A routine away mission turns deadly, setting events in motion that will forever change the relationship between Janeway and Hamilton.
PRESENT TENSION

PAST IMPERFECT SERIES – BOOK II

FLETCHER DELANCEY
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AUTHOR’S NOTE

This is the second book in the Past Imperfect series.

For more in the series,
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OTHER BOOKS BY FLETCHER DELANCEY

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To learn about the world of Alsea, immerse yourself in the Chronicles of Alsea site: alseaworld.com.
For the ones who would not stay silent.
The coffee turned out to be something of a challenge. The beans needed to be ground, but since fresh coffee beans were hardly the norm on a spaceship, the replicator contained no patterns for a grinder. The one grinder on board was in Neelix’s kitchen, and Janeway refused to let Lynne out of her sight yet, nor did she want to leave the quarters. “Here, give them to me,” she said, holding out her hand.

Lynne looked at her oddly, but dumped the little scoop of beans into her hands. Janeway walked over to the replicator and poured the beans directly onto its smooth base. “How big are the granules once they’ve been ground?” she asked.

Lynne thought for a moment. “About two millimeters in diameter, I guess. I don’t know, coffee isn’t really my drink.”

“Computer,” said Janeway, “alter physical form to units two millimeters in diameter.” The replicator glowed for a moment, and the small pile of beans was reduced to a smaller pile of granules. Janeway swept them off into her hand and turned a triumphant smile on Lynne. “Mission accomplished. Now what?”

Lynne pulled a cone-shaped contraption and a box out of a bag by the beans. Opening the box, she extracted a bit of paper, opened it into a cone, and fit it into the contraption. She placed the unit atop a mug and held it out to Janeway. “In the filter,” she said.
Janeway dumped the granules into the filter and dusted off her hands, watching as Lynne walked back to the replicator.

“Computer, one cup of water, one hundred degrees Celsius.” Pulling the hot water from the replicator, Lynne poured it into the filter, instantly filling their quarters with what was surely the most mouth-watering aroma in the entire Delta Quadrant.

Sniffing the air appreciatively, Janeway said, “If that tastes half as good as it smells, I'll be your slave for life.”

Lynne grinned at her. “Don’t make promises you can’t keep.”

Janeway waited impatiently for what seemed like hours until the last of the water had dripped through. Pulling the paper filter out of the cone, Lynne tossed it into the replicator. “Computer, recycle,” she said. Then she turned and, with a flourish, presented the steaming mug of coffee to her partner. “Prepare to be my slave for life.”

The first sip nearly sent Janeway to her knees as she closed her eyes and moaned. “Oh my god. Oh my god. This is the best thing I have ever tasted. You are my hero and I will love you forever.”

“I thought you already loved me.”

“I love you more now. Oh my god.”

“Curious,” mused Lynne. “Fresh coffee seems to reduce your vocabulary.” She smiled at her partner’s continued moaning. “Haven’t you ever had real coffee before?”

Janeway reluctantly ceased her coffee worship long enough to answer. “Only at expensive restaurants. It’s not very common now, not when most people use replicators.”

Lynne clicked her tongue disapprovingly. “Not everything can be replicated, you know.”

There was no answer, only a small slurping sound as more of the precious liquid found its way into an extremely appreciative captain. Lynne rolled her eyes. “Well, I can see you’re going to be non-verbal for awhile. I’ll just go take care of breakfast now.”

“Mm-hmm,” was her answer, accompanied by another sip.

The rest of the day was spent simply being together in Lynne’s quarters, eating fresh bread and, on Janeway’s side, drinking far more coffee.
than was good for her. It was a quiet, unexciting day, and that normalcy went a long way toward knitting their hearts back together. Lynne had brought a disc player back from Earth along with her collection of discs, and Janeway happily set her engineering mind to the puzzle it presented. First she had to figure out a way of modifying it to accept a modern energy source. Once that was accomplished, she fiddled with it until she’d created a means of transferring the data at high speed from the player directly into the ship’s computers. The whole task took only a few hours, after which Lynne set about copying her new library of music into the computer and cataloguing it. Janeway used that time to read some of her favorite poetry. Reading always soothed her mind, but lately she hadn’t felt much like doing it. Now, as the words wrapped their magic around her, she felt as if she were back in the arms of an old friend. Every now and then she looked over the top of her PADD and smiled at the sight of Lynne busily organizing her library. Both women were supremely content.

Once Lynne had the music catalogued, she sat against the arm of her sofa and pulled Janeway back against her chest, wrapping her arms around her lover’s waist and bracketing her with her legs. “Okay,” she said. “You just go right on reading, but I’ve got some great background music for you.”

Janeway rested her head on her warm pillow. “I’m ready.”

“Computer, play Miles Davis, Kind of Blue.”

The room filled with a quiet jazz, which soon grew into something commanding much more attention. “Background music, my ass,” said Janeway, admiring the consummate trumpet and saxophone artistry.

Lynne laughed. “You’ve picked up too many of my idioms.”

“I hate to disappoint you, sweetheart, but that one made it to my century.”

Lynne’s arms tightened. “‘Sweetheart’?”

“Well, I had to come up with something, and you seemed to object to anything with too many syllables.”

“I don’t object to this.”

Conversation ceased then, as the women listened to the four-hundred-year-old sounds of Miles Davis and his band. After a while Janeway picked up her PADD again, and a pleasant hour passed away. By the time the album had ended, Janeway had given up on her reading and was just listening, eyes shut, comfortably snuggled against her partner’s chest.
When the last strains of music died away, she said, “That was some of the best jazz I’ve ever heard. What a tragedy that it was lost for so long.”

“Good thing I brought it back then, isn’t it? I knew you’d love it. That album is a who’s who of the best jazz artists on the planet at that time. In my opinion, that is.”

“I’ll respect your opinion in this case.”

“Hmm. Nice qualifier there.”

Janeway put her arms around the legs holding her in place and squeezed. She felt whole again, and so content that the unfinished issues of the previous night no longer seemed too big to handle. It was time to ask some questions. Lynne had taken care of her the previous night, but she knew her lover was hurting too. After a day of recovery, she finally felt strong enough to help.

“I know it must have been hard for you to leave your family,” she said quietly. Lynne’s arms tightened around her, but when nothing was said, she continued. “I want you to know that though I may never understand exactly how hard that was, I do understand what a gift you gave me. And I’ll do my very best to deserve it. I don’t ever want you to second guess your decision.”

She felt a kiss dropped onto the top of her head before Lynne rested her chin there. “Thank you. I’m not sure you have the power to keep me from second guessing, but don’t ever think you’re the cause of it. I think that no matter which way I chose, I would have had regrets.”

“I know. I just wish you’d never been forced into such a difficult choice. How did you say goodbye to your parents?”

After a pause, Lynne said a little too carefully, “I recorded a message for them on a PADD and left it with a lawyer. It will be shipped to them the day I disappear. I mean the day I disappeared. Hell, I can’t keep track of my tenses.”

Her reaction set off alarm bells, and Janeway turned to look at her directly. “What did it say?”

“I explained what happened to me, and about you, and told them not to worry because I was happy.”

“That’s not all, is it?” asked Janeway, watching her body language. When Lynne didn’t answer, she knew. “Oh, no. Please tell me you didn’t violate the Temporal Prime Directive.”

“Do we have to discuss this now?”
“That would be a yes, then,” she said, her heart sinking. “What did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything except make sure my parents were provided for, okay? I was very careful.”

It was her captain’s instinct, Janeway thought later. It just took over sometimes, and not always at the most opportune moments.

“No, it’s not okay,” she said. “This is serious, and I think you know it. You need to tell me exactly what happened.”

“Here we go.” Lynne cast her eyes toward the ceiling in mute appeal. “Couldn’t even get through twenty-four hours without you demanding to know how I misbehaved this time.”

“Well, if you wouldn’t—” Janeway stopped before she could finish an incendiary sentence. “If there’s any chance you did violate the Temporal Prime Directive, even accidentally, then I need to know.”

They stared at each other in a charged silence before Lynne said, “All I did was give them some money and tell them how to invest it. And I made sure the PADD would self-destruct, too. I didn’t do anything to alter the timeline.”

Appalled, Janeway pushed herself off the couch, needing the distance. “You don’t think telling your parents how to invest will alter the timeline? Lynne, you essentially told them the future! If that isn’t a violation of the Temporal Prime Directive, I don’t know what is!” Her disappointment pushed her further into captain mode as she demanded, “What happened? You did the one thing I asked you not to do, and you knew how important it was! What were you thinking?”

Lynne stood up as well, her own stance aggressive. “You want to know what I was thinking? I was thinking that I owed them. I had a choice, and whichever way I chose I was going to lose someone I love. Choose them and lose you, or choose you and lose them. I chose you. Do you understand what that means? It means I abandoned them! It means I’m not going to be there when they need me, if they ever get hurt, or sick—” Her voice faltered, and her bristling stance dissolved. “I’m their only child, and I left them. They had the right to expect that I would take care of them when they got older. They had the right to expect me to be there. But I won’t be. So I had to take care of them the best I could.”

Janeway watched in horror as tears welled up in Lynne’s eyes. “I know it must have—”
“No, you don’t!” Lynne said, impatiently swiping at one cheek. “You have no idea how hard it was not to tell them what I wanted to. I didn’t tell them about World War Three, or give them any clues as to how to save themselves. Believe me, I kept your damn directive in mind. For all I know they’re going to die in a few years. But I gave them the best chance I could, by making sure they had money. It buys a lot of protection, and it was the only way that I could be there for them. I had an impossible choice, Kathryn. So don’t thank me for the gift I gave you one second, and jump all over me the next for trying to do right by my parents. You got what you wanted. Don’t you begrudge them some tiny compensation for what they lost.”

Janeway was speechless, her own reaction suddenly seeming completely inappropriate to the situation. While she was casting about for something to say that wouldn’t make things even worse, Lynne fixed her with a determined look that was no less effective for the tears that had overflowed.

“I know you have to be the captain here,” she said, striking a blow straight to Janeway’s heart. “But I had a responsibility too, and I will not apologize for upholding it. I did the best I could. Do you understand?”

Carefully, Janeway reached up to wipe her cheeks. “Yes, I do. As your captain I can’t condone your actions, but as your lover I know why you did it. And I’m not sure I would have done any different in your position.” She sighed, once again struck by the disparity between what the two sides of her persona required. Well, she really wasn’t the captain right now; Chakotay was technically in charge at the moment. So she’d take care of Lynne as her partner, comfort her as she’d intended, and worry about the rest later. “I know you did your best,” she added. “I’m just sorry you had to pay such a high price for your choice.”

Lynne looked even more determined, if that was possible. “That’s the other reason I didn’t want to get into this. I don’t want you to take on any responsibility for my decision to stay. Don’t you dare feel guilty about it. It was my choice, and I made it with full knowledge of the consequences. It is not your fault.”

Janeway, who had been feeling quite guilty at that very moment, now felt even more guilty at being caught. “You know me far too well.”

“Not well enough yet,” said Lynne, “but I’m working on it. I love you, and I never want you to be disappointed in me. But I’m sure you will be
every now and again. I know we’re not always going to agree, but please
know that whatever I do, it will be what I thought was best at the time.”

“I know that,” said Janeway, pushing down the knowledge that she’d
conveniently forgotten that very thing not five minutes ago. “And I know
you’re not afraid to pay the consequences for your decisions. You have
very strong ethics, and I’ve always been proud of you for them. It’s just
that sometimes your personal ethics don’t match my professional ones.
And that’s not something I can change.”

“I know,” sighed Lynne. “It sucks great big donkey balls.”

Janeway let out a startled snort of laughter. “That’s a new one.”

Lynne chuckled as well, and suddenly the tension in the room was
broken. “No, actually it’s a very old one. But apropos, don’t you think?”

“Yes. But let’s make sure I don’t pick up that particular idiom. I can’t
imagine what Chakotay would think if I popped that one out.”

Lynne waggled her eyebrows suggestively. “I can, and I think he’d be
wide awake for hours afterward.”
Early the next morning, Janeway strode through the doors of her ready room. She wrinkled her nose at the mess. Though she had very little memory of the hours she’d spent here, trying to hide from reality, the proof was before her. PADDs were scattered over every surface, and a glass on her coffee table held a telltale whiff of whiskey to remind her that she’d fallen to a brand new low of drinking while still technically on duty. She quickly disposed of the glass, not wanting to think about that, and straightened up the PADDs. Then she sat behind her terminal, determined to find out what she could about Lynne’s violation of the Temporal Prime Directive. Not that she could do anything about it at this point, but she had to know. Besides, she wanted a second chance at dealing with Lynne’s revelation of the night before—the guilt she felt for her knee-jerk reaction was weighing on her too heavily. A little distance from the event had given her enough objectivity to realize that both of them had been through an emotional wringer, and their feelings were barely under the surface. Any emotional reaction was likely to be out of proportion. Still, knowing the source of her reaction didn’t make her feel any better. She just hoped she could make up for it.

Her first searches, for any permutation, abbreviation or initials of the names John and Elizabeth Hamilton, came up empty. She drummed her fingers on the desk, thinking. All right, so Lynne’s parents hadn’t made it
into the history files. That didn’t mean Lynne hadn’t altered the timeline, just that if she had, it wasn’t apparent in that manner.

After a few more minutes of thought she entered a new search parameter. Her screen immediately filled with data.

As she read, her eyes widened.

~

The shift had seemed longer than usual, particularly given the congratulations Janeway had to suffer from the crew regarding Lynne’s reappearance. Though she’d long given up any hope of discretion, it still bothered her somewhat that her crew should know so much about her personal life. She was embarrassed by their knowledge of her earlier despair, and wanted nothing more than to just sweep the whole episode under the deck plating.

When the beta shift filed in, she wasted no time leaving the bridge. In her quarters she found another whiskey glass that needed to be disposed of, and dumped it in the replicator with an internal wince. As soon as it was gone, she punched up a light meal with a delay on the timer. Then she poured two glasses of red wine and left them to breathe while she changed clothes.

She didn’t have long to wait. By the time she’d returned to her living area and selected the appropriate music, her door chimed.

“Come,” she called, and smiled as Lynne walked in. “Hi, sweetheart,” she said, handing her a glass and kissing her at the same time.

“Hello yourself,” said Lynne. “You look wonderful.” Her gaze held a slightly questioning look, no doubt due to the summons she’d received that morning. But it wasn’t time yet.

“Thank you,” Janeway said, gesturing for her to sit at the table. “I feel wonderful. You’re here and not four hundred years away. Ready to eat?”

“Always.” Lynne cocked her head to one side. “I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

Ignoring the opening, Janeway brought the food to the table, and they enjoyed a quiet meal together. Once the dishes had been cleared and the wine glasses refilled, however, Lynne could stand it no longer.

“All right, what’s going on?”
Janeway almost laughed—she would have bet a week’s rations on Lynne’s inability to give her one second longer than the end of the meal.

“I’ve been doing some research on possible timeline alterations due to your message,” she said, and held up her hand as Lynne stiffened. “Don’t worry, I’m not angry and we’re not going to get into another discussion on situational ethics. But I did find something.”

“What?” Despite the reassurance, Lynne was obviously worried.

“Before I tell you that, I need you to tell me exactly what you said in that message.”

It took a few minutes while Lynne thought about it, but eventually she laid the whole message out for Janeway, who nodded encouragingly. When she was done, Janeway stood and held out her hand. “Come with me,” she said.

Looking utterly confused, Lynne took her hand and followed her to the desk. On the way over Janeway snagged a chair from the kitchen table, which she offered to her partner. Pulling up her own chair, she called up her search results from earlier in the day.

“I honestly can’t tell you if you altered the timeline or not, because even if you did, I’d think that what I’m about to show you has always been here.” She shook her head slightly at the mental morass temporal situations always caused. “But at this point, I think the whole question is moot as far as negative consequences are concerned. If this is really a result of your message, it has only had a positive effect as far as I can see. In fact, your message to your parents may have been part of this timeline all along.”

“You’ve totally lost me,” said Lynne.

“Sorry. I’ll try to explain. After the Third World War, the Earth governments were crippled, and funding for such luxuries as space exploration just wasn’t there. They were concentrating too much on rebuilding. Fortunately, a few private foundations picked up the slack, providing funding so that research could continue. By far the largest of these foundations, and one that was apparently unaffected by the war, was this one.” She zeroed in on a logo, and Lynne gasped.

The logo showed a name in block letters: THE HAMILTON FOUNDATION. Atop the letters were simple, stylized line drawings of a man and a woman, gazing upward at a field of stars.

“But…but that’s not…I mean they couldn’t…”
Janeway squeezed her hand. “What did you tell your parents to do when they wanted to see you again?” She knew the answer, having heard it minutes before, but she wanted Lynne to make the connection.

A stifled sob showed that her partner had indeed put it together. She looked at Janeway in wonder. “I told them to go outside at night and look up, because I’d be in the stars.”

“And they did.”

Lynne examined the logo again, then shook her head. “This doesn’t prove anything. There must be a zillion Hamiltons in the Federation. What makes you so sure this has anything to do with my parents? The logo could be a coincidence.”

“This is what makes me sure,” said Janeway, clicking on another screen. “The logo doesn’t show the Foundation’s full name, but all of their official documents do.” She indicated a press release in text form, which bore a slightly different header: the Lynne D. Hamilton Foundation. Hearing a sharp intake of breath behind her, she turned and looked into Lynne’s shocked face. “What’s your middle name?” she asked. When she had first found this, she’d been astonished to realize that she didn’t know. She wasn’t proud of that.

“Delilah,” said Lynne faintly. “It was my grandmother’s name. But I hated it; it was so old-fashioned, so I always just used my initial. But… Kathryn, are you sure this is me? Does it list my parents as founders?”

“No, but a lot of records were lost in the Third World War, not to mention the wars that came after. But the name and the logo, among other things, are very convincing. There’s more.”

“Jesus. Okay, tell me.”

“The Hamilton Foundation had one focus: to fund any promising research that might advance humankind’s march toward space. Their funding corpus was enormous, and they always hired the absolute best investment advisors. I think they might have had some good input there.” She glanced sideways at Lynne, who flushed but refused to take her eyes off the screen. “Over the years,” she continued, “the corpus grew to unbelievable proportions, and the Foundation was able to fund research that the government couldn’t dream of supporting. The Foundation has long outlived your parents. And it’s the reason we’re in space now.”

Lynne turned bewildered eyes toward her. “I don’t understand.”

Janeway switched the screen from the logo to a list of names. “Here’s a
list of the research programs and individual researchers that the Foundation funded. Take a look.” She pointed at one name partway down the list.

“Zefram Cochrane,” Lynne read aloud. “The man who invented the warp drive?”

“That’s the one. Zefram conducted his research at a time shortly after the war, when the government couldn’t even guarantee postal delivery. You don’t think Zefram himself could have afforded the equipment he used, did you? Or guaranteed its delivery? No, he had the brains but not the money. He was working from a Hamilton Foundation grant. Your parents’ foundation made the first warp drive possible.”

Lynne was speechless, but Janeway wasn’t done yet.

“Do you know where the Federation’s greatest theoretical minds are right now? The ones working on space propulsion technology?” Lynne shook her head as Janeway called up another screen. “It’s called the Theoretical Propulsion Group, or TPG for short. It’s a civilian think tank closely associated with Starfleet. The TPG has been responsible for nearly all of the major advances in warp technology over the last hundred years. And guess who funds them?” She pointed at the screen, which showed a breakdown of TPG funding sources. The Hamilton Foundation was the first on the list, giving the TPG more than sixty percent of its funding.

Lynne looked up from the screen, a lost expression on her face. “I can’t even take this in. How is this possible?”

“You made it possible. The Hamilton Foundation still exists, Lynne. Your parents’ legacy—for three hundred and seventy-five years. They took the advice you gave them and used it to create a means of funding space exploration research in perpetuity. They’re indirectly the reason that Voyager exists. They’re indirectly responsible for my career, and my father’s…” she trailed off, thinking about the expanding spiderweb of links that went on farther than she could see. If the Klingons had found Earth before Humans had discovered warp technology, would they now be a Klingon colony? What about the Romulans, or any other Federation enemies? Were the Hamiltons partially responsible for the fact that Earth was not only still independent, but the center of a powerful alliance of worlds? With a shake of her head, she brought herself back to the germane point.

“You said you couldn’t be there for your parents, so you did the best you could. Well, your parents knew they couldn’t be there for you, but
they did everything they could to make sure that somebody else was. They’re not the reason that *Voyager* was in the right place at the right time, but they *are* the reason that we had the technology to be out there. They were looking out for their daughter. And I think that logo is a message to you.”

She called the logo back on the screen. Lynne stared at it, then hunched over the desk and put her face in her hands, her shoulders shaking. Just as Janeway touched her back, a keening cry broke from her throat, and she began to weep in earnest. Janeway comforted her as best she could, knowing that her partner was utterly overwhelmed. She wondered if she should wait before sharing her last bit of news, but decided that there really was no good time. Might as well get it all over with at once.

At last Lynne straightened up, wiping tears off her face. “I don’t know what to say,” she whispered.

“You don’t need to say anything.” Janeway cupped her cheek. “But I do have one more thing to tell you.”

“Oh, god, there’s more?” Lynne leaned back in her chair and took in a shuddering breath. “Go ahead.”

Carefully, Janeway took both of Lynne’s hands in her own and looked into green eyes shimmering with tears. “The Hamilton Foundation is one of the five largest in the Federation. It’s a private foundation, and as the direct descendant of John and Elizabeth Hamilton—not to mention the woman for whom the Foundation is named—you’ll be in control of it if we return to the Alpha Quadrant. You should simply by virtue of your lineage, but I’d be very surprised if your parents haven’t installed some means of guaranteeing your acceptance by the Foundation Board.” She paused and took a breath. “I’d also be very surprised if your parents didn’t set up a private trust for you, which would probably reflect the same investment strategies as the Foundation itself. So unless I’m very wrong, you’re one of the richest and most powerful women in the Federation.”
Seven of Nine saw her as soon as she entered the mess hall. A tingle settled into her stomach, and she no longer needed to analyze it to recognize the emotions it signified—she was relieved and happy to see Lynne again. Her friend’s departure from the ship had been a source of considerable worry, and telling herself that she only wanted what was best for Lynne had not been an effective antidote.

After a detour to the counter to accept Neelix’s latest offering, she made her way through the tables, a second tingle traveling through her stomach when Lynne looked up and smiled. But when she arrived at the table, she had no words to express her feelings. This had become a common frustration for her—no one had warned her that her ability to feel, and to understand those feelings, would outstrip her ability to verbalize them.

“It is very good to see you,” she said, hating the insufficiency of her words. “Though I know you did not make your decision for my benefit, I’m still very happy that you chose to remain aboard Voyager. It would not have been the same without you.”

Lynne’s smile grew. “You mean it would have been quieter. You’d probably have gotten more work done in Astrometrics without me bothering you.”

“I mean it would have been lonelier,” corrected Seven.
The smile slipped, and for a moment Lynne seemed as much at a loss for words as Seven often was. “Well...thank you, that means a lot to me. And it’s great to see you, too.” She gestured at Seven’s tray. “Take a load off.”

Seven didn’t move except to tilt her implant toward Lynne. “This is another idiom?” she asked. An eye roll answered her.

“Sit down, Seven.”

She sat, filing the latest idiom away in her eidetic memory. It was a good thing her cranial implant could store an almost infinite amount of information, because she was taking up a good portion of that space with Lynne’s never ending supply of odd phrases.

She put a bite of food in her mouth, winced slightly, then chewed and swallowed quickly. “So,” she said. “What brings you back to our neck of the woods?”

Lynne had been cutting a small potato in half, but at this she dropped her fork and stared. Then she broke up laughing, and Seven congratulated herself on her proper use of the idiom.

“Okay, you got me on that one,” said Lynne, once she’d gotten control of herself again. “I keep forgetting about your memory.” She immediately put a hand up. “No, don’t. I didn’t mean to give you that opening.”

Seven shrugged her shoulders, another bit of non-verbal communication she’d learned by observation, and continued to eat. Lynne was watching with a wide smile on her face. “You know,” she said, “you’re one of the people I would have missed the most if I’d gone back.”

Seven swallowed and carefully placed her fork back on the plate. She was unprepared for such a statement and could not reference any appropriate idioms to answer, so she reverted to what was most comfortable. “Thank you. That is...good to know. I would have missed you as well.”

The tingle was back in her stomach, getting stronger as Lynne reached across the table to pat and then squeeze her arm. “What is that?” she asked.

“What’s what?”

Seven looked down at the hand on her arm.

“Oh. That’s non-verbal communication for, ‘You’re one of my best friends and I’m feeling very affectionate toward you right now.’”

Non-verbal communication was impressive in its efficiency. It could communicate a great deal very quickly, and once Seven had realized the
obvious advantages, she had set herself to learning it. The greatest difficulty she encountered was that for some odd reason, humans tended to imbue the same gesture with two or more meanings. After a few awkward misunderstandings, she’d learned to ask for the alternate meanings.

“Is that the sole communication for this action?”

As usual, Lynne took her question seriously and sat back, thinking. “No. If you were upset and I did that, it would mean, ‘I’m sorry you’re upset and I want to comfort you.’ And if you were hurt or sick, it would be a gesture of comfort as well.”

Seven understood immediately. “I have seen Kathryn communicate with sick or injured crew in this manner.” Gradually, she was becoming more accustomed to referring to the captain by her first name when alone with her or Lynne. It was definitely one of her more difficult adaptations.

“Yes, I’m sure you have. She’s good at that.”

Seven tilted her implant toward Lynne. “I am one of your best friends?”

“Absolutely. Didn’t you know that?”

“No.”

“My fault, then. I should have told you. You have been for some time now. There’s nobody like you and I’m honored to have you as my friend.”

Seven reached very deliberately across the table, patted Lynne’s arm, and then squeezed it. Inexplicably, Lynne’s eyes showed signs of imminent tears, and Seven withdrew. Had she misunderstood? “I apologize,” she said. “I did not mean to make you cry.”

Lynne caught her hand and drew it back, replacing it with a tremulous smile. “It’s okay. I’m just...a little emotional at the moment, and you caught me by surprise.” Patting her hand, she added, “Thank you for this.”

Physical contact was rare for Seven, and she enjoyed the sensation. Then she frowned as her memory replayed Lynne’s words.

“Why are you feeling emotional?”

Lynne shrugged. “It’s just been a long couple of days.”

“That may be truthful, but it is inexact. I would not have asked if I did not wish to know.”

“You know,” said Lynne in a tone of mild complaint, “between you, B’Elanna and Kathryn I don’t get away with anything at all.”

Seven slowly withdrew her hand and resumed her normal, erect
posture. “It was your choice to select Kathryn for a partner and me and B’Elanna as friends. If we do not let you ‘get away with anything,’ that is merely a consequence of your own decision making.” She accessed an appropriate idiom. “Deal with it.”

Lynne snorted and began laughing again. “God, Seven, I have never heard anything so funny as you using slang. It’s just wonderful. Please keep doing it.”

“I will. Now tell me what is troubling you.”

Sobering, Lynne looked at her chronometer. “I’ve got a reservation on the holodeck in about five minutes. Will you go for a walk with me?”

Seven knew this meant that Lynne was going to use one of the outdoor-themed programs to “think,” as she’d put it once. She had often told Seven that she thought better while moving, and she felt better moving in a natural environment.

“I am free for the next forty-three point six minutes,” she said.

“Great. Let’s go.”

Thirty minutes later, the two women sat on a grassy field in the sun, a light breeze ruffling their hair and carrying the sound of the distant waterfall visible on a high cliff. It was one of Lynne’s favorite programs. As they’d walked a wide trail up to this field, she’d told Seven the details of her time on Earth, followed by what Seven knew was an abbreviated version of her argument with Kathryn regarding the Temporal Prime Directive, and finally explained what she understood of the Hamilton Foundation and her association with it.

“So that’s it,” she said. “It’s just too much to take in, you know? I feel happy, and sad, and scared, and overwhelmed, all at once.”

Seven had no point of reference for this conversation. Emotions in general were not something she felt comfortable with, and facing so many simultaneously was positively intimidating. But Lynne was her friend, and in need of assistance. She began dissecting the conversation in her mind, pulling together similar threads and discarding details that seemed irrelevant.

“You are happy because you know your parents lived, and they took
action to facilitate human space exploration and eventually your rescue, correct?"

"Correct. And I'm so proud of them for what they did with that little head start I gave them. My god, Seven, they practically shoved humanity into space. My own parents!"

"And you are sad because of the choice you made to leave them behind?"

"Yes. But don't you ever say anything about that to Kathryn. She'll beat herself over the head with it, given half a chance, and I don't want her to feel guilty."

Seven paused for a moment, distracted by the visual image of the captain engaging in cranial self-flagellation. This was not compatible with her impression of the captain's likely behaviors, so she assumed it was another idiom. But now was not the time to ask about it.

"You are overwhelmed by the amount of information you've been given?"

"That's a good way of putting it. I guess I just need some time to process it."

Seven nodded. "Your emotional reaction is understandable, from what I have learned of human emotions and mental processing speed. The only reaction I do not understand is your fear. What are you afraid of?"

"I'm afraid of that damn Foundation," said Lynne.

This didn't clarify anything at all, and Seven approached it with her usual logic. "There is little reason at the moment to fear it. The probability that we will ever return to Federation space in our lifetimes is very low. The Foundation is not likely to ever affect you."

"Do you really believe that?" asked Lynne. "I mean, I know what the probabilities are, but they're just cold numbers. Do you really believe that Kathryn, or you, or B'Elanna, or someone else here won't figure out some way to speed up our return?"

Seven gave the question serious consideration. "No," she said at last. "I do not believe that. Given the unique abilities and determination of this crew, it is quite possible we may someday find a way to return sooner."

"Well, there you go."

Ignoring this response, Seven rephrased her original question. "Why do you fear the Foundation?"

Lynne looked toward the waterfall for some time without answering.
Seven waited, not the least bit bothered by the silence. Those crew members who felt compelled to fill a silence with their voices, regardless of whether they had anything meaningful to say, simply made her feel irritable and impatient. Lynne understood that verbal communication was only worthwhile when it actually communicated something. It was one of the things Seven appreciated most about her.

Eventually Lynne met her eyes again. “Kathryn says I’m probably one of the richest and most powerful women in the Federation. I don’t know how to deal with that. I’ve never been either, you know? I’ve spent my life—until last year, anyway—living on a small amount of money and doing a job that I knew I was very good at. Now suddenly there’s this huge expectation. If we get back to the Federation, I’m going to have to take over some giant foundation, wielding the sort of power that some planetary leaders don’t even have. I don’t know how to handle those kinds of finances. I don’t know what to do with the power. I’m just a mountaineer and an outdoor instructor, what the hell do I know about leading a foundation?”

Seven thought she had detected the issue. She might not understand the more nuanced human emotions, but fear of failure was something she understood very well. Her determination not to fail Kathryn had driven her to some of her greatest efforts in the past.

“Are you convinced that you must take over the Foundation? And if you are, do you believe that the Foundation would accept you as its lead officer? Perhaps this is a nonissue.”

“I asked Kathryn the same thing; about being accepted, I mean. She’s convinced that my parents would have foreseen this and put something in place to guarantee my acceptance. And I’m inclined to think she’s right. Which means that my parents would have expected me to take over, so I owe it to them to try. Which brings me right back to my original problem. I’m terrified.”

Seven considered this. She personally believed that Lynne could do anything she wished to do, but how could she convince her friend of that?

“Eight months ago,” she said, “what did you know about space travel, tactical maneuvers, or hand-to-hand combat?”

“Nothing,” said Lynne automatically.

“What do you know about those topics now?”
Lynne stared. After a long pause, she said, “Did I just get slammed by Borg logic?”

“Yes.”

There was no sound but the waterfall for several seconds.

“Fine,” said Lynne at last. “You’re right. If it comes to that, I’ll learn what I need to know. I’ll just treat it like a mountain, I guess.”

“Clarify,” said Seven. “Please,” she added a beat too late. Some things still didn’t come naturally, despite her practice.

Lynne grinned at her. “Nice catch.”

Seven arched an eyebrow and waited.

“Okay. What I mean is, when you climb a mountain, you can’t look at the mountain as a single unit. You have to break it down into a bunch of smaller units, and plan your strategy for each of those smaller units in turn. You still need to have an overall goal or direction in mind, but you can’t be thinking about the summit while you’re still getting up and over the first steep pitch at the bottom. In fact, it can be dangerous if you do, because you can psyche yourself out—” She looked at Seven and corrected herself. “I mean, you can convince yourself that you can’t make it. And if you do that, you’re done. Might as well pack up and go home. You have to focus on what’s in front of you at the time. And after a while, one unit at a time, you find yourself at the summit. That’s how I’ve climbed every mountain, even the ones I’ve done before.”

Seven nodded. “Your analogy is apropos. That is exactly what I was suggesting. If you view your current status as head of the Hamilton Foundation in the same way you view a mountain to be climbed, I believe you will succeed.”

“Huh. What do you know. I feel a lot better.” Lynne seemed a little amazed by this, and gave Seven a dazzling grin. “Thanks, Seven. That really helped.”

“I am glad I could assist.” And truthfully, she was. A few months ago she would never have considered partaking in a conversation of this sort—helping someone come to terms with their emotions. She would rather have realigned all of the plasma relays with her optical implant deactivated. But now, she found a sense of satisfaction in her success. She had aided her friend, and it felt...good.

Another thought occurred to her. Did other people feel this sense of satisfaction when they aided a friend? Today she had been prepared to ask
Lynne for assistance on a research topic, but Lynne’s distress had made her own desire seem unimportant. Now she wondered if her friend might actually benefit from being asked to assist. She ran this question through her cortical implant and in less than one second tallied seven separate occasions when Lynne had pronounced herself “happy to help.”

Seven was always ready to test a hypothesis.

“I am hoping that you might be able to assist me in turn,” she said, carefully watching Lynne’s face for a reaction. Her hypothesis received an immediate increase in credibility when Lynne smiled.

“Sure, Seven. Anything. What do you need?”

“You are aware that in the past I researched human sexual relations, culminating in a date.”

“Yeeesss.” Lynne drew the word out, her brows contracting.

“I found that research almost entirely lacking, and abandoned the project. Since observing you and Kathryn together, however, I have determined to renew my research. I believe that the primary cause of failure in my initial attempt was my decision to use the Doctor as a guide.”

“Yeah, that’d do it.” Lynne rolled her eyes.

“You do not like the Doctor?” asked Seven in some surprise.

“No, no, that’s not it. I, uh, just don’t think he’d be the best choice for a project like that.”

“Why?”

“Because…well, please don’t take this the wrong way because I know you like him—but he’s not Human, he doesn’t understand the intangibles and subtleties of Human emotions, and yet he considers himself superior to Humans in every way. That’s just about the worst possible combination you could get in someone who’s supposed to guide you through Human interactions.”

“I am not offended by your assessment. Rather, I agree with it. This is precisely why I have decided that you should be my guide in this project.”

