too intimidated by her rank to reveal what was bothering them. Chakotay was far better at making that kind of connection.

To her surprise, she saw Lynne in one of those dark corners, speaking intently to Crewman Slater. Lynne had worked closely with Slater and his partner Johnson for her first few months on Voyager, and though she no longer spent her days in the archeology lab, they were still friends. Janeway guessed that Slater had gotten bad news, and Lynne was offering
her support. Unwilling to interrupt their conversation, she looked around the bar for somewhere else to sit.

“Captain!” B’Elanna’s voice rose above the general roar, and she followed the sound to a corner where two tables had been pushed together. B’Elanna waved her hand in the air and pointed toward an empty chair beside her. Janeway waved back and began to make her way through the crowd. It took her nearly ten minutes to walk the short distance, as she stopped at each table along the way. Everyone she spoke with had bright eyes and ready laughter as they greeted the captain and shared their news. Babies had been born, weddings had taken place, promotions given and retirements taken. Life went on in the Alpha Quadrant, but thanks to what was now a regular mail call, it wouldn’t go on without them anymore.

“Thanks for saving me a seat,” she said when she finally arrived at her destination.

“You’re welcome. You’d never have gotten one otherwise. Not without pulling rank, anyway.”

“Yeah, this place is jammed,” said Tom from B’Elanna’s other side.

Janeway looked around the happy faces at the table. “So, what’s the news?” she asked.

B’Elanna finished her drink and added the empty glass to the other three already standing in front of her. When she turned to Janeway, the smile on her face threatened to split it in half. “My mother’s alive.”

“You heard from Miral?” Janeway was surprised and very pleased. A few months earlier, B’Elanna had undergone a near-death experience in which she’d seen and spoken with her mother, and had returned convinced that Miral was dead. It had been a very difficult time for her, and Janeway had lent what little support she’d been able to. It had felt, to her, woefully inadequate.

But B’Elanna was nodding, still smiling and looking as if she wouldn’t be stopping any time soon. “She said she’s proud of me. She’s proud of what I’ve done here on Voyager. Can you imagine?”

“You keep saying that,” said Tom, putting his arm around her shoulders. “And of course we can imagine it. Why wouldn’t she be proud of you?”

“Because I’m not Klingon,” said B’Elanna, looking back and forth between the two of them. “Most of what I’ve accomplished here has been
in spite of my Klingon heritage, not because of it. I just never thought she’d see anything worthwhile in that. I’ve felt like I let her down in so many ways.”

“Maybe,” said Janeway, “she understands better than you think. Because your Klingon heritage certainly does have a lot to do with your success, right from the very beginning. Why do you think I chose you for my chief engineer?”

“I thought it was because of my problem solving skills,” said B’Elanna.

“Those were certainly a big point in your favor, but they’re not what got you the post. What made the difference for me was your passion. You believed in your ideas, and in your ability to bring them to fruition. You argued with me when you thought I was wrong. That’s what got you the post.”

B’Elanna shook her head, her bewilderment evident. “You’re telling me I’m chief engineer because I argued with you?”

Janeway smiled; B’Elanna was just a little drunk and it looked cute on her. Not that she’d ever say that out loud.

“I’m telling you you’re chief engineer because you have the passion of your convictions, which is something I value in an officer. And from what you’ve told me about your parents, I’m pretty sure you got that passion from your mother. So yes, your Klingon heritage has a lot to do with where you are now.”

“Huh. And here I’ve been working so hard on controlling my mouth around you. Wonder how much higher I can climb if I let go and start arguing more?”

“Uh, B’Elanna, maybe you shouldn’t have any more ale,” said Tom, who was plainly worried that she was going to get herself in trouble.

“It’s okay, Tom.” Janeway caught B’Elanna’s eye and added, “She knows she’s already at the top of her profession here. There’s nowhere to go but down, and no faster way to get there than to mouth off to her captain.”

“I’ll drink to that,” said B’Elanna, just as the holographic waiter appeared to take their orders. It was fortunate that his brain was tied into the ship’s computer, as orders were shouted from all sides of the table without regard for interruption. In the midst of the chaos, Janeway felt a hand on the back of her neck and knew that Lynne had arrived.

“Hi, love,” Lynne said into her ear. She had brought an empty chair
with her, and with a general shuffling the staff at the table managed to make room for one more. Sliding gracefully into the newly created space, she extended her long legs under the table and loudly added her order to the rest before turning to smile at Janeway.

Janeway ran her eyes up and down Lynne’s body, taking the time to thoroughly appreciate how sleek and confident her wife looked in her new uniform. God, she loved that uniform. She hadn’t been able to give Lynne a Starfleet security uniform upon her official appointment, but Lynne had designed something that Janeway frankly thought looked better. It was Starfleet from the waist down, though the boots weren’t exactly standard issue—not with fifteen-centimeter blades tucked into their concealed sheaths, and special alloys making the toe of each boot a lethal weapon. Her fitted, short-waisted jacket had the same neckline as the standard uniforms, but was black with panels of gold that ran from just under each arm to the hemline. Janeway thought those panels did wonders to accentuate Lynne’s narrow waist and broad shoulders. A line of gold piping outlined the area where the color band of a standard uniform would normally be, and on her right upper sleeve she bore an insignia that was purely Lynne: the laurels from the United Federation of Planets emblem, bracketing two snow-covered mountains. In the foreground Voyager swooped across the scene.

Yes, she liked that jacket a great deal, but she liked what was under it even better. The shirt was tight, sleeveless and the same color scheme as the jacket, with gold piping at the top of the collar. The first time Janeway had seen Lynne without the jacket, she’d been hard pressed to keep her hands to herself. If it were possible to require that her personal security escort go without a jacket at all times, she would have made the order official immediately. Unfortunately, decorum still prevailed; and after all, she did get to look forward to watching Lynne take off her jacket as soon as she got to their quarters after her shift. It was her favorite time of the day.

“Hey,” said Lynne, breaking her out of her increasingly lustful reverie. “I heard you talked to your mom today.”

Janeway leaned in to keep their conversation more private, though she doubted anyone could hear them over the general background roar. “I don’t really want to make it public. Nobody else on this ship has gotten to speak with their family, and I don’t want any bad feelings.”
Lynne raised an eyebrow. “Kathryn, it’s already as public as it could possibly be. I heard about it within half an hour. And nobody begrudges you the chance to talk with your mother, especially since it lasted for all of what, thirty seconds?”

“About that,” admitted Janeway. “Not nearly long enough. But hearing Mom’s voice…” she trailed off, unable to articulate what that had meant to her.

As usual, Lynne seemed to understand without words, squeezing Janeway’s arm and sliding her hand down to entwine their fingers. “So what did you manage to cover in thirty seconds?”

“Just that she and Phoebe are okay, and she misses being called Mom.” Lynne’s brows drew together. “What does Phoebe call her?”

“Mother. Back when we were teenagers she got it in her head that ‘Mom’ was too childish, so she switched, and she’s never switched back. It’s funny, because in every other way Phoebe is the wild child of the family. Mom says she’s sure our wires got crossed somehow.”

“Your mom obviously doesn’t know you the way I do. If you were any wilder I certainly couldn’t handle you.”

“Right.” Janeway couldn’t help but grin. “Somehow I think you’d manage. But let’s not give Mom any more fuel than she already has. I’m sure I’m going to get a full ration of shit as soon as she and Phoebe read our letters; they don’t need anything more to tease me about.” But, she thought wistfully, she’d give a great deal to hear that teasing. Phoebe could exasperate her beyond endurance, but right now that sounded wonderful.

Lynne was looking ostentatiously guilty. “You mean I wasn’t supposed to tell them that I can’t keep up with you in bed? Whoops.”

Janeway was about to respond when Harry whistled from the other side of the table. “Damn!” he said loudly. “Look at that!”

Lynne and Janeway both swiveled in their chairs, and Janeway could practically hear the jaws dropping all over Sandrine’s. Revi and Seven had come in, and they both looked smashing. Of course, Janeway always thought Revi looked beautiful—with her dark skin and hair, she was one of those people who looked fabulous in a blue science uniform. What was stunning the general population, however, was Seven’s outfit. Her biosuit and high heels were gone. Instead, she wore a uniform identical to Lynne’s, with science blue highlights instead of gold. The black pants and
boots somehow made her legs look even longer than the biosuit had, and with her hair loose around her shoulders, the overall impression was one that raised the temperature in the room a good ten degrees.

“So, you like?” Lynne said into her ear.

“I didn’t know you designed one for her as well.” Janeway couldn’t take her eyes off the couple approaching them.

“I did the window dressing, but there’s a lot going on in that outfit that you don’t see—body temperature and implant regulation and god only knows what else—and Revi’s responsible for that. It was bugging the hell out of both of us that the Doctor had designed such a piece of voyeuristic crap for Seven, so when you made Revi CMO, practically the first thing she did was come to me about that biosuit. She liked what I’d come up with for my own uniform and wanted to use it in her design.”

“Is her shirt sleeveless too?”

“Of course.”

Janeway fanned her face with her hand, causing Lynne to double over in laughter. Then Revi and Seven were there, along with the waiter and their drinks, and it took several minutes for the shouts, catcalls and requests for additional drinks to die down enough to allow any conversation. When they’d all settled down, Revi and Seven had found seats across from them and their table was full to beyond capacity.

“Damn, Seven!” said B’Elanna. “You clean up nice.”

Seven raised an eyebrow. “I’m always clean.”

“Yeah, but you’re not always nice,” said Lynne, to the general merriment of the table. Janeway noticed that Chakotay was not laughing. He was staring daggers across the table, and when she followed his eyes she saw that Revi was returning the stare with a faint look of challenge on her face. Interesting.

B’Elanna turned to Lynne. “What’s with you two and these new uniforms? And where can I get one?”

Lynne shrugged. “Sorry, you can’t have one. Non-Starfleet contractors only.”

“I’m not Starfleet!” protested B’Elanna. “And Seven isn’t a contractor.”

“Okay, let me rephrase. These uniforms are reserved for individuals one hundred and seventy-five centimeters and over. Shrimps need not apply.”

Over the howls at the table, B’Elanna leaned across Janeway to grab a
fistful of Lynne’s shirt. With her other hand she fished an ice cube out of her water glass and was making a valiant attempt to get it down Lynne’s collar. In the ensuing tussle, Janeway scooted back, grabbed the top edges of both Lynne’s and B’Elanna’s chairs, and yanked inward. Both chairs came up off their legs, and with a shriek B’Elanna crashed onto the floor. Lynne, however, hadn’t had anything to drink and managed to save herself. With a sheepish look at Janeway, she got up and helped B’Elanna back into her chair, then leaped back with a yelp and frantically pulled her shirt out of her pants. As B’Elanna roared with laughter, a mostly melted ice cube dropped out, and Lynne advanced on her again. Janeway stood up, placing one hand on Lynne’s chest and one on B’Elanna’s shoulder.

“All right, you two. Take this somewhere else if you want to keep it up. Or channel it into something less potentially destructive, like a drinking challenge.” She rolled her eyes.

“How about a game of pool?” asked Tom, in a laudable effort to save his girlfriend.

“No pool for me,” said Lynne. “I suck at it. And B’Elanna thinks pool is where you take a wooden stick and beat people about the head with it.”

“Lynne, you are not helping,” said Janeway in a low tone. More loudly, she added, “I’ll play a game, Tom.”

Immediately the table rang with bets being placed against Tom, but since no one would bet against Janeway, the would-be gamblers had to give up. En masse, the group trudged over to an empty pool table, though Janeway noticed that Chakotay used the moment as an opportunity to slip away. She shook her head; it was becoming more obvious to her that her first officer and CMO were never going to get along. Chakotay’s objections had been loud and surprisingly emotional when she’d announced Revi’s promotion, but he hadn’t said anything to make her reconsider, so she’d shut him down quickly and warned him that she did not want to hear another word on the subject. Now the very sight of the doctor seemed to anger him, and Revi plainly didn’t like him any better. But as long as their animosity didn’t affect their job performance, there wasn’t a thing she could do about it.

Tom racked up the balls and offered the break to Janeway, who accepted with a grin. Her shot immediately sank two stripes and a solid, and with a wink at Lynne she chose solids. Lynne just smiled and shook her head.
With the crowd around them loudly analyzing shots and offering advice to Tom, Janeway cleaned up the table while Tom still had two balls out. He accepted his defeat gracefully, commenting that there was no dishonor in losing to a shark. Janeway rested the butt of her cue on the ground and looked around the group. “Any takers?” she asked. All but one of the crew shook their heads, and Janeway locked eyes with the standout. “Revi?”

Revi stepped to the wall and selected a cue, hefting it in her Human hand before returning it and pulling down another. This seemed to meet with her approval, and she stood at the foot of the table. “Where did you learn to play?” she asked.

“A little hole-in-the-wall bar in San Francisco. On Market Street. It gave me something else to think about besides my Academy deadlines.”

“I think I know that bar,” said Revi. “I played there a few times. The owner was nice.”

Janeway sized up her challenger, wondering if Revi was hinting at a heretofore unknown talent. She mentally shrugged; one sure way to find out. She racked up the balls and offered the break to Revi.

“Thanks,” said Revi. Using her cybernetic arm as the resting hand, she set up her shot and smacked the cue ball with considerable strength. The balls exploded across the table, flying around as if they were self-powered, and it took some time for the table to settle. But for all that brute strength, Revi didn’t have a great deal of finesse—only one ball dropped in.

“Stripes it is,” said Revi, moving around the table to her next shot. She picked off a ball with a crisp stroke, dispatched another with almost negligent ease, and then banked the cue ball off a rail to send a third in. Janeway was beginning to reconsider her initial opinion of Revi’s skill, but then the run ended. The last three striped balls were trapped behind a clump of Janeway’s, so Revi banked the cue ball and broke up the cluster with her next shot. The balls separated nicely, but nothing dropped. Standing up, Revi rested her cue stick on the ground and smiled at Janeway. “Your shot.”

“You did play in that bar, didn’t you?” Janeway was delighted—Revi was a worthy challenge. Swiftly, she sank three of her own balls, then took considerable time eyeing the table for the next one. Dismissing the easiest shot as one that would leave her cue ball in the wrong place, she chose
instead a shot that required banking the ball off the opposite end of the table to get it behind one of Revi’s and nudge her own in. The ball dropped, allowing her easy access to the next shot, but after that she was stuck. So she casually tapped the cue ball, rolling it into a corner that gave Revi almost no way to reach any of her own balls.

“Ah,” said Revi, “I didn’t realize we were playing dirty. All right, I can do that.” And with a skill that raised a shout from the onlookers, she got herself out of the corner by banking the cue ball off two rails and dropped a ball, tying up the game. Her next shot was a combination, using one of her remaining balls to knock the other in, though the aftermath left her in a tough spot. She made a valiant effort, though, and came very close to clearing her last ball—but it bounced off a corner of the pocket and rolled a few centimeters out. The crowd groaned.

Grinning, Janeway dispatched her last two balls and called the eight ball in the center pocket. With a decisive click, she knocked it in and stood up. “Good game,” she said.

Revi looked at the table. “I can do better,” she said. “It’s been a long time since I played; I just need a little warm-up. Care to go again?”

“Sure.” Janeway set about racking up the balls.

“Care to make it a little more interesting?”

Lifting the rack, Janeway looked sharply at her CMO. “What do you suggest?”

“Thirty rations says I can beat you in this one.”

Janeway tried not to smile too broadly. “You’re on.”

Immediately bets were placed all around the table, and Janeway was amused to see that some of her crew were betting against her now. Tom, she noticed, was still betting on her. She winked at him as she lifted her cue. On the break she sank two stripes and one solid, and this time called stripes. Revi was too dangerous to give a handicap to. With swift precision, she cleared all but one of her balls before getting caught in an impossible location. Revi immediately took advantage of the open table, sinking one ball after another with a calm attitude that bespoke hours and hours of practice.

“I see your youth was as misspent as mine,” Janeway observed after Revi sank her last ball.

Revi gave her a smile before resting her cue on the ground and studying
the table. She was down to the eight ball, but it sat behind Janeway’s stripe right next to a corner pocket. She walked around the table twice before finally choosing her shot, a daring attempt to dig the eight ball out from behind Janeway’s and sink it in the opposite corner. It nearly worked, but the finesse she’d had to use meant that the ball didn’t quite have enough speed to go in, and it stopped right on the lip of the pocket. Cheers and groans sounded around the table as Janeway stepped in, quickly sinking her last ball and taking advantage of Revi’s setup to nudge the eight ball over the edge.

“I believe that’s thirty rations you owe me,” she said.

Revi shook her head. “Too close. I want another chance. A hundred rations says I can take you.”

The crowd went silent, and Janeway had to consciously keep her jaw from dropping. “Revi, I don’t think—”

“It’s my choice,” said Revi. “Don’t tell me what I do or don’t want to bet. Just tell me if you have the brass to take it. Come on, you’ll only have to pay out seventy if you lose.”

But if she won, Revi would owe her one hundred and thirty rations! Even at a commander’s rate of pay, that was over a month’s worth. The wide eyes around the table confirmed that Janeway wasn’t the only one staggered by Revi’s bet. It was nearly unheard of.

But Revi was staring at her, the challenge written all over her face, and Janeway couldn’t back down. Especially not in front of her crew. “All right,” she said. “I accept.”

An excited murmur went up from the crowd, and as Revi racked up the balls Janeway watched the word spread swiftly around Sandrine’s. By the time Revi lifted the rack, the entire population of the bar was jammed around the table—even Chakotay was there—and the amount of betting going on was phenomenal.

As the winner of the last game, it was Janeway’s break. She sank two solids, and cleaned up another three before finding her last two balls completely trapped by a clump of stripes. “Your shot,” she said.

But Revi gave her a look of pure triumph. “My game, you mean. Do you want to pay up now, or are you going to make me clear the table?”

Janeway’s first thought was one of incredulous disbelief, but she looked closer at her opponent and began to feel serious misgivings. Revi was too confident.
“You’re going to have to back up that mouth,” she said. “I’m not paying anything until I see the eight ball go down.”

Revi shrugged. “Suit yourself. Don’t know what I’ll spend all those rations on, but I’m sure I’ll think of something.” She turned to the crowd. “How many of you bet against me?” she called.

Janeway was surprised to see that nearly half the crowd put their hands up. Good god, that meant over half her crew was betting against their captain! Didn’t they have any faith? She’d been queen of this pool table for six years now; surely they hadn’t given up on her so soon.

“All right,” said Revi to those whose hands were in the air. “You’d better start figuring out how to live without those rations, because they’re gone.”

She turned to the table and lined up her first shot, aiming at two of her balls that sat a centimeter apart. The cue ball slammed into them with a sound like a projectile weapon, stopping dead on the spot while the striped balls shot into opposite corners and dropped almost in unison. The spectators shouted in glee or dismay, depending on their bet, and Janeway began to worry.

Revi calmly walked around the table, set up her next shot, and looked Janeway in the eye as she hit the cue ball. She held their gaze, and neither needed to look at the table to know the result. If the sound of the ball thunking into the pocket hadn’t told them, the roar of the crowd would have.

Forced into the role of bystander, Janeway watched in increasing astonishment—and grudging admiration—as Revi methodically cleared the table in a series of brilliant shots that made her play in the first two games look infantile. There was no hesitation, and each shot seemed to miraculously set up the next. She even did one behind her back, turning an awkward reach into a shot that looked deceptively simple. Toward the end Janeway’s remaining two balls seemed to greatly limit Revi’s options, but she played as if the table were empty of everything but what she wanted. When the last striped ball went in, she casually called out the center pocket in what Janeway would have sworn was an impossible maneuver. No way could she get that cue ball around the solids to where she wanted it to go. But she did, and the onlookers shouted in increasing volume as the cue ball banked o

![Rail Bank](image-url)

ff all four rails, sailing around the stripes to lightly touch the eight ball and push it into the pocket.
It was instant pandemonium, as crew members slapped each other on the back or loudly demanded their winnings, while Revi strolled up to Janeway with a wolfish grin on her face.

“I believe that’s seventy rations you owe me,” she said.

Janeway could hardly believe what she’d just seen. “You hustled me!”

“Sure I did,” said Revi. “And you swallowed it. When I was a teenager in San Francisco, I learned that the best players always fell the hardest, because they couldn’t back down from a bet. I financed a bay view condo by taking down players like you.”

“Where the hell did you learn to play like that?”

Revi’s expression became unreadable. “You know that bar you mentioned?”

Janeway nodded.

“My parents owned it.”

Stunned, Janeway could only stare as the crowd surged around Revi, shaking her hand and rubbing her shoulders. The doctor had just made her reputation on Voyager, and when Janeway fought her snarling, competitive nature down enough to think clearly, she realized that nothing she could have done as a captain would have earned Revi even half this much acceptance. So she swallowed her pride and managed to accept the good-natured gibes of her crew with a minimum of internal grimacing, though it wasn’t easy.

As the crowd bore Revi off to the bar, where she would no doubt be drinking free for the next two weeks, Lynne came up and wrapped an arm around Janeway’s waist. “Well, that was something to see,” she said carefully. “How are you doing?”

Janeway turned her head to meet Lynne’s eyes, and saw genuine concern instead of the amusement she’d dreaded. Lynne knew her well.

“I’ve got a severely bruised ego,” she said. “Being humiliated in front of most of my crew isn’t my idea of a great time. But I’d do it twice over to see that.” She looked back at the bar.

“Looks like they’re competing to buy her drinks,” Lynne observed. “Too bad she only drinks sparkling cider.”

Janeway laughed. “Well, I don’t, and I’m feeling a bit dry. Care to join me?”

“I’d go anywhere with you, babe,” Lynne answered in an exaggerated drawl. “There’s something about you and that pool cue that makes chills
go down my spine.” She flashed a sultry smile, and suddenly Janeway felt great.

“In that case,” she said, pulling Lynne in for a one-armed hug, “let me buy you a drink and see if I can get you to go home with me.”

She’d lost her standing as the best pool player on the ship, but what she’d gained was worth so much more. Revi was worth so much more.

“I noticed the Doctor never showed up,” said Lynne as they entered their quarters. “Is he still sulking?” She headed for the bedroom, stripping off her jacket as she went.

“Hold it right there,” ordered Janeway in her best command voice. She hid a grin when Lynne instantly stopped and turned, a look of alarm on her face.

“What is it?”

Janeway strolled up to her, openly evaluating her form. “I just didn’t want you to take anything else off until I got a chance to enjoy this.”

“Oh, for—are you ever going to get used to me in uniform?”

“I hope not. If I ever stop appreciating this view, check to see if I still have a pulse.”

Lynne dropped the jacket on the floor and put her hands on her hips, making her shoulder muscles stand out. Janeway’s eyes were instantly drawn to them, and from there to the breasts that were perfectly outlined under the tight shirt. She was glad they were in their quarters at last, having fought all evening to prevent herself from openly staring at her wife.

Laughing, Lynne said, “Who knew you were such a dog? I’ve never even had men look at me the way you do, and they’re supposed to be the visual ones.”

Finally Janeway raised her eyes. “Oh, I don’t doubt they looked at you. You just didn’t see it.”

“Yeah, they were probably slightly more subtle than you. Honestly, Kathryn, I never knew what the term ‘undressing with her eyes’ meant until I met you. You make me feel like I’m standing here naked.”

“That can be arranged,” said Janeway, once more indulging herself in the visual feast before her. “I think I’ll send an order to Tuvok that you can
only accompany me on missions to tropical locations. It’s a crime to cover
that up with a jacket.”

“Are you going to order Seven to accompany us on those missions
as well?”

The question startled Janeway out of her reverie, and she looked up to
see Lynne’s eyes dancing.

“Well, if one is good, two is better, right?” Now Lynne was starting to
have too much fun. “I mean, Seven looks damn hot with her jacket off.”

“I’m sure she does,” said Janeway, closing the distance between them
and running her hands up Lynne’s sides. “But she belongs to someone
else. You, however…” She pulled Lynne’s head down for the kiss she’d
wanted to give her all evening.

When they parted, Lynne said quietly, “Finish your sentence.”

Suddenly Janeway was nervous. What was she thinking, making a
statement of ownership like that to Lynne? She had a nasty feeling that
she was about to be put in her place.

“Finish it,” repeated Lynne.

Janeway looked into her eyes and saw no signs of indignation. Gather-
ering her courage, she said, “You belong to me.” And quickly added, in an
attempt at self-preservation, “Just as I belong to you.”

Lynne locked her hands behind Janeway’s neck. “You know,” she said,
“there are only a very few people who have ever tried to say that to me.
And it was always the point at which I started to think about leaving.”

Before Janeway could panic, Lynne pulled her in for a passionate kiss,
breaking away only to nuzzle her throat. Janeway shivered when Lynne’s
low voice sounded right next to her ear. “But when you say it, it just
seems right. I do belong to you, Kathryn.” She left a searing trail of kisses
and nips as she made her way to the other ear, gently biting the lobe
before adding softly, “And to hear you say you belong to me makes me
wonder if I’m dreaming.”

“You’re not dreaming,” said Janeway as Lynne pulled back. “I went
ahead and notified the entire crew.”

“When—oh.” Lynne laughed. “The wedding. Well, that was a mutual
announcement. I kind of like Seven’s term for it.”

“Publicly acknowledged monogamous relationship?”

“That’s the one.” She leaned down to pick up her jacket. “Can I
change now?”
“Do you have to?”

A theatrical sigh answered her. “Well, it’s a good thing I designed this uniform for comfort, because I’ve got a feeling I’ll be living in it for a while.” She walked into the bedroom and came back out a moment later without the jacket. Heading straight for the replicator, she said, “I’m totally dehydrated. Want some water?”

“Sure.” Janeway picked up a PADD and took it to the couch, where Lynne joined her a moment later with two glasses in hand. “Thank you.”

Lynne finished her water, put the glass on the coffee table, and snuggled into Janeway’s side. “You never answered my original question before getting distracted by your inner lech. Is the Doctor still sulking?”

“According to Revi, he’s doing better. She’s got a pretty good handle on him. When he deactivated himself I was ready to pull him back out, but she said that was just what he wanted. I think it really surprised him that he sat in the computer for three days without anyone calling for him.”

“I’ll bet that was a wake-up call.”

Janeway nodded. “Revi says they’re working together fairly well, though I think she’s taking a lot more from him than she’s letting on. I know she’s sympathetic to his situation, and I am too, but I hope she doesn’t let him push her too far because of it. You know he’ll try.”

“He’ll try,” Lynne agreed, “but Revi’s got a steel backbone.” She paused before adding, “I didn’t mean that literally. Is her spine an implant?”

“No, but it’s reinforced. And a hell of a lot stronger than steel,” said Janeway. “But your figurative meaning is a good point. If she didn’t let me push her around, I doubt she’ll let the Doctor do it.”

They snuggled in comfortable silence until Janeway reached out for her PADD. “Would you like to watch my messages with me?”

“You haven’t viewed them yet?” Lynne’s surprise colored her voice.

“No, I wanted to wait. I waded through a pile of Starfleet communiqués today, but I was saving these until I could sit down and relax with them.”

Lynne sat up. “Kathryn, these are your personal letters. I don’t need to be here for this.”

Which was precisely what Janeway was worried about. She knew that Lynne couldn’t help but feel left out when everyone got mail but her, so she had planned to include her in her own mail call. “Yes, you do,” she
said. “If I belong to you, then my family does too. So these letters are to you just as much as they are to me. The only reason you’re not on the address line is because they didn’t know who you were when they wrote these. Next month will be a different story.”

“That’s pretty sideways logic,” said Lynne. “But I appreciate the intent.” She relaxed against Janeway’s side once more. “So who did we hear from?”

Janeway kissed the top of her head in gratitude for that “we.” She loved the fact that Lynne could see right through her and still play along.

“Well, first up we have a letter from Mark. Not family, per se, but close enough.”

“Ooo, I get to see the man in action. Hit it.”

“What?” Janeway wasn’t sure why Lynne would want her to hit the PADD.

“Sorry. Idiom. It means, ‘play it.’ ”

Janeway committed that one to memory, and briefly wondered how many more idioms Lynne could possibly come up with. She pressed the play button.

“Hello, Kathryn,” said a very familiar voice, as she watched Mark’s image on the PADD. “I hope you don’t mind me including a message in the Janeway packet. Gretchen called me and offered to send something, and I couldn’t turn down the chance to talk to you. I can’t tell you how pleased I was to hear that you’d made contact again. I’m so proud of you.”

“He sure says ‘I’ a lot,” observed Lynne.

“Shh.” But Janeway’s lips twitched. Lynne managed to keep any further commentary to herself as they watched the rest of the message, but the damage was done. Every time Mark said “I” she winced, knowing that Lynne was probably counting. And, she realized, he did use the word with rather grating frequency. Why hadn’t she noticed that when they were engaged? And why hadn’t she noticed how…well, how boring he was? Intelligent, kind, level-headed, gentle…but boring. Before Mark finished talking, she was already wondering what on earth she’d ever seen in him. He was so different from the vibrant, passionate woman at her side.

When the message ended, she waited for the inevitable comment. It didn’t take long.

“So that’s what a moron looks like,” Lynne remarked.
“Lynne!” Janeway stifled a laugh, but only out of an old loyalty.
“What? You’re not actually going to defend him, are you? The man gave you up for lost and married someone else! He had you in his hands and let you go! You don’t get much more moronic than that.”
“It was his secretary,” Janeway muttered, not entirely sure why she was offering this detail.
Lynne pulled away to look at her directly. “His secretary? Jesus Christ, that was a cliché four hundred years ago!”
Now Janeway did laugh. She couldn’t help it; it felt too good to have Lynne getting fired up on her behalf. “It’s all right. That stopped hurting a long time ago. In fact, it didn’t hurt all that much at the time, which was my first clue.”
Lynne settled back in. “Well, I hope he enjoys my message.”
“What? Oh, no. You didn’t.”
“Sure I did,” said Lynne, her grin entirely too large and wholly unrepentant. “Actually it was a thank you note. After all, if he hadn’t been an idiot I would never have had a chance with you. You’re way too principled to have had an affair on him.”
Privately Janeway wasn’t too sure of that, but this was one of those times when honesty was not the best policy. “What did you say?”
“Oh, I just sympathized with him regarding how difficult it must have been to let you go, and told him that you were in good hands now. I might have mentioned that several of the crew have said they’ve never seen you so happy, and that I can’t keep up with you in bed.”
“You did not say that!”
“Oh yes, and did I mention that I was wearing my workout gear when I recorded the message? I made sure I was nice and sweaty, and since I hate just looking into a PADD while I’m talking, I kept myself busy by sharpening my boot knives.”
Janeway burst out laughing. She could picture Lynne doing it, too. “Please tell me you’re just yanking my chain,” she said once she could speak again.
Lynne looked at her askance. “I can’t believe that one survived into the twenty-fourth century. That’s amazing!”
“That’s from your time?”
“Actually, before my time. Haven’t you ever thought about what it means?”
Janeway shook her head. “Not really. I just know it’s a reference to teasing or joking.”

“Well, the origin dates back to some equipment that you don’t have on Voyager.”

“And? What was it?”

“The original flush toilet. It was gravity feed only, with a tank of water high above the actual toilet bowl. You flushed by pulling a chain that opened a valve.”

“And what, exactly, does that have to do with teasing or kidding?”

“I have no idea.” When Janeway snorted, she looked indignant. “Hey! I don’t know everything.”

“No,” said Janeway, working hard to keep her face straight, “but you certainly give the impression that you do.”

Lynne elbowed her in the ribs, which started a wrestling match on the couch that only ended when one of them knocked the PADD onto the floor. After mutual recriminations and feeble defenses, they got themselves rearranged and settled down.

“You didn’t really send Mark a message, did you?” asked Janeway, who honestly wasn’t sure.

“I really did.” Lynne’s smile was too evil for Janeway to doubt her. “He hurt you, and I had a chance to make him eat it. So I took it. I did stretch the truth a little on the knife part, though.”

“Imagine my relief,” said Janeway dryly. “What about the sweaty workout gear?”

“Gospel truth. Shorts and a sport bra. I made sure there was lots of cleavage and that my nipples were at full attention.”

Janeway nearly fell off the couch laughing. Oh, god, she could just picture Mark’s face when he watched that message. She almost felt sorry for him.

Lynne was laughing now, too. “I didn’t tell you at the time because I knew you wouldn’t let me send it. I’m glad to see you’re not mad about it.”

Wiping her eyes, Janeway sat up. “How on earth could I be mad about it? The sexiest woman on this ship, and certainly one of the sexiest Mark has ever seen, tells him that I’m in good hands? It’s priceless.” She wrapped her arms around Lynne and pulled her in for a tight hug. “Thank you.”
Lynne returned the hug happily. “You’re welcome. It’s my job to defend your honor, you know. Got any other moronic exes that I need to deal with?”

“No really. There were a few idiots, but they were all a long time ago. And I can’t say that I wasn’t an idiot then, as well.”

Lynne nodded with understanding. “I’ve been there. I just stopped being an idiot last year.”

“No you didn’t.”

And that precipitated another wrestling match, which ended with Lynne pinning Janeway to the couch and demanding a surrender. Janeway, laughing too hard to fight back, gave up willingly and got a sweet kiss for her reward. Once again they sat up and straightened out their clothes.

“I can honestly say that this is the most fun I’ve ever had during mail call,” said Janeway, recovering the PADD from its second trip onto the floor.

“Me too,” said Lynne. “I hope they’re all like this.”

“Ready for a letter from my sister?”

“Yes. I really am looking forward to seeing Phoebe. You’ve talked so much about her.”

“Don’t ever tell her that. Her ego would never recover from the instant bloat.” Janeway activated the next message, and felt a lump rise in her throat as her obnoxious, beloved sister smiled at her.

“Hey shrimp,” said Phoebe. Lynne muffled a snort, and Janeway pinched her in a particularly sensitive spot.

“Don’t get a big head or anything, but I’ve missed you like crazy. Obviously Mother has too, but god, you took ten years off her shoulders when you contacted the MIDAS array. When she called me I couldn’t believe it was the same woman. I know you’re doing everything you can, but please don’t let anything happen to you. It would kill Mother, and it would even bother me a little bit.”

Janeway watched raptly as Phoebe filled her in on her latest artistic successes, her most recent crash-and-burn love affair—“she doesn’t have any other kind,” Janeway told Lynne—and the fact that she’d run into Mark in San Francisco and found him to be as soporific as ever.

“Oh, I like her,” said Lynne.

Janeway just pulled her closer, not taking her eyes off the image.

“That’s about all the news that’s fit to tell. Now for the news that’s not fit: Starfleet is making the most of your long-distance call and your ‘against all odds’
success. I can’t turn on the FedComm unit without seeing your face. Thank god they’re using images from your most recent logs, is all I can say. The haircut looks great. It’s about time you got rid of that starchy bun.

“When you get back home, you’d better be ready. They’ll be putting you on recruitment vids all over the Federation. You’re a star, Kathryn. The Dominion War has really decimated the fleet, and you’re the best news they’ve had in a long time. They’re going to jump all over you as a shining example of what Starfleet was and can be again. I don’t know if anyone else will tell you that, so I am. I know you’ll get home somehow, and I know how much you hate surprises. So consider this a favor.

“Guess that’s it. I can’t wait to get your message and see what you’ve been up to. I love you, Kathryn. Get your ass home.”

Janeway felt tears rising to her eyes at Phoebe’s final words. They’d never been overly affectionate with each other, and she could count on less than one hand the number of times either of them had said they loved the other. It meant so much to hear it now. Home had never seemed so close—nor so far away.

Lynne wrapped both arms around her and held her tightly, and Janeway briefly rested their heads together. Then she gently pulled the arms away. “I’m all right,” she said. “Come on, let’s see what Mom has to say.” And then I might not be all right anymore.

With a hand that shook ever so slightly, she accessed the last message and hit the play button.

Her mother regarded her intently, a slight smile on her face. “Kathryn, my darling. There’s so much to say, and none of it means anything at all compared to knowing that you’re safe and so much closer to home. It’s been so hard to keep the faith—we never knew if you got our last messages, when you made contact through that alien array. And we never saw you. But now Owen Paris assures us that we can count on getting a real message from you, and I can’t tell you how much I long to see your face...”

She stopped speaking for a moment, turning her head to one side as she fought for control, and Janeway didn’t even try to stop her tears. They rolled silently down her face as she saw the ravages her absence had wrought on her mother.

Gretchen Janeway mastered herself with a steel tempered through years of watching both husband and daughter put themselves in danger. With the same slight smile she’d shown at the beginning, she caught Janeway up on news of the farm, their neighbors, a host of Starfleet admi-
rals and captains they’d known through the years, and various tidbits about Phoebe that her sister had neglected to mention, most of which were highly amusing.

“I won’t tell you to be safe or come home soon,” she said, when the news had run dry. “I know that getting your crew home is your top priority, and you’ll do whatever you have to. How you’ve gotten as far as you have is nothing short of a miracle, and I keep praying for more miracles to fall your way. Thank you for making this possible—it’s so much easier to keep the faith now. I can’t wait to get your message and see my daughter again. I love you, Kathryn. Please take care of yourself. Let yourself be happy.” She blew a kiss, and the image ended.

Janeway stared at the dark PADD, an apparently endless supply of tears running down her cheeks. She’d been crying nonstop through the message and didn’t seem to be slowing down.

A small choked sound cut through the silence, and she turned in surprise to see Lynne looking at her, her hand to her mouth.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. Lynne shook her head and turned away, but her trembling shoulders told the story. Gently Janeway tugged her back, though Lynne refused to face her. “Lynne, talk to me.”

All that got her was another vehement shake of the head, and Lynne began to cry in earnest. Finally she gasped, “My mom,” and Janeway’s sudden understanding shattered her tenuous control. She rested her head against Lynne’s back, her own body shaking with the force of her emotion.

Almost immediately Lynne broke her hold and turned around, gathering her up and cradling her. “I’m sorry, love,” she whispered.

It felt good to be held like this, here in the quiet of their quarters, and Janeway allowed herself to relax into it for a few minutes. Then she straightened up, wiping the tears off her face. “Why are you sorry?”

Lynne gave her a watery smile. “I was trying to be strong for you. Guess I didn’t do so well.”

Janeway pushed a few strands of hair off Lynne’s face. “I’m the one who should be sorry. If I’d been thinking I would have realized what those messages would bring up for you.”

“No.” Lynne was adamant. “I loved seeing your sister and your mom. It just hit me all of a sudden. Your mom...she’s hurting so much. And I realized what my mom must have felt when she watched my message...” She stopped and took in a deep breath. “Kathryn?”

“What, sweetheart?”
“Remember when I said I wasn’t all that invested in getting back to Earth? I changed my mind. You have to get back to them. That woman needs you. God, I feel selfish enjoying myself here, with you, when your family is in that kind of pain.”

Smiling, Janeway undid the band holding Lynne’s braid in place and indulged herself in the sensual joy of running her fingers through the thick hair. “Don’t you dare feel selfish,” she said. “You’re doing exactly what my mom wants. Don’t you remember the last thing she said? She told me to let myself be happy. I didn’t do that until you came into my life. If Mom were here right now, she’d tell you to stop with the selfish nonsense and enjoy yourself with me just as much as you possibly can. And then she’d tell me I finally found the right one, and wasn’t it just like me to go seventy thousand light years away to do it.”

Lynne chuckled, then sniffed. “Thirty-five thousand,” she said. “You were halfway home before you found me.”

“That’s because I had to pick up Seven first.”

Lynne sniffed again, nodded, then wrapped her arms around Janeway’s waist and rested her head on her chest. Janeway held her close, stroking her back. When she showed no signs of moving or saying anything else, Janeway reached one hand out for the PADD, deactivated the sound, and played her mother’s message again. She watched her mother’s face intently, reading the years of worry and grief written there, and when the message ended she, too, had found new impetus in her desire to return home. She’d always been driven to get her crew home, but now she wanted it for herself just as much.

She put the PADD down and resumed her stroking of Lynne’s back. And then, from nowhere it seemed, a rumble of laughter made its way up her throat.

Lynne pulled back. “What?”

“I was just wondering,” Janeway said, her laughter bubbling out, “what on earth Mark thought when he saw your message. God, Phoebe is going to love you. You have got to tell her about that in your next message; she’ll be your biggest fan.”

Lynne’s expression relaxed, and her eyes crinkled as she smiled. “I can do better than tell her.” She disentangled herself from Janeway’s grasp, walked over to her desk, and came back with a PADD. “Here you go.”

“You made a copy?” Lynne nodded, settling back onto the couch.
Janeway activated the message and immediately snorted when she saw the image on the screen. “You weren’t kidding! Could you possibly have been more overtly sexy? Nice nipples, by the way.”

The video showed Lynne in her form-fitting workout shorts and sports bra, sweaty as promised, and with her hair down around her shoulders. Since Lynne always kept her hair up during a workout, Janeway knew this was strictly for Mark’s benefit. The message had been recorded right here on the couch, and as Lynne earnestly expressed her understanding of Mark’s decision, then assured him that Janeway was in good hands, she rested her elbows on the back of the couch in a casual manner. But Janeway was certain the pose was anything but casual: it threw her breasts into prominence, exposed her toned abdominals, and made her shoulder and arm muscles bulge. It was a performance that only got better when Lynne gracefully crossed one long, bare leg over the other as she continued to speak to Mark as if he were her best buddy. Then she uncrossed her legs and leaned forward, resting her forearms on her thighs and exposing a lovely amount of cleavage as she began speaking more softly. Janeway instinctively ducked her face closer to the screen to hear, and then realized that was just what Lynne had intended as she confided that she had been forced to take vitamin supplements in order to keep up with Janeway in the bedroom.

At that, Janeway lost it altogether and dissolved with laughter, wrapping her arms around her stomach. “Oh my god, you actually said that!”

“I told you I did,” said Lynne. “I was kidding about telling your family, but not about this.”

They watched the rest of the message together, with Lynne providing occasional commentary that added to the hilarity, and when it ended Janeway held the PADD to her chest like a treasure. “May I keep this?”

“It’s your copy. I meant to give it to you all along, but I wasn’t about to let you see it until the packet was gone.”

“Very prudent of you, but I’d like to think I wouldn’t have interfered.”

Lynne raised an eyebrow.

“Okay,” Janeway conceded. “I’d have been much too concerned with Mark’s feelings, but that doesn’t mean I can’t fully enjoy it now. I think I’ll keep this in my ready room for the times when the stress level gets too high. This is just hilarious, Lynne. God, I had no idea you were such an
actress. My only regret is that I can’t be there to see his eyeballs pop right out of his head.”

“Well, I have to admit I’m glad you’re reacting this way,” said Lynne.
“Can I show it to Revi?”
“Hey, it’s your reputation. You do whatever you want with it.”

Janeway had quite a few truly evil thoughts about what she wanted to do with it, but concluded that discretion might be the best policy in this instance. For now, anyway. “Actually, it’s your reputation too,” she said.
“When Phoebe sees this, your reputation in my family will be made. You won’t have to do anything else; they’ll love you. And I get to look good by proxy.”
“Not by proxy,” said Lynne.

Janeway put the PADD on the table and drew Lynne into her arms. After several minutes of contented snuggling, Lynne spoke up.
“Kathryn?”
“Mm hmm?”
“I don’t suppose you can make me a vid like that. You know, tank top, sweat, bulging muscles?”
“Not on your life.”
“Damn.”
The next day began with a senior staff meeting to discuss the possibilities of future communication with the Alpha Quadrant. Seven and Harry had gone over Lieutenant Barclay’s theories and pronounced them a good starting point, though there was a great deal to be done before they could come up with a working theory. After additional input from B’Elanna, Janeway put Seven in charge of developing the concept, with B’Elanna and Harry as her team. “Operation Bell” was a top priority, and when the meeting ended the staff members immediately began talking excitedly amongst themselves, anticipating daily communication with home. A solution might still be months away, but Seven was confident that the concept was feasible. And if Seven was confident, then as far as Janeway was concerned, it was a done deal.

Returning to her ready room, she began to wade through all of the news that had arrived in yesterday’s mail packet. It was the lowest priority of the information received, but she had been looking forward to catching up on what was happening in the Federation. A lot had happened in the last six years, and it took her the rest of the day just to skim through the highlights. She read through in chronological order, so it wasn’t until the end that she came across the article that sent a chill down her spine. Only one month ago, the Federation had been rocked by the news that the Hamilton Foundation was pulling funds
from every aspect of space research except for faster-than-warp propulsion.

She abandoned her skimming and did a data search on the topic. Her screen lit up with dozens of news stories, analyses and political columns dissecting the Foundation’s decision, none of which had any more details than the original article. Dr. Alison Necheyev, the CEO of the Foundation, was repeatedly quoted but managed never to say anything concrete.

Necheyev? Surely not.

But a second data search showed that Dr. Alison Necheyev, niece to Fleet Admiral Alynna Necheyev of Starfleet, had been named CEO of the Hamilton Foundation six years ago—immediately after Voyager had been pulled into the Delta Quadrant. Janeway examined an image of her in one of the articles. Oh yes, definitely Necheyev’s niece. The blond hair and narrow, Slavic features were there, and she held her chin up in the very same manner. She didn’t have quite the same hard-as-duranium expression, however. Considering that her job probably involved a great deal of politicking, that wasn’t surprising.

Janeway sat back in her chair, thinking hard. Her first impulse was to keep this from Lynne. The ramifications of the Foundation’s move were enormous, and she knew Lynne would be very upset once she understood them. The Foundation had been a touchy subject from the moment Janeway had first told her about it, and she didn’t see how Lynne could do a thing about the current situation, so why get her upset for nothing?

Her second thought contradicted the first. She herself had insisted on total honesty in their relationship; it was an outgrowth of their problems dealing with Lynne’s tendency not to share things. They’d even written a mutual promise of honesty and openness into their wedding vows. That had been Lynne’s idea; she had wanted to give Janeway a more concrete version of the promise she’d made when she had proposed.

No, she couldn’t keep this from Lynne. But she wasn’t looking forward to the conversation.

“THeY dId WhAT?”

Janeway knew Lynne had heard her. She waited as her wife paced back and forth in their living room, finally stopping in front of her.
“This is about me, isn’t it?”

Janeway nodded. “I’m just guessing, of course, but the timing is too perfect to be coincidental. The Foundation’s announcement came just five days after our first contact with MIDAS, which is the first anyone in the Federation knew of your existence. They want to get you home, Lynne. That’s what the Foundation has always been about. So this shouldn’t be too surprising.”

Lynne collapsed onto the couch. “But all those agencies, universities and think tanks you showed me when I got back from Earth—they’ve all had their funding pulled? I don’t know much about that kind of thing, Kathryn, but I can guess what that’s done to a lot of people. Not to mention Starfleet.”

“It’s more than that.” Janeway quickly outlined the political ramifications of the Foundation’s decision, wincing at the expression on Lynne’s face.

“So you’re telling me that I’m single-handedly responsible for a fundamental shift in governmental power?”

Janeway reached for her hand. “Don’t take that on yourself. You didn’t have any say in this. The Foundation has its own set of policies and its own mission.”

“Yeah, based on me.” Lynne ran her free hand through her unbound hair. “This feels very weird, Kathryn. I don’t like it.”

Janeway flashed back to a memory of herself telling a still-green Ensign Kim that in Starfleet, weird was part of the job. She didn’t think Lynne would appreciate the sentiment right now.

“Your parents couldn’t have known how powerful the Foundation would become. I’m sure they never anticipated anything like this. But they established the Foundation out of love for you, so maybe you should just take this as a sign of that love and let it go at that. You can’t do anything about it anyway.”

Lynne pulled her legs up on the couch and leaned back against the arm. “Maybe I can. Maybe I need to start thinking about asserting myself in the Foundation. I’ve been avoiding even considering it, since it wasn’t likely to become an issue for the foreseeable future, but that’s obviously changed. I think it might be time to suck it up and deal with the legacy my parents left me.”

“What do you suppose you can do from here?”
“I can tell them not to divert the funding.”

“And you think they’ll just accept your word that you are who you say you are?”

“Why wouldn’t they?”

Janeway almost laughed. Lynne was so intelligent that Janeway sometimes forgot how completely naïve she was regarding politics and business.

“Because there’s an enormous amount of money and power at play,” she said, “and I suspect the people who hold it aren’t going to be happy to take orders from a woman thirty-four thousand light years away. You can try, but it might be an uphill battle. I suspect that your parents intended for you to take control of the Foundation once you returned, not from out here.” She couldn’t resist the opportunity to play Devil’s advocate. “Besides, are you so sure you don’t want that kind of funding devoted to bringing us home?”

Lynne gave her a look of disbelief. “You’re joking. You’d be the first person to reject this. The fate of one hundred and forty-eight people versus the political stability of the Federation?”

Janeway shrugged. “Of the quadrant, actually.”

“No, it’s not, but it’s bigger than we are. This may not be a battle we can fight. Yet.”

Lynne frowned. “I need to get a message to that CEO. Alison?”

“Dr. Alison Necheyev. And if Seven does what I think she can do, you might be able to speak with her directly.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot,” said Lynne, perking up with interest. “How did the staff meeting go?”

“Good. I think we’ve got a shot at visual communication within two months.”

“That’s fantastic! Okay, this is much better news.”

“I won’t argue with you on that. We’re calling it Operation Bell.”

“Bell? As in Alexander Graham?”

“Mm hmm. That was Tom’s idea.”

“Tom needs to update his history files. Alexander Graham Bell didn’t invent the telephone.”

“He didn’t?” This was news to Janeway.
“Nope. He just stole it from the guy who did. I think you should change your name to Operation Meucci.”

“I sense a story from the history professor.” Janeway settled herself in. “What happened?”

“In my opinion? I think Meucci was one of those genius people who can do amazing things in the lab, but don’t have any sort of business sense. He had a list of inventions as long as my arm, from coffee filters to smokeless kerosene lamps to a method for making paper pulp out of wood…any one of which could have made him wealthy if he’d only known how to finance and market it. Instead, he got taken by some con artist investors and went bankrupt.”

“Ouch,” said Janeway. “He needed a business partner.”

“He did,” Lynne agreed. “Part of the problem might have been that he was an Italian immigrant to New York, and just wasn’t dialed in to the American business scene.”

“Dialed in…?”

“Um…” Lynne gave her a sheepish smile. “Connected. God, that’s ironic—I just realized that’s an idiom based on telephones. When you called someone, you dialed them.”

“Got it.” Janeway waved a hand. “Go on. What happened with the telephone?”

“A clusterfuck, really. He’d barely made a prototype when he was severely burned in a boiler explosion on the Staten Island Ferry. This was after the bankruptcy, so needless to say, having him in the hospital put his wife in dire straits. She sold his drawings and a bunch of his inventions to a second-hand dealer in an effort to raise money. When he finally got out, the first thing he did was try to recover them, but they’d all been sold to some mysterious young man. He managed to recreate his work, but then couldn’t afford to buy a full patent on the telephone. So he bought a caveat instead, which was an intent to file, and had to be renewed every year until the full patent was bought.”

“Uh oh,” said Janeway. “I sense a disaster.”

Lynne nodded. “Yeah—he wasn’t consistent in keeping up the renewals. But wait, it gets worse. Meucci met with a vice president at a telegraph company based in New York, which was one of the biggest communications companies around at the time. He wanted permission to test his telephone on the company’s telegraph wires, and as part of the
proposal gave the vice president a prototype and a copy of his caveat, which of course described the invention in some detail. Two years later, he still hadn’t gotten to perform the test, the vice president kept putting him off, and when he finally asked for his documents and device back, he was told they’d been lost.”

“Oh, no.” Janeway could easily imagine it, having dealt with more than a few con artists and thieves in the Delta Quadrant.

“Right. And then his caveat expired, and Bell jumped in with a full patent application. Turned out that there were some nasty little deals between Bell, the U.S. Patent Office, and Western Union Telegraph, involving a shitload of money. Meucci brought suit, but Bell had better lawyers and a lot more cash, and of course he had it sewn up with all the back room dealing. So even though Meucci had the support of the U.S. government, which prosecuted Bell for fraud, Bell somehow managed to keep himself out of the courts for ten years—until Meucci died. Then the U.S. dropped the case, the world forgot about Meucci, and Bell was immortalized as the inventor of the telephone.”

“I had no idea,” said Janeway. “What a story!”

“Am I going to have to go back to work for Slater and Johnson? It sounds like your history files still need some accuracy checks.”

“That’s probably true,” said Janeway, “but I need you more. Now that I’ve finally gotten used to the concept of a personal security escort, I’m not about to let you go.”

Lynne stared at her, an enormous smile spreading over her face. “Really?”

“Really.”

“Thank you! God, what a lovely thing to hear. You just made my whole week. Maybe my month.” She pushed off the couch arm and proceeded to demonstrate precisely how she felt about that statement, and Janeway felt no guilt whatsoever at her intentional use of a distraction.
Over the course of the next month Janeway had several opportunities to utilize her new personal security escort. It didn’t take her long to conclude that this was the best idea Tuvok had ever had. It gave her more opportunities to be with her wife, and Lynne practically glowed with excitement every time they left the ship. Only once were her specialized services actually necessary—ironically enough, not when Janeway was acting in an official capacity. They’d finished bartering for some mechanical supplies and retired to a local bar to relax before returning to the ship. Off the clock and enjoying each other’s company, they were on their second drinks when a group of four men approached their table, obviously interested in more than polite conversation. Janeway declined the pleasure of their company, but her words apparently didn’t penetrate. Lynne stood up and warned them off in a voice Janeway hadn’t heard before, and while she was looking at her bristling wife in surprise, one of the men made a grab for her.

Lynne exploded. That was the only way Janeway could describe the flurry of motion—she wasn’t even able to follow her moves. The only one she really saw was the first, when Lynne stepped into the man reaching for Janeway and dispatched him with a single blow to the throat. The other three fell like dummies on an Academy firing range; Janeway barely had time to save her drink when one of them crashed onto the table. In
seconds it was over, and all four men were picking themselves up and sidling away.

Janeway looked at the carnage and then at her wife. “Don’t you think that was a little excessive?”

“No one touches you.” Lynne was still bristling. “It’s too risky.”

This was an old argument between Janeway and Tuvok. Tuvok felt the captain was too lax in her personal security, not giving sufficient concern to the possibility of skin-patch poisons, wrist-mounted hypos or any number of concealed weapons that were deadly at close range. Letting anyone within the range of physical touch was, in his opinion, far too dangerous. Janeway felt that the danger was overstated, and she hated being treated like a porcelain doll. So she’d ordered Tuvok to relax. He had obeyed, but only after registering a formal protest.

“Lynne, there’s not—”

“I said, no one touches you.”

She looked into Lynne’s unyielding gaze and suddenly understood exactly what Tuvok had done. He had manipulated circumstances so that she would end up with the one individual on her personal security detail who could override her wishes. Certainly she could order Lynne to relax, as she had Tuvok, and Lynne would obey—for exactly as long as it took them to reach their quarters. Then a pitched battle would break out, and Janeway would have no peace until she gave in. She could see it in Lynne’s eyes. This wasn’t a battle worth fighting.

Those Vulcans were a wily bunch.

“You know, you could at least have left one for me,” she said. “It’s been forever since I was in a good bar fight.”

Lynne looked at her incredulously, then burst into laughter. “I’ll keep that in mind for the next time. Shall we go before we attract any more trouble?”

After that, Janeway had no more concerns for Lynne’s safety on away missions—at least, not as far as her ability to defend against physical attack. There were other risks that could not be defended against, but she knew she’d drive herself insane worrying about them, so she eventually managed to push that concern into a corner of her mind. Part of her would always worry, every time they went out, but on the whole she preferred worrying about Lynne while they were together to worrying about her while they were apart.
Operation Meucci was entirely successful, with Seven, B’Elanna and Harry completing a working theory in time for their next transmission to MIDAS. The current communication conduit was created by the MIDAS lab directing a tachyon beam at an itinerant class B pulsar, producing a micro-singularity through which a real-time data stream could be passed. The limitations were two-fold: the MIDAS array only came within range of the pulsar once a month, and the energy involved in creating the singularity was so vast that only a tiny conduit could be opened for a very short time, allowing for data and voice transmission but no live imagery. Operation Meucci bypassed those limitations by utilizing a natural singularity located slightly outside MIDAS’ normal range. Building on Lieutenant Barclay’s concept, Seven and her team had determined that by boosting MIDAS’ output and directing a phased tachyon beam at the singularity, a similar but much larger conduit could be opened, allowing for visual data streams. Voyager could then pick up and return the signal once certain modifications were made to its deflector dish. The theory had one limitation, and that was that the natural singularity would only be in the required alignment to MIDAS for eleven minutes each day. Still, eleven minutes of visual contact each day was far better than one quick data stream per month. It would allow honest-to-god calls home, and the boost to crew morale would be incalculable.

The few minutes of time during their next MIDAS transmission was devoted to discussing Operation Meucci, and Lieutenant Barclay’s voice was trembling with excitement. Janeway had no doubt that he’d be spending twenty-six hours a day in the lab until he could get it to work. They agreed that Janeway would orient Voyager and initialize the deflector modifications once a week at an assigned time, in order to “pick up the phone” should Barclay’s efforts be successful. By the time their transmission ended, the excitement of the bridge crew was palpable. Janeway cautioned them against expecting too much, but she knew her words fell on deaf ears. Besides, she couldn’t even control her own sense of anticipation. The idea of both seeing and speaking with her family again—and for more than a few seconds—was absolutely thrilling. She had no doubts that Barclay would eventually be successful. What she really hoped for, however, was that he could pull it off in time for her to arrange a birthday transmission for Lynne.

By the time she and Lynne had reached the point in their relationship
where such personal information as birth dates were exchanged, they had both already had theirs. It turned out that their birthdays were only eighteen days apart, with Lynne’s coming first on the second of May. She would be turning forty-five. That date was rapidly approaching, and Janeway’s greatest wish was that she could give Lynne a real family tie to Earth in the form of a birthday call from her mother and sister. She had another gift cooked up which she knew Lynne would absolutely love, but with any luck she might be able to make this an even more special occasion.

She and Chakotay had already decided that, should Operation Meucci be successful, they would use a lottery system to determine the order in which personnel had access to the comm system. Data transmissions of logs and letters would run beneath the video transmissions, allowing daily contact for all crew with only a twenty-four hour delay in response time—but what everyone was waiting for was a chance to call home. Given an eleven-minute daily time limit, they had decided to reserve two for Starfleet business and allot the other nine for three-minute personal communications. With one hundred and forty-eight people on board, it would take fifty days before everyone had an opportunity to speak with a loved one, and that was discounting any important Starfleet communications that might pre-empt the personal time. So her birthday wish for Lynne involved not only Barclay’s success, but her own luck in drawing an early number in the lottery system.

When she went home that evening after her shift, Lynne was sitting on the couch with a PADD in her hand and a look of wonder on her face. Janeway knew exactly what was on that PADD, and mentally thanked her mother and Phoebe for responding.

“Hi, sweetheart,” she said, dropping onto the couch next to her. “Something interesting?”

“I got two messages. From your mom and your sister.”

“Really? Anything I can see, or is it private?”

“God, Kathryn, I can hardly imagine how anything from your family could be private. Yes, you can see them.” She handed the PADD over, and Janeway activated the first message. It was from Phoebe, congratulating Lynne on landing her sister, and then commiserating with her for the burden she’d just taken on. She offered several pieces of entirely inappropriate advice, talked about the wedding vid, asked Lynne a few questions

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about herself, and ended with a heartfelt expression of joy that Lynne had joined their family.

*Thank you, Phoebe. I couldn’t have asked for anything more perfect.*

Janeway put her arm around Lynne and pulled her in for a hug. “She loves you already. And this was *before* she saw the copy of that message to Mark.”

Lynne laughed. “So you sent it, then.”

“Of course I sent it! Pass up an opportunity like that? I think not. Now, about this advice—”

“Don’t worry, I discounted all of it—”

“Good.”

“—because I already know how to handle you better than that. She’s years behind in knowing who you are. I think I’ll give her an update.”

Janeway pulled back and saw the self-satisfied smirk on Lynne’s face. “I don’t think that’s a good idea at all.”

Lynne poked her in the ribs. “I’m just teasing you. My first loyalty is always to you, love. But I do have to wonder why her view of you is so different from mine. Is it the ‘sister filter,’ or is it that you’ve changed that much in six years?”

Janeway gave the question serious consideration. “I’d have to say a little of the first and a lot of the second. I’m definitely not the same person I was when I left Earth. And I’m not the same person I was before I met you.”

“Hm. Does that mean you’re better or worse since meeting me?”

“Better, of course. Didn’t you read your Marriage Handbook? Page ninety-six tells you exactly how to answer that one.”

“There’s a manual? How come I didn’t get it? Shit, I’ve been figuring all this out on my own.”

“And doing a fine job of it, too.” Janeway leaned in for a kiss, only to find a firm hand on her chest.

“Don’t think I can’t see patronization from six kilometers out, Captain. You’d better try that again.”

Janeway let her teasing smile slide away and looked at Lynne with an open heart. “You saved me from losing myself. I was slowly forgetting how to be Kathryn, since all I could be was the Captain. You brought me back from that edge. Of course I’m a better person since I met you. Because I’m whole again.”
The stunned look on Lynne’s face was priceless. “You really do have a
manual. I was going to give you a hard time, but now I can’t remember
what the hell I was thinking. That was an incredibly sweet thing to say.”
“No, that was a true thing to say.”

Lynne gave her the kiss she’d denied earlier, and it was worth the wait.
It took Janeway a few minutes to remember there was still a message to
be viewed.

“So what did my mom say?”
Lynne leaned her head on Janeway’s shoulder. “Enough to make me
cry. Go ahead.”

Keeping her arm around Lynne’s waist, Janeway activated the PADD.
There was her mom with a welcoming smile on her face. As she spoke,
there was no doubt that Gretchen Janeway was absolutely thrilled with
the knowledge that her daughter had finally married, and to such a special
woman. She thanked Lynne and told her that she looked forward very
much to meeting her in person.

“Kathryn told me what you gave up to be with her. She had a look on her face
that I have never seen on her before, but I recognized it. It’s the same expression I
used to see on my husband’s face when he looked at me—and later, when he looked at
Kathryn and Phoebe. It’s a kind of love that I always hoped she’d find. I am so
grateful to you for being there and loving her, but as a mother, I’m also grieving for
both your loss and that of your parents. I can’t do anything about your parents, but
perhaps you might accept me as a second mother? Because I’d love to call you my
daughter. I hope you don’t think me presumptuous; my offer comes from the heart.”

By the time the message ended, Janeway had tears in her eyes. She
should have known her mom would come through; her own sense of
compassion had been instilled in her by Gretchen’s example. But she
hadn’t expected anything quite like this.

“Well, what are you going to tell her?” she asked, her voice intention-
ally light.
Lynne sniffed. “I’m going to tell her that I’d be honored. And that I
hope she’s ready for a daughter who might need a lot of hugs.”

Janeway tightened her arm and kissed Lynne’s cheek. “She’ll be ready.
She gives great hugs, and somehow she always smells like cinnamon.”

“Thank you for doing that for me.”

Janeway pulled back. “I didn’t. All I did was ask them to write you.
Mom’s offer is hers alone, and I can tell you that it’s not anything she’s
done before. You’re the only person she has ever offered to take into our family. And you’d better watch out, because that offer means she *will* treat you like her own. You’ve just acquired a parent who will worry about you, tell you when she thinks you’re making the wrong decision, and ask you why you aren’t eating enough.”

“It sounds like heaven,” whispered Lynne.
The first week after Operation Meucci had been put into effect, Tom oriented Voyager and Seven activated the deflector modifications at the appointed time. The bridge crew had agreed amongst themselves that they didn’t expect much; one week was a ridiculously short time for Starfleet to have completed the modifications necessary to the MIDAS lab. In spite of that, when the time came and went with no sign of contact, there was a general deflation of spirits. It was hard not to hope for a miracle.

A week later Janeway found herself being forced to parley with an aggressive species that had intercepted them at just the wrong time and demanded a “toll” if they wished to be allowed passage through the area. Janeway didn’t want an unnecessary fight, but the clock was ticking and she would not let some little piss ant neighborhood bully get in her way. When diplomacy wasn’t working quickly enough, she ordered Tuvok to take out their weapons. Unfortunately, the bully had friends they hadn’t detected hiding in a nearby nebula, and Voyager found itself in the middle of a major battle. By the time they disabled enough ships to secure their own escape, they were past the deadline. Janeway was furious—and more than a little tempted to go back and kick some serious ass on the remaining ships they hadn’t disabled, just to get it out of her system.

The third week found them in a peaceful sector, with nothing between
them and a successful transfer. They held their collective breaths as Tom put *Voyager* into position and Seven activated the deflector modifications.

“I’m picking up a phased tachyon beam,” reported Harry.

“There’s triaxialating signal encoded in it,” added Seven.

“On screen,” said Janeway.

An image of two men in Starfleet uniforms briefly appeared on screen, then vanished in a cloud of interference. The audio was equally broken up.

“Voyager, this…Lieutenant…fleet command…you receiving this?” Janeway turned to Seven. “Can you clear it up?”

“I’m attempting to do so now.”

The image resolved itself into Admiral Owen Paris and Lieutenant Barclay. Both had ear to ear grins.

Admiral Paris looked briefly at his son before focusing on Janeway.

“Captain Janeway, it’s a pleasure to finally talk to you in person.”

“The pleasure’s all mine, Admiral. How’s the weather in San Francisco?”

“Cold and rainy, as usual.”

Janeway felt a wave of homesickness. “It sounds delightful. Lieutenant Barclay, my congratulations on establishing the first transgalactic comm link. You’ve earned a place in the history books.”

“Your team deserves at least half of the credit, Captain,” said Barclay, flushing a deep red.

Janeway gave him a smile. “Just be sure to thank us when you accept the Daystrom prize.”

“I will. Uh, Admiral?”

Paris looked at him in some confusion, then his face cleared. “Oh yes.” He turned back toward Janeway. “Mr. Barclay has arranged a small gift for you and your crew.”

The image abruptly changed to a view of Earth, in all its blue and green glory. Every member of the bridge crew sucked in their breath. Barclay’s voice came over the link.

“This is a live image from McKinley Station. Not too much cloud cover over North America today.”