“Right. Good, I’m glad you’re not—what?”

“I have decided that you should be my guide in this project,” Seven repeated patiently.

Lynne’s mouth dropped open.

“You should close your mouth before you catch flies,” said Seven, remembering a piece of advice she’d once heard Kathryn give a crewman.

“Okay, that’s it, I’m in the twilight zone,” said Lynne. “I can’t believe
you just said that.”

“You asked me to continue using idioms.”

“That’s not what I meant! You want me to help you study Human sexuality?”

“Yes.” Seven thought privately that Lynne was not exercising her usual intelligence at the moment. She did not normally ask questions that had already been answered.

Lynne clapped both hands to her face and slowly drew them down. After a few moments of silence, she looked back up. “Okay, one rock pitch at a time, right? What’s your summit?”

“Pardon?”

Pinching the bridge of her nose in an unconscious imitation of her partner, Lynne said, “What is the end goal of your research?”

“Ah. I wish to experience the full range of Human sexuality, including non-procreative intercourse and the type of emotional intimacy that you share with Kathryn.”

An expulsion of air escaped Lynne’s lungs, accompanied by a subvocalization that sounded something like “hoo boy.” She shook her head. “All right. I’ll do my best, Seven, but this is a tall order. I’m not going to guarantee success. And I’m going to have to think about how to do it.”

“The Doctor used the holodeck,” offered Seven.

“The Doctor is a computer program. That’s fine for him. I don’t have the slightest idea of how to program the holodeck.”

“But I do,” said Seven. “I would simply require you to advise me in how the programming should manifest itself.”

“You mean, I tell you what a character should say and do?”

Seven nodded, pleased. It appeared that Lynne’s normal intelligence was reasserting itself.

“Hmm.” Lynne looked thoughtful. “That might actually work. To a point.”

“I am glad to hear that.” Seven checked her internal chronometer and stood. “I must return to my duties. Thank you for agreeing to assist me.”

Lynne rose to her feet as well. “I’ll walk you out. Computer, end program.” As they departed the grid-lined holodeck, she said, “I gotta admit, you took my mind right off my own problems.”

Seven spent a few microseconds translating the slang and then smiled. It was so satisfying when a hypothesis was proven correct.
“I’ll never work.”

“Clarify.”

“Yeah, B’Elanna, why not?”

B’Elanna looked at her two friends and sighed. She was going to get sucked into this harebrained scheme, she just knew it. Here she was, enjoying a nice dinner, when these two had to come over and throw a spanner in her plans for a quiet evening.

“It won’t work,” she said, “because Seven can’t do the programming. Part of dating is dealing with the unknown. If she knows how a character is going to act or react, she’s not going to learn anything.”

Lynne and Seven looked at each other.

“I hate to say it,” said Lynne, “but she’s got a point. And it’s not even on her head.”

“Hey!”

Lynne produced an innocent smile that didn’t fool B’Elanna one bit.

“Then what is the solution?” asked Seven.

Lynne’s smile turned predatory, and B’Elanna groaned. She could see it coming, had seen it coming, and still had no means of escape.

Seven turned to her. “B’Elanna. You are the most qualified programmer after myself. You would be an excellent choice for this undertaking. Will you do it?”
“No! I mean, I’m not really a good choice for this, Seven. Sure, I could do the programming, but this requires a little more, uh, sensitivity than I have.”

“Bullshit,” said Lynne succinctly. “Don’t give us that. You’re plenty sensitive enough when you want to be. Kathryn told me about the chat you had with her when Seven and I were in the brig. And I seem to recall a few occasions when you and I had some pretty sensitive conversation. Try again, B’Elanna, because that one’s not gonna fly.”

Seven cocked her eyebrow—or at least, the implant where her eyebrow had been—at Lynne. “Not going to fly?” she asked.

“Meaning it won’t work,” replied Lynne in a stage whisper. She turned back to B’Elanna and raised her own eyebrow.

B’Elanna looked back and forth at the two expectant faces. Her agile mind ran through several possible scenarios, none of which allowed her to get out of this with any grace whatsoever. She spent a brief moment hoping for a red alert, and when nothing happened, gave in as she’d known she would.

“Fine, I’ll help. But if things don’t turn out the way you hope, don’t blame me. You’re the ones who browbeat me into it.”

“Fair enough,” announced Lynne. “When do you want to start, Seven?”

“I see no reason to wait. All three of us are free at the moment. Shall we start now?”

B’Elanna groaned again, but her friends ignored her.

“Now’s good,” said Lynne. She pulled two chairs out from the table that B’Elanna had previously been enjoying all by herself, sat down, and aimed a cheerful grin at B’Elanna. Seven signaled to Neelix and sat next to her. In a moment Neelix bustled over, an expectant look on his furry face.

“What can I do for you ladies? The hash is particularly good today, and I can recommend the brownies. Pity about the lack of nuts in our stores, but I think the walla root makes an excellent substitute. You should definitely try it.” He looked at them hopefully.

Lynne’s wince did not go unnoticed by B’Elanna. “Thanks, Neelix,” she said. “Lynne loves brownies; why don’t you bring a big square over for her?” Ignoring the toxic look Lynne shot her, she continued, “I’ll just have a glass of white wine from the replicator. Seven?”

“Nothing for me, thank you,” said Seven.
“I’ll have a glass of water, too,” said Lynne.

Neelix nodded and bustled off.

B’Elanna looked at Seven. “When did you stop saying, ‘I do not require nutrition at this time’?”

“Stardate 53166.2,” said Seven, who as usual was nothing if not exact. “That is when I realized that I was the only person to use that response, and that such responses are at least partially responsible for the way other crewmembers view me. I have been attempting to modify my speech during social occasions. You, Lynne and Kathryn have been my most frequently-used models.”

“You’ve been modeling yourself after me?” B’Elanna wasn’t sure how she felt about that.

Seven’s raised brow left no doubt as to her feelings, however. “I did not model myself after you. I modeled my speech patterns after several individuals, of which you were one.”

“Oh. Well, you could do worse, you know.”

“No doubt I could if I made a serious attempt to do so.”

Lynne’s snort drew B’Elanna’s attention from the ghost of a smile on Seven’s face. “You’re the one teaching her this disrespect, aren’t you?” she accused, but inwardly she was charmed. It was so amazing to see Seven’s face relax into that tiny smile she produced these days. Why, the woman was almost becoming Human.

“Believe me, Seven never needed any training in how to be disrespectful.” Lynne’s face fell as Neelix set a brownie in front of her. “Uh, thanks, Neelix.”

“You’re most welcome! Try a bit now, and tell me what you think!” Neelix put B’Elanna’s wine down and stood back expectantly.

Flashing a you will die soon look at B’Elanna, Lynne broke off a piece, took a deep breath, and placed it in her mouth. After chewing for a moment, she paused, then resumed her chewing at a slower rate. With a stoic expression, she swallowed.

“Well, what do you think?” Neelix asked.

“Um… it’s a very unusual flavor, Neelix. Not like anything I’ve had before.”

Neelix beamed. “There’s plenty more where that came from! Just let me know if you want seconds.”
“Oh no—I mean, no thanks. I’m trying to watch my weight, you know?”

Neelix eyed Lynne, whose constant workouts kept her in near-perfect physical condition. “If you say so,” he said as he left.

Raising her wine glass, B’Elanna offered a toast. “To Fossil and her developing diplomatic skills.”

“Oh, shut up,” said Lynne, right before picking up her water glass and draining it. She thunked the empty glass down, wiped her mouth a little more vigorously than usual, and threw the napkin on the table. “Yuck. And you know I hate that name.”

B’Elanna laughed. “Serves you right,” she said. “Revenge is so sweet.”

Lynne pushed the plate holding the remains of her brownie as far away from her as she could get it. “Not in this case it isn’t.”

“Ladies,” said Seven in a perfect imitation of Janeway. “Shall we get started?”

Two heads swiveled to stare at her.

“You know,” said B’Elanna, “she’s getting positively scary.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Lynne. “When I started teaching her my idioms, I never gave any consideration to how far she’d go with it. Now she’s picking up speech patterns all over the place.”

Seven sighed. “That is inaccurate as usual. I have specific parameters for acceptable speech patterns, having no wish to adopt an inferior manner of speaking. B’Elanna should consider herself fortunate; her speech fell outside my parameters. However, I also gave consideration to whether or not the candidate was a friend, and it was this that enabled her to become one of my models.”

“Careful, Borg,” said B’Elanna. “Push me any further and I’ll teach you all about inferior speech.”

Lynne laughed. “You’re my hero, B’Elanna. I thought I was pretty good at cussing until I met you. Now I know I’m just a rank amateur.”

B’Elanna made a mock bow, and then both women turned back to Seven, who was waiting patiently.

“Okay, we’re ready,” said Lynne. B’Elanna nodded her agreement.

Seven fixed them both with an icy stare, then her face softened and that tiny smile appeared. “If you’re sure,” she said. At the nodding of two heads, she pulled a PADD out and placed it on the table.

“I have recorded the characteristics that I find attractive in others. I
then cross-referenced those traits with various crew members who possess one or more of them. This seemed to be a practical starting point for the project.”

Lynne took the PADD, scanned it briefly, then handed it to B’Elanna. “Point number one. Dating has nothing to do with practicality. Your Borg logic is not going to be applicable here.”

“She’s right,” said B’Elanna as she replaced the PADD on the table a moment later. “Dating is about getting to know someone and seeing if they do anything for you.”

“Clarify. Please.”

“She means you just have to talk to your dates, spend time with them, and determine whether any of them attract you,” said Lynne.

“And how will I know if they attract me? How did you know with Captain Janeway?”

“Oh, yes, how did you know?” asked B’Elanna, crossing her arms over her chest as she turned to Lynne. This was bound to be juicy.

The question took Lynne by surprise. “Um…well, I guess I’d have to say it was when I realized that the sound of her voice put butterflies in my stomach. And that I was starting to count the hours until I could see her again. And then one night at dinner, I noticed that she had the most perfect set of—” She stopped and turned a bright shade of red, much to B’Elanna’s delight.

“Teeth?” she offered, enjoying the play of colors over her friend’s face.

“I was not aware that dentition was taken into consideration when determining a date’s attractiveness,” said Seven.

“Oh, it certainly is,” said Lynne, glaring at B’Elanna, “but the point is that you’ll know you’re attracted to someone when you suddenly start seeing them in a different way. For instance, I’d been having dinner with Kathryn for several weeks before I suddenly noticed that she had the most amazing eyes, and that they change color depending on what she’s wearing. If I hadn’t been attracted to her, it’s likely her eyes would never have caught my attention, or if they had, I would have observed them and then dismissed them. Does that make sense?”

“No,” said Seven. “I observe those details upon first meeting an individual. Instant assessment of an individual’s characteristics is programmed into all Borg. It aids us in determining the potential usefulness of each incoming drone.”
B’Elanna winced. It always made her uncomfortable when Seven referred to her Borg past so casually. It never seemed to bother Lynne, however, which she ascribed to the fact that Lynne had never met any fully assimilated Borg. She prayed that her friend never did.

“Okay, let’s try this again,” Lynne said. “When you do your initial assessment of an individual, what do you make note of?”

“Physical characteristics—eye color, which can indicate light tolerance; thickness of hair, which in some species indicates cold tolerance; overall health, length of bones, muscle structure, intelligence, fat to weight ratio—”

“All right,” Lynne interrupted. “I get the picture. But when you do that sort of assessment, have you ever looked at a person’s eyes and thought they were beautiful?”

Seven paused. “No. Beauty is defined differently by different species. It is irrelevant to the Borg.”

B’Elanna thought it was high time to get away from the Borg references. “Stop thinking like a Borg, Seven. Think like the Human you are. Think about the Human definitions of beauty. Have you ever looked at anyone’s eyes—say, anyone on this ship—and thought that they were a nice color?”

Seven looked from her to Lynne and back again. “No, I have not. But now that we are discussing it, I observe that your eyes are brown, and Lynne’s are a shade of green that is not common among Humans. Many species define beautiful characteristics by their rarity, so I believe that Lynne’s eyes would be considered beautiful. Since brown is the most common eye color amongHumans, your eyes are not as likely to be considered attractive.”

“Thanks a lot,” said B’Elanna. Damn if Seven’s bluntness didn’t get her sometimes. Common eye color!

Lynne shot her a smirk. “Seven, you’re looking at beauty from an empirical perspective. But it’s really very subjective. If you were attracted to B’Elanna, you would probably note my eye color and its empirical attractiveness, but you’d look at B’Elanna’s eyes...” Here she made a point of staring into B’Elanna’s eyes at close range, and dropped her voice into a sultry register. “And you’d notice how rich and dark they are, and how you could just drown in their depths. You’d want to get closer to them; you’d want the right to be able to stare into them, instead of
sneaking looks now and then…” Now she drew even closer to B’Elanna, who was beginning to feel a little hot under the collar. “And eventually you’d want to find out what those eyes looked like in the depths of passion, whether they got darker during orgasm, and whether she’d close them when you kissed her—”

B’Elanna’s eyes flew wide open when Lynne kissed her right on the mouth. She was so startled that it took her a few seconds to push her friend away. “What the hell was that?” she demanded.

“No,” observed Seven, “she did not close her eyes when you kissed her.”

“No, she didn’t, did she?” Lynne’s grin was demonic. “But you’re right, honey, revenge is sweet.”

“You bitch.” She couldn’t believe that Lynne had gotten her like that.

“I’m wounded. You didn’t enjoy our kiss?”

“Apparently not nearly as much as you did, honey.”

Lynne threw her head back and laughed, stopping just long enough to point and gasp, “God, you should have seen your face!” before going off into gales of laughter again. Almost against her will, B’Elanna began to chuckle, and was soon laughing as well. Seven looked on with a bemused expression and patiently waited for them to calm down. Eventually they did, and Lynne explained between occasional chuckles.

“There really was a point to that, Seven. I mean, besides getting B’Elanna’s goat.” She raised an arm to block B’Elanna’s punch to her shoulder, flashing her a merry look before turning back to Seven. “When you’re attracted to someone, empirical definitions don’t matter. For instance, freckles might not be considered attractive, but if you meet someone you really like and he or she has freckles, you might suddenly decide that freckles are really pretty. It’s not the beauty that fuels the attraction, it’s the attraction that defines beauty to you.”

“She’s right,” said B’Elanna. “I always disliked self-centered, smug people until I fell in love with Lynne, but now I think those are really attractive traits.” This time she was the one to block the blow.

“Oh, stop it,” said Lynne. “We’re trying to help Seven, and you’re just confusing the issue.”

“No,” said Seven, “I believe I understand what you are both trying to convey. Clearly it is not something I will fully understand until I experience such an attraction.”
Two heads nodded in unison.

“Which returns us to the start of this project. How can we create a situation where I might experience this?”

B’Elanna looked at Lynne for any ideas, finding Lynne looking back at her. “We could send her on a blind date,” she suggested.

“Geez, B’Elanna, did any of your blind dates actually work out?”

“Yes. Didn’t yours?”

“God no, they were all unmitigated disasters and I made my friends swear they would never try it again. Think we could do better for Seven?”

“Are you kidding? We have the holodeck. I know we can.”

She still couldn’t believe she’d gotten sucked into this, but damn if she wasn’t going to do the best job she could. This was her friend, and B’Elanna had learned that for all her icy exterior, Seven was really a warm-hearted person. She deserved someone to share herself with. The problem was, who on board could possibly match her for intelligence and strength of will? The only people she could think of were herself, Lynne, Janeway and Tuvok. Three of those were already paired, and she’d never really been into women.

Well, they’d start with the first part of the engine and build it as they went. Hopefully the necessary pieces would show up when they were ready for them.

Speaking of engines…

“So, Seven, one question before we start. Which fuels your engines, men or women?”

Seven cocked her head to one side. “You are referring to which gender I find most attractive?” At B’Elanna’s nod, she continued, “I do not believe that gender is relevant. Did you not just explain to me that it is the person inside who fuels the perception of beauty?”

“Well, yes, but usually a person is…prewired, so to speak, to prefer one or the other.”

“Ah.” Seven considered. “I do not think at this time that I can make a determination, having never been attracted to either one. In addition, utilizing both genders will double the possibilities of finding a suitable mate, will it not?”

“In theory, yes,” said Lynne. “Though you may find it doesn’t actually work that way. But we’ll go with both to begin with.”
Seven nodded. “Thank you,” she said. “I appreciate your willingness to help me with this project.”

Lynne reached over and rested her hand on Seven’s arm. “We’re not helping you with your project, Seven. We’re just helping you.”

After a pause, Seven said, “I understand.” And there was that tiny smile again.

B’Elanna watched their interaction in some amazement. Who would have thought, just a few months ago, that anyone besides Janeway could reach out to touch Seven—and she would actually smile?

If that sort of miracle could happen, maybe they had a fighting chance with this.
Seven approached the holodeck doors with a feeling of trepidation. She hated being nervous; she had never feared anything as a Borg and didn’t enjoy the sensation now. She also didn’t enjoy having no control over her circumstances, but Lynne and B’Elanna had steadfastly refused to let her see anything they were doing.

It had been a week since the discussion in the mess hall, and her friends had locked themselves in the holodeck programming room every available off-shift moment. Any question Seven asked was simply answered with, “You’ll see when it’s time.” She had learned to hate those words, and wondered with increasing frequency whether involving her friends had been the best of ideas. In the meantime, she had researched blind dates in the ship’s library, finding a large amount of literature devoted to various negative aspects of this social custom. This had not been reassuring.

Then she had received the summons: she was to appear in the holodeck at 1700, wearing “casual clothes for a temperate day.” She had spent some time in front of the computer attempting to determine the definition of “casual clothes,” refusing on principle to ask anyone’s advice. Her attire was the one factor over which she had any control at all. Now, standing in front of the holodeck doors, she knew for certain that she should never have instigated this project. Unfortunately retreat was not
an option, so with a deep breath and a conscious straightening of her shoulders, she stepped inside.

She was on a city sidewalk, busy with pedestrians and lined with small shops. At the end of the street, a high snow-capped mountain range towered over the city. The sky was a cloudless blue, the air temperature twenty-six degrees Celsius. A slight breeze blew from the direction of the mountains, carrying with it the scent of some species of flower. Seven recognized B’Elanna’s touch—very few engineers programmed in details so fine as scents on a breeze.

She turned in place, observing her surroundings, and heard her name called. Lynne was sitting at a table outside a small restaurant, dressed in shorts and a sleeveless shirt and sipping from a glass. Seven began to wonder if her own light sundress might be too formal after all, but Lynne didn’t let her wonder long.

“Hi, Seven! You look great! Have a seat.”

She sat on one of the two empty chairs at the table and looked around for the occupant of the third.

“He’s not here yet,” said Lynne. “Would you like something to drink?”

“I do not require...no, thank you, nothing for me.” Seven’s speech tended to revert to Borg formality when she was uncomfortable.

“Nervous?”

“No.”

Lynne’s smile said she knew otherwise.

“Yes, I’m nervous,” admitted Seven. “I have never before engaged in an activity where I was unable to research and prepare in advance. I do not like the feeling of being unprepared.”

“I understand. Really, I do,” Lynne added when Seven raised a brow. “I’ve been on blind dates before, and so has just about everyone. And the one thing they all have in common is that you never know what you’re in for.”

“How reassuring to know that my feelings of trepidation are normal,” said Seven.

Lynne’s eyes danced. “Wow, your sarcasm is really coming along.”

“May we initiate the exercise now?” Seven’s ability to make “small talk” had dwindled to zero, and she just wanted to complete this part of the project as quickly as possible.

“Not yet. I want to tell you a few things about your date first. You
didn’t really think I’d let you go into this totally blind, did you?” She saw Seven’s expression and winced. “Well, I’m sorry about that. I guess we could have shared a few details with you, but I didn’t want you stressing over what you knew. I wanted to be here with you from start to finish.”

“You will be here, physically, during this date?”

“Yes. Not all blind dates are one-on-one. Sometimes the friend who makes the introductions sticks around to make conversation flow more smoothly, because she’s the only one who knows both parties. So that’s what I’m doing today. I’ll be here the whole time.”

Suddenly the date project seemed more interesting and less intimidating. “Thank you. I appreciate your presence.”

“You’re welcome. And I promise to do my level best to make this work for you. Now, shall I tell you a bit about your date?”

“Yes, please. You may start with our current location.”

Lynne leaned back in her chair. “You’re in my old stomping grounds in Boulder, Colorado. This restaurant is a popular jump-off spot for climbing trips.”

“‘Jump-off spot’?”

“A place where people meet and load their gear before starting a trip. I’ve been to this restaurant a zillion times. And the man you’re meeting is one of my climbing buddies.”

“He is like you, then.”

“Oh, no, not at all. I’ve been climbing all my life, but Paul—that’s his name, Paul Hosta—he just started a few years ago. He was married, but his wife died of cancer. He always told her he’d like to learn to climb, but never got around to it. Before she died she asked him, as a favor to her, to make the time and learn. So he did. And he’s gotten really good at it, too, good enough for me to trust him on my rope.

“I chose Paul because he understands personal loss. And I think that for anyone to have the slightest chance of making a connection with you, they have to understand that. Your separation from the Borg was an enormous personal loss, and it has a lot to do with who you are now.”

Seven regarded her in some confusion. “So he will talk about the loss of his wife, and expect me to discuss being severed from the Collective?”

“I don’t think so. He may never even mention his wife today, and he probably won’t expect you to talk about your separation from the Borg. Remember, Seven, he knows nothing about you except what I’ve told him.
—I mean, programmed into him. Just like you will only know what I’m telling you now. The point is that you will both be learning about each other at the same time.”

“Very well,” said Seven doubtfully. “Please share any other relevant personal details.”

“Okay. First of all, he’s a professor of mathematics at CU Boulder—I mean, the University of Colorado. B’Elanna downloaded modern mathematical concepts into him, so he won’t be stuck in twenty-first century math. You might be surprised at what you and he can talk about. He’s a very nice man, very detail-oriented, loyal to a fault, and quite generous. He’s pretty serious, though, which is why he and I were never more than friends. I need someone with a wicked sense of humor.” She winked. “Your humor is still developing, so I don’t know if his seriousness will be a plus or minus to you. You’ll have to let me know. Does that help?”

“Yes. It is more than I knew about Lieutenant Chapman before my last date.”

Lynne’s expression grew dark. “That was a fiasco, and if you don’t mind my saying so, the Doctor handled it all wrong. He put you in unfamiliar clothing, in an unfamiliar setting, and then left you to figure out for yourself what to do. You should never have been put in that situation for your very first experience.”

“You have also put me in unfamiliar clothing and an unfamiliar setting,” Seven pointed out.

“Well, it’s true that the setting is unfamiliar, but I had you pick out your own clothing, and I’m not leaving you to figure out for yourself what to do. I’m going to be here every step of the way.” Lynne leaned forward, her eyes intent. “If you feel uncomfortable at any point in this, let me know. We’ll stop it right there, and then we’ll talk about why you feel uncomfortable and see if we can fix it. There’s no pressure, Seven. Paul isn’t real; you can’t hurt him or his feelings, and he’s not going to tell everyone on the ship how your date went. This is just practice.”

Seven considered this, and realized that she was currently more relaxed than she had been at the start of her last date. Lynne was treating her role of mentor in a very different manner than the Doctor had, and she appreciated the difference. It would just be so much more efficient, she thought with an inward sigh, if she could simply assimilate all of this social information instead of learning it in this slow manner. Sometimes
she really missed being Borg. Of course, if she were still Borg there would be no dating to consider. She immediately dismissed this circular line of thinking, reminded herself that she’d asked for Lynne’s help, and focused on the project.

“I’m ready,” she announced.

“Good. One more thing: I had B’Elanna program Paul with current knowledge of Federation and non-Federation species, so he knows about the Borg. It wouldn’t be realistic for you to date someone who could look at you and have no idea of what you used to be. So he may ask you some questions. But Paul’s a good guy; I don’t think he’d be obnoxious about it. I just wanted to give you fair warning.”

Seven was puzzled by this—since her separation from the Collective, she’d never known anyone other than Lynne who didn’t judge her by her Borg past, so the concept of not being judged in that manner had not occurred to her. She said nothing, however, merely nodding her head and waiting.

Lynne looked down the street and said, “Computer, begin program Paul Hosta.”

Seven couldn’t detect the addition of a person to the crowd moving up and down the sidewalk, but within six seconds she separated her target from the others. A tall, blond man, approximately 186 centimeters and 100 kilograms, was walking toward their table and looking directly at them. When he saw her looking back, he smiled and raised a hand. She imitated his gesture and critically assessed him as he drew near their table. Light brown eyes, no facial hair, tanned and weathered skin indicating time spent outdoors. His body structure denoted consistent physical exercise. She determined that by Human standards, he would be considered attractive.

When he arrived at their table, Lynne put a hand under Seven’s elbow and stood up, tugging as she rose. Seven stood as well, waiting with some discomfort for the formalities of the initial meeting.

Lynne stepped around the table and walked right into the man’s arms, hugging him tightly as she said, “It’s so good to see you!” But there were tears in her eyes when she pulled back, and she shook her head at Seven, who had been about to ask why. “Paul, I’d like you to meet one of my best friends and a very special woman, Seven of Nine. Seven, this is Paul Hosta, a good friend and climbing partner, and a really bad poker player.”
“I’m not bad; you’re just lucky,” said Paul, flashing a toothy grin at Lynne. He leaned across the table, holding his hand out to Seven. “Seven, it’s good to meet you. I’ve heard nothing but good things about you.”

Seven shook his hand. “Thank you. I have also been informed of your positive characteristics.”

He laughed, which Seven found odd. Her statement had not been meant to amuse.

Lynne reclaimed her chair and Seven followed her lead, while Paul settled himself across from the two of them. Before Seven could even think of what she was supposed to do next, Lynne was saying, “I haven’t eaten yet, have you, Paul?”

“No, and I’ve been thinking about a calzone all day,” he said.

Lynne turned to Seven. “This place is famous for their incredible calzone. I would personally walk ten kilometers for one. I know you’re not hungry, but would you like to try some of mine? I can order it with an extra plate.”

Seven nodded. “Yes, that would be acceptable.”

Paul signaled a waiter over. “Shall we share a bottle of merlot?”

“Red wine,” whispered Lynne, as she leaned across Seven to reach for the water jug.

“Thank you, but I will have water instead,” Seven said.

“Seven can’t drink,” said Lynne. “She has a reaction to alcohol. But I’ll happily share a bottle with you.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Paul said. “You’re missing out on one of the finer things in life.”

“I disagree. I have seen many things in life that I consider much finer than wine.”

“Such as?”

Seven briefly catalogued several thousand items, then picked one that she thought her dinner companion might understand.

“Such as a warp field equation that works perfectly in the first iteration.”

His face lit up and he smiled widely. “Yes, Lynne mentioned that you work in astrophysics. You obviously know your way around theoretical mathematics—that’s great! I’m sure Lynne told you that I’m a math professor at UC; I don’t often get a chance to talk shop with anyone besides my coworkers. And none of them are nearly as beautiful as you.”

Present Tension

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“Oh, that was ham handed,” said Lynne, throwing her balled-up napkin across the table at him. He caught the napkin and tossed it back, smiling in a manner that Seven thought indicated minor embarrassment.

“Sorry,” he said. “I tend to stick my foot in it when I’m nervous, and I’ve been nervous about meeting you. Though I’ve been looking forward to it very much,” he hastened to add.

“I have also been looking forward to meeting you,” Seven answered. It wasn’t a lie, since “looking forward” did not necessarily imply that pleasurable expectation was involved. But Paul’s admission of nervousness had eased Seven’s own sense of trepidation, and she was able to summon up a smile. “And I find it…refreshing that you commented on my mind first and my physical appearance second.”

Paul’s face turned red, and Seven took a moment to acknowledge B’Elanna’s superior programming skills. Not many holodeck characters showed the depth of detail that this one did.

Lynne laughed. “Well, Paul, you certainly deserved that one.”

They were interrupted by the waiter, who took their order efficiently and left them to their conversation. Seven decided it was time to take command of the situation, and utilized a conversational line she’d stored from her research.

“Paul, tell me about your work at the university.”

He obliged, talking at great length about the students he taught, the research he was involved in, and the joy he had felt the previous year when he’d finally come up with the proof for a mathematical theorem that had stymied him for several months. Seven found herself listening with interest. Paul had an analytical mind, and although she knew she could have found his proof within days rather than the months it took him, still it was…pleasant to hear someone speak enthusiastically about the type of problem-solving that she herself enjoyed.

At his urging, she described some of the solutions she’d devised in her time on Voyager, and he listened carefully, asking intelligent questions and demonstrating a keen understanding, if not of her work specifically, then of the underlying mathematical principles. Their food came, was eaten (the sampling she had of Lynne’s calzone was quite palatable, another example of B’Elanna’s thoroughness) and their plates cleared, and still she and Paul conversed easily. Having never had this type of pleasant conversation with anyone other than Captain Janeway, Lynne,
or sometimes B’Elanna, Seven was enjoying the novelty of the experience. The time passed without her being consciously aware of it, so it was with some surprise that she watched Paul rise from his chair and smile at her.

“Seven, this has been a true pleasure. Honestly, I can’t remember when I last enjoyed shop talk more. I hate to leave, but I’ve got to get back to the university and finish up some papers before tomorrow. Can I call you later?”

For a moment Seven was stymied by the request, since obviously a holodeck character could not contact her. Then she remembered that this question was common at the end of a successful blind date, indicating that Paul wished to date again. She trusted that B’Elanna would have programmed Paul to not ask for her contact information, and responded in the affirmative.

Paul smiled widely. “Great! I look forward to it.” He reached out and shook her hand, then turned to Lynne, who had been uncharacteristically quiet through their conversation. “Sorry, I know this must have been boring as hell for you.”

“I’m not sorry,” said Lynne, getting up and going around the table to hug him. “You and Seven had a good time, and that’s what I was here for. You take care of yourself, okay?”

“I will,” he promised. With a final wave at Seven, he turned and walked away, soon vanishing into the crowd of pedestrians. Lynne stood looking after him for a few moments, then resumed her seat and downed the last of her wine in one long gulp.

“Are you all right?” asked Seven.

Lynne laughed shortly. “I’m supposed to be asking you how you feel right now.”

“Perhaps. But I am not the one who had tears in her eyes earlier this afternoon, nor am I the one currently showing signs of sorrow.”

“Can’t get anything past you.” She stared down the sidewalk in the direction Paul had gone. “B’Elanna’s a hell of a programmer, isn’t she?”

“She is excellent. Her attention to detail is unusual and admirable. But that did not answer my question.”

With a small sigh, Lynne turned back. “It’s just that I didn’t expect the holodeck version of Paul to be so…Paul. I mean, it’s him. Really him, not just some two-dimensional character. Even with the little differences we
put in to modernize him, he’s still my friend, and it really threw me for a loop to meet him here.”

“Were you not involved in his programming?”

“Yes and no. I mean, I told B’Elanna all about him, and I designed his physical appearance with her help, but B’Elanna did most of the work and I never actually saw the walking, talking end result until now. It was a bit of a shock to see someone I’ve left behind, and have to tell myself that he’s not real.”

“I believe I understand,” said Seven. “I am sorry that this was so difficult for you.”

“Don’t be,” said Lynne, straightening up and smiling brightly. “It’s not a big deal, it was my own damned idea, and besides, this was about you. So tell me, what did you think?”

Seven knew she was being diverted, but she also knew from experience that Lynne would not talk about her emotions until she was ready, if ever. So she answered the question with due consideration. “It was a far more pleasant experience than I expected. Paul is a kind man, and his thought processes are logical, ordered and analytical. I enjoyed our conversation. I noticed, however, that you did not take part.”

“What, are you kidding? I’m not the one who understands algorithmic warp field equations, or whatever the hell you two were talking about. I just thought it was great fun watching you relax as the date went on. You did really well, Seven. If this had been a real date, Paul would be calling you tonight or tomorrow to set up your next one.”

She probably should not feel this pleased, thought Seven. After all, this was just a holographic date, not a successful ship defense or something truly important. But coming after the dismal failure of her first date, success on this one was very satisfying indeed.

“I did notice,” she said, “that he did not ask me about my implants or my time with the Borg.”

“Not surprising. Paul is very polite, and he would probably consider it ill-mannered to comment on your implants on a first date. It would certainly come up later, should you choose to continue dating him. And as for your time with the Borg, he’s probably fascinated by the concept but afraid to ask about it for fear of causing you pain.”

“Why would speaking of it cause me pain?”

“Because you lost your connection. Humans tend to put their own
emotions onto others. Paul lost his wife and that hurt him very deeply. He’s going to assume that losing your connection to the Borg hurt you just as much, if not more. So he’s not going to want to ask you about it, no matter how curious he might be. He’ll likely wait for you to bring it up yourself.”

Seven processed this new information, decided that it could be useful, and filed it away. With this date successfully completed and analyzed, she was now ready to continue with the project. “What will happen next?”

“That’s entirely up to you. What do you want to have happen next? Do you want to see him again?”

“I don’t know. While enjoyable, our conversation was in actuality quite limited in range. I am unsure if we will be as compatible when we attempt to discuss other topics.”

“That’s the whole point of dating, Seven. To figure out whether you’re compatible. So your choice is to try Paul for a second date, and see if you can talk about something besides math, or to try someone new. B’Elanna and I have a second person lined up for you, so we’re ready for whichever choice you make.”

“Who is the second person?” Seven wished to have all of her options clear before making her decision.

“Thought you might ask.” Lynne flashed a grin. “Her name is Sandra, and she’s another climbing friend of mine. Incredibly strong, both mentally and physically. Not a math whiz at all, but she’s ex-military, so you’ll have something in common.”

“But I have never been in the military.”

“God, Seven, you’ve been in the biggest military organization that ever existed. You don’t think the Borg are military in structure?”

Seven considered this, then nodded her head. “I understand how you can make that comparison. In reality, the Borg do not have a military command structure, but the concept of each person being trained to do a specific task, and working together as a team, is similar. And we certainly do attack and defend with precision.”

“Do you still consider yourself Borg?” asked Lynne curiously.

Seven hesitated. She knew that most of the crew would expect her to answer in an immediate negative, but with Lynne she took a moment to deliberate. “Most of the time I do not. But sometimes, yes. Why do you ask?”
“Because just now you said ‘we’ when referring to the Borg.”
Reviewing the conversation in her eidetic memory, Seven confirmed Lynne's statement. “Does this bother you?”
“No, not at all. You’re my friend no matter how you perceive yourself. I was just wondering, that’s all. So, what will it be? A second date with Paul or a first with Sandra?”
“I wish to meet Sandra,” Seven decided. “Do we have sufficient holodeck time available to do it now?”
“Amazingly enough,” said Lynne, “I just happened to reserve the holodeck time. Shall we?”
Seven nodded, and turned to look down the sidewalk as Lynne called out, “Computer, begin program Sandra Kernston.”
THE BRIDGE WAS QUIET. Janeway listened to the murmurings of the crew acquiring and confirming information, and the reassuring sounds of various sensors and boards doing their jobs. No alarms. No problems. Nothing to do.

She was bored out of her mind.

A desert planet took up most of the main viewer, turning slowly beneath them. It was not a planet she would normally have looked at twice; it had a pre-warp society on the southern continent and not much to offer in general. Not even shore leave, since the planet’s weather and ecology was not conducive to the enjoyment of most of her crew. She thought Tuvok might appreciate the baking heat, but he was the only one. However, the northern continent boasted some impressive rock formations containing three of the raw materials on B’Elanna’s List, which is why they were in orbit now, planning an away team.

The List, as Janeway called it, was a running tally B’Elanna kept of resources and parts they needed, wanted, or would be wise to stockpile. Whenever the opportunity arose to acquire any of those things, they took it. Life in the Delta Quadrant was too uncertain to do otherwise.

The away team hadn’t yet been assembled. At the moment, she and Chakotay were determining who its members would be.
Janeway decided on one of them. “I’m going.”

Her first officer looked up from his PADD. “Captain, is that really necessary?” he said quietly.

One thing she could count on with Chakotay, he never questioned her within the hearing of the crew. She thought again. Well, hardly ever. “That depends. Is it necessary to have a captain whose mind is happily occupied and stimulated by a new experience such as rock climbing, as opposed to going stark raving space happy from boredom? I think yes.”

“Captain,” said Chakotay, and she braced herself for the Speech. “It is not appropriate for the captain of a ship to put herself at unnecessary risk just to keep from being bored. There is no reason for you to be on that planet; B’Elanna and the other engineers can handle the resource extraction just fine.”

“I didn’t say they couldn’t. I just said I was going with them.”

“The planet’s fauna are large, carnivorous and predatory. You and I just picked six members of security to accompany the away team for protection. This is not a good choice for your mental holiday. Would you want Lynne down there?”

Janeway’s head snapped up and she fixed her first officer with a deadly glare. “You just stepped onto a very thin line.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, “but I wouldn’t be doing my job if I didn’t protect you. I understand your need to get off this ship now and again, and I promise that when we come to a planet that is not a security risk, I’ll be first in line to wave goodbye to you. But this planet isn’t it.”

Janeway glared at him for a bit longer, then sighed and turned back to the main viewer. “Your point is taken. I’ll wait this one out. But I’m taking leave the first chance I get, and you’re watching the shop for me.”

“You got it,” he said, relief showing through his voice.

The resource extraction went flawlessly, and the away team returned without a hitch. It was a very long and dull six hours for Janeway, however, and she had a lot of time to think while sitting in her bridge chair, chin on fist. The main topic on her mind today was the same one that had occupied her off and on for some time now. When should
she ask Lynne to move in with her? She’d been ready to, right before Q sent them to twenty-first century Earth, but that experience had been so difficult for her partner that she hadn’t wanted to add any pressure or stress to her life. It had been two months since then, and Lynne seemed to have recovered. Of course, Lynne was very good at keeping things inside, try as Janeway might to pull them out. She often wished she could crack those walls and make Lynne let go of her grief, safe in her arms, but it wasn’t something she wanted to force. Someday, hopefully, Lynne would come to her. In the meantime, she had to move forward.

She’d been over the pros and cons thirty times already, and had slowly gotten over her own fear that it was too soon. She was ready. Lynne meant everything to her, and she was tired of dividing their time between two sets of quarters. It would be so much easier to combine them. She knew it would also be harder at first, and that was part of the reason she’d held back in the beginning. But the more time she spent with Lynne, the more certain she was that they would easily sail through the initial difficulties. And what a reward at the end! To have Lynne be there when she got off shift, to hold her or be held by her every night...

“Captain?”

Janeway came back to the present with a jolt, and realized that Chakotay was holding a PADD out to her. Shit. How many times has he already called me?

She took the PADD, relieved to see no sign of teasing in his eyes. He hadn’t caught her daydreaming, then.

After reviewing the file, she signed it, handed it back, and immediately resumed her line of thinking. Lynne seemed to be happy, the ship was traveling through a peaceful sector, and frankly, she was afraid to wait any longer. She had nearly lost her lover once already, and she couldn’t help but think that Lynne’s decision at Earth might have been made more easily if she’d spoken up earlier. No more waiting for the right time, she decided. There might never be one, the way things happened on Voyager. She had to make the time, and she was making it now. Tonight. Tonight she’d do it.
Janeway checked her quarters one last time. Candles, wine, music—everything looked good. She smiled, feeling confident that she could include herself in the assessment. She’d taken special care with her appearance this evening, and was looking forward to Lynne’s reaction to her choice of attire. What there was of it, that is. The soft, silken dress clung to her and left very little to the imagination, and she hadn’t bothered with anything underneath it. If all went according to plan, extra clothing would just get in the way.

The door chimed, and her knees nearly buckled under a sudden wave of nervousness. She’d never done this before, and although she was as ready as she’d ever be, still the thought of laying herself so open to rejection was frightening.

Taking a deep breath, she went to the door and keyed it open.

“Hi, love,” said Lynne as she stepped in. “What’s up? Your message said—” She stopped in her tracks and stared. The heat in her gaze caused a corresponding warmth to move through Janeway’s body. Already she was well repaid for the effort she’d put into her appearance.

“Jesus, you’re beautiful,” Lynne whispered. She moved closer and ran a light finger under the thin strap holding up Janeway’s dress. Bending down, she replaced the finger with warm lips, then nibbled across the exposed collarbone. When she straightened up again, Janeway’s knees were wobbly from a far more pleasant cause than fear.

“Never mind,” murmured Lynne. “I’m not going to ask any questions at all. I’m just going to enjoy this. God, Kathryn, sometimes you’re so beautiful it makes my chest hurt.”

Janeway looked up at the love shining out of those green eyes, and wondered how she had ever gotten so lucky as to find this treasure floating in the Delta Quadrant. She reached up and curled her hand around the back of Lynne’s neck, drawing her down for a kiss that started out hot and only gained in temperature as it went on. When they parted, both were breathing heavily.

“I love you.” Janeway’s voice was barely more than a whisper.

“I love you, too.”

“I know. You gave up everything for me.”

“Only the things I could live without,” said Lynne. “I can’t live without you.”
Janeway was startled at the sudden prick of tears in her eyes. “I wanted to ask you a question.” She laughed shakily. “Actually, I thought I’d get you drunk on cheap wine first, and maybe seduce you, but we seem to have skipped that part.”

Lynne ran a light finger across her collarbone, pausing to dip down and brush it lightly across the tops of her breasts. “You seduced me as soon as you put this on. Whatever the question, the answer is yes if this is my reward.”

Janeway closed her eyes, wanting nothing more than to let Lynne take her wherever she wanted to go. Maybe she should put off their conversation for just an hour or two longer. Opening her eyes again, she caught Lynne’s gaze and said, “This is your reward regardless of your answer. Do you want it now?”

“God, yes,” breathed Lynne. She looked around the room, spotted the wine glasses, and pulled Janeway over to the table with her. “Let’s put that cheap wine to good use.” Handing one glass to Janeway, she held her own up. “To a past I’ll never forget, and a future I never dreamed of.”

Janeway nearly lost her composure at that, but held it together with an effort. She raised her glass and said, “To unexpected treasures and great gifts.” They clinked their glasses together and drank. When Janeway put hers down, Lynne picked it up again and moved both glasses to the side. Gently she backed her lover up against the table, then leaned down for a heated kiss while her hands brushed Janeway’s dress straps off her shoulders.

Janeway dropped her head back, exposing her throat to those marvelous, warm lips. Lynne knew all of the right spots for nibbles, licks and an occasional nip. By the time those lips grazed the top of her breast, she was so aroused that she was having a difficult time standing. Somehow Lynne seemed to sense it, and the next thing she knew, she was being lifted onto the table. Lynne helped her slip her arms through the straps and slowly peeled the dress down to her waist. For long moments she simply stared, in obvious and very gratifying appreciation. Then she reached over, picked up one of the wine glasses and took a sip. Locking eyes with her lover, she dipped her finger in the wine and brought it, with a single drop hanging from its tip, to Janeway’s mouth. Without breaking their gaze, Janeway drew the finger into her mouth and sucked it clean.
She smiled when Lynne closed her eyes, knowing her lover was momentarily overwhelmed. She never had a problem letting Lynne take the lead in their lovemaking, because they both knew that she could usually take back control in a moment. Both of them liked to lead, and both of them lost control with each other on a regular basis. The constant give-and-take was one of the things she enjoyed most about their lovemaking.

Lynne slowly pulled her finger from Janeway’s mouth, dipped it back into the wine, and then deliberately touched the next droplet onto an exposed nipple. This time it was Janeway who closed her eyes at the cool sensation, but they flew open again when warm lips enveloped her nipple. “Oh, god,” she whispered, as she felt Lynne’s tongue swirling around her sensitized skin. A light kiss was planted on the nipple as Lynne pulled away, and then a cool droplet landed on her other nipple, followed instantly by the warmth of Lynne’s mouth. The gentle play continued for some time, with Lynne apparently happy to keep doing it forever. At last she pulled back and waited for Janeway to look up and meet her eyes. Without breaking eye contact, Lynne took a mouthful of the wine, leaned down, and wrapped her lips around a nipple. Wine dribbled down Janeway’s breast, but most of it stayed in Lynne’s mouth, along with a now supersensitive nipple that was surrounded first by cool wine, then by a warm tongue. As Lynne pulled away she kept her lips and teeth tight around the nipple, stretching it out to a point just shy of painful and holding it for a moment before letting it go. Taking another mouthful of wine, she turned her attention to the other breast, and Janeway was soon writhing under the assault. Lynne knew just how rough she liked it, and had become skilled at taking her right to the edge without ever going too far.

After what seemed like hours of the most exquisite sensations focusing on her breasts, Janeway felt a hand sliding her dress up her thighs. The new touch brought her eyes open, and she reached out to pull Lynne’s head up for a kiss. But Lynne pulled back, gently took her hands away, and placed them back on the table. With another gentle bite to Janeway’s throat, she murmured, “No. This is my reward, remember?”

“I know. I didn’t think that meant I couldn’t have my reward, too. I want to touch you.”

“Later,” breathed Lynne, kissing her just beneath her jawline. “I just want to focus on you; I don’t want to think about anything else.”
They both watched as Lynne’s hand continued its journey beneath the dress. When her fingers reached the top of Janeway’s thigh, she let them barely brush the curls there, taking advantage of her lover’s sensitized skin. Sure enough, Janeway jumped at the touch, then jumped again when Lynne resumed her caresses. As that area desensitized and her involuntary jerks lessened, Lynne’s touch moved to her folds, barely making contact as she grazed over the skin. Janeway jumped once again, and heard a low chuckle.

“I love it when you do that,” said Lynne.

Janeway growled, low in her throat. She was ready to get on with it; there was only so much teasing she could take. Apparently her message was received; Lynne placed a hand in the center of her chest and gently but firmly pushed her down. As the hard, cool surface of the table met her naked shoulders, Janeway thought briefly about the picture she must be presenting at the moment. Her thoughts were distracted, however, when Lynne took both of her hands and positioned them above her head. “Keep them there,” she whispered, before taking her mouth in a devastating kiss. Janeway used all of her remaining will power to keep from burying her hands in Lynne’s hair while their tongues met. Without breaking the kiss, Lynne cupped a breast with one hand and ran the other down Janeway’s throat, between her breasts, and down her stomach to her thigh. Pushing Janeway’s legs apart, she brushed her fingers back up her inner thighs, caressed the swollen clitoris, then slid down to slowly enter her. The instant feeling of fullness told Janeway that Lynne was using two fingers, and she thrust her hips up, pushing herself against Lynne’s hand. The pressure was an exquisite relief after the relentless buildup, and she groaned with pleasure.

Lynne broke the kiss and pulled back, looking at her lover with hooded eyes. “Do you know how incredibly sexy you look right now?” she asked, pushing her fingers further in.

Janeway clenched her fists and hoped the question was rhetorical, because she was incapable of answering. She looked into deep green eyes, then closed her own as Lynne slowly pulled her fingers back and thrust them in again. “God,” she said, barely recognizing her own voice.

Lynne’s lips brushed one ear and she shivered at the low, sultry tones as her lover said, “Funny how religious you get at times like this. Tell me, Kathryn, how do you want it? Fast and hard?” She pulled her fingers
nearly out and then pushed them back in, so firmly that Janeway’s entire body moved. “Or slow and gentle?” Now the fingers curled and moved at a tortuously slow pace, and Lynne added a very light thumb caress to her clitoris.


That low chuckle curled around her again, and Lynne kept up the slow pace, lowering her head and kissing her way along Janeway’s torso before finally arriving at a breast. When she took the nipple in her mouth, Janeway cried out and arched up, blindly seeking to increase that pressure any way she could. Lynne pulled her head back, stretching out the nipple and effectively locking Janeway into her arched position. She knew from experience that if she let her body relax and lower, Lynne wouldn’t let go. The only way to keep that incredible sensation from turning into pain was to stay right where she was. With her hands over her head and her body locked into an arch, she was totally under Lynne’s control. The knowledge only increased her arousal, and she groaned again. As if she’d been waiting for the cue, Lynne pulled all the way out—but before Janeway could express her displeasure, she felt the fingers reenter, and knew that a third had been added. Now Lynne changed her tempo, thrusting faster and more powerfully, causing Janeway’s body to move with each stroke. The thumb strokes to her clitoris increased in pressure as well, and the combined assault, both mental and physical, soon pushed her over the edge. She thought her back was already arched as high as it could go, but when the orgasm hit she went up even higher, crying out before shuddering and collapsing back on the table. Somewhere in all that Lynne had let go of her nipple and was now nuzzling her throat and jaw, murmuring endearments as Janeway gasped for air.

While she was still recovering, Janeway heard Lynne’s voice close in her ear. “Don’t go anywhere, love. I’m not finished with you yet.” She heard a chair move across the floor, and then felt hands on her hips, pulling her back to the edge of the table. Her feet were lifted up and placed on the arms of the chair, and warm lips were soon nuzzling her inner thighs. She rolled her head from side to side, unable to summon the energy to protest. God, she didn’t have another orgasm in her; that last one had taken everything she had.

But slowly, Lynne worked her back up. By the time she felt a tongue
sliding across her clitoris, her hips were already moving. Lynne was playing the game she loved so well, pulling her head back and using a maddeningly light touch, no matter how hard Janeway tried to increase the pressure. Finally Janeway gave up, letting her body go limp. A moment later fingers entered her as Lynne wrapped her lips around her clitoris and began moving her tongue across it in short, sharp strokes. Instantly Janeway’s hips were grinding, and she nearly splintered the edge of the table with her bare hands as she held on, willing the orgasm to hit and simultaneously not wanting it to end. The intense sensations built up and up, until her back was arched once more and every muscle in her body went rigid as the orgasm roared through her. She trembled and collapsed back onto the table, utterly spent. Dimly she felt herself gathered up in loving arms, then lifted off the table and over to the couch, where she was gently settled on the soft surface. She swallowed and tried to speak, but her voice wasn’t working.

“Shh, just rest,” said Lynne, caressing her face.

By now her vision was clearing, enough to see the big smile on Lynne’s face. She narrowed her eyes at her partner. “What?” she croaked.

“Oh, nothing.” Lynne’s smile got even wider. “Just that I’m thinking we need to install better soundproofing in your walls. That was some scream.”

“I did not scream.”

“Ah, my mistake. That must have been me, then.” Lynne’s eyes sparkled and she leaned forward to kiss Janeway on the jaw.

Janeway closed her eyes and floated for a few moments, then opened them again. “I really screamed?”

“You really did. I’ve never been so proud.” Now Lynne was chuckling, and if Janeway had had any energy left she would have swatted her infuriating partner.

“So why am I on the couch?” she asked instead. “Aren’t you supposed to carry me to bed after such a virtuoso performance?”

Lynne didn’t rise to the bait. “You may be lighter than me, love, but you’re not that light. You’ve got a lot of muscle packed onto that petite frame.” Lynne ran her hands down Janeway’s arms and sides. “Besides, I didn’t spend all that time relaxing you only to have you tense up when I dropped you on the floor.”
“I’m relaxed, all right.” Janeway’s eyes slid shut, and she wanted nothing more than to sleep. She knew she shouldn’t; she still hadn’t talked to Lynne yet, but after all she couldn’t ask a question like that while she was in this condition. No, she’d rather be a little more in control of her faculties, and either she needed to be dressed or Lynne needed to be naked. Her eyes closed again and she was already half asleep when gentle lips touched hers, and Lynne’s voice whispered in her ear.

“Go to sleep, love. I’ll be here when you wake up.”

But when Janeway woke up, it was to an empty room and the annoying chirp of her communicator.

“Bridge to Captain Janeway.”

She sat up, pushing away the blanket that Lynne must have draped over her, and stumbled over to her desk while holding her dress up with one hand. Picking up the communicator, she activated it and growled, “Go ahead.”

“Captain, I’m sorry to disturb you.” It was Harry Kim. “Sensors have detected an ion storm heading our way. It’s a big one. Really big, and moving fast.”

“I’ll be right there.” Cursing to herself, Janeway stripped off her dress and strode into her bedroom. Lynne was there, sleeping on top of the covers fully clothed. She took a precious few seconds to watch her lover sleep, the sight causing a happy ache in her chest. Then she touched her shoulder.

“Lynne.”

Lynne’s eyes opened immediately. She smiled, but it slipped as she observed Janeway’s stiff bearing. “What is it?”

“Ion storm coming in. We haven’t had one since you’ve been on board, have we?”

“No, but I’ve read about them.”

“Then you know how dangerous they can be. And this is a big one. I’m sorry, Lynne, I had better plans for the rest of our night than this. But I have to go.”

Lynne nodded. “I’m sure I’ll be called in, too.” She rose up, wrapped her arms around Janeway, and squeezed. “But don’t be sorry,” she said as she pulled back. “I had a great evening.”
Janeway leaned forward to kiss her and then reluctantly stood up. “So did I. But I owe you now, so keep that in mind.”

“I won’t forget, don’t worry.”

Then Janeway was stepping into the hated but very efficient sonic shower, and her mind cleared itself of everything but preparations for the oncoming storm.
“REPORT,” said Janeway as she strode onto the bridge. Harry jumped out of the captain’s chair with a look of relief on his face.

“According to sensors,” he said as he moved to his console, “the storm is 1.3 light years in diameter and moving toward us at warp seven.”

Janeway stood behind him and checked the readings. They weren’t good. The storm was moving too fast; they didn’t have time to go around it. They could outrun it—if she wanted to backtrack the wrong way for several days or even weeks, and stress her engines in the process. There was no telling how long the storm might last.

“How long before it hits?” she asked.

“About forty minutes now.”

She nodded and stepped away, making her decision in the time it took to walk back to her command chair. Activating the ship’s comm in her console, she spoke in a calm voice. “Yellow alert. Senior staff to the bridge. All hands, report to your stations. Secure all stations and prepare for ion storm impact in thirty-five minutes.”

At Harry’s quizzical look, she said, “That way they’ll definitely be ready. Always tell people they have slightly less time than they actually do, unless it’s critical.” She narrowed her eyes and added, “That advice excludes me, of course.”

“Of course!” Harry said hastily.
Janeway smothered a smile and turned back to the main viewer. Harry’s earnestness made him so much fun to tease.

Within five minutes the remaining senior staff appeared on the bridge, spreading to their positions and calmly assembling information on the coming storm and the ship’s preparedness. Janeway received instant answers to both her questions and her orders. Preparations were going smoothly, and in this brief moment of calm before the storm hit, she sat back and took a moment to appreciate how her bridge crew had grown in the last six years. Harry was still youthful and earnest, but he had matured into a fine bridge officer, calm in an emergency and very skilled at his job. Tom Paris had, for the most part, smoothed out the rocky road he’d been traveling for most of his life; seeming to find a peace and contentment in the Delta Quadrant that had eluded him at home. She wouldn’t want anyone else at the helm in a crunch. Tuvok, of course, hadn’t changed at all, except perhaps to become slightly more tolerant in his interactions with Voyager’s highly unusual crew. And then there was Chakotay. He was solid, dependable, and predictable. She felt confident having him at her back, but had to admit to herself that he hadn’t lived up to her initially high expectations of a Maquis captain. Chakotay lacked the creativity and the initiative that made a good captain a great one. He was always careful, always mindful of his responsibility to the ship. Which was as it should be…but. She shook her head. A captain couldn’t always be careful. Sooner or later, you had to take a chance. So far, the only time she’d seen Chakotay really take a chance was when he was pursuing personal vengeance against Seska. Still, his solidness was often a good complement to her own risk-taking tendencies. They made a good team.

She brought herself back to the moment and studied her console. Five minutes, and the crew would be expecting impact now. She activated the comm.

“This is Captain Janeway. Preparations are complete; well done, everyone. Voyager is pointed into the ion storm, which will lessen the impact, but it’s still going to be a rough ride. Impact in five minutes.”

She sat back in her chair and watched the main viewer, which no longer showed any stars at all, just a vast, swirling storm headed straight for them. Bracing herself, she tightened her grip on the armrests and sent a thought to her beloved ship. *Hang in there, old friend. You’ve seen worse, haven’t you? You’ll see us through this.*
As if in answer, Voyager shuddered with the impact of the storm’s initial pressure wave. The bow rode up alarmingly, the inertial dampeners scrambling to keep up. Then the bow dropped down and an arrhythmic rocking and bucking set in, punishing both ship and personnel as anything not secured flew through the air and impacted the ceiling, wall or floor. Staff who had no stable chairs to use were clinging to handles and poles that had been designed for this purpose. Still, it was impossible to avoid bumps and bruises, and the longer the storm lasted, the more difficult it was to continue holding on. To lose one’s hold could mean far worse than bruises.

For over an hour the crew held on, and the strain was showing. Janeway was luckier than most, able to brace herself in her chair, but after this much time her muscles were trembling with the effort. She spared a rueful thought for the battle harnesses that had been suggested, several years ago, as an option for the bridge and critical crew. The idea was good, but the harnesses had never been a high enough priority to actually move into the design stage. As soon as this storm was over and they’d repaired any damage, she was going to have a talk with B’Elanna about those priorities.

She was receiving regular updates from Tom, Harry, Tuvok, B’Elanna and the Doctor. They’d had several ruptured bulkheads, a lot of electrical and gel pack damage, a scattering of broken bones and one very serious head injury, and B’Elanna was beginning to sound stressed about the engines. If this storm lasted much longer, a very real possibility existed that Voyager’s engines would not be able to maintain their heading—they were already well past overheating. If they lost the engines, she wouldn’t need to worry about prioritizing battle harnesses, because there’d be no ship to install them on.

The storm lasted another interminable fifteen minutes before sensors reported a lessening of the ionic disturbances. Five minutes later, the constant shuddering and bucking ended, and an eerie silence enveloped the ship, broken only by the insistent sound of various alarms beeping for attention. Janeway slumped back in her chair in relief, her muscles so strained that she could barely lift a finger. But there was no time to relax. She needed to see what the worst of the damage was, and the first concern was the engines. They’d been running too hot for too long, and
she knew there would be no good news there. Forcing her aching body to move, she sat up again and hit her comm badge.

“Janeway to Engineering.”

“Torres here.”

“B’Elanna, what’s the damage?” She didn’t have to say more. They’d been working together long enough for B’Elanna to know that she wasn’t asking about gel packs or electronics.

“Well, we still have engines, Captain. But the operating temps compromised the magnetic clamps, so we have no warp drive at the moment. I’m starting on repairs now, and I think we’re going to find a lot more broken or compromised parts as we tear into the engines. But I can’t report on that until we get started.”

“The engines are our highest priority, B’Elanna. I want a full report once you’ve assessed the damage. If we need to, we’ll pull staff for you.”

“Understood. Torres out.”

Janeway opened the next link. “Janeway to sickbay.” She sighed, knowing that her life had just turned into a never-ending series of damage reports, repairs, and priority assessments. She spared a wistful thought for her interrupted evening with Lynne, and then turned her attention to the Doctor’s rundown of injuries. It was going to be a long night.

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Four days later, Janeway woke up in her quarters and stretched, enjoying the luxurious feeling of actually being well rested. She’d been working non-stop since the storm, catching an hour or two of sleep when she could. For the first two days she’d put herself at B’Elanna’s disposal, knocking the rust off her engineering rating and pitching in wherever she was needed. Then it was back to the bridge and her ready room, overseeing other repairs and compiling a depressingly long list of supplies they needed, both to complete repairs and to replenish their stores of gear, components and raw materials. Harry and Seven were now on task, searching for a likely planet that had what they needed and, hopefully, a star-faring culture willing to sell or trade.

In the meantime, she had earned a break. And if she wasn’t mistaken, so had Lynne. She hadn’t seen her partner since the storm interrupted her carefully planned evening, but she’d checked on her now and again,
enough to know that Lynne had worked herself so hard that Tuvok had sent her to her quarters the previous night.

After a leisurely morning spent sipping coffee and updating herself on the ship’s status, she dressed and made her way to Lynne’s quarters. When the chime brought no response, she checked the computer for Lynne’s location and found that she was inside, probably still asleep. Janeway overrode the lock and let herself in. She and Lynne had long ago authorized each other for entry to their quarters, but rarely made use of the privilege.

Walking through the quiet, darkened room, she stopped in the doorway of Lynne’s bedroom and watched the still form sleeping on one side of the bed. Half of the bed was perfectly smooth, a sign of Lynne’s exhaustion—she hadn’t moved during the entire night. Stepping back into the living room, Janeway quietly checked the computer and learned that Lynne had given the lights out order ten hours ago. She smiled to herself. Lynne should be rested by now; perhaps she ought to wake her up before she slept too long? And then maybe she could tire her out again.

Shucking her boots, she padded back into the bedroom and slowly, carefully climbed onto the bed, straddling her lover. Lynne was nude and had, as usual, pushed the covers down to her waist. She was lying on her side, but it took only a gentle nudge to get her to roll over on her back. For several minutes Janeway indulged herself in simply watching her sleep. Her hair spilled over the pillow in glorious disarray, and her features were relaxed in sleep as they never were when she was awake. Janeway stared at the peaceful face, wondering if Lynne would ever let her truly share the burden she carried. It was always hard to get her lover to admit feelings of pain or loss. The twin topics of Lynne’s decision at Earth and her parents’ Foundation had hardly been touched on since the day after her return, and Janeway was almost certain that she was still grieving. Yet any attempt to bring up the subject was almost invariably brushed off. Only once had Lynne given any sort of response, and that was just to say that her meditations with Tuvok were helping. Otherwise, Janeway’s efforts to deal with the issue were often followed by a round of lovemaking that effectively put the concerns right out of her head.

She narrowed her eyes at that thought. For the first time, it occurred to her that Lynne was using sex to avoid emotion. Was it subconscious, or intentional? She studied her partner’s sharp features, wishing she could
see into the mind behind them; wishing that Lynne would open her mind and emotions as much as she had opened her heart. She gave that thought some consideration and had to wonder: was she withholding herself as much as Lynne? Was she truly sharing herself, or did she just think she was? Ruefully she admitted that she was probably just as guilty. Why else would it have taken her so long to ask Lynne to move in?

Reaching out to caress Lynne’s face, she whispered, “Someday, sweetheart, I hope you’ll let me in all the way. I really am trying to do the same for you.” She leaned down and kissed her cheek, then nibbled a line down her throat to a soft breast. It fascinated her how the nipple responded to her lips and tongue without Lynne’s awareness. Such a strange thing, she thought, the way our bodies react without our knowledge or consent. After bringing one nipple to an alert and hardened state, she switched her attentions to the other while gently squeezing the first between finger and thumb.

Lynne stirred, and Janeway glanced up to see tension returning to her face. She sat up and ran the palms of both hands along Lynne’s sides, bringing them back over to cup both breasts and lightly pinch the nipples.

Lynne’s eyes opened, and she looked at Janeway in dazed confusion.

“Kathryn? What…” Her eyes closed again as Janeway’s fingers tightened, and her back arched slightly. “What are you doing here? What time is it?”

Janeway leaned forward, kissed her on the side of the jaw and then moved to her ear to whisper, “Too many questions. Just relax.” A sleepy groan was her answer. Janeway returned her attention to Lynne’s breasts, enjoying the almost illicit thrill of playing with her lover’s body when she wasn’t mentally capable of responding.

After a few minutes, Lynne stirred again and wrapped her arms around Janeway’s back. Her eyes opened, this time much clearer.

“Is this my wake-up call?” she asked, smiling.

Janeway studied her face, saying nothing. Lynne’s smile faltered. “Kathryn? Is everything all right?”

Janeway didn’t want the thrill to end. She realized, looking at Lynne’s now fully-aware and worried expression, that she wanted total control this time.

“No, everything is not all right,” she said, taking Lynne’s arms and pulling them away from her back. “You will not touch me, do you
understand?” She slid Lynne’s hands under her pillow, the action bringing their faces a hairsbreadth apart. Lynne’s eyes widened in comprehension, then narrowed again. Janeway could practically see the wheels turning as her lover decided whether or not she would play the game. She threw a little more fuel on the fire, nipping at Lynne’s lower lip once and then again, harder. Raising her head she said, “I owe you, remember? And I’ve had four days to think about how to pay that debt.”

Their eyes locked and for a moment she thought Lynne would turn her down. But then her lover nodded once, nostrils flaring. “I’m yours,” she said.

The simple words sent a bolt of heat straight to Janeway’s groin, and she leaned forward to deliver a bruising kiss. Lynne gave as good as she got, and Janeway reveled in it for a few seconds before remembering that this wasn’t allowed. Abruptly she broke it off, sitting up while tightening her grip on Lynne’s wrists.

“No,” she said. “I told you, you will not touch me. That includes your tongue, so don’t try it. Touch me and I leave. Say anything to me unless it’s an answer to my question or command, and I leave. Move any part of your body that I haven’t given you permission to move, and I leave. Do you understand?”

Lynne’s eyes bore into hers, and Janeway could easily read the turmoil of a strong will forcing itself to submit to another. She knew that turmoil well, since she felt it every time Lynne played this game with her. They didn’t do this often; both of them had to be in just the right mood for it to work. And she’d just upped the stakes. Never before had one of them forbidden the other to speak or move. She desperately hoped that Lynne was in the right mood this morning.

After a long moment, Lynne nodded again. “I understand,” she said hoarsely. Yes! Janeway felt the rush of power, and her own arousal soared. “Good,” she said, growling the word. She swung a leg over and stood beside the bed, then slowly pulled the covers the rest of the way off. Hands on hips, she surveyed the body laid out before her. At forty-four, Lynne had a body that most twenty-somethings could only wish for. She was relentlessly active, working hard and playing harder, and Janeway loved that she got to reap the benefits. She herself was very fit, but not
quite so hard-bodied as Lynne. Yet Lynne made her feel like a queen every time they made love. She wanted Lynne to feel the same way.

Moving to the foot of the bed, she lightly trailed her fingers along Lynne’s calf and up her thigh. “Spread your legs.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Lynne complied. Janeway smiled, recognizing the pause for what it was: a demonstration that she didn’t have total control after all. Oh, she was up to this challenge.

“Wider,” she said.

Another pause, and Lynne spread her legs further, the action opening up her center to Janeway’s gaze. She stared at it for a moment, then looked up into Lynne’s face. Without breaking eye contact, she trailed the fingers of one hand along the inside of Lynne’s thigh, barely brushing over the junction of her legs, then moved up her stomach, between her breasts, and ended by closing the hand over Lynne’s throat just firmly enough to feel the pounding pulse in her carotid arteries.

“Don’t think I don’t know the game you’re playing,” she said quietly, staring into defiant eyes. “It would seem that I’m going to have to show you exactly how little control you have. I’m going to enjoy this beautiful body of yours, but if you want to come, you’ll have to beg for it.”

Lynne’s expression changed to outright disbelief, and Janeway chuckled as she turned away. She rummaged through Lynne’s closet and emerged with a silk scarf, which she held out for her partner to see.

“Close your eyes,” she said as she walked back to the bed. She folded the scarf and laid it over Lynne’s eyelids, tucking the ends snugly between her head and the pillow. “Not that I think you’ll cheat and look, because you know if you do—” she put her lips next to Lynne’s ear and whispered the next words, “—I’ll walk out.”

She moved back and leaned against the wall, letting the silence press on her lover’s ears as she indulged herself in a good, long look. Although she had no intention of letting Lynne touch her, part of her wished she could—because the scene before her was arousing in the extreme. Lynne was submitting to her, not because she was physically restrained, but because Janeway had commanded it. To her, that submission of the will was far more exciting than any physical restraint. Lynne felt the same way, and they had never yet explored actual bondage. She wasn’t sure they ever would—though she would rule nothing out.

Quietly, she stepped forward again and very lightly brushed her finger-
tips along Lynne’s ribs. Lynne jumped in surprise, and Janeway smiled. She pulled her hands back and stood very still. After several minutes she could see Lynne trying, by minute movements of her head, to fix her location. She concentrated on breathing slowly, through her mouth, in order to avoid making the slightest noise. At last Lynne appeared to give up, and still Janeway waited. It wasn’t until she saw Lynne’s shoulders slump that she was certain that her lover had truly given up the search. Then she reached out and brushed her fingers along the underside of Lynne’s breast. Lynne jumped again, even higher than the first time, and as soon as she came down Janeway brushed the other breast. This time the jump wasn’t as pronounced, so Janeway shifted tactics. Lowering her head, she nipped Lynne on the pulse point in her throat.

Lynne gasped, throwing her head to one side and dislodging the scarf in the process. Janeway immediately pulled her head back and tucked the scarf in. Moving her lips close to Lynne’s ear, she growled, “I said, don’t move. Was there some part of that you didn’t understand?”

“No.” Lynne’s voice was low.

“I didn’t think so.” Janeway backed off and stood silently, watching. The only sound in the room was Lynne’s harsh breathing, a sign that—together with the flush suffusing her chest—indicated a high level of arousal. Janeway knew that if she slid a finger into her lover’s folds, it would come away wet. That thought immediately took over her brain, so she moved quietly down the bed, reached out and dragged a finger through Lynne’s slick center, rubbing it over the clitoris before pulling away. Lynne’s hips jerked, but she made no sound. Janeway moved back up again and stared down at her lover.

“You’re so wet already,” she whispered. With infinite care, she painted Lynne’s nipples with the moisture on her finger. Then she launched an all-out assault on Lynne’s breasts, sucking hard and nipping at one while squeezing and pinching the other. Lynne writhed under her, groaning, as Janeway switched her mouth from one breast to the other. There was no way Lynne could keep still for this, though Janeway was delighted to see that she was trying.

As suddenly as she had begun, she broke off and stepped back. Lynne’s chest was heaving with her labored breathing, and Janeway enjoyed the view.

“Do you know how beautiful you are?” she asked.
Lynne’s head turned slightly toward her, and Janeway noiselessly moved to the foot of the bed before speaking again.