Janeway could barely get her voice to work. “That’s...quite a view. Thank you, Reg.” She didn’t realize that she’d addressed him in such a familiar manner until the image changed back, and she saw the beaming smile on Barclay’s face.
“You’re welcome, Captain. And may I say that it’s an honor to meet you face to face.”

“It’s an honor for me as well, Lieutenant. We owe you a great debt. Home feels a lot closer today than it ever has.”

Barclay nodded seriously. “Now that we have the comm link working, I’m being transferred to a different project. I’ll be devoting my time to figuring out any way to speed up your journey.”

“I’m pleased to hear it,” she said sincerely. “With you on our team I don’t see how we can go wrong.” He flushed again and actually looked at his feet. Janeway kept her amusement off her face, but it wasn’t easy. “Admiral, is there anything that we should be aware of as long as we have the link up and running?”

“No,” said Paris. “This was just a test, so besides me there’s no official Starfleet presence at the moment. You can bet you’ll be seeing a bevy of brass tomorrow, though. I know you’ll be wanting to devote comm time to your crew, but please reserve tomorrow’s transmission for Starfleet business. There are quite a few flag officers who want to see you.”

“I understand.” And the politicking begins. “Then if there’s nothing else, Admiral, would it be too much trouble to see that view from McKinley Station again? I’ve got a ship full of people who deserve a good long look at it.”

Admiral Paris nodded. “Until tomorrow, then. Goodbye, Captain.” He glanced at Tom again, allowing a pleased smile to cross his face. The image changed back to Earth, slowly rotating under a light layer of clouds.

Janeway punched the code into her console to activate a ship-wide video feed. “All hands, this is the captain. I’m pleased to report that Operation Meucci was a complete success. If you’ll proceed to the nearest video monitor, you can see a live image from McKinley Station. Congratulations, everyone.”

Though the bridge was soundproofed, she swore she could hear the cheers. The bridge itself was dead silent as they all stared in fascination. After a minute or so, Barclay’s voice came over the link again.

“Captain, since we’re devoting the rest of the transmission to a video feed, I thought you might like a few different views.”

She didn’t know how he’d pulled it off on such short notice, but before their time ran out they were treated to views of Mars, the Utopia Planitia shipyards, Vulcan and Betazed, ending once again with Earth. During all
that time there wasn’t a sound on the bridge except the occasional chirp from a console.

“The singularity will be moving out of alignment in fifteen seconds, Captain. I’m sorry I couldn’t show you more.”

Janeway swallowed. “You’ve shown us more than we expected, Lieutenant. Thank you. Janeway out.”

The transmission ended, and Seven put the forward sensors back on the main viewer. They all looked at each other in stunned silence before Janeway spoke again. “Mr. Neelix was prepared for our possible success. I believe the party will begin right about—” she checked her chronometer—“now.” The laughter broke the mood on the bridge and Janeway settled into her chair, her mind whirling with the ramifications of daily contact with the Alpha Quadrant and Starfleet. She hadn’t been alone since their first contact almost four months ago, but daily contact changed everything. Suddenly she had superiors again, on a regular check-in basis. And, judging by Admiral Paris’ comments, she had political responsibilities as well. It was ironic—after more than six years of longing for this, now she was wondering what the hell she was in for. She knew her command style had changed considerably over the years. It was a necessary response to their circumstances, had kept them alive and knit them together as a family—but was it anything that Starfleet would approve of? Good god, she hadn’t given any real thought to her career in ages; that kind of thinking tended to take a back seat when one was fighting for basic survival. Now it was staring her in the face, and she was assailed by doubts. There were a number of actions and decisions in her logs that could be interpreted unfavorably.

Then her thoughts drifted back to Phoebe’s message, when she’d warned Janeway about her celebrity status. If Starfleet wanted her on recruitment vids, then she had a lot of clout in her corner. And she wasn’t afraid to use it.

The next morning, in response to a communiqué that Admiral Paris had included in their first visual transmission, Janeway went to the conference room to receive her call in private. What she hadn’t expected
was the instruction that Lynne be standing by to take part when asked. What the hell did Starfleet brass want with Lynne?

While Lynne waited in the hall outside, Janeway took a position in front of the large monitor. Harry notified her of the incoming transmission not thirty seconds later, and she watched as the Starfleet logo gave way to an image of—Jesus, every single admiral in Starfleet, apparently. She felt her spine stiffen of its own accord.

Admiral Necheyev, her direct supervisor, spoke first. “Captain Janeway. It’s good to see you again.”

“Thank you, Admiral. It’s good to see you as well. All of you.”

Necheyev gave her a tight smile. “No captain in the history of Starfleet has ever been genuinely pleased to see a roomful of admirals. Are you trying to tell me you’re different?”

That question could mean any number of things. Janeway took the safe way out.

“I’ll admit the sight of so much brass is a little blinding, Admiral. But given that I haven’t seen any of it in six years, yes, it’s a pleasure to see all of you.”

Admiral Paris laughed easily. “It’s more than a pleasure to see you, Captain. We’ve been waiting a long time for this. Starfleet has had its share of bad news in the last several years; it’s nice to have something positive to work with. Let me introduce you to some of the people you may not recognize.”

In the end it was really just a public relations stunt. Janeway knew, by the easy and general questions they asked her, that this was all being recorded for release to Federation news outlets. They didn’t ask about the Borg alterations to the ship, her Maquis and Borg crew members, species 8472, or anything that could be considered remotely delicate. Instead, precious transmission time was wasted on how she felt about making live video contact with the Federation, how she’d held her crew together for the last six years, how morale was aboard Voyager these days…and her personal favorite, from an admiral she didn’t recognize: why hadn’t she changed over to the new uniforms? She informed him that energy was their most limiting resource, and refitting the entire crew with new uniforms wasn’t as high on her list as, say, replicating parts for the plasma relays. Then she smiled to defuse her answer and said, “We’re planning to celebrate our arrival in the
Alpha Quadrant by changing over to the new uniforms. Given that we’ve already covered forty-two thousand light years in a little over six Earth Standard years, I’m hopeful that we’ll be home before you change them again.”

That got her a laugh, and the next two minutes passed quickly. At the five-minute mark, Admiral Necheyev called a halt to the proceedings and, after bidding a formal farewell to Janeway and asking her to remain for her next caller, led the admirals out of the room. A bare second later an attractive blonde woman in civilian clothing stepped into view, and Janeway recognized Dr. Alison Necheyev. She kept her face blank, but inside she was reeling. This woman had just cleared out an entire roomful of admirals, and claimed half of the second-ever transgalactic comm link to herself. Janeway wasn’t sure “powerful” was a sufficient word to describe her.

“Hello, Captain Janeway. I’ve wanted to meet you for years.”

“Thank you, Dr. Necheyev,” said Janeway evenly.

Necheyev smiled. “You’ve done your homework. That doesn’t surprise me. My aunt speaks very highly of you, and she doesn’t waste praise on those who aren’t more than worthy.”

Janeway raised her eyebrows. “That’s a high compliment indeed. Thank you for sharing it.”

“You’re welcome. I’d love to speak with you further, but we have little time and there’s someone else I’d like to meet. Is Lynne Hamilton available?”

Janeway tapped her communicator. “Janeway to Hamilton. Come on in.”

The door opened instantly and Lynne joined her in front of the monitor. “Good morning, Dr. Necheyev,” she said.

“Ms. Hamilton, it’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m glad I needn’t waste time on explaining who I am, though you did rather ruin my surprise. You can imagine how intrigued the Hamilton Foundation was to learn of your presence on the updated crew roster.” She consulted a PADD. “But the roster doesn’t list your full name. What does the D stand for?”

“Delilah,” said Lynne. “I was named after my grandmother. When I was a little girl I loved that name, but in the sixth grade one of the boys in my class made fun of it, and I decided it was too old-fashioned. From that point on I went by my initial. And you don’t need to be subtle, Dr.
Necheyev; I fully expected some sort of test. Surely there’s more. My parents wouldn’t have made it that easy.”

Necheyev gave her a smile that Janeway thought might be real. “They didn’t. Though I’ve already made up my own mind. You haven’t changed much since you left your message on Earth.”

“What message?”

“This one.” Necheyev held up the PADD and played a few seconds of video, enough for Janeway to realize what she had.

Lynne went completely still.

“No, they didn’t destroy it,” said Necheyev. “They wanted it to be available as a means of identifying you.” She nodded to someone off screen. “Ms. Hamilton, I’m sending you a few files and I suggest that you read them carefully. Obviously you already know about the Foundation, and probably about your role in it, but there are a few details that may not be in your ship’s database. I firmly believe that Voyager will be home sooner rather than later, and you should be prepared.”

“Thank you,” said Lynne, her voice sounding thick. “In the meantime, I wanted to speak with you about the policy change. I don’t want to be responsible for that. I’d like you to reverse that decision.”

Necheyev looked at her sympathetically. “Your parents made that decision, and it can’t be reversed until you formally claim your position. You can’t do that until you’re physically here on Earth. So I’m afraid I can’t oblige you.” She looked back at Janeway. “I meant it when I said I’d like to speak with you further. Perhaps someday all three of us can sit down for lunch and what I’m sure would be a riveting conversation. The two of you must have some amazing stories to tell. And congratulations, by the way, on your marriage.”

Janeway wasn’t at all surprised that she knew about that. Anyone who could claim priority over most of the admirals in Starfleet would certainly be able to get her hands on the most recent Starfleet records. Since Lynne now held a formal position on the crew, Janeway had been obligated to report their marriage in the first transmission after their honeymoon.

“Thank you,” she said. “Lynne has brought a great deal of happiness into my life.” Out of the corner of her eye she could see Lynne turning to smile at her.

“And you’ve brought a great deal into hers,” said Necheyev. She held up the PADD again. “Ms. Hamilton, it’s not too many people who could
make a declaration of love that lasts for nearly four hundred years. Tell me, what do you know about modern physics?”

Lynne shook her head slightly, and Janeway knew she was thoroughly unsettled. “Nothing. My field was biology. Physical sciences make my head hurt.”

Necheyev actually laughed. “I strongly suggest you start studying. After all, you’re married to an expert.” She looked off screen. “Our time’s up. It truly has been a pleasure speaking with you both. I hope to meet you in person someday soon.”

“Goodbye, Dr. Necheyev,” said Janeway. Lynne echoed her, and a moment later the Starfleet logo filled the screen.

Lynne stumbled to the conference table and collapsed in the nearest chair. “Oh, my freaking god.”

Janeway knew she’d been thrown, but this was something more. “What’s wrong?”

“They have the PADD, Kathryn! My parents didn’t do what I asked them to do!”

“I’m not sure why that’s bothering you so much. They obviously protected it. PADDs weren’t invented until the 2350s.” She knew she was on the wrong track when an impatient look crossed Lynne’s face.

“How much trouble would I be in if proof existed that I violated the Temporal Prime Directive?”

Janeway sat down next to her. “I forgot about that.”

“How could…never mind. So is it bad?”

“If the Hamilton Foundation is aware of the original source of its corpus, they’re probably invested in keeping it quiet.” Janeway was thinking out loud. “If a Federation court found that original funding to be illegal, the ruling could result in the entire current corpus being forfeit. So it’s in the Foundation’s best interest to keep that little tidbit a deep, dark secret. I think you’re okay.”

Lynne looked at her, the hope painfully obvious. Then she dropped her head in her hands. “What a mess. If I’d had any idea this would happen, I’d never have done it. It seemed so simple at the time. And now I’m supposed to learn twenty-fourth century physics? So I can take over some giant foundation that gives grants for research I can’t even comprehend?”

It was a good time for a mini-lecture on the purpose of the Temporal Prime Directive, but Janeway was learning to separate the captain from
the wife. Lynne didn’t need a captain right now. “You did the best you could at the moment,” she said. “Besides, I think it was supposed to work out this way. You’ve already got the CEO of the Foundation on your side, so you’re ahead of the game as far as claiming your position goes. All things considered, this was a good conversation. And for the record, I have complete faith that you can catch up on current physics.”

Lynne lifted her head, regarded her very seriously for a few seconds, and then smiled. “She’s a pistol, isn’t she?”

Janeway narrowed her eyes. “How can you keep coming up with these things? Isn’t there a finite supply?”

“What? Oh. It’s a term to describe a certain kind of person. Usually a woman, now that I think about it. Someone with a formidable intellect and a forceful personality, who leaves you a little breathless after she talks to you. You’re pretty much the personification of the term. It also used to mean someone incredibly sexy, but I never thought of it that way. Though you’d fit that definition, too.”

“That’s good, because I don’t think I’d like it if you told me you thought Alison Necheyev was incredibly sexy.”

Lynne’s smile grew. “I’ll let that go without the obvious reply. But she is a little intimidating.”

“No, she’s a lot intimidating. You didn’t see what happened before she walked on screen. Here I was, making useless small talk with what looked like every admiral in Starfleet, and then Admiral Necheyev shooed them all out, telling me I had another caller waiting. Alison Necheyev, by herself, has as much or more power than a roomful of admirals. Enough power to take over half of the second transgalactic comm link in the known universe. Enough power to make me tread very carefully.”

“Jesus,” said Lynne. “And if I take over the Foundation…”

“She’ll be working for you.”

Lynne dropped her head in her hands again.
Alison Necheyev looked up from her PADD as the chair across from her was pulled out. “Hello, Aunt Alynna. Thank you for meeting me.”

Admiral Necheyev sat down and regarded her niece gravely. “It’s always a pleasure to have lunch with you, Alison. Though I’m fairly sure this lunch has a purpose besides catching up with family.”

Alison smiled. “To the point as usual. There are advantages to small talk, you know.”

“Rarely enough to make it worth my while.”

They got no further as the waiter, no doubt galvanized by Necheyev’s admiral bars, came over to take their order. When he left Alison said, “I see you have them trained here, too.”

“San Francisco waiters are born recognizing Starfleet insignia,” said the Admiral. “Training doesn’t appear to be necessary. You realize that your standing request to Admiral Paris for comm time with Lynne Hamilton exploded your little secret. He’s not a stupid man.”

“I never thought he was,” said Alison, taking the abrupt change of topic in stride. “Though I’m surprised you’re admitting it.”

The Admiral waved that off. “Why did you do it? I thought this was classified.”

“Do what?” said Alison innocently. Her aunt just stared at her, and she
stifled a smile. “I’ve revealed nothing, Aunt Alynna. The conversation with Ms. Hamilton took place in private, with only my personal assistant in attendance. If my request for comm time prompted some snooping around, well, that’s not really my problem.”

“You wanted him to snoop around.”

“Of course I did.”

“Which brings me back to my original question. You know I hate circular conversations. Get to the point.”

Verbal jousting with the Admiral just wasn’t very satisfying, thought Alison. “The point is that I felt it wise to take out an insurance policy.”

“Meaning you want Ms. Hamilton’s existence to be made public.”

“Not necessarily public. Just expanded a little. Specifically, into the Starfleet departments that are working on the faster-than-warp projects and the MIDAS lab, both of which are under Admiral Paris.”

The Admiral eyed her speculatively. “You’re worried.”

Alison had made a decision before inviting her aunt to lunch. She needed an ally, and there was no one she’d trust more than her aunt. The Admiral was a rigid Starfleet lifer, and her loyalty to fellow officers was unshakable. For all her gruff attitude, Alynna Necheyev would move heaven and earth to keep her people out of trouble.

“Yes, I am,” she said. “Aunt Alynna, I’d like to speak frankly with you. I don’t feel that I’m violating my promise of confidentiality at this point, since you figured everything out on your own.” She smiled slightly. “And now Starfleet knows, so it would seem that keeping everything a total secret is a bit like closing the bay doors after the shuttles are already out.”

Admiral Necheyev sat back in her chair. “I wondered how long you’d wait.”

“I’d have waited forever if I thought I could control this. But I can’t. We’ve just gotten in the new proposals for this fiscal year and there are some very promising ones. But I’ve never had the time to personally examine findings from every one of our grantees, and that’s not going to change. The board officers have directed me to send all theories and progress reports to Voyager on a quarterly basis at minimum; more if something particularly promising surfaces. That concerns me. Certainly there are some very good engineering minds on Voyager, but they might be tempted by their situation to utilize a good-looking concept without
examining it down to the last sub-variable. Which means they’re vulner-
able to a mousetrap.”

The Admiral nodded. “Mousetrap” was a Starfleet term, meaning a
tiny buried bit of code or other form of sabotage, too small to detect
unless one was actively searching for it. And sometimes not even then.

“I agree,” she said. “Janeway is a risk-taker. It’s what makes her an
excellent captain, but in this case it might lead her to a disastrous
decision.”

“And I don’t have any way of warning her directly, even if I had some-
thing concrete to go on. We only have one means of communication with
Voyager, and it’s easily monitored by anyone who knows how. That’s why I
need help. I’ve already got Admiral Paris curious, but I don’t know if he’ll
see as far ahead as you already have. I wondered if you could nudge him in
the right direction.”

“Meaning…”

“Meaning I need some personnel assigned to going through those
reports with a microscanner before they go to Voyager. I’ll do what I can,
but I have a Foundation to run and I just don’t have the kind of time it
would take. A team of crack engineers and theorists would. Unfortunately,
I don’t employ too many of those.”

“You want me to ‘nudge’ Paris into reassigning an entire team?”

Alison gave her aunt an open look of dismay. “You sound doubtful. Are
you telling me you don’t have the power?”

The Admiral’s eyes narrowed. “That kind of blatant manipulation may
work on others, Alison. It doesn’t work on me.”

“Do I at least get points for effort?”

Admiral Necheyev stared for a moment, then gave a bark of laughter.
“Sometimes I look at you and you’re still eight years old, trying to impress
me any way you could. Yes, I’ll give you points for effort. And for giving
me a good laugh, which I desperately needed after spending a morning
engaging in stupefying banter with every over-promoted desk jockey in
Starfleet.”

Alison winced in sympathy. “Better you than me. Why do all admirals
gain weight once they get promoted, anyway? Yourself excepted, of
course.”

The Admiral snorted. “Because they think they’re past the point of
climbing through Jeffries tubes, that’s why.”
Alison smiled, then hit her aunt with the real firepower. “There’s something else you need to know. The first thing Ms. Hamilton said to me, after answering my little test question, was to request that I reverse the Foundation’s policy change. Unfortunately, she has no official power until she claims her legacy, so her request carries no weight right now. But what you have on that ship is a politically naïve woman who married a Starfleet captain—a captain who in no way could be considered naïve. Obviously Captain Janeway influenced that request.” She paused, letting that sink in before she delivered the final bomb.

“Ms. Hamilton will do whatever Captain Janeway asks her to. And Captain Janeway is under your direct supervision. If Voyager returns soon, I would imagine that Starfleet and the Federation would be very pleased at the rapid renewal of funds. But if they don’t return, the current funding situation will be static for one hundred years. It can’t be changed.”

The Admiral looked at her from under lowered brows. “I take it back. You’ve learned a lot about manipulation.”

“I’m just telling you the situation as I see it.”

Her aunt nodded. “And I appreciate your forthrightness. It’s preferable to people snuffling around, afraid to tell me something I might not want to hear. I’ll do what I can. Provided that you keep an open channel with me.”

“I will. Thank you.”

They looked up as their waiter arrived, having apparently set a speed record in getting their drinks and appetizers. Alison had dined at this restaurant numerous times, and though the food was excellent, the service was fashionably slow.

The waiter poured their wines and spent some time bowing and scraping before finally leaving them alone. Alison scooped up the seasoned butter for which the restaurant was justifiably famous and began slathering it on fresh, steaming bread. “I’ll have to take you out to lunch more often,” she said. “This was by far the fastest service I’ve ever gotten.”

“The uniform is good for a few things,” agreed the Admiral.

They chewed in silence for a few minutes, simply appreciating the fine food and the view. Across the bay, the buildings of Starfleet Headquarters shone a brilliant white as they caught the spring sunshine. Alison gazed at them, remembering her conversation with the captain who had recently...
been featured in so many newsvids. And Lynne Hamilton, who didn’t look or behave anything like a woman who could go out and buy a planet if she wanted to. That woman was an innocent; Alison had determined that in the first few seconds. Bringing her into the Foundation cold would be like throwing a gold latinum bar into a room full of Ferengis.

“Captain Janeway looked good, didn’t she?” she asked.

The Admiral nodded. “She’s changed. Of course, I’d expect that after being out there on her own for six years. But I think she’s changed for the better. She used to be a bit like you, trying her damnedest to impress me. Now I get the feeling she wouldn’t give a tribble’s ass whether I was impressed with her or not. And she handled that ridiculous press stunt very smoothly. She’s become quite the politician.”

“You prefer your captains not to care whether or not they impress you?”

“Only the ones I have high hopes for.”

“So you have high hopes for Captain Janeway.”

“I believe that Janeway has an admiralship waiting for her if she gets home in the near future. And if she plays her cards right.”

Alison took a thoughtful bite. “I don’t think she said more than twenty words to me during our conversation,” she said after she’d swallowed. “But watching her body language and her attitude convinced me that she knows how to play her cards.”

They drifted into other topics as they finished their meal and enjoyed their cups of fresh-ground coffee. But for Alison, thoughts of Voyager and the two women she’d just met were always at the forefront of her mind.

“I can’t imagine going six years without this,” she said, lifting her cup. “Replicated coffee just isn’t the same.”

Though it was a non-sequitur, the Admiral understood immediately. “And Janeway’s an addict,” she said. “Though if I know her, she’s figured out some way to grow it on board. I can picture her converting an entire cargo bay to a coffee hydroponics lab.”

“Hopefully she started some time ago, then. It takes four years for the first beans.”

“I suspect,” said the Admiral, “that one of the things Janeway’s learned out there is patience.”
For the next few weeks, Voyager was swept up in the excitement of daily contact with home. Those who had drawn low numbers in the comm time lottery were the object of countless offers from those with high numbers, and there was quite a bit of bartering. Janeway herself tracked down the holders of comm time on Lynne’s birthday, one of whom was Crewman Tal Celes. She didn’t think she’d have much of problem with this particular negotiation, since her own number was lower than that of her target.

“Crewman Celes,” she said as she stepped into a secondary lab on deck eight.

Celes leapt to attention. “Captain!”

Despite their having been stranded for over six years, Starfleet protocol and Janeway’s own tendency toward formality among the lower ranks meant that her rank still intimidated some of Voyager’s crew. She’d made an effort in the last year to reduce some of that intimidation factor, but Tal Celes had never been receptive.

“Relax, I'm not here to inspect your work,” she said, deliberately softening her own stance. “I just wondered if I might talk you into a little comm time trade.”

Celes had the expressive face common to Bajorans, and the confusion
that flashed across it was plain to see. “Um, Captain, I think you might have been misinformed. My time slot isn’t for another six weeks.”

“And mine is next week. Interested?”

Her brows drew together. “I don’t understand. Why would you give up your time?” Comprehension dawned. “Oh, that’s right. You get two minutes every day. I guess a three-minute slot doesn’t mean as much to you as it does to the rest of us.”

For a moment Janeway was taken aback. “Is that what the crew thinks? Celes, for two minutes each day I get a rapid-fire burst of questions and orders from Starfleet. There’s nothing remotely personal about it. I want to talk to my family as much as any of you, and just like you I have to wait for my allotted time.”

“I’m so sorry, Captain, that was…I mean, I was…”

“Don’t worry about it. But I hope you’ll correct that impression if you hear other crew discussing it.”

“I will, believe me. But I still don’t understand why you’d give up an early slot.”

Janeway leaned toward her and lowered her voice. “Because it’s Lynne’s birthday. I want to surprise her with a call home.”

“Ohhhhh.” Celes’ eyes were round. Then she smiled, the first natural smile Janeway had ever seen on her. It changed her face completely. “That’s so sweet.”

“Does that mean you’ll trade with me?”

“Of course, Captain! Thank you! I’d love to call my folks five weeks earlier.”

“I’m the one who should be thanking you. And Celes? Will you keep this completely confidential?”

“Oh yes, absolutely. You can count on me.”

“Thank you. Now, let me see what you’ve been working on.”

Celes’ body snapped erect once more. “Uh, okay, I’m—”

Janeway held up her hand and gave her a grin. “I’m just teasing you. This was a personal visit. I really am grateful to you.”

With a final nod she left, barely able to suppress her amusement at the look on Celes’ face. That was bad, Katie. You should be ashamed of yourself.

She wasn’t.
The day before Tom’s scheduled comm time, Janeway called him into her ready room for a private conference. He appeared moments later, an easy smile on his face. “Something I can do for you, Captain?”

She leaned back in her chair. “Yes, actually. I hear you’re calling your father tomorrow.”

“That’s right.”

“I can’t tell you how pleased I am to hear that, Tom. He’s very proud of you.”

Tom ducked his head. “We’ve been sending messages back and forth since the first connection. He actually said that to me in one of them. I never thought I’d hear that from him.”

“Well, you’ve worked hard for it.” She pulled a small box out of her desk drawer. “I thought you might want this before you see him face-to-face tomorrow.”

Tom looked at her, surprise and anticipation written all over his face. He recognized the box.

“Well, are you going to open it?” Rarely had she seen him at a loss for words.

Slowly, he opened the box and took out the full lieutenant’s pip. Janeway got up from her chair and came around the desk.

“There were some people who thought I was insane for bringing you onto my crew,” she said. “They took great delight in telling me how you were going to fail; that you didn’t have what it took to be a good officer. I’ve taken great delight myself in notifying those same people of your accomplishments and this promotion. You’ve had a rocky road, Tom, but I’m proud of you too. You’ve become everything I hoped you would be. May I?” She held out her hand.

His cocky grin for once absent, Tom reverently placed the pip in her palm.

“Computer, note in log. Due to his hard work in overcoming prior behaviors and limitations, his excellent performance of duty, his growth within his position and his numerous contributions to keeping this ship in one piece, I am promoting Lieutenant Junior Grade Tom Paris to full Lieutenant, with all of the privileges that rank implies. Authorization Janeway zed five-one-nine-seven.”

“So noted.”

Janeway pulled Tom’s dark pip off his collar and replaced it with the
new gold one, smoothing down the fabric across his shoulders when she
was done. “Looks good on you, Tom.”

“Thank you, Captain.” There was an earnestness to his expression that
she didn’t often see. “I’ve always been grateful to you for taking a chance
on me. If it hadn’t been for you, I’d be either drunk in a gutter somewhere
or hiring myself out to the highest bidder for flight plans that don’t pass
official scrutiny. Meeting you and getting stranded out here is the best
thing that ever happened to me, and I’m not sorry you made the decision
to destroy the Caretaker’s array. Not for a minute.”

“I appreciate that, Tom. That decision certainly had some unexpected
consequences. Some better than others.”

“Most better than others. Now that we have a link to the Alpha Quad-
rant, we’re in the history books. B’Elanna and I were just talking about
how few people today get the chance to explore truly new territory—
Starfleet has been doing less exploration and more policing for a long time
now. But us, we’re out here doing what Starfleet was created for originally.
We’re the ones on the edge, seeing things no one else has ever seen
before, and sending the data back home. We’re making a big difference. I
wouldn’t trade this for anything, and there are a lot of people who agree
with me.”

“I hadn’t thought about the history books,” said Janeway, trying to
lighten the mood.

“Well, you should. Because you’re already in them, Captain.” His grin
reappeared. “Just think, people are probably already using Voyager
programs in the holosuites, imagining themselves to be intrepid explorers
and living exciting lives totally removed from their humdrum reality.” He
leaned toward her. “And they’re probably all playing you. It used to be
Captain Proton. Now it will be Captain Janeway.”

“God forbid!” Janeway was horrified at the thought.

Tom laughed. “Are you sure you want to get home, Captain?”

“I think you need to leave now, Lieutenant Paris, before you give me
nightmares.”

He snapped to attention. “Yes, ma’am, Captain Pro—I mean, Captain
Janeway.”

She pointed. “Out.”

He flashed her another grin and sauntered toward the door. Just before
entering the sensor range he stopped and turned back. “Captain, thank you. For believing in me.”

“You’re welcome, Tom.”

When the door shut behind him, she collapsed into her chair. “Maybe I don’t want to get home.”

THAT NIGHT SEVEN dropped by for a visit. Janeway was glad for her company; she hadn’t seen much of Seven since returning from her honeymoon. It seemed that Seven and Revi had become an inseparable team, despite Revi’s inability to be what Seven wanted. Janeway marveled at Seven’s strength; she could only imagine how difficult it would have been for her if Lynne had insisted on remaining friends. They’d be friends, certainly, but Concealing her emotions would have been a strain. Concealing those emotions in a situation like Seven’s, where her thoughts were literally open for reading by the very person causing them, must surely be exponentially worse.

After as much small talk as Seven could tolerate—she was getting better at it, but Janeway knew she still considered it inefficient—she looked around the quarters and asked, “Where is Lynne?”

“In the holodeck. Dr. Necheyev sent her an interactive program designed to teach physics concepts to grammar school students, so she’s trying it out.”

“That seems beneath her intellectual abilities.”

“Not really. Lynne’s an extremely intelligent woman, but she’s four hundred years behind in the field. Starting her out at the university level would be like asking you to understand the nuances of Human relationships and emotions the day after I severed you from the Collective. You simply didn’t have the ability to comprehend them at that time.”

Seven tilted her head. “I had not considered how foreign the physical laws of the universe might seem to her.”

“Foreign is a perfect word for it. She told me today that this universe isn’t the same one she grew up in.”

“But that is in—” Seven stopped. “She wasn’t being literal. I understand how she must feel. It’s…difficult to be surrounded by individuals
who appear to have a perfect understanding of concepts that seem incomprehensible.”

“Hence the entry-level program.”

“I believe she will have a far easier time understanding physics than I did understanding Human relationships and emotions. Physical laws are logical.”

“To you and me, certainly. But I’m not sure Lynne thinks that way. Not everyone gets physics, Seven. There are people on this ship who don’t have the slightest idea how warp engines or replicators work. Nor do they care, as long as they do work.”

“That concept I find incomprehensible.”

Janeway laughed. “I’ve missed our talks, Seven.”

Seven looked slightly uncomfortable. “I’ve been…distracted.”

“I know. Don’t worry about it. I’m just enjoying your company at the moment.”

“Thank you, Kathryn. I’m enjoying yours as well. However, I must admit that I came here to ask you for a favor.”

“If it’s in my power, I’ll do what I can. What is it?”

“I would like you to accompany me when I call my aunt.”

Well, that was unexpected.

“I’d be happy to, though I admit to being a little surprised. Wouldn’t Revi be a more obvious choice for you?”

“Revi is a friend. In this instance, I feel that a family member would be more appropriate.”

God, Seven always did have the ability to cut right through to her heart. “Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to be there for you as your family,” said Janeway. “Are you worried about how your aunt will react?”

“To some degree,” admitted Seven. “However, I’m more concerned about my own ability to maintain a meaningful conversation for three entire minutes with an individual who is a stranger to me, and yet will no doubt expect me to consider her as family. She is not.”

“It’s a unique situation,” agreed Janeway. “I understand your trepidation, and I’ll do my best to make it go smoothly.”

“Thank you,” said Seven with obvious relief.

But something was bothering Janeway. “Seven…before the wedding, you called Revi family. Just now you called her a friend. Are you…okay?”
She didn’t really know how to ask, especially when Revi might be listening in.

“If you’re referring to the relationship between Revi and myself, it’s progressing smoothly. If you’re referring to my emotional well-being in this situation, I am as well as can be expected. Nothing has changed between us since Revi declined my offer of a monogamous relationship.”

The forthright answer told Janeway that Revi was regenerating. Since the wedding, Seven had continued to schedule her regeneration times separately from Revi’s. It was the only outward sign of their altered status.

“I’m sorry, Seven. I know it must be difficult for you.”

“I’m adapting.”

Janeway looked at her steadily, waiting for that Borg impassiveness to give way to real feeling. She was certain Seven was just putting up a good front.

She was right. Seven sighed and relaxed her erect posture slightly. “You’re correct, it’s extremely difficult. I’ve become adept at compartmentalizing my thoughts and still more adept at blocking my emotions. Neither is a skill I wished to acquire, and I hope that someday neither will be necessary. But it has already been two months and as yet I see no difference in Revi’s mind.”

“Don’t give up hope. Two months isn’t long considering all the changes that have happened in her life. Honestly, she’s come along faster than I expected in terms of professional development. Two months ago she didn’t even want to be called ‘Doctor,’ and now she’s CMO. I think the personal changes will come with time.”

“My trust in your insight, and Lynne’s, is what enables me to tolerate the situation,” said Seven. “I do hope, however, that the time you speak of refers to months and not years.”

“It has to, Seven.” If it doesn’t, I’ll be forced to knock some sense into that woman myself. “But I’m curious: if you don’t want to compartmentalize your thoughts or block your emotions, why don’t you just ask Revi to tune out your frequency?”

“Because,” said Seven sadly, “I can’t bear the silence. Though her regeneration periods provide me with a respite from guarding my own thoughts so carefully, the sense of relief lasts for only a short time before I begin to...crave the contact. Hearing her in my mind is a requirement for
my mental health, and guarding my thoughts is an acceptable price to pay.”

Janeway put a gentle hand on Seven’s arm and nodded. There wasn’t anything she could say to that. Seven was in a hard place, and there was nothing either of them could do about it.

After a pause, they resumed their conversation on other topics, and Seven stayed for another hour before gracefully taking her leave. Janeway watched her go, indulging herself in thoughts of how far Seven had come in just a few months. She could take little credit for it, but that didn’t stop her from feeling a great sense of pride. Now if Revi would only let herself trust—that woman had no idea what she was passing up. *But nothing blinds so much as fear,* she thought.

Soon after Seven’s departure, Lynne came home.

“Hi, love,” she said, walking in and flopping down on the couch. “God, my brain hurts.”

“How did it go?” asked Janeway sympathetically.

“Painfully slow. It’s a little humiliating to be struggling with a *grammar* school program, for god’s sake. But I really like the program itself—it’s fascinating. I can barely hang on to the concepts, but they intrigue the hell out of me. I just wish I could wrap my brain around them more easily.”

“You’ll get there.” Janeway had total faith in her partner.

“Yes, but will I get there before the twenty-fifth century?” Lynne bounced up again and headed for the replicator. “I need a little unwinding time. Do you mind?”

“No, go ahead.” There had been adjustments to make when Lynne moved in, and one of them had to do with her occasional need to unwind—which usually involved loud music. It could be jarring when Janeway just wanted a quiet evening of reading, but she had let Lynne do whatever she wanted, until the night that it got to be too much. Then she’d snapped in a rather explosive manner, startling the hell out of Lynne, who’d had no idea that she had any issues whatsoever with the music. That had prompted a discussion on being honest with each other regarding needs and space issues, and Lynne had replicated a set of earbuds. Now she asked before turning on her music, and if Janeway wanted peace she’d say so. Lynne would put in the earbuds and they were both happy—to a degree. Now the problem was that with the earbuds in, Lynne was lost to the world, and Janeway sometimes felt that she might
as well not even be in the same room. She much preferred having Lynne really \textit{with} her. Like all compromises, it wasn’t entirely satisfactory.

Tonight she shared Lynne’s mood for some music, and was curious to see what she’d come up with. They still hadn’t gotten through all of the music Lynne had brought back from Earth.

“Who’s it going to be this time?” she asked.

Lynne turned away from the replicator with a drink in her hand.

“Tonight I’m in the mood for Joe Cocker.”

“A new one. Genre?”

“Hard drivin’ blues, baby! Computer, play ‘The Best of Joe Cocker.’”

Janeway listened to a raspy male voice with only a piano accompaniment, knowing from the way Lynne stood in the middle of the living room that a beat would be coming soon. Sure enough, in came a pounding rhythm and Lynne began dancing.

“His voice sounds like he’s been drinking a liter of whiskey a day,” called Janeway.

“Yeah! Isn’t it great? That’s why I love him.” Lynne twirled and gyrated, holding her drink and somehow never spilling a drop, while Janeway sat back and enjoyed the view. When the first song ended, Lynne said, “Now this next one is the perfect strip tease song.”

The rhythm was quite a bit slower, a sensual beat that invited the hips to move with it. And then Janeway realized that the singer was giving explicit instructions.

\textit{Baby take off your coat...real slow...baby take off your shoes...I’ll take your shoes...baby take off your dress...yes, yes, yes...you can leave your hat on...}

Unable to resist the lure of Lynne’s movements, Janeway was soon right behind her, pulling their bodies together as they danced. By the end of the song they were face to face, and she took the opportunity to pluck Lynne’s drink out of her hand. Perhaps a third of it was left, which she dispatched in a few swallows, enjoying the raised eyebrow that earned her. She set the glass on the coffee table and drew Lynne’s head down for a heated kiss.

“You’re right,” she agreed when they broke for air. “It is a perfect strip song. So when are you going to perform it for me?”

“Me, strip?” Lynne looked incredulous. “Not my style. Not in this lifetime.”

“Well, a girl can dream.”
Lynne laughed, tugging her in by the hips, and they began slow dancing to the next song.

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TWO DAYS LATER, Tom Paris walked into Janeway’s ready room and made the request she’d expected sooner or later—just not from him. She looked at him, stunned.

“I’d be delighted. It would be my honor. But if I can ask—when the hell did this happen? I never had an inkling.”

“Neither did B’Elanna,” said Tom. “I’d been thinking about it for a while, but it never really got past that stage. Then you promoted me, and I talked to my dad for the first time, and all of a sudden I felt like I had something to offer her.”

Janeway wanted to refute it, to say that he’d always had something to offer, but instead she simply nodded. “Then I guess I gave you that promotion just in time. So when’s the big day?”

“We’ve set it for two months from now. I’d be happy to do it today, but B’Elanna said she wanted me to get used to the idea of an engagement before we rushed into the marriage itself. I’ve been wanting to do this for a while, so I hardly think I’ll change my mind—but I figured what she’s really saying is that she needs the time to get used to it. And I’m okay with that.”

Janeway stared at the man who had once been such a brash, arrogant jerk. His understanding of B’Elanna and graceful acceptance of her needs spoke volumes for his maturity.

“Tom,” she said, “I think you’re going to make a great husband. And B’Elanna’s a lucky woman. I’m really looking forward to this. So is it going to be in Sandrine’s?”

Tom rolled his eyes. “Like B’Elanna would ever let us get married in a pool hall. No, she wants to design a special holoprogram. It’ll be a traditional Terran wedding, though. I already asked, but she’s not interested in incorporating any Klingon traditions.”

“That’s probably good for you.”

Tom grinned. “Yeah, I wasn’t really looking forward to slicing my palm open and mixing our blood.”

“I’ve always wondered about that. Why the palm?” Janeway mused.
“Why the most-used part of the entire body? Why not something like, say, the forearm, that you won’t keep re-opening every time you turn around? I mean, with modern regenerators it doesn’t really matter, but that tradition originated at a time when people really needed their hands intact to grip swords or bat’leths.”

“I guess it’s that warrior mentality—let’s hurt ourselves where it’s going to cause the most trouble.”

They shared a smile, and Janeway impulsively got up from her chair and came around her desk to hug her helmsman. “I’m so happy for you. And so proud of you.”

He hugged her back enthusiastically. “Thanks, Captain.” When they parted he said, “Just to be really clear on this—B’Elanna and I aren’t asking you to officiate because you’re the captain. We’re asking you because we can’t imagine anyone else marrying us.”

“Thank you,” she said. “That means a lot to me.”

When he’d left and she was once again alone in her ready room, her thoughts turned to the long-term outlook for her crew. It was happening, as she’d known it would—they were starting to pair off. She was only surprised that it had taken this long after her own wedding for the first request to hit her desk. She knew of several other serious relationships that were probably heading toward this step as well. Crewman Slater, after receiving what Lynne had referred to as a “Dear Janeway” letter in their first real mail call, had rebounded right into Jennifer Delaney’s arms. She’d been of the opinion that it would last about as long as Delaney’s previous dalliances, but Lynne had disagreed.

“They’ve had an unspoken attraction going for a long time,” she’d said. “They never acted on it because Slater was engaged. Now he’s not, and even though he’s hurting, I think it’s the best thing that could have happened for both of them. It looks like the real thing to me.”

And apparently it was, because at two months it had already lasted longer than most of Delaney’s flings, and Janeway had never seen the woman so serious about anyone. Slater’s partner in crime, Crewman Johnson, had really startled her by showing up at one of Neelix’s parties holding Mortimer Harren’s hand. She’d actually stared at them before Lynne’s elbow in her ribs had jolted her back.

“Kathryn! Stop staring.”

Janeway had turned to her wife in complete astonishment. “Mortimer
**Harren?** The man who would rather theorize about life than live it? The man with five degrees in theoretical cosmology and not the slightest clue about how to be a Human being? What the hell is Johnson doing with him?"

“Loving him, I’d guess. Mortimer may be an asshole to the rest of us, but apparently he’s a completely different man with Johnson.”

“Jesus god, he must be.”

Lynne had laughed, taking Janeway’s hand in her own. “You know, there are almost certainly people on this ship who can’t imagine how different you are with me.”

“That’s not the same thing at all.”

Lynne had given her a look that plainly conveyed her amused disbelief, and Janeway had been forced to concede that it was at least *remotely* possible that Mortimer Harren had a Human, loving side she’d just never seen before. But only remotely.

The other coupling that had surprised her at first was Harry Kim and Tal Celes. After seeing them at Sandrine’s, sitting very close together and displaying unmistakable body language, she’d given it some thought and decided that perhaps it wasn’t so hard to believe after all. Two more earnest, eager-to-please individuals did not exist; they were practically made for each other. She sincerely hoped it worked out; they both deserved to be happy. Though she couldn’t imagine what it might be like when they argued—they’d probably fall over each other trying to be the first to apologize.

And now the first actual wedding was on her calendar. The first wedding, she suddenly realized, that would very likely result in children. She walked to the upper level and got a cup of coffee from the replicator, tapping it with her fingers while she stared out the viewport. For so long she’d been focused solely on getting *Voyager* home, but as of right now she needed to begin thinking in a different way. The unavoidable fact was that she might end up captaining a multigenerational ship. And that would require an entirely new set of guidelines and objectives, which should be carefully thought out and firmly in place before they were required.

She picked up a PADD from her coffee table and made a few entries. *One more thing to add to the docket,* she thought with a sigh. *Is it ever going to end?*
The bridge crew watched the main viewer anxiously, waiting for their first good look at the mystery ship. Seven had reported it on long range sensors the previous day, and Harry had then detected a communications buoy set near the ship. Its message had prompted a senior staff meeting. The ship was obviously not moving and had sustained damage, but the buoy was not a distress call. It was a warning that the ship was under medical quarantine and should not be approached. All attempts at contact had gone unanswered.

The consensus at the staff meeting was unanimous. Despite the fact that the quarantined crew had neither asked for assistance nor returned their hails, they would approach and offer what aid they could. Unsurprisingly, Revi in particular had been adamant about their obligation to assist, even in the absence of a distress call. “There could be any number of reasons why they haven’t put out a distress call,” she said. “They may not be able to.”

“Or it could be a trap,” said Chakotay.

“Unlikely,” Tuvok said. “Most traps do not warn potential victims to stay away.”

Even at warp seven point five it had taken nearly twenty hours to reach the ship, and they came out of warp right next to the warning buoy. Their
view of the ship confirmed its damage; it had obviously been through a fight and come out on the wrong end.

“Mr. Kim, try another hail,” said Janeway. And this time, perhaps because of the short range, it worked.

“They’re answering, Captain.”

“Put it on.”

A short, bald humanoid appeared on screen. “Please do not attack,” he said nervously. “We wish only to die in peace.”

“I’m Captain Kathryn Janeway of the Federation starship Voyager,” said Janeway. “We are not here to harm you. If you’re willing, we’d like to offer medical assistance.”

The alien bowed his head. “I thank you for your peaceful intentions, but you would be wise to obey the warning buoy. We are beyond any aid, and if the Visconi find you here they will not be pleased.”

“Who are the Visconi?”

The alien looked up again. “You are not from this area.”

“No. We’re a long way from home. Perhaps you can tell us what’s happening in this region.”

What was happening, it turned out, was that they’d entered a war zone.

B’Elanna looked up when the transporter doors opened. Doctor Sandovhar was on time and ready, a good start to their first away mission together.

“Good afternoon, Lieutenant Torres. Ready for some reassembly?”

“Reassembly?”

“Sure. You do the engines, I’ll do the bodies.”

“You’re not much for formality, are you, Doctor?” asked B’Elanna as they stepped up to the transporter pad.

“Nope. Had enough of it to last more than a lifetime. Now I revel in Human informality.” Sandovhar smiled at her before looking back at the operator’s console. “Energize.”

The transporter room faded away, to be replaced with a much darker, much more disorganized room that appeared to pass for a bridge.

Two of the aliens, which they now knew were called Arnett, were
waiting for them. Like the rest of their shipmates, they were short, bald and covered in spots. Except the spots weren’t natural, according to the information they’d received during earlier communications. The people aboard this ship were refugees from a war that was raging in this sector, and had been attacked by the Visconi, an aggressive species currently attempting a total takeover of the sector. The Visconi used a combination of energy and biological weaponry, and the spots were the dismal evidence of their work. The ship was reparable, but the Arnett were dying.

As the room solidified, B’Elanna could see the Arnett edging away from them. Given what they’d experienced, she could understand a certain amount of caution. But before she could greet their hosts, one of them pointed a clawlike hand at Sandovhar.

“Siglis preserve us! They’ve sent a Borg to end our misery!”

B’Elanna frowned, looking first at the Arnett and then at Sandovhar, who had gone very still.

“Oh, for Kahless’ sake,” she snapped. “That’s Doctor Sandovhar, and she’s no more Borg than you or I. She’s here to help.”

Sandovhar found her voice. “I’m sorry if my appearance disturbs you,” she said evenly. “My name is Doctor Revi Sandovhar, and I’m the Chief Medical Officer of Voyager. I’ve studied the records you sent over, and I believe I can cure your plague.”

The Arnett lowered his arm. “But you…you are not Borg?”

“I escaped from the Borg,” said Sandovhar. “I’m not one of them.”

He came closer, peering up at her. Sandovhar wasn’t a tall woman, but she towered over this man by a good seven centimeters. “No,” he said after a careful study, which she bore in silence. “I can see you are not. Please forgive my foolish error. We have been through much, and are not inclined to trust.” He held out his hand, which had two fused fingers and an opposable digit. “I am Tuness, first healer of the New Hope. If you will come with me, I’ll take you to our medical unit.”

Sandovhar looked at B’Elanna. “Good luck with the engines,” she said.

B’Elanna nodded. “You too. I mean, good luck with your work.”

“Don’t need it,” said Sandovhar, indicating her host. “The Arnett already did all the hard work. I’m just doing cleanup.”

Tuness bobbed his head and led Sandovhar out of the room, while B’Elanna looked after them in some surprise. That was a different attitude than she was used to from a doctor. Between this and the unforgettable
night in Sandrine’s, when Sandovhar had beaten the pants off Captain Janeway, she was realizing that there was more to their CMO than met the eye.

The remaining Arnett stepped forward importantly. “I am Dunott, first engineer,” he said. “Please accept our greatest thanks for your assistance. Even if you cannot repair our engines, we are grateful to you for your kindness.”

“You’re welcome,” said B’Elanna, who hated these inevitable meet-and-greet moments and just wanted to get on with it. “It’s part of our mission to offer assistance to those in need. If you’ll show me to your engine room, I can assess the damage and see what needs to be done.”

“Of course,” said Dunott. “If you will follow me?” He turned and led B’Elanna to a door in the opposite wall of that which Sandovhar and her escort had departed through. They stepped through into a cramped corridor, and B’Elanna gave a moment of thanks that the Arnett had designed their ship with high ceilings. As it was, the top of her head was only a few centimeters from the ceiling. She thought about Lynne, Seven or Tuvok trying to walk through here and had to stifle a snicker. They’d be bent over like crones.

She followed Dunott through a long, twisting series of corridors, finally ending in front of a pair of doors that opened vertically. She hated that kind of mechanism; it always made her think of a guillotine. When she stepped through it, she found herself in a cramped engine room that was plainly designed for small people with small hands. If she needed any assistance on this project, she’d have to rule out at least four of her staff right off the bat. They’d never fit.

She turned to Dunott. Standard protocol dictated that she explain what she was going to do before doing it. She was, after all, a guest on this ship.

“I’m going to scan your engines,” she said. “It’s part of the damage assessment process.” Dunott nodded and watched in fascination as she pulled out her engineering tricorder, immediately noting the dangerously unstable magnetic constrictors. Within five minutes she knew that there were several hours of work here, but it could be done. Folding the tricorder, she turned back to an expectant Dunott. “We can repair your engines,” she said. “It will take some time, however, and I’ll need to bring two additional staff as well as supplies.”
Dunott stared at her silently before realizing that she was asking his permission. “Of course!” he said. “Please, bring whatever you need.”

She nodded and tapped her communicator. “Torres to Voyager.”

“What’s the verdict, Lieutenant?” Janeway asked.

“We’re looking at six hours with two more staff to repair the engines,” she said. “But I don’t foresee any problems.”

“Excellent. Dr. Sandovhar reports that she expects to have a medical solution in another three hours, so it looks like we’ll have the New Hope back on course in no time. Bring over whatever and whoever you need, and give me hourly updates.”

“Acknowledged. Torres out.” Three hours? Sandovhar worked fast. There had been some mutterings when Janeway had announced her promotion, but it was plainly obvious that this woman knew what she was doing. The Doctor hadn’t been happy about his demotion, and had advertised that fact to whomever would listen, but B’Elanna was secretly happy to have a replacement for him. She’d repaired the Doctor’s holomatrix and programming files enough times to know just how fine the line was between a working doctor and a useful but static collection of medical files. Besides, Sandovhar didn’t seem to share the Doctor’s sarcastic personality, or his god complex.

Dunott was looking at her in wonderment. “Your doctor can cure us?”

“If she says she can, then she can,” said B’Elanna.

“And you can get us moving again in only six hours?”

“Yes,” she said. “You took some bad hits, but none of the damage is permanent.”

He seemed to be overwhelmed. “We will be grateful to you until Siglis returns for us,” he began, and B’Elanna knew he was starting in on some long-winded profession of appreciation. She cut him short.

“We’re happy to help out,” she said. “And the sooner I get started, the sooner you’ll be up and running. If you don’t mind, I need to start bringing over some staff.”

“Of course,” he said, showing no signs of moving, and B’Elanna stifled a sigh. It was going to get crowded in here.

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Janeway sat in her chair, watching the unchanging scene on the main view screen. Both B’Elanna and Revi had reported in, and everything
was moving right along; ahead of schedule, even. So far the away mission was an unqualified success. She just hoped they could wrap up and move out before any Visconi ships detected them, since defending both themselves and a crippled ship wasn’t anything she had on her To Do list today.

“Sandovhar to Voyager.”

“Go ahead, Doctor,” said Janeway.

“I have the biological samples I need, Captain. One to beam back, directly to sickbay.”

“Acknowledged.” Janeway nodded at Harry Kim to initialize the transport. “Chakotay, I’m going to sickbay. You have the bridge.”

She found Revi and the Doctor both huddled over a microscope. “That configuration won’t work,” the Doctor was saying. “We need to resequence the proteins.”

“The configuration is wrong,” agreed Revi, “but the proteins aren’t the problem.”

“How’s it going?” asked Janeway.

“We’re working on adapting a cure to the physiology of the Arnett,” said Revi, straightening up. “It should be fairly straightforward.”

“Once we resequence the proteins,” added the Doctor.

“The proteins are exactly what they should be,” said Revi evenly. “I don’t waste time fixing what isn’t broken, Doctor.”

“I disagree. If you would—”

“Doctor,” interrupted Revi, “if you would look a little more closely at the reaction, you’d see that it’s the oxidizing agent that’s holding up the process.”

Grumbling to himself, the Doctor sat down and pulled up the image on the scope. Revi smiled at Janeway. “Nice to see a friendly face in sickbay, Captain.”

Janeway didn’t miss her meaning, but Revi was in charge here. Unless she specifically asked for help with her staff, she was on her own. “Nothing’s happening on the bridge, so I thought I’d go to where the action was,” she said.

“Well, there’s no action here, Captain,” the Doctor observed acidly. “And there won’t be until our CMO listens for a change instead of dictating.” His emphasis on Revi’s title couldn’t be missed.

“Doctor, you might want to watch the insubordinate comments with
the captain in the room,” said Revi. “I’ve given you a certain amount of
leeway, but I can’t speak for the captain’s tolerance.”

“The captain’s tolerance is running pretty thin,” said Janeway, who
was, in fact, startled by the Doctor’s overt lack of respect. “Doctor
Sandovhar, may I speak with you privately?”

“Certainly.” Revi led them to the CMO’s office and closed the door.
“What can I do for you, Kathryn?”

“You can explain to me just how long you plan to put up with that
crap,” said Janeway bluntly. “You’re fostering insubordination, Revi. You
need to put a stop to it now, before it gets any more out of hand.”

Revi sighed. “I know it sounds bad, but it’s under control.”

“Is it? Because you’re right, it does sound bad. I know you’re sympa-
thetic to his situation, but that doesn’t mean you should rescind all proto-
cols of discipline and respect.”

“I’m not. If it gets much worse, I’m prepared to step on him hard
enough to make him two-dimensional. But that’s the worst thing I could
do right now, and I’m hoping to avoid it. I can’t force the Doctor to
respect me, even though my rank should command it. I need to earn his
respect through decisive, undeniable professional competence—and I’m
about to.”

“What do you mean?”

“Right about now, the Doctor is finding that he’s wrong, and I’m right.
That’s going to shake him up a bit. What I’m going to propose next
should seal the deal.”

Janeway regarded her thoughtfully. “You have something up your
sleeve.”

Nodding, Revi said, “This plague is exactly what I’ve been waiting for.
As horrified as I am by the reality of a biogenic weapon, I have to admit
that it’s providing me with the tool I needed to clear the air in sickbay.
Want to watch?”

“How long will it take?”

“About twenty minutes.”

Janeway considered. Nothing was likely to happen on the bridge in the
next twenty minutes, and she had to admit to curiosity regarding what
Revi had planned. “All right,” she said. “Let’s start the show.”

They exited the office to find the Doctor looking uncomfortable.
“Well, Doctor?” asked Revi. “What did you find?”

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“The oxidizing agent is the limiting factor,” he admitted. “It became clear once I looked for it. What I don’t understand is how you knew to look for it. Of all the hindrances I could think of, that was fifth or sixth on the list.”

“Call it instinct,” said Revi, and Janeway saw him wince. As a hologram, instinct was one thing he didn’t have. Finely tuned logical connections, yes, but not instinct.

“I have a proposition for you,” Revi continued. “You seem to have very strong opinions regarding how to proceed with the synthesis of this repairing agent. I have equally strong opinions, and at the moment we’re just getting in each other’s way. So I propose that we each work separately.”

“That seems a waste of resources,” said the Doctor smugly. “Duplication is supposed to come after the proof, not before.”

“Are you afraid to work on your own?”

“That’s absurd.”

“Then convince me. Prove to me that you can develop a repairing agent faster than I can.”

“This is a waste of everyone’s time,” said the Doctor, moving out from behind the scope and walking right into Revi’s personal space. Janeway wondered idly if he’d learned that from her. “I’m a hologram, with the entire medical database of the Federation at my disposal. You’re Human. There’s simply no way you can compete. No offense meant, of course.” He smiled at Janeway, but she knew he most certainly did intend offense.

“I think it’s an excellent idea,” she said, having guessed what Revi had in store for him. After her own humiliation at the pool table two months ago, she could recognize the signs. Revi was setting up a hustle. “In fact, I’m ordering you to take part, Doctor. The race begins now, and I’ll referee.”

The Doctor stared at her. “Captain, you can’t possibly—”

“Now, Doctor. You’d better get moving or Doctor Sandovhar will get a head start.” Indeed, Revi had already walked to the tray of biological samples and was pulling out vials.

With a disbelieving look, the Doctor threw his hands up theatrically and stalked to the tray. “Fine,” he huffed, pulling out samples. “If I’m ordered to take part in a farce, I’ll take part in a farce. What do I care about wasted time, it’s not my cells degrading even as we speak. I’m sure
the Arnett will appreciate that we’re utilizing our most efficient methods to save their lives—"

“Doctor?” Janeway called out. “From this point on, the race will be conducted in silence.”

With a final loud sigh, the Doctor acquiesced. Just in time, Janeway thought; if she’d had to listen to much more of this she’d be asking Revi for a headache hypo. Taking a seat at the nearest terminal, she uploaded the astrometrics chart she’d been reading on the bridge. She never was much good at just standing around, even if it was for only twenty minutes. She smiled to herself at the thought. *Twenty minutes, Revi? You told me three hours.*

As it turned out, Revi had underestimated the time required. It took twenty-three minutes before she straightened up and announced, “I’m done.”

The Doctor wheeled around from his station, his face a mask of disbelief. “That’s impossible!”

“See for yourself. Put a fresh biosample on the scope.”

He stared at her.

“Doctor,” said Revi quietly, and this time Janeway heard the voice of command. “Put a fresh biosample on the scope, now.”

Janeway could see the power shift happening right before her eyes. The Doctor did as ordered, and she walked around behind them to get a view of the scope’s screen. Revi moved aside and subtly encouraged her to get closer.

“What you’re looking at, Captain, is an enzyme called anhydroxynafalinase. Its job is to catalyze the reaction of two separate byproducts that result when the cell processes nutrients.” Revi reached out and touched a pad on the controls. “Now I’m introducing a few new molecules into the picture—the byproducts that are supposed to react with the enzyme. This process takes place at a rate of several million reactions per second, so the scope is set to display at a speed that we can actually see. Watch what happens.”

Janeway watched the molecules float lazily toward the enzyme. One brushed against it and kept on going.

“They didn’t bond,” she said.

“Exactly right. The enzyme has been damaged, and the reactants don’t recognize it. Under normal circumstances these byproducts are harmless,
but since the enzyme isn’t bonding with them, the cell can’t neutralize them and flush them out. They’re building up to toxic levels, and it’s resulting in a total systemic failure. Very clever as a manufactured weapon, since it affects not just muscle or skeletal or specific organ cells, but every single cell in the body.”

“So how will you fix it?”

Revi flashed her a smile. “With a little molecular engineering. Everything I’ve shown you so far is what the Arnett had already figured out. Diagnosis at the molecular level is the time-consuming part, but they don’t have the medical know-how to engineer a solution. The challenge was to create a new molecule that will dock with the enzyme and alter its shape to one that the reactants can recognize. And the docking must be both seamless and permanent.”

She took a vial from her tray and inserted it into the scope. A press of a control pad introduced her repairing agent into the biosample, and Janeway watched in fascination as a group of odd-shaped molecules floated into the picture, one of them heading straight for the enzyme. As soon as it made contact, the two molecules bonded. Seconds later, one of the original reactants brushed against the newly repaired enzyme and locked in, leaving a space open on the enzyme that was obviously designed for the other reactant. Sure enough, another, differently-shaped molecule wandered by and was captured. Immediately the two reactants bonded to each other and were released by the enzyme, floating away as another reactant came along and locked itself in. Revi touched a control and the action sped up, showing the enzyme bonding reactants and releasing them, one after another, in an endless procession.

“Looks like it’s holding,” she said. “We’ll let it run for a few billion reactions to make sure.”

The Doctor straightened up. “If I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes, I would never have credited it,” he said slowly. “How did you engineer that molecule so quickly?”

“I admit to a slight advantage, Doctor.”

Janeway kept her smile to herself, but only barely. Yep, it was a hustle.

“Well?” the Doctor asked acidly. “Are you going to share your little advantage?”

“I’m ex-Borg.”

“What does that—”
“Think about it. You’ve doubted my qualifications from the beginning because you didn’t think a Human doctor could compete with a holographic one. But you keep forgetting I’m not entirely Human anymore. You may have access to the Federation’s entire medical database, but I have access to that and a lot more. Specifically, eight thousand, three hundred and seventy-nine more species’ worth of information. And the Arnett are one of them. I recognized the enzyme involved in this and knew exactly which proteins were required to repair it. That was my advantage in this race, and it will continue to be my advantage for just about every species we will ever work with between here and the Alpha Quadrant. Can you compete with that, Doctor?”

Janeway looked at Revi in surprise. Her voice had remained calm throughout her explanation, but by the end it had acquired a whip-like edge. For someone who had professed sympathy for the Doctor’s situation, she certainly wasn’t showing it now. Her words had been carefully chosen to flay him open at the point of his greatest pride—his superior knowledge. Which had just become his inferior knowledge.

The Doctor sat down in dismay. “No, I can’t compete with that. Why am I even activated? You don’t need me anymore.”

“Certainly I do,” said Revi. “Stop looking at me as an either-or individual. First you wouldn’t accept me because you thought of me as fully Human, and now you’re overestimating my abilities because you’re thinking of me as fully Borg. I’m neither. I have the knowledge of the Borg, but some of the physical limitations of a Human. I can’t work nonstop for days on end the way you can. Seventy-two hours is about my limit. I have to eat. I have to regenerate. And I like my down time, too. I don’t want to be in sickbay every waking hour. So I need someone to be here when I can’t, and when there’s too much for one person to do, and sometimes just for the enjoyment of sharing ideas and theories with another highly qualified doctor. That would be you.”

“Congratulations,” Janeway said before he could respond. “We have a working repairing agent and a means of saving a lot of lives. Good work, both of you.”

“I didn’t do anything,” muttered the Doctor.

“Are you or are you not a member of Doctor Sandovhar’s staff?” asked Janeway, driving the point home.

“Apparently I am.” His voice was barely audible.
“Then you share in the credit. And the next time anything goes wrong in sickbay, Doctor Sandovhar shares in the blame, whether or not she had anything to do with it. That’s how it works, Doctor.” She turned to Revi. “I need to get back to the bridge. Will you walk with me?” She thought the Doctor could use a little processing time, and really didn’t want to be here for the fallout.

“Doctor, please begin the duplication process,” said Revi. The Doctor nodded wordlessly.

As soon as the sickbay doors shut behind them, Janeway pulled Revi to the side of the corridor. “Do you know how many times the Doctor and I have butted heads?” she asked.

“No, but I can imagine.”

“Well, let’s just say that scientific notation was invented so Humans could count that high. And I would have given a lot to be able to shut him down, permanently and at the ego level, like you just did. I’m glad I was there to witness it.”

“I am too, though my initial thought was to keep it private to spare the Doctor from a more public humiliation. But his little comment in front of you pretty much sealed his fate. The private insults I could handle, but the public one just pissed me off.”

Janeway grinned. “Remind me never to piss you off. Of course,” she added, “I already got my public humiliation, so maybe I’ve paid in advance.”

Revi looked sheepish. “You know, I never apologized for that. I meant to. At the time it was fun, but I wasn’t thinking about the ramifications of hustling you in front of the crew. It was just—”

“A public comeuppance to my own ego, and one I richly deserved,” finished Janeway. “Don’t apologize for it. And keep up the good work in there,” she said, indicating the sickbay. “I do have one question, though.”

“What’s that?”

“Why did you tell me the vaccine was three hours away, when you knew you could whip it out in twenty minutes?”

“Partly to set up the Doctor,” said Revi. “But also because I really do need to make sure the repair stays intact. If the connection fails, it’ll happen in the next two hours. So if everything still looks good two and a half hours from now, then we’ve confirmed a winner.”
Janeway nodded. “I’m also a little surprised that the Doctor has apparently never seriously considered your Borg knowledge.”

“Probably because I’ve never brought it up before now,” said Revi. “I didn’t need to; everything we’ve dealt with up to now was within my realm of knowledge from before my assimilation. I was really hoping he’d accept me on my own merits. I was a good doctor long before I acquired my cortical implant.”

“Your records make that abundantly clear. But why would you want to dismiss that knowledge? It’s extremely valuable. It makes you unique.”

“It’s blood knowledge, Kathryn. I have it because billions of people died, both literally and figuratively. It’s not something I’m proud of.”

“I can understand that, but you didn’t have any control over how that information was acquired. What you do have control over is how it’s used from here on out.” She rested her hand on Revi’s cybernetic arm. “I think you made a great start today.”

Revi looked down at her hand, then back into her eyes. “It’s a start,” she agreed.
**Voyager slipped** through space at warp six, taking the most direct route across the Visconi’s claimed territory. The First of the *New Hope*, grateful for the assistance to his ship and crew, had provided Janeway with some very helpful charts and advice.

“We will spread the word among the Arnett that you are an ally,” he said, “but when the Visconi find you, you must never admit to having helped us. That will brand you an enemy and they’ll tear you apart. Your ship is impressively armed, Captain, but the Visconi are well armed as well, and there are many more of them. Please be careful.”

Janeway had thanked him for the advice and sent the charts to Seven, who had quickly plotted the most direct course and sent it to the helm. Now they were in a race, hoping to make it through before being detected. Janeway wasn’t afraid of meeting the Visconi, but the idea of having to negotiate with a species capable of manufacturing and using a biogenic weapon was decidedly unappealing. At least the Arnett had a cure now—and the fact that the Visconi were unaware of that gave the Arnett a great advantage.

At 0100 after their first day of transit, Janeway was woken by a call from the bridge. Nine ships had been detected on an intercept vector—it could only be the Visconi. She ordered the senior staff to the bridge.
“Captain,” said Tuvok from his tactical console. “The ships are approaching in a V-formation from behind us.”

“Confirmed,” said Harry. “Moving at warp seven. They’re in pursuit.”

“Armaments, Tuvok?”

“Advanced enough that we would be wise to avoid a fight.”

Janeway nodded, having expected this.

“Captain, they’re hailing us.”

“On screen.”

A rail-thin alien appeared on the main viewer. His face reminded Janeway of a rodent, and when he spoke, his voice carried the tone of an individual accustomed to instant obedience.

“Victory to unidentified ship. You are in Visconi territory. You are ordered to break from warp at once.”

“Bring us to impulse, Mr. Paris,” said Janeway. “Mr. Kim, open a channel.” At Harry’s nod she responded. “I’m Captain Kathryn Janeway of the Federation starship Voyager. We are merely traveling through this space and seek no conflict.”

“That is well for you,” said the Visconi captain. Moments later the fleet of nine ships came out of warp in a backward V, coasting up to surround Voyager on both sides with the point ship directly behind them.