“You work so hard for that incredible body, and the best part is, you don’t do it to look good. It’s just who you are. And you’re giving it all to me.” Lynne’s head straightened again as she focused on the voice, and Janeway reached out with both hands to gently run her fingertips down Lynne’s legs, from her hips to her feet. Pulling her hands back, she quietly moved to the other side, then leaned forward and spoke into her lover’s ear.

“Aren’t you, Lynne? Giving it all to me?”

After a moment, Lynne nodded.

“I didn’t hear you,” said Janeway, running a light finger down her jawline.

“Yes,” said Lynne, her voice cracking. She cleared her throat.

“Do you want me to take what you’re offering?” Janeway’s finger dipped between two soft breasts.

Another pause. “Yes.”

Now she ran her finger down the center of Lynne’s stomach and paused just above the thatch of hair. “How badly do you want it?”

Lynne didn’t answer, and Janeway laughed. “Not quite ready to beg yet, I see. I’d have been disappointed otherwise. This game has just begun, Lynne.” Very slowly, she dragged her finger through Lynne’s folds and pushed it inside. Lynne was drenched, so Janeway pulled her finger out, added two more, and pushed them back in hard. Lynne jerked and cried out, and Janeway continued her hard thrusts while she leaned over and took Lynne’s mouth in a passionate kiss. She felt Lynne’s tongue start to push into her own mouth and then retreat, as her lover obviously remembered her warning. But it was enough for Janeway to pull out and step away. Lynne gave a frustrated cry and then went silent, panting through her open mouth.

“I see you forgot my instructions for a moment,” Janeway commented. A thought struck her and she smiled wickedly. “It’s obvious that you’re having a hard time not touching, so why don’t you touch yourself?”

There was no response, and even as her smile grew, she made her voice harder and more commanding. “That wasn’t a request. Bring your hands down, and show me how you’d like me to touch your breasts.”

A long pause, and then Lynne slowly brought her hands out from
under the pillow. She cupped her breasts, then spread her fingers over them and began to gently draw her fingers from the outside in, ending with a light tug on the nipples. By the time she had repeated the motion twice more, Janeway was already too wet for comfort. She shifted a little, trying to ease the pressure, and saw a tiny smile appear on Lynne’s lips.

_Goddammit, she knows she’s turning me on._ Janeway put her hands on top of Lynne’s and squeezed with them. Then she arranged them so that Lynne’s hands were covering her breasts, but her nipples were protruding between her fingers.

“Keep them there,” she said, just before lowering her head to lick and suck a nipple and its surrounding fingers. Lynne arched her back and moaned as Janeway continued her ministrations, switching back and forth between breasts. Finally she lifted Lynne’s hands away, replacing them under the pillow, and repeated the motions her lover had shown her. Lynne arched again, pressing into her hands, and Janeway let them both enjoy the sensations before stepping back once more. She smiled at Lynne’s growl of frustration, but made no sound, nor did she move for several minutes.

When she next touched her lover, it was to caress her gently, running her fingers lightly all over her body. Not an inch was left untouched, and she made repeated visits to the areas she knew were especially sensitive: the undersides of Lynne’s breasts, the insides of her elbows and knees, the inner thighs, the pulse points in her throat. She circled close to Lynne’s nipples and her clitoris, but never touched them. Lynne’s body became taut as her arousal climbed, and when Janeway finally climbed onto the bed and slid her tongue along the soft inner folds at Lynne’s center, she shuddered and let out a cry that Janeway was pretty sure could be heard in the hall outside.

Now the torture began in earnest. They’d been lovers long enough for Janeway to know all the signs of impending orgasm, and she used her tongue and fingers to repeatedly bring Lynne right to the brink, only to back off and spend long minutes caressing her partner’s body, paying close attention to the sensitive areas to keep Lynne’s arousal high.

Finally, the fourth or fifth time that Janeway detected the first shudders of orgasm and pulled away, Lynne snapped.

“Kathryn!” she shouted. “For Christ’s sake, just do it!”
Janeway couldn’t resist proving her power. Putting her lips next to Lynne’s ear, she said, “Are you begging me to let you come?”

“God, yes! Please!” Lynne was beyond caring now.

Janeway pulled the scarf off her face and watched as she blinked, adjusting to the light. “Don’t close your eyes for anything. I want to see you when you come.”

She renewed her stroking, expertly hitting the magical spot that never failed to send Lynne over the edge. Once again she built her up and held her there, never breaking their eye contact. She could see the effort Lynne was making to keep her eyes open, and smiled encouragingly. Then Lynne’s jaw and neck went taut, her muscles strained, and her eyes started to close.

“Look at me,” Janeway said, and Lynne’s eyes snapped open again. She came with a long, keening cry, and Janeway thought she’d never experienced anything so intimate as their eye contact at that moment of ultimate surrender. As the shudders racked Lynne’s body, Janeway said, “You’re released.”

Lynne’s head fell back and her eyes closed, her body twitching with the aftershocks. Her breathing was harsh and ragged, her skin slick with sweat. Janeway lowered herself on top of her lover, allowing full body contact for the first time. Lynne brought her arms out from under the pillow and wrapped them around her, giving her a feeble squeeze before her arms fell limply to the mattress. Not wanting to crush her weakened lover, Janeway braced herself on her forearms and gently gathered Lynne’s head in her hands, covering her face and neck with small kisses.

“I love you,” she said. “Thank you for giving that to me. I know it must have been hard for you.”

There was a long pause, and she thought Lynne might have dropped off. But then her eyes opened, looking slightly dazed. “Damn straight it was,” she said in a weak voice. “And you realize that you’ve just raised the bar for me. Paybacks are a bitch.”

“I know,” said Janeway, squeezing her again. “I’m looking forward to it.”

Lynne smiled, her eyes closing, and a few minutes later her even breaths told Janeway that she had, indeed, worn her lover completely out. She slid off to the side, leaving one arm and leg draped over, and snuggled in. Maybe she hadn’t quite caught up on her sleep, either.
When Janeway woke, she found herself looking straight into a pair of smiling green eyes.

“Hi,” she said, rolling over onto her back and stretching. She pulled herself into a sitting position, a little surprised when Lynne promptly scooted over and rested her head on her thigh. “What time is it?”

“Almost 1300,” said Lynne. “And I’m absolutely dying for a shower. I went to bed clean, but somebody got me all grimy again.”

“That’s not grime,” said Janeway, stroking Lynne’s hair. “That’s just good, honest sweat.” She looked down at the dark head, feeling a rush of protectiveness in her current position. Lynne did not often seek out this kind of comforting contact.

“Right, sweat and a few other things,” said Lynne. She turned her head and ostentatiously sniffed Janeway’s pant leg. “And a good bit of it rubbed off on you, too. If you go outside like that, the entire ship is going to know that you ravaged me without even bothering to get undressed. You fiend.”

Janeway laughed, basking in the easy contentment she always felt in Lynne’s presence. “These days, that could only enhance my reputation.”

Lynne sat up. “Then I think you’d better recycle those clothes and come take a shower with me, because I don’t want your reputation any more enhanced than it already is.”
“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Come on, you don’t know that your crew is convinced you’re larger than life? Isn’t that the reputation you intentionally created?”

“I didn’t create anything,” Janeway protested. “I’ve just maintained an appropriate distance from the crew, that’s all. And in the last few months I’m not even sure I’ve managed that.”

“Hmm. I think you’ve done just fine. Half the crew forgets how to speak when you’re around because they’re so nervous, and the other half would give just about anything to get you in bed. It’s that other half I’m worried about. If they knew the truth I’d have to start beating them off with a large stick.”

“And what is the truth?” purred Janeway, getting up on all fours. She straddled Lynne’s legs, pushing her back down onto the pillows.

Lynne looked up at her, all signs of teasing gone from her face. “That you’re everything they think and more. And everything I ever wished for.”

Startled by the sudden shift in their conversation, Janeway leaned down, kissed her gently, and said, “You, on the other hand, are more than I ever hoped for.”

The kiss went on for some time, a soft, loving meeting of the lips that started out slow and eventually grew passionate. When they finally parted, Lynne’s voice was low and husky as she said, “Come take a shower with me and let’s see if we can’t inspire some good, honest sweating on your part.”

Never one to turn down an invitation like that, Janeway stripped out of her clothes, ran them through the recycler, and joined her lover in the shower. Normally she detested sonic showers, but Lynne had discovered that the sound produced at the lowest intensity setting was actually rather soothing. Janeway had never used that setting, since it took even longer than a hydroshower—and the main point to a sonic shower, aside from eliminating water usage, was its efficiency. Most people didn’t want to spend more than one or two minutes getting clean unless they could luxuriate in hot water.

They stood together in the ethereal blue light as the system activated, running their hands up and down each other’s bodies. Gradually Lynne’s caresses grew more sensual, and before long her arms were the only thing holding Janeway upright as she shuddered and gasped for air. When she recovered and began to return the favor, Lynne protested that she had
nothing left in her. Janeway interpreted that as a personal challenge, and
tough it took a while, eventually she had Lynne shaking in release. This
time Lynne’s legs gave out completely and she sank onto the shower’s
bench seat, closing her eyes and resting her head against the wall.

“Jesus,” she complained. “I can run ten kilometers, but I can’t stand
up in the shower. You’d think I’d have more stamina.”

“I’m taking this as a testament to my skills,” said Janeway, trying hard
not to sound too smug.

Lynne opened her eyes and scowled. “Just because I said the crew
thinks you’re larger than life doesn’t mean you have to think so, too. If
you’re not careful I may decide it’s my job to keep you humble.”

Janeway dropped a quick kiss on her nose. “Computer, deactivate sonic
shower,” she said as she pulled Lynne to her feet. “I don’t doubt you’re up
to the job, sweetheart. But I’ll try to be less cognizant of my greatness.”

Lynne grabbed her around the waist and began to tickle her, prompting
a very uncaptain-like shriek and a paroxysm of laughter. They eventually
made their way out of the shower and into the dining area, where they
put together a midday meal with the economy of movement born of long
familiarity. Janeway indulged herself in a cup of what she now thought of
as Real Coffee. To make the precious fifty-pound bag last as long as possi-
ble, the stasis container was kept in Lynne’s quarters. Janeway knew that
if that bag was in her own quarters, she’d have put a large dent in it by
now. Rationing it out made it more special.

As they ate, they caught up on the prior four days and compared notes
on their experiences in the storm. Janeway was very interested in Lynne’s
reaction to the event, and debated internally whether or not to mention
her concern about the engines overheating. The decision was taken out of
her hands when Lynne brought it up herself. She’d spoken to B’Elanna
earlier and heard all about it.

“I’m curious,” she said. “Why did you choose to ride out the storm
instead of going around?”

“Because we couldn’t have gotten around it before it hit us,” said
Janeway. “It was moving too fast. My only choice was stay or retreat, and I
chose to stay. Of course, I didn’t realize the storm was as bad as it was, or
I might have made a different decision.”

“Why did you stay? I mean, not that I’m questioning your decision,
but...why not back off and wait it out?”
“Because ion storms can last for days or even weeks, and there’s no way to know which way they’ll move or how long they’ll last. We could have been forced far off course, and while I’m willing to backtrack when I absolutely have to, I can’t make a habit of it or we’d never get home.”

Lynne thought about that for a moment and nodded. “Makes sense.”

Janeway changed the subject. “I’d imagine the storm put a damper in your latest project, too.”

“Yeah, B’Elanna obviously has no time for programming these days, and I wouldn’t trust the holodeck right now even if she did. I’ve heard the stories about how malfunction-prone that place is, so I’m not going anywhere near it until we finish repairs. I guess we’ll just have to wait a while. It’s just as well; I’m starting to run out of ideas.”

“Not going well?”

Lynne sighed. “No, it’s not that. Actually, Seven is doing better than I thought she would. She’s relaxing and even enjoying herself, not that she’d put it that way. Her ability to interact and socialize has really improved, and she’s gained a lot of self-confidence. But she’s progressed to the point where she’s expecting something to happen emotionally, some spark of attraction, and I’m just not sure we can accomplish that on the holodeck. I think the next step for her is out in the real world—but I have no idea who she could take that next step with. Honestly, I’m a little afraid for her.”

“Why?”

“Because she’s poised at the edge of an emotional leap, but she’s got nowhere to go with it. Kathryn, think about it. Seven doesn’t deal well with a lack of progress. The strongest force in her life is assimilation of information—she has to keep growing, keep moving forward, or her entire basis for existence is compromised. If she can’t go forward, I can only see one of two things happening. Either she’ll shut down this aspect of her growth and retreat into herself, which I think would be tragic and ultimately destructive for her. Or…”

Janeway’s thoughts had raced ahead, and the conclusion hit her with heart-stopping force.

“Or she’ll leave,” she said. Lynne nodded, and the two women stared at each other. Janeway felt as if reality had just shifted beneath her feet; in the years since she’d freed Seven from the Collective, she’d never given serious thought to her leaving. In the beginning she hadn’t allowed her
the option, reasoning that Seven wasn’t ready to survive away from a
supporting environment, and she sure as hell didn’t want that environ-
ment to be the Borg. As Seven had learned and adapted, she’d accepted
the fact that someday her astrometrics officer would grow beyond the
need for her mentoring—but there was a big difference between accepting
an abstract idea and being hit with the reality of it. If Seven left Voyager,
she’d leave a big hole in Janeway’s heart as well.

“Lynne, we can’t let that happen—I’m not ready to lose her.” As soon
as the words left her mouth, she realized how they sounded. Oh shit.
But when she looked up, she saw only understanding and compassion
in Lynne’s eyes.

“You really love her, don’t you?”

“More than anyone but you,” Janeway admitted, relieved beyond belief
that Lynne accepted the complex emotional connection she had
with Seven.

Lynne nodded. “Somehow I always knew that. It was something I
thought about at Earth. When I was deciding whether to stay or go, one
thing that made it easier to consider staying on Earth was the thought
that eventually you might find another partner in Seven.” Her eyes twin-
kled as she took in Janeway’s open-mouthed expression. “Shocked you on
that one, huh?”

“Christ.” Janeway finally found her voice. “How can you just sit there
so calmly and say that? If I thought you had another potential lover
waiting in the wings, I’d go insane with jealousy.”

“Guess it’s a good thing I don’t have anyone, then.” Lynne smiled, but
then her expression grew serious. “You’ve never given me a reason to be
jealous, Kathryn. You’ve got so much integrity that I can’t begin to
imagine you being unfaithful. Besides, what I sense between you and
Seven isn’t at that level. I’m not sure what it is, but it’s not that.”

“I don’t really know what it is, either,” said Janeway. It seemed so
strange to be talking to anyone about this, much less Lynne. But it was
also very liberating. “I guess I’ve always been a little afraid to examine it
too closely. She’s very, very special to me, and I’m...well, I’m extremely
protective of her. For a while I told myself it was just the normal protec-
tiveness any captain feels for her crew, but...” She trailed off.

“But it’s not,” Lynne finished for her. “No, I don’t think most captains
would face down the Borg Queen herself to retrieve a single crewmember.
I’m pretty sure the average captain would look at the success-to-failure risk on that one and dismiss it as a suicide mission.”

“It was,” said Janeway quietly.

Now it was Lynne’s turn to stare open-mouthed.

“I’m not saying I went into it expecting to die,” Janeway amended. “I didn’t even let myself think about it. There were simply no other options —once I realized that Seven had been coerced into leaving, had in fact given up her life for the good of the ship, I had to bring her back. Period. It wasn’t until I got back and started writing up the report that I realized what I’d done.” She could still remember the shock that had hit her then.

“Everyone else already knew it. And yet Tuvok, Tom and the Doctor went with me anyway.”

“Wow,” said Lynne. “And here I’ve always thought Tom and the Doctor were assholes. Now I’m going to have to start thinking of them as noble assholes.”

Janeway laughed. “Trust you to find something funny about it.”

Lynne reached over to take her hand. “There’s nothing funny about that kind of love, Kathryn. Just a deep, infinite joy. I’d never felt it before I met you, and personally I think the fact that you have two people to love that way makes you incredibly blessed. It actually makes me happy to think that if anything ever happened to me, you wouldn’t be totally alone. You’d have a second chance.”

“Don’t ever say that,” said Janeway, gripping her hand fiercely. “What I feel for Seven isn’t this, and I don’t want to find out if it can eventually grow into it.” She took a breath. Now’s the time.

“Lynne, I had a question I wanted to ask you before that ion storm hit us. Actually, I’ve been wanting to ask you for some time, but the timing was never right and things kept getting in the way and—” She stopped herself before the babbling could get out of control. Lynne just looked at her, waiting patiently with a small smile on her face.

“I wanted to ask you to move in with me,” she finished.

The smile slipped from Lynne’s face. And in all her imaginings of this moment, Janeway had never anticipated the next question.

“Why?”

“What?” Did I hear that right?

“Why do you want me to move in?”

Janeway stared at her. “Wasn’t it you I was just talking to about love
and partnership? Because if it wasn’t, it was someone who looked just like you.” She winced, knowing that had sounded harsh, but she was floundering. She started to pull her hand away, but Lynne held on.

“No, wait. I do love you, you know that. And you are my partner, and…” She sighed. “Let me start over. I didn’t expect your invitation, and I’m just a little thrown by it. I, uh…I’ve never lived with anyone. I mean, not since my roommate days. I’m very used to having my own space, and I guess I just wanted to know how you felt our living together would improve on what we have now.”

“Would improve…what do you mean? Don’t you think about waking up every morning with me? Because that’s how I feel about you. I want to see you when I go to sleep at night and when I wake up in the morning. I want to know you’re in our quarters when I get off shift, or be waiting for you to get off yours. I’m tired of running back and forth between decks. I want you there all the time. Don’t you?”

Lynne looked down at their hands. “It just sounds like you want us to live together for the sake of convenience. I’m not hearing a whole lot more than that.”

“What?” This time Janeway did pull her hand away. “This is not about convenience, it’s about being together. I’m offering you my heart here. What more do you want from me?”

“You’ve already offered me your heart,” said Lynne softly. “Believe me, I know what a precious gift that is. What you’re offering now is your quarters, and I’m just not sure that moving in is the best thing for us. How will it change anything? It certainly won’t change how I feel about you—I already love you with all my heart. Will it change how you feel about me?”

Janeway stared at her partner, wondering how on earth this could have gone so wrong. What the hell had just happened? She was confused and hurt, and unwilling to show it. A defensive anger swept over her, and she spoke before she thought.

“Moving in would not change how I feel about you, except possibly to give me a chance to love you more. But I have to say, this conversation is making me doubt your feelings. It sounds to me like you don’t want to move forward, and I have to wonder why.”

There was pain in Lynne’s eyes, but all she said was, “I don’t know what to tell you right now.”

Janeway was stunned. That was it? She waited, but when Lynne
showed no sign of continuing, she stood up and pushed her chair back. “Well, you think about it and let me know when you do have something to say. Thanks for a great day, sweetheart, but I think it’s time I went back to my quarters now. I’ll see you later.”

“Kathryn, wait—” But Janeway was already in the hall, and Lynne’s voice was cut off as the door closed behind her. She strode toward the turbolift, expecting Lynne to come after her and half dreading, half hoping she would.

She didn’t, and Janeway returned to her quarters, alone, heartbroken, angry and confused.
Although she was off duty the next day, Janeway notified Chakotay that she was taking his shift and he should get some rest. She ended up working a double shift. *Voyager’s* engines and deflectors were back up to one hundred percent, but her weapons and defensive shields were still only partially operational and wouldn’t get any better until they could find some parts and materials. Seven had focused her efforts in Astrometrics solely upon finding a viable planet for trading, and by the end of Janeway’s second shift had finally located a good prospect: a warp-capable culture on the fifth planet of a system less than a day’s travel at high warp. The third planet of the system contained several of the raw materials they needed, so if they were lucky they might be able to finish repairs and stock up on supplies as well. The trip would take them well off their heading, but Janeway felt naked with weapons at only sixty-three percent and shields less than that. Getting *Voyager* back up to full operational capacity was her highest priority.

She scheduled the away team and smiled bitterly to herself as she added her own name, remembering her discussion with Chakotay earlier in the week. Then she’d wanted off the ship because she was bored. Now she wanted off because she needed to keep busy, to not think about the turn her personal life had taken. She couldn’t afford to think about it; *Voyager* needed her now.
When she returned to her quarters late that night, she found two messages from Lynne asking for a chance to talk. She hesitated in front of her terminal, then turned it off and went to bed.

The planet was called Dakmor and, thought Janeway ruefully, it appeared to be inhabited by a race of bureaucrats. She’d never seen so much red tape. The Dakmorians had rules for everything, and clearly needed total control. The fleshy, paunchy humanoid who answered their hail assured her that the away team was welcome to trade on Dakmor, but they were not allowed to transport down. Shuttle arrivals and departures had to be cleared in advance, and could only fly in through a portal in a force field that shielded the entire main city. They were not allowed to bring energy weapons. They would please read the extensive list of regulations being transmitted, and of course they were responsible for their compliance. Any non-compliance would be dealt with according to Dakmorian law. Thank you and enjoy your stay on Dakmor.

Janeway perused the regulations and shook her head. It’s a wonder they don’t regulate bathroom breaks. Then again, that’s probably in the fine print.

She’d had to think hard about stopping here when their sensors had picked up the orbiting weapon platforms protecting the planet. The Dakmorians had offensive technology that could turn Voyager into Swiss cheese, and their defensive technology was equally impressive. But the number of ships parked around the planet, from quite a few different cultures, spoke of a healthy trading system. Apparently, the Dakmorians were simply very careful about protecting their planet and space. She’d seen no signs of aggression while approaching the system, nor did the regulations indicate anything but a desire to control access to the planet. And Voyager’s needs were just too great. They had to acquire those supplies, and Dakmor was the only game in town.

Once the proper clearances were received, Tom piloted the shuttle to their approved landing site at the city’s central port. After making their way through the most stringent security check she’d ever seen, the away team emerged into the city itself. It was a huge place, bustling with commerce, and B’Elanna was looking forward to the engineer’s version of shopping. Janeway found herself looking forward to it as well, if only
because she was increasingly confident that this place could fulfill most, if not all, of their needs. Not being able to simply beam up their goods would be a pain in the ass, but they’d done it the hard way before and would again.

She split the away team into two units, sending B’Elanna, Tom and a security officer in one direction while she, Tuvok, and a second security officer went the other. Each had their list, and they would keep in contact as they located various items. Just as the team was about to set out, Janeway’s communicator came to life.

“Bridge to Captain Janeway.” It was Chakotay.

“Go ahead.”

“Captain, be advised that in addition to the force field, the Dakmorians appear to have some sort of jamming field over the city. We do not have transporter locks.”

“Acknowledged.” Although she wasn’t expecting trouble, Janeway had long since learned to be careful. “Does it cover other areas?”

“We’re checking on that. Stand by.”

The away team stood around, watching people go by on the shuttleport’s moving sidewalks, while they waited for word from the ship. Eventually it came.

“The field covers the entire planet, but it’s more focused over the cities.”

“Got it. Thank you, Chakotay; we’ll try to stay out of trouble. The team is splitting up; keep an eye on us even if you can’t keep a lock.”

“Acknowledged. Have fun shopping, and don’t forget the curtains for the bridge.”

Janeway smiled at the gentle banter. “Polka dot okay?”

“I was thinking paisley, but you get whatever you think is best.”

“I always do. Janeway out.” She looked around at the team, some of whom were trying to hide their amusement. “All right, let’s go. Be careful, stay out of trouble, and keep an eye out for paisley curtains.”

There were nods all around, and the crewmembers moved off in opposite directions.

Several hours later, Janeway was feeling pretty good about things. They’d made several trips back to the shuttle, laden down with supplies, and Tom had already flown two full loads back to Voyager. The city was a bustling trade center, featuring everything she could think of and quite a
few things she’d never heard of, and they had already crossed nearly all of
the items off B’Elanna’s list. B’Elanna and her team had gone back with
the last shuttle, since they now had what they needed to finish repairs to
the weapons and shields, leaving Janeway’s team to wrap things up. She
anticipated being off the planet in another hour.

All in all it had been a surprisingly pleasant day, despite the red tape
she’d had to wade through at the beginning. Tuvok approved of the clean
and orderly nature of both the city and its inhabitants, and Janeway had to
admit she was appreciating it as well. After some of the places they’d seen
in the Delta Quadrant, this was refreshing.

They stepped out of the store where they’d purchased some electronic
parts of surprisingly good quality, and stopped to consult the list. Janeway
was just about to suggest their next destination when a shout rang out to
their right. Looking up, she saw a young Dakmorian boy running toward
her, his face white with fear. A siren sounded, and lights went on over the
red platforms at the intersection behind the boy. They’d noticed those
platforms at all four corners of every intersection in the city, and had
wondered what they were for. She turned as the boy ran past her, and saw
that the platforms at the next intersection were lit as well. A moment
later, four Dakmorians in identical black uniforms materialized on the
platforms and immediately began running toward the boy. He dashed
across the street toward an alley, but four more uniformed men from the
other intersection got there ahead of him. All eight men piled onto the
boy, swinging fists and boots. Janeway took an instinctive step forward,
but stopped herself just before Tuvok said, “Captain.”

“I know. It’s not our fight.” It was difficult to watch, but she couldn’t
turn away. Soon the police officers stood up and dragged the now-limp
boy off the street. Two officers supported his unconscious body between
them as the group made their way to an intersection. Three men stepped
onto platforms, while the boy was stuffed into the fourth. As soon as they
vanished, three more men transported, leaving two for the final transport.
The street was quiet and nearly empty. A few pedestrians hurried away
from the area, their eyes cast downward. No one had even stopped to
watch the altercation—it was obvious that the inhabitants didn’t want to
draw attention to themselves.

Janeway looked around, seeing the city with new eyes. “Tuvok, I think
your nice, orderly city is that way for a reason.”
“Agreed,” he answered. “It would be advisable to complete our mission and depart as soon as possible.”
“You’ll get no argument from me.”
A somber threesome quickly located and purchased the last available items on the list. The immense sense of satisfaction that Janeway would normally have felt at their near-perfect success rate was tempered by the memory of the beating they’d witnessed. All she wanted to do now was get off this planet and be on their way.
They were loading the goods into the shuttle when her communicator activated.
“Bridge to Captain Janeway.”
“Go ahead, Chakotay.”
“Captain, this may sound like an odd question, but is there anyone left on the planet besides you, Commander Tuvok, and Lieutenants Paris and Parker?”
“No.” Janeway didn’t like the sound of this.
“Just confirming the sensors. We’re picking up a fourth Human life sign in the city. It’s about one kilometer away from you and…stand by.”
Janeway and Tuvok looked at each other while they waited.
“Sorry about that, Harry was just confirming something. The life sign also has a Borg signature. We’re checking now for signs elsewhere in the system.” Another long pause.
“Captain, we’re picking up no other signals. This appears to be the only Borg signature within reach of our sensors.”
Tuvok’s eyebrow went up. “Borg do not usually travel alone.”
“No.” Janeway’s mind was working furiously. “And the sensors picked up the sign as Human first, and Borg second. Which means this may be a former Borg.”
“There aren’t too many former Borg around, except in the Cooperative.” Chakotay was referring to a colony of escaped ex-Borg they had met nearly four years ago. They had inducted his mind into a mini-collective and then imposed their own will on him, manipulating him into helping them create a new hive mind. Janeway knew he’d never gotten over his sense of betrayal from that event.
“The Cooperative is a considerable distance behind us,” said Tuvok.
“True, but distance doesn’t mean the same thing to Borg as it does to us. And if this is a colonist, then he or she is probably separated from
their hive mind. Which means we could have a Federation refugee on our hands—quite a few of those ex-Borg were from the Alpha quadrant.”

“That does seem likely.”

For Janeway, there was no choice at all. “Chakotay, download the location to our tricorders. We’re going to check it out.”

“Coordinates are downloading now. Be careful, Captain.”

“ Aren’t I always?” She waited until her tricorder flashed with the new information, then added, “Coordinates received. Janeway out. Tom, stay with the shuttle. Tuvok, Parker, you’re with me.”

It took a little less than fifteen minutes to narrow the search down to one city block. They split up, Parker going one way while Tuvok and Janeway went the other. Janeway changed her tricorder setting and began scanning for a Human life sign. She found it at the same time that Tuvok discreetly pointed.

“There,” he said, indicating a figure in a hooded coat. Janeway nodded; the Dakmiorians didn’t usually wear hoods. She saw Parker approach from the opposite side and waved him off. All three followed the figure at a distance.

After several minutes of watching their target examine food products at a grower’s stall, Janeway had made two observations. This person did not behave like a Borg, and he or she handled everything with the right hand only. The left hand stayed hidden in the coat.

“It’s not Borg,” she said.

Tuvok nodded. “Though obviously attempting to hide Borg components. I expect the left hand is cybernetic, and there are likely to be implants on the face or neck.”

“I’m going to approach. Stay here, and tell Parker not to assist unless I call for it.”

She left Tuvok speaking quietly into his comm badge, and casually walked up next to the figure. Pulling an unrecognizable fruit from a bin, she looked at it and said, “Excuse me, but do you know what this is?”

The hood turned toward her, but not far enough to reveal the face.

“No, I don’t.” The voice was low and distinctly female.

“Not surprising. There aren’t too many of these in the Federation, are there?”

The woman went very still, then raised her head and turned to fully
face Janeway. She had dark skin, pronounced cheekbones and almost black eyes.

Holding out her hand, Janeway said, “I’m Captain Kathryn Janeway, of the starship—”

“Voyager, yes, I know,” said the woman, as they shook hands. “I am… Revi Sandovhar. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Janeway put the fruit down, waving away the shopkeeper with a no thank you. “You’re a long way from the Cooperative.”

Revi smiled. “Well done, Captain. And you’ve also made it further than we thought you would.”

Janeway shuddered internally at the “we,” but Revi showed no signs of being part of a collective. Still…

“What happened to the hive mind?”

Revi paused before answering. “You don’t agree with our actions,” she said. Her cool, matter-of-fact tone was so reminiscent of Seven that Janeway felt a chill run down her spine.

“You used a Human being against his will,” said Janeway.

“It was for the greater good. Thousands would have died without his help. There was no other way to prevent all-out war.”

“It was still wrong.”

Another pause.

“Yes, it was,” said Revi. Her voice was warmer now, and a little regretful. “We thought we were so much better than the Borg, but ethics have a way of slipping when it’s crunch time.”

Crunch time. The phrase was one Janeway used often, and she had gotten it from her father. As far as she knew, it was a uniquely Starfleet phrase.

“The hive mind is still active,” Revi continued. “But once we had brought order to the population, we backed off on our transmissions. We tried to find a way to keep order and harmony while still allowing for as much individuality as possible. It’s a fine line to walk, Captain. In the end, several people petitioned to be released from the hive mind, in order to achieve full individuality. The ruling council did not want to keep members in the collective against their will.” She raised her eyebrow, acknowledging the irony. “Nor could we allow the former chaos to return. So we agreed to allow the petitioners their freedom. The price was voluntary banishment.”
“You were on the council, weren’t you?” Janeway was fairly certain the plural pronouns weren’t just collective-speak.

“Yes. It was I who suggested the compromise. And now I’m paying the price for my freedom.”

Janeway looked at the hood, and the left hand that still had not emerged from its pocket. “Is it worth it?”

Revi laughed shortly. “Prejudice, hatred, and fear wherever I go? Oh, certainly. Freedom is sweet. But nobody told us that individuality really meant being alone.”

“It doesn’t have to,” said Janeway.

“Spare me the platitudes, Captain. You forget that we saw into Chakotay’s mind while he was connected. We saw his hatred for the Borg, and though he changed his opinion while with us, most people don’t have that kind of immersion. They just hold on to the hatred. It doesn’t matter what we were before; once a Borg, always a Borg, apparently.”

“Seven of Nine might not agree with you.”

Revi looked up sharply. “Who?”

“Seven of Nine. My astrometrics officer.” Janeway waited for that to sink in.

“You have a Borg on your crew?”

“No, I have an ex-Borg on my crew.”

Clearly, Revi hadn’t expected that. She stared at Janeway for a long moment before clearing her throat.

“How long?”

“Pardon?”

“How long has Seven of Nine been with you?”

“Three years now. It hasn’t been easy for her, because she was assimilated as a child and raised by the Borg. She’s had to learn about individuality, but I’m proud to have her on my crew—and even more proud to call her my friend.”

Revi’s eyes widened at the words. Then a smile shaped her lips, a real one that went all the way to her eyes. “I would like to meet your Seven of Nine.”

“She’s not mine, but I think she’d like very much to meet you as well.” Janeway smiled back at her. “Will you accompany us back to Voyager?”

A small gust of wind blew Revi’s hood back and Janeway caught a
glimpse of Borg hardware on the side of her jaw. Quickly Revi replaced the hood. “Thank you for the invitation, Captain. I would be delighted.”

Janeway nodded, and Revi fell into step beside her as she turned toward Tuvok. Neither of them noticed the shopkeeper’s fearful look as he scurried to the back of his stall.

Tuvok and Parker converged on them, but were still fifteen meters away when the siren went off. The red platforms ahead of them lit up, and a moment later four of the black-clad police materialized and ran toward them. Janeway looked behind her to see which poor unfortunate was in trouble this time, but saw only the shopkeeper and a few pedestrians—and another set of four police running toward them. When she looked ahead again, it was obvious that she and Revi were the target. In a moment the first set of men shoved her aside and piled on Revi, who reacted with the lightning speed and strength of a Borg. Bodies went flying in all directions, and Revi straightened up with a snarl. Her hood had come off and her left arm was out, revealing a cybernetic attachment going all the way up to her bicep. Long black hair streamed as she whipped around to meet the next attack; the four police from the intersection behind them had caught up. Janeway saw even more uniforms coming toward them and, in a purely instinctive decision, went back-to-back with Revi. Based on what she’d seen of the law here, Revi would probably vanish forever if the police carried her off. But if Janeway went with her, the ex-Borg had a much better chance of getting out of this.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Tuvok and Parker running toward them, but she couldn’t let them get involved. She needed Tuvok back on Voyager so that Chakotay would know what had happened, and besides, two more people weren’t going to make a difference in the wave of police now pouring over them.

“Tuvok! Get out now!” she shouted, then ducked a roundhouse blow and came up with a palm to her attacker’s chin, snapping his head back. A follow up kick to the side of his knee and the officer howled and dropped like a rock. Chakotay’s going to love bailing me out of this one, she thought. The familiar, fierce joy she always felt in a good brawl came bubbling up, and together she and Revi disabled a large number of Dakmorians. But the police kept coming and Janeway knew it was a losing battle. It wasn’t too much longer before she felt a hard blow to the back of her head, and her battle was over.
Chakotay paced the ready room, waiting for a return transmission from the officious Dakmorian who’d smugly informed him that his captain and the Borg were being held for crimes against the state. It had taken him nine calls, each time being passed off to a different person, before he’d finally connected with this idiot. So far he’d learned nothing but the general charge, which by itself had shocked him. Crimes against the state for a street brawl with the local police? Tuvok’s report had been delivered in his usual crisp, detached tones, but Chakotay could read between the lines. Tuvok and Parker had watched Janeway and the Borg go down under a pile of at least twenty police, and both were unconscious and bloody when they were dragged to the nearest transporter pad. Voyager’s sensors had located them on the other side of the city, in a complex that held a large number of Dakmorian life signs in a very small area. Obviously Janeway had gotten herself thrown in jail. Both her and the Borg’s life signs were stable, but they weren’t moving, and it had already been nearly seven hours. The Spirits only knew how badly they’d been beaten.

His options were not good. Starfleet regulations stated that every member of Starfleet must abide by the laws of the culture they were visiting, and if they broke those laws, they were punished according to the culture. Those regulations had led to a few tragedies, but as a whole they
were necessary to keep Starfleet from turning into an imperialistic force, immune to any law but its own. Janeway herself had reluctantly allowed both B’Elanna Torres and Tom Paris to undergo trials on planets where they’d been accused of a crime, working within the system to prove their innocence. He knew she would expect him to do the same. If only he could get the stupid sonofabitch bureaucrat to tell him specific charges and expected procedures!

When the return call finally came through, it didn’t make him feel any better. The Dakmorian officer, who called himself a Protector, informed him that Janeway would be held until trial, which would commence in two day’s time. Bail was not an option. The charges would not be dropped, no matter what Chakotay said.

“I expect the trial to be short,” said the Protector. “After all, we have sixteen wounded officers and another twelve who were there but escaped uninjured. Thirty officers of the Protectorate!” He shook his head. “The Protectorate takes a dim view of those who would attack it.”

“My captain and her friend did not attack your Protectorate,” said Chakotay. “They were defending themselves against an unprovoked attack.”

“An attack against officers of the Protectorate is an attack against the Protectorate itself,” said the officious man. Chakotay felt an urgent need to strangle him. “And the altercation was not unprovoked. A shopkeeper reported the presence of a Borg drone in the city! You can imagine our concern. The Borg threat is constant and not taken lightly; the drone had to be neutralized. Your captain chose to ally herself with an enemy of the state, which is of course a crime against the state. I am sorry.” He didn’t look sorry at all. “The Protectorate takes care of its own.”

“Who will be representing them at the trial?” Chakotay asked, willing himself not to show any anger.

“The Borg will not be tried; drones are probed for information and then destroyed. As for your captain, the court will assign a trial officer. That is only a formality, of course.”

“May we conduct our own investigation? Perhaps we could...assist the court in determining the details of the crime.”

“You are welcome to your own investigation, but you will find it rather a waste of time. There is little that could counter the testimony of thirty officers of the Protectorate.”
“Nevertheless, we will be sending our officers down.”
“Notify the Border Guard. That is not my concern.” The Protector’s tone was growing impatient.
“Thank you,” said Chakotay, gritting his teeth. “One more question, Protector. What is the sentence in the event of a guilty verdict?”
“Proven enemies of the state are destroyed immediately after trial. But the Protectorate is merciful; your captain’s death will be quick and painless.”
Chakotay thought of Janeway’s battered body, unmoving for seven hours now, and somehow doubted the Protector’s word.
“Be aware, Mr. Chakotay,” said the Protector, “that in situations such as this, we cannot allow any misguided thoughts of attempted rescue. Your ship has some powerful armaments, but I assure you that the Protectorate’s offensive capability is stronger. We have targeted your ship, and should any of your crew make any...unfortunate errors, we will not hesitate to destroy you. I’m sure this is an unnecessary precaution, of course, but we are obligated to inform you of the regulations.”
Chakotay was reeling, but he managed to find the appropriate words to end the call. He stood at the desk for a moment, then threw a PADD against the wall with all his strength. Slumping back into the chair, he was unsurprised when Tuvok contacted him.
“I know,” said Chakotay. “You’ve detected a weapons lock.”
A pause. “That is correct, Commander.”
“Tuvok, please report to the ready room. I have some new information.”
The security officer acknowledged the order, and Chakotay rested his head on his hands. “And it’s not good,” he said to the empty room.

 Janeiroy gradually became aware of her surroundings. She assessed the situation as well as she could without revealing her consciousness, just in case she was being watched. She was lying on a lumpy surface. The air stank of unwashed bodies and the sharp, acrid scent of urine. A low murmur of many voices sounded all around her, and the resonance of the voices told her that she was in a place with reflective walls. None of the voices were near her. The fact that she could under-
stand the words told her that her comm badge was still on, which was at least one thing in her favor. The rest didn’t sound good.

_Holding cell. I’m in some sort of prison._

Slowly she cracked her eyes open, only to find that her right eye wouldn’t even open that far. She couldn’t hide the wince as she quickly shut both eyes again.

“You’ve got a nasty black eye, Captain.” Revi’s voice sounded very near. “And a lot of other injuries I wish I could help you with. But my arm’s been knocked out and they’re not allowing us any supplies.”

Janeway carefully opened her left eye. Revi was leaning over her, a very concerned expression on her bruised face. She had the aquiline nose, high cheekbones and wide-set eyes common to people of the Indian subcontinent. The Borg starburst on the right side of her jaw, identical to Seven’s, did not detract from her dark beauty. Janeway smiled as well as she could.

“You shouldn’t hide a face like that under a hood.”

Revi’s eyebrows went up, and she laughed. “That wasn’t the first thing I expected you to say.”

“I try never to do what’s expected of me,” said Janeway. “Unless it’s to my advantage. Can I sit up?”

Revi frowned. “You can try if you want, but I wouldn’t recommend it. You’ve got at least three cracked ribs and one that I think might be broken, along with a concussion that knocked you out for seven point three hours. That’s in addition to the bruises you’re probably feeling over your entire body. I wrapped your head and ribs with a sheet from the bunk, but it’s still going to hurt.”

“Great. Help me anyway.”

Revi sighed, but carefully wrapped an arm around Janeway’s torso and assisted her. The pain was incredible—every breath was an intense jab, and her head felt as if it were encircled by a slowly tightening metal band. She closed her eye and focused on slow, shallow breathing until she could push the agony into a corner of her mind.

“You’re lucky that broken rib didn’t puncture a lung. I get the feeling that nobody here would care.” Revi’s voice dripped with contempt. Then, in a more gentle tone: “Can you sit up by yourself?”

With her pain under control, Janeway opened her eye. “Yes, I think so.” She braced herself as Revi carefully withdrew her arm, then studied her cellmate more closely.
“You don’t look quite as bad as I feel,” she said.

“It’s hard to knock out a Borg with physical force. They used an electromagnetic charge on me. Short-circuited things I really don’t want to know about. I’m afraid you took the brunt of the physical attack.”

“Do you need medical attention?”

Revi smiled sadly. “Not the kind you can provide. But thank you. The worst part at the moment is that the EM charge knocked out my arm. If it were functioning you wouldn’t feel nearly so bad.”

Janeway examined the arm, a memory sparking in her aching head.

“You were a medical/repair drone.”

Revi pulled her arm away. “How…?”

“We destroyed a Borg probe over a year ago. One of the items we salvaged was an arm like that. Our doctor was very excited about it. Laser scalpel, biomolecular scanner, microsuture capabilities in one attachment.”

“Not to mention tissue regenerators for bone, muscle and skin. Yes, very useful.” Revi’s voice was cold. “When it’s operating. I’m sorry it’s not doing you any good.”

Janeway looked around. They were alone in a filthy cell about four square meters in size. She and Revi were on one of two bunks, situated head to head on two of the walls. A third held a water faucet above a metal grate, and the fourth was open. A low hum announced the presence of a force field.

“I see they spare no expense for the housing of their guests,” she said.

“We’re not guests. We’re enemies of the state, according to our very helpful guard. I’m scheduled to be disassembled and destroyed tomorrow. Your trial is in two days, and it seems to be a foregone conclusion that you’ll be found guilty.” Her expression was haunted. “I’m very sorry. It’s not right that you should be punished for my crime.”

“What was your crime, anyway?” asked Janeway. “What did you do that set two dozen police on us?”

“I’m Borg,” she replied simply.

“I was afraid of that.” Janeway sighed and gingerly rested her head against the wall. “They’re a little sensitive about that here, aren’t they?”

“A bit. If I’d known the penalty for having Borg implants was death, I would have crossed this lovely planet off my itinerary. And I’m sorry to say that your punishment is death as well.”

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“Well, I’m not quite ready to die yet. And I’m not ready to let you die, either.” Janeway turned her head to find dark brown eyes pinned on her.

“I don’t understand you. Why did you defend me? You must have known you’d be hurt. And you didn’t even know whether I deserved to be taken in or not.”

It was hard for Janeway to think with her head pounding the way it was, and she could now add nausea to her list of happy little side effects. But talking kept her mind off the condition of her body, so she explained her thought process, pausing every few words for a painful, shallow breath.

“I’d just witnessed a small boy beaten half to death earlier today, and it was all I could do not to step in then. But the boy was Dakmorian, so it wasn’t my fight. You, on the other hand, are Human—and a former prisoner of war, I might add. And you didn’t kill those first officers who jumped you, though we both know you could have, very easily. So I knew you weren’t violent. It all amounted to an unprovoked attack, and as a Starfleet officer I’m obligated to assist Federation citizens in need. I’m especially obligated to assist fellow Starfleet officers.”

Revi looked stunned.

“How did you know?”

Janeway smiled weakly. “It’s only crunch time in Starfleet, Revi. Your slang gave you away. You also have a certain bearing about you that seems familiar. I’d guess you went through command school. And I’d also guess you were taken at Wolf 359.”

There was a long silence. At last Revi said, “I see why Chakotay thought so highly of you. His trust and loyalty were not misplaced.” She held her hand out. “Allow me to introduce myself properly. I’m Commander Revi Sandovhar, chief medical officer of the U.S.S. Rendezvous.”

Janeway carefully shook the proffered hand, trying not to jar her ribs. “It’s an honor to meet you, Commander. But why the secrecy?”

Revi looked down. “I’ve...I did some things as a Borg that I don’t like to think about. It went against everything I ever learned in Starfleet, every principle I ever lived by, and an oath I took very seriously. I don’t claim my rank because I don’t deserve it.”

Janeway recognized this kind of guilt. She’d seen it in Seven’s eyes, during her rare unguarded moments. And how much worse it must be for
someone like Revi, who’d had a lifetime to internalize those principles instead of six short years.

“Commander, you were not responsible for your actions as a Borg. But you know that, don’t you? You just don’t believe it.”

“No,” said Revi quietly. “And if you had my memories, you wouldn’t believe it either. Please, call me Revi. I really don’t care to use my rank.”

Janeway reached out to rest a hand on Revi’s thigh. “I can call you Revi. Or I can call you Doctor, if you wish.”

“No!” Her head came up, and the look in her eyes made Janeway pull her hand back. “Please…just call me Revi.”

Janeway studied the haunted face in front of her, and knew this conversation was over. “All right, Revi. Tell me what you know about this place, and let’s start working on a way out. Does your personal shielding still work?”

B’Elanna was on the bridge, testing out the newly-repaired shields while Tuvok checked the weapons and Seven worked on the problem of the Dakmorian jamming systems. Voyager was back up to full strength, but it didn’t really matter with those weapons platforms targeting them. The Dakmorians had them by the throat and everyone on the bridge knew it. Their senior staff meeting had been very somber, with ideas being rejected almost as soon as they were suggested. Rescuing Captain Janeway was currently a last-resort option, and at the moment it seemed impossible, at least not without severe risk to the ship and the rescue team. Their greatest hope at this time was that Tuvok’s research would reveal a way to secure Janeway’s release within the Dakmorian legal system. But the clock was ticking, and tempers were getting frayed.

She spared a thought for Lynne, whom she’d left in her quarters half an hour ago. She’d taken a brief break to bring her friend up to speed and found her distraught beyond belief. B’Elanna hadn’t expected her to be taking the news well, but Lynne’s reaction was off the scale. After spending all the time she dared calming her friend down, B’Elanna had returned to the bridge in the hopes that something new had come up during her break. Surely there had to be a way out of this.

But the news on the bridge was unchanged. Tuvok would be going to
the planet’s surface as soon as weapons tests were completed, looking for a legal loophole. Meanwhile, she and Seven would be working on finding ways through the transporter jamming field. It would be tough to beat; the Dakmorians’ technology was highly advanced. Even if they did find a way through the field, the warnings from the Dakmorians regarding unauthorized entry were quite clear: enter without permission and be destroyed. She didn’t doubt they had the ability to back up the threat.

She was wrapping up her tests when the turbolift doors opened and Lynne walked in. B’Elanna looked up in surprise; Lynne’s appearances on the bridge were rare, and never occurred unless Captain Janeway was on shift. Her friend glanced at her as she passed, striding straight to the ready room door and requesting entry. Chakotay let her in, and a hush settled over the bridge as the door closed behind her. There was a sense of expectation in the air.

It didn’t take long before they could hear raised voices behind the closed door. Lynne’s higher tones were more audible than Chakotay’s, but his could occasionally be heard as well. The voices rose and fell, and then there was silence.

A moment later the ready room doors slid open, and Chakotay stalked out with Lynne hot on his heels.

“I said this conversation is over!” he snapped. Lynne reached out, grabbed his arm and jerked him around.

“It is not over until you pull your head out of your ass and do something!” she shouted.

The entire bridge crew went still, watching the two combatants go toe to toe.

“I would love to do something!” Chakotay shouted back. “But my first responsibility is to this ship. I don’t have the luxury of thinking like a lover!”

“Bullshit! You don’t have to think like a lover to know that Kathryn Janeway is irreplaceable! She is invaluable to this ship and this crew, and you’re just throwing her away!”

“I AM NOT THROWING HER AWAY!” roared Chakotay. “I’m doing everything I can to get her out!”

“The fuck you are! If you were doing everything you could, you’d pull Voyager out of range and send an extraction team to this planet right now! Where are they?”
You think it’s that simple? Tell me, Lynne, who on this ship would you point to and send on a goddamn suicide mission?”

The words seemed to snap Lynne out of her rage, and she straightened up from her aggressive stance.

“I’ll go,” she said quietly.

“What?”

“I said, I’ll go. You don’t have to point to anyone. I’m volunteering.”

The bridge was dead silent.

“I appreciate the offer,” said Chakotay at last. “But I’m not sending a team to certain death. In the first place, we don’t have a way of getting them down. And even if we could, the risk is too high. Captain Janeway herself would not approve of such a high-risk effort.”

Lynne’s calm demeanor vanished as quickly as it had come.

“That is not true and you know it!” She stabbed a finger in Chakotay’s chest. “If it were you down there, she’d be leading the team herself. She told me once that there were only three rules to being a captain: keep your shirt tucked in, go down with the ship, and never, ever abandon a member of your crew. How can you even consider leaving her there? Are you really that much of a chickenshit?”

“You are out of line!” shouted Chakotay. “I understand your concern, but get off this bridge now before I have you thrown off!”

“Why? You can’t handle an honest appraisal of your cowardice?”

Chakotay was clearly seething. He looked over at Tuvok, who nodded. Oblivious to the exchange, Lynne poked him in the chest again. “There’s a fine line between playing it safe because of responsibility, and playing it safe because you don’t have the balls to be a real leader. And I’m the only one who can tell you that little bit of truth because I’m not in your system. So show some goddamn fortitude, Chakotay, and DO WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE! I’m already offering—send me! What the hell have you got to lose?”

The turbolift doors opened and two security personnel entered. B’Elanna felt sorry for them, especially Lieutenant Parker, who’d already witnessed Captain Janeway being beaten and was now about to be asked to force her lover off the bridge. Ensign Emily Watson didn’t look too happy, either.

“ Escort Ms. Hamilton back to her quarters,” ordered Chakotay in a
tight voice. Watson and Parker came down from the upper deck and approached Lynne from behind, with Parker in the lead.

Without taking her eyes from Chakotay’s, Lynne said, “Touch me, Parker, and I’ll take you out.”

Parker hesitated, and Chakotay gave him a hard look. “You do not take your orders from her, Lieutenant. Get her off my bridge!”

Parker put a hand on Lynne’s arm, and B’Elanna watched in shock as her friend whirled around, pushed her hip into him and threw him over her shoulder. He crashed against the captain’s chair and lay dazed on the floor, as Watson drew her phaser and fired at point blank range. The energy from the close shot spun Lynne around, and it was only Seven’s Borg reflexes that saved her from smashing face first into the upper deck rail. Leaning over the rail from her station, Seven caught her friend by the shoulders, then held her limp body in place while she vaulted over the railing. She crouched, gathering Lynne up in her arms, then straightened and looked at Chakotay.

“Did I give the order to use weapons?” the Commander shouted.

None of the stunned bridge crew responded. Finally, Watson stammered, “N…no sir! I felt it necessary to use force to subdue her, sir!”

Seven took the attention off the poor Ensign. “Shall I take her to her quarters, Commander?” she asked in a tone of voice that was several degrees cooler than normal.

Chakotay looked very tired. “No. Take her to the brig,” he said. “The charge is assaulting a Starfleet officer.”

“Very well,” said Seven. She paused, then added, “For the record, Commander, I will also volunteer for the extraction team—should you decide to authorize one.” She turned, cradling Lynne’s body, and made her way off the bridge.

Ouch, thought B’Elanna. Coming after Lynne’s devastating accusations, Seven’s short statement had just about emasculated Chakotay. She understood, to some extent, the hard spot he was in. But Lynne was right—Captain Janeway would never leave a crewmember behind. Chakotay couldn’t play this one safe.
Janeway was feeling a distinct sense of déjà vu as she disassembled her comm badge. It had proven useless in contacting Voyager, and she suspected a dampening field. But she knew from experience that it was possible to manually calibrate an ex-Borg’s bioelectric field to match that of a force field. She’d done it once with Seven, while escaping a ship that was taking them back to Borg space. She hoped it worked as well the second time. But her vision was a bit blurry and her hands shook, making the operation take a good deal longer than it should have. Revi had offered to help, but Janeway knew exactly what she was looking for and reasoned that she could do it faster, regardless of her injuries.

“Tell me about your crew,” said Revi. “I know you have several ex-Maquis, an ex-Borg, a Talaxian and an Ocampan—quite a diverse group. And yet they seem to work together very well.”

“Yes, they do. Though we don’t have the Ocampan anymore; Kes left the ship three years ago. But to add to your diverse list, our chief medical officer is a hologram—” Janeway saw Revi’s wince and decided to move right past the Doctor—“and we have a Human on board who was born over four hundred years ago.”

“Really!” Revi looked fascinated. “How on earth did that happen?”

As Janeway worked on her badge, she found herself telling Revi all about Lynne, in far greater detail than she’d intended. By the time she had
the microfilament she was looking for, Revi knew more about her relationship with Lynne than most of the crew on Voyager.

Revi turned her head, offering access to her starburst implant. “You must miss her very much,” she said.

Dear god, but she did. Janeway had to lower her hands for a moment while she composed herself.

“Captain? Are you all right?”

“Fine, Revi. I’m fine.” But she wasn’t. She didn’t know if it was the concussion, the constant pain, or the overall stress of her last few days, but suddenly her emotional control was slipping. Her relationship with Lynne seemed doomed to failure. She might be able to get herself and Revi out of here; she might even be able to help Revi find absolution in some way. But could she help herself? What was there left for her on Voyager if she and Lynne couldn’t work things out? And why didn’t Lynne want to take that next step?

“Captain.” Revi’s voice was soft and Janeway realized she’d blanked out for a moment. A gentle hand wiped away a tear she hadn’t even felt, and she turned her head away in embarrassment.

“I’m certainly not Betazoid,” said Revi. “But it’s pretty obvious that you’re in pain. Can I help in any way?”

“Not unless you have a degree in counseling,” said Janeway, still watching the opposite wall. “Lynne and I are at an impasse right now, and I’ve managed not to deal with it for two days so far. But I’ll have to face it sometime, and it’s just...hard.”

There was complete silence, and finally Janeway turned to see what Revi was thinking. Warm brown eyes looked at her with understanding.

“Do you think you can continue now?” Revi asked, gesturing toward the microfilament in Janeway’s hand.

Surprised, Janeway simply nodded. Revi turned her head again, and she set to work. The task soothed her thoughts, and she was hardly aware when she began speaking.

“I asked her to move in with me. It took me months to get to that point; to make that kind of commitment. And she turned me down. Said it sounded to her like I just wanted more convenience. Apparently she’d rather keep her own space than be with me. I can’t understand it—she gave up _everything_ for me, and now she doesn’t want to commit? I just don’t know where we’re supposed to go from here.”
There was a long silence, punctuated by tiny beeps as she worked. “Your implant is different from Seven’s,” she said. “This is going to take longer than I thought.”

“It’s probably an older version,” said Revi. “I was severed from the Collective over eight years ago.”

Several minutes passed, the beeps from Revi’s implant a tiny counterpoint to the harsh sounds coming from the prison cells around them.

“Captain.”

“Hmm?”

“Why didn’t you ask her to marry you? I mean, it sounds like that’s the next logical step.”

Janeway nearly dropped the tool she was holding. She sat there, stunned, until Revi turned to face her.

“Is that what she’s waiting for?” Her voice was nearly a whisper.

“I don’t know. But you said yourself that she’s already given everything up for you. Your asking her to move in could be interpreted as asking her to give up the last thing she has—her own space. And you’re not offering a commitment in return. Not really.”

Janeway closed her eye and replayed her last conversation with Lynne. Seen from the viewpoint Revi suggested, it took on a whole different form.

“I thought I was giving her my heart. She said I already had. Now I know what she meant.” She felt a surge of energy push back the fog that had been nibbling at the edges of her brain.

“Revi, we have to get out of here. I’ve got someone I need to talk to.”

“Then you’d better get back to work, Captain.” Revi smiled and turned her head once more.

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Tuvok looked through the force field to the figure slumped on the bunk. He’d known Lynne Hamilton for ten months now and had been training her for nearly six of them. In that time he’d learned to respect her. She worked hard and learned quickly; indeed, he had never had a student master the skills of Vulcan martial arts as readily as she was doing. In addition she was rational, logical and careful in her thinking. Except, apparently, when something threatened the woman she loved.
Although he could not approve the behavior he’d witnessed on the bridge, he could certainly respect that kind of loyalty. Janeway could not have asked for a more passionate champion.

He deactivated the force field and stepped into the cell. Though Ms. Hamilton had to be aware of his presence, she showed no signs of it.

“My security training, at some point, requires that each officer be stunned by a phaser in order to learn its effects on their physiology,” he said. “I believe we can now bypass that part of your training.”

Ms. Hamilton slowly raised her head and stared at the opposite wall. “That must be a popular part of your curriculum. I can’t say I’d ever want to experience it again.”

He sat on the bunk beside her and examined the wall as well. “It might interest you to know that Ensign Watson stunned you because she was afraid to engage you in hand-to-hand combat. As your instructor, I can only be pleased with the skills you displayed on the bridge.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ms. Hamilton turn to look at him. “You’ve got to be kidding,” she said.

“I do not kid.”

She snorted and returned to her perusal of the wall. “It may also interest you to know that after you were carried out, every single bridge officer volunteered for an extraction team. Seven of Nine was the first.”

She continued to stare straight ahead. “And what did Chakotay say to that?”

“He agreed to examine the option more carefully. A senior staff meeting was called, and a plan of action has been decided.”

He turned to face her, and saw a light of interest for the first time since he’d stepped in the cell.

“You and Commander Chakotay were both correct in your thinking, though somewhat less than logical in how you expressed yourselves. He cannot afford to risk the ship, but neither can he allow the Dakmorian legal system to carry out a predetermined trial with a death sentence for an act of self-defense. I have found no precedence for a legal defense, and do not believe that we can solve this problem within the Dakmorian system. Therefore, we will utilize a two-pronged strategy. Voyager will withdraw from Dakmor, citing our submission to their superior offensive systems. We hope that the Dakmorians are confident enough in their
superiority to not suspect such a submission to be anything but genuine. But the *Delta Flyer* will stay behind, with Lieutenant Paris, the Doctor, and a two-person extraction team aboard.”

He noted that he now had Ms. Hamilton’s full attention.

“This team will beam to the surface outside the city limits, penetrate the city and prison defenses, extract Captain Janeway and, if possible, the ex-Borg, and beam back. Currently Seven of Nine and Lieutenant Torres are working on a way to defeat the transporter jamming system. They are close to a solution. When they find it, they can modify portable transporter pattern enhancers to allow a beam-out from any location.”

“Okay,” said Ms. Hamilton. “But when the Dakmorians detect the *Delta Flyer* after *Voyager* has supposedly given up and pulled out, aren’t they going to be a bit suspicious?”

Tuvok inclined his head. It had not been a small problem.

“Mr. Kim and I have located a small weakness in the shielding of the nearest orbital platform, and have modified the *Delta Flyer*’s shields to allow it to pass through. Before *Voyager* leaves, the *Delta Flyer* will approach the platform as if it were simply moving past, initiate transport, then immediately take shelter within the platform’s own shields. Their sensors should not detect the shuttle.”

“And when it’s time for it to leave again?”

“Then we will all trust in Lieutenant Paris’ skills.”

She nodded, her expression thoughtful. “There seems to be an awful lot of luck involved in this plan.”

There were certainly more uncontrollable factors than he preferred. “What many call luck is often simply good preparation. We will be as prepared as possible.”

Her next question was one he had expected; he was only surprised that it had taken her this long to ask.

“Who’s on the team?”

“I will lead it,” he said. “And although several members of the crew volunteered to accompany me, Commander Chakotay saw the logic in assigning someone who is not currently working any other assignment, has been training in infiltration, and is, in fact, in the process of working off a sentence of confinement to the brig.”

It was extraordinary, he thought, the way her face and body language came alive at that information.
“Thank you, Tuvok. I know that was your doing. When do we leave?”

“As soon as Seven of Nine and Lieutenant Torres can find a way to transport. The Delta Flyer is prepped and ready, and all necessary gear is aboard, including more discreet clothing.”

She stood up, nearly bouncing on her feet. “Well then, let’s get changed.”

“Sit down, Ms. Hamilton.”
Slowly, she obeyed.
“You realize that you are charged with assaulting a Starfleet officer.”
She winced, but nodded.
“This is a serious charge, and there is little defense considering that the act was committed in front of several witnesses. Commander Chakotay has agreed that your participation in what may very well be an impossible mission will serve as your sentence. However, Captain Janeway will be informed of the charge upon her return to the ship, and she will have the option of reviewing and changing your sentence.”

Now she looked pained, but nodded again. “I’d happily spend the rest of our trip in here if it meant bringing her back. As long as she’s alive, she can be just as angry at me as she wants.”

He had expected no less.
“I will speak to Captain Janeway on your behalf. Before doing so, I will need to understand the motivation behind your behavior. Obviously you are worried about her safety, but the entire crew shares your concern and yet none of them felt compelled to call Chakotay a coward who lacked testicles. You are normally more…tactful.”

Her lips twitched, but she said nothing.

He wasn’t looking forward to this next part, because experience told him that an emotional minefield lay dead ahead. But this was his job—and he had come to consider Ms. Hamilton something of a friend.

“Is there anything else that I should be aware of?” he asked.

She studied her hands for some time as he waited. At last she sighed and said, “The last time I saw Kathryn, we didn’t part on the best of terms. We had a…a misunderstanding, and didn’t have a chance to sort it out before she left.” She looked up. “If anything happens to her and we end on that note, I won’t be able to live with it. And I mean that quite literally.”
“I assume this misunderstanding was of a personal nature,” said Tuvok.

She nodded without speaking, and he waited again. It was his experience that most Humans, given enough time and silence, would eventually verbalize their issues. Ms. Hamilton took longer than average, but she didn’t disappoint—and once the words started, they came tumbling out.

“She asked me to move in with her. We were having an absolutely wonderful day together, and then she asked me to move in with her, and I just froze. All I could think was that I didn’t want to. I didn’t want anything to change, and I made a mess out of everything, and she left angry and hurt. I left her two messages the next day that she didn’t return, and then she went to Dakmor. God, if I could have her in front of me right now I’d say yes in a heartbeat. I don’t know why I was so scared.”

“But you have just explained to me the cause of your fear,” he said. Why did he keep finding himself in these situations? Why did Humans have such a difficult time seeing what was right in front of them?

“When did I do that?”

“When you said you did not want anything to change. You have experienced more change in your life than almost anyone I have ever known or heard of. It is quite logical that you should be reluctant to initiate yet another alteration of your life at this time. I believe that if you were to express your fear to the Captain in those terms, she would understand and accept it.”

Ms. Hamilton stared at him, wide-eyed.

Having accomplished his objective in this conversation, Tuvok saw no need to continue. “Are you ready to leave, Ms. Hamilton?”

Present Tension

TWO HOURS LATER, Tuvok and Lynne Hamilton were in rocky, desert terrain, three kilometers out from the city’s boundary. So far, everything had proceeded according to plan. Voyager was gone, out of reach of the planet’s weapons installations, and the Delta Flyer was currently hiding inside the shields of the closest platform. Just before entering the shield, Lieutenant Paris had executed a quick transport, releasing the jamming field immediately afterwards. With luck, the Dakmorians would see only a
flicker in their field, attributable to nothing but a minor technical hiccup. But if the extraction team were discovered, they were entirely on their own. There was no room for error.

Now the difficult part began. Both Tuvok and Ms. Hamilton carried large packs containing the modified transporter pattern enhancers, a full medical kit, explosives, and a hand-held communicator with boosted transmitter levels and anti-jamming capabilities. In addition, each carried a tricorder, hand phaser, and phaser rifle. Ms. Hamilton’s intensive training had resulted in a more than adequate skill level with weapons, infiltration equipment and martial arts, but she had never taken part in a live mission before. Tuvok had no doubts about her abilities, but he considered her emotional strength where the captain was concerned to be something of an unknown factor. He would watch her closely.

They crouched behind a ridge, scanning the city’s perimeter. Tuvok’s energy-sensing field glasses showed the protective force field around the city, and he had to admire the redundant defensive systems. From a security standpoint, the Dakmorian’s systems were nearly ideal. From his standpoint, they were very inconvenient.

Ms. Hamilton silently showed him her tricorder, which had pinpointed the life signs at a thirty-two degree bearing from their position. He nodded, entered the coordinates in his glasses, and scanned the area. Ah. A large, square building, with what appeared to be weapons turrets at each corner and centered on each wall. And—he checked the energy settings—yes, another force field. Lowering the glasses, he considered their options. Getting through the transporter jamming field had taken the combined skills and intelligence of two of the most accomplished engineers he had ever known. He had no illusions about his own ability to penetrate the next two fields without the support of Voyager’s crew or systems. They had to find another way.

“Ms. Hamilton,” he said quietly. “Check the city perimeter force field for ports. The Dakmorians must transit through it somewhere. We don’t have the time or resources to shut any part of it down, so we will need to find a port and a way through it.”

She nodded and raised her glasses. Tuvok resumed his scan of the prison building, looking for a port in its field. After a quarter of an hour, he saw a hovercraft approach the building, pause, then pass through the field and settle to the ground. He marked the coordinates where the
hovercraft had passed through and turned to Ms. Hamilton, who was still scanning. Without taking the glasses from her eyes, she said, “There are two ports that I can see on this side. One seems to be regular traffic, and the other appears to be limited entry—all of the craft that have gone through look exactly the same.”

“Give me the coordinates of the limited entry port.”

He watched long enough to see a hovercraft enter the port, and noted that it was identical to the one he’d seen in front of the prison. Lowering his glasses, he said, “You have found our front door, Ms. Hamilton. That is a military entrance.”

As they packed up their glasses and began to move, she said, “Not to question you, but exactly how are we going to walk through a military entrance?”

“We are not going to walk through. We are going to fly through in a military hovercraft.”

“Okaaay. And how will we acquire this hovercraft?”

“We are going to set a trap for it. And you will be our bait.”

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Tuvok crouched behind a boulder and double-checked the charge and setting on his phaser rifle. He’d chosen his ambush carefully. The location was blocked from the port’s view by a steep dip in the approach path, and his position was blocked from the road by a curving, high bank of boulders. Ms. Hamilton stood at the edge of the approach path, looking considerably worse for wear than she had half an hour ago. They’d torn her clothes and rubbed dirt on her face and body, in order to give credence to the part she was about to play.

He heard the hum of an approaching hovercraft and gave a short whistle. Ms. Hamilton immediately stepped out into the approach path and began running straight down its center, and a moment later a hovercraft swept past Tuvok’s hiding place. He held his breath. They had seen no foot traffic on this road, so Ms. Hamilton’s presence was guaranteed to attract the attention of the hovercraft crew. Logically, they would stop to investigate the situation, but there was a chance that the Dakmorians were paranoid enough to shoot before stopping. He’d given Ms. Hamilton the odds, and she had chosen to proceed. He approved
her courage; it was not easy to run with one’s back to possible weapons fire.

She stopped, turned, and began waving her arms frantically. The hovercraft slowed and settled to the ground next to her, kicking up a small cloud of dust as it came to a rest. Tuvok brought the rifle to his shoulder.

The door opened and a uniformed Dakmorian stepped out. Ms. Hamilton rushed up to him, gesticulating frantically and pointing up the road. He couldn’t hear her words, but knew she was doing her best to convince the officer that she’d been attacked on the approach path. He waited, hoping that additional personnel would disembark and make their mission simpler. Unfortunately, missions were rarely as simple as one could wish and he was unsurprised when the officer took Ms. Hamilton by the arm and began to force her toward the craft. They had anticipated this possibility, and Tuvok took careful aim on the officer while Ms. Hamilton dragged her feet, putting up a token resistance. Just as they reached the entrance to the craft, she broke the officer’s hold and darted away. Tuvok dropped the man with a phaser bolt and was up and running almost before the Dakmorian had hit the ground, chasing Ms. Hamilton who had already jumped into the craft. By the time he reached the entrance, she was standing in it, smiling at him.

“Hi, Tuvok. Need a ride?”

He observed her relaxed stance. “If I did not know better, Ms. Hamilton, I would say you were enjoying this.”

She sobered. “Actually, I’m just enjoying still breathing at this point.” She ducked back into the craft and Tuvok followed her in, observing two stunned Dakmorians at the controls. He looked around the craft, noting the holding area in the back. Excellent.

“Drag these two over there,” he ordered, then went outside to pick up the fallen officer. Ms. Hamilton had moved one of the bodies into the holding area when he returned. He dropped the officer in the passenger area and helped her carry the second man to the back. Tuvok chose the man whose size most closely matched his own and stripped off his uniform, while Ms. Hamilton stripped the man Tuvok had carried in. He wore the fanciest uniform, almost certainly denoting a higher rank, and his uniform fit her well. Tuvok removed all weaponry from the three men, while Ms. Hamilton bound their hands and feet with the ties they’d brought.
“Who would have thought zip ties would make it to the twenty-fourth century,” she muttered as she worked.

“Pardon?”

“Never mind.”