“You are not authorized for transit through our territory,” he continued. “State your intentions.”

“I didn’t realize that authorization was required,” said Janeway evenly. “We’re a long way from home, and are simply taking the fastest route back. We were unaware of any restrictions in this area.”

“Ignorance is no excuse.” He examined her, and she had the impression that she was a particularly interesting museum specimen. “I have not seen your species before. Where are you from?”

“We’re from an area of space thirty-four thousand light years from here.”

He stared at her. “You will return with us to Viscon now.”

Janeway knew from the Arnett’s charts that the Visconi homeworld was a full day’s travel out of their way, and she wasn’t in any hurry to go there. “Is that necessary?” she inquired. “Surely a man leading such a fleet as yours has the power to authorize our passage. We pose no threat and wish only to be on our way.”
“You’re not a threat,” agreed the alien. “Because the moment you make a move in the wrong direction, I will erase your existence. We are transmitting coordinates now. You will proceed to Viscon at warp seven, and we will accompany you in case you get…lost. You can then petition the Viscon Council for authorization to traverse our space. If they agree, you will be allowed to proceed. If not, you will be escorted to our nearest border.”

Which would be the area where they’d entered this space, and going around the Visconi’s claimed territory would take nearly four weeks. Not her idea of a good alternative, and she wasn’t even convinced that the alien captain was telling the truth about that option. Her gut feeling told her that the Visconi might be more likely to eliminate a problem than escort it out of their playground.

“Very well,” she said in a bored tone. “Mr. Kim, do you have the coordinates?”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Then let’s get this show on the road. If our ‘hosts’ are ready.”

“A wise decision,” the alien captain said. “Proceed.”

At warp seven, it had taken them fourteen hours to arrive at Viscon, and their nine-ship escort had kept them inside its V formation the entire distance. Janeway had never seen anything quite like it; even the most militaristic cultures she’d encountered wouldn’t have devoted that many warships to a single trespasser. Either the Visconi were the most paranoid species in the quadrant, or they had so many resources that nine warships were easily dispatched for escort duty. Neither possibility boded well.

Once there, they’d been given their marching orders by another, equally rat-faced alien who also declined to identify himself. She was to beam to the provided coordinates to petition the Council, and the only concession she’d managed to wrest had been permission for her personal escort to accompany her. The militaristic Visconi did, at least, understand the need for a bodyguard. Naturally, weapons would not be allowed.

Now she stood on the transporter platform with Lynne, preparing to beam down for a mission that held unknown dangers. It was the first time she’d taken Lynne into a situation that made her nervous; until now their missions had been far more benign.
It still felt a little surreal to see Lynne in her uniform, standing on the next pad over. To her it seemed that no time at all had passed since Lynne had come aboard, out of her element, scared to death and refusing to show it. Now she stood tall and confident, watching her with a calm air and showing no signs of the apprehension that Janeway felt. Whether Lynne was too inexperienced to realize how risky their mission might be, or whether she was showing the results of Tuvok’s mental training, Janeway didn’t know.

“Ready?” she asked.

Lynne nodded. “All set.”

“Energize.”

When the tingling ended, they stood in an enormous hall, with fifteen-meter ceilings and no end in sight in either direction. The sounds of hundreds of people conducting business filled the air, and they were surrounded by orderly rows of aliens who shuffled forward between color-coded lines on the floor. Most of the aliens were Visconi, but she saw at least six other species as well. None of them were Arnett.

“Captain.”

Janeway turned toward Lynne, making the mental adjustment to their current status. When they were on duty and in the presence of others, Lynne called her by her rank. It always took her a moment to adapt.

She followed Lynne’s pointing finger to the floor and saw that they were standing inside a box outlined in red. On one side of the box, two parallel lines broke away and stretched off down the hall. The instruction was obvious.

“I think we’ve beamed into bureaucratic hell,” she said. “Shall we?” Without waiting for an answer, she stepped out of the box and strode along the line. Lynne swung in beside her.

“Captain, don’t you find it curious that we were escorted all the way in here by nine warships and now nobody seems to even care that we’re here?”

“I’m assuming that we’re still under escort. If there aren’t security cams or some equivalent all over this place, I’ll eat my pips.”

Lynne nodded. “Like a casino.”

“Ah, casinos. One of the few constants in the universe.”

“Casinos, or the desire to get something for nothing?” She looked over at Janeway’s snort. “I never spent much time in them, but when I did the
security fascinated me. Nobody ever seemed to look up, but the ceilings were always studded with camera ports.”

“Nobody’s looking up here, either, but I don’t think it’s from blissful ignorance.” Janeway recognized the dull, fearful attitude of an oppressed population. She wondered what all of these people were standing in line for.

The lines they were following seemed to keep themselves separate from those hemming in the other aliens, and were entirely empty. Apparently they were in the express lane. After leading them for what felt like a quarter kilometer, the lines made a sharp left turn and ended in front of a closed door. Janeway reached toward the door, only to have it slide soundlessly to one side. Ahead was a small, gray room, empty of any furniture. There was no other exit.

“I don’t like this at all,” murmured Lynne into her ear.

“I don’t either.” Janeway pulled out her tricorder and scanned the room, but could detect no other passageways nor any energy sources within or near the room. Before she could return the tricorder to her belt, a disembodied voice floated from within the room.

“The Council hearing will commence in one minute.”

Still she stood at the threshold, reluctant to enter the box.

“The Council hearing will commence in thirty seconds.”

Apparently the whole thing was automated. Janeway made her decision; if these people had wanted them dead, their nine warships could have blown Voyager out of space any time since yesterday afternoon. She took a step toward the doorway, only to feel a hand on her collar holding her back. With a stern look, Lynne slipped past her and entered first. She turned in place and looked at Janeway, who shook her head and stepped inside. Lynne obviously didn’t think a thing about it, but not a single other person on Voyager would have dreamed of grabbing the captain by the collar. The thought made her smile inwardly.

As soon as they entered, the door closed seamlessly behind them. Seconds later, the gray walls of the room seemed to go transparent. Janeway was reasonably certain that they were watching some sort of video transmission, but it felt like they were standing in the middle of a room, surrounded on all four sides by seated Visconi. There were eight on a side, with no obvious leader.
“You are Captain Kathryn Janeway of the Federation starship Voyager,” said one. “Your home is thirty-four thousand light years from here.”

“That’s right,” said Janeway, waiting to see what else they knew.

“Your petition is for free passage across our space.”

“Yes.”

Another Visconi spoke up, his voice indistinguishable from the first. “We are interested in your propulsion technology. How did you travel so far?”

Ah. That explained the express lane treatment. “From what I’ve seen of your ships, our propulsion technology is no more advanced than yours. We did not arrive here of our own volition; we were pulled from our home space by an extremely powerful entity. At our current rate of travel, it will take us half of our lifespans to return.”

The Visconi looked at each other, some murmuring in low voices.

“It is unfortunate that so many resources were wasted to bring you here when you have nothing to offer,” said a Visconi seated behind Janeway. She turned to face him.

“Why would you assume I have nothing to offer?” She let the murmuring continue for a few seconds before adding, “In our travels we’ve met many advanced species who have been willing to share their technology with us. We’re willing to share it in turn.”

After a pause, one of them asked, “What kinds of technology?”

The hook was set. Time to reel them in.

“Jesus Christ, is that what you were going through all those times you’ve been in treaty negotiations?” Lynne was walking beside her as they made their way back down the red lines.

Janeway rubbed the back of her neck. “Glamorous job, isn’t it?”

“Is it too late to go back to away team rotation?”

“Much too late; you’re stuck with me now.” She smiled at Lynne’s theatrical groan. “You’re the one who wanted this so badly. And just think, that was a short negotiation. The Visconi are very efficient.”

“Four hours is short? What do you call long?”

“Four days.” The even louder groan made her laugh.
“So did you have some sort of bladder extension surgically implanted in command school? Because my teeth are floating, and if we don’t find the Visconi version of a restroom soon I’m going to make an intergalactic scene.”

“We can’t have that.” Janeway completely understood, having a rather full bladder herself, but she’d learned long ago to drink very sparingly prior to and during negotiations. “All of my efforts at establishing friendly relations would go right down the toilet.”

“Oh, that was awful.”

Janeway really wanted to poke Lynne in the gut where she knew it would cause the most distress, but she was supposed to be a mature diplomat and so kept her hands to herself. A moment later she put on her best Captain’s face for the government escort waiting for them in their original beam-in square. Taller than Lynne, with the same rat-faced features that all Visconi seemed to have, he stepped forward with a hand upraised in greeting.

“Well met, Captain Kathryn Janeway. The Visconi Republic is pleased to have an ally from such a distant place. We hope you will enjoy your tour of our capital; we are very proud of our advances.”

“As you should be,” said Janeway smoothly. “From what I’ve already seen, the Visconi are an accomplished people.”

He raised one foot slightly and brought his boot heel down with a click, which Janeway had learned was an acknowledgment of a compliment or a gesture of respect. “If you will come with me?”

As they began walking, Janeway made a tactful request, and their escort immediately changed direction, leading them to an unmarked door and standing respectfully at attention. Lynne opened the door for Janeway, but as soon as they were both inside she bolted past the startled captain and vanished behind a partition. “Thank freaking god,” she moaned in relief, and Janeway laughed.

“You need to learn to drink less.”

“Piss off,” said Lynne good-naturedly, making Janeway laugh again as she stepped behind her own partition.

“Nice,” she said. “I save your wimpy little bladder from certain containment failure and all you can do is hurl insults.”

“My wimpy little bladder is deeply grateful to you, but the rest of me thinks you’re enjoying this far too much.”

She couldn’t deny that.
The next two hours passed by in a blur of governmental buildings, parks, temples, and military facilities. Janeway ruefully thought to herself that she hadn’t meant to make that good an impression on the Visconi, but the tour was part of the VIP treatment that the Council had accorded her. She found it taxing to pretend admiration for these people and their accomplishments while remembering the Arnett crew that had been attacked, infected, and left to die. At least Lynne seemed to be enjoying herself to some degree. Not that she said a word, but Janeway could read her facial expressions, and it was the look of wistful longing that inspired her to ask their escort for a departure from the itinerary. They had pulled up in front of a massive open-air market, a stop most likely designed to show off their thriving economy, and Janeway knew that Lynne was wishing she could explore among the brightly colored stalls. A polite request resulted in their guide giving them an hour to look around while he took care of governmental business. He would return to collect them at the entrance, he said, and right before his transport departed he even gave Janeway a handful of Visconi coins to spend.

As they walked into the market, Lynne stopped for a luxurious stretch and sighed happily. “Ahh. Nice to be out of that transport. Though I have to say it’s been totally fascinating. It’s not every day a girl gets a VIP tour of an alien culture.”

“You seem fairly well able to separate your feelings,” said Janeway. “I know what you think about the Visconi, and yet you’re enjoying this.”

“That’s because I don’t think what we saw with the Arnett was necessarily indicative of how the Visconi people feel,” said Lynne. “All through Earth’s history, citizens were usually clueless about their government’s actions. Or helpless to change them, or both. The more repressive or dictatorial the government, the less people were allowed to know. Even the U.S. government did nasty things we didn’t know about, though it usually came out years or decades later. Or else we were fed partial truths designed to win our support for things that nobody would have okayed if they’d known the whole story. And I don’t think that’s limited to past Earth governments, do you?”

Janeway immediately thought of the Federation turning colonies over to the Cardassians, destroying homes and cities, ending generations of terrafarming, and uprooting families for a useless appeasement effort that did not, in the end, prevent the war. She certainly hadn’t agreed with the
decision, though she’d been duty-bound to fight the resistance that sprang up because of it.

“Yes,” she said. “Unfortunately. I like to think that the current Earth government is more open and truthful than in your time, but really there’s no way for me to know for sure. I can say that the ideals of the Federation are diametrically opposed to that kind of deception, but I’m also enough of a realist to know that ideals are not always the only guiding forces.”

“That’s one of the things I love about you,” said Lynne. “Ideals are your guiding forces.”

Janeway wished she could hold her hand. “Thank you,” she said. “Will you still love me if I stumble over an ideal?”

“Absolutely.”

They spent a leisurely half-hour perusing the market stalls before reluctantly turning and beginning their walk back. Lynne was carrying four small packages, courtesy of Janeway’s love of bargaining, and they were comparing the artworks of two different stalls when a small boy bumped into the captain.

“Pardon me,” said Janeway, smiling at the urchin with the smudged face. He glanced at her from under long lashes and scurried off. To Janeway’s complete surprise, however, the child was jerked to a halt by Lynne’s long arm.

“Lynne! What are you doing?”

Lynne stared daggers at the little boy. “Give it back.”

“I don’t have nothing,” he said sullenly.

“Give it back or I’ll take it from you,” she said, her voice hard. “And if I have to do that, I promise you won’t like it.”

Despite her initial impulse to order Lynne to stand down, Janeway let the scene play out. With a scowl, the little boy reached into his dirty coat and pulled out her tricorder. Eyes widening, Janeway took the tricorder and replaced it in her belt pack. She hadn’t felt a thing; this kid was good.

“Can I go now?” the child asked without a trace of apology.

Lynne crouched down to look him in the eye. “As long as I never see you again. And tell whoever’s running you to stay away from us. We’ve got a military transport waiting for us outside; the next kid that tries anything joins us in it. Do you understand?”

The boy nodded and sprinted away the moment Lynne released her
grip. She straightened up and looked regretfully at Janeway. “I hate doing that. But being nice to kids like that will just turn you into a target.”

“Did you see him take it?”

“No, but I suspected something as soon as he bumped you. And then I saw your empty belt pack.”

“You sound like you’ve had experience with this sort of thing,” said Janeway as they resumed their walk through the market.

“More than I could wish. Most of the best mountains in the world, I mean on Earth, were located in some of the poorest countries. We’d always fly into the big cities first and then take local transportation from there, so I spent a lot of time in some of the poorest cities on the planet. They’re all full of little kids like that, living on the streets and usually working for someone older. I wanted to save them all when I first started climbing. They live in a whole different world than we do, though, and they don’t respect you for feeling sorry for them. It just turns you into an easy mark.”

Janeway nodded, troubled at the thought of that kind of poverty. “You won’t find them on Earth now. We eliminated homelessness and poverty long ago.”

“I know, you’ve said that before. It’s still hard for me to imagine.”

“Someday I’ll just have to show you, then.” Their hands briefly touched as they made their way under the arching gates of the market.

“Welcome back, Captain; Ms. Hamilton,” said Tuvok. Janeway wasn’t surprised to see him waiting for them in the transporter room, despite the fact that it was well into beta shift and he’d gotten as little sleep last night as she had.

“Thanks, Tuvok. It’s good to be back. Seven hours is just about my limit for making nice today.” She led the way into the corridor.

Tuvok raised an eyebrow as he paced beside her. “I assume your negotiations were successful?”

“They were willing to trade in exchange for free passage across their space. It won’t put us out much.”

“I would have been surprised if it had,” said Tuvok. “Your skills as a negotiator are formidable. Are they still bleeding?”
“And people say Vulcans have no sense of humor.” Janeway was always delighted when Tuvok’s particularly dry brand of humor made an appearance.

“Indeed we do not. Do you have anything to report, Ms. Hamilton?” asked Tuvok, turning to Lynne.

“No, it was a routine mission.”

“That’s not true,” said Janeway. “Lynne has now completely proved the necessity of my having a personal security escort. Two months ago she saved me from four groping drunken men, and today she saved me from a small boy.” The smile she directed at Lynne was not returned.

“I believe,” said Lynne stiffly, “that what I saved was a piece of Federation technology from falling into the wrong hands.”

Janeway knew she’d put a foot wrong. “True,” she said to Tuvok. “I got pickpocketed at a market. Lynne saw it and caught the kid before he could get away.”

“Well done, Ms. Hamilton.”

“Thank you.” Lynne’s voice was clipped.

“Tuvok, will you deliver this PADD to engineering? As soon as we can get our little trade put together I’d like to get out of here.”

“Certainly, Captain.” Tuvok took the PADD and branched off a side corridor. Janeway called the bridge and updated Chakotay, who’d also pulled a double shift.

“Have the bridge officer call me when we’re ready to go,” she said after giving him the abbreviated version of their negotiations. “I’ll be in my quarters. In the meantime, go get some rest. Janeway out.”

The last words were said as she and Lynne walked into their living room. Without pausing in her stride, Lynne dropped the packages on the couch, stripped off her jacket and stalked into the bedroom. Janeway followed close behind.

“Lynne, I didn’t—” was all she got out before the bedroom door slid shut in her face. Stunned, she stood there blinking for a moment. Damn! She’s really pissed. She put a hand on the door, but instinct warned her not to open it. Instead she went back to the living area and began to untie their packages.

A minute later the door opened and Lynne came out in loose pants and a t-shirt. Without even glancing at Janeway, she went to the replicator and programmed in a cup of tea. Janeway waited, but when Lynne
sat at the table with her tea and pulled out a book, she couldn’t stay quiet.

“So you’re not talking to me?” she asked.

“I think it best not to at the moment,” said Lynne coolly, not looking up from her book. “I wouldn’t want to say something I’ll regret.”

Janeway walked over and sat down opposite her. “Like I did, is that what you’re saying? I didn’t mean to belittle what you did down there. It was just a joke.”

Finally Lynne met her eyes. “In my experience, most jokes of that sort have some basis in truth.”

“And what truth do you think I’m unconsciously telling you?”

Lynne looked at her for several silent seconds. “That I’ve been wasting my time,” she said at last. “All these months I’ve been working my ass off, largely in an effort to earn your respect, but I don’t think it worked. I saw a potential physical danger to you in that bar on Laiton; you just saw some drunken groping men. Today I saw a potential loss of Federation technology; you saw a cute little kid.” Her voice was growing louder and more harsh. “Why the hell am I doing this job? You don’t value what I have to offer. Do you even think I can do it? Did you just give it to me because I sleep with you?”

Janeway felt a rush of anger sweep over her, sending all of her diplomatic skills right out the airlock.

“Are you saying you believe I put you in a position I didn’t think you were qualified for? Is that it, Lynne? You think I took you on a potentially hostile mission today because you’re my wife and that relationship earned you a posting? Goddammit!” She slapped her hand on the table and stood up, fuming. “If that’s what you really think, then we’ve got a big problem. And I can’t deal with it right now.”

She was across the room in a few steps, but wheeled around before the door opened. “You know what? You’re right. All those efforts to earn my respect were a waste of time. Because you already had it, from the first day I met you.” Without waiting for a response, she walked into the corridor.

Two hours later she finished her tour of the ship in her traditional spot, the observation lounge. For years she’d taken regular walks around
the ship, alternating between beta and gamma shifts, partially due to her own restlessness and partially to a desire to connect with her crew. Over the last three months her tours had become less frequent as she spent more time at home with Lynne, but that was going to change starting now. Tonight had been a revelation; the crew had greeted her with wide smiles, and many had told her that they were glad to see her. Her walks had been more important to them than she’d realized, and she regretted letting other things take priority. It had been fun to bury herself in her new domesticity, but the reality was settling in. She was the captain. She had a responsibility to more than just herself and her marriage.

She had always ended her walks here in the observation lounge, usually choosing to sit in the dark and watch the star streaks. The view was panoramic, and at this time of night there was rarely anyone to disturb her solitude. She settled herself into a chair and relaxed, closing her eyes. For two hours she’d managed not to think about the argument, but with no more helpful distractions, Lynne’s words were ringing through her head. She just couldn’t understand it—how could Lynne make those kinds of assumptions? Did they not know each other at all?

A soft footstep alerted her to another presence in the room, and she kept her eyes shut as she listened. With any luck, whoever it was would think she was sleeping and tiptoe back out again. A twinge of guilt went through her; the lounge was open to anyone, and here she was hoping to drive another crewmember out. But the guilt wasn’t strong enough to get her to acknowledge the presence. After trade negotiations, a tour and two hours of talking to her crew, she was ready to be alone.

The intruder was either blind, totally unaware, or willfully disregarding her needs. She heard the steps come closer, followed by the sound of a body seating itself in a chair opposite her.

“That won’t work, I know you’re not sleeping.” It was Revi’s voice. “Don’t try to fool a doctor.”

Feeling more than a little disgruntled, Janeway opened her eyes. “I was hoping that whoever it was would have the grace to leave me alone.”

“Sorry. This is a public space. You want alone, go back to your quarters.”

“I can’t, I’m not alone there.” It was more than she’d meant to say, and she braced herself for the inevitable. But Revi just nodded and turned to
the viewports. After several minutes, when Janeway had begun to relax again, Revi spoke up.

“Can I ask you a question about the Visconi?”

“Go ahead.” It wasn’t what she’d expected, but she wouldn’t argue with a reprieve.

“Thank you. Now, I have no agenda here, so please don’t read anything into my question. I’d just really like to know what you think.” She turned her gaze back to Janeway. “Two days ago we were injecting a shipful of Arnett to cure them from a lethal disease intentionally inflicted on them. Today we’re negotiating with the people who designed and used that same biogenic weapon. Not to save our own lives, but for time. One month of time. So my question is, do you have any ethical conflict with this situation?”

Her expression and the calm tone of her voice prevented Janeway from taking offense. She could see that Revi was truly curious.

“No,” she said. “I don’t. I learned a long time ago that I couldn’t afford to maintain a black-and-white set of ethics. Sure, I could stay out of Visconi space in ethical solidarity with the Arnett. One month isn’t that much. Until we combine it with another month down the road, and maybe two months the next time, and then where do we draw the line? Is three months a long enough time to compromise our ethics? One year? Besides, I don’t see our trade as an ethical compromise at all. I’m not enabling or endorsing the Visconi agenda in any way, and it’s possible that our trek through this area might give us the opportunity to help additional Arnett.”

Revi nodded. “That’s true. Did the Arnett come up in any of your discussions with the Visconi?”

“With the Council, definitely. I had to acknowledge their conflict and agree to stay out of it, which I did in a manner that doesn’t prevent us from offering aid, so I’m not concerned about that particular promise. I don’t think the Council even considered the possibility that we might want to offer aid, so they didn’t require me to promise I wouldn’t. But I did find it rather interesting that in the hour Lynne and I spent talking to various craftspeople and traders in the public market, nobody mentioned the Arnett. It’s as if they’re not even aware of the conflict. Then Lynne reminded me that citizens are often ignorant of their government’s
actions. It’s possible the Visconi people have no idea that their government is using biogenic weapons against another race.”

“True. Interesting how often Lynne’s experiences from four hundred years ago are perfectly relevant to the current time.”

“It’s not just her experiences. She also reminded me that citizen ignorance has been around throughout written Earth history. Some things are timeless.”

“Such as the first big fight after a honeymoon. Everyone has them.”

“I wondered how long it would take you to get around to that.” But the oblique approach was a Revi trademark, curiously disarming, and she no longer found herself dreading this conversation. “Are you here to dispense useful advice?”

“Well, I don’t know how useful I can be. I can tell you that from my experience as a doctor and a friend, I’ve seen the aftermath of a few of these. They’re rarely fatal.”

“I’m not worried about it being fatal. I just wish it hadn’t happened, and I wish Lynne would have a little more trust in me, both personally and professionally. It—” She stopped, realizing that she was getting dangerously close to making herself vulnerable. Revi said nothing, merely looking at her with that calm, understanding gaze, and suddenly Janeway realized that she didn’t mind being vulnerable with her friend. Revi wouldn’t push her, and she wouldn’t take any pleasure from the revelation that Janeway was not all powerful. In fact, she thought wryly, it wouldn’t be a revelation at all, would it? Revi already knew she was Human.

“It hurts,” she said finally. “It just kills me to know that Lynne honestly thinks I made her my security escort because of our personal relationship, and not because she earned it. I just don’t know how to deal with this one. It goes right to the core of who I am, and it makes me think she doesn’t really know me. And that I don’t really know her. Who the hell did I marry?”

Revi showed no reaction. “Can you tell me what happened?”

Finding herself calmed by her friend’s quiet demeanor, Janeway related the story. “So I walked out,” she concluded. “And I’m not even close to being ready to go back. I don’t know what to say to her.”

Revi’s broad smile was completely unexpected. “Kathryn,” she said, shaking her head, “how is it that you can see right through my head, and yet be completely blind when Lynne is doing the exact same thing?”
“I assume you’re going to explain that.”
“Right after you got back from your honeymoon, you took me to task for not trusting you. Except that you realized, and made me realize, that it wasn’t really you I didn’t trust. It was myself.”

Janeway stared at her. “That doesn’t make sense. She’s worked her ass off for months—her own words, by the way—to qualify for what she’s doing. She’s even earned Tuvok’s approval, which is as close as we can get here to a holy blessing. How could she do all that and still not trust herself?”

“Do you know why I chose physical medicine and not psychology?”
“I’m sure you’re going to tell me.”

Revi chuckled at her dry tone. “Because physical medicine makes sense. If X does Y, then the predictable reaction Z occurs. It’s very logical. But our psyches aren’t in the least bit logical. They do things that don’t add up at all. Lynne’s an amazing person who seems to have adapted beautifully to her new environment. So beautifully, in fact, that I’m suspect of it. You’re the one who knows how she really thinks and feels, and you’re the only one who can help her with this. The fact that she put in all that work just to earn your respect says a lot. And if she thinks you don’t trust her skills, that might just be a confirmation of her own doubts.”

Janeway turned her gaze back to the view, and out of the corner of her eye saw Revi do the same. They watched the star streaks for several minutes before Janeway spoke again.

“Revi?”
“Hmm?”

“Have a good night. I’m heading back.” She stood up, and when Revi followed suit she impulsively reached out and hugged her. “Thank you. You’re a good friend.”

“You’re welcome. Now get out of here. I came here hoping for a little peace and quiet, and you’re cluttering the place up.”

Janeway waved her hand as she turned away. “I’m going.”

When the door slid open, she stopped in her tracks. Their living area was lit solely by a dozen candles scattered throughout the room, and
slow Risan jazz was playing softly in the background. Lynne had changed into her silk robe and was lying on her side on the couch, fast asleep.

“Looks like I missed the party,” Janeway whispered. Quietly she crossed the room and took a seat on the coffee table, watching her wife. Lynne’s features were peaceful; she always looked years younger when she was asleep. Feeling a wave of affection, Janeway reached out and carefully brushed a lock of hair away from her face. Immediately Lynne’s brow furrowed; then her eyes opened and she blinked drowsily.

“Hi,” she murmured.

“Hi yourself.”

Lynne pushed herself into a sitting position and rubbed her eyes. “I waited up for you.”

“So I see. It looks like you were setting up a seduction.”

“No,” said Lynne, more awake now. “Though I wouldn’t have minded if it had turned into that. I was actually setting up an apology. I’m sorry, Kathryn. I don’t even know what that was about.”

“It’s okay, I understand.”

“You do? Because I don’t. You’re the most professional person I’ve ever met. I know you would never have given me the job if you didn’t believe I could do it.”

Janeway reached out to take Lynne’s hands in her own. “Do you believe that you can do the job?”

“Well, Tuvok signed off on me, and you hired me, so I must be able to do it.” Lynne’s smile might have fooled someone else, but Janeway knew better.

“That didn’t answer my question,” she said gently. “Do you believe that you can do it?” The smile faded and Lynne tried to pull her hands away, but Janeway held on. “Talk to me, Lynne.”

She could see in her eyes that Lynne did not want to have this conversation. But she wasn’t about to let go until this was out in the open, and Lynne couldn’t pull away without making an obvious effort.

The standoff ended quickly; Lynne’s hands relaxed while she stared off over Janeway’s shoulder. Janeway waited, giving her the time she needed, and eventually Lynne’s gaze shifted back to her.

“Have you ever felt like you took on more than you could handle?” she asked.

Janeway squeezed her hands and let go. “Every single time I’ve
accepted a new posting, and never more so than when they gave me my first ship. I was sure I'd crash and burn, and everyone would know what a failure I really was. I thought it was just a matter of luck that nobody found out.”

Lynne’s surprise was evident. “You’re kidding. I can’t imagine anybody more qualified than you to captain Voyager.”

“Well, by the time I got Voyager I’d already been captain of another ship. So it wasn’t quite the same thing. But that doesn’t mean I’m still not afraid of failure. In fact, I’m more afraid of it now, because the consequences are so much worse out here.”

Lynne said nothing to this, and Janeway knew that Revi had been right.

“Are you afraid of failing?” she asked.

Lynne dropped her head. “I’m worried that I already have,” she whispered.

“When?”

“That boy in the marketplace. I didn’t get to him before he got to you.” When she raised her eyes Janeway could read the self-censure in them. “What if he’d been more than a pickpocket? That didn't even occur to me until after we got back. I didn't see him as a real threat. You joked with Tuvok that I saved you from a small boy, but I didn’t. I failed you before I even started.”

“Oh, Lynne, you did not. Your instincts were better than mine. I didn’t see him as a threat at all, but you at least knew he was a pickpocket. If you hadn’t been there, I would have lost my tricorder—and you were right, that would have been a serious loss of technology. You did fine. Don’t be so hard on yourself.”


“That just means I can recognize it better than anyone else.”

After a pause, Lynne spoke seriously once more. “I’m afraid this is all a mistake. What if I’m not good enough? You talk about consequences—if I fail it means I lose you. Voyager loses you. What the hell was I thinking? It was fine when it was all simulations and lessons with Tuvok, but now it’s for real and I’m not so sure I should be here.”

“Mm hmm. Tell me, Lynne, were you scared the first time you led a mountain climb?”
Lynne looked askance. “You’re leading me.”
“Fine, then humor me.”
“I can see where this is going, just so you know.”
Janeway nodded, acknowledging her less-than-subtle approach, but all she cared about was the outcome.
“Okay. Yes, I was scared to death. I had people depending on me for the first time. If I screwed up, people were going to get hurt.”
“So what happened?”
“Nothing.” Lynne’s body language was relaxing.
“And how long did it take you before you stopped feeling scared?”
“Never,” said Lynne. “Didn’t expect that one, did you? I’m always just a little nervous before a climb, whether it’s leading a group up a mountain or soloing a big wall. Mostly excited and exhilarated, but a little nervous at the same time. I’ve always believed the day I stopped being nervous was the day I’d get myself in big trouble.”
They looked at each other in silence, each breaking into a grin.
“Do I need to finish this conversation, or can you take it from here?” asked Janeway.
“No, it’s pretty obvious from here out.”
“Good. I think you’re ahead of the game, Lynne. You already know one of the most valuable rules: if you’re not a little bit afraid when dealing with the unknown, then you’re either an arrogant fool or an ignorant one. Either way you’re a fool. Fear has a useful purpose. Use it, let it give you a fine edge, but don’t let it beat you.”
“You should be producing inspirational vids, you know that?”
“The only person I want to inspire right now is you. Did it work?”
“It might down the road. Right now I’m still scared.”
“That’s okay, we’re not going to just talk it away. But you’ll get there. I have faith in you.”
“That makes about one and a half of us.”
Janeway chuckled. “Then we’ll just keep working on that other half. Deal?”
“Deal.” Lynne’s expression was open and vulnerable, and Janeway realized that they’d gotten to the root of this problem far more quickly than they would have a few months ago. It wasn’t happening overnight, but they were making progress.
“Good. Can we go to bed now?” she asked.
“I was just waiting for you.”

Janeway nodded and rose, bringing Lynne up with her. They went into each other’s arms automatically, each seeking a comfort they could find nowhere else. Janeway slipped a hand inside Lynne’s robe and found nothing but bare skin underneath. She moved her hand upward, cupping a warm breast.

“Thanks for waiting for me,” she whispered.

“You’re welcome. Thanks for coming back. And for knowing me so well.”

Janeway opened her mouth to say she didn’t, Revi did; but quickly decided that now was a good time to shut up. Pulling away, she took Lynne’s hand and led them around the quarters, where they took turns blowing out the candles. In the starlit dimness they walked into the bedroom.

This time, the door stayed open.
Two days into the five-day crossing of Visconi space, Voyager ran into a fleet of Arnett ships. Seven was taking a turn at the bridge science station and reported them first; Harry confirmed a few seconds later. Chakotay called Captain Janeway in from the ready room and she appeared on the bridge almost instantly, as she usually did.

“Report,” she said as she strode to her chair.

Chakotay rose and stepped over to his own chair, his movement unconsciously timed so they sat down together. “Nine small Arnett ships ahead, identical configurations. Fifty-four life signs among them, six to a ship. No sign of Visconi,” he said.

Janeway checked her console and looked up. “Looks like escape pods to me. And at impulse, they’re a lifetime away from the nearest planet.”

Chakotay nodded. “That’s what I thought, too.”

“Mr. Paris, lay in a course to intercept and increase to warp eight. Janeway to Doctor Sandovhar.”

“Sickbay is preparing for casualties, Captain. The Doctor is ready to begin triage in the shuttlebay as soon as the first pods arrive.”

Janeway got an odd look on her face, and Chakotay hid a smile. Sandovhar’s arrogance was going to get her in trouble this time.

“Doctor Sandovhar,” said Janeway in that too-calm voice, “why are you
making the assumption that the pods will be tractored into the shuttlebay?”

After a pause, during which the entire bridge crew held its collective breath, Sandovhar’s voice came back. “The pods are moving at impulse and likely to house a number of casualties. Voyager can’t afford to be seen by the Visconi rendering aid to the Arnett, nor can we leave them to struggle along for the next fifty years to reach the nearest planet. The most efficient means of avoiding Visconi detection, rendering aid, and getting the Arnett to a habitable planet is to tractor the pods in and resume our course and speed. Am I wrong?”

Janeway turned to look at Seven, who raised an eyebrow at her. With a strange twitch to her lips, the captain resumed her conversation. “You’re not wrong, Doctor, and I appreciate your efficiency, but I would like to at least promote the appearance of a chain of command. Perhaps next time you might wait for my order?”

“My apologies, Captain. I’ll remember that in the future.”

Chakotay schooled his face into impassivity as Janeway faced him, but inwardly he felt a satisfaction at hearing Sandovhar get publicly slapped down. It sounded as if her appeal was starting to wear off, and Janeway’s next order only reinforced that thought.

“Chakotay,” she said quietly, “Once we get the first pod tractored in I’d like you to go to sickbay to keep an eye on the situation. Doctor Sandovhar may have her hands full with the Doctor in the shuttlebay, and I’d feel more comfortable with another senior officer on hand.”

“Certainly, Captain.” He was relieved—Janeway was finally coming around.

At warp eight it took them less than ninety minutes to reach the pods, and the refugees seemed desperately glad to hear their hail. Apparently the name Voyager had already made the rounds, and these Arnett were more than happy to accept their help. Their ship had been destroyed by the Visconi, who hadn’t bothered to chase down the escape pods, knowing that they’d never reach a habitable planet before their air ran out. Very few of the refugees had escaped injury, and several were badly hurt. The First of the destroyed ship directed Voyager to the pods with the most serious injuries, and within a few minutes they’d tractored the first one in. The Doctor called in to the bridge shortly afterwards; the injuries, though nasty, were easily treatable and the worst cases were now being
transported to sickbay. At a nod from Janeway, Chakotay rose and exited the bridge.

The corridor outside sickbay was silent, and Chakotay paused before the doors, steeling himself for seeing broken bodies and people in pain. But when the doors opened, the screams that assaulted his ears were not from pain. They were from sheer terror.

The scene was surreal. Four Arnett occupied the biobeds, three of them unconscious. On the far side of sickbay, Sandovhar was poised menacingly over the fourth, her black cybernetic arm hovering over the refugee’s throat as the woman screamed in abject fear. Her panic made her words nearly incomprehensible, but the commander could pick out the words “no” and “assimilate.”

Chakotay was shocked. Certainly he’d never trusted Sandovhar, but neither had he ever thought she would actually attempt assimilation. Slapping his comm badge, he shouted, “Security to sickbay!” He looked wildly around, realizing there was nothing close to hand that he could use as a weapon. Sickbay was full of useful drugs, but he had no idea which was which, and there was no time to read labels. The only thing he had to use was his own body, and without hesitation he sprinted across the sickbay, shouting, “Doctor! Stop!”

Strangely, it worked. Sandovhar dropped a hypospray on the floor and began to back away from the biobed—straight into Chakotay. He grabbed her from behind, twisting her organic arm up behind her back and doing his best to hold the cybernetic arm at her side. All he had to do was keep her occupied long enough for security to arrive, which wouldn’t be difficult since Sandovhar wasn’t fighting him.

“What the hell is going on here?” he growled. When Sandovhar neither answered nor moved, he knew she was well and truly caught. There was no mistake; she’d shown her intentions. “So your true nature comes out at last,” he said, tightening his grip. “You’re not going anywhere, Borg.”

Sandovhar came to life. With a display of effortless Borg strength, she twisted in his grip and threw him bodily through the air. He impacted the wall with enough force to drive the wind out of his lungs, and by the time he picked himself up off the floor, she was gone.

The sickbay had gone eerily quiet, and as he fought to get air back into
his lungs, he looked over to see that Sandovhar’s victim was now unconscious. Once he could speak again, he activated his comm badge.

“Chakotay to security. Doctor Sandovhar just attacked me and an Arnett refugee and has left sickbay. She is currently considered a danger to the ship. Send a team to apprehend her; I’m in pursuit.”

The blast of emotion hit Seven with a force so strong that she actually staggered against the upper deck railing. Kathryn heard her and looked up.

“Seven, are you all right?”

Seven flinched and put a hand to her head. Nothing she had ever felt from Revi compared to this. It wasn’t that Revi had dropped her shields—it felt more like they had completely disintegrated. Her mind was open, raw, and dysfunctional, and the primary emotions were horror and grief. Seven sent out a call through their link, but for the first time there was no answer at all, not even an awareness of her presence.

“Captain,” she said, “something is very wrong with Revi.” Then she winced as Revi’s emotions shifted to pure, unadulterated rage.

Before Kathryn could respond, Tuvok spoke up. “Captain, Chakotay just called for a security team to apprehend Doctor Sandovhar. He reports that she attacked both him and an Arnett refugee, then left the area. He is in pursuit.”

Kathryn’s gaze shifted back to Seven, who understood that she was expected to rebut the report. She wished she could. “I don’t know what’s happening,” she admitted. “Revi is not responding to our link.”

“Janeway to Chakotay. Are you all right?”

“A bit bruised, but otherwise okay.” It sounded as if Chakotay were running. “She’s in the turbolift, do you know where it’s going?”

“Deck eight,” said Tuvok when Kathryn looked at him.

“Track her movements,” Kathryn ordered, “evacuate the area around her, and trap her inside a level ten force field barrier as soon as you can. Send a security team to the site.” As Tuvok nodded his acknowledgment, she continued, “Chakotay, report to sickbay. The Doctor will need you to point out which of the Arnett was attacked. We’ll handle Doctor Sandovhar.”
“Acknowledged.” Chakotay didn’t sound pleased, but Kathryn barely waited for him to finish before barking out more orders.

“Janeway to the Doctor. Beam yourself to sickbay immediately. Doctor Sandovhar has attacked one of the refugees; Chakotay is there waiting for you.”

“Yes, Captain.” The Doctor obviously heard Kathryn’s tone and wisely asked no questions.

“Janeway to Hamilton. Report to sickbay and prepare to assist the Doctor in any way you’re able. Also be prepared to assist security in apprehending Doctor Sandovhar should it be required.”

“Yes, Captain.” Like the Doctor, Lynne didn’t ask questions, but her tone of voice indicated total disbelief.

“Tom, as soon as we get the last pod loaded, get Voyager back to normal course and speed and then I want you in sickbay as well. The Doctor is going to need all the help you can give him.” Turning even as he responded, she looked at Tuvok expectantly.

“She has left the turbolift and is proceeding down the corridor on deck eight, section ten. I’m initiating force fields…now.” He watched his board for a moment. “Doctor Sandovhar is secured, Captain.”

“Good. Stay here and monitor the situation. You have the bridge; I’m going to see about our renegade doctor. Seven, you’re with me.”

As they rode the ‘lift, Kathryn asked, “Are you getting anything from her?”

Wishing she could say anything else, Seven answered truthfully. “I’m not receiving any coherent thoughts. She is only sending pure emotion.”

“What’s she feeling?”

“Extreme anger.”

Kathryn’s facial expression did not change, and when the turbolift doors opened she led them straight to the nearest weapons locker. Quickly she pulled out two compression phaser rifles and offered one to Seven. “I’m sorry, but Revi may leave us no choice. If she’s a danger to the crew or the ship, we have to neutralize her. I understand she’s important to you. If you don’t think you can do this, tell me now.”

Seven looked from the rifle to her stony face. “I’ll do my duty, Captain. But I will not require the rifle to do so. If Revi needs to be…controlled, I’ll do it personally.”

Kathryn nodded silently, secured the second rifle and led the way
down the corridor. They hadn’t gotten far before they heard the sound of a force field being hit, again and again.

“Commander Sandovhar, stand down!” called a male voice.

Revi’s response was very clear. “Let me go and get the fuck away from me!”

They rounded a corner to see six security officers standing, weapons ready, on the far side of the force field trap. Revi faced the officers, only centimeters away from the humming field. Hearing their approach, she wheeled around to glare at them.

“Status, Lieutenant Parker.” Kathryn’s voice held the tone that Seven recognized as her “captain voice.” It didn’t bode well for Revi.

“The Commander is secured, Captain,” said Parker. “But she won’t stand down and she won’t stop throwing herself against the force field.”

As if goaded by his words, Revi strode the short distance to the force field separating her from Seven and Kathryn and flung herself against it. “I said let...me...go!” she roared, punctuating each word with another attack on the field.

Seven stepped forward and tried once again to reach out through their link, desperate to stop Revi from doing herself harm. It seemed to work; Revi ceased her attacks on the force field and stared at her instead, but her eyes held no sign of recognition. Then she shook her head irritably.

“Stop it,” she growled. “Get the fuck out of my head. I’m so sick of you being in my head. Get away from me, and let me go!” She flung herself against the force field again.

But in that brief moment, Seven had seen into her mind. “Captain,” she said urgently, “she wishes only to go to Cargo Bay Two. Her rage is not directed toward any of us. It’s directed toward the Borg. I do not believe she will cause anyone harm.”

“Seven, she’s already attacked two people.”

“We don’t know exactly what happened. But I do know that she has no intention of harming us. If we don’t take action quickly, she’s going to damage her Borg systems.”

They looked at Revi, who had switched sides and was once again throwing herself against the force field nearest the security team.

“I hope you’re right about this,” said Kathryn in a low voice. Then, louder: “Lieutenant Parker, line your team up along the corridor walls. We’re lowering the force field. Be prepared to defend yourselves if neces-
sary, but do not provoke Doctor Sandovhar and do not fire without my order.”

“Yes, Captain.” A hand signal from Parker sent three of his team to one wall, while he and the other two stood on the opposite side.

Kathryn lifted her hand to her comm badge, but it came to life before she could touch it.

“Doctor to Captain Janeway.”

“Go ahead.”

“Captain, I can’t find any evidence of injury to this patient other than what I documented upon her arrival. Apparently Commander Chakotay stopped Doctor Sandovhar before she could do any harm.”

Kathryn met Seven’s eyes. “Acknowledged. If you don’t require the Commander’s services any longer, he’s needed on the bridge. Janeway out.” She tapped her badge. “Janeway to Tuvok.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Evacuate all personnel between here and Cargo Bay Two, and from the cargo bay as well. Erect a force field on the far side of the entrance to the cargo bay, and when that’s done drop these force fields immediately.”

“Acknowledged.”

It took an interminable twenty-eight seconds for the force fields to go down, long enough for Revi to throw herself against them six more times. Seven was growing very concerned about possible damage. But as soon as the fields dropped, Revi started down the corridor, apparently unharmed and paying no attention whatsoever to the security team. Kathryn and Seven followed close behind, while the security team formed ranks behind them.

When they reached the cargo bay, Revi walked directly to the alcove unit, waited for the door to recognize her, then stomped up to the nearest regeneration alcove and threw herself at it, screaming, “No more!” The cargo bay echoed with the sounds of cables and panels being ripped out, while electrical shorts hissed and sparked.

“I’ll repair the damage, Captain,” said Seven as they watched Revi tear the alcove apart. “I don’t believe I can reach her mind until she has expended some of this anger.” She was finding it difficult to focus; the rage flowing off Revi’s mind was astonishing in its depth and ferocity.

“All right,” said Kathryn. “But I can’t allow her to destroy all of them. You both need them for your survival.”
“She will not,” said Seven.

But ten minutes later Revi had completely destroyed the first alcove and started on the next one, with no apparent diminishing of her rage. Seven knew she had no time left; Kathryn would not stand still much longer.

“Captain, I’m going to stop her,” she said. “She will fight me, but please do not allow anyone to shoot unless you’re certain that I’m losing. I believe that in her current condition a phaser bolt would be very detrimental to her Borg systems, including her cortical implant.”

“Are you sure? You could be seriously hurt. I’ve seen her fight.” Kathryn hadn’t taken her eyes off Revi, who was bending metal with her cybernetic arm.

“I’m sure. She may have been trained by Starfleet, but I was trained by Hirogen. And as a medical/repair drone, she wasn’t programmed for combat techniques. I will not fail.”

Kathryn met her gaze, then gave one sharp nod.

Hoping that Revi’s intense focus would prevent her from seeing anything else, Seven cautiously approached her friend. If she could just get in range, she might be able to bring Revi down in one move.

She was within grappling distance when Revi whirled, bringing her cybernetic arm around in a vicious backhand. Had it connected, the arm would have dented even Seven’s reinforced skull plating, but Seven ducked the blow and stepped behind her. Revi’s momentum swung her upper body around, and before she could recover Seven lashed a kick at the back of her right knee and a simultaneous blow to her right shoulder. The combination sent Revi twisting off her feet. She crashed to the floor, where she just had time to roll onto her back before Seven landed on top of her. Revi screamed, an animal cry of pure rage, and used all of her Borg strength in an attempt to throw off her attacker. But Seven pinned her arms and legs and held on grimly, her own strength taxed to the utmost to keep her position. Her head hurt from the screams that echoed in her mind as well as her ears.

“You fucking bastards! I won’t do this anymore! Damn you all to hell!” Revi thrashed and bucked, her fury pouring out, and Seven was hanging on with increasing desperation. Just when she thought her hold would break, everything changed. The rage burning through her mind suddenly turned into debilitating despair, and Revi went limp beneath her.
“Oh gods, please, please don’t make me do this anymore. It’s not me, it’s not me, it’s not me…” The last syllable devolved into incoherent sobbing, and Seven knew that Revi had no fight left in her. Rolling off, she pulled her unresisting friend up to a sitting position and slipped in behind her, resting her torso against her own. Rubbing Revi’s upper arms in a gentle, repetitive motion, she called her name, over and over, hoping to break through. In that final outpouring of emotion, she had caught just a few images, enough to realize that Revi was trapped in her memories and had no idea where she was.

“Revi, come back. You’re not on a cube, you’re on Voyager. You’re safe, Revi. They can’t harm you. Revi…”

She continued her assurances, both verbally and mentally, the entire processing capacity of her cortical implant focused on the limp body in her arms and the alarming lack of coherence in their mental link. Finally that link sharpened, and Revi lifted her head.

“Seven?”

Unthinkingly, Seven wrapped her arms around Revi’s chest and squeezed, resting her chin on the top of her friend’s head. “Yes. It’s good to have you here again.”

Revi grasped Seven’s forearms and held on silently. Her emotions were still open, and Seven could easily see how much she required the safety of their embrace.

“Don’t worry,” she whispered. “I won’t allow anyone to harm you.”

Revi said nothing, but her grip tightened. Seven looked up then, surprised to see that the cargo bay was empty save for Kathryn, who was now unarmed. The moment their eyes met, Kathryn stepped forward.

“Seven,” she said in a low voice, “if you need me I’ll stay; otherwise I’ll be just outside with the security team.”

Despite the gravity of the situation, Seven felt a thrill of pride. With that sentence, Kathryn had ceded control to her. She was acknowledging that Seven was the one person most qualified to resolve this issue—not a mathematical, engineering or physical dilemma, but one dealing with Human emotion. Seven had often dreamed of such a time, but never had she believed it would actually arrive. However inappropriate it might be at the moment, she could not help her feelings of accomplishment. And because they were alone, and the situation seemed more personal than professional, she made a deliberate choice.
“Thank you, Kathryn,” she said. She saw Kathryn’s eyes widen at the use of her first name, but then a quick smile crossed the captain’s face. “I don’t believe that Revi would wish to have any more witnesses at this time. If you would not mind—”

“It’s all right,” said Revi. As she spoke, Seven could feel their mental connection revert to its normal strength. “I remember enough to know that there are already plenty of witnesses. And I think Kathryn deserves an explanation.” She pushed against Seven’s arms, and with a sense of loss Seven released her. But Revi just lifted her own arms free and then tugged Seven’s back around her waist. Tilting her head to one side, she met Seven’s eyes. “Don’t go anywhere,” she said. “I just wanted to get my arms loose.”

“I will remain here until you wish me to leave,” said Seven.

: Be careful what you promise. I may never want that. :

Seven looked at her in surprise, but Revi’s eyes were on Kathryn, who was crouching down in front of them.

“What happened?” she asked quietly.

Revi sighed. “It was one of the refugees. The Doctor had just trans-ported the worst cases, and when I leaned over the first patient, she panicked. She saw my Borg implants and assumed that I was about to assimilate her. She screamed and pleaded with me not to hurt her—and I was in my worst nightmare.”

“Your memories.”

“No, actually I mean that literally,” said Revi. “I have nightmares when I regenerate.”

“I was not aware of this,” Seven said in dismay.

“My transceiver goes dormant during regeneration. You wouldn’t have sensed it.”

“I meant that you didn’t tell me. Perhaps I might have been able to assist you.”

“I’m sorry, Seven. I didn’t want to think about it.”

Kathryn looked at the destroyed alcove, then back at Revi. “Looks like your mind took that decision out of your hands. What happens in your nightmares?”

Revi tensed, and Seven felt her reluctance. After a few moments, she spoke again.

“I’m on a Borg ship, but I’m not Borg. I’m me. But I’m still hurting
people, and every time I try to stop, a drone holds me there and forces me to keep going. No matter what I do, they won’t let me stop. It’s so much worse than what really happened, because in my nightmares I don’t have the excuse of being a drone. I just don’t have the ability to stop.”

“So when the refugee was afraid of you hurting her…”

Revi nodded. “I lost my grip on reality. It was so much like my nightmare. It was happening again, I was hurting an innocent person who was begging me to stop, and I just had to get away. I backed away from her and ran right into someone else, who grabbed me and held me there. I heard a voice saying that my true nature had come out and I wasn’t going anywhere, and that was when I completely panicked. I threw off whoever was holding me down and ran out of there.”

Kathryn had an expression on her face that Seven couldn’t decipher. “That was Chakotay,” she said.

“Oh, perfect,” said Revi. “The one person on Voyager who hates me the most.”

“Why do you say that? I know you two have your issues, but hate is a strong word.”

Revi was quiet for a moment. “I had a...meeting with him a while back,” she said. “I thought you were in your ready room, but you’d just left. Let’s just say that Chakotay took off the gloves and we both knew exactly where we stood with each other.”

“When was this?” Kathryn’s voice was very calm, but her eyes were narrowed. Seven knew the signs; someone was in trouble. She could almost feel pity for Chakotay, but he had caused Revi pain. Therefore whatever Kathryn did to him would not be sufficient.

“Ten days before your wedding,” said Revi. “But Kathryn, that’s not important. I don’t want to cause any trouble between you and your first officer.”

“Don’t worry about that. If you can, tell me the rest of what happened today.”

Seven felt Revi’s ribs expand as she took in a deep breath. “It gets a little fuzzy from there. The present and past, nightmare and reality, all got mixed up in my mind and I couldn’t tell the difference. I see now that it was a classic flashback, but I wasn’t exactly thinking like a doctor at the time. I had this thought in my head that I could end it all if I could just get to the alcoves and destroy them. I wasn’t thinking of them

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as alcoves, though. They were just Borg technology and in my mind, they were what was holding me captive, making me do these horrible things. I was so angry, gods, I’ve never been so furious in my life. And it felt good to be angry, because then I wasn’t afraid anymore. I’m always so afraid in my nightmares, so helpless. Today I was at the point where it was time to destroy or be destroyed. Either way, it was going to end.” She shifted and looked up at Seven. “When you came up behind me, I didn’t know who you were. I just thought you were another Borg trying to stop me. I’m so sorry; you know I would never hurt you intentionally.”

“Your apology is unnecessary,” said Seven. “You didn’t hurt me. But I am sorry that I had to hurt you.” She frowned as she caught a shadow of emotion from Revi, who was rapidly rebuilding her shielding but hadn’t yet gotten up to full strength. “You’re feeling guilty. Why? You never touched me.”

Revi closed her eyes tightly. “Because…I would have…” She stopped, swallowed, and opened her eyes again. “I would have killed you if I could,” she whispered. “Gods, Seven, I’m so sorry. Please forgive me.”

“There is nothing to forgive,” said Seven, who honestly did not see the problem. “I knew you wished to kill me; I could see it in your mind. It was irrelevant. You required my assistance.”

“You knew?” Revi pulled away and looked at her accusingly. “You knew and you came after me anyway? What in the hell were you thinking?”

“I was thinking that you were my friend and you needed me. Was I incorrect?”

The question stopped Revi cold and she paused, considering. “No,” she admitted. “I did. I still do.” She closed her eyes again and allowed herself to slump back against Seven’s chest. “Gods, I’m so tired.”

“Then I think it’s time you returned to your quarters,” said Kathryn.

“I know,” said Revi, showing no signs of movement. “I just don’t want to think about walking through those corridors right now.”

“You won’t have to.” Kathryn tapped her comm badge. “Janeway to sickbay.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“No attack took place, Doctor. It was a misunderstanding. Can you do without Doctor Sandovhar’s services for a while?”
We’re a little busy here, but with Mr. Paris and Ms. Hamilton I can handle the situation. Is she all right?

“Yes, she is, but I’m giving her two days off if you don’t need her right away.”

“We’ll be fine, Captain. I’m glad she’s okay.”

“I’ll pass that on. Janeway out.” Kathryn grinned at Revi. “Well, that’s new. He passed up a perfectly good opportunity to make a sarcastic remark about never having needed your services in the first place.”

“We’ve been getting along much better since our little competition. It’s made my job a hell of a lot easier.”

“I can well imagine. But you have no job for the rest of today and tomorrow. I do, however, want you in sickbay sometime in the next twenty-four hours to let the Doctor take a look at you. All right?”

“Okay,” said Revi in a resigned tone.

Kathryn reached out and lightly squeezed her shoulder, then looked up at Seven. “You’re off for the same period of time. Take care of her.” She activated Revi’s comm badge. “Computer, site-to-site transport, two to transport to Commander Sandovhar’s quarters. Authorization Janeway alpha one five six two.”

She stepped back, and Seven watched her vanish as they were transported to Revi’s quarters. They materialized on the living room floor, neither one moving from their position.

“Well, that was nice of her,” said Revi.

“Kathryn is a very compassionate woman,” said Seven. “Still, she does not use resources lightly. I believe this transport is a reflection of her respect for you.”

“The gods only know why she would respect me after this.” Revi’s voice was hardly audible.

Seven tightened her arms. “She knows that your actions originated from a desire not to harm, a desire to end the pain you thought you were causing others. Why would she not respect that?”

After a pause, Revi asked, “Do you respect me?”

“You should not even have to ask. Look into me and see.”

Normally, Seven felt nothing when Revi looked deeper into her mind, unless she was intentionally pulling out memories. But this time was different. With Revi’s shielding still less than fully functional, Seven saw images as their minds connected. Several were from their recent experi-
ence; others seemed unrelated—except that they all involved herself. She saw herself through Revi’s eyes, in situations both real and imagined, and was most surprised at a flash of the two of them kissing. The hope she’d harbored since her philosophical discussion with Kathryn and Lynne flared into full life. They had been correct, Revi was concealing her attraction. But here it was, buried beneath her shields.

The images ended, and Revi turned to look at her directly. Seven knew, from the emotions she was still sensing, that Revi was unaware of what she had inadvertently shared.

: You’re a good friend, Seven. Thank you for sticking it out with me. I know it hasn’t been easy. :

: Anything worthwhile is worth an effort. But you did not look deeply enough. There is more there than just respect. :

: Oh? What did I miss? :

Seven was glad to see that her face had lost much of its tense, drawn look. She hoped she was doing the right thing as she leaned down and touched her lips to Revi’s.

The physical sensation was very pleasant, but it was nothing compared to the intense surge of emotion from Revi, which combined with her own feelings to make her slightly dizzy. Revi was taken by surprise, but her shock quickly changed to a warm happiness, then a feeling of resignation and loss. Seven drew back and looked at her, wincing at the sorrow so visible in her expression and her emotions. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. The look on Revi’s face was causing a pain in her chest. “I did not wish to make you sad.”

“You didn’t,” said Revi, reaching up and caressing her cheek. “I’ve dreamed about you kissing me for a long time. I just never wanted you to know.”

“I saw the image in your mind. But I don’t understand. If you dreamed of this, why would you not wish me to know? I made my own feelings very clear; why have you hidden yours?”

Revi pulled her hand back. “Seven, look at me. I’m fucked up. I think I gave a rather stunning demonstration of that just now. I have nothing to offer you. And I think too highly of you to let you get tangled up with the likes of me.”

Seven wasn’t sure if her own shields could have blocked her instant outrage, but she didn’t bother to raise them. Revi’s eyes widened.
 Seven… She didn’t get the chance to finish her thought.

“You seem to be under the mistaken impression that you can control what I feel,” said Seven sharply. “You cannot. You assume that whether or not I get ‘tangled up’ with you is entirely your decision. It is not. And your assumption that you should control who I choose to be with implies that you hold the power in our relationship. You do not. And I greatly resent your assumptions.”

“But that’s not—”

She was cut off again by a very angry Seven. “If you choose not to be with me, that is your choice and your right. But you have no right to tell me that I cannot choose to be with you. It’s my decision, and your attempt to deny me that choice by concealing your own feelings was both wrong and hurtful. I will not tolerate that presumption. Do you understand?”

Revi had shrunk away, her shoulders hunched as if warding off a blow. “Seven, please!” she cried.

The desperation in her voice stopped Seven, who finally took a moment to listen to the thoughts running through her friend’s mind. With a start she realized that Revi was barely retaining her mental coherence. Her anger vanished, instantly replaced by remorse as she pulled Revi back against her chest.

: I’m sorry. This was not an appropriate time for me to express my frustration. Please forgive me; I was being selfish and inconsiderate. :

The mental connection seemed to stabilize Revi. She lifted her head, letting it fall back against Seven’s shoulder.

: It’s okay. I’m just really tired, and I can’t deal with this right now. Can we talk about it later? :

: Yes, of course. : Seven couldn’t believe her own actions. She had just expended a great deal of effort preventing anyone else from hurting Revi—for what? So she could complete the task herself?

: Don’t beat yourself up over it. I’m just—exposed right now, and I don’t have any defenses left. Okay? :

: I understand. : But she felt terrible.

: Stop it. I’m all right. Will you help me up? :

Carefully, she stood and pulled Revi up with her. : Do you wish to regenerate? :

: No. I don’t want anything to do with those alcoves right now. I just want to
sleep, in a real bed. : She turned to face Seven. : Kathryn knew that before I did. I just realized that. :

: Kathryn is a very perceptive woman. :
: So are you. You knew what I needed back there. Thank you for taking care of me. :

Seven looked down at her friend, so quiet and withdrawn. She wanted nothing more than to continue taking care of her.

Revi smiled, catching her thought. : Would you think me selfish if I said that right now, I want that too? :

: No. :
: Then will you come with me? :

Seven nodded and Revi turned, tugging her by the hand. She led them through the living quarters to the bedroom, where she let go of Seven’s hand, tugged off her jacket and dropped it to the floor. Her boots soon followed, and she climbed onto the bed, turning over on her back and closing her eyes with a sigh. Seven looked at the discarded clothes on the floor and frowned. Such untidiness was aberrant to Revi’s nature, and a strong indicator of her exhaustion. She stood still, watching the prone form on the bed, unsure of what was expected of her. After a moment an image shimmered into her mind, and without hesitation she pulled off her boots, draped her jacket over the chair, and lay down next to her friend. Revi rolled to her side and rested her head on Seven’s shoulder, sighing again when Seven wrapped an arm around her back and pulled her in close, using her other hand to caress Revi’s hair.

: Thank you, Seven. I really needed this. :
: You’re welcome. Sleep now. :
: Will you stay? :
: I’ll watch over you. You are safe. :

Revi’s response was incoherent, and Seven was mesmerized by the workings of her friend’s mind as she fell asleep. She had never experienced this before. When Revi regenerated, her thoughts were abruptly cut off as she entered a cycle and just as abruptly came back on line when the cycle was completed. But this process, this Human version of regeneration, was different. Revi’s thoughts seemed to wind down, becoming increasingly random. Her emotional guard dropped entirely, but her emotions were also random and muted. It was as if Revi’s brain had simply run out of fuel and was slowly coming to a halt.
No, thought Seven as she looked down at Revi’s relaxed features. Not a halt. More like an energy-saving level of operation, running at minimal power until the full systems should be needed once again. Revi was now completely asleep, but Seven could still hear activity in her mind. Nothing she could decipher, just a kind of mental hum.

She let her head relax on the pillow and settled in. She didn’t know how long Revi would need her, but however long that might be, she would be right here.

Janeway watched Seven and Revi vanish from sight, her hopes high for their future relationship. Revi had finally reached out for Seven, and Seven had taken care of her as if she’d spent her life nurturing others. If this didn’t break Revi out of her self-imposed emotional exile, nothing would.

She exited the cargo bay and stopped, momentarily startled to see the security team waiting outside. She’d nearly forgotten about sending them out earlier.

“The situation has been resolved,” she said crisply. “It is to be considered classified at this time. Thank you for your efforts. You may return to your duties.”

“Yes, Captain,” said Lieutenant Parker. He turned to his team. “Let’s go.” Janeway watched them move off, murmuring amongst themselves as they walked. They could talk to each other all they wanted, but none of them would breathe a word about what they’d seen. Labeling the mission as classified meant that no one else save Tuvok would learn of it. It was the least she could do for Revi, who was obviously humiliated that so many had witnessed her breakdown. Then she tallied all of the others who would have to be notified of the classification, and suspected it might be a lost cause. Still, it was worth a try.
The pods had been successfully tractored in, Tom and Lynne were in sickbay helping the Doctor, and Tuvok was dealing with refugee placement. Chakotay was on the bridge, freeing Janeway to retire to her ready room to find out exactly what the hell had happened that morning. She hadn’t shared Revi’s story with Chakotay, wanting to collect all possible data before speaking with him. All he knew was that the situation was resolved and she would fill him in later. And now she was attempting, not all that successfully, to calm herself down.

She’d called up the security logs from sickbay and watched the encounter between Revi and the refugee. Everything had taken place as Revi had recounted it—she had never even touched the woman. But Chakotay’s actions had stunned her. He couldn’t have played into Revi’s nightmares more accurately even if he’d known about them. It was no wonder that Revi had snapped.

Next she had run a search through the security logs from her ready room, locating the log from the day Revi and Chakotay had spoken together. She’d just finished viewing it and was absolutely furious. Forcing herself to wait another five minutes, she eventually got to the point where she was reasonably certain her voice would not betray her. Only then did she call Chakotay in.
“Chakotay,” she began when he had taken his seat, “I’ve been trying to piece together what happened in sickbay. Exactly what did you see?”

He sat back in his chair. “When I entered sickbay, only one of the refugees was conscious and she was screaming. Doctor Sandovhar was standing over her, preparing to assimilate her. I called security and engaged the doctor. She ceased her assimilation efforts, threw me into a wall and disappeared. That’s the last I heard of her until you told me the situation was resolved.”

“Did you say anything to Doctor Sandovhar during this encounter?”

“Yes, I ordered her to stop and she did.”

“Anything else?”

“Not that I can recall.”

Janeway drummed her fingers on her chair, the only outward sign of her anger. “I just finished watching the security log. Knowing that, would you care to revise your story? Because I believe you did say something else. In fact, let me quote it for you. You said, ‘So your true nature comes out. You’re not going anywhere, Borg.’”

He looked a little embarrassed. “Yes, I do remember saying something like that, but it’s not like it wasn’t the truth. I caught her in the act of assimilation, for god’s sake.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Of course I’m sure!” Now he was offended, and not doing a good job of hiding it. “It’s not an easy thing to mistake.”

“If she was reverting to Borg, why would she have been so frightened?”

His mouth dropped open. “She wasn’t frightened. She threw me into a wall, remember? I’m the one who got hurt.”

She reset the security log to a specific time index, paused the playback, and swiveled it to face him. He looked at the scene of himself holding Revi by the arms as she was twisting around.

“Look at her face, Chakotay. What do you see?”

He raised his eyes. “She does look afraid.”

“Actually, she was terrified. Look again.”

He did. “Well, I guess she knew she was in trouble. She was attacking the refugee and I caught her.”

“And how do you know she was attacking the refugee?”

“Because I saw it. Didn’t you just ask me this?”
“No, before I asked if you were sure about the assimilation. Now I’m asking if you actually saw an attack.”
“I caught her in the act!”
“Did you speak to the refugee? Ask her what happened?”
“She passed out, and none of the other refugees were conscious. There was no one to talk to.”
“No one except Doctor Sandovhar. But you didn’t talk to her, you just accused her.”
He stiffened. “Why are you grilling me? I’m not the one who betrayed her captain and crew.”
“No, you just betrayed your position and my trust in you.”
Stunned, he took a moment to respond. “What are you talking about?”
“I’m talking about your complete inability to let go of your judgmental attitude toward Doctor Sandovhar, despite my direct order to not let it affect your professional behavior. I’m talking about the second-in-command of this ship openly telling a Starfleet commander that he’s waiting for her to make a mistake and that she has no right to access her captain.” Now she allowed a little of her anger to show through, and he visibly shrank in his chair. “I’m talking about my first officer allowing his prejudices to affect his professional judgment to such an extent that he endangers the ship’s CMO, a security team, the captain and oh yes, let’s not forget the astrometrics officer, who put herself in considerable personal danger this morning in an effort to undo the mess you caused.”
He looked at her as if she’d lost her mind. “What mess? She was committing a crime, and I was there to stop it because you sent me down there to watch her! Why is my distrust unprofessional and yours is apparently just healthy caution?”
That stopped her cold. “Is that why you think I sent you down there? Because I didn’t trust her?”
“Wasn’t it?”
It took her a second or two to fight down the surge of anger. “No,” she said, her voice belying the effort required to speak calmly. “I sent you because I’ve been all too aware of your continuing inability to get past your prejudices, and I thought it would be good for you to see Doctor Sandovhar working in her element. There’s a reason I made her CMO, and I hoped if you saw her in action you might begin to understand. Chakotay, she was doing her job. She was not committing a crime, and she didn’t
attack you. You attacked her and she acted in self-defense.” He tried to interrupt, but she gave him no time. “The situation you walked in on was explosive and needed careful handling. Not only did you not handle it in a careful manner, but when you allowed your personal prejudices to influence your professional behavior you made it much worse. You gave us incomplete and misleading information, and based on that information I put a security team in harm’s way and also endangered Doctor Sandovhar and Seven of Nine. If Seven hadn’t been with me, the situation would have ended with Doctor Sandovhar being taken by force. And that’s what you wanted, wasn’t it?”

“What I wanted was the safety of the ship and crew, Kathryn,” he said. She immediately held up her hand, grinding her teeth together.

“Chakotay, we are not on a first-name basis right now. I reserve that for people who have earned my respect, and you lost that today.”

That, more than anything else, seemed to get through. He sat back in his chair slack-jawed.

Janeway reset the security log once again, this time to the point before the refugees were beamed in, when Revi was still alone in sickbay. She hit the playback without a word.

The log was recorded from an angle that clearly showed Revi’s movements, and it was obvious that she was in the act of calmly lifting a hypospray to the refugee’s throat when the screaming began. There was no attack.

When the playback ended, the only sound in the room was their breathing. Chakotay didn’t meet her eyes for several seconds. When he finally looked up, his expression was one of total confusion.

“I don’t understand, then. Why was she screaming? Doctor Sandovhar didn’t even touch her.”

“She was screaming,” said Janeway quietly, “because she was viewing Doctor Sandovhar with the exact prejudices that you hold. A reasonable reaction, considering that she didn’t know any better. But you did. Or at least you should have. Instead, you allowed your personal distrust to interfere with the performance of your duty, and caused a dangerous situation in the process. Doctor Sandovhar was experiencing a flashback to her days as a Borg drone, and as the first person on the scene you had the ability to minimize that situation. Instead, you made it worse. I can’t tell you how much worse without betraying the doctor’s confidence, but
suffice to say that I am now worried about her recovery. And I am very, very disappointed in you.”

He flinched.

Janeway eyed him for a moment before sitting up straight in her chair. “Commander Chakotay, for unprofessional conduct and for actively endangering your fellow crewmembers, I am relieving you of duty and confining you to quarters for ten days.” His eyes flashed up, shocked, as she continued. “Be glad I’m not throwing you in the brig. You can consider the light sentence a testament to your past job performance, but you’re on probation now. You’ll have to earn back my trust and my belief in you. I cannot have a first officer who can’t discharge his duty fairly.”

He maintained their eye contact, but plainly it was costing him some effort.

“I suggest you spend some of that time reflecting on your behavior and the harm you may have caused a valuable member of our crew. Your sentence is effective immediately.” She paused, her anger finally getting the better of her. “Now get out.”

Chakotay seemed rooted to his chair, but her hard glare broke him loose. Without a word, he got up and left.
If Seven thought that feeling Revi going to sleep was fascinating, she now decided that it came in a distant second to feeling her wake up. It was like watching a collection of unrelated atoms spontaneously align themselves into complex molecules: complete order from complete chaos. Revi’s thoughts pulled themselves together, and Seven could actually hear the moment when subconscious gave way to conscious. She was propped up on one elbow, looking at her friend when Revi opened her eyes, and enjoyed watching the waking process repeat itself physically. As Revi’s eyes cleared, her thoughts followed, from wondering why she was in her quarters and why Seven was there, to remembering the events of a few hours ago. Her emotional shields apparently did not assert themselves immediately upon waking, because Seven felt her instant humiliation when she remembered. Her eyes closed again.

: Oh, shit. That really happened, didn’t it? :

: Yes. :

: I’m surprised you’re still here after that. And how am I ever going to face Kathryn? Or Chakotay? Damn, Chakotay of all people. And the security team… this is all over the ship by now, isn’t it? :

Seven had hoped that sleep would help Revi regain her normal self confidence, but that was obviously not the case. Imitating a motion Revi had used on her earlier, she gently caressed her friend’s cheek and jaw.
Revi’s eyes flew open.

: I am here because I made you a promise, and more importantly because I wish to be. What occurred a few hours ago has no bearing on who you are as a person, and in no way changes my high opinion of you. Nor will it alter Kathryn’s opinion. She contacted me while you were asleep. She is very concerned about you, and said that if you needed anything at all, including a friend, you are to ask her. :

: Really? :

Seven found this doubt painful. : Yes, really. She also said not to ‘get any ideas’ about this event impacting your position as CMO. This should not surprise you, Revi. You’ve made friends on Voyager, people who care about you. We will not turn our backs on you because you are not perfect. :

Revi’s emotional shielding came back to full strength as she let out an inelegant snort. “That must have taken you a while to learn, Ms. Perfection.”

“It did. And you know it’s still hard for me to accept anything less than perfection from myself. So you must also know that I understand some of what you are feeling right now.”

Briefly touching Seven’s cheek, Revi said wistfully, “You’re not very far from perfection. It’s difficult for me to imagine you being able to understand this.”

“Then I can see I must remind you of my own mental breakdown.”

“What breakdown?”

“Do you not remember? I told you of the time that I attempted to download too much information into my cortical processor and overloaded it.”

“Yes, but you never said anything about a breakdown. And I haven’t seen that in your mind.”

“I became extremely paranoid. I turned against my friends and shipmates. It’s not a memory I maintain at the forefront of my mind; you’ll have to look deeper to find it. But I believe you should see it in its entirety.”

Seven closed her eyes and concentrated on a memory she had buried. Her breakdown had been deeply humiliating to her, and it had taken some time for her to realize that none of her friends thought any less of her for it. She hoped that by sharing this experience, she could help Revi to see that the events of today need not affect her reputation on Voyager.

The memories exploded across her brain, and she knew that Revi was
pulling them out. She waited, wincing at a few of the scenes. But then came the moment when Kathryn talked her down on the Delta Flyer, making a very personal plea, and she smiled. Perhaps she shouldn’t keep this particular event buried in her mind; it did contain one very special memory.

She opened her eyes to find Revi staring at her in shock.

“You were ready to kill yourself!”

“I was convinced that the one person I truly trusted and cared for was sending me to the Alpha Quadrant for dissection and destruction. Death at my own hand, and in the process of destroying the captain’s plan, seemed a far better alternative.”

Revi nodded. “Yes, I can see that. And I can also see that your relationship with Kathryn was extraordinary even then.”

“It was, and it is. But no more extraordinary than my relationship with you.” That left Revi speechless, and Seven continued, “So you can see that your breakdown was actually quite minor in comparison to mine. I sabotaged Voyager’s targeting scanners and several computer programs, stole a shuttle, and was preparing to destroy technology that would reduce our journey by three years. All you did was strike Commander Chakotay, who undoubtedly deserved it, intimidate some security officers and tear apart one alcove. I believe that in terms of ‘bragging rights,’ I have a distinct advantage.”

Revi laughed. “I believe you do at that. Thank you, that really helps.”

Thrilled at having elicited this reaction, Seven said, “You know I will assist you in any way I can.”

“I do know that,” said Revi. “Better now than I did at the start of my shift today.” She patted her stomach. “But before we discuss anything else even remotely heavy, can we take a food break? I’m starved.”

Seven rose from the bed and reached for her boots, but Revi stopped her. “You’re not going anywhere, are you?”

“No.”

“Then leave the boots off. Make yourself comfortable.”

Seven, who was accustomed to wearing shoes at all times, wondered how comfortable she would be without them.

“Trust me,” said Revi. “You’ll get used to it, and then you’ll start looking forward to the end of your shift because it means you can take your boots off. Human feet weren’t meant to be trapped. There are twenty
muscles and one hundred ligaments in each of your feet, and they don’t get properly exercised or stretched inside shoes.”

Seven watched, pleased, as Revi picked up her boots, put them in the closet, and ran her jacket through the recycler. If Revi was tidying up and reverting to Doctor-speak, then her mental and physical health had improved. Revi turned to her and smiled.

: Yes, I’m feeling better. Thanks to you. :

They moved into the living quarters, where Revi pointed Seven toward a chair and went over to the replicator. “Can I get you anything? I’m personally craving a big bowl of curry.”

“I will have a small bowl of that, please, but with the spices reduced by seventy-five percent.” Seven well remembered the last time she had tried some of Revi’s curry. She was convinced that the concoction had removed the top layer of cells from her tongue.

“Your European heritage is showing through, you weakling,” teased Revi. “Tell you what, I’ll bring you milk with your meal. If it’s too hot, the milk will neutralize the burn.” She returned to the table with a tray holding two bowls of curry over rice, two glasses of water and one of milk. As she set out the food and drink, she added, “If you’re going to spend any kind of time with me, you’ll have to start eating the real stuff. Without milk. I don’t socialize with anyone who can’t. It’s my personal litmus test.”

She raised her glass to Seven, drank, and then dug into her bowl of curry. Closing her eyes at the first taste, she exhaled happily. “Oh, yeah. I’m good now.”

Seven tasted her curry cautiously, found it acceptable, and began eating with more enthusiasm. One thing about their mental connection, it allowed conversation to continue whether one’s mouth was full or not. She sent out a thought.

: I do wish, very much, to spend more time with you. But not even that could induce me to voluntarily participate in the chemical removal of my mouth lining. :

Revi had been in the process of lifting a forkful to her mouth, but at that she dropped the fork back in her bowl, leaned her head back and laughed.

: Hey, you’re talking about my comfort food. : Her mental voice reflected her laughter.

: You find it comforting to consume caustic substances? :
I guess so, if that’s how you want to put it. Makes me feel warm inside, you know?

What you call warm I call volcanic.

Revi snorted again. Well, it takes all kinds to make a universe.

I have heard Kathryn say that. And I have heard Lynne say “whatever floats your boat.” If burning off your epithelial cells floats your boat, I can only accept it as a fascinating but very odd quirk of your nature.

Revi grinned and raised her glass again. To odd quirks, then. I’ve heard that boat phrase recently, but not from Lynne.

Seven nodded. It has been an interesting linguistic study, watching twenty-first century idioms make their way around the ship.

Why do you think they’re catching on?

I believe it’s due to the fact that Lynne’s circle of friends includes most of the senior staff, and her wife is the captain. The people she is closest to are the most influential on the ship. If they assimilate her idioms, the other crewmembers are more likely to repeat them.

Interesting use of the word “assimilate,” Seven.

Seven looked sharply at her, hoping she hadn’t made a misstep. But Revi showed no signs of distress, and they spent the rest of their meal sharing thoughts on various topics, always steering clear of the biggest topic of all. She knew that she had to let Revi set the pace for that conversation.

After their meal, Revi took their dishes to the replicator and recycled them, then returned with two steaming mugs. Seven accepted hers and inhaled the sweet, spicy smell emanating from it. What is this?

Chai tea. It’s a traditional drink in my family. Since we can’t drink synthehol, this makes a nice after dinner substitute.

She tried it, enjoying the sensations that washed over her tongue.

Glad you like it.

They moved to the couch and sat in mental silence, sipping their drinks. Seven had exhausted her capacity for communicating around the unmentionable topic, and was now waiting for Revi to take the conversational lead. Revi, for her part, was gazing into her mug as if the solution to the origin of the universe could be found there. Eventually she looked up and sighed.
“I can’t put this off any longer, can I?”

“Certainly you can,” said Seven. “But it would be inefficient. This issue will not resolve itself.”

“Inefficient,” repeated Revi with a slight grimace. “I suppose I have been. Well, thank you for giving me the space to think about this a bit before dealing with it.”

“You’re welcome,” said Seven. She put her mug down, turned to face Revi directly and waited.

Revi looked at her expectant stance and shook her head, smiling slightly. “Guess the waiting period is over, then.” She put her own mug down and turned as well. “Okay. First off, I owe you an explanation. I can tell you’ve been thinking while I was asleep, and you’ve obviously figured out why I’ve kept my blocks up all these months.”

“You did not wish me to know that you possessed romantic feelings for me.”

With a slight wince, Revi said, “Yes and no. You already knew I had some romantic feelings when I let you in on the holodeck, during our first date. What I didn’t want you to know was how much those feelings had grown.”

“Clarify, please.”

Revi picked up her mug and took a sip, in what Seven thought was clearly a stalling tactic. No sooner had the thought formed in her mind than she saw Revi’s lips curve in a smile as they touched the rim.

: Guilty as charged. : But when Revi put the mug down again, her mind and expression were very sober. : This is just a little hard for me. I don’t want to say the wrong thing, and I don’t want you to get mad at me again. :

The reminder of her untimely outburst instantly filled Seven with remorse. : I am very sorry about that. My words were ill chosen and inappropriate, and they hurt you. :

: No, they didn’t. It wasn’t your words that hurt me. It was your anger. :

Seven tilted her head, waiting for further information.

Revi wrapped her arms around her torso, leaning back against the arm of the couch. : I can’t show you how I felt, because I don’t want to go there again. But I can tell you that I have rarely in my life felt quite so defenseless as I did earlier today. Normally I can block emotions coming into my mind in much the same way that I block my own from going out. It’s something that I haven’t taught you yet—I
was planning to. When you're not blocking I’m very much aware of your emotions, but they don’t impact me directly. It’s kind of like I’m seeing them through a viewport. If I let your emotions resonate as strongly in my mind as they do in yours, it would be hard for me to function.

She paused, and Seven nodded. : I understand.

: Okay. That’s how it works normally. But that flashback really knocked me off my feet. Even after you brought me out of it, I couldn’t pull myself together.

: You had no emotional blocks. For your emotions or mine. : She could see the pieces coming together, but the conclusion was unthinkable.

: Exactly. When you got angry, I couldn’t protect myself. It felt...like I was being battered.

Seven lowered her head, a white-hot shame rushing through her as she remembered Revi’s hunched stance and her desperate cry. : Kathryn and Lynne said it is normal to cause pain to those we...are close to. I didn’t believe them, but I have already proven them correct. I have no excuse.

Revi moved up next to her, putting a hand on her leg. : Don’t do that to yourself. You didn’t know. And your anger was justifiable. You were quite right in what you said, actually. It was just that when you said it, I wasn’t in any condition to deal with it.

: I can’t prevent myself from feeling this way just because you tell me to. : She could not remember feeling quite this bad before. Revi had trusted her, and she had repaid that trust by hurting her when she was least able to defend herself. She was no better than Chakotay. Worse, actually—Revi had never trusted Chakotay.

“Seven, stop.” The commanding tone in Revi’s voice was something Seven had not heard before, and it snapped her out of her thoughts.

“Listen to me,” said Revi more gently. “You didn’t know, but you do now. Save your guilt for a time when you knowingly hurt me, not when you did it by accident.”

“I will never knowingly hurt you.” Seven was aghast at the very concept.

“I know you believe that. But if we take this relationship any further, you probably will. And I’ll probably hurt you, too. This is something you need to know before you make any decisions about us. And it’s one of the reasons I didn’t want you to know how I felt.”

“I don’t understand.”
“I know. Bear with me.” Revi ran her hand through her hair and leaned back. Seven could hear many different thoughts going through her mind, so quickly that she couldn’t make them out. She waited for Revi to sort through them and present them to her.

Blowing out a breath, Revi dropped her hand again. “Let me start from the beginning. I was fascinated by you when I first came on board. Even aside from the joy of being able to share my thoughts again, I felt an instant attraction toward your mind and your heart. You’re a beautiful person, inside and out, and I feel truly fortunate to have been able to witness that beauty on the inside.”

Seven blinked. She knew that others appreciated her aesthetically, but their opinion had rarely mattered. Revi’s opinion, she found, mattered a great deal. A warmth spread through her as she listened to Revi’s voice and mind.

“It didn’t take long before that fascination turned into a romantic attraction. But after you told me that you felt the same way, I got nervous. As long as it was one-sided, I didn’t have anything to worry about. But if you shared my attraction, then there was a chance that we might end up in a relationship together. And that seemed like a very bad idea to me.”

Seven wanted very much to refute this statement, but through an act of considerable will she managed to restrain herself. Revi gave her a wry smile. “I know. So anyway, I kept my emotional blocks up to make sure that you didn’t see just how strong my attraction was. I knew if you did, you’d pursue it. And I honestly thought I would be bad for you. I’m still not convinced I won’t be, but I’m not going to make the mistake of preempting your decision again. You were quite right about that—I don’t have the right to choose for you, and I’m sorry that I took that on myself.”

“I accept your apology,” said Seven. “I’m sorry that I became so angry. I can see in your thoughts that you believed you were doing what was best for me.”

“Well…” Revi waggled her hand in front of her in a gesture Seven knew meant ‘somewhat.’ “I did believe that, but my motivations weren’t entirely altruistic. I was also—no, make that I am also, scared shitless.”

Seven caught the flash of thought in her mind. “Of me?” she asked incredulously. “Why?”

“You know why.”
Suddenly understanding, she tried not to let the pain in her chest get past her blocks. : *Because of what I just did to you.* :

Revi shook her head. : *Your guilt is preventing you from reading me clearly. No, because of what we can do to each other. Our mental connection makes a relationship between us different from anything you would have with anyone else on this ship. Sharing our thoughts and emotions can result in moments of incredible joy and connection. It can also result in us hurting each other very badly. I’ve never cared about anyone quite the same way that I care about you, and that makes me extremely vulnerable to what you think and feel towards me. If you care about me like that, you’ll be just as vulnerable. You need to understand that before you make any decisions about us.* :

: *Does not any intimate relationship carry the potential for hurt?* :

: *Yes. But our potential is for a whole different level of hurt. The payoff is that we also have a potential for a whole different level of love.* :

Love. It was a concept that she had heard about, read about, but had no real comprehension of. She had dismissed it in her first years on Voyager as first a physiological disease and then an irrelevant emotion, one that made its sufferers dangerously weak. But as time passed, she had come to see it in a different way. Dismissal had turned to curiosity, which had recently changed to a longing. She was aware that her lack of experience with love set her apart from the rest of the crew in a way that few other things would. And here, at last, was a chance to understand it, to experience it, with someone for whom she already felt an intense attraction.

Revi had followed her thoughts. : *I don’t think that’s entirely accurate. You’ve experienced love, you just haven’t defined it as such.* :

Seven raised her eyebrow. : *For whom?* :

: *Kathryn. I saw that in you the day I came on board.* :

This was a startling concept. She loved Kathryn? But it didn’t feel the same as what she felt for Revi. And yet Kathryn herself had said that she had unknowingly admitted that love in her wedding toast.

: *Oh, Seven. You have so much to learn.* :

From anyone else, that would have been irritating. But from Revi, and in thought form, the words were a simple statement of truth with no value judgment attached.

: *I agree. Does this mean you’ll teach me?* :
The thought was fraught with meaning, and Revi stared at her for a moment before answering.

: *How much do you want to know?*: 

: *Everything*: 

Revi nodded, and Seven knew she’d expected nothing less. She listened to the thoughts tumbling through Revi’s mind, arguments for and against going forward. She had made her wishes clear. Now Revi had to decide for herself, and it was plain that despite their conversation, this was still a difficult decision for her.

There must have been some sort of temporal anomaly in the room, because the twelve seconds before Revi finally spoke took much longer than normal time. Seven wasn’t surprised when Revi abandoned thought communication; it was as if the moment was of such import that the answer needed to be spoken aloud.

“I will teach you, to the best of my ability. I’m obviously not going to talk you out of this. And the truth is, I don’t want to. Not anymore.”

With that, Revi dropped her shielding. For the first time she let her true feelings show, and the intensity hit Seven with a physical force. She’d never felt anything like it. Even when Revi had been emotionally defenseless earlier, the fear and anger from her flashback had prevented other emotions from coming through. Now there was nothing to interfere with the strength of these feelings as they curled around Seven’s brain, freed from months of repression. They infused her with a sense of being wanted, of being priceless, of being...unique. Revi was showing her that she was the only one in her heart; that she was actively choosing Seven over all others.

: *Before we go any further, I need you to understand that I’ve made this choice once before. I’ve had several lovers, but only one partner. I need you to know about Steph*: 

The image that appeared in Seven’s mind surprised her. : *I’ve seen her before*: 

: *Yes. But then you didn’t know who she was*: 

A series of images came down the link, and Seven closed her eyes as the story unfolded in her mind. When the last image faded, she could hardly bear the sorrow. At last she understood the grief that had always underlain Revi’s every emotion and darkened so many of her thoughts. She knew why Revi was so afraid for both of them.
I understand. And I am very sorry, for you and for her. But you must know you were not responsible.

It doesn’t matter. It was still my hands, my actions. This is who you’re choosing.

Seven knew that Revi was waiting for her judgment. Would she proceed, knowing what had happened? If she decided not to, Revi would understand.

But for her, there was no question about her decision. This new knowledge, though tragic, had merely illuminated Revi’s motivations. It did not alter her thinking in any way.

I have never chosen a partner before. But I hope you’ll be both my first and my last. I have not changed my mind.

Revi’s eyes grew shiny, the only outward sign of her vast relief. Gods. You are so much more than I have ever deserved.

We will see if you still think so a week from now.

That earned her a watery smile. I love your humor. I love so much about you. It might seem strange, but what I feel for you is already stronger in some ways than what I felt for Steph. I want to show you.

The warm emotions returned, this time accompanied by images. Revi was sending thoughts of the two of them together, sharing their lives, in all the aspects of a long and loving relationship. Seven lived a lifetime in a few minutes as she watched their time together unfold in Revi’s imagination, and she wanted nothing more than to spend the rest of her real life making these thoughts and images into a reality.

The images changed, becoming more concrete and more physical: it was their date at Kronos as it might be now. They dined together; walked along the sea wall hand in hand; came back to Revi’s quarters and sat close on the couch, wrapped in each other’s arms. And then came the image of them naked and twined together in a bed, moving against each other in a slow dance that Seven recognized as copulation. But somehow she’d never imagined it looking like that.

It doesn’t, Seven. Copulation is a simple physical act. What I want with you is so much more. I want to make love with you.

Seven was startled to see that Revi had moved close to her—she had been so involved with the onslaught of emotions and images that her awareness of her external reality had faded. She looked into the eyes so
near her own and swallowed. This was what she wanted, and yet, it was much more than she’d expected.

Their eye contact never wavered as Revi spoke to her mind. *This is just the beginning. The actual reality of this may be overwhelming for you. Not just because it’s your first time, but because our mental connection is going to magnify everything. I’ll be watching what you’re feeling, and if you have even a moment of fear, I’ll stop. I will never do anything you don’t want.* : She reached up and touched Seven’s cheek with her fingertips. *This is all about you.* :

Seven captured the fingertips and held them against her face. : *No, it’s not. This is all about us.* :

Revi’s smile was slow and sensual. : *I haven’t been part of an “us” for a long time.* : Her thoughts telegraphing her intent, she leaned forward and kissed her. All of Seven’s doubts about her own ability to engage in a meaningful sexual encounter faded as she responded to the images and thoughts flowing down their link. Revi was showing her exactly what to do, without the limitations of speech. Almost instantly, Seven understood how to vary the pressure of her lips, how to move her mouth so that they made contact in different ways. When she felt Revi’s tongue touch her lips, she was already expecting it and knew how to respond. The part of her brain still devoted to logical processes found the sensations fascinating. Not only was she feeling the warmth and smoothness of her tongue sliding past Revi’s, but she could also feel what Revi was experiencing. Dimly she noted that her body temperature had already risen six tenths of a degree, and that her respiration was on the rise as well.

Revi pulled back, much to her disappointment. But that was short-lived as she felt lips moving down her jaw to her throat. Instinctively she let her head fall back, and marveled at how sensitive the skin of her throat appeared to be. The kisses were causing shivers to run through her body, yet she was experiencing a strange sort of lassitude at the same time. How was it possible to be relaxed and excited simultaneously?

: *Just wait, Seven. You don’t know the meaning of either “relaxed” or “excited” yet.* :

Revi spent so long kissing and gently nibbling her throat, jaw, ears and face, all while softly running her hands over her body, that Seven actually failed to note the elapsed time. Either her internal chronometer was nonfunctional, or her cortical implant was not making a proper connec-
tion. The most startling realization was that she really didn’t care—the sensations she was experiencing were of far more import.

Revi looked into her eyes as she slowly pulled Seven’s uniform shirt out of her pants, then lifted it up and over her head. Maintaining their eye contact, she ran her hand over the newly bared skin, making Seven wish she’d remove the bra as well. The thought drew a smile from Revi, who finally looked down at what she’d uncovered. There was an unfamiliar emotion from her then, something similar to attraction but much more intense.

: It’s desire. : Revi caressed the skin just above her bra. I’ve desired you for some time, but I’ve never let myself really feel it until now. And now, looking at you, I can hardly feel anything else. : She began kissing a trail from Seven’s throat to her cleavage, dipping her tongue in before moving elsewhere, everywhere, dropping kisses and small nips as she went. And for the first time since leaving the Collective, Seven gave herself completely over to someone else. Her trust in Revi was absolute. She was torn between wanting to sink into the current sensations Revi was producing now, and feeling an impatient expectation of what was to come. She wanted it all.

She could hear Revi’s amusement at that thought, but it vanished a moment later as Revi rose and took her mouth again, this time in a kiss that was far more demanding. Seven responded to the thoughts and images, wrapping one arm around Revi’s back and using a hand on the back of her head to pull her in. She felt her bra being unfastened, but paid little mind as the kiss took all of her attention. Then Revi pulled away, gently removing the bra at the same time. A reverent awe flowed down their link as she viewed Seven’s naked torso.

: So beautiful. : It was the last coherent thought that Seven caught for some time. When Revi began kissing and nibbling her breasts, her mind was overwhelmed with the physical sensations, as well as the mirrored sensations that came down their link. She felt both the heat of Revi’s lips and tongue on her nipple, and Revi’s own sensations of the hard, round nipple in her mouth. Feeling both sides at the same time ratcheted the intensity up to a level that was dangerously close to overloading her cortical implant. Dimly she heard the sound of someone groaning, and realized that it was her own voice. She was vocalizing without knowing it, her body was moving of its own volition, and her mind was buried under
the onslaught of images and sensations. She was losing control, and a
flash of fear lanced through her.

The mental bombardment and physical touches ceased abruptly. A
single thought cut through the silence.

: Seven, it’s all right. You’re all right. It’s absolutely normal to lose control
like that. :

She opened her eyes to see that Revi had backed off and was sitting on
her heels, their physical contact now limited to their entwined fingers. It
took a few moments for her to realize that Revi had raised her mental
shields once again, thus protecting her from the onslaught of shared
emotions and sensations.

: It is? Do you lose control? :

Revi grinned rakishly. : Only when the sex is really good. :

: Losing myself is a positive sign? :

: Oh yeah. : She sobered. : But I think we’ve gone far enough for today. This is
all so new for you, and I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable. : She reached out
for the bra, which lay on the floor by the couch, but Seven caught her arm.

: No. I do not wish to stop. : She had waited far too long for this to let it
end prematurely. She wanted to experience it all now, not parcelled out
over time.

Revi wasn’t convinced. : I felt your fear. I never want to feel that when we’re
intimate. :

: You will not, because I will no longer be afraid. You have explained; I accept
your explanation. Now I know what to expect, and I’ll be prepared for it. :

: Seven— :

: You must continue. Please. :

Revi stared into her eyes. Slowly, a smile curved her lips. : I will comply.

: She stood up, pulling Seven with her. : Let’s take this to the bedroom,
shall we? :

: I will go wherever you wish. :

Revi had begun to move away, but at that thought she turned, scan-
nning Seven’s face with a startled expression on her own. Seven stood her
ground, returning the look with a raised eyebrow. : Do you doubt me? :

: Never. I doubt me. :

Seven relaxed her stance. This was an issue they would not resolve in
one evening, much as she might wish to. : Then my belief must be enough for
both of us right now. : She brushed past a surprised Revi and walked into the
bedroom, quickly stripping off her uniform pants and underwear before turning around. Revi was just entering the room, and at the sight of Seven standing there naked she stopped, leaning against the doorway for support.

“By all the gods, Seven. You are so incredibly beautiful.” Revi’s voice was husky.

“I have never cared about that before now,” said Seven. “But I wish to be beautiful for you.”

“Don’t worry, you’ve succeeded and then some.”

“Then why are you still in the doorway?”

A low laugh rewarded her. “Mostly because my legs won’t move.”

Seven was intrigued by that sultry laugh. She stepped to the door and grasped Revi’s hand, pulling her into the center of the room before dropping her hand and tugging her uniform shirt out of her waistband. Then she paused, waiting for permission.

Revi ran her hand up Seven’s arm, brushed it over her shoulder and skimmed gently down her chest. Once again her shields came down, and Seven reveled in the renewed flow of emotions and sensations.

: Yes. Please. : It was written on Revi’s face as well as in her mind.

Immediately Seven pulled the shirt over Revi’s head and ran her own hands eagerly over the skin now exposed to her touch. It wasn’t long before that was not enough, and she reached behind Revi to undo her bra. There was no fumbling, no awkwardness; their shared connection told Seven exactly what to do and exactly how Revi felt about it. She pulled off the bra and dropped it to the floor, her eyes riveted to the already hardened nipples. Fascinated, she began caressing Revi’s breasts, marveling at the different physical textures as well as the sensations flowing down their link—sensations that she was causing. An unexpected feeling of power swept through her. It was her touch that made Revi’s eyes close, her light pinches that elicited those small, quiet vocalizations. Eager to explore the boundaries of this newfound power, she leaned over and took a dark nipple in her mouth.

The groan that seemed torn from Revi’s throat was music to her; but even better were the sensations that she could feel on Revi’s side. She sucked on the nipple, responding to the image that had appeared in her mind a moment before, and saw Revi’s head go back as a louder cry escaped.
The series of images that flashed through their link gave her a great deal to work from. The problem now was not that she did not know what to do; it was that she had to choose what to do first. There were so many possibilities open to her that she stalled momentarily, unable to decide which was the more enticing.

Impatient at her indecision, she wrapped one arm around Revi’s upper back and the other around her hips, abruptly pulling their bodies together while she bit down none too gently on the tendon in Revi’s neck.

“Gods, Seven!” The cry was wrenched from Revi. : *And I was worried about YOU?*

Seven smiled, adding a slow, minute gyration of her hips as she held Revi in place, kissing her deeply. She found her body responding to both her own sensations and Revi’s, and soon became aware that they shared an urgent need. Their minds were now so tangled together that it was becoming difficult to tell where Revi’s feelings ended and her own began, and the situation was made even more complicated by the fact that her feelings had intensified so much that they easily equaled Revi’s.

Suddenly a flash of joy came down the link. Revi had finally thrown off all restraint, accepting Seven as an equal partner who did not need to be treated quite so carefully. And before Seven had even processed her intention, she found herself being propelled backwards, bumping into the bed and falling on it. Immediately Revi’s hand and clamp were moving up her legs, making trails of fire along her nerve endings. Not to be left behind, Seven sat up and unfastened Revi’s trousers with blinding speed, pushing them and the underwear beneath them down as far as she could reach. Revi sent a mental command as she finished taking them off.

: *Scoot up, Seven.* :

Seven pulled herself up so that her entire body was on the bed. Before she had even settled in place, Revi climbed on the bed with her, straddling her body on all fours. The look in her eyes and the emotion emanating off her was something new, and Seven thought it looked remarkably similar to that of a predator eyeing its intended prey.

Revi’s smile was sensual. : *You should recognize it. You were looking at me exactly the same way not eight seconds ago.* :

: *Ah. Is that what Lynne means by “you look good enough to eat”?*

A bark of surprised laughter greeted that question. : *Maybe. But there’s another possibility.* :
The image that hit Seven’s mind made shivers run down her body, which she could only attribute to a sense of anticipation. She had seen this activity illustrated in her research and knew that it was supposed to produce some of the strongest physiological reactions attainable in a sexual encounter. And she was very ready to experience it with Revi.

: Show me. :
: I just did. : Revi waggled her eyebrows.

Seven directed an even stare toward her lover. : That is not what I meant, as you well know. Show me or I will be forced to do something we will both regret. :

Delighted surprise came down the link. Revi had not expected her to be playful. : Are you threatening me? : 
: I never threaten. I merely state consequences and act when necessary. :
: And what is the consequence if I don’t show you? :
: Do you really wish to find out? :
Revi gave in. : No. I have far better things to do. :

With that thought, she lowered her head and began a line of soft kisses down Seven’s throat. The kisses continued between her breasts, then circled around while Revi explored one of them more thoroughly. Once again Seven found herself reeling from the dual sensations, and when Revi wrapped her lips around a nipple and began sucking, she found herself flung back to that dizzying mental state, that near loss of control, that had so unnerved her before. But this time she was prepared, and let herself go without a second thought.

: Thank you for your trust. It’s such a precious gift. : The emotion that accompanied Revi’s thought was deeper than anything she’d seen before, and Seven wanted to explore it further, but she couldn’t seem to maintain her thought processes with any kind of coherence. Finally she gave up, promising herself to revisit it later, when she could think properly. For now she devoted herself to simply experiencing the sensations that were overwhelming her. Revi’s attentions to her breasts were increasing in their intensity, and the persistent sucking was evoking answering sensations in her groin. She could feel Revi’s rising arousal as well, which affected her own even more, in a seemingly never-ending upward spiral.

Revi shifted, bringing a knee to rest on her legs, and Seven immediately spread them to make room. With a smooth movement, Revi slipped her legs inside and settled in, pushing herself down so that her attentions were now directed to Seven’s abdominal implant. It was an area that
Seven would never have willingly shown another person besides the Doctor, knowing how very different it was from the unbroken skin of full Humans. But Revi possessed the same implant, and apparently knew things about it that Seven did not. Things such as the previously unimagined sensitivity of the areas between the metal ridges, where the mesh appeared to be connected directly to her nerve endings. Her body was arching upward, and her hips were moving of their own accord. She wanted the sensations to continue forever, but then remembered the earlier image Revi had sent and wished instead that Revi would move lower. If that activity was supposed to create even stronger physiological responses than those she was experiencing at the moment, then she wanted to feel them now.

: It’s not very Borg-like to be so impatient. : Revi was looking up at her with dancing eyes.

Seven’s answer was immediate and heartfelt. : I am less a Borg now than I have ever been. :

She felt the surprise, and a moment later Revi came back up her body to devour her lips in a passionate kiss that sent chills down her spine. When respiration became an issue, Revi pulled back and smiled at her. : You have no idea how happy it makes me to hear that. :

: Of course I do. Our minds are one. :

: Not exactly. But they will be. :

Seven lifted an eyebrow. : What do you mean? :

Revi just shook her head as her smile grew larger. : You’ll see. Before too long, I expect. : And with that she resumed her activities, gradually working her way down until her face was at the apex of Seven’s thighs. With great care she spread Seven open, gazing at what lay before her with a sense of worship that warmed Seven throughout. The images that came down their link grew increasingly sharp and powerful, and Seven had just enough mental processing capacity left to deduce that Revi’s growing arousal was also enhancing the quality of their connection.

That capacity fled, however, at the first touch of Revi’s tongue on the astonishingly sensitive tissues between her legs. Everything she had ever read on this topic was completely inadequate to the task of describing the reality. Of course, none of those sources had ever described it in the type of situation she and Revi were experiencing. Revi’s tongue and fingers were causing reactions in nerve endings she didn’t even know she had,
but Revi’s own sensations, of the soft—and in one place, surprisingly hard—flesh beneath her tongue and around her fingers, of the taste and scent, more than doubled the mental impact. Her body now seemed entirely detached from her mind, moving to its own rhythms, deregulating her breathing and inducing vocalizations that were neither coherent nor controlled. The mental impact was another form of lovemaking altogether as each of them fed the other with her pleasure, increasing and entwining until Seven could no longer distinguish Revi’s thoughts and impressions from her own. She lost herself eagerly in the duality of their experience, luxuriating in a sense of belonging she had never, ever known before, feeling the tension and pleasure building higher and higher, to an end she could not imagine. When they reached a tension that seemed truly unbearable in its brilliance, a shattering release shook both of them and suddenly their minds truly were one, with no barriers left standing, and for one blindingly perfect moment she saw Revi in her totality; every thought, emotion and memory at her fingertips.

She cried out at the loss when that moment faded away and their minds separated once more, the sensation of her own individuality shocking in its loneliness. With her body continuing its minor convulsions and her lungs seemingly unable to pull in enough oxygen, she put her hands to her face and cried, the sorrow of losing that perfection more than her already overstimulated mind could withstand.

: I’m here, Seven. I haven’t gone away, gods, please don’t cry. : Revi’s weight settled on top of her and she immediately wrapped her arms around her, pulling their bodies together as if she could physically recreate the joining she had just experienced in her mind.

: I thought the omega molecule was perfection. For three point two seconds I had the opportunity to look into the face of it, and I thought I would never again have such an experience. But I was wrong. This was perfection, and it hurts me to lose it now that I’ve found it. :

: But you haven’t lost it. :

Seven shook her head, hurt and bewildered that Revi could lie about something so painfully obvious.

“Seven, look at me.”

Revi’s voice startled her into opening her eyes, and what she saw stopped her tears instantly. In her research of Human relationships, she had often come across the reference of eyes being “windows to the soul,”
and had dismissed the concept as fanciful and irrelevant. But now, looking into Revi’s eyes, she understood. The connection she had just felt was still there, reflected back at her in an expression she could now recognize.

“Yes,” said Revi, smiling as she caressed her face. “It’s still here. It’s just in a different state right now. There are other ways to reach the kind of bonding we just experienced—drugs and meditation are two—but doing it through lovemaking is the easiest. It’s also the shortest-lived, and I should have warned you about that. I wanted the bonding to be a surprise; I didn’t realize it would hurt you. Forgive me?”

“No,” Seven rasped, her throat dry. She swallowed twice before attempting further speech. “There is nothing to forgive. I believe that had to be experienced to be understood.” Releasing Revi from her tight grip, she raised her hands to the face that had swiftly come to mean everything to her. “I know more about love now than I could have learned in a terabyte of data. Enough to know that I love you, Revi. This is not a crush.”

Revi nodded. “I know. I saw it in the bonding. I’m so sorry I doubted the strength of your feelings. My blindness and stupidity put us both through hell. I’d ask you to forgive me for that, but I know you already have.” She ducked down for a kiss, and when she raised her head the smile on her face made Seven’s breath catch. “And I also know that you’re perfectly aware of my own feelings, but I want to verbalize them just the same. I love you, Seven, so much that it scares me. I have since that moment in Kathryn’s ready room, when you showed me so much kindness and compassion that I never wanted to let you go. When you held me I felt safer than I ever have in my life. You gave me the strength to stop running—from everything except you.”

“You’ll always be safe with me,” said Seven. “I understand now how much you need that, and I’ll protect both your body and your mind with everything I have.”

“I know you will.” Seven had never seen Revi smile like that; it held none of the shadows that usually hovered in the corners. “And I understand how much you need our connection. It will always be there, and a lot stronger now that I don’t have to keep my blocks up. We can reach that moment of perfection any time you want; it’s always within your grasp.” She paused. “Well, within bounds of reason.” She began to chuckle as she projected a series of images into Seven’s mind: the two of

*Future Perfect*
them making love on the conference room table, while the rest of the senior staff looked on in shock.

“Tom Paris wouldn’t be shocked,” said Seven. “He’d be taking notes.”

Revi threw back her head and laughed heartily, her delight sliding smoothly down their link, and Seven found herself laughing with her in a reaction that felt entirely natural. So natural, in fact, that she was unaware of its import until she felt Revi’s surprise. As her laughter wound down she stared up into Revi’s eyes, enjoying their shared happiness. “That was wonderful,” she said.

Revi laughed again. “Yes, it was,” she agreed. “I hope to hear it a lot more often. I think you and I have needed each other.”

“I’ve never needed anyone,” Seven responded automatically, but then frowned. “At least that’s what I once thought. It was incorrect. I do need you—you complete me.” Her frown vanished. “We complete each other.”

“I was waiting for you to finish that thought. There is no imbalance here, Seven. We need each other equally, and if you ever have any doubt about that, you know what to do.”

“Yes,” said Seven, content in the knowledge that she had just been given the ultimate acceptance.

They relaxed in each other’s arms, enjoying the comfort of simply being together. Seven’s mind belied the peaceful pose of her body, however—it was operating at a furious pace as she processed all that she’d just learned.

:Seven, you’re making me tired just listening to you. :
:That is not my intention. But there’s so much to understand. :
:Well, you could just accept it all and not worry about it. :

Seven turned her head to look at her lover, and Revi laughed. “Okay, maybe not. Gods, you should see your face. You look like I just suggested that we hold hands and jump out an airlock.”

Seven ignored the jibe. “I’m attempting to resolve a contradiction. In my research into the mechanics of copulation, there were many references to the pain and bleeding involved in a Human female’s first experience. Yet I felt no pain, nor did I observe bleeding. Can you explain?”

“Ah. Yes, I can. You had no hymen.”

Seven immediately felt inadequate, but Revi squeezed her. “Stop that. It’s really common. This is one of those areas where romantic literature has practically no resemblance to real life. In all the romantic literature, a
woman *always* has a little pain and bleeding her first time, and it’s made out to be something important for a whole bunch of reasons, most of which aren’t healthy in my opinion. But the truth is that there are many ways for a woman to tear her hymen—an accident, a highly active lifestyle, even a hard landing after a high jump. You were Borg, Seven; involved in space battles. You didn’t exactly lead a quiet existence. I’d have been surprised if you *did* have an intact hymen.”

“Was your hymen intact?” Seven asked.

Revi ran her fingertips up Seven’s abdominal implant. “I saw that one coming. No, it wasn’t. I’m not sure when I tore mine, but I used to ride horses a lot. Plenty of bouncing on a hard saddle, especially when I was first learning and hadn’t quite mastered posting. I remember at least one time, when I tried a jump I wasn’t ready for and hit the saddle hard enough to take my breath away. Suddenly I had new sympathy for men who get kicked in the testicles. But I don’t ever remember bleeding, so I can’t point to any particular event.”

“But if hymens are so easily torn in situations other than intercourse, why does the literature not reflect this?”

“I think you’re opening a whole anthropological can of worms there. Historically, there has always been a lot of importance placed on virginity for all kinds of reasons, most having to do with a sense of ownership and possession. But unless there’s an actual medical examination, virginity can’t be proven without the convenient appearance of blood and pain. So the literature puts those things in. And they *do* happen, Seven; many women retain intact hymens until intercourse. But the percentage is a lot less than the literature would have us believe. I think the myth of the virginal hymen is still so strong, even after thousands of years, that a lot of people honestly don’t realize it’s a myth. They think that hymens never break except during initial intercourse.”

“As I did.”

“Case in point.”

Seven was disgruntled. “How can such misconceptions be allowed to continue?”

“Because Humans aren’t Borg. We don’t have universal sharing of information.”

“I’ve often thought of Humans as inefficient. This is additional data to support that belief.”
“Yes, but Borg don’t have sex. It’s too inefficient. Personally, I’m willing to put up with a little inefficiency in order to get payoffs like that.”

Seven considered that for two point eight seconds before rolling them over and smiling down at her new lover. “I concur.” With no further delay, she began applying the many lessons she had learned in the last hour. As with everything else, she was a quick study, and when she had this kind of incentive her scholastic excellence was unparalleled. She had a difficult time reining in her impatience, but her desire to take Revi to the same heights she had just experienced helped reduce her sense of urgency. She delighted in her ability to make Revi’s body move to a rhythm of her own choosing, and the textures of the soft curves beneath her hands and lips were enough to occupy her for hours of intense study. But of far greater import was the building mental connection. She felt Revi’s arousal, her voluntary surrender of control, and once again they shared their pleasure with each other in the rising spiral that Seven knew she would never get enough of. She fought the temptation to rush the moment, wanting this spiral to go as high as possible before it ended. Reverently she slipped her fingers into Revi’s center, feeling both her partner’s sensation of physical fullness and her own of an enveloping velvet heat. A slow thrusting, a leisurely exploration of those complex folds with her tongue, and soon the spiral ran out of her control—Revi’s pleasure was taking them both higher than she’d realized. She held on to Revi’s bucking hips, her own body swept along for the ride, and then closed her eyes as the barriers fell and the bonding exploded across their connection. In her ears and mind she heard both Revi’s cry of release and her own of sheer joy. This time, even as her body shook in the orgasm, she was able to focus more on their mental joining—a perfection that validated her very existence. She searched their bonding for specific memories, and experienced them in all the richness of reality. Hours passed in microseconds, and when she crashed back into her own individuality the sense of loss was tempered by the knowledge that she could attain this connection again and again. It would never be truly lost.

: I could spend the rest of my life pursuing that moment. : She lay there, exhausted, her cheek pillowed on Revi’s thigh.

: Gods, I wouldn’t survive it. You have a focus unlike any I’ve experienced. :

: Elaborate, please. :
When you’re making love to me, you’re devoting one hundred percent of your attention to me. That’s not the norm. It’s an incredible feeling.

Seven raised her head to find Revi looking down at her. But that is what I felt when you made love to me. What else would we be focusing on?

Revi dropped her head back and laughed tiredly. “Oh, Seven. You have no idea how impersonal sex can be. And I don’t think I ever want you to find out.”

Seven rose to all fours and made her way to the head of the bed, noting distractedly that her arm and leg muscles were extraordinarily weak. She was relieved to arrive at her destination, where she laid back and scooped Revi up so that she was lying full length on top of her. A small yelp was squeezed out of Revi as she felt herself lifted, and she raised a sardonic eyebrow at Seven once she’d been settled in place.

“Is this to be my new sleeping position?” she asked.

“This is the only condition I can imagine that could induce me to attempt sleeping,” Seven said. “If you wish me to ‘sleep with you,’ it will have to be in this orientation.”

“Getting a little ahead of yourself, aren’t you? Did I invite you to stay?”

“No,” said Seven in perfect confidence, “but our minds have been one and I know everything about you. You want me to stay.”

“Gods, you’re insufferably arrogant. I can see the bonding is going to make you worse than anyone’s wildest dreams.” But Revi’s smile belied her words, and their link still included all of her emotions. Seven knew she was actually quite pleased.

“I don’t mean to be arrogant,” said Seven honestly. “I have never understood how simple truth is so often mistaken for arrogance. Besides, I’m glad you want me to stay, because I never wish to leave.”

Revi’s face softened and she crossed her arms on Seven’s upper chest, resting her chin on them. “Then we’re in perfect agreement.”

Seven nodded. “Will you explain about sex being impersonal?”

“I knew you wouldn’t let that one go.” She sighed, and Seven could hear her ordering her thoughts. “There’s sex, and then there’s making love. What you and I just did was making love. The difference is in the emotions, or lack thereof.”

“I understand,” said Seven, who had been following both the spoken
and unspoken thoughts. “But if the emotions are present, do the partic-
pants not devote all of their attention to each other?”

“Ideally, yes. In reality, not always. Even partners who love each other
deeply can have intimate relations that don’t hold a candle to what we
just experienced, because they aren’t focused for any number of reasons.
Stress, outside distractions, time limits, mental concerns…”

“But those factors will always be present,” said Seven. “The moments
when all outside influences are ideal must be very rare. Today you were,
and still are, very concerned about the ramifications of your flashback this
morning. Yet you did not let it affect your focus on me. I share that
concern, as well as a strong desire to separate Chakotay’s head from his
neck—” Revi snorted—“but I would never allow that to interfere with my
focus on you. Why would we? If people are limited by circumstances, how
do they enjoy their lovemaking?”

“Speaking from experience, I can say that we enjoy it by lowering our
standards. There’s an old saying that even bad sex is good.” Seven shook
her head at the contradiction, and Revi laughed. “I’m so glad you don’t
understand that. But Seven, sex is very pleasurable at all levels. If people
were dissatisfied with anything but the level you and I have achieved—
well, we’d all spend a great deal of our time being unhappy. What we have
is unusual. Even discounting the link, a lot of people don’t experience
anything close to what we just did, but they still enjoy it.”

“I’ll accept your word,” said Seven. “I have no wish to acquire data on
my own.”

Revi smiled at her. “Good. I selfishly have no wish to see any other
partners in your mind.”

“You are gratified to know you’re my first.”

“Gods, you make me sound like such a lecher. But I guess you’re right.
Partially.”

“Partially?” Seven extended her mind into their link, grateful that
Revi’s blocks were still down and that she allowed the exploration. “You
are worried that I will eventually wish to try other partners. For compar-
ison purposes, or because I will grow tired or bored. I will not,” she said
with complete certainty.

Revi’s stare was level and very serious. “You can’t guarantee that.
People’s emotions change.”

“Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds, or bends with
the remover to remove,” quoted Seven. She had only intended to use the second and third lines of the sonnet, but when she felt Revi’s amazement she couldn’t resist finishing it. “O, no! it is an ever-fixed mark that looks on tempests and is never shaken; It is the star to every wandering bark, whose worth’s unknown, although his height be taken. Love’s not Time’s fool, though rosy lips and cheeks within his boding sickle’s compass come; Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks, but bears it out even to the edge of doom. If this be error and upon me proved, I never writ, nor no man ever loved.”

Revi’s look of total shock struck her as humorous, and for the second time in her adult life, she laughed. “You did not expect me to quote a sonnet?” She was delighted that even with their connection, she could still surprise her partner.

“That’s putting it mildly. I never pictured you reading Shakespeare.”

“Kathryn enjoys poetry. She loaned me a book of sonnets in her efforts to help me understand the concept of creativity, though I believe she secretly hoped it would give me an insight into Human emotions. It did. The most famous of all Earth playwrights stated, over seven hundred and eighty years ago, that love was defined by its very constancy. I love you, therefore by definition it will not change at its most basic level. And if what I feel is not love, then I challenge you to show me an example so that I may determine the difference.”

Revi opened her mouth, then shut it again. “Remember when I said there was no imbalance in our relationship?”

“Of course.”

“I might have been wrong about that. I think I’m going to be scrambling to keep up with you.”

Seven tightened her arms around Revi. “You will not. But you must know that I will never accept statements like that one without a full exploration of the logic. It is not logical to tell me that my love for you will eventually fade.”

“Seven, there’s nothing logical about love in the first place. Emotions aren’t logical.”

“No,” agreed Seven. “So why are you arguing with me?”

Once again Revi was stopped cold. This time she gave up and, to Seven’s momentary distress, rolled off.

“Wait!” Seven tried to catch her, but Revi was fast on her feet.
“Come on,” said Revi. “It’s time for our next lesson in lovemaking. Lesson Twenty-Six: Singing in the Shower. If you thought the mental aspect of what we just did was breathtaking, wait ‘til you see what happens when we touch each other at the same time. Think orgasm squared.”

Seven knew that Revi was referring to the Doctor’s organized and numbered lessons on dating, utilized during her first attempt to research Human romantic interactions. She followed Revi with a smile, thinking that if the Doctor’s lessons had been like these, she’d have required no further instruction.
Chakotay unrolled his medicine bundle and stared at its contents. It had been too long since he had last consulted his animal guide, and his current confinement was a harsh testament to how far he had drifted. The verbal flaying Janeway had given him had hurt more than anything he could recall, even her rejection of him as a potential partner, and he was determined to get back into her good graces. As a self-inflicted punishment, he’d watched the sickbay security log three more times, each time wincing at his own actions. He had behaved unprofessionally. But he still couldn’t shake the thought that Sandovhar was more than she seemed, and dangerous to the crew. Janeway had never explained that damnable interlink Sandovhar had hooked Seven into, nor the obvious changes in Seven’s behavior since Sandovhar had come on board. He just wasn’t comfortable with the ex-drone. But for Janeway’s sake, he’d do his best to explore his own feelings and determine whether or not her accusation of prejudice had any basis in truth.

Placing his hand on the akoonah, the device that would assist his mind into the spirit world, he gazed at the carved river stone and began the ceremony.

“Akuchimoya. We are far from the sacred places of our grandfathers. We are far from the bones of our people...”

As he spoke the sacred words a familiar lightness invaded his body,
and he soon found himself among the windswept cliffs of his spirit place. Breathing the dry, warm air, he smiled to himself. Why had he put off this journey?

“Because you weren’t ready to hear my words,” said a familiar voice. Chakotay wheeled in shock.

“Father!”

Kolopak smiled. “I’ve been waiting for you. You certainly took your time.”

“I don’t understand. You’ve never been in my vision quests before.”

“Yes, I have. You just never needed me before.”

“How can you say that? I’ve needed you more times than I can count.”

Kolopak shook his head. “What you needed was to find your own strength. You no longer seek strength now, but an understanding of yourself, and that’s my department. No one can know you like your father.”

“Then you know why I’m here.”

“Of course. To remove the scales from your eyes and the stoppers from your ears. You took longer than I expected, my son.”

Chakotay felt a brief flash of irritation; his father always did know how to get under his skin. Kolopak laughed.

“It is a father’s right, and never more so than in the spirit world. I have better access now than ever.”

Chakotay stared at him, forcing down his indignation. How many times had he wished he could speak with his father just one more time? Would he waste this chance on old angers and childhood grudges? If he had learned one thing in the Delta Quadrant, it was to seize every opportunity as if it were the last. Because it very well might be.

“Then you have learned well, my son.” Kolopak beamed at him with visible pride. “But you still have much to learn. Come, walk with me.”

An outside observer in Chakotay’s quarters would have seen the commander place his hand on an electronic device, chant a few sentences, and then cease moving for over an hour. When he finally stirred again, it was to drop his face in his hands.

“Oh, Father,” he mumbled. “I had hoped to be a much better man when I saw you again. I thought I was through being angry.”

Slowly he got to his feet and stood up, his legs tingling from the sudden rush of blood into inactive limbs. Rubbing out the pins and needles, he walked to his desk and retrieved his comm badge.
“Chakotay to Captain Janeway.”
“What is it, Commander?”
His eyes closed, both at her tone of voice and her impersonal use of his rank. He had some very large bridges to rebuild.
“I have a personal request.”
“Revi, you must get up. Kathryn gave you a twenty-four hour deadline to see the Doctor and you have only thirty-one minutes remaining.”

“I know, I know. But if she’d known what was going to happen, I think she’d have made that deadline something along the lines of a week.”

Seven smiled at her reluctant partner. “And you believe she didn’t know this would happen?”

Revi’s eyes flew open and she sat up, propping herself up with her hands. “I don’t think I like what I’m hearing in your head.”

Her new position displayed her breasts to excellent effect, and Seven shamelessly enjoyed the view. “Whether or not you like it is irrelevant. The fact remains that Kathryn gave me precisely the same time off that she gave you, implying that she knew we would spend that time together. Since we have never before spent that length of time exclusively in each other’s company, the conclusion is inescapable. She knew that we would become lovers.”

“She couldn’t have known,” argued Revi. “The last time she and I discussed you, I made it very clear that I didn’t have those kinds of feelings for you.”

“Apparently it’s much more difficult to convince those with whom you do not share an interlink. Both Kathryn and Lynne assured me that you
had ‘those kinds of feelings’ for me when I spoke with them at the end of their honeymoon.”

“I know,” groaned Revi. “I picked that one up in our last bonding. Gods, how embarrassing. And I’m supposed to speak to them again? I don’t think I even want to see them again. Lynne was ready to kill me.”

“You’re being unreasonable.” Seven ran her fingers through Revi’s hair, having learned that her lover greatly appreciated this form of touching. “They’ll be very happy for us. Both of us. However, your social acceptance is not what concerns me at the moment. Your physical health is. Come on, your delay tactics are ineffective with me.”

Muttering, Revi allowed herself to be pulled out of the bed and into the shower. Her efforts to entice Seven into another round of lovemaking were rebuffed as additional delay tactics, which they were, but Seven could see that Revi was stung by her refusal.

“I will be more than happy to renew this activity upon our return,” she said, reinforcing her assurance with a passionate kiss. When she pulled away, the smile was back on Revi’s face.

“Promise?”

“Of course.”

Revi sighed and finished soaping up. “I know I sound like a six-year-old. It’s just that what we’ve experienced in the last twenty-four hours has been pure magic, and there’s a part of me that’s afraid that when we walk out that door, nothing will be the same.”

“Nothing will be the same,” Seven pointed out. “When we arrived in these quarters, we were friends and shipmates. We will leave as lovers. Why would you wish things to be the same?”

Revi ducked her head under the water. : You’re so good for me, Seven. You keep me on my toes like nobody I’ve ever known before, with the possible exception of Kathryn. : 

: Can you imagine an interlink with her? : Seven had often thought of this scenario.

: You must be kidding. That would be terrifying. That woman already knows me better than I know myself without an interlink; I can’t imagine what she’d be like with one. :

Revi finished rinsing and stepped around Seven, allowing her to take her turn in the water. In only one day, thanks to their link and a natural compatibility, they had already acquired an ease of movement that spoke of long inti-
macy. Seven had not recognized it until Revi had pointed it out, informing her that it was not usual for a relationship as new as theirs. Seven took it as one more proof of the inevitability of their coupling. They were simply meant to be together. She had spent some time estimating the odds of their meeting, but had been interrupted in the middle of her calculations by a lover who had already grown impatient for the next round. The next time she’d had a moment to think about it, she’d decided she simply didn’t care.

She pondered Revi’s thoughts on an interlink with Kathryn as she quickly finished rinsing. “I can imagine it in regards to her insight into my mind,” she said as she shut off the water and opened the shower door. Her longer arms had an easier reach for the towels, and she handed one in to Revi before taking her own. “It would simply be more of the same. Her ability to understand my thought processes has too high a success rate to be explained as either chance or educated guesses. She seems to know me, as you said, better than I know myself.” They stepped out of the shower and began dressing; Revi in civilian clothes and Seven in her recycled uniform because she had nothing else with her. “What would differ would be my insight into her mind. That, I think, would be fascinating.”

Revi paused as she buttoned up her shirt. “I guess I hadn’t thought about it from that angle.” She finished buttoning and took up a hairbrush. “But you know, Seven, she’s still Human. A unique and truly remarkable one, but Human nevertheless. If you could see into her mind, I think you’d find the same wishes and doubts that we all have.”

Seven took her turn with the brush while Revi passed the sonic dehumidifier over her hair, drying it almost instantly.

: I find that difficult to believe. : Seven appreciated the fact that no amount of noise, even the high-pitched whine of the sonic dehumidifier, could interrupt their conversation.

: Why? :

: Because I have witnessed Kathryn in moments that would have rendered most individuals either fearful or extremely sad, and she has rarely shown any hint of those types of emotions. : She paused in her thought as Revi clicked off the dehumidifier and handed it over, then continued as she dried her own hair. : I have, however, seen her happy and angry; playful and ruthlessly efficient. Therefore I know that she is not repressing her emotions, unless she has the ability to repress them selectively. :
And why wouldn’t she? Seven turned off the dehumidifier with great relief. “This device makes my teeth hurt.” She began to twist her hair up, but Revi put a hand on her arm. Seven looked at her in the mirror and smiled at the wish that was crystal clear in her mind. “I will comply,” she said, letting the hair fall and earning a kiss for her reward. “But only because I’m not on duty. It’s an inefficient style and impedes my visual range.”

“Yes, but it looks fantastic.”

Seven rolled her eyes, but they both knew she was pleased. They walked out of the bathroom and sat on the bed together as they put on their footwear, while Seven resumed their prior discussion with an ease that Revi shared. “I don’t know. Is it possible to selectively repress emotions? I had believed it to be an all-or-nothing proposition. When I was Borg I felt nothing. When I became Human I felt everything.”

“You’re a special case. You didn’t have a lifetime to learn how to separate your emotions. Some people are very good at it, and Kathryn is one of the best I’ve ever seen. That’s not necessarily a good thing for her personally, but it helps make her a great captain.”

They left Revi’s quarters and made their way down the corridor, continuing their conversation in private.

How do you know about her ability to separate emotions? Because I’ve seen her in a few unguarded moments. I know for certain that she has some of the same emotions and doubts that we all do.

Is this anything you can share with me? They stepped into the turbolift, acknowledging the two ensigns who were already in it. “Deck five,” said Revi. Not without betraying her confidence. But I’ll ask her about it. I don’t want to have to keep any more blocks up with you.

Seven looked at her, pleased at this testament to their growing intimacy and trust. I appreciate that very much. Thank you. She noticed the ensigns looking at her oddly, and realized that she was smiling at Revi. Having heard none of the prior conversation, her facial expression must have seemed inappropriate.

Revi turned and smiled right back at her. If they’re going to think you’ve gone space happy, they might as well think the same of me.

Such solidarity made Seven’s smile even wider, and by the time they
disembarked on deck five, Revi informed Seven that they’d made a big enough impression to guarantee inclusion in that day’s hot gossip.

“Seven! Doctor Sandovhar—it’s good to see you both,” exclaimed the Doctor when they entered sickbay. He sounded genuinely happy as he chattered on, leading Revi into her office since all of the biobeds were occupied. Seven had not often seen him since turning her regular checkups over to Revi, and for a moment she felt guilty at not spending more intervals of time with him. She was mindful of his attraction to her, and having recently learned the difference between unrequited love and love that was returned in equal measure, she now felt sorry for him. She wished he could be as happy as she was.

“I’m sorry that I couldn’t be here to help with the Arnett,” said Revi.

The Doctor made a motion of dismissal with one hand while activating his medical tricorder with the other. “Don’t worry about it,” he said, running the probe up and down her body. “Most of the injuries were handled by Mr. Paris and Ms. Hamilton, and the more serious ones, while certainly life-threatening, were easily taken care of by your tireless and efficient emergency medical hologram. It wasn’t anything along the lines of, say, resolving an artificially induced disease.”

“Not going to forget that anytime soon, are you?” Seven recognized Revi’s tone as indicating her amusement, and could hear it in her mind as well.

“Not until I devise some means of returning the favor.” He focused his attentions on her head, changing some settings on the tricorder and making several additional passes before replacing the probe and deactivating the tricorder. “You’re in perfect health. Just in time for my day off tomorrow.”

“And who authorized that?”

“The captain, yesterday. Seems she took pity on my overworked matrix. I have a golf game scheduled in the holodeck.”

“You know, Doctor, it makes perfect sense to me that you would enjoy the world’s most boring and pedantic game.”

Seven listened to the banter, knowing that Revi had worked and planned to get this relationship to precisely this point. She had learned more about Human interactions in the last twenty-four hours than in any single year prior to now. An interlink with Revi, or at least a Revi who was
now allowing near-total mental access, was the most efficient learning device ever invented.

“At least I knock balls around on a large, healthy, outdoor venue instead of squinting over twelve square meters of green felt in some smoke-filled room,” said the Doctor. “And since any mention of your chosen vice must bring to mind your hustling of Captain Janeway—with whom I feel great sympathy, might I add, as a fellow victim—I should pass along a message. The captain wanted you to stop by the bridge after I cleared you.”

“Then I guess we’d better go.” Revi pushed off the desk she’d been leaning against. “Do you have your report on the Arnett? I can take that with me and catch up.”

“Oh ah ah,” said the Doctor, waggling his index finger. “I believe you were ordered to take yesterday and today off. Today is less than half over. Try again tomorrow.”

“Doctor…”

“The Doctor is correct, Revi.” : And I would prefer your undivided attention for as long as I can get it. Who knows when we’ll have another opportunity? :

Revi looked at Seven and shook her head. “I could fight one of you, but not both. Fine, let’s go. Thank you, Doctor. Enjoy chasing your little white ball around, and let me know how many times you have to cheat.” She led the way out of sickbay, ignoring the Doctor’s indignant huff.

Kathryn was equally happy to see them when they arrived on the bridge, instantly turning the conn over to Commander Tuvok and leading them to her ready room. She escorted them to her upper level and procured drinks for all, smiling as Seven carried Revi’s drink over to her. Once they’d settled on the couch, she said, “I can’t tell you how relieved I am to see you, Revi. The Doctor said you were fine, but that only answered the physical part of my concern. I can see now that the mental part is doing equally well.”

Revi glanced at Seven. “It is, thank you. Better than well, actually.”

“I can see that, too.” Kathryn took a sip of her coffee. “So tell me, do you two have any illusions about keeping your relationship a secret?”
Seven choked on her hot cocoa, requiring a cough or two to clear her bronchial tubes. She could feel Revi’s amused resignation.

“How did you know?” Revi asked.

“Oh, let me count the ways.” Kathryn’s smile was brilliant. “There’s the minimal to nonexistent personal space between the two of you. There’s Seven’s solicitousness, which I’ve never seen before. There have already been several glances back and forth; you can’t keep your eyes off each other and I’d bet you’re counting the minutes until you can get back to private quarters so you can stop worrying about keeping your hands off each other. But most of all, there’s the glow.”

“What glow?” asked Seven, alarmed by the possibility and then puzzled when Kathryn just put her cup down and laughed. Revi wasn’t helping matters, having joined Kathryn in the private joke.

“It’s an old joke about new lovers,” explained Revi. “We’re supposed to glow with happiness and thoroughly sated desires.”

“She’s mostly right,” added Kathryn. “It’s old, but it’s not a joke. You two are blinding examples. I may need to turn down the lighting in here.”

“Kathryn, stop; you’re embarrassing Seven.” Which was quite true; Seven had no idea that her new status would be physically apparent and was somewhat distressed at the prospect.

“But not you, I notice.” Kathryn turned to Seven and took her hand with that beautiful smile still on her face. “I’m very, very happy for you. This is the best part of being Human, and I’m thrilled that I get to watch you learn about love and happiness now, instead of the more negative emotions you’ve had to deal with. And I can’t think of anyone better suited to you than Revi.”

“Thank you, Kathryn.” Seven was pleased and touched by what amounted to a benediction from the one person whose admiration and respect she most desired.

“And Revi—” Kathryn reached out with her other hand—“all I can say is, it’s about time you finally saw the light. If you’d taken much longer I don’t know if I could have held Lynne back. She was more than ready to ‘assist’ you in taking off your blinders.”