She finished just as Tuvok located the force field controls for the holding area. He raised the field, securing two of the men, and then settled into the pilot’s seat. After a brief inspection of the flight controls, he lifted off, rotated the craft in place, and swung it around behind the boulders. Once they were out of sight of the approach path he settled the craft again, disengaged the engines, and made his way back to Ms. Hamilton, who still stood behind the officer. Pulling a hypospray out of his pack, he injected the man.

It didn’t take long for the man to come around, groaning.

“I can sympathize,” said Ms. Hamilton. “Feels like a train ran over you, doesn’t it?”

The man looked up at her. Despite being stripped and bound hand and foot, he showed no fear. Instead, he fairly simmered with outrage. “Who are you? How dare you attack an officer of the Protectorate?”

Tuvok moved into his line of sight. “We have no time to answer your questions. You will, however, answer mine. What is the code to pass through the city force field?”

The man did not answer, simply staring at Tuvok in anger.

“I will only tell you this once,” said Tuvok calmly. “You will tell me the code, or I will extract it from you. I assure you that you would prefer the former.”

“You will get nothing from me,” spat the officer.

“That is incorrect,” said Tuvok. “Ms. Hamilton, hold his head. Do not allow him to move it. It will be difficult in a few moments.”

He reached out, placing his fingers on the nerve points of the man’s skull. Blocking everything else from his mind, he concentrated on the energy beneath his fingers. Different physiology. These are not the right points. With his eyes closed, he moved his fingers around the man’s head until the energy lined up properly. Yes.

“My mind to your mind,” he said, beginning the ancient ritual. “My thoughts to your thoughts...”

His mind sank into that of the Dakmorian officer, moving through foreign pathways and in some cases, forcibly shoving through narrow or
blocked spaces. Dimly, he could hear the man screaming, but it was very distant, in the physical world. He was wholly immersed in the world of thought now, searching for information. The pathways of this man’s mind were just different enough from any known species to cause him some difficulty, but he pressed on. The stakes were too high to fail.

Eventually he found the information he sought, and carefully backed out. Withdrawal from a mind meld was even more critical than entry—any error could result in damage to his own mind. This withdrawal had to be slower than usual, due to the man’s foreign pathways, but the damage Tuvok had caused on entry helped mark his way out. Eventually he felt himself settling back into the familiar confines of his own mind, and opened his eyes.

Ms. Hamilton was still holding the now limp officer’s head. She was staring at the man with a look of total horror, her face white under the grime.

“Tuvok,” she whispered.

“It was necessary.”

“He was in agony.”

“Yes. A Vulcan mind meld, done against the will, is very painful for a Vulcan. For another species, whose mental pathways are not compatible, it can be…devastating. He will not recover his mental faculties.”

She raised haunted eyes to his.

“Ms. Hamilton,” said Tuvok firmly. “Do not allow your admirable sense of ethics to prevent you from completing this mission. We have a specific objective, and we must do whatever is necessary to achieve that objective. Do you understand?”

She swallowed and nodded, looking very unhappy.

“Remember that you volunteered for this mission,” he said. “It is too late to change your mind because you dislike what is required of you.” Then, more kindly, he added, “What is Captain Janeway’s life worth to you?”

“Everything,” she said immediately.

“Then you must be prepared to do anything to save her.”

“I know. I know what you’re saying, Tuvok. And I’m sorry you’re having to deal with this. It’s just…” She stopped and shook her head. “I’m okay,” she said in an entirely different voice. “Let’s get on with it.”

He nodded, and together they dragged the man back to the holding
cell. While Ms. Hamilton raised the field, Tuvok retook the pilot’s seat. She joined him in the copilot seat a moment later, tucking her hair under the officer’s cap. Soon they were back on the approach path and streaking for the port.

Once Tuvok had the craft on its course, he looked over at Ms. Hamilton. She was resting her head against the back of the seat and staring straight ahead.

“I normally do not teach guerilla tactics until later in the security course,” he said. “We may be able to bypass some aspects of that part of your training as well.”

She smiled, and some of the tension went out of her body. “Thanks. And I’ll never tell anyone that you actually have a sense of humor.”

“I do not. I was perfectly serious.”

After a pause, she asked, “Tuvok? Would you have done the mind meld if he’d told you the code?”

“Yes. The likelihood of him giving false information was too high. However, if he had told me anything, it would have made it easier for me to locate the information. We cannot afford to make any mistakes, Ms. Hamilton. There will be no second chances.”

Their arrival at the port ended any further conversation. Ms. Hamilton held her tricorder up, reading the energy levels of the field while Tuvok came to a halt just in front of it. He entered the code, and the control panel in front of him lit briefly with an amber light.

“Go,” she said.

He accelerated once again, taking care not to move too quickly.

“God, Tuvok, this might actually work,” she said in a tone of amazement.

“I am surprised to learn that you had doubts,” he answered dryly. “However, I must caution you against becoming overconfident. The mission is not a success until it is completed.”

“Climb one pitch at a time, right. I understand.”

He did not recognize the reference, but had no time to ask for clarification as he became preoccupied by steering the craft through the city streets to the next set of coordinates. Their entry through the prison force field was as easy as the perimeter entry, and he settled the craft in the landing area. They rose immediately and shouldered their packs.
“Leave your rifle here,” said Tuvok. “We are attempting to be inconspicuous, and these packs are too noticeable already.”

“All right. So now what? We walk through the front door?”

“Not this time,” said Tuvok. “I did not see any dark-skinned Dakmorrians during our time in the city, nor did I see any female officers.”

“I’ve got my hair up,” she protested.

He raised an eyebrow. “That is not your only female characteristic. We will look for a side door and attempt an entry where there are fewer observers. Remember, walk as if you know exactly where you are going and will tolerate no interference. Even if people wonder about us, attitude is often all that is required to make them pause. I believe those bars on your uniform will be useful.”

She nodded. Tuvok activated the entry control and they stepped out, closing and locking the hovercraft entry. Keeping their eyes straight ahead, they strode past the main entrance and around the corner of the building. There were several side doors to choose from, one of which had a recessed entry. For all their technology, the Dakmorians obviously were not used to dealing with guerilla tactics and had not designed their buildings or systems with that in mind. Tuvok appreciated their lack of experience.

With Ms. Hamilton blocking the view from behind and checking her tricorder for Captain Janeway’s life sign, Tuvok pulled out his own tricorder and quickly broke the locking code. It would have been most convenient if the officer’s knowledge had extended to this building’s individual codes, but he was prepared to do it the hard way. They entered the door and closed it behind them.

“She’s two levels up and one hundred and thirty meters this way,” said Ms. Hamilton, pointing. Tuvok nodded; the captain was on the other side of the building. They began walking, looking straight ahead but scanning in their peripheral vision for a way up to the next level. Several Dakmorian police were using the hallway as well, and Tuvok could see that they were attracting some attention. But no one approached or called out.

After traversing twenty meters, Tuvok felt a tap on his arm and looked to see Ms. Hamilton indicating a door on their left. A stairwell was visible through it. The door was not locked, and in moments they emerged onto the correct floor.

There were more police here, but still they moved through unchal-
lenged. Soon they arrived at the entrance to the holding cells: a narrow, open doorway protected by another force field.

Tuvok stepped to the control panel and began the process of determining the lock code. It was taking too long. He began to fear that this field was beyond the tricorder’s ability to break, and was just considering other options when a siren went off. Immediately he heard shouts and the sound of boots running toward them.

“Our time has expired,” he said. Stepping back, he pulled out his phaser and destroyed the control panel in a shower of sparks. The field dropped. “Quickly!”

They ran through the doorway and narrowly missed being taken out by the guard on the other side. Green bolts of energy filled the air; Lynne dropped to the floor while Tuvok dove and rolled, coming up in a crouch and stunning the guard. Lynne’s phaser went off to his right, and he looked to see another guard dropping to the floor. He quickly scanned the room, finding no other targets. Opposite the doorway they’d entered was a sealed door, its window showing a long hall lined by holding cells on both sides. Another door on his right led to yet another long hall—which was filled with uniformed Dakmorians, all armed and all running toward them. A glance out the destroyed force field showed a similar view.

“Over here!” He ducked behind a desk, the only cover in the room, and was joined a moment later by Ms. Hamilton.

“You take the right hall, I’ll take the front.” She looked tense and scared, but nodded. A hail of energy bolts lanced into the room then, and all his attention was taken up by efforts to stay alive. He fired whenever he could, noting with some satisfaction that the bodies were piling up in his hallway. He could hear Ms. Hamilton’s phaser firing regularly beside him; a good sign. But the firefight went on for far too long, and Tuvok was growing concerned. The longer they were pinned down, the less their chances were of getting to the Captain. One of them would have to keep moving while the other stayed there, holding off the Dakmorians. Of the two of them, he was more experienced in a firefight.

“Ms. Hamilton!” he shouted over the high whine of energy bolts. “You must continue! Go out the door behind us; it leads to the cell block. I will stay and give you as much time as I can.”

“I can’t leave you!” she shouted back.
“You will do as I order or you will condemn the Captain to certain death. Go now! We are running out of time.”

With a cry of frustration, she dropped her phaser in front of him, crawled to the door, and hit the control panel. When the door slid open, Tuvok sent a hail of phaser fire down the opposite hall, covering her as she jumped up and took off running down the back hall. As soon as the door closed behind her, Tuvok shot the control panel, destroying the electronics and temporarily sealing the door. Certainly there was a manual override somewhere, but this would delay any initial attempts to pass through. He picked up her phaser and began firing down both halls simultaneously. He hadn’t expected her to give him the phaser—it increased the amount of time he could hold off the Dakmorians, but gave her one less tool for the task ahead of her. Nevertheless, she was his best student. If the odds were in their favor, she would get the job done.

Now, he thought, would be a good time for Captain Janeway’s famous luck to come into play.
It had taken much longer than Janeway expected to complete the alterations to Revi’s implant. Her condition made it difficult to concentrate or hold her hands steady, and they were interrupted at regular intervals by the passing of a guard. Whenever they heard boots approaching, Revi would get up and lie on the other bunk while Janeway sat in place, eyes closed and head resting against the wall. Often the guard would stop in front of their cell for several seconds before moving on. Revi said they were stopping to stare at her. Janeway heard the resignation in her voice, as well as the unspoken thought: once a Borg, always a Borg. She knew that, to some extent, her own crew had been guilty of the same assumption about Seven. But they’d learned to accept her over time, and Seven had changed as well. She felt certain that Revi would find a far more accepting environment on Voyager.

But first, there was the little matter of their jailbreak.

While working on Revi’s implant, they’d been able to time the passing of the guard. It turned out to be very regular, and now they were simply waiting for the next one to come by. After his passing they would wait two more minutes, giving him time to get out of hearing range, before they made their attempt.

The guard’s boots sounded in the distance, a measured pace for which Janeway had developed an intense dislike. It spoke of arrogance and over-
confidence, and she was looking forward to showing these Dakmorians that not all of their prisoners were totally under control.

The steps drew closer and she leaned her head back, closing her good eye. Normally it would be difficult for her to sit still at a time like this, but now her body welcomed the chance to relax. She’d said nothing to Revi, but she was very concerned about her mobility. After finishing the work on Revi’s implant, she had taken a few practice steps around their tiny cell—and each one had been a breath-stealing agony. Somehow she would have to summon up the will to push through that pain. There was simply no other option.

Step, step, step. Pause. The guard was in front of their cell, watching the Borg on display. She heard nothing but a faint rustle of fabric as he shifted his stance, and then he moved off again. Opening her eye, she looked over at Revi, who silently got off her bunk, sat next to Janeway and wrapped a supporting arm around her shoulders.

“Come on. Let’s get you ready to go,” she whispered.

With Revi’s help, Janeway got up and moved to the entry. They stood in front of the field until Revi nodded her head, her internal chronometer keeping perfect time. She stepped through and turned with a big smile.

“Nice work, Captain.” A moment later, she’d disabled the force field and Janeway joined her in the hallway. They turned in the opposite direction from where their guard had gone, and had taken all of five steps when the siren sounded.

“Damn!” Janeway glanced around for somewhere, anywhere to hide besides their cell. All she could see was a long hallway with cells on all sides; maybe one of them was empty. She moved painfully forward. Running footsteps could soon be heard—but they were moving away from them, not toward them.

“I don’t think that’s because of us, Captain,” said Revi. “I don’t suppose you have any friends in high places?”

Janeway grinned. “Actually, I do. And they love to cause trouble.”

“Then let’s take advantage of it.”

They moved as fast as Janeway could tolerate. Other prisoners stared at them as they passed, but none said a word, apparently too frightened by the sight of Revi. Janeway was glad for the small favor, since a prisoner uproar was the last thing she needed right now.

When they arrived at a T-intersection, she paused.
“This way,” said Revi as she turned left.
“How do you know?”
“I was awake when they brought us through here.”

They made their way down the hall, passing several more intersections. Janeway shook her head at the seemingly endless rows of cells. This was a vast holding facility, and it appeared to be full. No healthy society would incarcerate this large a percentage of its citizens.

Stopping in front of a large control panel, Revi said, “Hold on, Captain. I may be able to figure out what’s going on.” She extended her organic arm, and Janeway watched in fascinated horror as two assimilation tubules leapt out of a wrist implant that could easily pass as a rather interesting bracelet. As the tubules penetrated the panel, Revi’s eyes closed and she went very still.

Janeway sagged against the wall, grateful for the rest. She concentrated on catching her breath, a difficult task when each intake of air felt like something sharp was poking into her lungs. And that’s probably exactly what’s happening, she thought wryly.

Suddenly two sirens blared simultaneously, from different parts of the building. Janeway looked up at Revi, who opened her eyes and pulled her arm back, ending her connection.

“Security logs report two intruders at the entrance to the cell block,” she said. “They’re pinned down by sixty officers, with more on the way. So I created a little distraction for them. Let’s see if we can go help.”

Bracing herself, Janeway pushed off from the wall and took a step forward. Running footsteps brought her head up—these were coming straight toward them. A Dakmorian officer came around the corner at the end of the hall, saw them, and increased his speed. A second man came out of an intersection between them and the officer. He looked at the running officer, then down the hall toward Janeway and Revi. Shouting a warning, he raised his weapon toward them.

Revi immediately stepped in front of her. She heard someone scream, “No!” and felt an energy bolt sizzle past. By the sound of it she knew it wasn’t a stun bolt. Revi sprinted away, revealing the two Dakmorians rolling on the floor and grappling for the weapon. One of them was hampered by a large pack and was clearly taking the brunt of their exchanged blows. His opponent connected with his jaw, snapping his head...
back and knocking his cap off. A long braid of dark hair spilled out, and Janeway’s heart stopped as she recognized her lover.

“Lynne!” she shouted. “Revi, help her!”

Never in her life had she felt so helpless as she did now, weaponless and hardly able to walk, much less aid her partner. Lynne was fighting for her life and she could do absolutely nothing about it except pray that Revi could get there in time.

Prayer wasn’t enough. She heard the weapon fire, and both bodies stopped moving.

Oh my god, Lynne…

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The power cells on Tuvok’s phasers were getting low. At the current rate of firing, he estimated that he could hold off the Dakmorians for another three to four minutes. If Ms. Hamilton encountered no delays or problems while locating Captain Janeway, it might be enough. He could no longer spare any concern for his captain and crewmate, however. His entire life had come down to the next three minutes. He felt no sorrow at his imminent death—his life had been full of intriguing experiences and great opportunities for learning, and his death would be for a good purpose. His only regret was that he would never have the chance to see T’Pel again. He hoped his wife might find a new mate; she was too young to spend the rest of her life alone.

The next three minutes went by quickly, and he set aside one phaser while it still had enough energy for a final kill shot. He would not be taken alive. With the remaining phaser in hand, he readied himself to pick out his last targets.

Two alarm sirens went off, and his first thought was that Ms. Hamilton had tripped them. But then he realized that the sirens came from different parts of the building—something else was going on. The blizzard of energy bolts that had been flying past him suddenly diminished greatly in number, and he looked out from his cover. Half of his opponents were running back down the halls, apparently in response to the new alarms. Tuvok took immediate advantage of the reduced fire, shrugging out of his pack and pulling out two explosive charges. They were powerful ones, strong enough to destroy both corridors and
everyone in them. The blast would kill him as well, but his own death was a moot point now.

It took only seconds to arm the charges. He fired several shots down one hall, threw a charge, and did the same with the other. Then he dove under the desk and covered his head.

The explosions collapsed the room around him, burying him in debris. His last thought was one of satisfaction: he had bought the captain and Ms. Hamilton the time they needed.

Janeway moved as fast as she could, but it was still a frustrating crawl. All she could do was watch as Revi ran the last few meters to the still bodies, picked up the Dakmorian, and threw him clear across the hallway. His body hit the wall with a thump and slid to the floor, leaving a dark smear behind. Revi dropped to her knees beside Lynne’s body and began to check her for injuries, and Janeway waited, her heart in her mouth. Then the universe handed her an entirely undeserved miracle: Lynne raised her head, and when Revi stood and held out her hand, Lynne grasped it and was pulled to her feet, apparently uninjured.

The next second they all nearly lost their balance as two explosions rocked the building. More alarm sirens began to shriek, and Janeway suspected that whoever was here with Lynne had just caused a whole lot of trouble.

Lynne looked down the hall toward her, took a few wobbling steps, and broke into a run, with Revi right behind her. She stopped in front of Janeway, her face a mask of horror as she reached out.

“Kathryn! Oh god, what did they do to you? I’m afraid to touch you.”

“I’m all right,” said Janeway. “It’s nothing the Doctor can’t fix. Are you all right?”

Lynne followed her gaze to her own blood-soaked uniform. “It’s not mine.”

The relief sapped what was left of Janeway’s energy, but she mustered up enough to ask, “Who’s here with you? What’s happening?”

Lynne began frantically twisting out of the pack she carried. “It’s just Tuvok and me; I left him back at the entrance. I’m getting you out of here right now.” She dropped the pack to the floor and pulled out a transporter.
pattern enhancer. “Here,” she said, shoving it toward Revi and pointing. “Set this up over there.” She handed a second enhancer to Janeway, who took it automatically and then winced at the pain the movement caused. Lynne straightened up with the third enhancer in hand and caught Janeway’s wince. Her face darkened with rage.

“Those fucking bastards. I’d be happy to kill every last one of them.” She took the enhancer out of Janeway’s hand and ran to set it up, leaving the captain to look after her in shock. Lynne wasn’t kidding; her eyes had been murderous.

With both of her pattern enhancers set up and activated, Lynne ran to Revi and activated hers as well. She pushed Revi inside the enhancers’ perimeter and dashed back to her pack, pulling out a hand-held communicator.

“Hamilton to Delta Flyer.”

There was a long pause, a little static, and then Tom’s voice came through.

“Lynne, good to hear from you. Do you have them?”

“Yes,” said Lynne, looking into Janeway’s eyes. “The enhancers are on. Lock onto them and beam two out.”

It was only then that Janeway realized Lynne was standing outside the perimeter.

“Lynne! What are you doing?”

“I can’t leave Tuvok behind, Kathryn. I love you. Don’t ever forget that.”

Revi stepped out of the perimeter as well, and Janeway started to move toward them—but the familiar tingling of a transporter stopped her motion, and then she was standing in the warm and comforting confines of the Delta Flyer.

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The next twenty minutes were the longest of Janeway’s life. The Doctor immediately descended on her, despite her efforts to wave him off—though she certainly appreciated the analgesic hypospray. She wanted to do something, dammit, and he was getting in the way. Both Tom and the Doctor gently pointed out that neither they nor she could do anything at all, and her top priority now was to let the Doctor tend to her injuries.
while they waited for news from Lynne. She gave in with little grace, and submitted to the Doctor’s care feeling as if her heart were constantly one beat away from cardiac arrest. She’d never been this scared. Her mind whirled with images of Lynne’s death, and her fear and frustration created a mood so oppressively black that even the Doctor kept his mouth shut. She was wound tighter than a plasma coil, and when the call finally came through, she exploded off her chair, nearly knocking the Doctor over and never feeling a thing from the ribs that weren’t yet fully healed.

“Hamilton to Delta Flyer.” Lynne’s voice sounded breathless. “Three to beam up, and now would be good.”

Janeway was activating the transporter almost before Lynne finished her sentence. She turned to watch the beam resolve itself into a sight that she would never forget: her lover, grimy, bloody and grim-faced, wearing one pack and carrying a second; and Revi, who held a dusty, unconscious Tuvok in her arms.

“Tom, best possible speed back to Voyager,” she said.

“Yes, ma’am.” Tom was already on it.

“Doctor, I think you have bigger concerns than me.”

The Doctor nodded and moved toward the back of the craft, where Revi was settling Tuvok on the floor.

“Hold on!” Tom yelled. Janeway saw phaser fire streak by the Flyer’s windows just as the floor dropped out from under them. She grabbed onto the console and checked the readouts as Tom threw the Flyer into a dizzying series of banks, dives and dodges. She was beginning to feel queasy when he finally hit the warp drive and the shuttle settled into a smooth ride once more.

“Sorry about that,” Tom said. “Just a little farewell gesture from our hosts. We should rendezvous with Voyager in less than half an hour.”

“Thank you, Tom. Good job.” Janeway rose from her seat and looked at Lynne, who let go of the wall support she’d been gripping and stared back at her with an expression of utter exhaustion. For several seconds neither of them moved; then Lynne’s entire body seemed to deflate. She dropped the pack she was holding, shrugged out of the other one, and walked slowly toward Janeway, never breaking their eye contact. Janeway suddenly felt every one of her injuries again as she painfully closed the distance between them. They stopped a hairsbreadth apart, neither knowing quite where to touch the other. Lynne’s face was dirty and
bruised, she had a lump on her jaw, and it looked like she would soon be sporting a black eye to match Janeway’s own. Tentatively she raised a hand to tuck a bit of hair behind Janeway’s ear, her eyes filling with tears.

“Kathryn, I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

“I’m sorry too,” Janeway murmured. “We have a lot to talk about, but not here.”

Lynne swallowed and nodded, dropping her hand and turning away. Janeway caught it as it fell and tugged her back around. The green eyes that met her own were starting to glaze over with shock, and Janeway knew they had more to deal with than just their relationship.

“I love you too,” she whispered. “And I am so proud of you. You did what you had to do.”

Lynne nodded again, then sagged into the nearest chair and put her face in her hands. Janeway touched her back briefly before going to the rear of the shuttle.

“Doctor, report.”

The Doctor set aside his medical tricorder and pulled out the bone knitter. “Concussion, a few severe lacerations and bruising, broken humerus and a bruised kidney. He’ll be a bit sore, but there’s nothing life threatening. I’m knitting this arm and then it’s your turn, Captain.” His tone left no room for discussion, not that Janeway was in the mood to fight anymore. With her team back on board, she wanted nothing more than to end this.

She turned to Revi and held out her hand, which was taken in a warm clasp. Janeway brought her left hand up and enclosed Revi’s, then looked pointedly at Revi’s own left arm. Revi hesitated, then awkwardly raised her cybernetic attachment and rested it against Janeway’s hand. Their eyes met for a long moment.

“Thank you,” said Janeway at last. “It means the world to me that you stayed behind to help Lynne and Tuvok. You didn’t even know them. I owe you a debt of gratitude.”

“No, you don’t. I was paying off my own debt to you. And I do know Lynne—I’ve seen her through your eyes.” She looked toward the slumped form at the front of the shuttle. “Don’t let that one go, Captain,” she said quietly.

Janeway watched Lynne, who hadn’t moved since sitting down. “I have no intention of it.”
Seven of Nine stood beside Commander Chakotay and watched as the Delta Flyer settled down in the shuttle bay. Captain Janeway had requested that she meet the shuttle, but she knew that meant she was really being requested to meet Revi Sandovhar, the former Borg who had caused this situation. Although she herself had benefited from the captain’s propensity to “pick up strays,” as she’d heard crewmembers put it, she couldn’t help but feel anger toward this latest one. She’d watched her best friend phasered on the bridge, Janeway had been severely beaten, and Janeway, Lynne, and Tuvok had all nearly been terminated. All because of this individual. Well, she would be professional for Captain Janeway’s sake, but that was all.

The shuttle doors opened and Janeway emerged, with Lynne right behind her. Seven felt a shock at viewing their condition—knowing of their injuries had apparently not prepared her for seeing them. But they were here and in no medical danger, according to the report from the Doctor. Behind Lynne came the ex-Borg. Terran, 173 centimeters, approximately 82 kilograms with her remaining Borg hardware. Dark hair, eyes and complexion—and looking straight at her. Seven stared her down, but the ex-Borg just raised an eyebrow and smiled. That startled Seven; she was unaccustomed to seeing an expression like that on an individual with
Borg implants. Tom Paris came out last; the Doctor and Tuvok had already transported to sickbay.

“Welcome back aboard, Captain,” said Chakotay. There was a tone of relief in his voice, and Seven suspected he was just as happy to hand over control of the ship as he was to see Janeway.

“Thank you. It’s good to be back. Chakotay, Seven, I’d like you to meet Revi Sandovhar, formerly of the Cooperative in the Nekrit Expanse. Revi, this is Commander Chakotay, my first officer, and Seven of Nine, my astrometrics officer.”

Chakotay offered his hand stiffly. Revi shook it and said, “Commander. On behalf of the Cooperative, I would like to offer my apology for our actions. It was a difficult time for us, and I have no excuse for the decision we made. But I would like you to know that your actions saved thousands of lives.”

Chakotay gave a short nod, but said nothing. Revi turned and offered her hand to Seven.

As they shook, Seven noted that Revi’s left arm was a cybernetic medical/repair attachment—she’d been one of the drones assigned to assimilation of new Borg and repair of existing drones. She shuddered internally. As a Borg, Seven had been responsible for the assimilation of thousands, but she’d never directly operated on an individual. Revi had been personally involved. She looked up into Revi’s eyes, and saw the knowledge there.

: Yes, I have done far worse than you, Seven of Nine, Tertiary Adjunct to Unimatrix Zero One. :

Seven went very still. She’d heard the voice in her head just as clearly as if she were still attached to the Collective. But that was inconceivable. Her external transceiver had been destroyed when Janeway severed her link, and her neural transceiver could only be accessed by a very strong transmission. The type of transmission that a single drone could not accomplish.

: As a repair drone I have a high-powered transmitter in my cortical implant. It allowed me to reach drones who for any reason were not receiving intact transmissions from the Collective. Obviously you never required services from drones like me, or you would be aware of our capabilities. Seven, Captain Janeway is talking to you. :

She actually heard the smile in Revi’s last thought, even as she saw it
on her face. Turning to the Captain, she accessed her eidetic memory and replayed Janeway’s question.

“Yes, Captain, I would be happy to show Revi around the ship. But does she not require medical attention?”

“Not that your Doctor can provide.” Revi spoke aloud. “I have some system malfunctions caused by an electromagnetic shock administered by the Dakmorian. A repair drone would be handy—” Seven saw a ghost of a wink—“but barring that, my own nanoprobes will eventually resolve the problems. I just need to fuel them, and I can do that through eating.”

“Would a Borg regeneration unit help?” asked Janeway.

Revi seemed momentarily stunned. “That…would be very helpful indeed,” she said, after a noticeable pause. “Do you mean to say that you have one?”

“We have four,” said Seven. “If you will come this way, I will show you. Captain?”

Janeway immediately excused them, and they exited the shuttle bay. To any observer it would have appeared that they moved through the ship in total silence, but Seven and Revi were having an intense conversation.

:I’ve been looking forward to meeting you, Seven.:

:I admit I have not felt the same. I experienced anger toward you for indirectly endangering three of the most important people in my life.:

:You must know that if I could have prevented it, I would have. Captain Janeway jumped into a fight and allied herself with me, knowing that she risked injury. She is a remarkable woman.:

:Yes, she is.:

:Your feelings for her are very strong.:

:She took me from the Collective and forced me to live. I hated her for imposing her will on me. Now I would gladly give my life for her. She gave me everything. She is everything to me.:

Seven felt surprise through their link, a new and rather shocking phenomenon. Although their verbal communication was achingly familiar, never in her time with the Collective had she received emotions along with thoughts. How was it possible?

:It’s an unexpected aspect to being an ex-repair drone. The implanted transceiver allows direct mind-to-mind communication, but the Borg never expected that communication to involve more than thoughts or transmissions. There is so much more to the mind than they really understood. So much they dismissed as having no value.:
Such as emotions?

Yes.

Those “dismissed” aspects of the mind are the most difficult things I have experienced since being severed from the Collective. I do not understand much of what I feel.

There was a long pause, and Seven sensed that her companion was carefully considering what to say next. When Revi’s voice once again sounded in her mind, it was tentative.

I could help you with that, if you wanted. But I would not want to impose myself on you in any way.

Seven gave her offer serious consideration. She knew next to nothing about Revi, but the connection created by their joined minds was so comforting to her, so familiar, that she felt almost as if they were…family.

I appreciate your offer. I may accept it at a later time, but I would prefer to learn more about you first.

I understand. You have no reason to trust me.

I do not have sufficient data upon which to base a conclusion.

Revi laughed out loud, startling her. “You still talk like a Borg.”

“I was assimilated at the age of six. To me, talking like a Human is still the equivalent of speaking a foreign language. I am improving, however.”

“I have no doubt. You’re a remarkable individual,” Revi said as they approached Cargo Bay Two. “And I hope you’ll allow me to get to know you better. Whoa!” The doors had opened to reveal four glowing alcoves, and she stood rooted to the deck, her astonishment clear to Seven’s senses. “You weren’t kidding. This looks like a slice of a Borg cube.”

“Kidding is something I’m still learning to do. Lynne says I’m getting better at it.”

“Oh, I get the feeling that you have a wicked sense of humor,” said Revi, but her mind was no longer on their conversation. “So which one of these is yours?”

Seven indicated her alcove, and Revi stepped up on the dais to give it a careful inspection. Slowly, she moved to the adjoining one, her manner hesitant and her previous mental clarity oddly out of focus. Seven felt a bewildering mix of emotions from her, so jumbled that she could only pick out a few. The relief she could understand, but there were also apprehension and a strong sense of doubt, which she found baffling. Nothing
about an alcove could cause such a reaction. It was simply a tool, and one
that Revi clearly needed.

Before she could ask for clarification, Revi turned and said, “Looks like home to me. I would love to continue our conversation, but I haven’t regenerated in a very long time. Would you mind?”

“Certainly not. It is the purpose for which I brought you here.”

“Thank you.” She stepped into the alcove, but stopped just short of the connection. : You never answered me. Will you allow me to get to know you better?:

: Is it so important to you?:

: I’ve been alone for a long time. I think you understand exactly how alone. To make contact with a mind like yours is like…it’s like having a drink of fresh water handed to me when I’ve been dying of thirst. :

Her sincerity could not be doubted; it was a warm presence in their link and a powerful draw for Seven. Forgetting her earlier wariness, she nodded at the other woman. : I do understand. And the water is welcome to me as well. :

The warmth expanded into a wave of emotion that was reflected in Revi’s bright smile. “Then I guess I’d better get started,” she said, and stepped back, her body stiffening as the power nodes connected.

The sudden silence in Seven’s mind felt hollow and cold. Over the past three years, she’d made great progress in adjusting to that silence—or so she’d thought. In truth, it had taken only a few minutes of mind-to-mind communication for her to remember how devastating the loneliness of a single mind really was.

She stared at the unmoving figure in the alcove. She’d been prepared to dislike Revi, but their shared thoughts had quickly altered her perception. Now she found herself in a state of impatient anticipation, wishing she could somehow transport herself forward in time to the end of the regeneration cycle. She craved the comfort of another voice in her mind.

No, that was not accurate. She craved the comfort of this voice in her mind. It was so different from the dispassionate voices she’d known in the Collective. She had now tasted the best of both worlds: the Borg’s intimate mental connection, combined with Human individuality and emotions. Her link with Revi had just disintegrated three years of adaptation, leaving one overwhelming certainty.

She could never accept a silent mind after this.
Janeway rested her head against the back of her chair. The ready room door had just closed behind Chakotay, and she had a lot to think about. Jesus, what hadn’t happened? She’d had no idea of the Dakmorian threats to Voyager, the lack of support they’d been able to give the extraction team, or Lynne’s one-woman mutiny. Chakotay had looked sick when he’d told her about Lynne being phasered on the bridge, and it was only the obvious regret in his expression that kept her from climbing over her desk and throttling him on the spot. As it was, she hoped she didn’t run into Ensign Watson in the corridors anytime soon. The line between captain and lover was hopelessly muddled when it came to her own crew injuring Lynne.

She pinched the bridge of her nose, trying to stave off the headache that she could feel forming. The Doctor had patched her up—god, it was nice to see out of both eyes again—but she had a residual ache that he’d said would linger for a few days, and that wasn’t helping the situation any. What the hell was she going to do about Lynne this time?

Her door chimed again, the sound reverberating in her head. Goddammit, were they just waiting in line out there?

“Come,” she called impatiently, but her black mood dropped away as she saw her visitor. “Tuvok!”
“Captain.” He deposited a PADD on her desk and came to attention. “My report.”

“Please, have a seat.”

Only Tuvok and Seven could make sitting look like a military exercise, she thought as he assumed a ramrod straight position in his chair. She picked up the PADD with a smile. “You know, I could have waited until tomorrow for this. What did you do, write it on your sickbed?”

He inclined his head. “I expected that you would wish to be informed as soon as possible.”

“Thank you. But right now you’re more important. How are you feeling?”

“I am well, Captain. My injuries were largely superficial, and in fact my concern is for you. Are you well?”

“I’m okay. Can’t say much for Dakmorian hospitality, but it turned out all right.” She sobered. “Tuvok, thank you. Chakotay told me the nature of your mission to get me out; I had no idea.”

“Did he also tell you that there would likely have been no mission at all had Ms. Hamilton not challenged him?”

Well, that was news. “No, he didn’t mention that. He informed me of the Dakmorian threat to Voyager, and I agreed with him that he could not risk the ship.”

Tuvok looked uncomfortable. “Captain, I am not in the habit of second-guessing my superior officers. I obey my orders. But in this instance, I was not in total agreement with the Commander’s initial choice. Obviously the first priority was to protect Voyager, but he felt that you would not wish others to risk their lives for you and was reluctant to assign personnel to a likely suicide mission.”

“Well, he was right about that.”

“Nevertheless, your value to this ship must be taken into consideration. Like it or not, you are not the equivalent of a single crewman. Voyager depends on you to a very great extent, and would be crippled without you.”

Janeway didn’t know how to respond to that. At last she said, “You can’t assign values to individual lives.”

“That is incorrect. Your recovery was critical to the survival of this ship, and Ms. Hamilton reminded Commander Chakotay of that fact. Now, I
cannot defend the manner in which she chose to remind him, but the fact is that her direct and very public intervention in the decision-making process changed the course that was eventually decided on.” He shifted slightly in his chair, a sign of discomfort that spoke volumes. “Your duty will require you to review the Commander’s decision regarding Ms. Hamilton’s assault charge and subsequent sentence. I am here to advocate for Ms. Hamilton. Her actions were not well-considered, but I am also aware that she was under an extreme personal stress at the time. Given the extenuating circumstance, as well as her actions on Dakmor, I believe that her involvement in the extraction mission was adequate restitution for her actions on the bridge.”

Janeway stared at him. As chief of security, his recommendation regarding charges and sentences carried a great deal of weight. As her trusted friend and advisor, his opinion was highly valued. He knew that her position in this matter was very difficult, and in essence he was giving her his approval to let the whole thing slide without further comment or action.

“Thank you, Tuvok,” she said. “I’ll take your recommendation under advisement.” She knew he understood the real message.

Thank you, old friend.

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After Tuvok’s departure from the ready room, Janeway called up the security logs for the bridge. Selecting the time index for Lynne’s confrontation with Chakotay, she settled in her chair to watch. The scene that played out before her was like nothing she’d ever witnessed on a starship. She was stunned at her partner’s ferocious display of loyalty, love and faith; and completely dismayed at the manner in which she demonstrated those qualities. After Seven carried Lynne’s unconscious form off the bridge, she reset the time index and watched it again. When Lynne reacted to Chakotay’s invitation to choose personnel for a suicide mission, she knew exactly what was going through her partner’s mind.

You really love her, don’t you? Lynne had asked. I’m pretty sure the average captain would look at the success-to-failure risk on that one and dismiss it as a suicide mission. How ironic that they’d discussed Janeway’s mission to rescue Seven mere days before Lynne accepted a mission with a similar goal—and a similar probability of failure.
She logged off her terminal, handed the comm over to Chakotay on her way across the bridge, and stepped into the turbolift. Moments later she was in Cargo Bay Two, gazing up at the still form of Seven in her regeneration alcove. How many times had she stood here, watching this woman? She had been ready to give everything, including her life, to save Seven from the Borg Queen. And today Lynne had been prepared to do the same thing for her. It was humbling to be on this end of the equation, to be the one sacrificed for instead of the one making the sacrifice. For the first time, she wondered how Seven had felt about her captain risking everything for her. They’d never spoken about it after that day. Now she wished they had, because she could use some of Seven’s very logical thought processes right now. Seven probably had it all analyzed, catalogued and stored away. She, on the other hand, was floundering in her conflicting emotions. High on the list was guilt that her actions had set Lynne on such a dangerous path, but there was also an intense pride there, too. She was proud of her partner, and happy that in spite of everything, Lynne loved her enough to come after her.

Loved you enough to kill for you, came the unbidden thought, which brought her right back to the crippling sense of guilt.

She turned her gaze to the woman in the alcove next to Seven’s. If ever there was a woman who knew about guilt, it was Revi. Her face was smooth, unlined, set in the blank expression so characteristic of Seven when she regenerated. So different from when they were awake.

It was strange to have two women here now. She’d watched Seven regenerate so many times, deriving a sense of intimacy and peace when it had been just the two of them in the room—even if Seven had never known she was there. But now there were three, and if Revi stayed on Voyager, it was never going to be the same.

They were so different, these two. Seven, tall and lean and light, her stern exterior concealing a generous, caring heart. Revi, shorter and with a more powerful build, and dark exotic looks that belied the hurt, grieving soul within.

So much grief. So much guilt. Herself, Revi, Seven, Lynne—they were all too closely acquainted with loss. Life was just too short sometimes.

All the more reason not to leave anything unsaid, she thought. With a renewed sense of purpose, she turned and left the cargo bay. A few minutes later she walked into her quarters for the first time since Dakmor,
the familiar surroundings feeling even more welcome than usual. She stopped for a moment, simply taking in the sense of safety and comfort—and the blessed silence of the only place on this ship where no one demanded anything of her. It had taken her a long time to arrive at a point where she was ready to invite someone else in; someone who could make demands on her. And in all that time, it had never occurred to her that Lynne probably felt the same about her quarters. Her invitation had actually been a request for Lynne to leave her only sanctuary—and she had gotten angry when Lynne had said no. How stupid and blind could she be?

She took off her jacket, draping it over the back of a chair on her way to the replicator. “Computer, whiskey and soda.”

The first sip stung her throat; the second was merely bracing. By the third she felt the tension across her shoulders begin to relax, and with a sigh of relief she tapped her comm badge. “Janeway to Hamilton.”

“Hamilton here.”

“Lynne, if you’re free, I’d like to see you in my quarters as soon as possible.”

“I’ll be right there.”

Not five minutes later her door chimed. Janeway opened it, took Lynne’s hand, and pulled her into a fierce hug. They held each other tightly for a long time, letting the stress of the last few days drain out of them. At last she relaxed her grip enough to look into Lynne’s face, noting that the Doctor had removed all physical traces of her ordeal.

“I love you,” she said. “I love your loyalty, your belief in me, your determination, and your unwavering sense of self. And I’m sorry that I walked out on you before and ignored your messages. I didn’t understand, but that’s not an excuse. I should have talked to you.”

Lynne shook her head. “It’s not your fault,” she said in a strained voice. “I couldn’t have handled that worse if I’d tried. And then I was so afraid something would happen to you and it would end like that. I couldn’t have lived with it; god, what a nightmare...” She crushed their bodies together again, and this time a shiver racked her from bottom to top. Janeway held her even more closely, if that were possible, and when she felt a second shiver she turned her head to plant a soft kiss on Lynne’s cheek.

“Come on, sweetheart,” she whispered. “Let’s sit down.” Once she
had nudged her unresisting partner to the couch, she held up her drink and said, “I’ve had a traumatic couple of days, how about you?”

Lynne laughed shakily and rubbed her eyes. “Yeah, it’s been a bit rough. I’d kill for—I mean, I’d love a gin and tonic.”

“Coming right up.” Janeway retrieved the drink and pressed it into Lynne’s trembling hand.

“Thanks.” Lynne downed half the drink in one gulp and rested her head against the sofa back. “Christ, I’m so tired.”

“Maybe we should have this conversation later,” said Janeway as she sat down, putting her back to the armrest and crossing her legs beneath her.

“No way. I can’t live another hour with this between us.” Lynne straightened and turned to face her. “Tuvok had a few words with me while I was in the brig. He made me realize—” She stopped, her eyes widening. “Um, you do know I got thrown in the brig again, right?”

Despite the conversation they needed to have, and her deep concern for Lynne’s state of mind, Janeway couldn’t help but smile at the question. It was so typical of Lynne, and perhaps that very familiarity—something she had been so afraid of losing—was what brought the unbidden smile to her face. “Yes, I know,” she said.

Lynne took a deep breath. “All right, let’s get this over with first. How much trouble am I in?”

“What? None?”

Janeway shook her head.

“Why the hell not?”

Her smile grew larger. Trust Lynne to demand an actual explanation as to why she wasn’t in trouble. God, she loved this woman.

“Kathryn! Just tell me what’s going on, I’m dying here!” Lynne was not appreciating Janeway’s silent happiness.

She tried to erase the smile, but it wasn’t working and she had to give up. “Okay, okay. Yes, I’m fully aware of your actions and yes, I was racking my brain trying to figure out what to do with my authority-defying lover this time. And then I had a little visit from Tuvok, who defended your intentions if not your actions, and recommended that I let Chakotay’s decision stand. So I am.”

Lynne’s eyes went round. “That’s it?”
“Yes.”

“And you don’t have anything you want to say about that little scene?”

Janeway was enjoying this far too much, especially given the things they still hadn’t talked about. But Lynne’s disbelief was just too amusing.

“No, is there something you think I should be saying?”

Lynne’s jaw dropped open, and Janeway couldn’t stand it any longer. She broke up laughing, and oh, it felt good. Every time she looked up, the expression on Lynne’s face set her off again, and she knew she was on that knife edge where laughter runs very close to tears. She barely managed to stay on the right side of it, and probably looked a bit deranged, but it couldn’t be helped. Finally, she wound down enough to wipe her eyes and sit up straight again.

“Are you quite done?” asked Lynne.

Janeway snorted, tried valiantly to control herself, and went off into another fit of laughter. Lynne gave an exasperated sigh and flopped back against the couch.

At last Janeway felt she had herself under a modicum of control.

“I’m sorry, Lynne…”

“No you’re not.”

Janeway made a most uncaptain-like sound, but managed not to lose it this time. Reaching for her disgruntled lover’s hand, she said, “You’re right, I’m not. Yes, I do have a few things to say about that little scene. I watched it on the security log.”

“Oh shit, you saw that?” Lynne tried to pull her hand back, the dismay written clearly on her face.

“Twice, actually,” said Janeway, not letting her go. “And I have rarely seen such a display of loyalty. Lynne, you are my hero and my champion. With you watching my back I don’t see how anything in this universe can stop us from doing whatever we want to do. Now,” she raised her hand to stop Lynne from speaking, “I can’t say that I approve of your choice of phrasing, and you will publicly apologize to Commander Chakotay, Lieutenant Parker, and Ensign Watson. But as for the rest, I understand exactly what you were doing and why, and I love you for it. From what I hear, you’re the main reason I’m sitting here right now. So thank you, sweetheart.”

Lynne seemed momentarily at a loss, but then she relaxed. “You’re
welcome. And I’ll apologize to Chakotay and Parker.” She frowned. “I
don’t have much to say to Watson, though.”

“Lynne...”

“Okay, okay, I’ll apologize to her too. But she’s not on my happy list.”

“I know what you mean. I’m going to have a hard time not jumping
down her throat myself, but I have to leave that issue to Tuvok. You didn’t
see what I did. Close-range stun shots have a lot of power, and your face
almost made a high-speed acquaintance with the upper deck rail. Seven
saved you.”

“She did? I didn’t know that.”

“Mm-hmm. And then she pretty much ripped Chakotay’s testicles off
with a few well-chosen words. Poor Chakotay had a really bad
day.”

Lynne shook her head. “That was a bad day for everyone, Kathryn.
Some more than others.” She reached for her drink, took a large gulp, and
put it back down.

I know, Janeway thought. She wanted, no, needed to talk about what had
happened in that prison. Lynne’s eyes no longer held the glaze of shock
that she’d seen on the shuttle, but she knew the emotional shock would
take much longer to heal. And the hardest part was knowing that the
responsibility for that blow to Lynne’s psyche lay directly on her own
shoulders. If she hadn’t knowingly put herself in danger, Lynne wouldn’t
have come after her. Wouldn’t have killed for her.

She opened her mouth to speak, but Lynne beat her to it.

“If we’re done with the brig issue, then I really need to tell you
something.”

“Go ahead,” said Janeway, suddenly nervous.

“Okay. First of all, I’m so sorry about the way I reacted when you
asked me to move in with you. I was...I was scared, Kathryn. You
completely scared me to death. No, I mean it wasn’t you,” she added
hurriedly, seeing the look on Janeway’s face. “Fuck, I’m doing this just as
badly now as I did then.”

“Just tell me what you’re feeling,” Janeway said. “That’s all I ever
wanted to know.”

Lynne ran a hand over her hair in agitation. “You wouldn’t think that’d
be so hard, would you? Except I didn’t even know what I was feeling—not
until Tuvok pointed out the obvious. All I knew was that suddenly every-
thing was moving too fast, and it felt like you were pressuring me, and I
was losing control, and...I just froze. I’m really sorry about that. You deserved a real answer, and all you got was me being an idiot. But I didn’t know what to tell you.”

Suddenly Janeway remembered Lynne saying almost exactly those same words to her—right before she’d walked out. “You tried,” she said. “I just wasn’t listening.”

“I didn’t mean to hurt you,” said Lynne. “I know you thought you were making a big commitment, but it felt like you were trying to pull me away from the only security I have.”

“You own space.” Janeway silently thanked Revi for her insight.

“You knew that?”

“No,” she admitted. “I had some help. Ironically, mine was also a holding cell conversation.”

“Revi?”

“Yes. She’s remarkable, Lynne. I’m looking forward to learning more about her, and I think you’re really going to like her.”

“Hey, the woman patched you up and helped me save Tuvok. I already like her. By the way, is she okay? I haven’t seen her since we got back.”

“She’s still regenerating. Seven checked her program a couple of hours ago and it was only eight percent complete. Apparently it’s been a very long time since Revi regenerated, and her systems were running dangerously low. She’s probably not going to be up and about for another four days.”

“Wow. Well, I’m glad we have the facilities to help her out. So what did she tell you?”

“She just pointed out that you’d already given everything up for me, and I was essentially asking you to give up the one thing you had left, your own quarters. That hadn’t even occurred to me—all I could think of was that you didn’t want to move forward, and if we couldn’t go forward, what could we do? I was already envisioning the end of our relationship.”

Lynne looked stricken. “Oh god, no! That was the last thing on my mind. I never meant for you to think...” she trailed off. “Kathryn, don’t ever think that, okay? If there’s one thing I know for sure, it’s that I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

Janeway was floored—Lynne had never said that before. Her decision at Earth had certainly implied it, but she had never come right out and said it, and then her reluctance to move in had seemed to imply a lesser
commitment. Without ever hearing the actual words from her partner, Janeway had been left to draw her own negative conclusions.

“I do want to live with you,” Lynne added, shocking her even more. “And it will probably be sooner rather than later, now that I understand what’s going on in my own head. But I need a little time to adjust to—well, everything. I’m just not ready yet. Can you understand that?”

Janeway reached for her hand and laced their fingers together. “I understand that completely. And I’m sorry that I ever made you feel pressured; it wasn’t my intention. Take all the time you need, and let me know when you’re ready. And while you’re thinking about it, would you consider a different question?”

“What’s that?”

“Would you consider marrying me? Someday, when you’re feeling secure and don’t mind making yet another change?”

There was a very long pause while Lynne’s eyes went to the size of saucers.

“It occurred to me...well, frankly Revi suggested to me that I didn’t really offer you a serious commitment,” Janeway said into the silence. She was hoping she could talk the look of shock off Lynne’s face. “I hadn’t thought about it because to me, having you move in was the first step of an engagement. But you didn’t know that because I didn’t tell you. So I’m telling you now. I want to commit to you. Totally. And I’m willing to wait for as long as it takes for you to feel comfortable with that.”

She waited, her nervousness returning when Lynne continued to look like she’d been hit with a large object. But then came the most glorious smile as Lynne said, “Aren’t you supposed to get on your knees when you ask me that?”

Janeway relaxed. “I will if you really want me to.”

“Not necessary.” Lynne stood, and in one quick motion she pulled Janeway around, set her feet on the floor, and straddled her thighs. “I’ll get on your knees instead,” she said, just before bending down and giving Janeway one of the sweetest, most loving kisses she’d ever experienced.

When they broke for air, Janeway looked into her happy face and said, “Is that a yes?”

“That’s very much a yes, and a thank you for asking, and an I love you more than I can say.”

“Hmm. I had no idea a kiss could say so much.”
“Non-verbal communication…it’s so efficient.”

Janeway reached up, pulled the band off Lynne’s braid, and began pulling her fingers through the thick hair, gradually undoing it into the curtain of brown and silver that she loved so much. Lynne closed her eyes and hummed happily, as she always did at these times.

“Sometimes I wonder why I bother putting my hair up around you,” she said.

“Because you and I both enjoy taking it down so much.” Janeway used one hand to push the newly freed hair away from Lynne’s neck, then leaned forward and gently kissed the pulse point. She brought both arms around Lynne’s back and squeezed tightly, resting her head against Lynne’s chest and reveling in the physical contact.

“I didn’t know if I would ever get to touch you like this again,” whispered Lynne. “God, Kathryn, I was so scared.”

“I know,” Janeway murmured. “I felt the same way when I realized who that Dakmorian officer was, fighting for a phaser. And even worse when you beamed me up alone.”

Lynne squeezed her, then shuffled backwards and stood up. “Scoot over,” she said, making a circular motion with her finger. Janeway understood, turning and making room for Lynne to slip in behind her. They settled into one of their favorite positions, with Lynne resting against the arm of the couch and Janeway resting against her, back to front. Lynne slid her hands around Janeway’s waist and sighed contentedly. “Much better. I needed this.”

Janeway let her head fall back. “Me too.”

They basked in a companionable silence, broken only by the sound of their glasses being lifted from and returned to the coffee table. When Janeway’s was empty, she got up and went to the replicator, snagging Lynne’s along the way. Returning with refills, she settled back into position and asked, “Will you tell me what happened today?” She’d already read Tuvok’s report, but obviously he didn’t have all the details—and she wanted to hear it from Lynne’s point of view.

Haltingly at first, Lynne described their mission, with considerably more color than Tuvok’s factual report. Janeway felt a chill as she listened to the story of their hijacking the hovercraft, knowing that Tuvok had taken a calculated chance that the Dakmorians would land to investigate. She heard the horror in Lynne’s voice when she described holding the offi-
cer’s head as he writhed in agony under the forced mind meld, and the fear as she spoke of the firefight in the cellblock entry.

After leaving Tuvok behind, Lynne had followed Janeway’s life sign through the corridors, ducking and dodging various Dakmorians who were hurrying toward the firefight. Twice, though, she’d been accosted by police who realized she wasn’t what her uniform seemed. She’d disabled both, and then—

“Stop,” said Janeway. “Back up. Disabled them how?”

“The nerve pinch Tuvok taught me,” said Lynne, as if this were something perfectly ordinary.

“You can do a Vulcan nerve pinch?” Janeway was astonished.

“Well—yeah. Why?”

“Lynne, nobody can do a Vulcan nerve pinch except Vulcans. I’ve never heard of a Human using it, except for Seven.”

“Really? Tuvok didn’t say anything like that when he taught me how to do it. It’s not that hard.”

“Well, there has to be something special to it, or a lot more Humans would be using it.”

There was a long pause, and even without looking Janeway knew that Lynne had her thoughtful face on.

“I guess there is,” Lynne said at last. “Tuvok didn’t teach it to me until just a few weeks ago, when I’d finally made it past a particular block in my meditation exercises. A lot of Vulcan martial arts is closely tied to mental discipline, so maybe Vulcans don’t teach that pinch because so few Humans are willing to go through the meditation aspects of the training. It’s also possible that most Humans just don’t have the hand strength. The pressure point is deep inside the trapezius, and you really have to press hard to reach it. I’ve spent most of my adult life dangling from rocks by one hand or the other, so I have more hand strength than the average Human.”

Janeway shook her head and smiled. “You’re something else, you know that? Got any other special skills I should know about?”

“I don’t know, Kathryn. I mean, I didn’t even know the nerve pinch was that special. Tuvok has taught me a lot of things, but he never tells me how common the knowledge is or how easy or difficult it is for others to learn it. It’s like I’m learning in a vacuum. He’s either teaching me one-on-one, or he’s got me in the holodeck working with training programs,
or else I’m working on strength and flexibility routines in the weight room. I don’t have anyone else to compare myself to, but Tuvok always says I’m making satisfactory progress, so I know I’m doing all right.”

“I have a feeling you’re doing more than all right,” said Janeway. “But we digress. Go on with your story.”

“Well,” said Lynne, “we’re at the hard part now. Right after I disabled that second guy is when I came around the corner and saw you and Revi—and the guy holding an energy weapon on you.” She squeezed Janeway so tightly that the captain could barely breathe. “You know, I think I wasn’t really operating in reality during that mission. It was all so completely foreign to my normal experience that I just kind of watched it all from the outside, you know what I mean? It was like it was happening to someone else, not me.”

“I know the feeling.”

“And then when I saw that man getting ready to kill you, I had to come back into myself. Everything narrowed down to a single thought. Now I know what ‘single-minded’ really means, because I had absolutely no other thought in my head besides stopping him. Fear wasn’t a factor anymore; in fact, I didn’t feel anything at all except an absolute certainty that I had to take him out. And I did,” she said flatly.

Janeway remembered her own words to Tuvok just hours ago. You can’t assign values to individual lives.

That is incorrect, he’d said. He and Lynne had both valued her life more than their own, and now Lynne had killed for her.

She started to sit up, to face Lynne and talk about this, but Lynne just tightened her arms and held her there.

“Then before I could shove him off me,” she continued in an even voice, “he just sort of flew into the air and Revi introduced herself. Now there’s a handy person to have around in an emergency! I’m glad she and Seven are on our side.”

Janeway nodded, feeling sad and helpless. She’s not going to talk about it. Oh, Lynne, you’ll have to at some point.

“So after I got you out, Revi and I collected the transporter enhancers and headed back. We only saw three Dakmorians in the halls, but they were easy to knock out. Revi took out one of them and I don’t think he’s going to recover for awhile. Anyway, we took their weapons, so each of us had two. But then we got to the cellblock entry, and all the guards who’d
been in the cell block were clustered at the door, trying to get in. Revi and I stood just around the corner and had a discussion on what to do. She wanted to bluff them with assimilation, but I thought that might just make them fight harder out of fear or desperation. I wanted to use my uniform and ‘rank’ to order them to one of the other entrances, but Revi pointed out that my disguise didn’t hold up well at close range. The only other option I could think of was a major firefight. Fortunately, Revi came up with another one.”

Janeway was riveted, having not yet heard this part of the story.

“Well?” she asked, when Lynne paused.

“She found a communication panel and—I don’t know, I guess she assimilated it. She punctured it with her assimilation tubules and went inside the computer to assess the building layout and the latest security report. Turns out that Tuvok had collapsed the other two hallways leading into the cellblock entry, so the door all the guards were at was the only entry left. But it was fused shut, damaged from the explosives. Revi found an air duct that went over the room, so we went down the hall to the nearest air duct access, got up into it, and crawled right over all those guards into the room. And you know the rest. I heard Revi telling you about us digging Tuvok out and setting up the transporter enhancers while we were coming back on the Delta Flyer. We heard the guards cutting through the door with a laser as we were setting up the enhancers, so I was in a bit of a hurry to get out of there.”

“Yes, I was in a bit of a hurry to get you out of there,” said Janeway. “The Doctor was a little amazed at how fast I could move, considering he hadn’t finished with my broken ribs yet.”

Lynne dropped a soft kiss on the side of her throat. “I’m very glad Revi stayed behind,” she said, “because I have to admit that part of me actually liked the idea of just shooting my way through those guards. I was so furious about how they’d hurt you, Kathryn. Killing them all didn’t seem like such a bad idea. Besides, I’m not sure I could have gotten Tuvok out by myself. It’s handy having someone around who can send her mind into computers. Not to mention lift really heavy objects.”

She reached for her drink, and a silence settled over them. Janeway’s mind was whirling, thinking about Lynne’s kill and her casual statement of further homicidal intent, about Tuvok’s sacrifice, and about all the individual choices made over the last two days, including her own to put
herself in danger. Would she have done it if she’d known the full repercussions? But if she hadn’t, it would have meant standing aside and letting Revi be beaten and taken away, possibly irretrievably, and she simply could not have done that. As soon as Revi had agreed to come to *Voyager*, she’d become her responsibility.

*And you are the crew’s responsibility,* she thought with sudden clarity. *It works both ways. They did what they had to. Lynne did what she had to. No, actually, she did a bit more.*

Lynne squeezed her around the waist. “Hey. You in there?”

“Sorry, I was just thinking. You realize that if you were Starfleet, I’d be putting a citation in your file for your actions today.”

“A citation?”

“Mmm hmm. For bravery and acting above and beyond the call of duty. If I’m not mistaken, your mission was to get me out, correct?”

“Of course.”

“So when you had me inside the transporter pattern enhancers, your mission was over. No one would have questioned you for stepping in there with me. Did you know that Tuvok never expected you to come back?”

“Really? That doesn’t say much about his belief in me.”

“Not at all. He was just being logical. And logically, he knew that his death was necessary to buy us enough time to get out. It didn’t occur to him that you would be so illogical as to take even more time in order to come after him. You risked a lot.”

Lynne’s voice was firm. “I told you before, I’ve never lost a member of a climbing team and I don’t intend to start now. Besides, my personal hero once told me she would never, ever leave a crewmember behind, and I’ve always tried to emulate her. Well, for the last ten months or so, anyway.” She squeezed Janeway again. “Leaving Tuvok to come after you was absolutely the hardest thing I’ve ever done. The only way I could do it was to believe that I could go back afterwards. I’m just glad Revi was there—not just to help me go after him, but because of that little distraction she pulled off earlier. I’m pretty sure that made the difference.”

“It did. Tuvok said the additional alarms drew off enough of the Dakmorians to allow him to throw those charges. He couldn’t do it while both of you were there, because he knew the explosions would probably kill everyone within a thirty meter radius.”
“So he blew the place up knowing he’d die, too.”
“Yes. Fortunately, he had the protection of the desk and a Vulcan’s hard head.”
“Thank god for that.”
They fell silent again, simply enjoying being still, safe, and together. There was so much left to talk about, but for now, it was enough.
Seven was deeply immersed in her calculations, using two different workstations in Astrometrics. She was plotting their course through a system she’d just finished scanning, and the calculations were intricate due to the unusually large number of asteroids in the system. She was enjoying the challenge. To her, mathematics were a form of art: the numbers and formulas themselves were clear, concise and utterly predictable, like the colors used in painting, yet they could be used to create intricate, layered, unpredictable results. For Seven, the world of numbers was one both familiar and foreign, and she reveled in discovering new facets that her formulas could show her.

Her concentration was broken, however, when Revi completed her regeneration cycle. She felt it the moment Revi became conscious. She had felt a similar awareness literally billions of times before, when a drone came on line in the Collective and waited for its next instructions. But this was different. Revi’s presence in her mind was full, dynamic, multidimensional—it was the difference between the empty vessel of a Borg drone and the fully actualized, vibrant mind of an individual. To Seven, the difference was breathtaking. And there was something else as well—Revi’s presence was far stronger than it had been when she first arrived on board.

: Seven? :
Seven left her calculations running and walked out of Astrometrics, headed for the nearest turbolift.

Is this readout correct? Have I actually been regenerating for over four days?

Yes. Your systems were very near failure. Why had you not regenerated before?

Kind of hard to when there aren’t any regeneration units around. I wasn’t going back to the colony, and I certainly wasn’t going to hail any Borg ships.

I have been wondering about that. You realize that had you not eventually located a regeneration unit, you would have died.

Yes.

The short answer was devoid of emotion. In fact, Seven now noticed, there were no emotions at all accompanying Revi’s thoughts.

I understand why you would not wish to go back to a Borg ship, but why were you not making your way back to the colony?

Because it wasn’t that much better than a Borg ship. We were separate from the Collective but still part of a hive mind. I couldn’t live with that any longer. That’s why I left it.

The turbolift arrived at deck eight and Seven strode toward Cargo Bay Two.

But the alternative was not to live at all.

That’s right.

The only possible conclusion was difficult to believe.

You were committing suicide?

I guess you could call it that. It wasn’t anything I was actively pursuing; I just knew eventually I’d wind down and it would all be over.

Seven walked through the doors and stopped. Revi spun around from where she’d been reading a console, the expression on her face one of complete surprise.

“Well,” she said, “I guess the connection isn’t totally inclusive. I had no idea you were on your way over here.”

Seven closed the distance between them and looked down into dark brown eyes. “I, too, once considered suicide, but it was immediately after I had been severed, when the silence in my mind was too much to bear. I do not understand why you would wish to die when you chose to make your mind silent.”

Revi’s expression darkened, and Seven was buffeted by waves of anger and guilt. “Because I didn’t choose the memories! I didn’t choose to be hated, feared and reviled by every sentient being that I met! And I didn’t choose a life of complete and utter loneliness. Gods! Do you know how
lucky you are to have found a home here? You may have some difficult memories, and maybe not everyone on this ship wants to be your friend, but you do have people who care about you very deeply, who respect you and accept you. I would give anything to have that!” She stopped, and the emotions that had swamped Seven abruptly vanished. “I’m sorry. You didn’t deserve that, and I know you felt it.”

“I do not feel it now.”

“No. I can prevent the transmission of emotions unless I’m distracted or…well, overwhelmed. I’m a little muddled right now, and I don’t need to be spilling that on to you.”

: Why do you feel ‘muddled’? : Seven switched to direct communication, hoping it might help her understand.

: Because when I stepped into this regeneration unit, I chose life. I’m still not one hundred percent certain that it was the right choice for me. And if I was wrong, it’s going to take a long time to wind down to where I was when I came onboard. :

: Captain Janeway would say that it is always right to choose life. : 

: Captain Janeway does not have my memories. : 

: No. But she has some of her own that sometimes keep her awake at night. : 

Revi’s eyes widened, and a wry smile made its way onto her face.

: In other words, stop feeling sorry for myself? :

: In other words, you are not alone. :

Seven closed her eyes and concentrated on her own memories—of her time as a Borg, of Kathryn talking her down from her suicidal frenzy after being separated from the Collective, of her midnight “philosophical discussions” with the captain and some of the things that Kathryn had revealed during those discussions. When she opened her eyes, Revi appeared shocked. Then a rich tide of emotions came flooding down the link: astonishment, profound gratitude, sorrow…even a little bit of joy.

: Seven, I’ve never felt anything like that. Thank you for that incredible gift. :

Seven was surprised. : I thought you could sense emotions. Why have you never felt anything like that before? :

: Because you sent more than emotions—you sent actual images. I could see. I could actually see your memories. That’s never happened before; at least, not without me consciously entering the mind of another. Thank you for sharing so much of yourself. :

: I simply wanted you to understand. Captain Janeway spent weeks trying to get
me to understand the same thing—that I was not alone. Revi, living is the right choice.

A tiny tendril of hope came down their link. I’m beginning to think you may be right.

Seven raised an eyebrow. Of course. I’m always right.

Revi eyed her for a moment and then laughed, a musical sound that sent a warm feeling through Seven’s stomach. “Except when you’re not, but I’m guessing that’s not very often. Thank you for making me laugh. It felt great.”

“I fail to see what was so amusing. I was merely stating a fact.”

Revi waved her finger in Seven’s face. “You forget that I see into you, my friend. If you want to bluff me you’ll have to learn to shield your thoughts.”

“Then I shall endeavor to do so, since I am attempting to master the art of bluffing. Captain Janeway has recently convinced me that it can be a useful strategic tactic.”

“I have a feeling you’ll be a master in no time.” Revi grinned at her, and Seven felt a sense of friendship that she normally felt only around Kathryn, Lynne, B’Elanna and sometimes Tuvok. It should not have been possible, given their short acquaintance, but their mental connection put Revi in a unique category. She was certain that expectations based on prior relationships would not apply to this one.

“Thank you,” she said. “Now I must pass on a message. Captain Janeway asked me to invite you to see her when your regeneration cycle was complete.”

“By all means, I would love to.”

Seven tapped her comm badge. “Seven of Nine to Captain Janeway.”

“Go ahead.”

“Captain, Revi has completed her regeneration cycle and has agreed to see you.”

“That’s very good to hear. Please bring her to my ready room. Janeway out.”

Seven turned to leave, but Revi stopped her.

Seven, wait.

She turned back and raised an eyebrow expectantly. Revi suddenly seemed a little shy.

I would like to give you something, in exchange for what you just shared with me.
You do not need to give me anything.
I didn’t say I needed to. I said I wanted to.
Very well.

Slowly, Revi walked up to her and wrapped her in a hug. Seven stiffened at first, but then a warm feeling of comfort and affection flowed down their link, and she found herself relaxing under its soothing influence. Awkwardly she raised her own arms and wrapped them around Revi’s back. She could feel the metal ridges beneath Revi’s shirt, and knew exactly what lay beneath.

This is one of those things the Borg didn’t consider relevant, Seven. It’s a fundamental way of knowing that we are not alone, and one of the most basic of all Human needs. A Human infant that is denied physical contact will not thrive. As you are not thriving. You haven’t been held in a long time.

No. It is…a strange sensation.

And yet there was a faint familiarity about it, too. Gradually her hold on Revi tightened.

I think I know why it feels familiar. I can show you if you’ll give me permission to come inside.

Come inside?

To look beyond your surface thoughts and emotions. It’s an invasion of privacy unless you give me permission. But I think there’s something buried there that I can show you. A good memory.

Seven hesitated, then made her choice.

You have my permission.

She felt nothing at first. Then her mind suddenly filled with an image: her mother, leaning over her and smiling. Seven had never seen her face so clearly.

Annika, it’s time for bed.
But I’m not finished yet!
You’ve got all day tomorrow to work on it, and you’ve already managed to put me off for half an hour. Now it’s bedtime. Come on, sweetie, I’ll tuck you in.
Will you carry me?
A gentle, loving laugh.
You know, pretty soon you’ll be too big for me to carry you anymore. So I guess I’d better do it now while I can, huh?
Yes!
A warm, comforting sensation of being bodily gathered up and held
close. Of her own arms going around her mother’s neck and her legs 
wrapping around her waist. Her head resting on her mother’s shoulder. 
Full body contact; soft, sweet. Her mother’s hand rubbing her back as she 
was being carried, then gently laid down on a bed and covered with a 
quilt. A feather light kiss on her forehead.

  Goodnight, Annika. I love you.
  I love you too. Will you help me finish tomorrow?
  I’ll tell you what: if you’ll help me with some cataloguing tomorrow, I’ll help you 
with your project. Fair?
  Okay. Goodnight, Mama.
  Goodnight, sweetheart.

Seven came back to herself to find her head resting against Revi’s, 
their bodies molded together in a full-body hug that no longer felt strange. Revi was rubbing her back like her mother had, and she stayed there for a moment longer, enjoying the now-familiar sense of comfort, 
before lifting her head and stepping back. Revi smiled at her.

  I don’t feel any sorrow, so I’m assuming those are tears of happiness.

Seven swiped at her cheek and looked with surprise at her glistening 
fingers.

  I did not know I was crying. Why am I crying?

  A very Human reaction to the kind of sweet memory we just saw. Seven, that 
was beautiful. Your mother loved you very much.

  My mother and father were responsible for my assimilation. But the anger 
that Seven usually felt when she thought of that was somehow muted. She’d just seen for herself, felt for herself, how much her mother had 
loved her. The woman who’d looked at her, held her with such love and 
caring would hardly have intentionally placed her in danger.

She looked at Revi again. The warm brown eyes that looked back at 
her held nothing but understanding.

  Thank you.

  It was my very great pleasure. Shall we go see Captain Janeway?

  “We” are not seeing her. But I will be happy to take you to her.

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Janeway was just wondering what was keeping Seven and Revi 
when her ready room door chimed.
“Come in,” she called.

Revi entered first and looked around in some confusion. Seven came in right behind her, touched her briefly on the shoulder, and indicated Janeway’s perch on the upper level. Janeway’s eyebrows went to her hairline. She’d never seen Seven touch anyone before, at least not casually.

Seven left, and Revi climbed the steps to stand in front of Janeway.

“Revi, it’s good to see you fully recovered,” said Janeway, extending her hand. Revi shook it and they sat down on the couch.

“Thank you, Captain. I haven’t felt this healthy in a long time—you’re certainly a full-service ship.”

“Well, we try.” Janeway examined her guest, who did indeed look very different. Her eyes were brighter, her back was straighter, and she even seemed to carry herself with more ease. “In the interest of furthering our reputation, can I offer you a cup of coffee?” she asked.

“No thanks. After four days of regeneration, the last thing I need is more stimulation.”

“I can’t imagine not needing stimulation in the form of coffee. Would you like water instead?”