Revi dropped her head. “I know. I’ve been an idiot.” She raised her eyes to Seven’s and her back straightened. “But Seven has forgiven me, and that’s all I need. So you can tease me all you want, but I’m immune to that one.”
Kathryn looked back and forth between them. “You two do have it bad. I think I’d better instruct Tuvok to check the fire detection systems in both your quarters.”

“Kathryn!” Revi’s voice betrayed her embarrassment, and Kathryn laughed.

“Not immune to everything, then. Good. If I can’t have a little fun with you then there’s just no point in having arranged this so beautifully. I must say I’m quite proud of myself.”

“You’re insufferable,” said Revi. “You were right, Seven.”

“You said I was insufferable?” Kathryn gave Seven a mock severe look.

“No.” Seven would not be baited. “I said I was certain that you had ulterior motives for giving me the same time off that you gave her.”

“Damn,” said Kathryn, “I’m going to have to watch my step. Between the two of you I think my chances of pulling anything off have just been greatly diminished.” She squeezed their hands and then let go to retrieve her cup. “Now I do have to ask a serious question.”

“Go ahead,” said Revi and Seven simultaneously.

Kathryn swallowed and put the cup down. “I don’t want to pry into your personal affairs, but I need to know if this change in your relationship translates to a change in your mental connection. If I speak to you, Seven, am I speaking to Revi as well?” She looked at Revi. “Are you still separate mentally or has your interlink been altered?”

Seven ceded the question to Revi, who said, “It’s changed. Any separation we maintained before was due to careful compartmentalization of our thoughts and the fact that I had all of my emotional blocks at full strength. Now that I’ve taken those blocks down, I frankly have no desire to put any of them back up again, and we’re both enjoying not having to guard our thoughts so carefully. So in terms of confidentiality or security, which I assume is why you’re asking, you’ll have to consider us one entity.”

Kathryn nodded. “I suspected that. Thank you for your candid answer. That will be a bit of an adjustment, and it may require some changes in policy. But we’ll work with it.”

“Thank you,” said Revi. “We really appreciate your open mindedness. You’re handling this with the tolerance and grace I’ve come to expect of you.”

“You’re very kind to say so, but I’m just doing what’s best for the ship.
You’re both far too valuable to Voyager for me to allow an unorthodox situation to interfere with your inclusion in this crew.”

“That is incorrect.” Seven could not let that pass without comment. “At the very least it is incomplete. We would remain members of this crew regardless of whether or not you ordered us to keep our minds as separate as possible, and I believe you know that. There is no Starfleet directive requiring you to adapt to our situation. If any directive existed regarding a Borg interlink, it would no doubt require just the opposite. You are treating us with thoughtfulness and generosity, despite the potential difficulty of your own adaptation. Why would you not wish this to be recognized?”

Kathryn seemed speechless for a moment. “All right,” she said at last. “That was your voice and your phrasing, but I heard Revi in there too. Are you speaking through each other?”

“No, of course not.” Seven was insulted. “I am still entirely myself; Revi doesn’t control me.”

: It’s all right, Seven. She doesn’t understand this, but she’s trying. : Aloud Revi said, “There’s more to our connection than what we’ve told you so far.”

“Then I think you’d better tell me the rest.” Her tone was cool, and Seven was dismayed to hear it. Impulsively she reached out and took Kathryn’s hand in both of hers, and when wide blue eyes swung up, she found to her surprise that she could read emotions in them she’d never before been able to recognize.

“Kathryn,” she said softly, “your greatest goal for me has always been the reclamation of my humanity. But all of the books, programs, and philosophical discussions in the universe could not do for me what a single day of exquisite mental bonding has done. Revi has shared more than her mind and body with me; she has shared her humanity. That’s what you’re hearing now. There’s nothing sinister about it; there’s no control; there’s just the beauty of understanding. I still have a great deal to learn, but I see so much now. Don’t be afraid for me. I’m truly happy.”

The fear she’d seen in her friend’s eyes—fear that she’d realized was for her—faded into a new comprehension. Kathryn raised her other hand and hesitantly touched the loose hair brushing Seven’s shoulder.

“You’re so different,” she said. “I’ve seen you through so many changes, but I’m not sure I can keep up with you now.”
Seven squeezed the small hand in her own. “You will. I won’t lose you. I love you, and have for a long time. I just never had a way of understanding or defining it before.”

Tears sprang to Kathryn’s eyes, and Seven looked at Revi in panic. : What did I do? :
: Nothing but tell her a truth she’s longed to hear. And one she probably never thought she would. :
: I don’t know what to say now. I do not wish to distress her further, and she dislikes displaying emotion, especially while on duty. :
: Too late for that. :

Seven looked back to see Kathryn wiping her cheek and drying her hand on her pants. “Kathryn,” she said helplessly, “I’m sorry for causing you to cry on your shift.”

Kathryn shook her head, smiling. “Only you would say that. It’s okay, we’re alone and besides, these are tears of happiness. Everything I ever wanted for you is sitting right in front of me, and it’s more than I can hold in right now.”

“Everything?” asked Revi. “I can think of at least one more aspect of humanity that you haven’t seen yet.”

“Do I want to know?”

“Laughter.”

“You’ve laughed?” Kathryn’s expression was incredulous as she turned to Seven.

“Four times in the last twenty-four hours,” said Seven with some pride. And then found herself catching her friend as Kathryn launched into her arms.

“Seven, that’s wonderful! I’m so happy for you!” Kathryn pulled away, a wide grin lighting her face. “I can’t wait to hear it. How could you change so much, and literally overnight?”

“The bonding,” said Seven as if that explained everything. For her, it did.

“You said that a few minutes ago. An ‘exquisite mental bonding.’ Can you explain that? Am I prying?”

To Seven, nothing Kathryn asked could remotely resemble prying. “Not at all. But I will leave the explanation to Revi; her descriptive skills are superior to mine.”

Kathryn turned to Revi, who immediately flushed. “It’s, um, some-
thing unique to us. I mean, I’ve never experienced it with anyone but ex-
Borg who have joined me in an interlink. It happens during physical rela-
tions…and, um…”

Kathryn held up her hand. “Never mind. I am prying.”

Bemused by Revi’s sudden loss of verbal expression, Seven said, “No, you’re not. I retract my former statement, Revi; your descriptive
skills have inexplicably failed.” She turned to Kathryn. “The bonding
takes place during our simultaneous orgasms. It lasts only for a few
seconds, but in those few seconds our minds truly are one. Our
thoughts, emotions and memories are completely open and intertwined;
there is no separation of self. That is how I’ve learned so much in such
a short time. A great deal of information can be shared in twelve
bondings.”

She could feel the embarrassment flowing off Revi, and looked at her
in surprise to see her face hidden in her hands. : Revi? What’s wrong?
:
: Oh, nothing. You just told our captain that we had twelve simultaneous
orgasms in the last day. Just a little tea time conversation between friends.
:
Seven looked back at Kathryn, who was leaning against the couch with
an odd expression on her face.

“All right,” said Kathryn, “I’m officially on break now. This is not a
captain conversation.”

“Told you,” mumbled Revi.

“My god,” Kathryn said, shaking her head. “Twelve simultaneous
orgasms? I can’t believe you two walked in here under your own power.”

Revi groaned and rested her head against the couch with her forearm
over her eyes. “Just kill me now.”

“I don’t understand,” said Seven. “Why is this so difficult for you to
believe? Is it the quantity or their simultaneous nature?”

Kathryn poked Revi in the ribs. “You haven’t had the birds and the
bees talk yet, have you?”

“Oh, gods.” Revi turned away from them, bent over and laid her face
on the couch. “I’m not here,” she said in a muffled voice.

Kathryn threw back her head and laughed. “Oh, yes you are! This is
the most fun I’ve had in a while.” She turned to Seven. “Well, since your
partner appears to be out of commission, I guess it’s up to you. Are you
telling me that all of your orgasms are simultaneous?”

“Of course,” said Seven. “Why would they not be?”
Kathryn poked Revi again. “You’ve ruined her. She’ll never be happy with normal sex now!”

Revi just curled into a tighter ball, making an incoherent noise.

“Kathryn, you’re embarrassing her.” Seven felt obligated to protect her partner, even though she didn’t fully understand the cause of her distress.

“Thanks, Seven, I can see that even without the benefit of an interlink. And I’m taking great joy in it, too. Consider this payback for hustling me, Revi. At least I’m only embarrassing you in front of one witness.”

Revi uncurled and sat up, her normally dark skin even darker. “Okay, okay, point taken. You’re a piece of work, you know that? I would never have thought you’d want to have this conversation.”

“Normally I wouldn’t, but the fact that it bothers you so much changes everything.” Kathryn turned a delighted smile on Seven. “Let’s get back to this simultaneous orgasm discussion.”

“Oh for the GODS’ sake!” Revi burst out. “All right! Because of our interlink, we feel each other’s physical sensations just as strongly as our own. Which means that whenever one of us has an orgasm, the other does at the same time. Are you satisfied?”

“No, but you obviously are,” said Kathryn, right before wrapping her arms around her stomach and dissolving into laughter.

Revi exhaled in disgust, but then she began to laugh too, and the combination of Revi’s amusement in her mind, appreciation of Kathryn’s play on words, and the sight of both of them laughing affected Seven as well. Her laughter joined that of the other two, and Kathryn instantly raised her head, looking at her in wonder.

Seven and Revi wound down, with occasional chuckles still escaping. Kathryn was still staring at her. “God, you have a beautiful laugh,” she said.

“She does,” agreed Revi. “I wish you could see her the way I do.” She reached across the captain and took Seven’s hand. “She’s beautiful on the inside, too.”

Seven smiled. : Thank you. :

: No need to thank me for speaking the truth. :

“I know that,” said Kathryn. “I knew that almost from the day we met, even when you were fighting me so hard.” She shook her head. “But I never dreamed we’d end up like this. Seven, this is already beyond my wildest hopes for you, and I get the feeling you’re just getting started.”
“That may be true,” said Seven. “But the journey began with you. I said at your wedding that you had a place in my heart that no other would ever fill. That has not changed, nor will it.”

“Speaking of unchanging emotion,” said Revi, “I must thank you for lending Seven that book of Shakespearean sonnets. She quoted the hundred and sixteenth to me last night as part of a logical argument regarding the quality of her feelings for me. You’ve created a monster.”

“I happily accept credit.” Kathryn tilted her head. “‘Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds?’”

“That’s the one. I’ve heard the legends about the arguments you had with Seven when she first came on board, and I have to tell you that I’m amazed you won any of them. She’s formidable.”

Kathryn winked at Seven, who felt a warm sense of inclusion.

“Don’t worry,” Seven said. “In time I believe I can train her to be nearly your equal in verbal battle. Until then, do you think that you could advise her? As yet she is not a sufficient challenge.”

Revi sent her a sizzling glare, and Kathryn laughed. “Revi, you’ve got your hands full, and I’m not getting in the middle of it.”

Revi’s expression turned serious. “Actually, that brings up another topic that’s rather personal.”

“Well, this seems to be the time for it. Go ahead.”

Seven was fascinated by the process in Revi’s mind as she cast about for the proper phrasing.

“You and I have a unique relationship,” Revi began. “One that includes a close personal component, which I cherish. You’ve shared things with me that I’m reasonably certain you haven’t shared with anyone else, and I have valued those moments above almost all others. And I’ve kept your confidences.”

“I know you have,” said Kathryn. “And I’ve cherished those moments, too. It’s meant a great deal to me to have someone I could really talk to.”

“Then you need to know that I’m still here for you to talk to, but it may not be just me anymore. I have deliberately not shared those thoughts with Seven, but I have no control over what we share during a bonding. And, truthfully, I would welcome the freedom of not having to compartmentalize those thoughts anymore. I will if you ask, without question and for as long as you need. But I’m hoping that you can eventually be comfortable with having Seven as a confidante as well.”
Kathryn sat back, looking first at Seven and then at Revi. “I won’t lie to you, that’s a little difficult for me to wrap my brain around.”

“Kathryn, I’ve been privy to the medical records and procedures of every crewmember Revi has treated since beginning her work in sickbay,” said Seven. “The first thing she did upon returning to work was refer me to the regulations regarding doctor/patient privilege. I understand the concept and would never betray that privilege; nor would I ever betray any confidence that you shared with Revi, or me by proxy.”

“I’m not worried about your understanding of confidentiality,” said Kathryn. “It’s just that the relationship we’ve shared to this point has been based on the dynamics of captain and crewmember, or mentor and pupil, and only recently as friends and family. I’m not accustomed to thinking of you as someone with whom I can share my own personal issues. I’ve only shared that with three people in the last six years, and I’m married to one of them. What Revi is suggesting is a radical change in the way you and I interact.”

“A moment ago you were concerned about the speed of my personal growth and whether or not you could ‘keep up.’ It would seem that altering the dynamic of our relationship may be a change you need to make in order to facilitate that.” She could see Kathryn wavering in the face of her logic, and followed it up with an emotional appeal. “Besides, I would like it very much if I could give you even a fraction of the personal understanding and support that you have given me.”

“Oh, Seven. You never fight fair.”

“I learned from you.”

“No, you didn’t. You were fighting me from day one. You arrived knowing how.”

“True. But I never seemed to win until I began adopting your techniques.”

They stared at each other in silence for several seconds, and Kathryn slowly nodded. “Revi,” she said, still looking at Seven, “don’t worry about compartmentalizing any personal confidences I make. In future I’ll make them with the understanding that Seven will know everything you do. But Seven,” she said earnestly, “this is a big step for me. It may take me a while before I feel comfortable sharing that way with you directly.”

“I understand. You may never feel comfortable doing that. But I hope that someday you will.”
Kathryn looked away, then rose and walked to the replicator. “I need a refill. Anyone else?”

“No, thank you,” they said.

By the time Kathryn returned to the couch, she had reacquired some of what Seven was beginning to think of as her personal shielding.

: Not a bad description, Seven. : Revi gave her a wistful smile.

“My break’s over,” said Kathryn, and they knew she was back in captain mode. “I need to talk to you about yesterday.”

“I know,” said Revi. “Are you having second thoughts?”

“About what?”

“Having me as CMO.”

Kathryn shook her head. “Why would I have second thoughts about that?”

“Well, let’s see. I had a mental breakdown, which caused you to reroute staff into sickbay, pulled you and Seven off the bridge, and completely disrupted the medical treatment of fifty-four people. Not something you usually want to see in your CMO.”

“Seven, didn’t you give her my message?”

“I did.” : But you didn’t hear it, did you? : The thought she directed at Revi earned her a guilty look.

“Then I’m not sure why it’s coming up now. Revi, this is not at all what I needed to talk about, but I can see we’re going to have to deal with it first. No, I’m not having second thoughts. You didn’t have a mental breakdown, you had a flashback. It’s a completely different thing and you of all people should know that. We dealt with it and it’s over. And if you think the Doctor hasn’t had his share of issues, including a feedback loop resulting in total program paralysis, then I’ll have to fill you in on some history. Suffice to say you have nothing to worry about and my only concern on that topic is for your mental health, which you have assured me is good. If you’re all right, then I’m all right. Got it?”

Seven smiled to herself. She’d attempted to tell Revi these exact things, but somehow it seemed to have more weight coming from Kathryn.

Revi glared at her, but it quickly dissolved into a sheepish smile. “Got it,” she said, looking back at Kathryn. “You’re actually the second person to tell me that, so I guess I’ve no choice but to believe it. Thanks for not giving up on me.”
“Kathryn doesn’t give up on her crew,” said Seven.

“And especially not for such a half-assed reason,” added Kathryn. “Thanks, Seven. I may call you in here more often when I have to deal with Revi; it’s rather nice having backup.”

“Call me whenever you require my assistance.” Seven was enjoying this new interaction.

“Great, now I’m being double-teamed.” Revi tried her best to sound grumpy, but nobody in the room was taking her seriously. “All right then, if you didn’t intend to demote me, what did you need to talk to me about?”

“Commander Chakotay. After reviewing the security logs and establishing the chain of events, I removed him from duty and confined him to quarters for ten days.”

“On what charges?”

“Unprofessional conduct and actively endangering crew members.”

“Not that I don’t wish him all the best in his incarceration,” said Revi, “but I don’t get it. He didn’t actively endanger me.”

“Yes, he did,” said Seven. “You did nothing wrong, yet his report to security had both Kathryn and me convinced that you were a danger to the ship.” Without meaning to, she flashed onto the memory of Kathryn pulling one phaser rifle out of the weapons locker and offering a second to her.

Revi’s eyes widened as she caught the memory, and she looked at Kathryn in disbelief. “You did have a rifle. I remember it now. You were going to shoot me? The stun setting alone on those things can still cause a lot of damage to cybernetic systems.” She paused. “Tell me you had it set to stun.”

Now it was Kathryn’s turn to look disbelieving. “Of course I had it set to stun! Do you think I wanted to hurt you? I thought you’d gone rogue, Revi. I didn’t know what was happening, but Seven couldn’t read you, Chakotay said you’d attacked him and a patient and were a danger to the ship, and you didn’t even recognize us. My first duty is to this ship and crew; you know that. If you were a danger, then it was my responsibility to neutralize you, by whatever means necessary.”

“Whatever means necessary? Meaning if you couldn’t have brought me down with a stun bolt, you’d have changed the setting. Well, that would have been the ultimate irony, wouldn’t it?” Revi’s voice dripped with
sarcasm. “To be killed by one of the only people I’ve ever trusted and considered a friend. The shipmates I assimilated would have loved that.”

Seven saw the dismay flash across Kathryn’s face.

: Revi, stop! :

Her mental call was sharp enough to break Revi out of the spiraling emotions she’d been swept up in, and she looked toward Seven with her heart in her eyes. Seven got up from the couch and knelt in front of her, taking her Human hand in her own.

“We’ve both avoided thinking about this, but I believe you now require the whole truth,” she said gently. And she projected her memories of the event, from the moment Revi’s emotions had swamped her on the bridge until Kathryn had offered to wait outside the cargo bay. When she was done, Revi was shaking.

“Are you all right?” Kathryn had kept still during the memory exchange, but her concern was readily apparent.

“I’m fine,” said Revi, squeezing Seven’s hand. “I remembered some of that, but certainly not all of it. I’m sorry, Kathryn, I was way out of line just now.”

“Well, it’s not every day you find out that your friend was prepared to shoot you.” Kathryn’s effort to dismiss her apology fell flat.

“It’s also not every day I find out my friend was prepared to release me, even though I was violent and out of my mind, just because Seven said I wouldn’t hurt anyone. You trusted her and you trusted me, and I feel like a heel for not trusting you just now.”

“Revi, there’s no fault here. Well, there is, but the person at fault is already being punished. Don’t punish yourself, please. That’s not why I told you about Chakotay.”

“Why did you?” asked Revi. Her relief at the change in topic nearly overwhelmed their link, and Seven realized that in her focus on this conversation she’d forgotten to raise her own mental blocks against her lover’s emotions. They had practiced this in Revi’s quarters, with Seven protesting that she saw no reason to block the emotions from her mind after having waited so long to have access to them in the first place. But Revi had insisted, and now she understood why. After the exposure she’d had in the last several minutes, she felt a reduction in her own energy levels. Concentrating, she raised her blocks and found herself able to relax. Revi’s emotions were still there, but the intensity had been reduced.
“First of all,” said Kathryn, “because I thought you’d appreciate knowing that his actions had consequences. And second, because he called this morning and requested release from his quarters for the purpose of visiting you.”

Seven stiffened. “He would be wise to remain well away from Revi. If he touches her again I will remove his hand. Permanently.”

“Seven, it’s okay. I’m grateful for your support, but I can still fight my own battles.” Revi looked back at Kathryn. “What does he want?”

“To talk with you.”

“Is there any reason to believe that this talk will be productive?”

“Actually, I think it might,” Kathryn said. “He went on a vision quest last night, and it sounds as if he’s learned a few things. I won’t ask you to do anything you’re not comfortable with, but if Chakotay is ready to reach out, maybe the two of you can find some middle ground.”

Seven listened while Revi thought furiously. She felt the reluctance and the doubt, and the force of will her lover employed to overcome them.

“I’ll talk to him,” Revi said at last. “But I don’t want him in my quarters, and I’m certainly not going to his. Can we use the conference room?”

“Why don’t you use my ready room? It’s less formal and probably more conducive to the type of conversation I think you might be having.”

“That’s very kind of you; thank you.”

“When will this take place?” asked Seven.

“Whenever Revi wants. Chakotay still has nine days left in his sentence.”

“Right now,” said Revi. “I want to get it over with so I don’t have to spend the rest of my time off dreading it.”

“Are you sure you’re ready?”

“No, but I’m sure I want to be done with it.”

“I understand.” Kathryn looked toward the ceiling. “Janeway to Tuvok. Release the lock on Commander Chakotay’s door.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Janeway to Commander Chakotay.”

There was a short delay before Chakotay responded. “Go ahead.”

“Doctor Sandovhar has agreed to hear what you have to say. Report to my ready room immediately.”

“Acknowledged. And thank you, Captain.”
“You can thank Doctor Sandovhar when you get here. Janeway out.”
Kathryn stood. “Seven?”

Seven rose from her position and deliberately took a seat on the couch.
“I will remain here. Revi should not be alone with him.”

“It’s all right,” Revi assured her. “You can monitor it from the confer-
ence room.”

“Insufficient. When Commander Chakotay mistrusted and hurt you,
his actions impacted me as well. The sooner he understands our connec-
tion, the better it will be for all of us. Especially him.” Her threat was not
a subtle one.

: Seven—:
: Do not attempt to dissuade me. This is not negotiable. :

They stared at each other in silence until Revi looked back at Kathryn.
“Go ahead, Kathryn. If you hear the sound of anything breaking, you
might want to send Tuvok in.”

“If I hear the sound of anything breaking, I’m beaming everyone in
this room straight to the brig.” Kathryn wasn’t joking. “Seven, I under-
stand your desire to protect Revi. But don’t forget who and where
you are.”

“I will not.” Seven knew that was her captain speaking.

Kathryn nodded and left the room. When the doors shut behind her,
Revi spoke.

“Do me a favor, okay? Don’t mention the simultaneous orgasms to
Chakotay.”

Seven looked at her in surprise until she felt Revi’s amusement. “You
are attempting to divert me with humor.”

“Can you blame me? You’re a little hot over there.”

“I am far less ‘hot’ than I could be. Commander Chakotay deserves a
harsher punishment than confinement to quarters, and I would be more
than happy to carry out that punishment. I’m only surprised that you
don’t feel as strongly.”

“I suspect the confinement was the least of the commander’s sentence.
I may have been out of it yesterday, but I still remember the look on
Kathryn’s face when I told her what happened, and I just got a second
look at it through your eyes. I don’t imagine her conversation with
Chakotay was a pleasant one.”

Seven remained unconvinced until Revi sent her some imagery from
her own early memories of Voyager that stopped her cold. Yes, now that she thought of it, Kathryn had always been able to affect her far more with words than any other punishment.

The door chime rang, and Seven felt Revi’s instant dread. She reached out and clasped her hand.

“Come,” Revi called. Her face showed none of her feelings.

Chakotay entered, dressed in civilian clothes, and walked up to stand in front of them. His eyes dropped to their linked hands, but all he said was, “Thank you for agreeing to see me. Do you mind if I sit?”

“I’d prefer it,” said Revi. Seven noted that he chose a spot on the other side of Revi, further from her own reach.

: That’s because he recognizes a threat when he sees one, darling. You’re practically bristling. :

Only with considerable effort did Seven keep her jaw shut. : Darling? :

: It’s a term of endearment. And you are very dear to me. Do you mind? :

: No. What should I call you in return? :

: Anything you want. :

Seven realized then that the dread had vanished from Revi’s mind, having been replaced with total confidence. She’d used their connection, and their feelings for each other, to shore up her defenses.

“Did you have something you wanted to say?” Revi asked. “Or were you just going to stare at us?”

Chakotay blinked. “I didn’t mean to stare. It’s just that I’ve seen behavioral changes in Seven over the last five months that I ascribed to your having some sort of mind control over her. It hadn’t occurred to me until just now that the most likely explanation was also the simplest.”

“You mean that we’re in love?”

He looked her in the eye. “Yes. Are you?”

“Not that you have the slightest right to ask that, but yes, we are. Is that what you wanted to talk about?”

“No. I wanted to apologize to you.”

“For what? Yesterday, or the last five months?”

He acknowledged her barb with a pained smile. “You’re not going to make this easy, are you?”

“You haven’t made much easy on me, Commander. You may think of me as a Borg, but I’m still a Human being with Human feelings. And you’ve managed to bring out all of the negative ones.”
“I know. And I’m sorry for that. I recently looked into my heart and wasn’t happy with what I found there. I let my fear of betrayal blind me, and it resulted in my injuring you and losing the regard of the one person on board whose opinion means the most to me.”

“The captain.”

“Yes.”

“So you’re here because you want to earn your way back into her regard?”

“In part. I’m also here because I would like to earn your forgiveness. I made assumptions when I came into sickbay yesterday that were based on my distrust of you. If I’d been thinking more objectively, more professionally, I would have seen that you weren’t assimilating that woman.”

Revi yanked her hand out of Seven’s, and Seven winced at the flash of rage that seared her mind. She was a little awed at its strength even with the mental blocks.

“You thought I was assimilating her?”

“You must admit it looked bad from my perspective,” he said, attempting to justify himself. “You were holding your…that arm at her throat and she was screaming.” He pointed at her cybernetic arm.

“You know,” growled Revi, “for a man who swore he was watching my every move, you haven’t been very observant. My assimilation tubules are on this hand, you fucking idiot.” She held her Human hand up in front of him, releasing the tubules from her wrist implant for effect. His eyes widened, and Revi shook her head as she retracted the tubules. “Holy gods. I knew you were a paranoid delusional when it came to me, but I had no idea how delusional.”

He was obviously shaken, and took several seconds to pull himself together. “Neither did I,” he said. “Doctor Sandovhar, please accept my apology. I let my distrust of you get entirely out of control, and I’d like to prove to you that the side of me you’ve seen so far is not my normal behavior—and certainly nothing I’m proud of.”

Revi watched him in silence, but her mind was anything but quiet.

“Tell me something, Commander,” she said at last. “Why should I accept your apology now when you wouldn’t accept mine five months ago?”

“No reason I can think of. But I hope you will. I don’t have much in
the way of excuses, but I hope you’ll listen to the only explanation I
do have.”  

She nodded. “Go ahead.”

He took a deep breath. “Do you know anything about my activities in
the Maquis, right before joining up with Voyager?”

She laughed, and Seven felt her let go of her mental restraints. “Com-
mander, I know everything about you, remember? You were one of us for
a short while. And when you joined with Riley, you shared yourself to an
even greater extent with her. You’re one of the very few Humans in the
universe who have experienced an interlink bonding. It was wonderful,
wasn’t it?”

He looked shocked, but then closed his eyes and swallowed. “Yes,” he
said quietly. “It was.”

“Then before you go any further, you should know that Riley and I
joined as well. Everything you shared with her, she shared with me. The
bonding is an all or nothing experience; she couldn’t have kept anything
confident even if she’d wanted to. Do you know how much it hurt her
when we had to use you? Did you know that she loved you?”

By the expression on his face, he didn’t.

“She never knew what happened to you after that. And I’m glad,
because it would have been very hard on her to see what you turned into.
A bitter, distrustful, unforgiving man. All because, for a period of seven
point three minutes, we took your will from you and forced you to
commit an action that you wanted to commit in the first place. Oh yes, and
saved a few thousand lives in the process. What a burden you’ve borne,
Commander. Why don’t you try having your will taken from you perma-
nently, and being forced to commit actions that make your soul shrivel
inside you? Actions including deliberate mutilation and homicide? You’ll
pardon me if I can’t find it in my heart to feel sorry for you.”

Chakotay’s jaw was slack, and he took a few seconds to straighten up.

“I deserve that,” he said. “You’re right; I’ve been clinging to a sense of
injury that I should have let go of a long time ago. But what the Coopera-
tive did to me isn’t the only reason I haven’t trusted you.”

“No,” she said WEARILY, “you were determined not to be caught trusting
another spy, another betrayer. Not after Tuvok and especially not after
Seska.”

He stared at her. “Is there anything you don’t know about me?”
“Sure, anything that’s happened in the last three and a half years.”
“So you knew from the beginning that I was putting you in the same category as Seska?”
“No. I thought this was all about the Cooperative. It wasn’t until our conversation prior to Captain Janeway’s wedding that I realized there was more going on. But I didn’t blame you for not wanting to trust a spy again. I just wish you’d compared me to Tuvok instead of Seska. I don’t have any great fondness for Cardassians either.”

He chuckled, and then stopped as if his amusement had taken him by surprise. “You seem different,” he said. “But I know you’re not. I’m just seeing you as you really are, for the first time.”

“Commander, the only person who sees me as I really am is Seven of Nine. And, to some extent, Captain Janeway. So don’t flatter yourself. But I know what you’re trying to say, and I’ll admit it does give me some hope that perhaps we can coexist without singeing the air between us every time we look at each other. I’m tired of keeping my guard up and I’ve got far better things to do with my time.” She looked at Seven, who smiled at her.

“Does that mean you accept my apology?”

Seven listened as Revi struggled with her choice. The desire to tell Chakotay where he could put his apology was extremely strong, but she eventually fought it back with the realization that such an answer would only exacerbate the problem. It was interesting, Seven thought, that to Revi’s mind the most significant argument for forgiving him was the knowledge that to not do so would undoubtedly disappoint Kathryn.

The mental struggle took some time, and Seven was pleased to note Chakotay’s increasing discomfort as he waited. But eventually Revi spoke.

“Yes, I’ll accept your apology. Does that mean you’ll be treating me like a Human being and a professional?”

“Yes,” he said immediately. “Thank you, Doctor Sandovhar. I appreciate this, and you won’t regret your generosity.” He waited, and when neither of them said anything, his discomfort became obvious. “Well,” he said, rising from the couch, “I guess I’ll be getting back to my quarters now.”

Seven stood up as well. “Before you leave, Commander, there’s something you need to understand.”

“What’s that?”
“I am not nearly as forgiving as Revi, nor will I ever forget the condition I found her in after your misguided attempt to detain her in sickbay. If you ever touch her in anger or distrust again, nothing and no one on this ship will prevent me from exacting retribution.”

Their eyes locked. Slowly, Chakotay nodded. “I understand, Seven. It won’t happen.”

“Good.” Her unwavering stare followed him all the way out, and only when the doors closed did she turn to Revi.

Who was smiling at her.

“Darling,” said Revi, “I don’t think that was quite what he was hoping for as a parting statement. But I have to admit it makes me feel cherished and protected.”

“You are.” Seven wrapped her in the hug she’d wanted to give her for the last half hour. “Shall we return to your quarters? I believe I have a promise to fulfill.”

“Yes, you do. And I intend to collect.”

Hand in hand, they walked down the steps and out the doors. Kathryn rose from her chair as they came up on the main bridge level, and when they mounted the steps to the upper deck, she walked to the railing to meet them.

“Everything go okay?” she asked quietly. “I didn’t hear anything breaking.”

“If you stand outside Revi’s quarters five minutes from now, you might,” said Seven as she drew Revi into the turbolift. “We’ve agreed it’s time for number thirteen. Good afternoon, Captain.”

The doors closed before Kathryn could pick her jaw up off the floor.
Seven could not remember ever being quite so reluctant to start a shift as she was this morning. Even in the early days of her time on Voyager, when every shift meant another eight hours of distrust and antipathy from her shipmates, she went to work willingly because the loneliness and boredom of the cargo bay was even worse. Now she worked among friends and family, had her own department and a critical function to the ship’s well-being—yet she could hardly bring herself to think about going on duty.

“Come on, Seven.” Revi tickled her lightly on the ribs above her abdominal implant. “Lovely as it’s been, we can’t stay here forever. We both have duty.”

“I do not wish to go. You still have leave remaining from Bliss, and I’ve banked several days as well. I suggest we use that time now.” Seven tightened her arm around Revi’s back, holding the smaller body close.

“I promise that we’ll use that time soon, darling. But I have a sickbay full of Arnett and something to prove.”

“You have nothing to prove to Kathryn, and at your rank hers is the only opinion that matters.” But Seven knew she was fighting a losing battle; Revi’s thoughts clearly showed that the person she had to prove something to was herself.
“You know that’s not true. I have to get back on the horse.” And before Seven could ask, Revi shared the source of the idiom.

Seven pounced on the distraction. “Why would anyone wish to use a large quadripedal mammal for transportation?” A moment later she had her answer in the form of several images and considerable data from Revi’s mind. That was the trouble with sharing thoughts; it made delay nearly impossible.

Revi laughed. “Yes, it does. Now come on.”

Still Seven refused to release her, but quickly changed her mind when a small electric charge leaped through her abdominal implant. With a yelp, she let Revi go and scrambled out of the bed.

Revi casually swung her legs over the side of the bed and stood up. “Thank you. Want to shower with me?”

“You electrocuted me!” Seven could not believe the evidence of her own senses.

“Oh, don’t be so dramatic. It was a little bitty zap, and if you won’t let me go when I ask then you’d better be prepared to pay the consequences.” Revi walked around the bed, wrapped her arms around Seven’s neck and drew her down for a long, leisurely morning kiss.

: You know I would never hurt you. I just wanted to get up, and I didn’t feel like a physical battle. :

Seven’s initial outrage was instantly calmed, both by Revi’s explanation and by the soothing influence of her kiss. : I should not have held you down. :

: Darling, I love it when you hold me down. I just can’t take advantage of it right now. :

They broke apart and rested their foreheads together. “Shower?” asked Seven.

“Shower.”

As they quickly prepared for their shift, they went over their expected day together and Revi suggested they meet for lunch. Seven was crestfallen. “I can’t. I’m scheduled for a late lunch to play Velocity with Lynne.” But then her spirits rose at the thought of a solution. “I will cancel.”

“You most certainly will not,” said Revi.

“Why not? Lynne would understand.”

“Yes, she would, but that still doesn’t mean you should do it. The first
mistake a lot of new lovers make is giving up their friends in favor of focusing on their relationship. It’s understandable and very tempting, but also inconsiderate and ill-advised. And I seem to recall from your own experience that you didn’t care for it when Kathryn went through that phase with Lynne.”

The reminder activated Seven’s memories, and she recalled with perfect clarity the frustration and unhappiness she had experienced at that time. She was dismayed that she had been so willing to cause the same feelings in her good friend.

“You’re new at this,” said Revi, stepping forward and zipping up Seven’s uniform jacket. Seven stood still, knowing that Revi felt great pleasure in taking care of her. “Don’t be so hard on yourself; it’s a perfectly natural response to a new relationship. And knowing Lynne, she’s probably half expecting you to cancel and would have no hard feelings whatsoever. But I think you’re better than that.”

“I wish to be the best I can be for you,” said Seven earnestly.

Revi tugged the jacket down and smoothed out the fabric with her hand. Then she locked her arms behind Seven’s back and looked up. “I know. I feel the same way about you. So I guess we’ll just have to achieve perfection.” She flashed a smile, and Seven knew she had no such expectation. It was interesting, being in love with someone who in many ways expected less of her than she did of herself. But then, Revi expected more of herself than Seven did, so perhaps this was simply Human nature.

: People spend years learning that one. You just picked it up in one day. : Revi let her go and put on her own jacket. “Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.”

Revi laughed. “Idioms just don’t quite sound the same coming out of your mouth.”

“What do they sound like?” asked Seven as they went out the door.

“Like royalty trying to use slang.”

FLETCHER DELANCEY

Janeway regarded her guest with a friendly smile. “Thank you for coming, First Duras,” she said to the Arnett who sat across from her desk. “I wanted to let you know that we’re within three hours of the coordinates you specified, so you may want to begin preparing your people. But we’re heading out of Visconi space anyway; are you sure you wouldn’t like
us to carry you all the way out? It would be no hardship on us and I’d feel better knowing you were out of danger.”

“Thank you, Captain Janeway,” said First Duras. “But we have already imposed on you long enough. I’m sure the warship waiting for us can get us out of Visconi space with no trouble, and truthfully, I think my people would feel more comfortable on an Arnett ship.” He seemed to realize what he’d just said and stumbled over himself correcting it. “I didn’t mean that as an insult in any way! Your crew has been kind and accommodating and we’ve been honored to stay with you.”

Janeway waved him off. “Don’t worry, I understand. It must be particularly difficult for you as a First. I know if I’d lost my ship, it would be hard to be a passenger on anyone else’s.”

He nodded. “Some things hold true for all captains and Firsts. But I’ll still be a passenger on the Tarsonn.”

“Yes, but at least the Tarsonn is an Arnett ship.”

His smile was wistful. “One of the few remaining.” The smile vanished and he became all business. “I’ll get started on preparing my people. Would it be possible for me to be on your bridge when we arrive?”

“Certainly. I’ll call you when we’re within visual range.”

“Thank you, Captain Janeway.”

Seven had barely walked into the holodeck before Lynne dropped her phaser on her towel and enveloped her in an unexpected hug. “Congratulations, Seven! I’m so happy for you!”

Seven hugged her back as well as she could without dropping her own phaser. “Thank you.”

“You know, I’m a little surprised you’re even here. I would have expected you to be spending every available minute with Revi, after all the waiting and worrying.”

“I admit that I considered canceling. Revi reminded me that it would have been inconsiderate.”

Lynne shrugged. “I would have understood. Sometimes it’s okay to be a little selfish. You’ve certainly earned it.” A wicked smile crossed her face. “On the other hand, I’m thinking you’ve got to be at least a
little worn out after the last two days, based on what I heard from Kathryn. This could be the best chance I’ll ever have of kicking your ass.”

“Dream on,” said Seven, knowing that her use of the phrase would make Lynne laugh. She was right.

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Janeway crossed her legs as First Duras settled in the chair next to her. “She’s a fine ship,” she commented.

The First looked at the main viewer with a broad smile. “Yes, it is. It’s not often I get to see one of these.”

The Tarsonn loomed before them, four times larger than Voyager and bristling with armaments, but still retaining some graceful lines. It looked, to her eyes, more than capable of taking on a Visconi warship. But the numbers didn’t appear to be in the Arnett’s favor.

“Captain, they’re hailing us,” said Lieutenant Kim.

“On screen.”

The ship vanished, to be replaced with an Arnett male who looked her over in a manner she didn’t quite like.

“Captain Janeway, I am greatly pleased to meet you at last. I am First Nestos of the Tarsonn. We’ve heard much about your generosity, and we can never repay you for the lives you’ve saved.”

“It was our pleasure,” said Janeway. “We’ve enjoyed getting to know First Duras and his people over the last few days.” She looked at the First sitting next to her. “But I think they’re ready to move on.” He tried to smile, but succeeded only in looking uncomfortable.

“I have spoken with First Duras, and he has nothing but praise for you and your ship. But yes, we are ready to take on our new passengers. We are prepared to receive transport whenever you wish.”

Janeway turned to Harry. “Lieutenant, are our passengers ready?”

“The first set are on the transporter pad and waiting,” he said.

“Then proceed. Tuvok, drop the shields.” Janeway settled back in her chair, preparing for more small talk. Transporting over fifty people, even with the cargo bay transporters, would take some time. Once that was done they would jettison the escape pods, which would then be tractored in by the Tarsonn. And during all that she’d be making nice with First
Nestos. This was the sort of thing she would have loved to delegate, and the one duty that she never could.

“Dropping shields,” announced Tuvok.

“Energizing,” said Harry, and everything went to hell. Fifteen armed Arnett appeared on the bridge, their weapons covering every officer. Tuvok acted quickly, hitting the red alert and drawing a phaser. Janeway and Harry were almost as fast, but none of them got off more than one shot each before being overwhelmed by Arnett. They were disarmed and released, and Janeway was shoved back into her chair with four Arnett pointing weapons at her chest.

“I wouldn’t make any more sudden moves,” said First Duras as he stood at a safe distance.

“What do you think you’re going to accomplish?” asked Janeway furiously.

“We’re just borrowing your ship,” said First Nestos from the main viewer. “I do apologize, Captain Janeway, but this is a matter of the survival of our species. We don’t want to harm any of you, out of gratitude for what you’ve done for us, but don’t think that our reluctance means we’re unwilling. We can and will kill anyone who interferes with our objective.”

“Which is?”

“Adding your ship to our fleet. Voyager could make the difference between survival and our eradication.”

“And that makes it right,” she snapped.

“Captain Janeway, this is war. There is no right or wrong anymore, there is only winning or losing. We have been losing. Your ship could change the course of our history.”

“You’re assuming that your takeover of my ship is already guaranteed. We don’t give up that easily.”

“The soldiers on your bridge are only part of the invasion team. We have another two hundred in your corridors right now, including the fifty-four you saved. They’re rounding up your people, most of whom appear to be unarmed.” He made a clicking sound in his throat. “We had not factored in such lack of preparation on your part. Thank you for making our job easier.” He tilted his head, examining a control board, and looked back up. “Ah. There is the resistance I had expected. Your crew are fighting superior numbers and superior weaponry, Captain Janeway. I
suggest you instruct your people to cooperate, or we will be forced to permanently eradicate the resistance. If you do not comply, the first person to die will be here on the bridge."

“And if I tell my crew to stand down, do I have your word that they’ll come to no harm?”

“You have my word,” he said. “As one First to another.”

Janeway nodded. “All hands, this is the captain. We are in Code Gray, repeat, Code Gray. Voyager has been invaded by a hostile Arnett force. You are ordered to cooperate with the invaders to avoid personal harm and damage to the ship. I repeat, do not resist the invaders.” She glared at First Duras, who had the grace to look embarrassed.


“It means we’re under attack from within. We have codes for any sort of battle scenario; it’s a way of getting critical information to all of my crewmembers in the shortest period of time. Code Red means to prepare for imminent battle, Code Yellow means that battle is possible but not imminent, Code White—”

“Never mind,” interrupted First Nestos. “I have no time for lessons in alien military code. But this had better not be a trick, Captain Janeway. If it is, your crew will suffer and that will be your responsibility. Now if you’ll proceed to your cargo bay, you can join the rest of your crew while we complete our mission. As long as you continue to cooperate, we will make this as comfortable for you as possible.” At his words, all of the Arnett on the bridge took one step toward their targets, using their weapons to indicate that the staff should move to the turbolift. Janeway noted wryly that she now appeared to be deserving of six soldiers all by herself.

“Don’t I feel special,” she muttered, turning her back on the main viewer and marching up the stairs to the upper deck. As she passed Tuvok’s board, she glanced at it briefly and was reassured by the glowing blue control at the top left corner, confirming that Code Gray had been initiated. She had faith in her crew. That alien military code Nestos had no time for was going to come back and bite him in the ass.

Seven reflected with some surprise that the previous two days did
indeed appear to have diminished her energy levels to some degree. For the first time since they had begun playing together, Lynne had prevailed in a game of Velocity. Her victory dance had secretly amused Seven, but she showed no outward sign other than a renewed sense of purpose. She had won their second game, and they were now tied in the third and final game of the match, with each of them throwing away any sense of caution or restraint in their efforts to win. Seven was determined to retain her unbroken winning streak, while Lynne was equally determined to end it. Sweat dripped off Lynne’s face, and she was calling more frequent breaks in order to towel herself off. Seven, of course, did not sweat, having nanoprobes and specially designed clothing to regulate her body temperature. She took great pleasure in pointing this fact out to Lynne, adding a new swear word to her growing vocabulary each time she did so. Lynne appeared to have an inexhaustible supply of them.

They were hotly contesting a point, with Lynne having already crashed into two walls in pursuit of hard-to-reach shots. Her craftiness showed in this last shot, which was now caroming out of a corner and making its way with great speed to the opposite side of the court from where Seven stood. Seven ran and launched herself in the air, stretching out to make the shot...when the program abruptly ended and she landed heavily on the floor of the grid-lined holodeck.

“What the hell?” asked Lynne, breathing hard. She walked to their pile of gear and towel off yet again. “What just happened?”

Seven picked herself up off the floor. “Computer, state reason for ending program.”

“Ship’s protocol for red alert conditions state that all holodeck activity must cease.”

The ship's computer had barely finished speaking when Revi’s voice broke into her mind, more worried than she had ever heard it.

: Seven! The Arnett have taken over the ship! I’ve got two with weapons pointed at me right now. They’re taking us to the cargo bay; they say there’s no point in resisting since they have two hundred soldiers on the ship and have already taken the bridge. They must have troop transporters. :

: Revi, do what they require and remain safe. They will not succeed. :

: Don’t you dare do anything to get yourself hurt or killed! :

: I will do what I must. You know that. And so will you. :

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She tuned out Revi’s fear for her and fought down her own for Revi; she could not afford distractions now.

“Lynne, we’ve been invaded. There are too many for open resistance.”

Lynne’s training with Commander Tuvok had obviously been effective. Her friend barely acknowledged the impact of the news, only pausing for a moment before asking, “Code Gray?”

Seven nodded. “Computer, are there any Arnett immediately outside the doors of Holodeck One?”

“The Arnett invaded us?” Lynne’s incredulous voice overlapped that of the computer.

“Negative,” it responded.

They moved to the doors and carefully looked down the corridor when they opened. Seven indicated that they should go left, and they ran down the corridor, phasers at the ready. They hadn’t gotten more than fifteen meters when four Arnett carrying energy rifles rounded a corner ahead of them. Both women dropped to the floor and fired, each by unspoken consent taking out the two on her side. All four Arnett fell in a heap before they even knew what was happening. Seven leaped to her feet and raced to the Jeffries tube access, with Lynne right behind her. Within seconds they were safely inside and had locked the hatch behind them.

“What is going on?” demanded Lynne in a whisper. “I thought the Arnett were grateful to us.”

“Apparently their gratitude was insufficient,” whispered Seven, just as Kathryn’s voice came over the comm.

“All hands, this is the captain. We are in Code Gray, repeat, Code Gray. Voyager has been invaded by a hostile Arnett force. You are ordered to cooperate with the invaders to avoid personal harm and damage to the ship. I repeat, do not resist the invaders.”

A worried look passed between them before both women turned without a word and began making their way into the bowels of the ship.
Chakotay sat bolt upright as the red alert klaxon sounded. “Computer! What is the nature of the red alert?”

“Intruder alert,” the computer said calmly. “Unauthorized transport of one hundred and sixty life forms.”

Shit! That was more than the entire crew complement of Voyager. “Computer, identify life forms.”

“All transported life forms are Arnett.”

Chakotay raced to his nightstand, pulled out his personal phaser, and checked the charge. Good, it was full. He set it to heavy stun, ran for the door—and promptly bounced off it, having temporarily forgotten that he was under confinement.

“Goddammit!” he roared. What a time to be locked in! He paced his living quarters in frustration, feeling utterly helpless and wondering what was happening outside. But then Captain Janeway’s voice came over the comm, and he smiled. Carefully he stepped into sensor range of his door; this time it opened. He looked left—the corridor was clear. Turning his head to the right, he found himself looking straight into the faces of two Arnett soldiers, both with rifles raised.

“Put down your weapon and come with us,” one of them said. “We do not wish to harm you.”

Chakotay slowly knelt down in apparent compliance, then quickly
dropped and rolled to one side, firing as he went. A phaser bolt singed the carpet by his head, but he managed to stun both Arnett before they got off any other shots. Rising to his feet, he sprinted down the corridor to the nearest Jeffries tube hatch, punched in the access code, and was safely inside before any other Arnett showed up.

Without pausing, he began scuttling down the crawlway to the nearest Jeffries tube, through which he could move between decks. Code Gray was a protocol created four years ago, after Seska’s betrayal had resulted in Voyager being taken over by the Kazon. Designed as a response to any future hostile takeover, the Code Gray protocol required all crew members to arm themselves if possible and hide from the hostiles. All crew managing to escape were to meet at a Jeffries tube junction on deck six, the midpoint of the most-used decks. They would not attempt communications. When the escapees had gathered, the ranking officer would organize a takeover. One detail that Janeway herself had written into the protocol, mindful of how an imprisoned crewman had been a vital part of the retaking of Voyager, was that any crew held in quarters or the brigs would be automatically released. Another was that the Doctor would be instantly deactivated, unless in the process of a vital surgery. This would keep him out of enemy hands and allow the resistance to reactivate him when sickbay was clear.

To aid the resistance, a computer program had been activated the moment Janeway’s voice had called out “Code Gray” on the bridge. It would effectively sabotage propulsion, weapons, transporters, communications and internal sensors. None except transporters would go immediately offline, since that would be too obvious. Instead, the program would simply...scramble things. Impulse engines were available, but not warp. The ship’s phasers would fire, but the targeting scanners were off. Communications would operate only sporadically, with no discernible source for the interruptions. And the internal sensors would give false readings on the number and locations of Voyager’s crew. The purpose was simply to buy time for the crew resistance.

The problem, Chakotay knew, was that as soon as the Arnett figured out that the breakdowns were part of a controlling program, they would target Captain Janeway for the command codes. Part of her job in a Code Gray situation was to resist turning over those codes for as long as possible, but if the Arnett were ruthless enough to begin killing members of
the crew, Janeway would have no choice. And once the Arnett had full control of the ship, resistance would be much more difficult.

It was a race against the clock, and as Chakotay began the descent from deck three to deck six, he fervently hoped that enough crew had escaped to help him win.

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Voyager’s crew stood around the cargo bay, forming little groups here and there as they conversed among themselves. Occasionally people would wander from one group to another in an apparently random fashion.

It was anything but. The groupings were designed to hide the fact that the senior staff had formed a command center near the back of the bay, their quiet planning concealed by the general hum of conversation. As the Arnett guards moved around the bay, Starfleet security members tracked them, moving from group to group and passing the word to the senior staff. In this way, no guard came near the command center without all of the senior staff being warned in advance; whenever an Arnett came close enough, all he or she heard was innocuous conversation.

Once B’Elanna and Revi had joined the command group, Janeway began the planning session.

“All right, I need options,” she said. “Who made it out? Revi, where’s Seven?”

“She’s with Lynne,” said Revi, and Janeway mentally thanked her for the tactful reassurance. “They’re at the rendezvous point with Commander Chakotay and Ensign Vorik. They’re waiting to see who else shows.”

“Excellent,” said Janeway. “We do have communications.” The Arnett had efficiently stripped them all of their comm badges upon their entry to the cargo bay, which had bothered her on three counts. First, it prevented her from emergency communications with her resisting crew. Second, it prevented the resistance from locking transporters on most of them, with the exception of those crew who were the sole representatives of their species. Their unique attributes would enable the targeting scanners to locate them. And third, it was going to be a hell of a mess sorting out and
identifying over one hundred and forty comm badges when this was all over.

“Good, I thought Vorik might have gotten out,” said B’Elanna with relief.

Revi tilted her head. “Seven says Ensign Watson and Lieutenant Ayala just arrived.”

“That’s a start. While we’re waiting, let’s explore our options. We’ve got three objectives: retake the bridge, neutralize the Arnett on Voyager, and neutralize the Tarsonn. In that order. Any ideas?”

With Revi and Seven acting as a communications conduit, the two groups brainstormed for several minutes without arriving at a workable plan. While the discussion went on, Lieutenant Andrews joined Chakotay’s team, apparently the only other escapee. It was less than Janeway would have liked, but more than the Arnett knew about. And the interlink between Seven and Revi gave them a secret weapon of enormous utility.

After discarding several options, Janeway thought of one that had potential.

“Revi, can you produce a gas that could incapacitate the Arnett without affecting any of our crew?”

Revi thought for a moment, then nodded. “Yes. If I had access to sickbay.”

Janeway smiled for the first time since the Arnett had beamed onto her bridge. “What if I get you access to the Doctor instead?”

“That would work.”

“Good. Then here’s what we’re going to do.”

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It was a good plan, Chakotay decided. Everyone had their marching orders and they were preparing to split into two groups. But before they moved out, he needed to get one very important point across to a member of his team. Taking Lynne Hamilton aside, he looked her in the eye and said quietly, “This is going to be the hardest on you. Understand, Lynne, you can’t afford to think like a wife. Right now she’s your captain.”

It was a deliberate reminder of an argument between them that had approached mythical proportions in the crew’s retellings, when Lynne had
publicly called him out for not doing all she thought he should to rescue Janeway on Dakmor.

“I understand,” she said.

“Do you really?” He looked at her sympathetically. “Do you understand that you might have to watch her being physically abused? She knows that’s a possibility and she’s prepared for it. You have to make sure that we have every second of time available to us before you make a move. In this case, your duty to your captain has to supersede anything else.”

“I said, I understand. If they touch her I’ll make sure they eventually pay for it, but I won’t intervene until it’s absolutely necessary. Don’t worry, Commander.”

He watched her for any signs of doubt and saw only steely determination. Nodding his head, he gestured for Ensign Watson to join them.

“Hey, Emily,” said Lynne. “Nice to have you on my side this time.”

Ensign Watson ducked her head. “I really am sorry about that.”

“Don’t worry about it. At least I know you’re not afraid to pull the trigger.”

“Save the niceties for later,” said Chakotay, who was secretly pleased to see the two women addressing their conflict. “Get moving.”

“Yes sir,” they said in unison, and as they began moving away he heard Ensign Watson ask, “You know where we’re going, right?”

“Are you kidding?” Lynne’s voice floated back. “The last time Tuvok tested me on Voyager’s layout I practically had to draw the blueprints from memory. I know this place down to the last air duct.”

Which is why you’re doing this, thought Chakotay. He was immensely grateful that Tuvok had been personally training Lynne. Without a doubt, she could get the job done—as long as she could hold back her instinct to protect Janeway.

Turning to the rest of the team, he said, “Let’s go.” As it turned out, the selection of deck six as a rendezvous point had been an excellent one. His team only had to climb one deck to get to sickbay, and Hamilton and Watson were only two decks above the ventilation ducts that accessed the cargo bay. The bay was two decks high; they were making for the ducts at the first level in case they had to jump out of them. Even at that, it would be a long fall.

He led the way up the ladder, trying to shake the sense of a clock ticking.
Janeway watched Revi’s face, understanding that there was no better barometer for the progress of Chakotay’s team. She saw the brief flash of worry when Revi reported that they’d broken into sickbay and were in a firefight. And she knew even before Revi said anything that the sickbay had been successfully taken. They’d reactivated the Doctor, and now came the hard part: Revi would have to communicate to him, through Seven, every detail of synthesizing the gas. She was sitting on a crate, her eyes closed as she concentrated, and the rest of the senior staff had formed a tight group in front of her, partially to conceal her from the guards and partially to give her some mental space.

And all Janeway could do was wait. She cast a sidelong glance at the air vents midway up the walls, wondering if Lynne were in one of them now, watching her. What she wouldn’t give for an interlink of her own right now. Just in case, she held her hand over her heart in the gesture she’d taught Lynne on their honeymoon. *I love you.*

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The Doctor had quickly grasped what Revi was designing, and soon Seven found that she had only to share his progress with Revi instead of instructing him with every detail. This was vastly preferable, and gave her more mental space to devote to Revi. At the moment she was reassuring her about one part of their plan in particular.

: *It will only take a few minutes, and I’ll have guards. I will be as safe as possible.* :

: *A few minutes is all it takes to get killed, Seven. I just found you; I can’t lose you.* :

: *You won’t lose me. Have faith.* :

: *Faith? Not something I would have expected from someone raised by the Borg.* :

Seven played along. : *Of course I have faith. We assimilated many spiritual cultures; I have several thousand varieties of faith to choose from.* :

: *Anyone ever tell you that your sense of humor is a little twisted?*

The Doctor’s efforts were proceeding in an efficient manner, and so far no other Arnett appeared to have noticed that sickbay had been taken. Seven was just beginning to relax, when suddenly the stakes were raised.
Seven, the Arnett First is here. They've figured out the computer sabotage. They're taking Kathryn for questioning.

Seven passed that information to her team, noting that everyone's facial expressions grew even more determined. Their time was running out.
Janeway reflected ruefully that there was something ridiculous about being beaten up by people who were even shorter than she was. Nevertheless, the Arnett were doing a fine job of it. After she’d refused to give up the command codes, delaying for as long as possible and sending them on one time-consuming wild goose chase, they’d dragged her over to the wall and set about their efforts to “convince” her with an efficiency that spoke of long practice. Her arms and shoulders were being held to the wall by two soldiers, while a third worked her over with the butt of his phaser rifle. At least he was leaving her face alone, but damn, this was bringing back bad memories of Dakmor. The soldier hitting her was obviously trained in the arts of physical persuasion; his blows fell repeatedly on the exact same places, quickly changing a very unpleasant experience to one that was absolutely excruciating. It was taking every bit of her willpower to keep herself from screaming. Finally she closed her eyes and forced her body to go limp—not an easy task when every muscle was tense with the pain—and hoped that the ruse would work on a species unfamiliar with Human physiology.

Revi backed her up. “Let her go!” she shouted. “You’ve beaten her unconscious!”

“Idiots!” That was First Duras’ voice. “How do you expect to get any information if she’s unable to speak?”
The soldiers pinning her to the wall abruptly let go, and she slumped to the deck. That, at least, wasn’t faked—her legs could no longer hold her up. God, she hurt. And those blows just under her sternum weren’t doing her any favors at all; the initial hellish pains there had subsided to a kind of numbness that actually scared her more.

“Get out of my way, you bastards!” Revi’s voice was closer, and she heard the sound of bodies moving. Then her head was being gently lifted and settled onto a warm, soft surface—Revi’s leg, she guessed. It was hard to think when she was devoting every available brain cell to forcing her body to lie straight. She wanted nothing more than to curl up in a fetal position, protecting the throbbing agony that used to be her torso. She wished she had been beaten unconscious; it wasn’t much fun being awake right now.

“Revive her,” demanded First Duras.

“It doesn’t work that way, moron.” Revi wasn’t hiding her anger. “Our physiology isn’t like yours. Her body won’t allow her to regain consciousness until some of the damage has been repaired.”

“Then repair it.” First Duras’ voice changed, sounding somewhat regretful. “And please tell her to give us what we want. I never wanted to hurt her, but if she won’t give up the codes I don’t have any other option.”

“Of course you have options,” snapped Revi, already running the muscle regenerator imbedded in her arm over Janeway’s abdomen. Almost immediately the sharpest pains were diminishing, and Janeway could feel her body relaxing somewhat.

“You have the option of going back to your ship and leaving us alone,” Revi continued. “You have the option of behaving like decent individuals instead of the most ungrateful, back-stabbing species I’ve ever heard of. I never thought I’d be sorry to have saved anyone’s lives, but I’m sure as hell sorry we saved yours.”

Jesus, thought Janeway. Is she serious?

“You have a right to be angry—”

“No shit,” said Revi, and Janeway might have laughed had she not been in so much pain.

“I regret the necessity of our actions. But they are necessary. The survival of our species requires that we do things we’re not necessarily comfortable with. Can you tell me that you wouldn’t do the same thing in our position?”
“Let me tell you something about the woman you’re torturing. Six years ago she made the decision to strand herself and her crew seventy thousand light years from home, rather than put the existence of another species at risk. She chose the survival and well-being of another species over her own safety and that of her crew. She did the same thing on a smaller scale for your people, when she stopped to help you despite being in Visconi space. So yes, Duras, I can tell you that we wouldn’t do the same thing in your position. Don’t try to justify your actions by pretending that our ethics are just as bad as yours. They’re not.”

This diatribe was met with momentary silence. “Call me when she revives,” Duras ordered his soldiers. “I’ll be on the bridge.” The click of his boot heels told of his departure.

Janeway felt a tickle on her face, followed by a puff of warm air, and realized that Revi was leaning over her and letting her hair form a protective curtain. “Kathryn, I’m so sorry,” came a soft whisper. “Hang in there. The Doctor has finished synthesizing the gas, and the team is climbing to deck four now.”

Janeway didn’t dare respond, but knowing that they were close to their goal helped renew her determination. It was nice to know she’d taken that beating for a good cause.

As Revi continued to run the regenerator over her aching midsection, she thought of Lynne in the air vent, watching the whole thing.

_I’m sorry, sweetheart. That must have been harder for you than it was for me._

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The team that made its way through the Jeffries tubes was silent and grim. Seven had relayed the details of Janeway’s beating, and she knew there wasn’t a person among them who was not currently harboring thoughts of retaliation. But they were professionals, and their anger served only to increase their efficiency. They paused at the hatch nearest to Transporter Room One, and when Chakotay opened it up they poured into the corridor, moving in a tight group to the corner nearest their goal. Chakotay dropped to the floor and peered around the corner, then stood up again and held up four fingers, making a hand motion to indicate that the Arnett guarding the transporter room were flanking its doors. His next motion cued the team to move, and they leaped into the corridor.
The Arnett guards never even got their rifles up before being cut down, and Chakotay and Seven walked through the doors with weapons at the ready. Only two guards were inside the room, and they were dispatched with equal efficiency. All of the guards were pulled to a corner of the room and stacked in a pile, and if the team paid little care to the comfort of the Arnett as they dragged and dumped them, Chakotay chose not to notice.

Vorik stepped up to the controls and entered the code that would enable the transporters to function properly. “Ready,” he said.

Chakotay was already on the transporter pad, a small gas canister in his hand. “Energize,” he said, and a moment later he was gone.

Seven stood with Vorik at the controls, noting with satisfaction that he had effectively masked the transport. The Arnett would never notice, unless they were far more advanced than she gave them credit for.

Chakotay materialized in an air duct, the vent grating immediately in front of his face giving him a perfect view of the bridge. He clenched his jaw to see First Duras sitting in Janeway’s chair, looking quite at home.

Not for long, you bastard, he thought, giving the canister a vicious twist. The gas was invisible and odorless, so he had no idea if it was even being released. Two very nervous minutes later, the gas took effect. Once it started, it was fast acting, not even giving the Arnett time to call out an alarm before they passed out. Chakotay deactivated the field holding the vent in place and punched it out with the heel of his hand. Carefully he wriggled out, breathing a sigh of relief when he dropped onto the floor. He’d never been fond of tight spaces.

Jerk Duras out of Janeway’s chair and paying no attention to where he fell, Chakotay sat down and activated the console. Quickly he input the command codes to counter the Code Gray, then raised the shields around the bridge and locked down the turbolifts. “Bridge to Transporter Room One,” he said. “It works. The bridge is secured.”

“Acknowledged,” came Seven’s voice. “Stage Three in progress.”
Janeway’s break was over. One of the Arnett guards had gotten suspicious, and a swift kick to her badly bruised ribs had taken her by surprise. A bolt of agony shot through her, and she couldn’t hold back the cry of pain as she gave up the ruse and curled into a ball.

“I knew you were faking,” the guard said with satisfaction. “Get up.”

Reluctantly, she opened her eyes, blinking in the bright light. Delaying as long as she could, she slowly got to her feet with Revi’s assistance. Revi kept an arm around her waist, offering silent support, for which she was grateful. That cybernetic arm might have half a sickbay incorporated into it, but “analgesic hypospray” wasn’t among the inventory, nor had there been enough time to heal any but the worst of the injuries. Still, she felt better than she had, and alert enough to deal with whatever came next. Nudging Revi slightly, she maneuvered them so that she was visible to both air vents.

“No. He’ll just keep after the captain. I have a better idea—kill that one.” She pointed at Revi, and Janeway recognized her as the woman whose terror in sickbay had set off Revi’s flashback. “That’s their pet Borg, but the captain seems fond of her. I’ll bet if you kill her, you might get more cooperation out of the captain. And if you don’t, then start on the rest.”

“We don’t have authorization.”

“Do you think the First will care about that when we bring him the codes?”

The other guard gave Janeway an unpleasant smile. “I am a little tired of waiting,” he said. Raising his phaser rifle, he adjusted the setting and aimed at Revi’s chest. Janeway heard the whine of a power source ramping up, and knew he’d put the rifle on a kill setting. They’d just run out of time.

“Captain, one last chance. All you have to do to save this one’s life is give us the command codes.”

Janeway looked him straight in the eye as she lifted both hands to shoulder level, her palms up and fingers slightly cupped. “No,” she said, letting her hands drop to waist level, elbows at ninety degrees. It was sign language for now, and Lynne was waiting for it.
“Then her death is—”

The sound of a phaser burst seared the air, followed instantly by a second. Both the male and female guards dropped to the floor.

Tom and B’Elanna were the closest and leaped on the fallen guards, ripping their weapons from limp hands and opening fire on the remaining guards. They were supported by phaser fire from air vents on opposite sides of the cargo bay, and every guard that dropped was immediately pounced on by a Voyager crew member, who put their weapons to good use. In seconds it was all over, with thirty Arnett lying on the deck and twenty-four newly armed crew members moving purposefully toward the cargo bay doors, in order to form a protective barrier should any other Arnett attempt to enter. The other six—including the bridge officers—formed a circle around Janeway, who had found herself on the floor under Revi as soon as the shooting started.

“Revi!” Janeway pushed at her shoulders. “What are our casualties?”

Revi sprang up and grabbed Tuvok. “Take care of her,” she ordered, and vanished beyond the ring of officers.

Tuvok knelt beside Janeway and helped her sit up. “Captain, the cargo bay is secure and we have a force at the entrance, prepared to repel any Arnett attempt at entry. If they choose to transport in, we are still at a disadvantage. However, we are considerably better armed than before.”

Janeway looked at the phaser rifle in his hands. Why was it that Starfleet personnel were apparently the only military force in the known universe to carry stun weapons?

“What are our casualties?” She was frustrated beyond belief that she was sitting on the goddamned floor while members of her crew were hurt or possibly dead. With nearly her entire crew in that cargo bay, she knew some had to have been hit in the firefight.

“I do not yet know, Captain. Doctor Sandovhar is determining that now.”

B’Elanna squatted next to her. “It’s not nearly as bad as it could have been, Captain. I only see a few down.”

Janeway stifled the urge to shout at her. “A few down” could mean they were injured, or it could mean they were dead. It wasn’t B’Elanna’s fault that she didn’t know.

“Tuvok, B’Elanna, can you get me over to that crate?”

Her officers flanked her and carefully helped her to her feet. She stood
in place for a moment, getting her legs under her, before taking the few
painful steps to the crate. It was more comfortable than sitting on the
floor, and it gave her a much better view.

She looked up, wondering which vent Lynne was in. As per orders,
neither Lynne nor Ensign Watson were showing themselves even now.
They wouldn’t until given the all clear. Making sure that both vents had a
view of her, she discreetly pointed to herself and quickly spelled two
letters—*I’m OK*—then let that sign morph into another as she held her
hand over her heart again.

Revi reappeared and stood in front of her. “Only twelve of ours
injured, Captain. Unbelievable, considering the situation. Light phaser
burns only; apparently the Arnett really *didn’t* want to hurt us. You’re the
worst injury.”

“Thank god,” breathed Janeway, feeling lightheaded with relief. On
second thought, maybe she was just lightheaded—a wave of dizziness
threatened to collapse her.

“Hold on!” Revi was at her side instantly, propping her up. “It’s almost
over. They’ve taken the transporter room.”

Janeway nodded as the dizziness receded. “What about the Arnett
casualties?”

A somber look crossed Revi’s face. “Mostly light phaser burns as well,
but they had four fatalities. The rifle B’Elanna was using was set to kill.”

Their eyes met in understanding. B’Elanna had grabbed the rifle from
the male soldier who’d been seconds away from killing Revi. She hadn’t
had time to figure out its settings in the ensuing firefight, and the Arnett
had paid the price. Janeway regretted the loss of life, but she would not
feel guilty about it. In attempting to take over her ship, the Arnett had
brought it on themselves.

She felt a tingling as Revi resumed her work, knitting torn muscles
back together.

“For someone who didn’t know your physiology, that guard sure knew
where to hit you,” Revi muttered. “Bastard.”

“Simple math,” said Janeway. “Hit someone in the same place enough
times and you’ll do some damage. I’m surprised he didn’t rupture my
spleen.”

“He came damned close. You’ve got internal bruising, that’s why it
hurts so much.”
“It doesn’t hurt so much anymore.”
Revi gave her a look that plainly said she didn’t believe a word of it, and continued her ministrations.
“Why aren’t you taking care of the others?” asked Janeway.
“Did you not hear me say you’re the worst injury? Now be quiet and let me do my job.” Revi looked up. “Commander Chakotay has secured the bridge and Seven just beamed Ensign Vorik and Lieutenants Ayala and Andrews to Environmental Controls. We should have our ship back in just a few minutes.”
Janeway didn’t know if it was Revi’s work or the knowledge that their plan was nearly finished, but she felt a hell of a lot better.
“Seven says the gas is in the system,” said Revi a short time later. “She just sent Ensign Vorik to the bridge and is now bringing Lieutenants Ayala and Andrews back to the transporter room. They’re getting ready to go.”
“She’ll be all right,” said Janeway.
“That’s what I keep telling myself.” Revi moved her regenerator to a new area.
“Revi, Seven is the most capable officer I have ever known when it comes to missions like this. If anyone can do it, she can. She probably won’t even break a fingernail.”
“Bridge to Captain Janeway.” The call came over the cargo bay’s comm.
“Go ahead,” Janeway called out.
“Sensors show that no Arnett are moving on the ship. I’m unlocking the bay doors now. We’re clear.”
“Acknowledged.” Janeway looked up at the vents and made a hand motion calling her crew members down. Instantly the vent covers fell clanging to the floor and Lynne and Emily Watson backed out, hung by their hands, and dropped down. Lynne lost no time getting to Janeway’s side, where she fell to her knees and took Janeway’s hand in her own.
“Kathryn,” she said, and then seemed incapable of further speech.
“I’m okay,” said Janeway, allowing herself a small public display by cupping Lynne’s jaw in her other hand.
“She is, Lynne,” said Revi. “But if you’ll help me, we can get her to sickbay. She’ll be back to normal in no time.”
“Why can’t we transport her?” Lynne’s voice had come back.
“Excuse me, I’m right here,” said Janeway. “And you can’t transport me because I walked in here, and I’m walking back out again.”
“Well,” Lynne said, squeezing her hand, “I can see that the Arnett never touched your stubborn pride.”

“Not for lack of trying,” Janeway instantly regretted the joke when the horror showed in Lynne’s eyes. “Oh, Lynne, I’m sorry. I know that must have been hard for you to watch.”

Lynne’s expression hardened. “Let’s just say that bastard is very, very lucky that my hand didn’t slip on the power setting. I gave some serious thought to knocking it up a few notches.”

“I knew that was your shot. You timed it perfectly. I’m proud of you.”

Ducking her head, Lynne said, “Come on, let’s get you out of here.” She and Revi flanked her, helping her up. After a few slow steps, Janeway felt her strength returning and squeezed the shoulders of the women on either side.

“I’m good. You can let go. There are others who need help more.”

Revi and Lynne exchanged a look that clearly communicated their exasperation, but they obeyed. Janeway held her head up, straightened her shoulders, and slowly walked up to the officers still holding protective ranks around her. “Thank you,” she said, looking each of them in the eye. “You all did excellent work. It’s time to finish this.”

They gave her respectful nods and fell in behind her as she made her way to the doors. Stopping at the comm panel on the wall, she hit the all-call and spoke into it. Most of her crew were still in the cargo bay, but some had already left and besides, this was a symbolic gesture.

“All hands, this is the captain,” she said, hearing her own voice magnified over the cargo bay’s comm. “The Arnett have been neutralized and Voyager is back under our control. Congratulations on a job very well done. Now let’s get back to work.”

The crew cheered, and Janeway allowed herself a smile.

Just one thing left to do.

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Seven heard Kathryn’s announcement and felt a great sense of satisfaction. It was good to hear that confident voice again. She’d seen the beating through Revi’s eyes, and it had brought an instinct to the fore that she hadn’t felt since her final fight in the Tsunkatse arena. She wanted to kill the Arnett responsible, and knew she wasn’t alone in that regard.
Lieutenants Ayala and Andrews flanked her on the transporter pad, this time armed with compression phaser rifles. It was time.

She activated her comm badge. “Seven of Nine to Ensign Vorik. Energize.” The Tarsonn had made this easier for them by never raising its shields, its crew believing that Voyager was under Arnett control. Records showed that there had initially been a good deal of beaming back and forth between the two ships as various officers came and went; it was unlikely that their transport would be noticed.

The familiar tingling sensation overtook her, and she rematerialized in an area of the ship that Chakotay had said was near the Tarsonn’s computer core. All she required was a control panel with access to the main computer.

She pulled out her tricorder and found a likely energy source. “This way,” she said, and began striding down the corridor. They found the control panel easily, and without any preamble Seven plunged her assimilation tubules into it. Ayala and Andrews had been briefed already; they knew that Seven would be at her most vulnerable while her mind was inside the computer. They took up positions on either side of her, and just as Seven sent her mind into the computer she was aware of weapons fire on both sides. She never hesitated, trusting that her crewmates would protect her. Neutralizing the Tarsonn was of primary importance; Voyager would not be safe until her mission was complete.

For a moment she gloried in the unity and purity of existence she always felt at times like these, when her mind could run at will among logic circuits and analytical programs. Here there was only coding, only black and white, one and zero. No shades of gray and no uncertainties. But she had no time to waste, and quickly located the necessary coding. A few small modifications and the Tarsonn crew lost control of their ship’s shields, weapons, transporters, long-range communication and propulsion. She encrypted her changes with a Borg algorithm and pulled her mind back out again. When she returned to her body, she found that zero point nine minutes had passed and there were fourteen Arnett bodies piled in the corridors, with a firefight going on all around her. An excruciating burning sensation in her leg told her she’d been hit, and she realized that Andrews had one arm around her, holding her up.

She retracted her tubules and activated her comm badge. “Seven of Nine to Voyager. Three to beam out.”
The sounds of the firefight vanished, and when they rematerialized on the transporter pad her leg ceased to support her. Andrews lowered her gently to the pad, and she noted dispassionately that her leg tissues had been severely burned from a high phaser setting.

“Thank you, Lieutenants. You performed in an exemplary manner. However, I require medical assistance,” she said, just before passing out.

Janeway hopped off the biobed, happily pain free thanks to Revi’s attentions and some heavy duty analgesics floating through her system. And she was in total control of the situation; Revi had followed Seven’s mind into the Tarsonn’s computer and knew exactly when the changes had been made. She turned to Revi to thank her, but was stopped by the look of horror on the doctor’s face.

“What’s wrong?” She tried to keep the urgency out of her voice, but only one thing could have caused that expression.

“Seven! Oh, gods—”

Janeway gripped her shoulders. “Revi, talk to me. What’s happened?”

“Ayala to sickbay. Emergency medical transport coming in.”

The sound of a transporter beam shivered in the air, and they turned to see Seven materializing on the floor, still in her Velocity outfit. The odor of burned flesh assaulted Janeway’s nostrils, and she felt sick to her stomach as she saw the gaping hole in Seven’s leg and the charred fabric surrounding it. Swallowing her revulsion, she rushed to her fallen officer and, with Revi on the other side, lifted Seven onto a biobed.

Revi cut away Seven’s pant leg and carefully peeled it from the charred flesh, wincing as a significant portion of tissue came with it. Moving almost faster than Janeway could see, she sterilized the affected area, removed the dead tissue, and covered the ugly wound with a dermaplastic graft, the entire process taking less than ten minutes. While watching, Janeway contacted Chakotay on the bridge and learned that First Nestos was now demanding that she respond to his calls. With grim satisfaction she instructed Chakotay to tell Nestos that she was busy, and would get back to him when she was ready. Then she waited. She was damned if she’d leave sickbay until she heard Seven’s voice again, telling her that she
was ‘functional.’ But then, Seven didn’t use that term much anymore, did she?

Revi completed her procedure and looked at Janeway. “You told me she’d be okay,” she said accusingly.

“And she is,” Janeway pointed out. “Revi, she’s here, she’s safe, and she’ll be back to normal soon. Won’t she?”

“Yes,” said Revi, sounding reluctant. “But I never realized that severe phaser burns came under the category of ‘okay.’”

“Normally they wouldn’t. But Voyager hasn’t been in a normal situation for a long time. I’ve learned to accept that if we’re alive, we’re okay. And Seven is much more than merely alive, Revi. She’s got you and her nanoprobes on her side. She’ll be fine.”

Revi’s jaw was set. She turned to her medical tray, selected a hypospray, and pressed it to Seven’s throat.

Seven’s eyelids fluttered and opened, her expression blank for a few seconds before awareness returned. Propping herself on her elbows, she looked down her body at the graft and nodded in approval. “The nanoprobes are already repairing it,” she said with satisfaction. Then her eyes widened and she turned to Revi, who was watching her with an unreadable look on her face. “It’s only a temporary injury. I will return to full operational capacity soon.”

Revi might have been hiding her emotion from Janeway, but Seven could plainly feel it. Janeway thought now might be a good time for her to return to the bridge.

“Seven, it’s good to have you back. Well done.”

“Thank you, Captain. It is good to see you looking well, also.”

She’d nearly forgotten her own injuries in her concern for Seven. “I had an excellent doctor,” she said. “Looks like you do, too. I’ll leave you in her capable hands.” With a squeeze to Revi’s shoulder, she turned and left the sickbay, activating her newly-assigned comm badge as she went. They hadn’t yet had time to sort out the pile in the cargo bay.

“Janeway to Chakotay. I’m on my way. How’s the collection going?”

“Slowly. Two hundred Arnett is a lot to move. B’Elanna is working the cargo bay transporters, and Harry and Vorik are working the transporter rooms.”

“And they didn’t complain about being put on trash detail?”

“No, they all volunteered. And Lynne volunteered to help move the bodies. I’ve got thirty crew on that detail.”
It would have been faster to use the targeting scanners to pick out Arnett life signs and transport the unconscious Arnett directly from where they lay, but that required far more energy than simply using the transporter pads. Janeway wanted to be done with this as much as any other member of her crew, but she couldn’t justify the energy output when a little manual labor would do just as well. Besides, she recognized the boost to morale that such a concrete act of closure would bring to her crew.

“Well, they’ve got about ten more minutes before the gas wears off,” she said as she stepped into the turbolift. “Then they’ll have to start stunning them.”

“I don’t think that will be a problem, Captain.”

Janeway remembered the looks in her crew’s eyes when she’d straightened up and faced them after her beating. “No, I don’t suppose it will.”
B’Elanna knew she shouldn’t be taking part in this. The Starfleet side of her was shouting loudly about conventions regarding treatment of prisoners of war, and this certainly didn’t qualify. The Klingon side of her understood exactly why Lynne was doing it, and even felt a little sorry for itself that she couldn’t take part. But Lynne had a blood debt to extract. As the partner of the injured party, it was her right and hers alone.

She’d just never realized how much Klingon there was in her friend until now.

They’d finished transporting all of the Arnett but five. Duras, the two men who had held Janeway down, the man who’d beaten her, and the woman who’d suggested killing Revi had all been pulled from the group, bound, and set aside in an area of the cargo bay that the security cams didn’t cover. B’Elanna’s explanation to the other crew on trash detail was that they were holding these last five for a final interview. Nobody questioned her, and once the remaining Arnett were disposed of, the crew members left without a word. Now it was just her and Lynne alone with their “interviewees,” who had all regained consciousness several minutes earlier.

Lynne nodded at B’Elanna, who locked the cargo bay doors and put a temporary blinder in the security logs. Hopefully no one would ever have a reason to review them, but just in case she made sure they’d see
nothing but an empty cargo bay for this period of time. Once she and Lynne were ready, she’d reset the logs and allow them to record the final Arnett beamout, followed by her and Lynne walking out of the cargo bay. Then it was simply a matter of altering the time index of the log so that the beamout and departure took place before the blinder section. She wasn’t about to leave any tracks.

Lynne walked around the five prisoners, cutting them all free of their bonds. When she was done she tossed the knife to B’Elanna and watched the Arnett as they stood, rubbing their wrists and looking around in confusion.

“What is the meaning of this?” demanded Duras.

“Just a little farewell gesture before we send you back,” said Lynne. B’Elanna had never heard her voice sound like that.

“Look,” said the woman, “you got what you wanted. There’s no hard feelings, right? We did what we had to.”

“Right,” said Lynne, baring her teeth in a feral smile. “And I’m doing what I have to. You’re all responsible for the torture of a woman who did nothing but try to help you. That woman also happens to be my wife. I had to stand back and watch it happen, but I don’t have to stand back now.”

“I never touched her!” said Duras. He pointed at the man who’d worked Janeway over. “He was the one who beat her.”

“At your instruction,” said Lynne. “Don’t think that just because you didn’t get your hands dirty, you won’t pay the same price.”

“I had nothing to do with it!” said the woman nervously. Lynne gave her an even stare.

“You had no involvement in her physical injury, true. But you’re worse than the rest. You knew it would hurt her more to watch one of her crew die, so as far as I’m concerned, your hands are just as dirty as anyone else’s, if not more so. Now, here’s the deal,” she continued. “I’m unarmed, and it’s five against one. You’ve all got the same shot at me. I’m giving you ten seconds to do your best, and after that you can defend yourselves as best you can.”

“I’m not taking part in this,” said Duras, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Fine, but don’t think that will save you,” said Lynne. She held her
arms out from her body. “Computer, begin ten-second countdown, starting on my mark. Mark.”

“Ten,” said the computer calmly. “Nine. Eight…”

The woman looked at the others. “She won’t do anything.”

Lynne didn’t move.

“Seven. Six…”

Growling, two of the male guards charged Lynne, and B’Elanna winced at the power of the blows they landed. The Arnett were short, but well-muscled. Lynne was forced to take a step back as they rained blows on her abdomen, and a second later the woman joined in, circling around Lynne to land a kidney punch on her lower back. Duras and the man who had actually beaten Janeway simply watched.

“Three. Two. One.”

With a growl of her own, Lynne spun around and smacked the heel of her hand into the woman’s face, instantly breaking her nose. The woman screamed and fell to the floor, holding her bleeding nose and looking shocked. Lynne allowed her spin to carry her all the way around, and was facing the men with her arms up before they even realized she’d moved. They redoubled their efforts, but she knocked every blow aside with her hands and arms until she got the opening she wanted. A double punch that B’Elanna could barely even see hammered first the throat and then the nose of one guard, and he was on the floor bleeding and gasping for air. A lightning fast kick broke the nose of the second man, and before he could drop Lynne spun in the opposite direction and nailed him in the temple, instantly knocking him out. She turned and kicked the woman in the temple as well, then walked up and almost casually did the same to the man who was still gasping. Both slumped to the floor as Lynne stalked up to her last two opponents and stopped.

“Typical,” she said. “Your courage depends on your victims being held down for you.”

Duras refused to be baited. “You forget that I spent two days on this ship with you Humans. I know the rules that bind you. You can’t touch me if I don’t present a danger to you.” He held up his hands. “I surrender.”

The other guard followed his lead, and Lynne stared at them in silence before turning around. For a moment B’Elanna thought she was going to walk away, but Lynne suddenly whipped her body around in the most
spectacular spin-kick B’Elanna had ever seen. Her boot hit the male guard
on the jaw so hard that she heard the bone crunch from where she stood,
and she was pretty sure she saw teeth flying through the air. The guard
dropped, his screams muffled through his broken jaw. Lynne walked up to
him and drove the heel of her boot into his face, breaking his nose as well.
He went silent and stopped moving. When Lynne turned to Duras, even
B’Elanna shivered at the look on her face.

“And you forget,” she said, “that I spent an hour watching my wife
suffer because of you. As far as I’m concerned, you still present a danger.”
She lashed out with her boot and he dropped to his knees, screaming as
he held both hands over one eye. Lynne crouched in front of him and
slowly pulled his hands down, looking at him dispassionately. Duras
whimpered in terror.

“You’re blocking my target,” she said pleasantly, and drove her fist into
his nose. He fell backwards, making hideous bubbling sounds that
stopped a second later when she kicked him in the temple.

The cargo bay was silent, and B’Elanna looked at Lynne in awe. Never
in a million years would she have guessed her good friend would be
capable of what she’d just seen. She remembered all the times she’d
jokingly invited Lynne to “step outside,” and shuddered at the thought.
She was no slouch in the fighting department, but Lynne could wipe the
deck with her. If she didn’t know better, she’d swear that she’d just
witnessed Klingon battle rage.

“Come on, let’s take out the trash,” said Lynne, grabbing Duras by the
wrists and dragging him back to the blind spot. B’Elanna shook herself
out of her stupor and stepped in to help, and together they moved all five
back to where they’d started.

“Computer,” said B’Elanna, “target all single-celled organic matter on
cargo bay structures and transport to a point one kilometer off the
port side.”

With a hum, all of the blood vanished from the cargo bay floor, walls,
and computer panels. Lynne looked on in admiration. “I wouldn’t have
thought of that,” she said. “Nice job.”

“Yeah, but you’ve still got blood on your clothes. Take them off. Your
boots, too. And here.” She handed Lynne a small rag. “Wipe your face
and hands.”

Lynne didn’t even pause, stripping down to her undershirt and
handing her clothes and boots to B’Elanna, who walked over to the cargo bay replicator and ran them through the recycling setting. “At least that got rid of that funky smell,” she said. “You stink.”

“Hey, I was in the middle of my third game of Velocity with Seven when this hit the fan. I can't help it if I haven’t had time to take a shower.”

“Well, take one before Janeway sees you. And make sure you get a dermal regenerator on your knuckles.”

“I will,” said Lynne as she pulled her clothes back on.

“Ready?” asked B’Elanna.

“Ready.”

B’Elanna stepped back to the console, waited until Lynne moved into position, and reactivated the security logs. Nodding at Lynne, she walked to the pile of Arnett and picked up the first by the wrists. Lynne was there a second later, grasping his ankles, and they used their own bodies to shield the guard’s damaged face from the security cams as they carried him out. Several of the Arnett had bloody hands from covering their noses; they wiped these with the rag before carrying them out. Soon all five bodies were stacked on the transporter pad, carefully arranged so the cams never got a clear view of their faces. B’Elanna went back to the console and beamed the Arnett out, breathing a sigh of relief when they were gone. In the meantime, Lynne had recycled the rag in the replicator.

“One last thing,” said B’Elanna. “Come on.”

They exited the cargo bay, and B’Elanna turned back to the control panel on the outside wall.

“What are you doing?” asked Lynne.

“Beaming out any other organic matter. I specified single-celled because that precludes you and me from being targeted. But I know you knocked some teeth out of that one guard, and there may be other things that the first beamout missed.”

When the beamout ended, B’Elanna quickly made her adjustments to the security log time index, including some coding that would smooth the junction between the two separate logs. Any small discrepancies at the junction would be morphed out; no one who viewed them would ever notice. She then erased any signs of the two transports, as well as her own activities within the system. Activating the comm, she said, “Torres to the bridge. Transport complete.”
“Acknowledged,” came Janeway’s voice.

“Thanks, B’Elanna,” said Lynne. “I could never have done that without you.”

Now that it was finished and she could afford the distraction, B’Elanna gladly allowed her angry satisfaction to flood her system. “Some of that blood debt was mine, too. Janeway’s my captain and my friend, and I don’t think it was much easier on me to watch them beat her than it was on you. It makes me feel better to have had some part in that.” They made their way down the corridor. “I do have one question, though.”

“What’s that?”

“Why did you break all of their noses?”

Lynne’s smile was cold. “Revi dropped a little hint on Arnett anatomy. She didn’t know why I was asking. Turns out that’s the most sensitive place on their bodies. It’s kind of like crushing the testicles of a Human male.”

“Kahless.” B’Elanna shuddered. “I never knew you had it in you.”

“Honestly, B’Elanna, I didn’t either. But when I had to sit up there in that vent and watch while they tortured Kathryn, I saw red. Literally. I really wanted to kill them. When she collapsed on the deck, I actually changed the setting on my phaser. It took a lot of self-persuasion to change it back to heavy stun.”

They arrived at the turbolift and stepped in. “Deck three,” said Lynne.

“Deck eleven,” added B’Elanna. “I understand, really. I’m just a little surprised to see this side of you.”

Lynne sighed. “One of the things I love most about Kathryn is her sense of ethics. If she ever found out about this I don’t know what she’d do, and I’m feeling guilty just thinking about it. But I’m not her. And if I’d let those five skate off scot-free after what they did to her, I would have spent the rest of my life regretting it.”

The ‘lift doors opened, and B’Elanna clapped her friend on the back. “Go shower, Fossil,” she said. “And don’t forget the knuckles.”

Lynne turned and took B’Elanna’s hand in her own. “I owe you.”

“No, you don’t. Go.”

Lynne left, and as the doors shut B’Elanna went over everything in her mind. She couldn’t think of a thing that she’d missed. Kahless help Lynne if she had missed anything, because she could hardly even imagine Janeway’s fury if she knew what her wife had done.
She shook her head, remembering Lynne’s calm demeanor as she’d kicked the shit out of the Arnett. That preternatural calm had frightened her even more than Lynne’s demonstration of her skills. That was true rage. Ironic, she thought, that her own Klingon temper often caused others to give her a wide berth—yet Lynne, with her even temper and usually cheery personality, was far more dangerous.

Chakotay was right, she thought, remembering a discussion they’d had long ago. It’s always the quiet ones who blow big.

Janeway crossed one leg over the other and regarded the angry alien on her main viewer. “I’m sorry, First Nestos, but I can’t do that.”

“You can’t leave us like this!” he sputtered. “We’re sitting targets for the Visconi! I demand that you give us that algorithm.”

“You’re in no position to demand anything. And as for being a sitting target, I thought you might benefit from the lesson. Now you have an inkling of how we felt when you took over our ship.”

“We wouldn’t have harmed you. But you’re putting our entire species at risk!”

She raised her eyebrows. “You wouldn’t have harmed us? I’ve got the bruises to show that statement for the lie it is.” This wasn’t exactly true, since Revi had patched her up, but it had been true half an hour ago and that was good enough. “I’ve also got a member of my crew who was seconds away from dying at the hands of one of your soldiers. You’d better rethink that one.”

“I was speaking in larger terms. You talk of individuals; I’m talking about your crew as a whole. And if you’re trying to teach us a lesson, I think that lesson might be lost on us if we’re all dead!”

“Well, you do have a point there.” Janeway pretended to consider his words, though it was difficult to keep her amusement off her face. She really shouldn’t be enjoying this so much. “Tell you what,” she said at last. “I’ll give you the algorithm if you give me the correct military codes. There are two of them.”

He stared. “How in Siglis’ name am I supposed to know your military codes?”

“Because they’re universal. Most species have an equivalent, though
based on what I’ve seen of your species, maybe you don’t. So I’ll give you a hint. One code is a word you use when you wish to express regret for your actions. The other is what you say when you’re asking nicely for something.”

She heard a snort from the helm.

Nestos glared at her, his jaw working. “Fine,” he said, and by his expression she could see that he’d rather eat broken glass than do what she was asking. “We’re sorry for what we did. And may we please have the algorithm?”

She let him wait long seconds before answering. “That wasn’t bad, considering that it must have been your first time. You should say it more often; it gets easier with practice.” She uncrossed her legs and sat up. “I’ll contact my sickbay and see if our astrometrics officer is conscious. She’s the one you tried to kill on your ship, by the way. If you’d succeeded, that algorithm would have died with her and I couldn’t have done a thing to help you. A stupid move on your part; you really should try to think at least one step ahead.” She smiled at the way his face contorted before continuing, “Janeway to sickbay.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Doctor Sandovhar,” she said conversationally, “I have an Arnett captain on my screen who has apologized for his aggression against us and is now politely asking for a certain Borg algorithm to remove the lock-down on his ship’s systems. Is Seven of Nine capable of providing that algorithm?”

“One moment, please. I’ll speak with Seven and see.”

Janeway could hear the cold amusement in Revi’s voice. “Hold on,” she said to a visibly fuming Nestos, “the doctor is checking. Seven of Nine took a bad hit on your ship. Gee, I hope she can remember.”

This time it was Chakotay who snorted, and she didn’t dare look at him.

“Sandovhar to Captain Janeway.”

“Go ahead.”

“Seven was able to provide the algorithm. I’m sending it to your console now.”

“Thank you, doctor.” Janeway pulled up the algorithm and took a moment to admire it. Seven did good work. Who else could produce such an elegant piece of coding while phaser bolts were flying all around her?

Tapping a few commands into her console, she looked up at the main
viewer. “You should be receiving it now. Don’t be alarmed if it takes your systems an hour or so to come back online. We simply couldn’t afford the chance that you might attack or pursue us once you had control of your ship again.”

“And if the Visconi find us in that time?” he snarled. “Do you want that many deaths on your hands?”

“No,” she said honestly. “But you left me no choice. I’d be derelict in my duty if I gave you a second chance to betray our trust. Janeway out.”

Harry responded to her cue and cut off the transmission.

“Lieutenant Paris, resume original heading and get us out of here, warp nine. Lieutenant Kim, monitor for signs of pursuit.”

“Yes, Captain,” they chorused, and in seconds the main viewer showed a scene that was balm to Janeway’s soul: the star streaks produced by Voyager’s warp passage through space. Those streaks meant that all was well with her world once again. Voyager was safe, her crew unharmed, and in less than eight hours they’d be out of Visconi territory. They were a day and a half away from the border at the normal cruising rate of warp six, but Janeway felt that in this instance a little extra speed was advisable.

She turned to Chakotay. “I need to speak with you,” she said quietly, and he nodded. “Tuvok, you have the bridge.”

When she entered the ready room, an instant feeling of comfort settled itself around her. Nothing made this room feel more like home than being denied access to it for any period of time, and she took her seat with a grateful sigh. Chakotay sat across from her.

“I wanted to commend you on a job well done,” she said. “Your actions were exemplary, and I was very pleased to hear how well you worked with Seven of Nine. I know you two aren’t on each other’s favorites list right now.”

He furrowed his brow. “Why would that matter? Any petty differences we might have had mean nothing compared to a takeover of Voyager.”

She gave him a smile. “You have no idea how happy I am to hear you call it that. ‘Petty differences.’ Because that’s how I saw it when Doctor Sandovhar first came on board, and I couldn’t understand why you insisted on making more out of it than that, despite all of the evidence in front of you.”

“Because I was wrong. I don’t have the same problem with apologies that Nestos had, Kath—Captain.” She didn’t correct him. “I apologized to
Doctor Sandovhar and she accepted, and that’s that. We’re moving forward from there. Though Seven has warned me that I’m in danger of vivisection should I ever get any future ideas about hurting her partner.”

“Not surprising,” said Janeway. “When Seven gives her loyalty, she gives all of it.” She paused. “I couldn’t have gotten Voyager back without you, Chakotay. But I don’t need your services any more. You have a sentence to finish out.”

“Understood.” He rose and turned to go.

“One more thing,” she said. “I’m knocking three days off your sentence in recognition of your services today. So I’ll see you in four days.”

He smiled. “Thank you, Captain.”

Seven of Nine was getting impatient. The Doctor was hovering over her, detracting from the time that she could spend alone with Revi; her leg itched from the nanoprobes making repairs; and Revi had forbidden her to move until officially released. She was required to simply lie there doing nothing, and the combination was extremely unappealing.

: Revi, how many times must I repeat this same information? I am perfectly fine. You know as well as I do that the nanoprobes will remove all signs of damage within the next forty minutes. What purpose is served by keeping me here? :

Revi was at the other end of sickbay, working on inventory. She didn’t turn around. : The purpose being served is my own peace of mind. So shut up and stay put, because you’re going nowhere until I’m satisfied that you’re all right. :

Seven sighed. On this topic, Revi appeared to be quite beyond the reach of logic.

: Damn straight I am. And if I ever get hurt, you’ll understand exactly how illogical you can get, too. :

: I have already seen you hurt. I remained perfectly logical. :

Revi turned around and smiled at her. : Oh? Was it logical to threaten the first officer of this ship with physical violence should he ever touch me again? :

Seven crossed her arms over her chest. : Yes. Exceedingly so. :

Revi laughed, eliciting a startled look from the Doctor. She shook her head at him. “Private joke, Doctor.”
He huffed. “You know, it could be considered quite rude to carry on a conversation that does not include the third person in this room.”

“Why are you assuming that I’m carrying on a conversation?” she asked mildly. “I’m just laughing at a joke.”

“Probably for the same reason that I assume you require an oxygen/nitrogen atmosphere to survive,” he said. “It’s simply a fact.”

She shrugged. “Okay. You got me there. Maybe you should give me lessons in socialization, Doctor. I hear you’re quite good at those.”

He glared. “On second thought, I don’t wish to be included in this conversation.”

“Suit yourself.” Revi turned back to her inventory, and Seven dropped her head on the pillow with a sigh. Thirty-eight minutes to go.
Janeway rolled over in bed, stretching out and wincing at the pull of newly-healed muscles. No matter how advanced their medical care was, there was still a price to be paid for the kind of physical abuse she’d taken yesterday. She was going to be sore for a while.

She checked her chronometer and was surprised to see that they’d slept for ten hours. Nothing like the sleep of the deserving. But she was ready for a cup of coffee, and for that she needed Lynne. Originally, the stasis container holding her fresh beans from Lynne’s Earth visit had been kept out of her reach, in Lynne’s quarters. But when Lynne had moved in, she’d installed a lockout code on the container to ensure that Janeway couldn’t give in to temptation. It was amazing, she’d said, that the same captain who could move a starship with pure strength of will couldn’t muster the will power to keep her hands out of the coffee container. Janeway had pointed out that coffee was a completely separate category from anything else, and her lack of will power did not in any way reflect on her normal capacity.

She never told Lynne, though she assumed it was obvious, that she could have broken through that lockout code in minutes. Its mere existence was enough to keep her out, and besides, she enjoyed the game they made out of rationing her beans. Left to her own devices, she would
certainly have gone through the entire fifty pounds long ago, and she was grateful to Lynne for helping her make it last.

But she wanted a cup now.

“Lynne,” she said softly, brushing her wife’s hair away from her face and dropping a kiss on her temple. “You awake?”

“Mmmm.” A sleepy groan answered her. “I’m awake. I was just enjoying lying here.”

“You’ve certainly earned it. But I’m wondering if I could talk you into a cup of coffee.”

Lynne’s eyes opened. “Well,” she said in a clearer voice, “you’ve certainly earned that. Are you sure you only want one?”

Janeway grinned. “I didn’t know I had options.”

“If there’s anything I’ve learned about you, Kathryn, it’s that you make your own options.”

“True.” She threw her covers back and reached for her robe. “I’ll take you up on your offer, then. Let’s have a leisurely morning.”

“Sounds great to me.” Lynne sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed, stretching and yawning. “I could use a cup of cocoa myself.” She stood up and retrieved her robe, turning toward Janeway as she pulled it closed and belted it. “Shall we?”

But Janeway had stilled all movement, her eyes riveted to Lynne’s stomach. “What happened to you?”


Janeway was around the bed in a second, pulling Lynne’s robe open. She stared at the hideous bruising. “How did you get these?”

Lynne glanced down, and when she raised her head again there was a flash of fear in her eyes. She paused just a little too long before answering.

“I spent half the day crawling around Jeffries tubes and air ducts yesterday. I guess I just didn’t realize I hurt myself.”

Janeway looked at the bruising again, then reached out for Lynne’s hands, turning them over and inspecting the knuckles. They were perfect: no scrapes, no broken skin anywhere.

“That’s quite a trick,” she said. “I’ve crawled through a few Jeffries tubes and ducts in my day, too. I never managed to keep my hands quite so pristine, especially if I bruised the rest of my body that way. However did you pull it off?”

Lynne said nothing, and Janeway shook her head. “You’re lying. You
didn’t get these bruises from Jeffries tubes. Don’t you think I’ve had enough of these on my own body recently to recognize them?” At Lynne’s continued silence, she dropped her hands and demanded, “Who beat you?”

Lynne tied off her robe. “I can’t tell you that.”

“Unacceptable!” she shouted. Lynne flinched, but she was too upset to care. “Why are you hiding these? Why did you lie to me?”

After a long silence, Lynne met her gaze. “Because I can’t tell you the truth.”

That stopped her cold. She pulled the tie on Lynne’s robe again and ripped it open, the familiar marks bringing a lump of fury into her throat. “The hell you can’t. Someone beat you, and as your wife and your captain I have a right to know who. Tell me. Now!”

She knew she had lost when the mask slipped over Lynne’s face. It was a look she hadn’t seen in a long time.

“I’m sorry, Kathryn. It’s over and done, and there’s nothing you can do. Please don’t ask me anymore. I can’t tell you.”

“You’re honestly going to stand there with these bruises on your body and tell me that I should just put this out of my pretty little head?”

Lynne shrugged, and Janeway’s impotent fury boiled over. “This is not what a marriage is about, Lynne. You promised me. You promised that you would let me in; that you wouldn’t keep things from me anymore. Is this what your promises are worth?”

She’d struck a hard blow, and the evidence was in the tears that sprang to Lynne’s eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Lynne repeated, her voice breaking. “That’s all I can say.”

Janeway stared at her, then turned and went into the bathroom without another word. When she came out ten minutes later, the bed was made and the room was empty. She pulled on her uniform and stalked into the living room, where Lynne sat at the table with a cup in front of her. She met Janeway’s eyes and indicated the cup.

“I made your coffee,” she said softly. Janeway knew it was her way of apologizing.

It wasn’t nearly good enough. She didn’t even break stride as she backhanded the cup into the wall, feeling a dark satisfaction when it shattered. She continued on her way and said, “I’m going on duty. You do whatever the hell you want; you’ve got a day off.”
The door closed behind her and she stopped in the corridor, taking a deep breath. Technically this was her day off as well, though she’d planned to go on shift after taking a few hours to herself this morning. She’d be on duty until Chakotay’s sentence was completed. Now she was grateful for the necessity, since at the moment she couldn’t bear to be in the same room with Lynne. She needed to keep busy.

And she had a mystery to solve.

B’Elanna pulled a stack of banana pancakes out of the mess hall replicator and looked for a place to sit. Seeing Lynne sitting by herself at a corner table, she brought her tray over to join her.

“Hi, Fossil. Haven’t seen you in a couple of days.”

Lynne turned her head, and B’Elanna sucked in her breath at the changes in her friend’s face. “You look like shit. What happened?”

There was a pause before Lynne answered. “We forgot something,” she said.

For a moment B’Elanna didn’t know what she was talking about. Then it hit. “Kahless on a crutch! What? I went over that five different times and couldn’t think of a thing.”

“It wasn’t anything you did. This was totally my fault. Remember the ten seconds?”

“Yeah, what about them?”

“Remember the hits the Arnett got in? They left bruises.”

B’Elanna groaned. “Oh, no. And she saw them.”

“She saw them.”

“Not to pile blame on you when you’re down, but why the hell didn’t you use a regenerator?”

“I did—on my hands. I didn’t even know there were any marks on my stomach. Tuvok taught me how to tighten my abdominals to prevent gut punches from causing damage, and I think that, plus the adrenaline, kept me from feeling anything. I was sore the next morning, but I didn’t realize there was bruising until Kathryn pulled my robe open.”

B’Elanna covered her eyes in sympathy. She could only imagine. “So what happened?”
“We had a huge fight when I wouldn’t tell her who beat me, she stormed out, and now I’m sleeping on the couch.”

“She threw you out of bed?”

“No. She slept on the couch the first night, and I couldn’t stand the thought of her being the one out there when she didn’t do anything wrong. So I took it last night and gave her the bed.”

B’Elanna stared. “Wait a minute. You mean you two haven’t talked about this in two days?”

“No. I won’t tell her what she wants to know, and she’s not saying a word until I do. It’s bad, B’Elanna.”

“Fossil, I know you don’t want to, but you might just have to tell her and ride out the storm.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not? What’s the worst she can do?”

Lynne looked at her incredulously. “Don’t you get it? I committed a crime. Very much premeditated. And you helped me cover it up. If I tell her the truth, she’s going to come down on both of us like a ton of bricks. I’m not worried so much about myself, but you could lose everything. She could strip you of your rank and make you my cellmate for the next fifteen years. Do you want to move your wedding to the brig?”

B’Elanna felt a rush of heat wash over her as she considered the implications. “Funny,” she said, “I never actually considered that until now. I just thought of what she’d do to you.”

“Well, consider it. The stakes are too high. I can’t ever tell her the truth. Even if I tell her part of the truth and keep your name out of it, she’d figure it out. You were there doing the transporting. She’ll know you helped me. I’ll just have to wait this one out.”

B’Elanna took a bite of her food, which now tasted like dust in her mouth. She shoved the plate to one side and rested her chin in her hand. “This is not good.”

“No, it’s not.” Lynne looked at her dully. “I don’t know what to do. This is the worst it’s ever been. It’s hell sharing quarters with someone who looks at you like you’re nothing but an enormous disappointment.”

“Oh, I know that look. It’s awful. I’d rather scrub out the exhaust manifolds with my tongue than see it again.”

“Yeah, well, try living with it.”
Lynne wasn’t doing well, and B’Elanna had no idea how to help. “Well, Fossil, if you ever need a shoulder or a spare bed, you know where I live.” Lynne’s answer scared her more than anything else so far. “I never thought I’d say it, B’Elanna, but I might have to take you up on that offer.”

Janeway stood at the viewport in her ready room, staring at the passing star streaks. It had been three days now and she was getting nowhere. She’d repeatedly asked Lynne to tell her the truth, trying everything from rage to pleading to outright emotional manipulation, and each time she’d gotten the same response: an apology and a steadfast denial. Several times she had asked why Lynne couldn’t say anything, and that had only gotten her silence and a shake of the head.

Her home life was intolerable. She couldn’t stand being in her quarters and she couldn’t tell Lynne to leave. So it was up to her to go. Today she’d brought a few things to her ready room before the start of her shift; she’d be sleeping here for the foreseeable future.

In the meantime she’d spent every available spare hour trying to figure out Lynne’s secret. Discreet inquiries among her crew as to whether anyone knew the cause of Lynne’s bruises had produced such a symphony of emphatic negatives that she was more suspicious now than before. Something had obviously happened, and it was equally obvious that there was a serious cover-up going on. She’d pulled every security log that had Lynne in it, for the entire day of the Arnett takeover, and had found absolutely nothing but Lynne working, playing Velocity, walking with her out of the cargo bay, carrying bodies, walking through corridors, doing completely normal activities. Nowhere was there a record of Lynne in a physical altercation, or anything even close. She’d done a temporal analysis of the logs, and everything lined up. There was no missing gap. She just couldn’t get her hands on the truth, and the more she looked, the farther away the answers seemed to get. It was frustrating in the extreme, and Lynne’s continuing refusal to talk had pushed her initial fury into something so white-hot that she couldn’t even describe it.

Did their wedding vows mean nothing?
Chakotay stepped out of his quarters for the first time since the Arnett takeover, in uniform and feeling great. His sentence was served; his rift with Sandovhar was, if not healed, at least ended; and everything from here on out would be better than it had been. He had nowhere to go but up, and was looking forward to earning his way back into Janeway’s good graces. He was reasonably certain, from the fact that she’d reduced his sentence, that he was already making progress.

He whistled as he rode the turbolift, and walked onto the bridge with a bounce in his step. Greeting the officers already present, he sat down and logged into his console, catching up on the events of the previous two shifts.

The doors to the ready room opened and Captain Janeway stepped out, taking her seat with a stiffness that struck Chakotay as odd. Janeway was normally fluid in her movements, often slouching in her chair as if she had no spine at all. Not this morning. She greeted him with a coolness that he wasn’t expecting, not after seven days’ absence, and his bonhomie began to slip.

It didn’t take him more than ten minutes to figure out that something was very wrong. The atmosphere on the bridge was extremely tense, and the nexus of that tension was sitting right next to him. He had no idea what had happened in the last four days, and a reading of the logs provided no enlightenment. All he could do was wait until an opportunity presented itself to ask someone.

The opportunity didn’t come until the lunch break, which he spent making discreet inquiries. His network gave him enough hints to cause considerable alarm, and he spent the second half of the shift strategizing on how to acquire more information.

By the next morning, when Janeway once again came onto the bridge from her ready room, he knew the extent of the problem. How to deal with it was another thing altogether. He had one faint hope that intervention might not be necessary, because Janeway’s expertise as a mediator had been requested by a space port that they were now approaching, which meant Lynne would be going with her. Maybe those two would patch things up on their own.

This hope was dashed at the end of the third day, when Janeway
returned from her away mission and gave him a PADD of orders. One of
them was to transfer Lynne Hamilton back to the security pool, along
with a request for an alternative personal security escort. He was glad he
was in his office when he read that one, because his shock and dismay
would certainly have shown on his face had he been on the bridge.

It was time to take action. He walked into sickbay a few minutes later,
finding Doctor Sandovhar finishing up an exam on Crewman Chell. He
waited until Chell left and Sandovhar stopped in front of him.

“Something I can do for you, Commander?” she inquired.

“I’m hoping so. Can we speak privately?”

She led him into her office, closed the door, and looked at him
expectantly.

“I need your help,” he said without preamble.

“Well, that’s about the last thing I ever thought I’d hear from you.”

She gestured to a chair in front of her desk and took her own seat. “Do
you have a medical issue?”

“No, I have a personnel issue. Involving the captain.”

She nodded. “I’ve heard rumors. It sounds like she’s not a joy to work
right now.”

“That’s an understatement. Have you also heard any rumors about
Lynne and the Arnett?”

The instant guarded look on her face told him all he needed to know.

“Listen,” he said quietly, “I know what happened. Or at least as much
as anyone can know. The scuttlebutt is that Lynne took care of the trash
that tortured the captain, and there isn’t a soul on this ship that isn’t
cheering her on. Except Captain Janeway. I don’t think she has any
evidence, first of all because nobody’s telling her anything and second
because if she did, she’d have handed down a sentence by now. But she
certainly knows something, and it seems to have caused a serious rift in
her marriage. She just gave me the order to reassign Lynne back to the
security pool and assign someone else to the role of personal security
escort.”

“Oh, shit,” said Sandovhar. “That’s not good.”

“I’ll be honest with you, Doctor. I’ve seen Captain Janeway in some
pretty deep depressions, but this one already beats them all. She’s angry
and depressed at the same time, and it’s a bad combination. It’s affecting
morale in a big way. We need to fix this, but I’m not on her list of confi-
dants right now. She won’t listen to anything I have to say. I need someone she trusts.”

Sandovhar looked at him with incredulity. “And that’s why you’re here?”

He nodded. “She’s close to you. I need you to talk to her. Get through to her. Convince her, somehow, that she doesn’t need to do this to herself or Lynne. Nobody on this ship will think any less of her if she just lets this slide. In fact, I think if she took any disciplinary action, she’d lose the respect of a lot of the crew.”

“Do you count yourself in that number?” asked Sandovhar.

He eyed her. This one was cagey.

“I’ll respect Kathryn Janeway no matter what,” he said. “She’s earned that from me in six years of working together. But if she lets her Starfleet principles drive her in this situation, it would be a mistake. Because this isn’t a Starfleet situation. I freely admit that I myself didn’t pay too much attention to the comfort of the Arnett that my team dealt with. When I threw Duras out of the captain’s chair after I gassed the bridge, I was kind of hoping something might break when he landed.”

Sandovhar regarded him with an unreadable expression. “So you don’t think Lynne should be punished?”

“I think she’s serving a sentence right now. So is the captain.”

“And yet you just got out after seven days’ confinement, for something much less.”

Chakotay shook his head. “I made a mistake that put valuable members of this crew at risk. Lynne’s actions put no one on this crew at risk, and actually raised morale considerably. It’s not exactly a Starfleet attitude, but maybe I’m looking at this from more of a Maquis standpoint.”

He could tell he’d surprised her. Good. She didn’t know him as well as she thought.

“All right,” she said at last. “I’ll try it tonight, after my shift. I’m working a double. Besides, if she’s tired she might be a little more open to listening. I hear she’s sleeping in her ready room these days.”

“You’ve got a good handle on the grapevine,” he said with reluctant admiration.

“It’s not hard in sickbay. Sooner or later, everyone comes through here. Kind of like the barbershop.”
He hadn’t expected the humor. “Thank you,” he said as he stood. “One other thing, in case you haven’t seen her since we got Voyager back—she hasn’t been eating. I know the signs.”
“I’ll take care of it.”
He nodded. “Good luck,” he said, and turned to go.
“Commander.”
When he turned back, she was looking at him with that same unreadable expression. Then she smiled, and he was stunned at how completely that smile transformed her face.
“Call me Revi,” she said.

JANEWAY PULLED up the cargo bay log again. She’d finally put the puzzle together the previous evening, and it had shocked her to such an extent that she’d actually gotten sick to her stomach. Never, never would she have thought Lynne was capable of this, and she had no idea what to do about it. Part of her longed to throw the truth in Lynne’s face and dare her to explain it, but she couldn’t. If she admitted that she knew the truth, then she’d have to make an official response to the crime. And the hell of it was that no matter how bad a crime Lynne had committed, she still loved her and would rather die than administer the appropriate punishment. She simply could not hand down a five- to fifteen-year sentence to her wife. Nor could she do that to B’Elanna, for that matter. Maybe six years out here was telling on her, because she knew she was breaking a dozen different regulations with her silence. It made her an accessory to the crime.

She’d gotten her first real clue on the third viewing of this log, when it had occurred to her to wonder why the last Arnett beamed out of the cargo bay had been unconscious. By the last few beamouts, the gassed Arnett had regained consciousness. Some of the crew had stunned them, but others had found it easier to move them when they were conscious, and the disarmed Arnett hadn’t put up any fight. The penultimate beamout from the cargo bay had involved conscious prisoners. Why, then, had the last five been different?

That had been the loose thread which, when pulled, had revealed the whole unsavory truth. The clues began to add up. Now that she knew
where to look, it finally caught her attention that she couldn’t see a single face among the final five Arnett. In prior beamouts the prisoners had been stacked haphazardly, always showing at least two faces among the pile. When she’d examined the last set more closely, she recognized Duras by the slight difference in his uniform. The female among them, she suspected, was the woman who’d had the bright idea of killing Revi. The other three males couldn’t be identified, but she could certainly make a guess.

Then she’d magnified the images, looking for any other clues. Eventually she’d found something on the cargo bay floor that gleamed dully in the light, and maximum magnification had revealed it to be a tooth. God in heaven, a tooth. She’d actually stopped breathing when the implication hit her. A high-magnification scan of Lynne had shown no evidence of what she’d done, but that only made her feel worse. Not only had Lynne taken physical revenge on the Arnett, but she’d done it very carefully and covered it up perfectly. And Janeway knew that Lynne most certainly did not have the programming knowledge required to fake this log. There were only a few individuals aboard Voyager who did, and one of them was in the cargo bay with Lynne.

Having Lynne with her all day today had been pure torture. She couldn’t even look at her, and felt Lynne’s eyes on her back almost every second. There was simply nothing she could say, beyond giving commands, and by the end of their time at the space port she knew she could never do this again. She’d given Chakotay the reassignment instructions within minutes of her return.

With a sigh, she closed down the log and wearily made her way to the upper level of her ready room. This had to be resolved one way or another, but she still couldn’t see any way out of it.

As she reclined on the couch and pulled the blanket up to her chin, she gave up trying to hold back the tears.

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“Wake up!”
Janeway blinked in the too-bright light. What the…
“Come on, Captain.” Her blanket was whisked away. “Get up.”
Slowly she pushed herself into a sitting position, shocked at the effrontery of her intruder. “What the hell are you doing in my ready room?”

“Seeing to a patient.” Without so much as a by-your-leave, Revi took her chin in a firm hold and injected her in the neck.

“What was that?” Janeway demanded, jerking her head away.

“A cocktail of vitamins, electrolytes and essential minerals, since you obviously haven’t been eating properly for the last week. You can’t go on like this.”

Her shock vanished in a blazing fury. “You’re presuming a lot on our friendship.”

“I’m not here as your friend, I’m here as your doctor. Starving yourself is not in the best interests of this ship. I can’t believe how different you look from the last time I saw you.”

“Fine. Give me a prescription and get out.”

“Oh, no, it’s not that easy. My job is to get to the source of the medical issue. Starving yourself is only a symptom. There’s something else going on, and her name is Lynne Hamilton. Remember her? Your wife?”

Janeway leveled a sizzling glare at her. “You are way out of line, Doctor.”

The glare appeared to bounce right off as Revi took a seat on the couch next to her. “So,” she said casually, “the problem is that Lynne beat the shit out of the Arnett who beat the shit out of you, and you can’t forgive her for it. Does that about sum it up?”

She was so stunned that she forgot to be angry. “How did you…”

“Everyone knows what happened. You can’t keep secrets on a starship. And every member of this crew wants to give Lynne a medal. So why are you so upset?”

Why did she feel like she had lost control of this conversation before it even started?

“She committed a crime, Revi! You don’t think I have the right to be a little upset? And not just any crime, a war crime. Punishable by up to fifteen years incarceration, even if she isn’t Starfleet. And B’Elanna helped her cover it up. Yes, I’m a little unhappy about it.”

Revi regarded her seriously. “The Federation is not at war with the Arnett.”

“No, but a hostile invasion of a starship is an act of war,” snapped Janeway.
A charged silence hung in the air as they eyed each other, until Revi sighed and rubbed her forehead. “Kathryn, you can logic this out any way you want. You can call it a war crime, and you can throw the book at your wife and your chief engineer for doing what any other member of this crew would have given fifty rations to do. But what will that accomplish?”

“Nothing!” said Janeway in a tight voice. “Why do you think I’ve let it go?” She took a deep breath, realizing that she’d allowed herself to get far too upset. She needed to retake control.

“You haven’t let it go,” said Revi gently. “If you had, you’d be home right now with Lynne instead of sleeping in your ready room and driving your bridge crew completely insane. You know it’s bad when Commander Chakotay comes to me to ask for help. We’ve actually ironed out our differences because of this.”

Janeway stared at her—and laughed. It was shaky and on the ragged edge of tears, but it broke the wall around her heart. “Well, I’m glad something good has come out of this. Because other than that, it’s a disaster. Lynne’s put me in an impossible position.”

“Nothing’s impossible,” said Revi, taking her hand. “You’ll figure something out.”

Janeway took immense comfort from the gesture, but she shook her head. “There is no way out. I can’t be with her unless we get this out in the open. I just can’t live with a wife who won’t tell me the truth. But if I acknowledge the truth, I’ll have to punish both her and B’Elanna. So it’s either put both of them in the brig for the next decade or so, or let them keep their freedom and dissolve my marriage.”

“Holy gods!” Revi was horrified. “That’s the corner you’ve driven yourself into? No wonder you’re in such bad shape. Those are not your only options.”

“Then I’m all ears. What am I missing?”

“About half your brain,” said Revi. Janeway glared at her, and she shook her head. “I didn’t mean it like that, really. What I meant was that you’re thinking of this solely from a Starfleet perspective. There’s a whole other side to this that you’re not considering.”

“And that is?” Janeway was still stinging from the brain comment.

“The family perspective. Kathryn, listen to me very carefully. What Lynne did had nothing to do with Starfleet and everything to do with her love for you. And if you think she and B’Elanna are the only ones, then
think again. I’m the one who told Lynne where to hit them in order to incapacitate them the quickest.”

If Janeway thought she’d been stunned before, she was wrong. This took the prize. “You? How could you? You’re a doctor!”

“I’m also a Human being who is loyal to her captain and loves her friend. And I had to stand there and watch them hurt you. I had to hold you afterward and see you trying to cope with the pain. I heard you when that guard kicked you where he knew it would hurt the most.”

“But your Hippocratic oath—”

“Applies to my patients. And if I ever end up with more Arnett in my sickbay, even the ones who beat you, I’ll care for them to the best of my ability. But these weren’t my patients, not at that time, and my greater concern was for Lynne. She’s not very good at dissembling, you know. She thought she was being subtle when she asked about Arnett anatomy. I had a good idea as to why she was asking, and frankly I intentionally didn’t pursue it. I also didn’t want her getting hurt, so I told her how to take them out in a manner that would give them the least chance of injuring her.”

“Jesus.” Janeway didn’t know what to think. “You’ve got a ruthless streak in you. It’s just not something I’d expect in a doctor.”

Revi furrowed her brow. “Do I?”

“Well, aren’t you supposed to consider all life sacred?”

“I didn’t tell her how to kill them. And being a doctor in Starfleet is a little different from private practice. There’s a military aspect that has to be taken into account. And on top of that, the Borg literally rewired my brain. Maybe that changed me in ways I’m not aware of. But my reverence for life hasn’t changed, and I personally could not have done what Lynne did. That doesn’t mean I didn’t feel a sense of satisfaction when I heard about it. To me and to everyone else in this crew, that was an act of justice.”

“It is not Lynne’s prerogative to hand out her own personal justice.”

“As a member of this crew, no it’s not. But as your wife? Don’t you think the rules might be a bit different?”

“That’s an excuse. A comparable situation would be if, say, Harry Kim were to assault B’Elanna. Would that give Tom the right to beat up Harry?”
“Well, first of all B’Elanna would lay Harry out with one punch, so your analogy needs a little work.”

“I’m not in the mood for jokes, Revi.”

“Neither am I. And your analogy is flawed. If Harry hurt B’Elanna, she and Tom would have legal recourse. They could depend on you to make sure that justice was done, and everyone on the crew would know that Harry would pay for his act. Now, switch to our current situation. Our captain was hurt by aliens. Who could we depend on to make sure justice was done? Not you. Certainly not any of the Arnett. There wasn’t going to be any justice, Kathryn. The rules didn’t apply. So Lynne made her own, and there isn’t a single person on this ship who would want to see her punished for it. Except maybe you.”

“I don’t want to see her punished! For god’s sake, that’s the problem!” Janeway felt a headache coming on, and pinched the bridge of her nose.

“It is? If you don’t want to see her punished, and nobody else on Voyager does, then I fail to see any problem at all.”

“There’s a problem in allowing an act of vigilante justice to go unanswered. I have to think of crew morale and ship’s discipline.”

“Kathryn, crew morale went up when word of this got around, and it will take a nose dive if you hand out a sentence. As for discipline, I don’t think that’s an issue. Do you think your crew will be responsive to the lesson that they can expect a brig sentence if they act out of loyalty toward you when you can’t protect yourself? And if you really do want to teach that lesson, then you’ll have to punish a bunch of us. I’m on the top of the list after Lynne and B’Elanna. Then there’s Chakotay, who says he didn’t take too much time to worry about the comfort of the Arnett his team dealt with. Seven says she lacked only the opportunity to cause some serious damage. She certainly had the motive and the desire. And the crew on trash detail knew exactly why five specific Arnett were being picked out of the lineup. Quite a few of them have said they only wished they could have helped, but they knew it was Lynne’s right.”

“Wonderful. I appear to have lost control of my entire crew.” This was far worse than she’d thought.

Revi squeezed her hand. “Turn your brain around and think of it from the other direction. You haven’t lost control of your crew. You’ve earned their loyalty, their respect, and in many cases their affection. And they all had to stand there in the cargo bay and watch you being systematically
beaten. To my way of thinking, if they hadn’t taken some sort of action or expressed the desire to do so, you should be far more worried. And of all the crew, Lynne was the hardest hit. She knew it was coming and had instructions to let it happen. She had to watch it, knowing she could prevent it, but she obeyed her orders. Her job is to protect you, and she was forced to fail.”

“She didn’t fail. She performed her duty perfectly.”

“I didn’t say her duty. I said her job. I’m not talking about your personal security escort, I’m talking about your wife. Who loves you beyond all reason, and made an official, legally binding promise in front of all of us to love, honor and protect you. She was forced to break that promise, also in front of all of us. She couldn’t protect you. How do you think that made her feel?”

“Revi, I understand her motivation. But the fact remains that she committed a crime, and there are consequences for that. And as her captain, I bear the burden of ensuring that those consequences are carried out.”

Revi gripped her shoulders with her hand and the clamp on her cybernetic arm, something she’d never done before. In the back of her mind, Janeway noticed that the clamp was oddly warm.

“You’re not listening to me! I realize that your devotion to running this ship according to Starfleet discipline is what’s gotten you to this point. You’ve got a well-oiled team out there, who have made it through crises that would certainly have ended the journey of any less-disciplined crew. But you have to realize that although the Starfleet way may be right ninety-nine percent of the time, there’s another one percent that requires a different way. That one percent is when you have to think of this crew as a family, not a crew. We’re in a unique situation, and Starfleet regulations do not apply every single time. This is one of those times.”

“So you’re saying I should just let this go, openly acknowledge Lynne’s actions, and condone them.”

“No. I’m saying you should acknowledge this to Lynne, get it out in the open with her privately, and sweep it under the rug as far as the rest of the crew is concerned. Every ship has its episodes that are generally known and never officially acknowledged. In this case, the worst thing you could do is behave as a captain, because the actions you’re concerned with have nothing to do with your rank and everything to do with the personal
feelings you’ve engendered in the people who love you. Kathryn, you’re the one who told me, not two weeks ago, that you’d learned that black and white ethics don’t work out here. This is as gray an area as ever existed. You cannot respond to it with pure Starfleet principles.”

Their faces were centimeters apart, and Revi’s eyes were burning with the intensity of her emotion. Suddenly Janeway remembered that she wasn’t just talking to Revi anymore. Seven was in there, too.

“What’s Seven’s opinion on this?” she asked.

Revi pulled away, and Janeway instantly missed the connection. It had been seven days since Lynne had last touched her, and her body craved physical contact.

“She says she doesn’t understand why you’re having such difficulties. Since the entire crew is already aware of the event in question and approves it—and in many cases facilitated it—your own indecision on the matter is an inefficiency of the highest order. Your collective has already moved on without you.”

Janeway couldn’t help but smile. “Thanks, Seven.”

“She says you’re welcome. And I’d like to know if you’ve seen Lynne recently.”

“I spent the day with her today.”

“Yes, but did you actually look at her?”

“No,” admitted Janeway. “I couldn’t.”

“You need to,” said Revi. “She’s not doing well. Less well than you, in fact, and that’s saying something. As far as the crew is concerned, this whole issue is a moot point. But as far as you and Lynne are concerned, it’s tearing you apart. You need to deal with this. And you need to repair your marriage, because the rift is affecting the morale of this entire ship.”

“As the captain goes, so goes the ship,” said Janeway.

“Yes. But in this case, there’s more affecting morale than just the captain. Lynne has a lot of friends, too.” Revi tilted her head. “Seven has a question for you.”

“Go ahead.”

“She wants to know how you can claim the high moral ground when you have also committed an act of pure vengeance.”

“When—”

“T’sin Lessia.”

Janeway closed her eyes. She’d conveniently forgotten. No, she’d
actively put it out of her head. The action she was least proud of, when she’d deliberately set out to ruin a political leader after her betrayal had nearly gotten Lynne and B’Elanna killed.

“Seven’s right,” she whispered. “I have no high moral ground.”

There was a long silence as they stared at each other. Finally Janeway nodded. “Thank you, Revi. And Seven. You’ve given me a lot to think about.”

“Am I being dismissed?”

“Yes.” Her gentle tone took any bite out of the oblique order. “I think you’ve made all your points quite well. Now I need some time to work on the problem with this new perspective.”

“Okay.” Revi stood up. “Don’t stay up too late, Kathryn.”

She glanced at the chronometer to see that it was after one o’clock in the morning. “What are you doing up this late, anyway?”

Revi smiled. “A friend needed my help.”

“I thought you were here as my doctor.”

“That too.”

Janeway stood up and pulled her into a hug. “Well, your friend is grateful.” She released Revi and gave her a gentle push toward the door. “Now get out.”

“I’m going.”

When the ready room doors closed, Janeway called up a cup of coffee from the replicator and took it to the viewport. For some time she stood there, slowly sipping her coffee and watching the star streaks. When the cup was empty she set it down, walked to her desk and input a command into her terminal.

A minute later Tuvok appeared, wearing a robe but otherwise looking as awake and alert as if his captain hadn’t just woken him up at 0130.

“Yes, Captain,” he said.

“Tuvok, I apologize for calling you at this hour. But I need your input on a security matter.”
It was nearly two a.m. when Janeway entered her quarters.

“Lights, one-eighth,” she said quietly. The illumination revealed a pillow and neatly folded blanket on the couch; apparently Lynne had moved back into the bedroom. Carefully she walked across the living room, but before she went through the doorway she could see that the bed was still made.

“Computer, locate Lynne Hamilton.”

“Lynne Hamilton is in Holodeck Two.”

“Pretty damned late to be playing in the holodeck, Lynne,” she said as she turned around.

Minutes later she stood in front of the holodeck control panel, swallowing the lump that had appeared in her throat when she’d seen the file name. Without a second thought she overrode the privacy lockout and stepped through the doors. The familiar path stretched ahead of her, running along the ridge line and vanishing behind an enormous boulder. When she rounded the boulder she saw Lynne, still in uniform, sitting on the edge of the cliff where Janeway had accepted her marriage proposal. Her arms were wrapped around one drawn-up leg and she was resting her chin on her knee, while the other leg dangled over the edge of the precipice. Janeway knew it was just an illusion, but the sight of Lynne sitting so casually on the edge of a thousand-meter drop made her heart
race. She had a feeling that Lynne did this sort of thing all the time when she was climbing.

Making no effort to mask her approach, she walked up to her wife and settled down next to her.

“Tell me,” she said, staring straight ahead. “Are you paying the actual cost right now, or the potential one?”

Lynne turned her head, and Janeway followed suit. She was shocked by the glaze in those normally sparkling green eyes. Lynne looked lifeless.

“This is the potential cost,” Lynne said. “The one I was so afraid of. I never thought it would come so soon.”

“I didn’t either.” When Lynne didn’t respond, other than to look back out at the view, Janeway sat back and admired the mountain scenery. After several minutes she tried again.

“This can’t go on.”

“I know.”

“Then let’s finish this. I want my wife back. But I can’t live in a relationship where deception and withholding of truth are considered appropriate. So I’ll ask you one more time: what happened?”

Lynne closed her eyes. “I’m sorry,” she said in a dull voice. “I can’t tell you that.”

Janeway sighed. She could simply say that she already knew, but to her mind it was absolutely imperative that Lynne come out with the truth on her own. Otherwise what were those promises worth? She couldn’t do this for Lynne; she couldn’t set that precedent. It would put the burden on her for all future situations where Lynne was uncomfortable with disclosure. This was the same problem they’d faced from the first days of their relationship, and she knew that if she gave up now, she’d be setting the wrong path for the rest of their lives.

Lynne had to talk, and she could only think of one thing left to try. It was drastic, but if it didn’t work she could always back down later. Maybe a little time spent contemplating the cost would bring Lynne around.

“All right,” she said. “If you won’t tell me the truth, if you won’t keep your promises to me, then we have nothing left to talk about.” She slipped off her wedding ring, pulled one of Lynne’s hands away from her leg, pressed the ring into her palm and closed her hand around it. Lynne’s face was a mask of disbelief as she opened her hand and stared.

“No,” she whispered.
“It’s not what I want,” said Janeway. “But you’re leaving me no choice.”
“No…”
“Goodbye, Lynne.” She got up and began to walk away. She hadn’t gotten five steps before a heart-wrenching scream tore out of Lynne’s throat.
“NOOOOO!”
Janeway turned at the sound of flying gravel and saw Lynne scrambling up, one hand pushing off the ground while the other was held clenched to her chest. Her foot slipped in the loose rock, sending her to one knee, and to Janeway’s horror she stayed down, crouching on her hands and knees in the dirt, her head bowed as she made an inarticulate sound of utter despair.
Janeway didn’t even think; she was beside Lynne in a moment, dropping to her knees and pulling at her wife’s shoulders. Lynne looked up and surged into her arms, nearly sending her over backwards. She’d been shocked back to life, and her words were almost indecipherable as she sobbed, gasped and hiccuped in her agony.
“P...please, Kathryn! D...don’t leave me! I’ll have nothing left...nothing...” She buried her face in Janeway’s shoulder and gave herself over to her weeping. Their position was tenuous, and Janeway shifted in an attempt to sit more comfortably, but Lynne was a dead weight. She hid her face in Janeway’s neck and refused to let go, her body shaking with the force of her crying. “P...please...p...please...,” she gasped, over and over, and Janeway began to cry as well.
“I don’t want to,” she said through her tears.
“Then don’t! God, Ka...Kathryn, don’t!”
“Lynne, listen to me,” said Janeway, trying to get control of her own grief. “I can’t live like this. Neither can you. You have to tell me the truth.”
“I can’t!” Lynne wailed. “It’s not just about me!”
“No, it’s about us.”
“No!” She began to hyperventilate. “I...I mean...it’s not just my...s...secret.”
And it all fell into place. What else could have induced Lynne to withhold the truth, even at such a terrible cost, except her damned loyalty? She’d never been afraid to pay the price for her decisions before now. This was all about protecting B’Elanna, and it had been from the start. Lynne
had said as much when she’d repeated, every time Janeway asked, that she couldn’t tell the truth. Janeway groaned, hating herself for not having seen it. She crushed Lynne in her arms.

“Oh, Lynne, god, I’m so sorry. It’s okay, sweetheart, take deep breaths. Slow down...slow down...take a deep breath. That’s right. You’re okay. I’m so, so sorry.” Lynne was starting to get her breathing under control, but Janeway was on the edge of completely losing it. She’d missed it, she hadn’t seen it at all, and she’d put Lynne through hell.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered again, and this time Lynne responded.

“For what? You don’t have anything to be sorry about.”

“I should have known you were protecting B’Elanna.”

The sudden cessation of Lynne’s breathing was startling. She pulled back and looked at Janeway, her eyes and nose streaming. “What did you say?”

“I said, I should have known you were protecting B’Elanna.”

Lynne wiped her nose on her sleeve in a gesture that made her look six years old, but the agony in her face was a sharp contrast. “I don’t understand. You knew?”

“Not until yesterday. B’Elanna’s good; it took me six days to figure it out.”

“Then why were you asking me just now?”

Janeway closed her eyes briefly. “Because I thought you were just refusing to tell me the truth, and I can’t live that way. I needed you to tell me on your own. But I didn’t realize that it wasn’t just yourself you were protecting.” She brushed Lynne’s hair off her face. “And also because I don’t have the details.”

Lynne nodded slowly, tears still sliding down her cheeks. “Can you ever forgive me?”

“Don’t you know by now that I can forgive you for anything?”

“Even a crime?”

Janeway looked at her steadily. “Even that. What happened?”

Lynne was unable to hold the gaze. After a long pause, she said, “I couldn’t let them go without paying for what they did to you.”

“So you beat them.”

“I wanted to kill them. In that air vent I actually changed the setting on my phaser. It took every ounce of willpower I had to change it back. But I
didn’t have enough willpower to just let them go. I’m not like you. I wish
to god I was.”

“I don’t,” said Janeway, and Lynne’s eyes came back to hers. “I love
you the way you are. Except when you lie to me and keep the truth from
me. That can’t ever happen again.”

Lynne shook her head frantically. “I didn’t mean to lie. I was just so
scared that I didn’t know what to do. We were so careful; B’Elanna
thought of everything, and then there were those fucking bruises.”

“Yes, she did think of everything. Not only that, but this entire crew
seems to know what happened and they’re all mute as tree stumps. I
would never have known if I hadn’t seen the bruises. Why didn’t you take
care of them?”

Lynne looked disgusted. “Because I didn’t even know they were there.
I never felt them.”

“How did you get them?” It was the question that had started this
whole mess.

“I gave them all a free shot at me.”

Janeway stared at her. That was not what she’d been expecting. “I think
you’d better start from the beginning.”

“I will. But will you take this back first?” Lynne opened her fist,
revealing the ring she’d clutched the whole time. Slowly, Janeway took it
off her palm and slid it back on her finger. When she looked up from her
hand she saw fresh tears streaming down Lynne’s cheeks.

“Don’t cry,” she whispered. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“If you do it will kill me.”

“If I do it’ll kill us both. I can’t live without you either. Now tell me
what happened.”

And Lynne did, telling her every detail. Even the unpleasant ones.
Janeway didn’t make it easy, interrupting her every few minutes.

“Let me get this straight. You had three of them attacking you at once,
and you knocked them all out?”

Lynne didn’t seem to get the significance. “They’re pretty small. It
wasn’t really a fair fight.”

“I’d say giving five-to-one odds, with a ten-second head start, is a more
than fair fight. And I know how hard those bastards can hit. I’m sorry,
Lynne, I did you a disservice. When I found that tooth on the security log
I envisioned you beating up on restrained prisoners. I thought maybe they’d gotten in a couple of lucky kicks.”

“No!” Lynne was shocked. “I could never do that. That would have made me almost as bad as they were. Though the last two might as well have been restrained for all the defense they put up. If I hadn’t been so blind with rage I probably couldn’t have gone through with it. They actually tried to surrender.”

“Playground bullies,” said Janeway. “Happy to dish it out, but they don’t know what to do when it comes back at them.”

“I just wish they’d thrown one punch at me. Anything. I look back at that now and I can’t believe I did it.”

“I can’t either, but you know what?”

“What?”

“A very basic, uncivilized part of me is glad you did. They betrayed our trust and they hurt me. A lot.”

“You’re glad?”

“I said part of me is glad. The rest of me is not happy about it at all. Now go on with your story.”

Lynne finished her narrative, stopping several times to answer questions, until Janeway was satisfied. “What are you going to do?” she asked in resignation.

“Nothing.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“I did, but I don’t understand. I committed a crime.”

“Actually,” said Janeway, “now that I know what really happened, that crime is a whole lot smaller than I thought. In essence, you were involved in a brawl. Three of the five attacked you first. If I were to take action on this, it would only be for the last two. And I have no intention of taking any action.”

“Why not?”

“Several reasons. One, it’s been pointed out to me that there was apparently a long line of willing crewmembers who would gladly have done it if you hadn’t. And I’m not sure all of them would have been quite as fair as you were. Two, the entire crew knows what happened, and they’re all keeping your secret. If I punish you I’ll actually injure discipline rather than
encourage it, which is the whole point of punishment. I’ll also injure morale, which is a precious commodity on this ship. Three, I’ve come to realize that in this case, I don’t need to and in fact should not respond as your captain, but rather as your wife. Even Tuvok says that given the unique circumstances of the situation, he has no plans to pursue an investigation. And four, I’m guilty of the same crime of vengeance, so if I made you pay for your actions I’d have to pony up as well. And I really don’t want that on my record.”

“Okay,” said Lynne, “I got all that except the vengeance part. When did you do that?”

“When I forced a confession from T’sin Lessia and broadcast it over her entire planet.”

“I thought that was an act of assistance to the Tsians.”

“That’s how it’s recorded in my log, certainly. But in my heart? It was revenge, pure and simple. I wanted to hurt her for hurting you. Remember when you said you changed your phaser setting and then changed it back? I did the same thing.”

Lynne’s eyes were huge. “You went down there with your phaser set to kill?”

“Set to vaporize is more like it. I was full of righteous fury and I had Tsian law behind me. I changed the setting just before beaming down.”

“Jesus.”

“I know. I didn’t think I had it in me either. But love does strange things to one’s ethics.”

“That’s for sure.”

After a short silence, Lynne asked, “How could you think I’d beaten up on restrained prisoners?”

“Because I had damned little to go on, Lynne. You weren’t saying anything no matter what I did, so all I could think was that whatever had happened, you were terrified of my reaction to it. So terrified that even my moving out didn’t change your mind about telling me. I combed every security log that you were in that day, and eventually I realized that there was something a little off about that final Arnett transport in the cargo bay. So I went through it at high magnification, and I found a tooth on the cargo bay floor. Now, the average humanoid would go to great lengths to avoid getting a tooth knocked out of their head, so I could only assume that the owner of that tooth hadn’t been able to prevent the blow. I was envisioning B’Elanna holding them while you beat them. It was
completely out of character for both of you, but to my mind it certainly would have explained why you were so terrified of me finding out.”

“Well, I’m glad it at least seemed out of character. But it hurts that you could actually think that.”

“And it hurts me that it had to come to this before I learned the truth,” Janeway said sharply. “Besides, B’Elanna is acting out of character. I would have thought she’d have far more honor than to let you take the fall alone. She knew what was happening between us and she didn’t say a goddamned word.”

“Whoa, wait!” Lynne held up her hands. “Don’t be so hard on her. She’s tried several times to convince me to talk to you. Then she threatened to talk to you herself. I wouldn’t let her.”

“Why not?”

“Because I know you. Or I thought I did. I was certain you’d strip her rank and toss her in the cell right next to mine. I couldn’t let her take that kind of punishment when all she did was a little programming. It was my crime, not hers.” Lynne tilted her head. “And frankly, I’m still shocked that you’re willing to look the other way. No matter how we argue it, the line between right and wrong is still pretty clear. And I’m on the wrong side of it.”

“Yes, you are. But I didn’t make my decision based on that line. I made it based on the consequences. If I punish you and B’Elanna, it will accomplish nothing and cause a lot of harm. If I don’t punish you, then I live with the knowledge that I turned a blind eye to a crime on my ship. That’s not going to be easy. But of the two prices, I’d rather pay that one. Sometimes it’s not a matter of choosing between right and wrong. It’s a matter of choosing between wrong and more wrong.” She remembered trying to help Chakotay understand this concept, and how she’d told him that these were the decisions that kept her up at night.

Weariness washed over her, sapping her strength. She’d been up enough nights over this one; she wanted to go to bed. In her own quarters, with her wife.

Lynne was looking at her sadly. “I’m sorry I made you pay any kind of price. The last thing I wanted to do was to hurt you.”

Janeway nodded. “I know. We both got hurt on this one. But if you’re willing, I’d like to put it behind us. I’m ready to go home; how about you?”
The look on Lynne’s face was heartbreaking. “You’re coming home?” she whispered. As Janeway nodded, Lynne closed her eyes and swallowed hard. “Thank you.” When her eyes opened again, the gratitude in them was almost more than Janeway could bear. Only an hour ago Lynne had been so dull, so lifeless, and all because Janeway had been too angry to think straight. She’d missed the obvious, she’d walked out instead of fighting for her marriage, and now Lynne was thanking her for coming back. God, what an irony. They’d both made mistakes, but Lynne’s had been rooted in protection and loyalty, while Janeway’s sprang from... what, affronted ideals? Disappointment in her wife? Were either of those good enough reasons to cause this kind of damage?

Lynne stood, her normal grace having returned, and quickly slapped the dirt off her pants before holding out a hand. Janeway took it and stood still, letting Lynne brush her off as well.

“Thanks,” she said when Lynne straightened up.

“Oh, don’t thank me. That was purely gratuitous. I haven’t touched you in a week and it’s been killing me.”

“Me too,” said Janeway, as they began walking down the path hand in hand. “It’s strange. I went along just fine for five years without any physical contact, and now five days is torture.”

Lynne ended the program, and they exited into the darkened corridor. “It’ll be nice to sleep in the bed tonight,” said Lynne. They stopped in front of the turbolift and Janeway hit the call button.

“Where have you been sleeping?” she asked in some surprise.

“The couch.”

“Why?”

The ‘lift arrived and they stepped in. “Deck three,” said Lynne. “Because I kept hoping you’d come home, and if you did I didn’t want you to have to sleep in the living room. The whole situation was my fault, so I was the one who should have been on the couch. I felt awful that first night when you wouldn’t come to bed.”

They emerged onto deck three, and were soon in the comfort of their own quarters. “I hated it as much as you did,” said Janeway. “But I was too angry and hurt.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, Lynne. We’re done with it. The only thing I want right now is for you to hold me for what’s left of the night. I need to feel you.”
Judging by Lynne’s response, she needed it just as much.

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Janeway woke with a start. Something was wrong. She heard a whimper from Lynne, and sat up in alarm. “Lynne?”

Lynne tossed her head back and forth, making small, unhappy noises. Her hair was stuck to her forehead with sweat.


With a gasp, Lynne sat bolt upright, staring wildly and breathing hard. Janeway rubbed her back; it was slick with sweat. “It’s okay, it was just a nightmare.”

Lynne dropped back onto her pillow. “Oh, god.”

“Can you tell me about it?”

“It’s the same one I’ve had every night since you left. I didn’t think I’d have it tonight.”

She brushed Lynne’s damp hair off her face, continuing her caresses long after the hair was tucked back. “What happens in your dream?”

Lynne’s eyes closed as the soothing motion relaxed her. “I’m in the cargo bay. With the Arnett. Except there are more of them, and they’re all beaten and bloody. They’re lying all over, in pools of blood, and I’m the one who put them there. And then you come in, shouting at me.”

When several seconds passed in silence, Janeway prompted her. “Then what happens?”

Lynne’s face showed the effort it was costing her not to cry. “Kathryn…”

“Tell me.”

Tears slipped from beneath her closed lids, and her voice was barely a whisper. “And then I tear into you, and you’re screaming, and I can feel your bones breaking under my fists, and there’s blood everywhere. Oh, god, I’m so sorry.” She put her hands over her eyes and began to cry softly.

“Lights, one-eighth,” said Janeway. “Lynne, look at me.”

Slowly Lynne pulled her hands away, and Janeway sucked in a breath as the gentle illumination showed the ravages her nightmare had wrought. She looked far older than her years.
Taking a hand in her own and holding it tightly, she said, “Look at my face, sweetheart. I’m all right. It was just a nightmare.”

“I know.” Lynne reached up to touch her cheek. “But I feel horrible.”

“You didn’t do it.”

Lynne looked at her sadly. “Yes, I did. There was screaming, and there was blood. A lot of it. We had to wipe it off their hands so we wouldn’t drop them while we were carrying them.”

In her sleep-fogged state, it took Janeway a second to make the connection. “Oh, Lynne…”

“I wanted to hurt them like they’d hurt you, and I did. It felt good. They couldn’t touch me, Kathryn. I seem to have become very proficient at hurting people. But it doesn’t feel good any more. It feels awful.”

Without letting go of the hand she held, Janeway rolled onto her back and tugged. “Come here.” Relieved when Lynne willingly snuggled in, she wrapped an arm around her back and began running gentle fingers through her hair. “Remember the day you became ta’nek?”

“Of course.”

“Do you remember our discussion about you hurting people?”

“I remember we talked about a lot of things.”

“I said I was worried about you losing your innocence. And you said you weren’t turning into someone else, and that you couldn’t get jaded about hurting people because of your training. This dream is your mind trying to reconcile your actions with who you are, because you were right, Lynne. You haven’t changed into someone else, and you’re not jaded. What you’re feeling right now is proof of that. But you have lost your innocence. I wish it were different, but it’s not. So now we just move on from here. It may take you a long time to deal with what you did, but I’ll be right here beside you the whole way.”

There was no sound but their breathing for some time. Janeway continued to caress Lynne’s hair, knowing it was the most effective way of relaxing her. Her heart ached for her partner, but there was only so much she could do.

“Kathryn?”

“Hmm?”

“Thank you for loving me. Right now it feels like the only thing in my life that’s right.”
Janeway dropped a kiss on the top of her head. “You might as well thank me for breathing. It’s not something I can stop doing.”
“I love you too, you know that, right? And I would never hurt you.”
“I know. Computer, lights out.”
She stroked Lynne’s hair in a slow, gentle rhythm, and eventually heard her breathing even out. Gently she kissed her one last time, then rested her tired arm and stared into the night, wide awake.
B'Elanna stood in front of the ready room doors, taking a moment to gather her courage before venturing inside. Lynne had tried to keep her from doing this, but she couldn't stand it any more. It was too awful to watch Janeway getting more distant and stone-faced every day, while Lynne's broken heart was showing in every look and gesture. It had seemed so right and so easy at the time, but not now. The price was just too high.

She pressed the chime and waited several seconds before hearing Janeway's voice over the comm. Her order to "come" was clipped and all business. By that alone B'Elanna knew the captain wasn't in a friendly mood; if she was she'd have said "come in." That one word made a big difference.

She stepped through the doors and found Janeway at her desk, sipping from a cup of coffee and staring intently at her monitor. She didn't look up, not even when B'Elanna stopped in front of her.

"Just a minute," she said, still reading.

B'Elanna opened her hand and let her Maquis insignia slip from her palm to the desktop. Janeway went completely still. Slowly, she turned her head to look at the insignia, then equally slowly met B'Elanna's eyes. Kahless, she looked terrible. Like she hadn't slept in days, and hadn't eaten much either.
“Are you going to explain this?” she said.

“I’m resigning,” said B’Elanna. “I figure that way you can’t give me a dishonorable discharge or strip me of rank. I’m turning myself in, Captain.”

“For what?” Her voice was deceptively calm.

“For aiding and assisting a crime against prisoners of war, and tampering with ship’s security logs.”

“I see.” Janeway tapped her fingers on her coffee mug. “Sit down, B’Elanna.”

She sat and met her captain’s eyes, though it wasn’t easy. Janeway was looking at her with that cool, unreadable expression that she’d seen so often in their first years of working together, and she wasn’t saying a damned thing. It was taking all of B’Elanna’s will power to keep from shifting in her chair.

“Why?”

“Captain?” It wasn’t the question she’d expected.

“Why turn yourself in now? You covered it up beautifully. It took me six days to find anything at all, and even now I have no concrete evidence. Just circumstantial. If you’d kept quiet you’d have gotten away with it.”

Kahless on a crutch, she already knew. B’Elanna forced herself to maintain their gaze.

“Because it doesn’t matter any more if I get away with it. I can’t live with myself watching the destruction of your marriage. It’s killing Lynne not to tell you, and the only reason she won’t is because she’s afraid of what you’ll do to me. So I’m taking that out of the equation. This isn’t her fault.”

“I’d say what she did is entirely her fault.”

“Dealing with the Arnett, yes. Not telling you the truth, no. I can’t help the first, but I can help the second. And just for the record, Captain, it’s only Starfleet that would find fault with Lynne’s actions. A lot of cultures, including my own, would have faulted her only if she hadn’t avenged you.”

“It seems to me,” said Janeway in that cool voice, “that you only claim your Klingon heritage when it’s to your advantage. Otherwise you don’t want much to do with it. Am I supposed to overlook what you’ve done because in your culture it would be considered honorable?”

B’Elanna fought to control the instant anger that flooded her system.
“In my culture, what I did would be considered dishonorable,” she said. “Because I covered up a righteous act of honor instead of shouting about it in the corridors and toasting Lynne with a cup of blood wine. So no, Captain, you’re not supposed to overlook it. And you’re right, I have very mixed feelings about Klingon culture. But I’ll tell you one thing, this is one of the few times when I really wish this were a Klingon ship. Because then you’d be proud of Lynne, instead of scaring her to death with the thought of your justice.”

The silence that fell was painful, and B’Elanna knew she’d gone too far. Finally Janeway reached out to the insignia and pushed it across the desk toward her.

“I don’t accept your resignation,” she said.

For a moment B’Elanna didn’t get it. Then she understood. “You’d rather strip me of it publicly?”

“I’d rather not do anything publicly. In fact, this conversation is not taking place. I don’t know a damned thing.”

B’Elanna’s mouth fell open. “You’re letting it go?”

“Letting what go?” asked Janeway. Her expression left no doubt as to her meaning.

Slowly, B’Elanna picked up her insignia and reattached it to her collar. When she looked up, Janeway was watching her with a little more warmth in her gaze.

“Was there anything else, Lieutenant?”

“No, Captain.”

“Good. Then I want you to take a look at this.” She pushed a PADD over. “It’s a new transwarp theory from the TPG, and it looks very promising. I’d like your thoughts on it.”

B’Elanna felt a little dazed. “I’ll get on it right away.”

Janeway nodded. “Report back to me as soon as possible. Dismissed.”

B’Elanna was halfway to the door before she gave in. She had to know. “Captain?”

Janeway looked up from her monitor.

“Will you and Lynne be okay?”

A small, sad smile touched her lips. “We’ll be okay. Thanks, B’Elanna.”

B’Elanna smiled back, then stepped onto the bridge to find Chakotay waiting for her.
“Can I see you in my office?” he asked, and walked away before she’d even answered.

“It’s nice to be in demand,” she muttered as she followed him off the bridge. He led her into his office and turned abruptly.

“Tell me you didn’t just do what I think you did.”

“I guess that depends on what you think I did.” She wasn’t in the mood for this.

“I think you went in there and told the captain what you did for Lynne. I think you just gave her the eyewitness testimony she needed to take action. And I think you just screwed up any chance I had of resolving this without heartache on all sides.”

She glared at him. “Fuck off, Chakotay. She already knew.”

“Of course she knew. She just didn’t have any evidence. Now she does, and that means she’ll have to do something about it.”

“You don’t know her as well as you think you do. She’s not doing anything.”

He straightened up in surprise. “She said that?”

“She wouldn’t accept my resignation, and told me that we never had that conversation. She said she doesn’t know a damned thing.”

An enormous, relieved smile spread over his face. “Thank you, Doctor Sandovhar.”

“What?” Now that was the last thing she expected to hear him say. She knew how little love was lost between those two.

“Nothing,” he said. “Thanks, B’Elanna. I need to get back to the bridge.” And he walked out of his office, leaving her standing there.

“What the hell just happened?” she asked the empty room.

Chakotay waited patiently while Doctor Sandovhar finished instructing Crewman O’Donnell on his follow-up care. Judging by the bland diet she was prescribing, the poor man had had a serious intestinal upset and would have to be careful for a while. O’Donnell nodded unhappily and left as soon as Sandovhar would let him. She entered some notes in the sickbay computer and then straightened up, looking first at Chakotay and then at the Doctor, who was working at the microscope.
“May I see you on a private matter, Doctor Sandovhar?” asked Chakotay, knowing that she needed the excuse.

“Certainly. In my office.”

As soon as the door was shut behind them she said, “Tell me you have good news.”

“I have the best news. She’s decided to let the whole thing slide. And this afternoon she gave me a PADD of orders, one of which rescinded Lynne’s transfer. I think it’s going to be all right. I don’t know what you said, but it worked.”

She actually winked at him. “I told her she had to think more like a Maquis.”

“You what?”

“Just kidding. But not by much. I just convinced her that there was a different way of looking at the situation. Believe me, the view from where she was standing was bleak. No wonder she hadn’t been eating.”

He wanted to know more, but something told him it would be useless to ask. “Well, regardless of how you did it, the outcome was good. Thank you, Revi.”

She tilted her head. “Why thank me? I didn’t do it for you.”

“I’m thanking you in my capacity as first officer, whose duty it is to see that the personnel issues of this ship run smoothly. I couldn’t have smoothed that one out without your help. So thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” she said. “Are you trying to smooth us out, too?”

“That’s my job,” he said, smiling at her.

“In that case, why don’t you join Seven and me at Sandrine’s Friday? She’s expressed a desire to learn pool.”

“Oh no, another pool shark in the making.”

Revi laughed, startling him. He’d never heard her laugh before.

“I’m afraid so. But it will be fun to watch.”

“I accept your invitation,” he said, “but I’m a little puzzled by it. Why are you going out of your way?”

“Because,” she said, “now that you’re not waiting for me to trip up, I can relax a bit more around you. And now that I’m relaxing I can see that you’re a good man with the best interests of this ship and crew at heart. It occurred to me recently that what you did when you thought I was assimilating that Arnett was incredibly courageous. Stupid, but courageous. You
used your own body to stop me, even though you must have known that I
could have assimilated you in seconds.”

“I did what I thought I had to do,” he said, but he was pleased that she
was reaching out.

“I know. And really, I’d rather have you on my side than working
against me. It would be nice to think you’d extend that concern to me
as well.”

“You’re a valuable member of this crew,” he said. “It took me a while
to figure that out, but I have. Your best interests are a concern of mine.”

“Thank you,” she said. “As are yours to me. I’ve already recycled the
hypo of poison that I had waiting in case you ever came in here needing
medical assistance.”

He gaped at her, unsure if she was joking.

She smiled. “Kidding, Commander. I’m kidding. As far as I’m
concerned, you and I are shipmates and maybe someday we’ll be friends.
The trouble now is that Seven still wants to separate your head from your
body. So I’m hoping a little socialization might ease things between the
two of you.”

“From one personnel issue to the next.”

“A first officer’s job is never done. Neither is a CMO’s, for that matter,
but I’ve always found bodies much easier to patch up than minds or rela-
tionships. I wouldn’t want your job, Commander.”

“Chakotay,” he corrected. They’d gone over this yesterday, but he
figured it might take some time. “And I don’t see why not, you did great in
it last night.”

“Special case. I hope you aren’t expecting my help with Lieutenant
Paris.”

He frowned. Had he missed something? He hadn’t heard anything
about Paris. “Why? What have you heard?”

“Oh, nothing.” She gave him an easy smile and opened the door. “See
you at Sandrine’s Friday. Seventeen thirty.”

He followed her out, shaking his head. What was going on with Paris?
Seven activated the door sensor to her quarters and stepped aside, allowing Revi to enter first. They had just ended their second evening in as many weeks of socialization at Sandrine’s, with the two-fold purpose of teaching Seven how to play pool and reducing the animosity she felt toward Chakotay. The first goal had been reached with considerable success—pool, after all, was simply a matter of mathematics and physics, fields in which Seven had considerable expertise—but the second had proven more difficult. She was aware that Revi wanted her to reconcile with the Commander. She just didn’t know how. Every time she looked at him she remembered Revi lying beneath her in the alcove unit, broken and despairing. She did not understand how Revi could forgive him so easily. Their first evening together had been stilted at best, and although the conversation had been easier this night, it was still nothing approaching normal.

However, such thinking was unproductive at this time. This evening she had caught a flash of imagery from Revi that had fired her imagination, and she’d expended considerable effort in compartmentalizing her thoughts so that Revi would not see what was coming. She had been waiting for this, their first moment of privacy.

When Revi stepped through her door, Seven followed immediately
behind, seizing Revi by the shoulders and roughly pushing her into the wall.

“Seven! What—”

Revi was unable to finish her sentence as Seven took her mouth in a bruising kiss, holding her wrist and cybernetic arm against the wall. The initial surprise and faint irritation that Seven had felt through their link quickly changed into a sense of desire and a little amusement. : Gods, you’d think we hadn’t touched each other in a month. :

Seven made no response through their link. Instead, without breaking their kiss, she unzipped Revi’s jacket and pushed it halfway down her arms. Taking a handful of shirt collar in her Borg hand, she gave it a quick jerk and tore the shirt all the way down the front. A moment later the bra had also been severed, and Revi’s clothing hung in shreds.

: Seven! What are you doing?: Revi was slightly alarmed, and Seven realized that her own preoccupation with acting out the imagery had prevented Revi from being able to sense her emotions.

: I saw this in your mind tonight. : She pulled back and allowed her desire to surface in her thoughts. It wasn’t difficult, not with Revi’s breasts barely covered by the torn cloth hanging off her shoulders. : You watched me as I spoke to Commander Chakotay and you imagined me doing this to you. I didn’t realize that you would wish to be touched in a less gentle manner. But I’m happy to oblige. : Pushing Revi’s arms back against the wall, Seven leaned down, used her nose to nudge aside the shreds of clothing, and began a hard suckling of the newly exposed breasts.

: Oh, gods! : A white-hot rush of arousal singed their link and nearly overwhelmed Seven. She didn’t respond, focusing solely on the bare skin now available for her pleasure. Revi had always made love to her in a reverent manner, and she had, with the exception of a few nips to sensitive areas, followed her example. The images she’d seen in Revi’s mind tonight had surprised her, but she was thoroughly enjoying the opportunity to do something different. Hadn’t Kathryn always wanted her to be creative?

Raking her fingers over the sensitive mesh of Revi’s abdominal implant, Seven rose back up and resumed her passionate exploration of her lover’s mouth.

: Gods, Seven! I don’t think this is what Kathryn had in mind! :
I'm quite certain she didn’t have this in mind, either. After a final nip to Revi’s lower lip, Seven leaned down, reached through Revi’s legs to grasp the back of her waistband with her Borg hand, and efficiently severed the pant seam all the way to the front. The underwear went next, leaving Revi wearing two halves and nothing in between. Seven wasted no time exploring the exposed skin, finding an abundance of moisture there. Even as she touched Revi her fingers were anointed with a new rush of lubricant, concurrent with the flash of desire that came down their link. Revi was ready.

Seven straightened and looked down at her partner, allowing her own arousal to show in her face and thoughts. I want you.

I noticed. Revi was using humor in an attempt to retake some control over the situation. Seven, however, wanted total control. In response she slid her hands around Revi’s upper thighs and pulled her off her feet, holding her body against her own. Revi was taken by surprise, instinctively throwing her arms around Seven’s neck to keep her balance. Seven!

Seven turned, walked across her quarters, pulled a chair out from the table with her foot and sat down with Revi straddling her lap. She spread her own legs, forcing Revi’s apart, and reached behind her neck to remove her lover’s hands. Slowly she pushed them behind Revi’s back, watching in appreciation as the motion made Revi’s chest arch toward her. She held both the Human wrist and the cybernetic one in her Borg hand and sat back, looking with hooded eyes at the view.

Revi’s desire was now so strong that Seven was having a hard time controlling her own thoughts. But she wanted to make Revi wait, if only for a little while.

I never understood what the term “sexy” meant until I met you. At this moment you define the word. There is no other for me. She listened to the tumultuous thoughts in Revi’s mind, feeling a great sense of satisfaction that her partner was so aroused that she was barely able to put two thoughts together.

Finally Revi responded, her eyes burning into Seven’s. There is no other for me, either. I don’t think there ever can be.

Seven already knew this, of course, but to hear it so clearly presented in Revi’s thoughts gave her a sense of belonging and security that she had never known before entering this relationship. Nor had she ever known
she’d needed it. Now she had no idea how she could ever live without it again.

She used her free hand to brush Revi’s shredded clothing off her shoulders, fully exposing her torso. For several minutes she simply ran her fingers over the curves and ridges that seemed to be asking for her touch, occasionally pinching a nipple and enjoying the reaction, both in Revi’s body and her mind. Then, in keeping with the scenario she was playing out, she asked a pointed question.

: What do you want, Revi? :

Revi looked straight at her. : You. Only you, and for as long as you’ll have me.

: And with that simple, truthful answer, Revi effectively stripped away Seven’s pretense at control. She could not maintain the façade, not with that truth ringing in her mind. Releasing Revi’s arms, she pulled her lover in close and held her tightly. : Please don’t think that way. You have a chronometer in your mind, counting down our time together, but it’s not limited. There will never be another for me, either. :

She could see Revi’s wish to believe warring with her practical experience and expectations. It was not a battle that would be won at any date in the near future. Seven understood instinctively that she would be required to provide supporting evidence of her vow repeatedly, and over a long period of time, before Revi would be able to let go of her doubts and truly believe.

She turned her head and sucked in the nipple positioned so conveniently close to her mouth, focusing all of her attentions on the responses that came down their link. Revi’s arousal had been momentarily damped by their exchange of thoughts, but it returned almost immediately to its prior level. When she felt it was time, Seven reached between them and slipped her fingers into Revi’s center, not bothering with any other manipulation. The abundant lubricant made it unnecessary, and she knew from the white-hot charge sizzling down their link that Revi hadn’t expected such an abrupt transition and was intensely turned on by it. After a few strokes she began brushing Revi’s clitoris with her thumb, and in seconds they were both lost in the reciprocal sensations. Seven’s original intention had been to make Revi wait, to control this encounter and draw it out, but the sensations swamping her soon wiped out any
coherent thought except one: she wanted the bonding, and she wanted it now.

They rode the upward spiral of their mutual pleasure, the barriers between their minds beginning to break down, and suddenly it was there, sweeping over them—the oneness that Seven always craved and could never get enough of. She and Revi ceased to exist; there was now only a single entity comprised of all of their experiences, memories and thoughts. Seven glared in this new existence, trying to make it last as long as possible, but as always their minds separated before she was ready and she crashed back into her individuality with a jolt.

Panting, she held Revi close with one arm, slowing her motions with the other until she knew she had wrung every bit of pleasure out of her partner that she could. Only then did she cease her movements, simply holding their bodies together and allowing Revi to recover, both physically and mentally.

It took one point four minutes for Revi to pull away and look down at her. “Holy gods, Seven, what the hell got into you? That was incredible. And nothing I would have ever expected.”

“That was the intent. You were not meant to expect it.” Seven slowly pulled her fingers out, both of them wincing at the sensation and both sagging in relief when it was over. Revi’s eyes widened as Seven brought her hand up between them, flexing her fingers to ease the tension.

“Three fingers? I can’t believe I didn’t know that.”

“You mind was occupied.”

Revi laughed. “Just a little.” She leaned down and placed a gentle, almost chaste kiss on Seven’s lips. “Thank you, darling. It was wonderful and unexpected and incredibly hot. And now I really have to get up.” She carefully backed up and regained her feet, allowing Seven to support her waist until she was fully upright. The movement caused her shredded pant legs to fall, and she looked at Seven accusingly. “You do realize that you’re a complete beast. I’ve never had anyone literally tear my clothes off before.” She let her jacket fall to the floor and shrugged off the remains of her shirt and bra, then sat down to pull off her boots and the two halves of her trousers.

Seven sat in her chair, thoroughly enjoying the scene. “Perhaps you did not give anyone the proper incentive before,” she offered.
“And what incentive did I give you? I didn’t even know you’d caught that little image in my head. I swear it was just a flash of thought.”

“A powerful one,” said Seven, remembering how it had seemed to come from nowhere, searing through her mind with a heat that had left her momentarily disoriented. “And as for incentive, our bonding is enough to make me willing to do anything you could ever want or dream of. It’s in the closet,” she added, responding to Revi’s thought about borrowing a robe.

“Thank you.” Revi stood up and padded to the closet, pulling out Seven’s robe and belting it around her waist. “I feel like the sorcerer’s apprentice.”

Seven tilted her head and a moment later received the relevant data from Revi’s mind. “You do not look anything like an animated mouse.”

“Maybe not, but I’m going to have to roll up these sleeves or trip over them. Sometimes I forget how tall you are.” Revi wandered over to the replicator, turning up her sleeves as she walked. “Computer, two glasses of water.” She downed hers in a few gulps, placing the glass back into the replicator before bringing the second to Seven, who accepted gratefully. When Seven finished her drink she found Revi looking at her very seriously.

“I love you.”

“I love you too,” Seven answered. “You are perfection.”

“I most certainly am not. You can’t possibly still think that after bonding with me.”

Seven reached out for her hand. “I didn’t think it until I bonded with you. Once I saw who you truly are, the beauty that lies inside your heart and mind, I knew I had found the one I needed.”

Revi’s eyes shone with moisture. “Gods, you always manage to get me. I think I know you, and then you come up with something like that and I realize that I still don’t. Not yet.”

“You know me.” Seven was saddened at the realization that even mind-to-mind communication sometimes wasn’t enough. “You just won’t allow yourself to believe.”

“I’m sorry I can’t give that to you,” said Revi, dropping her eyes.

Seven squeezed her hand. “You have given me everything within your power. This is not something you can change at this moment. But we have time, and I’m a very patient woman.”
The comment had its intended effect. Revi’s eyes came back up, and she was smiling. “Right. So patient that you couldn’t even stick with your intent of making me wait for my orgasm. You were more anxious than I was.”

“I was not anxious. I was merely attempting to make the most efficient use of our time together.”

Revi laughed at that one. “Nice try, darling. But there’s nothing remotely efficient about our lovemaking, thank the gods.” Her expression grew serious once more. “I understand why you gave up the wait, though. And if you’d like, instead of me reciprocating, perhaps we could attempt a different method of bonding.”

Although it had not been mentioned since their first day together, Seven well remembered Revi’s reference to drugs and meditation being alternative routes to the bonding. “Which one?” she asked.

“Meditation. I don’t think you’ll ever want to try the drugs. They induce a loss of mental control that I just can’t imagine you being comfortable with, but meditation lets you keep most of that control. In fact, the trick with meditation is forcing yourself to let go enough for the bonding to take place.”

“I wish to try it,” said Seven immediately.

Revi smiled. “I know. But this isn’t going to be like making love. It’s a completely different experience, and we might not get there the first time. You’ll need to be patient.”

Seven gave her a wounded look, but couldn’t maintain it in the face of Revi’s snort.

“Come on.” Revi tugged her upright. “Let’s sit where we can both be comfortable.” She led them to the couch and sat down sideways, with her feet tucked up under her. Seven paused to remove her boots and then assumed the same position, facing her. They held hands, or in Revi’s case, hand and clamp.

: All right, Seven. You’re going to have to turn off that brain of yours. Advanced students can simply clear their minds of all thought, but the best way to start learning is to pick a single thought and concentrate on that. I’ll be working on my end to complete the connection. If you can narrow down all of your thoughts to just one, that single one can be powerful enough for me to hold on to and initiate the bonding. :

: I understand. : Seven spent a few moments deciding which thought to

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focus on. With Revi sitting right across from her, eyes shut, her thoughts naturally wandered to their recent sexual encounter and the way Revi had looked while straddling her lap.

: Seven, that is NOT going to work. :
: Why not? :
: It’s a little…active for our purpose. Pick something less physical. :

Sighing, Seven cast about for a less “physical” thought. She sifted through several thousand options, growing frustrated as her brain seemed to become more active rather than less. Eventually she could no longer keep her aggravation to herself.

: I do not see how I can do this. The more I try to think less, the more I’m thinking. :

She realized that her thought made very little sense, but Revi understood.

: It’s difficult to learn, darling. We’ve only been at it for ten minutes. Let’s take a break. :

: I don’t want to. :

“Seven,” said Revi, opening her eyes, “take a break. We’re not going to get anywhere as long as you’re frustrated. Your emotion will block me out.”

Seven abruptly stood, stalking across to the replicator and getting a second glass of water. She held the cool glass against her forehead, forcing herself to relax. A moment later she felt arms go around her waist from behind.

“Hey,” said Revi. “You’re doing fine. Don’t be angry with yourself for not getting it on the first try.”

“I am unaccustomed to failure,” said Seven unhappily.

Revi gently turned her around to face her. “It’s not failure. Not by a long shot. We’ve barely gotten started.” She pulled Seven’s head down and kissed her deeply, and by the time they separated Seven’s irritation had completely drained away.

Revi smiled. “If only everyone could cool down as rapidly as you can.”

“Everyone does not have you to assist them,” Seven pointed out.

“A few have in the past. They still couldn’t do it. You’re different. Unique.”

Seven allowed Revi’s thoughts to soothe her even further. “Thank you,” she said. “Can we try again?”

They spent the rest of the night practicing. Revi soon conceded that
indeed, Seven had far more patience than she did, because she would have given up long ago. But Seven was determined to make it work. After the first three attempts she’d finally fixed on the omega molecule as her single thought. Its perfection made it possible for her to focus, allowing other parts of her mind to gradually slip away, and with each attempt she could feel herself drawing closer to her goal. Nothing in the universe could have induced her to cease her efforts, not when success was within her grasp.

Her internal chronometer was one of the things she’d learned to disassociate, so she didn’t know what time it was when the miracle happened. All she knew was that suddenly, she went from a focused contemplation of the omega molecule straight into Revi. The single thought exploded into their bonding, and for a moment she was too stunned by the abrupt change to even function. But she adapted quickly, and soon realized that this bonding was fundamentally different from that produced by their lovemaking. When their orgasms induced a bonding, it felt as if her existence expanded to include Revi’s, hovered for a moment at the apex, and then began contracting once again. The actual moment of full bonding was very short. But this…this was that moment at the apex, stretched out into infinity. She had all the time in the world to walk amongst Revi’s thoughts and memories. She was surrounded by the woman she loved, and surrounded her in turn. They were both inside and around the other, a paradox that made perfect sense. There was no sense of urgency, no feeling of limited time slipping away. She had an eternity to go where she wanted. Feeling utterly content, she began exploring Revi’s memories of her childhood, experiencing every one as if it were actually hers. Even as she did so, she could feel Revi walking through her own memories, their different childhoods merging into one.

Abandoning this time period, Seven looked around for one that had been an intense source of curiosity for her. Revi had shared her memories of Steph on the night of their first bonding, but had not spoken or openly thought of her again. Seven wanted to know everything. This was, after all, the only other woman Revi had ever loved. Dead or alive, she was competition, and Seven wanted every detail that she could get.

With their minds so totally joined, Revi could not have stopped her from reliving those memories if she had wanted to. But she’d known that Seven would go there, and made it even easier by pulling out of her own exploration of Seven’s memories and joining their efforts. Together they
relived the entire relationship, from the first meeting until their last happy memory. At that point Seven pulled them out, not wanting Revi to be forced to relive the tragic end. She had already seen it once and did not ever need to see it again.

By mutual agreement, they let go of each other and retreated back to their own minds, and this time Seven felt none of the jarring sense of incompleteness when the bonding ended. She settled gently into her own individuality, tired from their explorations but absolutely content. For a moment she sat there with her eyes closed, gathering her sense of self before opening her eyes once more.

Revi was looking at her, an expression of wonder on her face.

“That was the most intimate love I have ever experienced,” she whispered. “Seven, thank you.”

Seven squeezed her hand, which she had unknowingly been holding for—she checked her internal chronometer—close to ninety-six minutes. They had taken their last break at 0217, and the bonding had occurred sometime afterward.

“I feel as if I love you both,” she said. Revi’s memories were now her own, and she knew Steph as well as if she’d been the one standing on her doorstep on that cool winter evening, professing her feelings and wondering if Steph would close the door in her face. She well remembered her—Revi’s—near-terror as she’d spoken the words, and the euphoria when Steph had smiled and asked why it had taken her so long to figure it out.

“You do,” said Revi. She shook her head. “I mean, we do. Gods, Seven, I’ve never done anything like this before. The semantics can’t keep up with the reality. You were there.”

“I know. She was beautiful. Mind, body and heart. I understand why you—we loved her.”

Revi’s eyes suddenly welled with tears, and she pulled her hand out of Seven’s to wipe them away. “I miss her,” she said helplessly.

“I do, too.” Seven did not stop to wonder how she could miss a woman she’d never physically met. The bonding transcended the reality in which she had previously operated, and she simply accepted this new version. She had loved Steph, and she’d lost her just as Revi had. She moved forward and took Revi in her arms, holding on tight as her lover
gave up and cried. Until now, Revi had never allowed herself to mourn. She’d never felt that she’d had the right.

“She was yours until the last moment, Revi. You’re not the one who took her away. Do you understand that?”

Revi shook her head. “No. It was my fault.”

“It was not your fault.” Seven projected her fierce belief, her love, and her total forgiveness into Revi’s mind, wrapping her up in a blanket of compassion. Revi snuggled in more closely, tightening her hold and giving herself over to her grief. The storm of weeping tore Seven’s heart apart, but she also understood how necessary this was—and how very, very long overdue.

At last Revi sat up again, wiping her eyes and smiling tremulously. “You know,” she said, “I’d forgotten all about that look Steph gave me the first time I told her I loved her. Gods, she was always so far ahead of me.”

“She was Betazoid,” Seven pointed out reasonably. “She knew what you were thinking. The real wonder is that you were so surprised at her knowledge.”

“I was surprised because I didn’t know until then. It never occurred to me that she could read feelings that I hadn’t even recognized.”

“It certainly occurred to you afterward.” They smiled at each other, both remembering the arguments Revi and Steph had gotten into when Revi’s tolerance of always being one step behind wore thin.

“Yes, it did. We had some pretty big fights over that. It was really the only thing we ever fought about.”

“That’s not true. You fought about your father.”

“Oh, yes,” said Revi, “that’s right. She always had so much more belief in him than I did. She thought he’d come around eventually. But she didn’t grow up with him.”

“Your lives would have been much less complicated if you’d made your relationship public.”

“But you know I couldn’t. Gods, I wish I could have. I wish he could have known her the way I did.”

“This is why you gave up your comm time,” said Seven, suddenly making the connection. Revi had declined to draw a number from the comm time lottery, telling Neelix that she’d rather let someone else call a little earlier. She had no one she needed to contact, she’d said. Seven had
known then that she was estranged from her parents, but she hadn’t known exactly why.

“That’s why.” Revi looked at her sadly. “Things were bad enough before. But now I’ve become everything he hates.”

“Then his intolerance will cost him the opportunity to truly know and love the most remarkable heart in the universe,” said Seven. “And that is entirely his loss.”

“But it’s mine, too,” said Revi. And Seven, who knew all about losing parents, could only reach out to hold her once more.

They spent the rest of the night talking, mostly about Steph and their years together. The dam had been broken, and Revi couldn’t seem to talk enough about her lost love. Seven didn’t mind. She’d loved Steph too, and it felt good to discuss their years together, coming to new understandings and different conclusions than Revi had at the time of the actual events. The intervening years had changed Revi’s outlook considerably, and of course Seven’s was different from the start. She never felt threatened by these memories and emotions, because she was entirely confident that Revi had room enough in her heart to love them both. There was simply no way to mistake Revi’s love for anything less than it was, not when they had shared such an intense bonding. She also understood that what they had together was very different from what Revi had felt with Steph. The fact that their mental communication went both ways was, in itself, a fundamental difference that altered the very fabric of their relationship. Revi had never been able to communicate with Steph the way she could with Seven.

As the gamma shift drew toward its end, their talk turned to other subjects, chief among them the continued rift between Kathryn and Lynne. Everyone knew they were back together again, but neither one of them looked happy. In fact, Seven and Revi agreed that they were looking worse with each passing day, and word from the bridge was that Kathryn was like a tiger with a thorn in her paw. Something wasn’t right, and Seven had already asked Lynne about it to no avail. For Seven the answer was clear: Revi needed to confront Kathryn and find out what was wrong.

“Are you insane?” asked Revi, startled. “She’d kill me.”

“That is an exaggeration. And I don’t understand your trepidation; you did it once with desirable results. Why would you not wish to repeat your success?”
“I got away with it once precisely because Kathryn never expected me to go so far over the line. Her shock gave me the opening I needed. I’ll never have that advantage again. If I tried that same technique now, she’d throw me out of her ready room faster than you can calculate a phase variance.”

Seven mulled this over and conceded Revi’s superior knowledge of Human nature. She was learning rapidly, but still lacked the instinctive understanding that Revi possessed. “Then what can you do?” she asked.

“Unfortunately, not much at this point. Not unless Kathryn comes to me as a friend. She’s so private; I know if I tried to push her about this she’d just shut me out. I think all either one of us can do is be there for them. It will have to come out sooner or later. Or they may just resolve it on their own and we’ll never know what the problem was.”

This was a distinctly unsatisfying conclusion, but Seven recognized the truth of it. “I wish they could be as happy as we are,” she said wistfully. She had modeled her own ideal of a relationship on Kathryn and Lynne’s, and it was difficult to see them failing.

“They’re not failing, Seven. They’re just having a tough time right now. Every relationship has those moments—you certainly saw that with me and Steph. They’ll get through it. They love each other too much not to.”

It was still not enough, but Seven understood that she had no ability to alter this reality. “We must prepare for our shift,” she said reluctantly. This night had literally changed her life, and she was loathe to see it end. But they had duties.

“I think the word you’re looking for is ‘magical,’” said Revi. “It was a magical night.”

“Magic is a term used to describe any event whose physical or technological origin cannot be determined,” said Seven. “We both understand what happened last night. Therefore it was not magical.”

Revi reached out to gently run the back of her hand along Seven’s cheek. “It was magical to me,” she said softly.

Seven found that she had no response whatsoever to that, so she grasped Revi’s hand, turned it over and kissed the palm. “I love you,” she said. “There will never be another.” She looked into Revi’s eyes, daring her to refute the statement as she always did.
But this time, Revi just looked back at her. “I hope not,” she said. It wasn’t a clear endorsement, but it was an improvement.

They replicated a new uniform for Revi, and Seven tried to hide a smile at the look Revi shot her when she gathered up the shreds of her old one. Her efforts were ineffective. “Don’t even try,” said Revi. “I know damn well you’re proud of yourself.”

While they cleaned up and got dressed, Seven brought up something that had puzzled her the previous evening. “Commander Chakotay spent much of our time together attempting to determine what was wrong with Lieutenant Paris,” she said. “In fact, I had the distinct impression that he has expended considerable effort over the last week on this issue. Why did you lead him to believe that something was wrong when you know it’s not true?”

“Because I’m playing with his mind,” said Revi. “It’s driving him nuts that he can’t figure out the problem, and I’m having a great time watching it.”

“Revi, that is…” She stopped, unable to think of an appropriate term to describe this behavior.

“Juvenile?” suggested Revi with a broad smile. Seven nodded.

“Maybe so. But we’re in a funny place. We’re not enemies anymore, and yet I’m not quite ready to be his friend, our evenings out notwithstanding. I guess this is my way of exacting a little revenge for what he did to me, without being outright cruel.”

“I see,” said Seven, who didn’t.

Revi laughed. “No, you don’t. But don’t worry, most people on this ship wouldn’t, either. Just those of us with devious little minds.”

“So Kathryn would understand?”

Revi broke down then, laughing helplessly. “Oh, darling, I wish she’d been here to hear that.” She got control of herself once more. “Yes, actually, I think she would.”

Their last words about Chakotay were fresh in Seven’s mind when she went to the bridge later that day, a report for Kathryn in her hand. She
found Chakotay holding the bridge, and just as she was exiting the turbo-lift she heard Revi asking her for a favor.

: Seven! Will you ask Chakotay a question for me? :
: Certainly. :
: Great. Now, you have to phrase it exactly the way I do. :

Seven turned her head as she walked down to the main bridge level. “Hi, Chakotay, how’s it hanging?” she asked. She saw his jaw drop open, along with Harry Kim’s, and turned her head forward again to prevent them from seeing the smile that she couldn’t control. In her mind she heard Revi having a hysterical fit of laughter.

: Revi, are you attempting to convert me to your juvenile behaviors? :
: You can’t tell me you didn’t enjoy that. Oh, gods, that was priceless! :

Seven just rolled her eyes and pressed the entry chime to the ready room.
Janeway rubbed her eyes as she tried for the third time to get through Admiral Strickler’s impenetrable communiqué. The man brought obfuscation to a whole new level, and it didn’t help that she hadn’t had a full night’s sleep in over two weeks now. Lynne’s nightmares were an all too regular occurrence, and even though she could usually get Lynne calmed down and back to sleep quickly, her own mind would never shut itself off. It wasn’t unusual for her to lie awake the rest of the night, thinking about the burdens that had seemed to fall on her shoulders all at once. The situation with Lynne was not improving. Besides the nightmares, she seemed to have acquired a whole different personality. Her cocky independence had vanished, to be replaced with a tentativeness that broke Janeway’s heart to see. The woman who normally threw herself wholeheartedly into everything she did was now merely going through the motions, and their marriage wasn’t the only thing affected. Yesterday Tuvok had submitted a formal report specifying his concerns regarding her performance. His language had been as objective as usual, but Janeway read between the lines and could sum it up in one sentence: Lynne was losing her edge, and if she didn’t get it back he would be forced to recommend a transfer.

On top of her home worries, she had a whole host of new professional concerns brought on by their regular Starfleet contact. She was undergoing her first review in six years, and Admiral Necheyev had been asking
some damned tough questions. On the one hand, she was grateful that
the questioning was taking the form of daily video messages back and
forth, which gave her time to carefully plan her answers. On the other
hand, that same delay gave Necheyev time to analyze the hell out of her
answers and come back with even more difficult questions. She’d had to
tread very carefully on several occasions.

And then there were the battles she was fighting on behalf of her crew.
The first thing she’d done upon establishing their initial contact with
Starfleet was send out two formal requests: one for amnesty for her
Maquis crew, and the other for official recognition of Seven and Revi as
Federation citizens and not Borg. She knew the request for Revi would be
easier; after all, she was a Starfleet commander who had been taken as a
prisoner of war. But Seven was going to be tricky. And to make matters
much worse, her initial requests had to go through Necheyev first, and
the Admiral had long been known as a hardliner when it came to both the
Maquis and the Borg.

After playing some serious hardball, she’d finally gotten Necheyev to
forward the requests, and now she was getting these impossible commu-
niquéés from Strickler, which took her forever to read and even longer to
respond to. His obsessive need for tiny and irrelevant details was driving
her insane.

These days, she thought irritably, the road to insanity was a fairly
short one.

The door chime broke through her thoughts and she tossed the PADD
on her desk. “Come,” she said, rubbing the bridge of her nose as a pair of
long legs stopped in front of her desk. “Hello, Seven.”

“Captain.”

Janeway looked up. And up. Why would Seven never just come in and
sit like everyone else?

“Sit down,” she said shortly. “I’ve already got a headache; I don’t need
a neck ache on top of it. What do you—” She stopped and pulled herself
together. “What can I do for you?”

Seven tilted her head, giving Janeway that look of keen examination
that said nothing was going unnoticed. Normally Janeway valued Seven’s
observational skills, but not today and especially not when she was the
one under the microscope.
“Are my pips on the wrong side this morning?” she said. It wasn’t really a joke.

And Seven didn’t get it. “No, they’re not,” she said. “Nor have they ever been. Why do you ask?”

“Because you’re looking at me like something’s wrong with me and I don’t appreciate it.”

An expression of surprise crossed Seven’s face before her mask of cool indifference came down. Janeway felt a tiny moment of guilt; she’d worked a long time to break through that mask and she hated to see it come back now. But dammit, she just didn’t feel like dealing with Seven’s tactless curiosity today.

“I apologize if I have offended,” said Seven evenly. She placed a PADD on the desk with a precise motion. “I have completed my analysis of the transwarp theory. I wished to bring it to you personally in the event that you had any questions or further requests.”

Janeway picked up the PADD, glanced at it briefly, and put it on the “to read” pile. “Thanks. I’ll get to it when I can. It’s going to be a little while.”

Seven eyed the stack of PADDs, which appeared to be teetering on the edge of total collapse. “Captain, if there’s anything I can do to assist you, I would be pleased to do so. It’s obvious that our communication with Starfleet has caused a significant increase in your workload. You have many qualified staff who would be glad to share this burden.”

Janeway felt a flare of irritation. “I don’t need lessons in delegation, thank you very much. If I could hand any of this off, you’d better believe it would have been done already. If that’s all you came for, I’ve got a lot of work to do.”

There was a tiny pause during which Janeway refused to look up, instead picking up Admiral Strickler’s communiqué and resuming her reading.

“Very well,” said Seven in a cool tone. She rose and departed without another word.

Janeway shook her head as the door closed. “I’d get through this crap a lot faster if people didn’t keep interrupting,” she muttered to herself.

Not ten minutes later her chime rang again, just as she’d finally gotten into the rhythm of Strickler’s impenetrable writing. She threw the PADD
onto her desk with a little more force than necessary, growling to herself. “Should have put a privacy lockout on the damned door. Come!”

This time it was Revi, and Janeway felt her irritation flare up into full anger. “I see Seven didn’t waste any time. If you’ve come to give me some well-meaning advice on how to handle my staff, you picked a bad day.”

Revi walked around the side of the desk and came to a stop in front of Janeway’s chair. “I haven’t come to give you advice; I came to give you a hypospray.”

“For what?”

“You told Seven you had a headache. I can take care of that. May I?” She held out the hypo.

Janeway eyed her suspiciously. “If I let you give that to me, will you leave me alone?”

“There’s no reason to stay; I’m just doing my job. I’m a little busy right now too.”

Janeway nodded shortly and turned her head, giving Revi access. She felt the cool sensation of a hypo injection, and within seconds the tight band around her forehead had eased. She closed her eyes in relief.

“Thank you,” she said, raising her head to meet Revi’s sympathetic gaze.

“You’re welcome. Kathryn, you don’t need to suffer like that. Just call me. I’ll come as soon as I can.”

“Do you have a hypospray that can get rid of that?” Janeway gestured toward the pile of PADDs.

“No, unfortunately. I have a pretty big stack in my office, too. Though if we’re comparing sizes, you win.”

The glimmer in those brown eyes gave her away; Revi knew exactly what she’d just said. Janeway couldn’t help the small smile that cracked her face. It felt almost foreign.

“I don’t always have to have the biggest, you know,” she said. “Sometimes smaller is better.”

“Sometimes none is best of all.”

Now the smile became an open grin. “Doctor Sandovhar, I’m fairly certain that this is an inappropriate discussion for the workplace.”

Wide, innocent eyes gazed back at her. “Captain Janeway, I was referring to PADDs. What were you talking about?”

“Apparently, nothing at all.”
They smiled at each other before Janeway nodded. “Thanks, Revi. But I really do have a lot to do.”

“I know.” Revi turned away. “Call me if you need me,” she said over her shoulder, then left.

Janeway looked at the closed door. “I will,” she said.

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That night Janeway came awake to the familiar sounds of Lynne’s distress. Quickly she rolled over and slid her hands under Lynne’s shoulders, wincing at the sweat that had already soaked the sheets.

“Shhh,” she whispered, as the body beneath hers twitched and trembled. “You’re all right, Lynne. It’s just a dream.” She’d learned through far too much practice that if she caught Lynne early enough, she could break through the nightmare without ever waking her.

Soon Lynne’s movements stilled, and she fell back into a deep sleep that Janeway envied. She carefully pulled away and moved farther to her side of the bed, where the sheets were dry. She hadn’t said anything about these nightly events to Lynne, instead quietly changing the sheets the next morning after Lynne had gone on duty. If her wife didn’t remember the nightmares, she didn’t see any reason to bring them up. In the meantime, unfortunately, she was paying the price. Her lack of sleep was becoming a real issue, and she silently thanked Revi for her tact earlier that day. As CMO, she could have ordered Janeway to go home and catch up on her sleep; instead she’d chosen merely to bring the situation out into the open and then let it drop. Janeway knew it was a gentle warning.

With a long sigh, she closed her eyes and willed herself to sleep. Please, she thought, just two more hours. That’s all I ask.

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For the next three days, Revi appeared in her ready room at the mid-morning break to give her a hypo for the headache that never really seemed to go away. Janeway briefly considered just asking for a supply that she could use on her own, but discarded the thought as soon as it occurred to her. She knew Revi would never allow it; she was being monitored.
On the fourth day, she felt completely trashed. Lynne had had a particularly bad nightmare the night before, waking herself up despite all attempts to calm her down. She’d actually tried to throw Janeway off before fully waking and realizing where she was. Then she’d looked up with tears in her eyes, breaking Janeway’s heart all over again.

“It’s never going to end, is it?” she’d asked.

Janeway had stroked the damp hair away from her face and made a guarantee that she couldn’t back.

“Yes, it will,” she’d said. “It’ll take time. But it will get better.”

“When?”

“I don’t know.” And secretly, Janeway was wondering the same thing herself. It had already been three weeks since the Arnett takeover and nothing had changed. There had to be something else she could do. She’d suggested that Lynne talk to Revi, only to be met with an emphatic shake of the head and a steadfast refusal. Lynne considered this to be personal and private, and she didn’t want to talk about it with anyone else.

But, thought Janeway as she sat at her desk and rested her face in her hands, it might be time to ask again. Things couldn’t go on like this. She was so damned tired. So tired that when the door chime rang, she didn’t even lift her head. She already knew it was Revi.

“Come,” she said, keeping her eyes closed and wondering if Revi would be so kind as to just inject her and leave.

“Okay, that’s it,” said Revi’s voice.

Nope, she wouldn’t. Janeway wearily raised her head and focused on her CMO, waiting for the tirade.

Revi didn’t disappoint. “Kathryn, you need to tell me what’s going on. I’ve given you as much leeway as I can, but I’m about ready to haul you into sickbay and put you to sleep for forty-eight hours. This is ridiculous.”

“That actually sounds kind of nice,” Janeway mumbled. Two days of sleep? Heaven. “But could you do it in my quarters instead?”

Revi dropped into the chair across from her. “What is wrong? You’re really starting to worry me.”

Janeway eyed her, trying to assess how much she was obligated to keep private as a wife, and how much she was obligated to reveal as a captain. Eventually, the captain won out.

“Lynne’s having nightmares,” she said. “Every night since the Arnett takeover, and sometimes more than once a night. I can usually calm her
down without waking her, but once I’m awake I can never get back to
sleep. I’m averaging about four hours a night.”
“Averaging. Meaning some nights you’re getting less.”
“My math’s a little off. Most nights I’m getting less.”
“So I have two patients,” said Revi. “And I suspect the one who really
needs help isn’t the one I’m talking to right now.”
Janeway shook her head. “I can’t get her to see you.”
“Yes, you can.”
“Revi, I’ve tried. To her it’s a personal weakness. She doesn’t want
anyone else to know about it. And I don’t think she even realizes how
often she has these nightmares, because I’m there to pull her out of them
before they wake her up.”
“Then you need to make her realize it,” said Revi. “And you need to
make her realize what this is costing you. As a starting point, I’m sending
you home right now. Get some sleep, and when Lynne comes off duty and
asks why you’re already in bed, tell her the truth.”
Janeway opened her mouth to object, but closed it again when she saw
the look on Revi’s face. She’d just run out of wiggle room.
“All right,” she said. “Shall I tell Chakotay, or did you already
do it?”
“I would never do that without telling you first,” said Revi. “You’re
still the captain.”
“For how long?” asked Janeway, rising from her chair.
Revi stood up as well. “I’m not removing you from command. You’re a
long way from that. I’m just telling you, as your doctor, that you desper-
ately need some sleep—and giving you the medical dispensation to get it.
And judging by the way you just gave in, I’d say you know exactly how
much you need it.”
Janeway couldn’t deny it; in fact, she felt nothing but a sense of relief.
“Let’s go,” she said. “The bridge crew will probably give you a medal. I
know I haven’t been the easiest person to work with these last
few weeks.”
Prudently, Revi didn’t answer that, merely standing by her side as
Janeway explained to Chakotay that she was taking the rest of the day off.
The presence of the CMO made it plain to all that her “day off” was actu-
ally a medical leave, and Chakotay’s concern was clear in his face.
“I’m all right,” Janeway assured him quietly. “I’ll be back tomorrow.”
He nodded and watched as the two women walked into the turbolift.
When the doors slid shut Janeway leaned against the wall, her exhaustion sweeping over her.


Revi didn’t smile, instead reaching out to grip Janeway’s shoulder. They looked at each other in silence until the ‘lift arrived at deck three, where Revi squeezed once and let go. “Sweet dreams,” she said.

“I hope so.” Janeway stepped out, hearing the doors close behind her. Her pace slowed as she approached her quarters, and when she entered the welcoming quiet she could barely keep herself upright long enough to pull off her uniform. Folding and recycling the clothes was definitely not an option; she left them in a pile on her side of the bed and crawled in, luxuriating in the comfort. Oh, god, what a pleasure to have the bed all to herself and know that nothing would disturb her for the next six hours. With any luck, she’d sleep the entire time.

Lynne was caressing her face, slowly building her up as their bodies moved together in the warm heat of the sun. Janeway turned her head into the caress, loving the intimate contact. “Mmm. That feels wonderful.”

The sound of her own voice woke her up, and she looked into a pair of worried green eyes. The dream faded away, leaving her with a crushing sense of loss. She wasn’t on Bliss, they weren’t making love, and Lynne would never again be the woman she’d been on their honeymoon.

“Are you sick?” asked Lynne, still caressing her face. “Your forehead feels hot.”

Janeway closed her eyes again, her mind not yet fully awake. She felt disoriented and strangely heavy.

“I’m okay,” she said at last. “I just needed some sleep. Revi sent me home.”

“She sent you home? As in, on medical leave? Isn’t that serious?”

Not really, was Janeway’s first thought, but then she remembered Revi’s advice. Tell her the truth.

She opened her eyes again. “Yes,” she said simply. “It’s the first step in
a chain of events that could end with her declaring me medically unfit to command. But it won’t get that far.”

Lynne’s look of worry deepened. “What won’t get that far? What’s wrong?”

Janeway pulled herself into a sitting position, noting that Lynne was still in uniform. “Did you just get off duty?”

“Such as it was,” said Lynne. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

“What do you mean, ‘such as it was’?”

“Later. You first.”

Janeway watched her, but Lynne had a stubborn set to her features that she recognized.

“I haven’t been getting enough sleep,” she said. “Not since I moved out, and especially not since…that night in the holodeck. You’re having more nightmares than you know about.”

“I’m waking you up?”

Janeway nodded. “Every night. Sometimes more than once. I can usually get you back to sleep, but I can’t seem to do the same for myself.”

“Kathryn! Why didn’t you say something?”

“I didn’t want to make things any worse for you than they already are. And the last time I suggested you go to see Revi, you practically jumped down my throat.”

“I did n—” Lynne stopped. “I don’t want to see her. Not about this.”

“Lynne, you have to. Please. For me if not for yourself. I can’t go on like this, and having Revi pull rank on me just proves it.”

She could read the expressions on Lynne’s face just as clearly as if they were labeled. Lynne didn’t like it, not at all, but she couldn’t refuse.

“All right, I’ll go tomorrow,” she said at last. “I don’t want this to be affecting you as well.”

“Thank you,” said Janeway in relief. “Now what happened to you today?”

Lynne stood up and began removing her uniform. “I failed a simulation.”

When nothing more was forthcoming, Janeway prodded her. “Can you be a little more specific?”

Lynne scooped up Janeway’s clothes and padded over to the replicator. After running both of their uniforms through the recycle mode, she put
them back in the closet, pulled a t-shirt over her head, yanked a pair of loose pants off a hanger and came back to the bed to put them on.

“Tuvok created a new simulation,” she said as pulled the pants up. “With the Arnett. Did you know that Vulcans have a vicious streak?”

“He’d be surprised if you called it that in front of him,” said Janeway. “I’m sure he’d call it practicality.”

“Yeah, well I call it vicious. He set it up so that I’d end up in hand to hand combat with a bunch of Arnett, and I just froze. I couldn’t do it.”

She turned toward Janeway. “I asked him why he programmed that simulation. He said I needed to learn to compartmentalize my emotions. That I couldn’t be effective as your personal security escort unless I could be nothing but your escort when I’m on duty. Not me, not your wife, just your escort. I don’t know if I can do that, Kathryn. I’m not sure I’m going to be able to keep this job.” And the look on her face said she really didn’t care if she lost it.

Janeway thought very carefully before she addressed this little bomb. As much as she’d fought against Lynne taking this kind of duty, once it had happened she’d realized how much she enjoyed having Lynne with her, and how much confidence the duty gave her wife. Lynne needed this posting; she couldn’t just let it go.

“You’re going through a difficult period right now,” she said, reaching out for Lynne’s hand. “I think, given the changes you’ve been through and all that you’ve done, that a little setback is to be expected. But you can’t let it stop you. You’ve got to keep going, sweetheart. You’ve accomplished too much to stop now. Hell, you talked me into making you my escort. If you can do that, you can do anything.”

Her attempt at humor fell flat. Lynne hadn’t laughed since the Arnett takeover, and today was no exception. She squeezed Janeway’s hand and said, “I appreciate the pep talk. But I’m afraid I don’t agree with you. Right now it doesn’t feel like I’m much good for anything at all.”

It was the same theme Janeway had been hearing since she and Lynne had reconciled. She was beginning to worry that she might not be able to handle this.

“Don’t do this to yourself,” she said. “Fight for what you want. You always have, and it’s one of the things I love most about you.”

But Lynne just gave her a look of unutterable sadness. “You forget, Kathryn. Fighting is what got me into this mess.”
And there wasn’t a damn thing Janeway could say to that.

At midmorning the next day, Revi came to see her.
“Kathryn, do you have time to talk?” she asked. “It’s about Lynne.”
“Is she all right?” Janeway was instantly worried.
But Revi didn’t answer right away. “Can we go up and sit?” She indicated the upper level.
Worry was now giving way to outright fear. “Certainly,” said Janeway, rising from her chair. She led the way to the upper level and, without asking, got a cup of tea and one of coffee from the replicator. They took their first sips in silence, broken only when Revi set her cup down with a soft click.
“I’ve just finished my tests on Lynne. She has extremely low levels of serotonin. Her body is reabsorbing it faster than it should.”
Janeway put down her own cup. “What’s the layperson translation of that?”
“She’s in a depression. She admitted that she’s tired all the time and that her daily routine feels like it’s too much for her. She’s worried and afraid and feeling completely inadequate. She’s showing all the classic symptoms of depression, and while I can certainly treat those symptoms, that won’t take care of the cause.”
“What is?” Janeway was afraid to ask.
“That’s why I’m here.” Revi’s expression grew even more serious. “What I just told you comes under the protection of doctor/patient confidentiality. I had no intention of sharing it with you, and I started to explain to Lynne that we could work together on this in confidence. But she insisted that you know everything, down to the last detail. It struck me as a bit odd. She didn’t just say she’d tell you, or that it was okay for you to know—she insisted that I personally give you the details. And she looked afraid when she said that. Do you know why that would be?”
Janeway closed her eyes for a moment, the guilt settling heavily on her shoulders. “Yes. It’s a reaction to my threatening to leave her if she didn’t tell me the truth about the Arnett. I told her there could be no more lies or withholding of the truth between us.”
Revi stared. “You threatened to leave her?”
“Yes.” She lifted her chin, unhappy at the personal turn this had taken, but determined to get through it for Lynne’s sake. “It was the only way to get her to talk about the Arnett. I’d tried everything else. That was the night you came and roused me out of here.”

The silence that followed that statement was distinctly awkward, especially with Revi looking at her that way. Janeway met her gaze evenly, refusing to back down. Finally Revi exhaled.

“Kathryn, I know this is uncomfortable for you. It’s uncomfortable for me, too, but Lynne’s health is at stake, so we’re going to do whatever it takes to resolve this. Therefore, it’s with the utmost respect that I have to ask you—” her voice suddenly got quite a bit louder—“what the hell were you thinking?”

Startled, Janeway said, “What?”

“Would you really have left her if she hadn’t told you the truth?”

“No!” She looked away, gathering herself. Not in a million years would she have envisioned herself having this kind of conversation. When she looked back at Revi, the disappointment in her friend’s face was difficult to bear. “No, I wouldn’t have,” she repeated. “But I was at my wit’s end, and I didn’t know what else to do. If that hadn’t worked, I’d have left for a while and hoped the reality of that action would have brought Lynne around. But it worked.”

“At what cost?” asked Revi. “That night I told you that you needed to respond to the situation as a wife, not a captain. But you went out and did the captain thing anyway, didn’t you?”

Janeway remembered the intense emotion of that late-night conversation, of Lynne huddled on the ground and the two of them crying in each other’s arms. No, she hadn’t been a captain at all.

“I wasn’t being a captain,” she said. “I did listen to you.”

“I don’t think you did. And I really don’t want to hear you say that you weren’t being a captain, either.”

This was getting out of hand. “Revi—”

“Because,” interrupted Revi, “for a captain, taking manipulation to an art form is considered a good quality. But for a wife, that same thing is grounds for divorce. So don’t tell me you were being a wife. I don’t want to think that you could intentionally and coolly manipulate your wife into doing what you want, at the expense of destroying her sense of security and self-worth.”
Janeway stared. “Is that what you think I’ve done?”

“No, that’s what I know you’ve done. Gods, Kathryn, how could you?” She ran her hand through her hair and added quietly, almost to herself, “Shit. This explains everything.”

Janeway’s own guilt was bad enough. Days of inadequate sleep had left her mental reserves completely empty, and yesterday’s long nap hadn’t been nearly enough to make up for it. Revi’s accusation pushed her right over the edge, and she lashed out in self-defense.

“You know,” she said icily, “for someone who’s never been married, you certainly have strong opinions about my marriage, and I’m getting tired of it. I did what I thought was best, and I’d appreciate it if you’d restrict your input to that of Lynne’s doctor and not my personal advisor.”

But Revi just looked at her, showing no reaction to her harsh words. Then she said the last thing Janeway had ever expected.

“How do you know I’ve never been married?”

Floored, Janeway found herself scrambling for an answer. “There’s nothing in your Starfleet records. And you’ve never mentioned it.”

“It’s not in my Starfleet records for a reason. I didn’t want my family to know, so we never made it public. And I’ve never mentioned it because my marriage…ended badly, and I haven’t particularly wanted to think about it. But I do have some experience in the matter. Three years’ worth, to be exact.”

“I…I’m sorry.” Janeway didn’t know what to say. She’d rarely felt so completely at sea.

“It’s not your fault. I really should have told you; we’ve shared so much in so many other ways. Kathryn, your friendship means a lot to me, and I’m grateful for the way you’ve opened up to me. I know you don’t give that easily. I didn’t open up in that particular area because I just wasn’t ready to talk about Steph. But now…well, I think you need to know. Can I tell you a story?”

Janeway nodded, grateful that she wasn’t being required to respond more actively. She needed some time to adapt to this astonishing revelation.

Revi picked up her cup and took a sip of tea, settling herself into the cushions more comfortably. “Steph and I met at the Academy. She was everything I wasn’t—calm, thoughtful, and balanced. She was comfortable in her own skin. I was several years older than her, having already
completed my medical training and residency, but she seemed so far ahead of me in terms of personal growth. I wanted to be just like her.”

“Revi, you’re one of the most calm and thoughtful people I know.”

“You can thank Steph for that. It’s amazing how love can change a person.” Revi smiled. “We hung out together, studied together, eventually did everything together. There came a time when I realized I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her. But there was one big problem. She was Betazoid.”

Janeway frowned. “Why was that a problem?”

“Because of my parents. My father more than my mother, but she let him influence her. They were very traditional. There was one particular… trait that they considered to be an abomination, an insult to the way the gods designed Humans. And Steph was the embodiment of that.”

“I’m still not getting it.”

“She was a telepath.”

“So? Every Betazoid is a telepath.”

“Yes, but not every Betazoid wanted to marry me. Just Steph. And my father would have made both of us miserable if he’d known. You have to understand, my father’s beliefs come from an ancient tradition, before Earth made contact with other worlds. A person’s mind and thoughts are between her or him and the gods. To have anyone else intercepting that divine exchange is considered an abomination. Father would never have let Steph into the house, much less allowed her to marry me. He didn’t even like having her in his bar, but since so much of his business came from Academy students, he couldn’t afford to discriminate. Home was a completely different story, though.”

“So you got married but never reported it,” said Janeway.

Revi nodded. “It made getting postings on the same ship a problem, but we managed it. Steph was a pilot, a damned good one, and my Academy grades and prior experience as a doctor were good enough to get me the pick of postings. We planned carefully and had a wonderful three years together, on three different ships, learning to live and love. Learning to accept each other for what we really were,” she added, giving Janeway a meaningful glance.

It was a gentle accusation, but Janeway felt it keenly. “It sounds like you were very happy together.”
"We were." Revi paused, looking out the viewport and swallowing hard. "Our last posting was on the Rendez-vous."

The connection was obvious, and she found her throat completely blocked. As if Revi hadn’t lost enough to the Borg...

Revi met her gaze, her eyes full of an old pain. "I assimilated her."

"Oh, my god," Janeway whispered in shock.

"Then I tore her body apart, limb from limb," continued Revi, never breaking eye contact, "and remade her in the image of Borg perfection. I took particular care with her, because some part of my brain still recognized her as someone special. I wanted her to be the personification of perfection. I left no part of her untouched. And when I was through there wasn’t much of her left. Now I hope to the gods that she’s dead, because I don’t ever want her to disconnect from the hive mind and realize what I did to her."

Janeway reached out for her hand, holding it in silent sympathy. Though her mind was reeling with the implications, there was absolutely nothing she could say. Revi acknowledged it with a sad smile, linking their fingers together.

"So you see," she said, "I know a little bit about what it takes to make a marriage work. I know that the kind of love you and Lynne share is a precious thing, worth protecting with everything you have. And I will do anything in my power to make sure you don’t have the kind of regrets that I do."

"For god’s sake!" Janeway burst out. "You can’t possibly compare this...this issue with what happened to you! I can’t believe you’re even discussing it in the same breath. Lynne and I may be having a problem, but it’s nothing compared to...to..." She stumbled to a halt, not knowing how to characterize a tragedy of such immense proportions.

Revi squeezed her hand. "There are different kinds of death, Kathryn. But they all have a common thread. They’re all about loss. Steph’s not physically dead, not as far as I know, but she might as well be. I’ve lost her and I’ll never get her back. Even if I could get her back, she’ll never be who she was. She’ll never again be the woman I loved. And right now, you’re looking at a similar possibility."

Janeway opened her mouth to refute it, but stopped when she remembered the evening before, and how she’d woken from her nap in a state of
mourning for the woman Lynne had once been. “It can’t be that bad,” she said, unsure who exactly she was trying to convince.

“Listen to me,” said Revi intently. “Some part of Lynne is dead right now. She’s functioning, but that’s about all that can be said for her. She’s not living, not as the Lynne you fell in love with. Now, there might be other factors involved in this, but certainly one of the big ones is you. You took something from her that she can’t live without. But you’re right about one thing: your situation and mine aren’t the same. Because yours is reparable.”

The words slammed into Janeway with a dreadful weight, and she tried to rally. “All right, I agree that what I did was…harsh. But Lynne’s nightmares are about what she did to the Arnett. And her depression is more likely the result of her difficulties in dealing with what she’s done, especially given the fact that she and I resolved our issues that night. I really think you’re reading too much into this.”

“Lynne’s nightmares are not about what she did to the Arnett. They’re about you leaving. They’re about her driving you away.”

Janeway shook her head. “They started several nights before that.”

“Yes, they started the night you moved out. Can’t you see what’s happening here? First you move out of your quarters because Lynne won’t tell you what she did. Then you threaten to leave her permanently. And now she’s living in fear that if she does anything wrong, you’ll make good on that threat. That fear is coming out in her depression during the day and her nightmares every night. And you’re both paying the price.”

Janeway refused to accept this interpretation. “She knows I won’t leave. I told her it would kill me.”

Now it was Revi’s turn to shake her head. “Wait. You told her you were leaving, and then you told her you wouldn’t? Kathryn, what exactly happened? Just tell me the basics. This is important.”

Janeway picked up her coffee, which had cooled considerably, and used it to stall for time. But with Revi watching her every move, the tactic wasn’t good for long. She put the cup back down with a click.

“I found her in the holodeck,” she said. “I sat down next to her and asked her one last time to tell me the truth. She refused. So I told her that if she wouldn’t keep her promises to me, there was nothing left to say. Then I gave back her ring.” Revi’s sudden intake of air distracted her for a moment. “That got through to her, and she finally told me what
happened. I took back the ring and told her that I wasn’t going anywhere. She said it would kill her if I left, and I said it would kill us both. The rest was just a discussion about what she’d done to the Arnett and how we were going to work through it.”

A silence fell as Revi stared at her, apparently unable to speak. At last she said, “I was trying to think of a diplomatic way to say this, but to hell with it. What you did was wrong. Completely, totally wrong. You walked in there like a captain and took Lynne apart as if she were an errant member of your crew. And in the process you took every bit of her security away. You may have told her you wouldn’t leave, but your actions showed that you most certainly would, and we both know that actions speak louder than words. You’ve essentially proved to her that if she doesn’t toe the line, she loses you. You’ve made your love conditional. It’s not a wonder that she’s having nightmares about driving you away.”

Janeway felt the ground slipping under her, and a dread gripped her heart. “But the nightmares aren’t...” She stopped, thinking about the description Lynne had given her that first night.

“Dreams are rarely literal,” said Revi gently. “Lynne said she always wakes up at the part where she’s physically beating you. That’s the part that terrifies her, Kathryn. Not the part where she’s looking at the Arnett lying around the cargo bay, knowing she put them there. The part where you come in and shout at her, and she breaks the bones in your face. The part where she does something horrible, unspeakable and completely unforgivable. The part where she knows she’s driving you away.”

Revi’s quiet tone was a strange contrast to the violence she was describing. But her words were breaking through, and the picture was coming together in Janeway’s mind. What she was seeing horrified her. She had proved that she would end their marriage if Lynne didn’t live up to her promises. She’d taken off her ring; Jesus, what a message that sent! Revi was right; simply saying she wouldn’t leave didn’t carry enough weight to counter the far stronger message implied in taking off her ring and pressing it in Lynne’s hand. And walking away from her after you said goodbye, she realized with a shock. It had been nothing but a strategy. But it had destroyed something inside Lynne, some critical part of her that made her the vibrant woman she was.

“She told me I was her security,” she said slowly. “When she gave up everything else, I became her only security. She said home was no longer a
place, it was a person. It was me.” She pulled her hand back, staring at the ring on her finger. “And I took that away from her. I just thought of it as the last trick in my arsenal to get her to talk—a temporary ploy. But Lynne didn’t know that.” She looked up with a short, bitter laugh. “She’d never imagine that. It’s not in her nature to think that way. God, Revi, what have I done?”

She didn’t deserve the sympathy in Revi’s expression.

“There’s no way around the truth; you’ve done some serious damage. Lynne’s been affected both psychologically and physically. I’ve given her something to correct her brain chemistry, which will help. But it’s only a temporary solution. There are two permanent ones, and the best one is in your hands. You’re going to have to prove to her that she is secure, and that you won’t leave.”

“That’s not something I can do overnight.”

“No, it’s not. The first thing I learned as a doctor was that it’s very easy to injure someone, and a lot harder to repair it. The good news is, you can fix it in time.”

Janeway hardly heard her; she was too busy remembering that terrible night in the holodeck when Lynne had come completely undone. No, be truthful. When you intentionally tore her world apart and watched her fall. And she’s been falling ever since.

A hand on her shoulder brought her back, and she looked into eyes full of compassion. “I know it hurts, Kathryn. There’s nothing worse than hurting the one we love. But Lynne is here, right now, and you can fix it. It’s not permanent. Do you understand?”

She did. Revi had disclosed her darkest secret in an effort to help her and Lynne; to break through her formality and personal defenses and make her see clearly. And it had worked, but at what cost to Revi?

“Are you all right?” she asked.

Revi looked surprised. “I’m okay. Why do you ask?”

“Because I just realized what you did for me and Lynne, and I know it can’t have been easy for you. I’m so sorry about Steph.”

“Now that’s the Janeway compassion I’ve come to expect and love,” said Revi with a smile. “I did tell you that to help you understand, but it wasn’t hard. It hasn’t been since I let Seven in. It’s amazing what mind-to-mind understanding and total forgiveness can do. I would never have thought that anyone could forgive me for that, but Seven does. And she
knows exactly what happened. I’ve come to realize that Steph won’t ever really die, because I carry around a piece of her in my heart. In fact, I’ve been thinking about her a lot more now that it doesn’t hurt so much. And now Seven has a piece of her, too. So in a way, I’ve gotten her back.”

“That’s wonderful and amazing,” said Janeway. “I’m so glad you’ve found forgiveness.”

“Me too. And if I can find it, you certainly can.”

“I hope so. I’m not certain I deserve it.”

“Take my word for it, you do. But you may have to crawl for it.”

Janeway didn’t respond, thinking about something Revi had said. “You said there were two permanent solutions. What’s the other one?”

There was a pause. “Lynne’s a strong woman,” said Revi. “She’s already lost a great deal and she’s adapted. If she had to, she’d adapt to this eventually, by making sure that your leaving her won’t have the power to hurt her so badly.”

“You mean by leaving me first.”

Revi nodded. “If not physically, then emotionally.”

Janeway thought about Lynne’s ability to pull into herself and wall off her emotions. It was something she’d fought against from almost the first day of their relationship. Yes, it would be a very natural reaction for Lynne, and wasn’t she already seeing some part of that?

A panic gripped her. How could she have been so wrong?

She met Revi’s eyes. “I’ll crawl. I’ll do whatever it takes.”

Janeway shot off the bridge the second her shift ended. From the moment Revi had left her ready room, she’d had the sensation of a clock ticking. The panic she’d first felt upon realizing what she’d done had gradually increased, until it seemed that her life was hanging by a thread. She needed to see Lynne now.

Their quarters were empty when she got there, and she immediately asked the computer for Lynne’s location.

“Lynne Hamilton is in Turbolift One.”

On her way home, then. She walked to the replicator and asked for their drinks, which had long ago been programmed in as a default. By the
time the doors opened, she was standing ready with Lynne’s gin and tonic in her hand.

“Hi, sweetheart,” she said.

“Hi.” Lynne stopped in front of her and took the drink. “How’d you know I needed this?”

“Because I needed one.” She clinked her own glass to Lynne’s. “To us.”

“To us,” Lynne echoed. She sipped her drink and closed her eyes for a moment. “God, it’s good to be home. What a day.”

Janeway took her hand and led her to the couch. “What happened?”

“Well, I spent the morning having my body and my psyche examined by Revi, which wasn’t my idea of a great time. Then I spent the afternoon in another simulation apparently designed specifically to make me fail. Though I’m glad to say it wasn’t as bad as yesterday’s. Whatever Revi gave me is working; I feel like I’m starting to see clearly again. Like the fog is lifting from my mind.”

“She stopped by my ready room, too.”

Lynne nodded. “I know. I asked her to tell you the results. I wanted you to know everything.”

Janeway winced. Once that statement would have made her happy; now it felt like a lead weight on her heart. “Well, she certainly told me more than I wanted to know.”

“What do you mean?”

She looked into Lynne’s concerned eyes and wondered how on earth she could even begin. Maybe she should wait? Maybe they should have dinner first. No, she needed to do this now. It wasn’t going to get any better.

“Lynne,” she said slowly, “remember when I said I could forgive you anything?”

The concern turned to outright fear, and she held up a hand. “No, don’t worry, this isn’t about you. Well, it is, but you’re not the one who needs forgiving.” She sighed and ran a hand through her hair. “I need to know if you can forgive me. I have something to tell you, and I guess I’m looking for a little assurance before I start.”

Lynne put her glass on the table and reached out for Janeway’s hand. “You’re scaring the hell out of me, but whatever it is, I can’t imagine not being able to forgive you.”

Janeway saw the love in her face and wondered if it would still be there
when she was finished with what she had to say. What would she do if Lynne told her that she’d deliberately done something to crush her?

She couldn’t even think about it.

Squeezing Lynne’s hand, she said, “I’ve done something wrong. Really, really wrong, and though I didn’t realize it at the time, I do now. I hurt you badly because I…I was strategizing instead of acting like a wife. Remember how I told you that I had a Marriage Handbook?”

Lynne gave her a small smile. “Yeah, I’m still waiting for mine.”

“Well, apparently I didn’t read mine carefully enough. In the holodeck, the night that we…settled our differences, I…” She paused. “I never had any intention of leaving you.”

“What?” asked Lynne in confusion.

“I could never have left you. I said that because I was desperate to get you to talk, and it was the last thing I had left to try. I’d tried everything else first, but nothing was working. So I…threatened to leave, but it was just a threat. I couldn’t have gone through with it, not for real.” Damn, this was sounding worse and worse the more she said.

Lynne pulled her hand away, her face completely blank. “That was a bluff?”

What an awful, single-word description for what she’d done. “Yes,” she admitted. “I felt like we were at a critical point in our relationship, and I thought it was imperative that you tell me the truth on your own. But nothing else got through to you, so I did what comes naturally to me in negotiations. I wasn’t thinking like a wife; I was thinking like a captain. And I am so sorry.”

Lynne’s blank expression was unchanging. “Let me get this straight,” she said. “You intentionally tore my fucking heart out of my fucking chest, threw it on the ground and stomped on it, all just to manipulate me into telling you what you already knew?”

Shit. This was not going well.

“I never meant to hurt you.” She knew as soon as the words left her mouth that it was the absolute wrong thing to say.

Lynne laughed, for the first time in three weeks, and it was a terrible thing to hear. “Oh, that’s rich. I’d hate to see what you’re capable of when you really do mean to hurt me. Jesus, Kathryn.” She picked up her drink and downed half of it in three long gulps, closing her eyes as the synthehol burned down her throat. When she opened them again,
Janeway saw a stranger. “I don’t know what to say to you. Never, never
would I have thought you could do that to me. I don’t even know who
you are.”

“I’m the same person I’ve always been. The person who
loves you.”

“Well, you’ve got a funny way of showing it.” Lynne finished off her
drink as Janeway watched in some alarm. They were both sippers, not
gulpers, and the way Lynne was drinking now was a better indicator of her
distress than either her facial expression or her voice. She was keeping it
inside.

Examining her glass as if it were the focus of her entire attention,
Lynne said quietly, “You told me that I should never bluff unless I was
willing to lose the pot. So I can only conclude that you were willing to end
our marriage.”

“No! That’s not true! Lynne, please believe me. Yes, I did tell you that,
and yes it’s normally true, but it wasn’t in this case. When I told you it
would kill me to go, that was the truth. I can’t live without you.”

There was a very long, very painful silence while Lynne stared at her
empty glass. At last she raised her eyes, and the stranger was still there.

“Maybe you’ll have to learn how,” she said, and stood up.

Panicked, Janeway stood as well. “Please don’t. Please let us talk
this out.”

Lynne looked toward the door, and Janeway felt her slipping away. “It
was wrong,” she said urgently. “I know it was wrong. I’m so sorry, I just
didn’t think about what it would do to you in the long term. God, if I
could take it back I would, but I fucked up—I made a mistake. Please
work this out with me. Don’t leave me.”

Slowly, Lynne’s head turned back. There was no emotion on her face as
she said evenly, “I should, you know. I should just walk out that door.”

Janeway felt a crushing relief. She wasn’t going to leave.

But then Lynne’s demeanor changed, and her icy calm gave way
to anger.

“I should just walk away, so you can see how it feels!” she shouted.

The sudden transformation was stunning. Lynne’s eyes were glowing
with rage; there was more life in her now than there had been for weeks.
The anger was rolling off her in waves, physically palpable in the small
room. She took a menacing step toward Janeway, who barely kept herself
from retreating.
“How. Could. You. Do that. To me?” growled Lynne. “You call that love? I call it deliberate cruelty. I wouldn’t treat a dog that way, much less the woman I promised to love and honor and protect. What are your promises worth, Kathryn? Tell me that!” Her face was centimeters away, and Janeway’s body was instinctively responding as to a threat. For a moment she thought she knew what the Arnett must have seen right before Lynne knocked them out.

Lynne’s arm moved suddenly, and Janeway couldn’t stop her flinch before she heard the explosion of shattering glass. She looked around in surprise. Lynne had thrown her glass straight into the replicator, with such force that quite a few of the broken shards had come flying back out and now lay scattered on the floor in front of the unit. She turned back to Lynne, hoping to god that she hadn’t seen her flinch.

But Lynne was already moving away, pacing in tight circles around the living room. “I cannot believe this. Jesus fucking Christ.” She stopped and lifted her head. “How do you live with yourself? I beat up some nasty little shits who desperately deserved it and I can hardly sleep at night. You tear out the heart of the woman you say you love and seem to go along just fine. Why are you telling me this now? Is it finally getting to you? Oh, that’s right, you wanted me to forgive you.” There was that terrible laugh again. “I’ll have to get back to you on that one.”

Janeway watched in despair as Lynne seemed to be moving farther and farther away from her.

“I’m telling you now because it took me this long to realize what I’d done,” she said. “I came here straight after my shift and I told you the minute you walked through that door. Lynne, I know it was wrong. I don’t know how I’m going to live with myself; just getting through the rest of my shift today was practically impossible. I’m sorry, desperately sorry for hurting you. Please believe me.”

“Why?” Lynne shouted. In a heartbeat she was back in Janeway’s face. “Why should I believe you? You’ve just told me that you lied on the holodeck. Why should I believe you now? Oh, and by the way, thanks for completely ruining that program for me. God, our engagement mountain of all places.” She stomped to the viewport and stood there, breathing hard, her clenched fists at her side as she stared out. Janeway carefully moved up next to her. She was afraid to touch her.

“You should believe me because it’s the truth,” she said quietly. “And
because—except for that one time—I’ve never lied to you. Lynne, I love you. I’ll keep telling you that until you believe me again. And I’ll keep asking you to forgive me until you do.”

Lynne spoke without turning her head. “You know what the hell of it is? I already forgive you. I love you too much for my own goddamned good. You intentionally tear my heart out and all I can think of is how hard it would be to live without you. What kind of a stupid fucking idiot does that make me?” She stepped back and suddenly threw her entire body weight into a punch at the viewport. The cry of pain shattered Janeway, and she already had tears running down her face as she caught Lynne around the waist.

“Oh, fuck,” gasped Lynne as they slid to the floor. “I think I broke every bone in my hand.”

Janeway hit her comm badge. “Janeway to Doctor Sandovhar. Medical emergency in my quarters.”

“I’m on my way.”

She cradled Lynne in her arms. “Oh, god, Lynne, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.” Lynne’s breathing was shallow.

“Yes, it is. Completely and entirely. I’m so ashamed. If anyone else had done this to you I’d kill them. I don’t know what to do with myself.”

Lynne didn’t answer, obviously concentrating on pushing the pain back in her mind. All Janeway could do was hold on to her and provide silent support.

Revi beamed into the living room, looking around until she saw them on the floor. She raced over and knelt beside them, gently taking Lynne’s hand into her own. “What happened?”

“I’ve been studying physics,” said Lynne before Janeway could speak. “I wanted to see how hard transparent aluminum really is. Turns out it’s a lot harder than glass.”

Janeway looked at her in astonishment. After all this, after all she’d done to hurt her wife, Lynne was protecting her? Christ, now she felt worse than ever.

“It’s okay,” she said. “Revi knows. She’s the one who made me see what I’d done.”

Revi pressed a hypospray to Lynne’s neck, and Lynne immediately began breathing easier. “Better?” she asked.

“Much,” said Lynne in a tone of relief. “Thank you.”
“You’re welcome. And for the record, personal experimentation isn’t always the best learning tool.” Revi carefully pulled one finger straight and began running her bone knitter over it.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Janeway thought the whole conversation was surreal. She sat there, cradling Lynne as Revi healed her hand, and wondered what on earth she could do to resolve this situation. Lynne’s final words before she’d hit the viewport had made one thing very clear—she felt powerless in their relationship. Janeway had taken away her sole security, yet Lynne could do nothing but come back to the woman who had hurt her. If there was one concept that Janeway knew about in every incarnation, it was power, and she understood that their relationship would never survive with this kind of imbalance—at least, not in any form she could imagine wanting. She’d taken Lynne’s power in their relationship, so it was up to her to give it back.

Slowly and gently, she pulled away and settled Lynne’s back to the wall, then knelt in front of her.

“Lynne, please help me,” she said.

Lynne looked up in confusion. “With what?”

“Us. Our marriage. I joked about having the Marriage Handbook, but the truth is that your instincts have always been better than mine. You’ve always looked out for me, but I’ve…I’m still having a hard time separating the captain from Kathryn. I need your help.”

Lynne glanced at Revi, then back to her, clearly astonished that she would say this in front of a witness. Which was exactly what Janeway was counting on.

“I don’t know what I’m doing, but I do know that I haven’t been doing it right. Please, tell me what to do. Tell me how to fix this. Tell me…” Her voice broke, but she pushed through it. “Tell me what you need. I want to give it to you. I want to learn to be as good a wife to you as you are to me.”

The wall came down, and for the first time in too long Janeway saw the old Lynne looking out of her eyes.

“Kathryn, all I have ever wanted—all I’ve ever needed—was for you to love me the way I love you. And I’m just not sure it’s possible. I think I need you more than you do me. You have Voyager and your responsibilities, and I just have you. I don’t think you can change that.”
Janeway took her good hand in her own. “I can’t change my responsibilities, that’s true. But as for needing you...” She paused, forcing herself to go to a place she’d locked away eight months ago. “I’ve never talked to you about the night you found me in your quarters. When you came back from Earth. I think it’s time.”

She had Lynne’s full attention. Revi’s, too, but to her credit the doctor was doing her best to remain unnoticed.

“I’ve always used fear as just one more tool in my arsenal, something to keep me sharp and alert and ready for the unexpected. But when I thought I’d lost you, when I believed that I would have to spend the rest of my life without you, I finally understood what true fear really was. It was crippling.” She closed her eyes, remembering the awful blackness that had yawned in front of her, threatening to pull her in. “I went to your quarters because they were all I had left of you. But without you they were just another set of rooms, another empty space. And I realized that I was the same way.” She opened her eyes again to see Lynne staring at her.

“Without you in my life, I’m just another empty body,” she said, not fighting the tears that rose up. “There’s nothing of value here. Sure, I have my responsibilities; I have Voyager. And I knew I’d have to go on because they needed me. But it wasn’t any kind of life that I wanted to live. It was just survival. And the thought of going on that way, for years and years of emptiness, was more than I could bear to think about. I knew I wasn’t big enough to handle it. And then you were there, kneeling in front of me in your robe with your hair down, and I swear to god I thought you were an angel at first.”

Lynne smiled, a tear making a slow track down her cheek. “Hardly.”

Janeway smiled back, feeling a tenuous connection reestablishing itself between them. “Well, it was better than my second thought, which was that I’d finally snapped and had completely lost my mind. Because I knew you were four hundred years and thirty-four thousand light years away, so how could you be right in front of me? But then I touched your face, and I knew you had to be real. Which brought me to the third possibility, that you were Q in disguise.”

“I remember that,” said Lynne. “You were ready to kill. You scared me.”

Janeway scooted closer, their faces just centimeters apart. “And then I saw the look in your eyes,” she said softly. “And I knew that Q could never
imitate what I saw there. Concern for me, and such a deep love. It pulled me back from the brink. I was lost without you. And I will never, as long as I live, forget what it felt like when you took me in your arms. It was absolute, total salvation.”

Now the tears were running freely down both their faces. Janeway reached up and brushed Lynne’s away. “Not need you? If anything, I need you more than you need me. You’ve already proven that you can survive losing everything and go on even stronger than before. All I’ve ever proven is that without you, I’m crippled.”

Lynne gently ran her fingers along Janeway’s jawline, then pushed a lock of hair behind her ear. “Thank you for telling me that.”

“You’re welcome. I should have told you before; I just didn’t want to think about that time again.”

“I understand.”

“I’m so sorry I hurt you.”

This time Lynne nodded. “I know.”

They sat there on the floor, staring into each other’s eyes, and Janeway would have been happy to never move again. She could feel their connection growing with every passing second, and it amazed her how much it had diminished without her realizing it. Lynne had already been slipping away, bit by bit, but she was coming back now. It was there to see, in those green eyes that she loved so well.

“Ladies,” said Revi, working on a knuckle, “I would like nothing more than to leave you here in privacy, but Lynne managed to fracture three knuckles and two phalanges, so it’s going to take me a bit longer.”

“Take all the time you need,” said Janeway. “And will you please tell Seven that this whole conversation comes under the category of doctor/patient privilege?”

“She already knows, Kathryn.”

“Thank you.”

Lynne looked at her in astonishment. “I forgot about that. I can’t believe you did that in front of two members of your crew.”

“I did that in front of two members of my family,” corrected Janeway. “But if that isn’t enough, I’ll open up a ship-wide channel and repeat everything I just said. I need you to believe me.”

“I do,” Lynne whispered. “I feel like...like I’m waking up again. Like I’ve been asleep for a while. Not quite here.”
Janeway leaned in and dropped a soft, lingering kiss on her lips. “I’m glad you’re back,” she whispered against her mouth. “I’ve missed you.”

She pulled back and sat there, looking at Lynne as Revi moved to the second knuckle. She felt as if volumes of words were passing between them silently, healing the cracks in her own heart that she hadn’t even known were there. God, she’d caused so much damage. What a fool she’d been. She thanked all available deities that Lynne was so forgiving, so ready to believe in her. What had she ever done to deserve this?

“Since apologies seem to be the order of the hour,” said Revi, not looking up from her work, “would it be all right if I offered one of my own?”

“For what?” asked Janeway.

Revi finished off the knuckle and moved to the last one. “For not doing anything to stop this whole train wreck in the first place.” She glanced up at Lynne. “I knew why you were asking about Arnett anatomy.” Dropping her gaze back to the hand, she continued, “If I’d been doing my job, I would have notified Kathryn and you wouldn’t have gotten anywhere near those five. But like everyone else, I was too caught up in my outrage at what they’d done to her. I wanted them to pay, and I was only too willing to let you handle the payment. But the cost has been horrendous, and I’m completely ashamed at my own part in this. Kathryn, Lynne, I’m truly sorry. You’re the ones who were hurt by this in the first place, yet you’re the ones who are continuing to pay the price for it, while the rest of us go around satisfied that justice has been done. Can you forgive me?”

Lynne reached out and put her hand on top of Revi’s cybernetic arm, stilling her motions. “You know, it just occurred to me that if those five Arnett could see us now, they’d probably be laughing their asses off. Sure, I hurt them, and you told me where to hit them, but the truth is that their doctors probably had them up and running again by the next morning. Well, except for the last two,” she amended. “Meanwhile we’re killing ourselves over here, three weeks later. I think we should all just write this one off and move on. Don’t you?”

Revi looked at Lynne, then Janeway. “I’m willing.”

“And I want nothing more than to put this behind us forever,” said Janeway.

“Good,” said Lynne. “Then it’s officially over. Can I have another drink now? I seem to have misplaced my last one.”
Janeway could almost feel the burden being lifted from her shoulders. “Only if you promise not to throw it. Though I have to say, I admire your efficiency. Throwing a glass right into the replicator is something I wouldn’t have thought of.”

“Yeah, well, there’s nothing worse than having to clean up after your own temper tantrum.”

“No, you just leave that to your poor overworked doctor,” said Revi.

They all laughed, probably more than the joke deserved, but it felt good. Janeway got up and came back with three glasses, including a cider for Revi, and when Lynne’s hand was healed they all retired to the table to continue their conversation. A few minutes later, at Lynne’s request, Seven arrived and they had their first evening together in too long. Janeway looked around the table with satisfaction, noting the smiling faces and the easing of tensions that, she now realized, had affected more than just her and Lynne. Once again she was reminded that she didn’t live in a vacuum; that what she did had a ripple effect, sometimes through her entire crew.

But the best thing of all was to look across the table into Lynne’s eyes and see her there, really there, as she hadn’t been since the whole travesty started. Janeway felt as if she were falling in love all over again, and suddenly she wanted Lynne all to herself. She’d had enough of company. They needed some alone time.

Lynne recognized the heat in her gaze, and with typical grace took the initiative. “Ladies,” she said, “I’ve had a long day and I’m a little tired. Much as I hate to kick you out, do you think we can continue this another time?”

“Of course,” said Revi, rising from the table. Seven followed suit. “Medical technology is a lot different than in your day, but the Human body hasn’t changed. You still need time to recharge your systems. I’ve logged both of you off for tomorrow. Get a good night’s sleep, Lynne.” Her statement was loaded, and everyone there understood it.

“I’ll do my best,” said Lynne. “I really have high hopes for tonight.”

After the goodbyes were said and the door closed behind their guests, Janeway turned to face Lynne. They stood there in silence, almost afraid to move, until finally she stepped into her wife’s embrace and felt herself being tucked up under Lynne’s chin.

Bliss.
“Kathryn,” said Lynne at last, “I want to go to bed. But I’m not tired.” Janeway pulled back enough to look into her eyes. “Neither am I.”

They turned out the lights and moved into the bedroom, slowly undressing each other and rebuilding their connection. When they finally made it to the bed, she tried to take over, thinking that Lynne would need that physical affirmation of her love. She wanted to take hours to worship her wife. But Lynne flipped them over and gazed into her eyes, gently holding her wrists down. “No,” she said. “It’s my turn.” And Janeway understood. Lynne needed to reaffirm her role in this relationship, to know that she had as much power as Janeway did. They had been imbalanced too long. So she nodded and relaxed, allowing Lynne to lead this dance.

It was her salvation.
Janeway looked at her chronometer, her whole body vibrating with anticipation. It had been two days since she and Lynne had reconciled—and two wonderful, sleep-filled nights with no nightmares—and today was Lynne’s birthday. She had a very important appointment, three minutes long, and absolutely nothing was going to keep her from it. She’d already reminded Lynne twice, much to her wife’s amusement.

“I’ll be there, Kathryn,” she’d said. “Don’t worry.”

But Janeway couldn’t help herself; she’d waited far too long for this. Deciding that it was close enough to the time, she looked over at Chakotay. “I’m off to make a phone call,” she said.

He smiled back. “Have a great time.” She nodded and left the bridge, calling Lynne as she stood in the turbolift.

“I’m on my way,” Lynne said. And in fact, by the time Janeway got to Astrometrics, Lynne was already waiting outside the door.

“So what’s the big secret?” she asked. “I can only assume that it has something to do with the fact that I’m now officially heading into old age.”

“What?” Janeway stopped to look at her in astonishment. “Old age! Where the hell do you get that?”

“I’m forty-five,” said Lynne. “I always figured I’d live to ninety, so that means I’m now at the midpoint and it’s all downhill from here.”
“Did you miss a critical part of your medical training? The Human life-span is not ninety.”

“Well, it wasn’t in my day either, but I figured on living longer,” said Lynne. “I gave myself an extra thirteen years.”

Janeway shook her head. “That’s not what I meant. I guess you did miss that part of your training. Today Humans can expect to live to one hundred and twenty. Easily.”

Lynne gaped at her. “One hundred and twenty? You’re kidding.”

“Would I kid about something as important as how much time we have left together? I’ve got another seventy-five years with you, and I’m counting on every one of them.”

“Wow. You left that part out of your sales brochure. If you’d told me that when we reached Earth, I wouldn’t even have left the ship.”

“Yes you would have,” said Janeway. “You had to.”

“True,” Lynne agreed. Then, more quietly: “Wow. Seventy-five years.”

Janeway pulled her toward the doors, which opened at her approach. Seven looked up from her workstation. “We’ll be in position in ninety-six seconds, Captain.”

“Thanks, Seven.” She pushed Lynne in front of the giant viewscreen, which was currently showing the video from Earth they’d received during their first comm link with MIDAS. “I have a couple of things planned for your birthday,” said Janeway. “This is the first.”

“Um, Kathryn, I hate to disappoint you, but I’ve already seen this.”

“You and the rest of the crew. That’s not what I was referring to. I’ve got a couple of people who wanted to speak with you today.”

Lynne looked at her in surprise. “You have comm time today? I thought it wasn’t until next week. You said you had a slot the day before mine.”

Janeway shrugged. “I might have slightly exaggerated the date.”

“Sixty seconds,” said Seven.

“So who are we calling?”

Janeway made her face carefully blank. “Gee, I can’t remember. But I’m sure we’ll find out in a minute. Literally.”

“Kathryn!”

“Hmm?” Janeway made a show of looking at the viewscreen. “Oh, look, North America is coming into view. So where did you live again?”
“You know where I lived, and I know where you lived, and stop trying to put me off. Who are we calling? It has to be your family.”

Janeway turned toward Seven. “Do you remember, Seven?”

“I do not,” said Seven. “In fact, I’m certain that I never knew. The code was simply programmed into my console.”

“Right,” said Lynne. “Ms. Eidetic Memory.”

“Twenty seconds,” said Seven. “Initiating deflector protocols now.”

They waited, facing the screen.

“Tachyon beam received. Initiating comm link.”


Lynne turned her head to look at her, but at that moment the image on the screen changed to two women, who beamed at them.

“Now there’s a sight for sore eyes,” said Gretchen Janeway. “Both of my lost daughters, looking absolutely beautiful. Happy birthday, Lynne.”

“Happy birthday,” echoed Phoebe. “We’d sing for you, but that might destroy the comm link.”

Lynne made a small sound in her throat, and Janeway tightened her grip. “Mom, Phoebe,” she said, giving Lynne time to recover. “It’s so good to see you. You look wonderful. And I think Lynne’s a little overwhelmed. I sort of sprang this on her.”

“Oh, nice going, shrimp.” Phoebe laughed. “Three minutes of time and you already rendered her speechless.”

“Lynne,” said Gretchen gently. “How are you?”

“I’m…stunned,” said Lynne. “Thank you for doing this. It’s certainly the most unusual birthday gift I’ve ever received.”

“And you’re the best one I’ve ever received,” said Gretchen. “I have so enjoyed our correspondence. You’re a treasure, and I don’t blame Kathryn for going seventy thousand light years out of her way to find you.”

“Thirty-five thousand,” said Lynne automatically.

“But I had to pick up Seven first,” reminded Janeway, smiling at her. They’d had this exchange before.

Lynne turned around. “Seven, will you come here, please?”

Seven looked nonplussed, but stepped forward. Lynne put her free arm around Seven’s waist and said, “Gretchen, Phoebe, I’d like you to meet my best friend. This is Seven of Nine, the other treasure of the Delta Quadrant.”
“I’m pleased to meet you,” said Seven politely. “But I don’t wish to take up Lynne’s birthday time.”

Lynne pulled her in closer. “It’s my call, and I’ll do what I want with it. And I want as much of my family in on this as I can get.” She dropped Janeway’s hand and pulled her in by the waist as well.

“Pushy little thing, isn’t she?” Phoebe was grinning. “Nice to meet you, Seven of Nine.”

“She’s not little,” said Janeway. “Haven’t you noticed?”

“Seven, I’m very pleased to meet you as well,” said Gretchen. “Both of my daughters have spoken very highly of you. When Voyager gets back to Earth, I’ll expect to see you for a visit.”

“Yes, Mrs. Janeway,” said Seven.

Lynne laughed. “She’ll be there. Along with her partner, Revi Sandovhar, who really is a pushy little thing.”

“You know she heard that,” said Janeway.

“So what are your plans for the day, Lynne?” asked Gretchen.

“I have no idea. Kathryn’s been very close-mouthed, but I think she has another surprise in store for me.”

“Or two,” said Janeway. “We’re going out to dinner at a private place I know, and then I’ve got a gift that she asked for three months ago. I’m pretty sure she’s forgotten all about it.”

Lynne turned to her in surprise. “I didn’t ask for anything.”

“My point.”

“Well, while you two are wasting comm time,” said Phoebe, “let me just say something extremely important. Lynne, I’ve been waiting to see you in person to tell you that the message you sent Mark was absolutely brilliant. I laughed myself sick when I watched that. You’re my kind of sister.”

“Thanks,” said Lynne, grinning. “I was actually kind of proud of that.”

“God, you should be. None of Kathryn’s previous lovers would ever have had the balls. I can tell you’re going to keep her on her toes.”

“Twenty-five seconds, Lynne,” said Seven.

“Thanks, Seven. It’s mutual, Phoebe. I’ve never known anyone like Kathryn. I think she might be unique in both my time and yours.”

“Lynne, take care of yourself.” Gretchen looked at her seriously. “This is something I’ve waited for, and it’s wonderful, but it won’t be enough until I can hold you in my arms and feel you.”
Janeway put her arms around Lynne and squeezed. “She feels absolutely perfect, Mom.”

“Goodbye, darlings.” Gretchen kissed her fingertips and blew the kiss to them.

“Goodbye, Gretchen; Phoebe.”

“Bye, Mom. And Phoebe, Lynne doesn’t have any balls.” Janeway chuckled at Gretchen’s expression.

“We’ll talk to you next week,” added Lynne.

Seven walked to her console and transferred the link to the quarters of the next crewmember on the call list. Not everyone was willing to make their calls in Astrometrics; most preferred the privacy of their own quarters.

“Thank you for including me in your family call,” she said quietly.

“I’m glad you were here,” said Lynne. “It meant a lot to me to be able to introduce you.” She turned to Janeway. “And as for you...nice little exaggeration there. I didn’t expect this.”

“That was the point.”

Lynne pulled her in for a short but heartfelt kiss. “Thank you. Two days ago I couldn’t imagine feeling this happy.”

Janeway kept her hand around the back of Lynne’s neck, needing the connection. “I’m hoping it will get better as the day goes on.”

Lynne smiled. “I’m looking forward to it.”

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It was funny, Janeway thought. She was nearly forty-three years old, a married woman, and yet her heart was still pounding as she stood in their living room, waiting for her date.

It’s not like you don’t already have the girl, she told herself. But there was a lot riding on this date. She’d planned it weeks in advance, but it had taken on a whole new meaning two days ago. She still had a lot to make up for.

The bedroom door opened and Lynne emerged in fitted charcoal gray trousers, with a brilliant blue silk blouse tucked in. Her hair was loose, and a dark scarf draped over her shoulders gave her a touch of elegance.

Janeway felt the breath leave her lungs. “Oh, sweetheart, you look gorgeous.” And she truly did. Lynne had dropped years off her face in the
last forty-eight hours. She looked once more like a woman comfortable in her own skin.

Lynne stepped up to her, grasped her hands and held her arms away from her body. “Thank you. So do you, love.” She looked Janeway up and down, an appreciative smile on her face. “It’s so nice to see you out of uniform.”

Janeway was in a navy linen pantsuit that she had always loved for its easy comfort and classy looks. “It’s nice to be out of uniform. Are you ready?”

“Yes. Lead on.”

“Okay.” She picked up the bag she’d tucked next to the couch and ignored Lynne’s pointed look. “Let’s go have dinner.”

A few minutes later they stood in front of the holodeck doors. Janeway punched the program into the console and stepped back to Lynne’s side, reaching for her hand. “I hope this will be all right.”

“Why wouldn’t it be?” Lynne asked as the doors slid open. She took a single step and stopped dead, the color draining from her face. “Oh, god.”

“Lynne—”

“I don’t think I can do this.” She tried to pull her hand away, but Janeway held tight.

“Lynne, please. If you really don’t want to, we won’t. But I don’t want that to be our last memory of this place. Please let me make it up to you.”

She watched, her heart in her throat, as Lynne closed her eyes and swallowed hard.

“Would it help,” she offered, “if I said that I had this planned before we even heard of the Arnett? I reserved this time almost six weeks ago. It’s a special place for me, too. Please don’t let me have ruined it for both of us.” She squeezed Lynne’s hand and then released it, letting her make the choice.

Without a word, Lynne led the way up the path. As they rounded the boulder she stopped again.

“I added a little something,” said Janeway, coming up beside her.

Their engagement mountain, as Lynne called it, was adorned with a cloth-covered table set for two. A candle flickered inside a small lamp, set in the center of a wreath of flowers. Next to the table stood a waiter in formal wear, and off to the side a three-piece jazz ensemble played quietly.

When Lynne turned to her, Janeway was holding out the rose she’d
carried in her bag. Lynne’s eyes dropped to the flower, and a slow smile crossed her face. She reached out and carefully took it from Janeway’s hand, testing the sharpness of a thorn with her thumb.

“I’d never replicated a rose with thorns before I met you,” said Janeway. “Now I can’t imagine them any other way.”

“Any other way isn’t natural,” said Lynne. And by the look in her eyes, Janeway knew she was saying a great deal more.

They walked to the table and were seated with perfect silent efficiency by the waiter, who placed their menus in their hands and walked around the boulder to vanish from sight.

“Ooo, Italian,” said Lynne. “My favorite.”

“What a coincidence,” said Janeway. Lynne graced her with a smile, then turned her attention back to the menu. Within seconds she’d made her choice and tossed the menu on the table.

“How do you do that?” asked Janeway.

“Do what?”

“Know what you want just like that? I look at the list and it takes me ten minutes to decide; they all look so good.”

“Maybe you just have a longer attention span than I do. Or maybe you make too many quick decisions on the job, so you’re giving yourself the luxury of dithering.”

Janeway snorted. “Dithering. Oh yes, that’s me.”

Their easy conversation continued as they worked their way through the salad, appetizer and main course. Janeway could feel herself unwinding as the time passed, simply enjoying this special time with Lynne. Except for the awkward start, Lynne seemed to be enjoying herself as well, and Janeway thought with some relief that she’d done the right thing.

When their dessert was served and she knew the waiter’s program had ended, she drew her gift from the bag and handed it across the table.

“Ahh, the mysterious item that I apparently asked for,” said Lynne, her eyes dancing.

“You’ll remember when you see it.” She could hardly wait. Unfortunately, Lynne sensed her impatience and smilingly dragged the process out to an excruciating length, until Janeway let out a sound of frustration. “Just open it!”
Lynne laughed and finished tearing off the paper. When she pulled the gift out of the box, her eyes went wide.

“Holy shit,” she breathed. “I do remember asking for this.” She pressed the play button and watched the vid with rapt attention. When it was done she played it again. Finally she looked up, an enormous grin lighting her face. “You look amazing.”

“I look sweaty and grimy, but that’s what you asked for.”

“No, you look absolutely amazing. Like the sexiest woman I have ever seen. Jesus, they should put this on the Starfleet recruitment vids. They’ll have people stampeding to sign up.”

“I hardly think so.”

“I know so. When was this?”

“About halfway through our third year out here. Neelix and I were on an away mission and when we got back, Voyager was dead in space. There wasn’t a single crewmember to be seen. Turned out that the ship had been infected by a virus that made the jump from microscopic to macroscopic. They grew to about this big.” Janeway held her hands slightly wider than shoulder width, and watched Lynne’s eyes get huge.

“Kathryn, that’s not possible. Viruses don’t do that.”

“Tell that to the Delta Quadrant viruses. So anyway, with environmental controls offline, the warp core was heating the ship to an unbearable degree, and I was dying in my uniform. I figured if I was going into combat, I might as well be comfortable. Hence the, um, outfit.”

“Yeah.” Lynne looked at the PADD, apparently captivated. “So these are security logs?”

“Mm hm. I assembled that from all the logs of that day. And if you ever let this get out of your hands, I’ll have to kill you.”

“Oh, don’t worry. This is mine.” Lynne hit the play button again, smiling widely as she watched the video of Janeway stripped down to her sleeveless undershirt and hunting viruses through her ship with a phaser rifle. “Everything I asked for is here,” she said, delighted. “The tank top, the sweat, the muscles—goddamn, but you’re sexy. I particularly like this scene of you stripping off and arming yourself.” She whistled. “Yowsa. Slamming that knife into the sheath—ooo.”

“That knife saved my life,” said Janeway. “I used it to kill a macrovirus just before I detonated the antivirus bomb.”
“Okay, story time. Tell me from the beginning. I haven’t heard anything about this one.”

“That’s because nobody was conscious except me and the Doctor.” And Janeway launched into her tale, enjoying the total attention Lynne was giving her. She hadn’t thought much about this little adventure for some time, but when Lynne had offhandedly asked if she could make her a vid like the now-famous Mark message, the wheels had begun turning. No way could she ever deliberately pose for a vid like that—but she had no problems assembling one from existing logs. If she’d felt a tiny bit self-conscious about it, that had vanished upon seeing Lynne’s overt appreciation.

They finished the last of the wine and watched the sunset, scooting their chairs together so that they could hold hands. When the sun sank behind the mountains, Lynne squeezed her hand and said, “Thank you for giving this back to me.”

“You’re welcome. Thank you for giving me the chance.”

They sat in the gathering darkness, wanting to enjoy every moment. When the last light had faded from the sky, Janeway stood and pulled Lynne up. “Our time’s almost over.”

“Damn. I could have stayed here all night.”

“Well, we could always save our holodeck rations and use them for that. I think a nice, soft bed on the edge of the cliff would be wonderful.”

“It would,” agreed Lynne as they moved down the path. “But I’d have to give up Velocity and climbing and evenings out with you to save the rations, and I’m not willing to do that.”

“Me either.” Janeway ended the program and they stepped into the corridor. “Back to the real world.”

“Kathryn,” said Lynne seriously, “that is the real world to me.”

Janeway looked at her in surprise. “I guess it would be. To me it’s a lovely treat.”

A companionable silence settled on them as they rode the turbolift to deck three and walked to their quarters. Once inside, Lynne put her rose in a bud vase and sat on the couch with her new PADD in hand. Janeway had a feeling that PADD was going to get a lot of use. Well, it was only fair; she’d certainly viewed the Mark message often enough.

Lynne finished the playback and started to laugh. “Did you see your mom’s expression when you told Phoebe that I don’t have balls?”

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“Yes, I did.” She couldn’t help but grin. “I don’t think she ever expected to hear that out of me.”

Lynne held up the PADD. “Does she know that you’re the one who has them?”

Janeway pounced on her and started the first tickle fight they’d had in weeks. She was delighted to see that Lynne had become playful again, but lasted only a minute before being flipped onto her back with her arms held over her head. She struggled briefly, then gave up when a soft pair of lips covered her own. Lynne let go of her wrists and held her face reverently between her hands. “I love you,” she whispered, all signs of levity gone from her eyes. “I always will.”

“I know.” Lynne had already proven that, staying with her when she’d given her every reason to go. “I love you too, and I plan to spend the rest of my life showing you how much.”

“I’m up for that.” Lynne smiled and kissed her again. When she pulled back, Janeway ran a gentle finger down her jawline.

“Happy birthday, Lynne.”

“Was it ever. And to think I get seventy-five more.”
Janeway’s own birthday got lost in the shuffle. Voyager had been pulled into a void, a spatial anomaly wrapped in an inert layer of subspace. They’d spent over two weeks there, fighting off the predations of other trapped ships that tried—and at first succeeded—to rob them of their food and energy stores. Eventually Janeway had managed to form an alliance with a few other ships and a species endemic to the void, and thanks to Seven and B’Elanna’s engineering skills, they’d found a way out. Normal space had never looked so sweet, but they were now in search of food stores, having lost over half of theirs. It was discouraging in the extreme. Sometimes Janeway felt as if her entire life revolved around rebuilding Voyager after the latest disaster the Delta Quadrant threw at them.

At least her home life was nearly back to normal. Lynne had regained her usual spirit and attitude, and had been a lifesaver for Janeway during their time in the void. The nightmares made only sporadic appearances now, for which she was eternally grateful. She was also grateful to Revi for warning them in advance that the subconscious often took a while to catch up with reality. Knowing that the nightmares might make a reappearance enabled her to easily deal with them when they did show up—otherwise she knew she would have panicked at the thought that everything she’d done to make up for her mistake was still not enough.
Sometimes, though, she’d catch a look in Lynne’s eyes that left a pain in her heart. Revi had said it was much easier to cause injury than to patch it up, and she knew that it was going to take more time for Lynne to completely recover. She was willing to focus their mutual energies on that aspect of their relationship, and for that reason felt no regret about her own birthday slipping past them while they were in the void. They’d all been busy just trying to survive, and now Voyager was low on resources and Lynne needed to take care of herself, not her.

So she didn’t think a thing about it when Lynne asked to meet her in the mess hall for dinner a few days after their escape from the void. Her suggestion that it might be good for the captain to be seen dining among the crew was a good one; god knew her crew needed a little dose of normalcy and morale. Lynne had said she’d be there at 1715, so Janeway stayed a few minutes after her shift, wrapping up a report. She walked through the doors of the mess hall right on time, looking forward to seeing her wife.

“Surprise!” shouted dozens of voices, and she stopped in shock. The room was festively decorated with streamers, there were plates of food everywhere—how could there be so much food?—and half her crew, it seemed, was looking at her with drinks in hand and smiles on their faces.

Lynne pushed between Chakotay and Harry and walked up to her, looking stunning in a short, sleeveless black dress and heels. “Happy birthday, love,” she said, taking Janeway’s hands in hers.

“But how…when…” Janeway stopped. She was well and truly surprised.

“Hey, the captain’s speechless!” shouted Tom, and the crowd cheered. Janeway had to smile at their enthusiasm.

“Anyone ever tell you people that you can’t count?” she asked good naturedly. “My birthday was last week.”

Seven spoke up. “By my calculations, time in the void proceeded at a rate of one hundred and sixty-three percent that of normal space/time. Therefore, today is your birthday.”

Janeway stared. “You didn’t mention that in the staff meeting.”

“I was advised that to do so would be unwise and would result in personal injury.”

“I told her I’d kick her ass if she said anything,” said Revi, and the crowd laughed.
“It really is your birthday,” said Lynne. “Did you honestly think I’d forget?”

Janeway tried to keep her thoughts off her face, but obviously she’d already been married too long to pull it off. “Oh, love,” said Lynne, pulling her in for a hug. She spoke quietly into her ear. “I’m sorry. In the void a celebration was pointless, and once we got out and Seven figured out the time disparity, I swore everyone to secrecy. I wanted it to be a surprise. I’m sorry if that hurt you.”

Janeway squeezed her and let go. “It didn’t.” Turning to the crowd she said, “Thanks, everyone. But isn’t a party supposed to have music? And where’s my drink?”

That was the permission everyone needed, and within seconds the party was in full swing. Janeway had to spend a little too much time thanking a parade of well-wishers, but in the interest of crew morale she did it happily. And she was truly touched by the knowledge Lynne had shared, that everyone here had donated half of their food rations for the day in order to provide the snacks. Tom and B’Elanna had put off their wedding because of the shortage, yet they’d donated to her birthday party. God, she had an amazing crew.

Once she had finished thanking everyone, she let Lynne lead her onto an area that had been cleared for dancing, and they spun around to a lively foxtrot while the crowd clapped and cheered. The little dance floor was packed immediately afterward, bodies jostling and bumping as everyone enjoyed themselves. Janeway could only handle another two dances before she started feeling claustrophobic.

“I’m ready for some food, how about you?” she asked. Lynne nodded, and they made their way out of the crowd and back to the food tables. With plates loaded and drinks in hand, they moved to a quiet corner for a breather.

“Well, you’ve pulled off the impossible,” said Janeway. “Crew members shouldn’t be able to keep secrets from captains. We’re supposed to know everything.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” asked Lynne. “The best things in life are often a surprise.”

“That certainly holds true for you.” She clinked her glass against Lynne’s and enjoyed her wife’s blush.
“Hey, this is your birthday. I’m supposed to be saying things like that to you.”

“You have the whole night. I’m completely open to it.”

Lynne laughed. “I’ll see what I can come up with.”

Their quiet corner soon filled up with friends, and Janeway had a wonderful evening just watching the smiles on the faces around her. It did her heart good to see so much happiness here, after the stress they’d recently been through. These people were remarkable in their ability to bounce back. They’d learned to seize the moment, and apparently the captain’s birthday was as good a moment as any.

She and Lynne eventually got separated as they spoke with different people, and it was late in the evening before she realized that she hadn’t seen her wife in quite some time. She scanned the room to no avail. With her height—and in those heeled shoes—Lynne was impossible to miss.

She turned to B’Elanna and Tom. “Have you seen Lynne?”

“She left a little while ago,” said B’Elanna. “She said you should stay and enjoy yourself for as long as you wanted to. But she was feeling a little tired and went home.”

Without telling me? For a moment she was hurt, but then understood. If Lynne had told her she was leaving, Janeway would have gone with her. Lynne wanted her to stay and have a good time, so she’d left in a way that wouldn’t obligate Janeway to cut her own evening short.

Nice try, Lynne. She had no intention of staying any longer. This had been a wonderful evening, but even at her own birthday party she was still obligated to be the captain. She was more than ready to go home and be Kathryn again.

“I’m going to head out too,” she said, ignoring the rather obvious glances that Tom and B’Elanna exchanged. Knowing Tom, there was probably a pool on how long it would take her to leave the party once she’d realized Lynne was gone. “I’m forty-three now, you know. These old bones just can’t party like they used to.”

B’Elanna snorted. “Right. I’ll believe you’re old when Seven finally beats you in Velocity.”

Janeway tried to keep the smug smile off her face. The fact that after nearly three and a half years she could still kick Seven’s ass in Velocity was a source of unending satisfaction to her—and equally unending frustration for Seven.
“I’m sure it will happen someday,” she said. “But until then, my Velocity title is all I have left since Revi stripped me of my pool title.”

“Yeah, I know how that feels,” said Tom, who’d considered himself quite a pool shark until the first time he’d played against Janeway.

They exchanged a few more jokes and pleasantries, and Janeway began the process of extricating herself from the crowd. It was impossible to simply leave, but she used all of her diplomatic skills to keep the conversations as short as was socially acceptable, and it was only another twenty minutes before she found herself in the corridor. She paused for a moment, enjoying the silence and the stillness, then resumed her walk.

Her second surprise of the night came when she entered her own quarters. The lights were low, candles were burning, and Lynne was straddling a chair set squarely in the middle of the living room. She was wearing her uniform jacket over the black dress and had tucked her hair up under a black fedora, which was pulled down low over her eyes. Her head was down as her bare arms rested on the chair back, and the slit in her skirt was showing leg all the way to her hip. She looked absolutely incredible.

“Hello, Kathryn,” she said in a low voice, keeping her head down and her eyes hidden. “Are you ready for your birthday present?”

Janeway stood still, having no idea what was going on but certain that she was going to love it.

“I’m ready.”

Lynne looked up then, fixing Janeway with a sultry gaze from under the low brim of her hat. “Stand where you are. Computer, begin Janeway birthday.”

She rose with the first beat of the music and slowly made her way toward Janeway, who was trying to recognize the familiar tune. Then the raspy voice came in. Baby, take off your coat…real slow…

Lynne stood in front of her, her eyes promising sweat and sex as she put her hands on Janeway’s shoulders, slid them to her zipper, and slowly unzipped her uniform jacket. Janeway’s body was already heating up as Lynne slid her jacket off, dangled it by one finger, then dropped it to the floor. She remembered the song now. It was the one Lynne had called “the perfect strip tease song.” But wait a minute, wasn’t Lynne supposed to be the one taking off her clothes?

Lynne put one hand on the back of Janeway’s neck and commandingly
drew her forward, while she backed up toward the couch. Once they reached it she grasped Janeway’s shoulders, twirled them around, and pushed her onto the couch. Leaning to one side, she picked up a glass, took a sip without ever breaking eye contact, then gave the glass to Janeway and backed away.

*Baby, take off your dress...yes, yes, yes...you can leave your hat on...*

Janeway lifted the glass to her lips in a daze, barely tasting the whiskey and soda while she watched Lynne slowly unzip her own jacket, letting it drop down her arms and then flinging it to one side of the room. She turned around, moving her hips in a way that really should have been illegal, and looked back over her shoulder while she slid one of her dress straps down. Then she smiled, pulled the strap back up, and did a slow shimmy that made the muscles in her bare back ripple.

Janeway wasn’t sure she was going to survive the length of this song. She was mesmerized as she watched Lynne put one heeled foot up on the chair and do things that dining chairs were never designed for.

*Come over here...stand on that chair...yes, that’s right...raise your arms up in the air...now shake ‘em...*

Lynne briefly mounted the chair, spinning up onto it and off again in a choreographed move that was all leg, leaving Janeway breathless. The next thing she knew, Lynne was right in front of her, leaning over and giving her a view right down the front of her low-cut dress.

*You give me reason to live...*

Lynne took off her hat, shook down her loose hair in a curtain that briefly obscured Janeway’s view, and at a climactic beat to the music threw her head back again, staring straight into Janeway’s eyes as she replaced the hat on her head. She spun around, shimmying to the beat, then repeated her earlier movement of looking over her shoulder as she drew a dress strap down her arm.

*Sweat darling, you can leave your hat on...*

This time the strap came all the way off and she pulled her arm through, turning around to reveal half of a black lacy bra as she moved her hips in a slow circle. In another few beats she spun around again and slowly unzipped her dress. Janeway was in the process of taking another drink when the zipper came down, and she stopped with the glass to her lips as she saw the naked skin beneath it. Lynne had gone to the party
without underwear? Jesus! But no, that was an illusion—she was wearing a black thong, Janeway now saw. Her hand began to slip on the glass, and she quickly wiped it on her uniform pants. Lynne never wore thongs; she consigned them to the seventh level of hell. That she was wearing one tonight, just for her, sent her blood pressure even higher.

Eventually the other strap came down, and all that held the dress on was Lynne’s hand pressing it against her chest.

They don’t know what love is…

At the next climactic beat of the music, Lynne lifted her hand and the dress dropped to the floor, leaving her in nothing but the black bra and thong, her heels and the hat.

But I know what love is…you can leave your hat on…

She stepped out of the pooled fabric and stalked toward Janeway, who put her glass down and wiped off her hands again. A moment later Lynne was straddling her lap, her hands behind Janeway’s neck as she arched back, thrusting her lace-clad breasts into prominence. She came back up as the music began to fade and took Janeway’s mouth in a crushing, possessive kiss. Wrapping her arms around her bare back, Janeway returned the kiss with equal passion, and when they broke apart, both were breathing hard. Janeway’s eyes dropped to Lynne’s chest, then slowly rose to the smoldering green eyes beneath the hat brim.

“I thought you said stripping wasn’t your style,” she said, her voice husky.

“It wasn’t,” said Lynne. “But that was a different life.”

There was so much conveyed in those few words. Janeway nodded, understanding the message. They could never go back to the way they’d been before. But maybe that didn’t have to be the negative thing she’d assumed it was. Maybe, as Lynne had just demonstrated, they could take a new path, do things a little differently, and make themselves better and stronger than they had been.

She leaned in to kiss the upper slope of a breast, just above the lace. Taking her sweet time, she nibbled her way across to the other breast, then traced delicate collarbones with a feather light touch. When she drew back, Lynne’s eyes were dark.

“Well?” asked Lynne in a low tone. “Aren’t you going to unwrap your birthday present?”
Janeway smiled. “Remember how you teased me by taking forever to unwrap your present?”

Lynne’s expression said very clearly that she did, indeed, remember it. Janeway reached out to pull a bra strap partway down Lynne’s arm, letting her fingers trail across the enticing swell of a breast.

“Paybacks are a bitch, sweetheart.”
The further adventures of Kathryn Janeway and Lynne Hamilton can be found on the Fanfic page at my website, fletcherdelancey.com.

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