“No, thank you, I really don’t need anything. But don’t let that stop you from enjoying your coffee. I remember something about your addiction from Chakotay’s thoughts.” Revi flashed an easy smile.

Janeway poured herself a cup and sat back against the cushions. “I wanted to ask you what your plans were. Is there anywhere in particular you wanted to go? Because I’m afraid we’ve left your last destination a few light years behind us.”

“Thank the gods for that. Actually, Captain, I have no plans anymore. My earlier plans are no longer viable, so I’m a bit at loose ends.”

“In that case, I’d like to extend Voyager’s hospitality to you. We’re headed back home, and though it may take us awhile to get there, I have no doubt that we will eventually. Your company would be most welcome.”

“I hoped you’d ask. I would like very much to stay aboard. Thank you.”

“There’s just one thing. Unfortunately, Voyager simply does not have the resources to carry passengers. Anyone aboard her for the long term will have to contribute in some way.” Janeway hadn’t pushed Seven or Lynne this way. She’d let them settle in, and eventually they’d both come to her asking for work. But Revi was different.
“Certainly, I understand that,” said Revi. “But I’m not sure what I have to offer in exchange for my passage.”

Janeway took a sip and fastened an even gaze on her guest. “I think you have a great deal to offer, Commander.”

Revi stiffened at the use of her rank. “Captain…”

Janeway held up her hand. “Please, hear me out.” She put the cup and saucer back on the table and straightened in her seat. “I’ve checked your records. They took a while to read, actually; you have quite a few extra certifications and a number of citations. And one rather interesting disciplinary write-up for accidentally injecting a hungover crewman with formazine. He threw up for half a day. Not the sort of mistake I can easily see you making, given your obvious expertise. Did that have anything to do with the fact that you’d filed a complaint against him for harassing one of your nurses?”

Revi’s lips quirked into a tiny smile. “Gods, that was half a lifetime ago. He was a Bolian who just wasn’t getting the cultural concept of harassment. Starfleet retraining didn’t seem to make any difference. I thought perhaps a little negative reinforcement might work better.”

“So you abused your position.”

“I protected my staff,” Revi answered firmly. “I have no idea what my nurse had already gone through by the time she finally reported it to me, but she was extremely upset. The formal complaint didn’t do a damned thing. He was right back at it.”

“Did your discipline work?”

“Yes, it did.”

“And what about your oath to do no harm?”

“I didn’t harm him. I just made him miserable for half a day. A tiny fraction of how miserable he made my nurse, I’m sure. And I saved his ass at the same time, because if I’d filed a second complaint, he’d have been removed from duty.” Revi’s expression closed off. “I’ve violated my oath a few times since then. Believe me, I know the difference.”

*I’ll bet you do,* thought Janeway. She needed to tread carefully here. “It sounds like you were a formidable CMO.”

“I was a good CMO,” said Revi. “But like I said, that was half a lifetime ago. I’m not anymore.”

“You could be.”

Revi shook her head. “No. That part of my life is long over.”
“That’s not the part of your life that’s over. You’re no longer Borg. But you are still Human, and the Borg didn’t take away your medical knowledge. In fact, I’d lay odds they added to it.”

She saw a flash of raw pain cross Revi’s face.

“Captain…please don’t ask me what I think you’re going to ask me.”

“I have to. Your records list you as missing in action, presumed dead. The minute you were found alive and severed from the Collective, your status went active. As of right now you are a Commander in Starfleet. Now, if you truly don’t want to be, you can resign your commission. But I think that would be a damned shame, both for you and for us. You’re a Starfleet officer on a Starfleet vessel which happens to have a shortage of them.” She leaned forward. “We have a holographic Chief Medical Officer. You have the qualifications and the experience to double our capacity in the sickbay. You’re a godsend, frankly, and it would be tragic if you allowed your feelings of being undeserving to deny this ship and its crew the services of a highly qualified medical officer. We need you. And it might just be that you need us, too.”

“Oh, I think that’s already been demonstrated,” muttered Revi.

“Pardon?”

Revi looked at her in silence for several seconds. Then her shoulders slumped and she leaned back against the sofa.

“You’re probably going to hear this from Seven anyway, so I guess I might as well tell you. When you found me, I was just a few weeks away from being dead.”

Janeway wasn’t sure which was more surprising, the information itself or the matter-of-fact manner in which Revi imparted it. “Go on,” she said.

Revi seemed relieved at her lack of reaction. “At the colony we found that once we’d removed the majority of our implants, an adjustment to our nanoprobes enabled us to recharge both them and our systems simply by eating. We still regenerated once in awhile, but we did it because it reordered our cranial implants and gave us an extra boost of energy. I thought of it as something like going to a spa. It wasn’t until I left the colony and no longer had access to a regeneration unit that I realized it wasn’t just a boost—it was absolutely necessary for the ongoing health of my remaining Borg systems. Without it, my systems have gradually been deteriorating, and that little electromagnetic shock courtesy of the
Dakmorians really didn’t help. So you’re right, Captain, I need you. I need that regeneration unit.”

“I don’t understand. Why didn’t you go back to the colony?”

Revi sighed. “Remember the phrase ‘live free or die’? That’s why. But now I have another option. If I want to live, I need to stay with you. But the price you’re asking is too high. I can’t serve as a medical officer. I’ll do anything else you need, up to and including cleaning the Jeffries tubes, but sickbay is not an option.”

Janeway let that hang in the air while she retrieved her cup and took a thoughtful sip. She had a serious issue on her hands now: a Starfleet chief medical officer who had just admitted to a passive form of attempted suicide and was refusing to perform the duty for which she’d been trained. In a normal situation, she’d put the doctor on medical leave and assign her to counseling until her issues could be somewhat resolved. But this wasn’t a normal situation, she had no counselor, and she was certain that allowing Revi to walk away from her vocation would be the worst thing she could do. She was equally certain, however, that it would take some strong maneuvering to get Revi back on her path.

She put the cup down. It was time to play hardball.

“Why not?” she asked. “Because you were personally involved in assimilations?” Undeterred by Revi’s stricken look, she continued, “Because you performed assimilation surgeries on other Humans? People you knew? Maybe even your own crew?”

The color drained from Revi’s face. “How…how do you know that?” she whispered.

“Seven told me that medical and repair drones were used in assimilations. Given your extreme reluctance to even consider resuming your duties as a doctor, the rest was pretty easy to guess. And you’ve told me twice now that you’ve violated your oath as a doctor.” Janeway laid a gentle hand on Revi’s leg, trying to counter the increasing panic she saw in her eyes. The doctor looked as if she might bolt from the couch any second. “I’m so very sorry,” she said quietly. “That’s a burden no one should ever have to bear, least of all a doctor.”

Revi dropped her gaze to Janeway’s hand, staring at it in silence. “Then you understand,” she said hoarsely. “You know why I can’t do this. I’ve violated my oath and every principle I’ve ever lived by.”

“I understand that you were taken as a prisoner of war, converted to a
Borg drone with no individual will, and used by the Collective to perform actions that you had absolutely no control over. There’s no shame in that; it’s happened to many others before you and many after.” Janeway squeezed her leg, then reached out for her cup and took a sip. “But you do have control now,” she said. “And yet you’re still letting the Borg use you.”

Revi’s head came up, her eyes narrowed. “Exactly what do you mean by that?”

“I mean you’re letting them dictate your life. It’s like you’re still a drone. You’re a highly qualified doctor and you’re talking about scrubbing Jeffries tubes, for god’s sake. That’s not the voice of a woman whose will is her own.”

Revi stared in disbelief. “What happened? You got back into your nice safe captain’s chair and suddenly I’m fair game? Who was that person sharing my cell on Dakmor?”

“A person who needed to focus on getting us out of there. Now we’re out, and I’m back in my nice safe captain’s chair, focusing on the best interests of my crew—of which you are now one.”

“And you think it’s in my best interests to impose your will on me? How lovely; I can trade the Borg for you. No thanks, Captain. You don’t have the right to dictate my career choices. It’s my life.”

“No, it’s not,” said Janeway. “Not anymore. Look at you. They’ve stripped you of your will and you still haven’t gotten it back. You’re not what you were before they took you. As long as you let your feelings of guilt keep you from resuming the life you had before, the life you worked for and trained for and fought for, then they are still winning. Do you want to spend the rest of your days under their control?”

“You—” She stopped, visibly struggling to keep her anger tamped down. “You have no idea what you’re talking about,” she finished in a tight voice.

“I’ve dealt with this before, Revi. You’re not the first ex-Borg I’ve had on my ship. So yes, I do have some idea of what I’m talking about. I have an idea that they’ve broken you to the point where you won’t let yourself live again. And I think you’re stronger than that.”

Revi’s self-control snapped. “Who the hell do you think you are? Gods! You sit there with your dainty little coffee cup in your beautiful ship and you dare to say you know how I feel? You think you can just headshrink
me and everything will be okay? Well it’s not okay, Captain! It’s never going to be okay!” She pushed herself off the couch and stood, anger bristling in every line of her body. “I don’t want the rank and I especially don’t want the title. If resigning will get you off my back, then that’s what I’ll do. It’s been a long time since I felt like a Starfleet officer anyway.”

She glared, breathing hard and waiting for a challenge.

“If you truly want to resign, I have no choice but to accept,” said Janeway calmly. “But before it comes to that, I would like your answer to one question.”

“And what would that be?”

“Is it really me you’re angry with?”

For a moment Revi stopped breathing. Her head dropped, her spine relaxed, and with an almost liquid movement she sank back onto the couch, covering her eyes with her Human hand and taking several deep breaths before meeting Janeway’s sympathetic gaze.

“I’m sorry, Captain,” she said, calm once again. “You’re right, it’s not you I’m mad at.”

Janeway nodded. “I know. And I wish I could figure out some way to help you not be so angry at yourself.”

“Myself? What makes you think it’s not the Borg?”

“Because your self-hatred is barely below the surface. I can see it. I just don’t know how to help you with it. What I do know is that you’re a brilliant doctor who had her whole life in front of her, had it taken away, then miraculously got it back again—and now you’re voluntarily throwing it away a second time. Please don’t let them do that to you. You don’t deserve it.”

They stared at each other in silence, but Revi’s body language spoke volumes. The fear was gone and the anger had burned off; now Janeway could only wait to see what was left. When the ready room door chimed she cursed her visitor for having such excruciating timing, then herself for not putting a lockout on the door.

“Damn,” said Revi. “It’s Seven. Let her in, Captain. It’s my fault; she’s worried about me.”

Janeway just looked at her. *What the…?*

The chime rang again, and Revi nodded.

“Come,” called Janeway. Seven stepped inside and walked quickly to stand in front of them.
“Captain,” she said, giving Janeway a cursory nod. Before Janeway could even respond, Seven had focused her attention on Revi. “Are you all right?”

Revi gave her a wan smile. “I’ve been better, but it’s okay. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to worry you.”

Janeway watched this interaction with steadily increasing confusion and concern. “Will somebody please explain to me what is going on here?”

Two heads turned to look at her, then back at each other. Seven gave a barely perceptible nod before meeting Janeway’s eyes. “Revi and I have a Borg interlink connection.”

This didn’t help at all, but Janeway was pretty sure she didn’t like the sound of it. “A what?”

“A Borg interlink connection,” Seven repeated patiently. “Revi has a transceiver embedded in her cortical implant which allows her to directly link with other Borg. As soon as she came on board Voyager we connected. We can hear each other’s thoughts as if we were still in the Collective.”

Janeway felt a chill run down her spine. “Are you telling me that you’ve formed your own miniature hive mind?”

“No, not at all.” It was Revi who answered. “We’re not thinking in unison or controlling each other in any way. I think the closest equivalent would be what Betazoids experience. Full Betazoids can read both thoughts and emotions. Seven and I have a very similar connection, though I believe it’s stronger because we can share memories and images as well. We can also shield our emotions, which is what I was doing when I came in here. But when I got angry a moment ago, I lost my shielding and Seven got the full blast. I suspect she felt a few other things, too.” She looked up at Seven, who nodded.

Janeway pinched the bridge of her nose. Well, here was a whole new wrinkle.

“Revi, Captain Janeway is correct,” said Seven suddenly. Janeway lifted her head. What?

“What?” said Revi. Her voice had an edge to it once again.

“You are allowing the Borg to control you. I did the same thing when I first came aboard, though our circumstances are different. I have much to feel guilty about as well, and I’ve had to learn how to process that. But you cannot let it destroy the rest of your life.”
There was a long silence while the two women stared at each other. Janeway held her breath, waiting for Revi’s explosion, and feeling both relieved and a bit puzzled when it didn’t come.

“Seven,” whispered Revi at last, “you don’t know.”

“Then show me,” said Seven in a gentle tone that Janeway had never heard before.

“No, you don’t want—”

“Show me,” repeated Seven. Then added, more quietly, “Please.”

After a long pause, Revi closed her eyes, and Seven followed suit. Janeway watched, stunned, as their hands moved toward each other and clasped. Suddenly she felt like an intruder in her own ready room. What was happening here was intimate beyond her understanding, and she didn’t know what to do. If she stood up and left, would she disturb them? Was she disturbing them by staying here? She examined them more closely. No, they didn’t seem to be aware of her on any level. And god, was Seven...crying? They both were!

She had just decided to quietly leave when their eyes opened again.

“Do you see now?” Revi’s voice was heartbroken, and Janeway felt tears start to her own eyes just hearing it.

Seven pulled on Revi’s hand, prompting her to stand up. For a moment they stood in silence, staring into each other’s eyes.

“Yes,” said Seven. “And I forgive you.”

Revi’s head dropped, and a choked sob tore its way from her chest. Carefully, Seven embraced her, holding her gently and rubbing her back.

Janeway was pretty sure she was going to need a spatula to scrape her jaw off the floor.

“Ladies,” she said, “the ready room is yours. I’ll be on the bridge.” With that she walked out. She didn’t think they even heard her.

Seven was stunned by the images Revi had shown her. Most Borg assimilation surgery was done without analgesics, since pain became irrelevant as soon as the new drone’s mind was fully assimilated. Therefore the pain was only felt for seconds to minutes before it was shut off by the Collective.

But Revi had seen every second of that pain. She had caused it. She had
watched while the faces of people she knew twisted in agony, cried out for mercy, called her by name. She showed Seven image after image, and in the background of each one was a faint memory of Revi’s own voice. The tiny part of her brain that had remained untouched by the Collective was crying along with her victims, repeating the same words over and over. *Forgive me. Please, forgive me.* The horror and grief that Seven felt in Revi’s mind touched parts of her own memories—things she’d made a point of not recalling.

She understood, better than anyone, why Revi was so helplessly buried under her guilt. And when the barrage of images ended, she knew what her friend needed.

“Do you see now?”

Seven pulled her up and looked into her eyes, clearly seeing the pain there that she had felt so strongly. “Yes. And I forgive you.”

: Oh gods! : Revi broke down completely, her emotions pouring out unchecked. : How can you? How can you do that? :

Seven wrapped her up in her arms, an act that now felt perfectly natural. : Because I was assimilated too. Someone did to me what you did to the others. I know what they felt. So do you, because it was done to you as well. We were all victims. All of us. :

The thoughts that came from Revi were incomplete and incoherent. Seven could barely keep up with the jumble of pain and guilt, but underneath it was a hope, a belief that someone could truly forgive her, even knowing what she’d done.

: Look into my mind, Revi. Feel it for yourself. :

Revi’s grief lessened, and a sense of wonder began to grow.

: You do. I don’t understand it, but you do. :

: It’s not necessary that you understand, just that you believe. But there is one thing that you must believe above all else. :

: What? :

Seven pulled away and looked into her eyes. “We were victims. But now we are survivors.”

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**JANEWAY DRUMMED** her fingers on her chair. She’d gotten a few odd looks upon emerging alone from her ready room, but she had simply
taken her seat and sent a cool gaze around the room. That particular act never failed to inspire the bridge crew to pay close attention to their own stations.

She had a problem, however. It had been nearly half an hour, and she had no idea how in the hell she was going to get back in her ready room. Should she contact Seven over the comm link? That would sound a bit odd. She certainly couldn’t walk up to the door and request entry. And she definitely didn’t want to just walk back in there.

A blinking light on her console alerted her to a new message. She accessed it.

*CAPTAIN, please return to your ready room.*

_Seven_

_She couldn’t help but smile._ Short, sweet and to the point—totally Seven. And how thoughtful of her to realize Janeway’s dilemma. It wasn’t too long ago that Seven would simply have walked onto the bridge and announced that the ready room was now available.

“Chakotay, you have the bridge.” She strode back into her ready room, thinking how strange it was to not know what to expect there of all places.

Seven and Revi were still on the upper level, but were now seated slightly apart on the sofa. Janeway walked up, took a seat on the other side of Revi, and looked at them both in turn. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, Captain,” said Seven.

Revi nodded. “We appreciate your consideration. But I’m sorry that you felt you had to leave.”

Janeway examined them closely. Both bore the signs of recent tears, but other than that, Seven seemed completely normal. Revi, on the other hand, looked like she’d been run over by a shuttle. Janeway thought that might actually be a good sign.

“I don’t know what just happened here,” she said. “But I’m going to assume it brought about some resolution.”

Seven looked at Revi expectantly. Revi gave her a tremulous smile, and
Janeway had the uneasy feeling that they were communicating. This was going to take some getting used to.

“Captain,” Revi began uncertainly, “I want to apologize for losing control earlier.”

Janeway waved that off. “That’s not important. Well, not this time,” she amended. “I pushed you pretty hard, and I’m sorry about that.”

Revi nodded, then took a deep breath. “I would like to resume my duties as a medical officer. But,” she forestalled Janeway’s immediate question, “I’m not ready to go full time. In fact, I’m not sure what I’m ready for. I just know I have to try. You and Seven are right; I’ve been letting the Borg beat me, and that just isn’t acceptable. But I ask that you let me go into this at my own pace.”

Janeway was astonished, but she also wasn’t about to turn down a miracle. “Of course. We’ll work together to determine a schedule that you’re comfortable with. And I’ll notify the Doctor that he’ll have some part-time help.” And won’t that be a fun conversation! “Now there is the question of quarters,” she continued. “The chief medical officer’s quarters have been used as a VIP suite, since our holographic doctor has no need of them. They’re available if you want them.”

“That’s very generous,” said Revi. “I accept your offer, and I’ll do my best to live up to your expectations.”

“It isn’t my expectations you have to worry about, Revi. It’s your own.”

Her smile was wry. “You have no idea what you just condemned me to. My expectations tend to be pretty high.”

“I know. That shows in your file.” Janeway rose. “I hate to kick you out, ladies, but I do need my ready room back. Seven, will you show Revi to her new quarters?”

“Certainly.”

Seven and Revi made their way to the lower level, but Janeway stopped them before they reached the door. “Revi.”

“Yes, Captain?”

She stepped down. “When you introduced yourself to me on Dakmor, you asked not to be called Commander or Doctor. However, as an active Starfleet officer, you’re going to have to use both rank and title. Do you think you can get used to us calling you Doctor Sandovhar?”

There was a long pause.
“It’s a name I haven’t heard for a long time,” said Revi at last. “Maybe it’s time for me to take it back. I guess I can get used to the crew calling me that. But Captain, I’d prefer it if you continued to call me Revi. It would seem odd at this point to revert to formality.”

It would be unorthodox, but Janeway could live with it. Besides, what on her ship was orthodox, anyway?

She extended her hand. “In that case, Revi, welcome to Voyager. It’s a pleasure to have you on board.”
As it turned out, her conversation with the Doctor was the easy one. He expressed enthusiasm for the advent of another doctor in the sickbay, for reasons that Janeway should have expected if she’d thought about it.

“At last, someone educated enough to actually appreciate my accomplishments! Not to denigrate you or the crew, Captain, but it has been somewhat...deflating, to consistently develop ingenious solutions to the problems we keep running into out here, only to find a distinct lack of understanding on your parts as to just how difficult those solutions really are. I often get the feeling that the crew simply expects miracles from me, as if they were as common as a hypospray. Of course,” he added with one of those self-important smiles that drove Janeway up the wall, “miracles are the norm for me. Still, it will be nice to work with someone who recognizes them for what they are.”

“Yes, well, I believe you will find that Doctor Sandovhar has a few tricks up her own sleeve that may be new to you,” said Janeway. “She has undoubtedly learned a great deal from her time with the Borg.”

“A great deal about assimilation, you mean.”

“Doctor.” Janeway leveled an even stare that brought him up short. “I would appreciate it if you would restrain yourself from any references to
assimilation around Doctor Sandovhar, unless the current situation requires it.”

“Why? Isn't that what she did?”
She managed not to snap at him, but it was close.

“Yes, it is. And if you will review your psychological files, you'll find that unwilling participation in such activities would be devastating to a Human doctor who had sworn to cause no harm.” She paused, giving him time to consider that information. “Revi is very sensitive about her Borg activities, and she will need time and assistance in recovering from her memories of that involvement. You will violate your own Hippocratic oath if you impede her progress in any way. Do you understand?”

He actually flinched from the quiet force of her final words. “Yes, Captain, I fully understand. Rest assured that I'll help her in any way I can.”

“I don’t want you to help her.” Janeway still had vivid memories of the Doctor’s attempt to ‘help’ Seven with what he thought were repressed memories. It had been a disaster. “I just want you to work with her and deal with her as one doctor to another. Can you do that?”

“Of course,” he answered with some hauteur. “Naturally I will reserve my opinion regarding her professional capabilities until I see them demonstrated. But I will keep an open mind, and I won’t make any reference to her past Borg activities.”

“Thank you.” Janeway paused, wondering if she should mention the other issue looming in the distance. Then she shook her head. No need to worry about that until Revi proves that she can handle a sickbay again. She bid the Doctor a good day and walked out, turning possibilities over in her mind. The fact was, a Human Chief Medical Officer outranked a holographic one. If Revi was able to recover sufficiently to fill her old role as CMO, then she would naturally take control of sickbay. Janeway imagined the Doctor’s response to the news that he was being demoted, and winced. Now that would be an unpleasant conversation. But it wasn’t anything she needed to think about just yet, thank god.

No, the Doctor had been easy. But when she called Chakotay into her ready room to inform him of the change to sickbay personnel, the vehemence of his objection surprised her. She’d expected him to have some personal issues with Revi’s presence, but hadn’t thought they’d cross over into his professional considerations. They did.
“Captain, I can’t agree with this decision.” His back was stiff and he radiated tension.

“I’m not asking you to agree,” she said mildly, covering her surprise at his agitation. “I’m simply informing you of the situation.”

“But Captain! How can you place the physical and mental well-being of this crew in the hands of someone who has already proven herself untrustworthy?”

“And how has she done that?” Was he referring to her time with the Borg, or her involvement with the Cooperative?

“By showing that she’s perfectly willing to force a person to engage in activities against their will! You didn’t approve of the Cooperative’s actions then. Are you changing your opinion now?”

“No,” she said evenly. “In fact, my very first conversation with Revi touched on that. I told her it was wrong and she agreed. And I seem to recall that her first conversation with you involved an apology for that very thing. Are you not going to accept that apology? Will you hold her individually responsible for the actions of the entire Council, just because she’s the one who happens to be here to bear your wrath?”

He didn’t respond, only clenching his jaw. Janeway could almost see steam coming out of his ears as she leaned back in her chair.

“Think about it from her side, Chakotay,” she said in a quieter voice. “You make a difficult decision that seems right at the time, and certainly saves thousands of lives. Then you rethink it and decide that perhaps it wasn’t the right decision after all. You admit that you wronged someone, you apologize to them. What else can you do?”

He shook his head. “Nothing. You’re right, Captain, she’s done everything she can. But it doesn’t make up for the fact that when it came down to it, she chose to use another Human being for her own purpose, without that person’s will or permission. How can you trust her to act in the best interests of our crew, especially in a medical capacity, when she’s already shown that she believes people are tools to be used as she sees fit?”

“That’s my job, you know.”

“What, trusting people?”

“No. Using people as tools, as I see fit. It’s what a captain does. The crew of a starship are tools, available to me to use for purposes that they as individuals might not understand. But they have to obey my commands, even if they don’t want to. Do you hate me for that, too?”
“That’s different and I think you know it. The crew of a starship have individual will. They choose to follow you. Revi didn’t give me that choice.”

“They choose to follow me when they sign on to Starfleet. Once they’re part of the organization, however, they’ve given up a great deal of their personal choice. When I send someone into a life-threatening situation I can’t stop to ask if that’s all right with them. I have to send them whether they want to go or not.”

“Captain, you say that it was wrong but now you seem to be justifying it by comparing it to the Starfleet command structure. It’s not the same thing.”

“No, it’s not. But the difference isn’t that big, and as a captain who is personally responsible for one hundred and forty-eight lives, I can fully understand why Revi and the Council made the decision they did. They didn’t decide to play mind games with you just to abuse you. They decided to commit what they considered to be a lesser evil in order to prevent a greater one.” She leaned forward again, bracing her forearms on her desk and pinning Chakotay with her gaze. It was critical that he understand the concept she was trying to get across, or he’d never be a decent captain.

“Sometimes, Chakotay, it’s not a matter of choosing between right and wrong. Sometimes it’s a matter of choosing between wrong and more wrong. Those are the choices that keep you up at night, and that’s the choice for which Revi apologized to you. And if you can’t accept that apology, if you continue to judge her character by a past decision that she wasn’t even fully responsible for, then I feel sorry for you. Because someday you’re going to have to make a similar decision, and your own lack of sympathy and compassion is going to come back to haunt you. You’ll be as hard on yourself as you are on her, and that’s going to put you in a bad place.”

He held her gaze for a few moments longer, then looked away.

“All right,” he said. “I’ll think about what you said, and I’ll try to keep an open mind. But I’m also going to watch her.”

Janeway barely restrained herself from rolling her eyes. “Will you be watching her for the sake of the crew, or for your own sake?”

“In this instance there’s no difference.”

“I think there is,” she said. But their conversation was going nowhere,
and she needed to check on Revi. She stood up, indicating that their meeting was at an end. “You do what you feel is right. But don’t let your own mistrust infect anyone else in the crew, and I had better not see it affecting your professional interactions with Doctor Sandovhar. We have a chance here to help both her and ourselves, but it’s a delicate situation. If I hear your opinions from any other source, I’m going to come down on you like a ton of bricks. Do I make myself clear?”

“As crystal.” He wasn’t going to back down.

“Good. Then you’re dismissed.”

As the door hissed shut behind him, she sat back in her chair with a muttered curse. She hated it when they butted heads, and it often seemed to happen at times when she least expected it. Well, Chakotay was a professional. She trusted him to deal with his feelings on his own time. As for her, her shift had ended some time ago and she still had to drop by Revi’s quarters before she could relax. She logged out of her terminal and allowed a smile to cross her face. At least she had something to look forward to this evening.

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“So how did it go with Revi?” asked Lynne. She and Janeway were occupying opposite ends of the couch, enjoying another album from the twenty-first century music library. Janeway had discovered that she loved blues, and Lynne had quite a collection of it.

“She’s agreed to start working part time in sickbay. We haven’t worked out the schedule yet; I wanted to give her time to settle into her quarters.”

“Kathryn, that’s fantastic!” Lynne was resting against the sofa arm, her long legs tangling with Janeway’s. “And a hell of a turnaround. You said she couldn’t even stand to hear the word ‘doctor’ before. How did you get through to her?”

Janeway relaxed against her own sofa arm, facing Lynne. “I didn’t. Seven did.”

She enjoyed the look of total surprise on her partner’s face.

“Oh, really,” said Lynne, crossing her arms over her chest. “Okay, spill it. You’ve got a story to tell.”

As Janeway described the events she’d witnessed in her ready room, Lynne’s eyebrows crawled into her hairline.
“So now I’ve got two ex-Borg in a Borg interlink, and I’m not really sure how I feel about it,” Janeway concluded. “Though I certainly can’t argue with the results in this instance.”

“Jesus, Kathryn, I think it’s amazing! Can you imagine? What an incredible gift—imagine if you and I could hear each other’s thoughts and emotions. Think of all the arguments we’d have avoided if we could have understood each other on more than just a verbal level.” Lynne widened her eyes comically. “Ooo, think of the sex.”

“Seven and Revi aren’t you and me,” Janeway reminded her. “Seven is still very undeveloped in some ways, and Revi’s bound to have a huge influence on her, whether she means to or not. And Revi herself isn’t exactly emotionally healthy right now. I think I’ll be keeping a close watch on this.” With an internal start, she realized that she had just echoed Chakotay’s words.

“Kathryn.” Lynne’s voice was firm. “Maybe you don’t need to. Maybe it’s time to just let Seven make her own way. You can’t protect her forever, and honestly, I think she can take care of herself. Didn’t you just say that she’s the one who got through to Revi?”

“Well, yes, but—”

“Then it doesn’t sound like Revi’s the one who did the influencing, does it?”

Janeway looked across at her knowing smile. “Are you telling me to butt out?”

Lynne threw her head back and laughed. “And another twenty-first century idiom makes the leap! It does sound great coming from you, I must say. Yes, I’m telling you to butt out. Let it happen. Mostly because I don’t think you have a chance in hell of stopping it. With that kind of connection, Seven is going to be outside your influence. And you know what I think? I think they need each other. I think this could be the best thing that ever happened to Seven, and it sounds like it may be one of the best things that could happen for Revi, too. Think of it—for Seven’s entire stay on Voyager, she’s been the one being taught, the one who doesn’t know, doesn’t understand, isn’t like the rest. And now—”

“And now she’s able to help someone else.” Janeway had caught up and was racing ahead. “Someone else who shares her experience, who understands. And Revi has someone who knows exactly what she’s done…” She trailed off. “Oh. That’s what was going on.”

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“What?”
“I just figured out how Seven got through to Revi.”
“Are you going to share?”
Janeway mentally replayed the scene she’d witnessed, and nodded. “Seven asked Revi to show her something. I think she saw exactly what’s been haunting her, and when she said she forgave her, Revi finally had someone who knew the truth, someone who was actually qualified to offer forgiveness. I don’t think those words from anyone else would have meant anything. She certainly didn’t respond to me telling her that she had no reason to feel guilty.”
“I don’t think it’s a matter of Revi forgiving herself,” said Janeway, thinking of the many deaths she herself had been responsible for. The names and faces of every Starfleet crewmember who had died under her command would be etched in her memory forever. And then there were the thousands of nameless, faceless lives that had ended at her command to fire. All of the deaths by space battle were self defense and morally justifiable—but the fact remained that she had given the orders that ended sentient lives. She had come to terms with most of her decisions and their consequences, but there were some things for which she could not forgive herself. And that, more than anything else, was the true burden of command.
“That’s probably never going to happen,” she continued. “The best she can hope for, I think, is to come to some sort of peace with it—to stop hating herself, accept it as something she can’t change, and move forward from there. Right now her self-hatred is eating her alive, and that’s what Seven will be dealing with.” And does Seven have the wherewithal to do that? she wondered. Lynne’s confidence in her friend was encouraging, but Janeway wasn’t convinced that Seven, for all her formidable intelligence and rapid emotional growth, could handle what was ahead.
Although she’d certainly handled Revi in the ready room. She shook her head. Maybe Lynne was right; maybe she should stop worrying about something she had no control over and just trust Seven to do what she could. After all, Seven never gave anything but her best, and her best was usually pretty damned good.
Lynne, however, was still processing her last words. Her voice, when she spoke, was very quiet. “Are you speaking from experience? Do you understand what Revi is feeling?”

Janeway looked out the window at the passing star streaks. Did she? Could she really understand?

“Only partially,” she said at last, still gazing out. “Our situations are very different. Revi swore an oath to do no harm, yet she did great harm to a great many people, some of whom she knew. My oath is to protect my crew and the interests of the Federation, and any deaths I’ve caused have been to serve that oath. So I don’t feel the same guilt that she does.”

She turned her head and met Lynne’s gaze directly. “But you know that everything changes when you take a life. Everything. Anyone who has killed, however unwillingly and for whatever noble reason, can understand at least part of what Revi feels.”

It was a not-so-subtle invitation to talk, but Janeway had already used up her subtlety in earlier attempts, to no avail. Lynne still hadn’t talked about the man she’d killed on Dakmor, and Janeway had gone beyond concerned to downright worried.

Overt invitations didn’t seem to work any better than subtle ones. Lynne’s face closed off, and she looked away. “I’m a bit tired,” she said. She swung her legs off the couch and stood, extending a hand. “Come to bed?”

Janeway looked up, reading nothing in her guarded expression. Suppressing a sigh, she took Lynne’s hand and followed her into the bedroom. They prepared for bed in silence, and she wasn’t sure what to expect when they finally slipped between the sheets. She wouldn’t have been surprised to see Lynne move to the other side of the bed, adding a physical distance to the mental one that was already making itself painfully felt. Instead, she was lovingly gathered up and tucked into their normal spooning position, her back to Lynne’s front.

“Good night, love,” Lynne murmured.

“Good night, sweetheart,” said Janeway softly. But her eyes remained wide open, staring into the darkness. After several minutes, she spoke again. “Are you ever going to let me in?”

There was no answer. Lynne had fallen asleep.
Janeway wasn’t sure what time it was, or why she’d suddenly woken. She lay still, listening. A moment later a deep, shuddering intake of breath broke the silence, and she rolled over. Lynne was curled up and facing away from her.

“Lynne? Are you okay?”

For several seconds there was no answer. Then Lynne turned onto her back and stared up at the ceiling, her eyes reflecting the glitter of the warp field streaks passing by the window. “Not really,” she said in a whisper.

Janeway leaned over, brushing a lock of hair away from her face. “Want to talk about it?”

There was a long silence; so long that she dropped her hand and rolled onto her back once more. Staring at the ceiling along with her lover, she felt the lead weight of failure. Lynne was hurting, and she knew why—but she couldn’t do a damned thing about it. Not without being invited in, and Lynne had erected some formidable walls.

To her surprise, Lynne shifted and turned onto her side, nestling her head on Janeway’s shoulder and snuggling in. Immeasurably comforted by this gesture, Janeway rested her cheek against the dark hair and wrapped her arms around her lover. She said nothing, thinking that maybe, just maybe, silence and physical comfort might work where conversational gambits had not.

Or maybe it was just time. Because Lynne wrapped her own arm around Janeway’s waist and began to talk.

“I know what you’ve been trying to do. And I appreciate it, really. A lot of what you said is true—everything does change when you take a life. But that’s not my problem.”

“Okay,” said Janeway, keeping her voice level. “Can you tell me what your problem is? You know I’ll do anything I can to help, even if it’s just to listen.”

“I know you will.” Lynne sighed, her breath tickling Janeway’s skin. “I’m sorry. I don’t like myself much right now, and I’m a little afraid that when I tell you what’s going on, you won’t like me much either.”

Janeway squeezed her more tightly and dropped a kiss on her head. “I love you, and I can’t imagine what you could say to change that. What is it that has you worried?”

Lynne began rubbing her hand gently along Janeway’s side, where the ribs had been broken. “It’s just that...everyone seems to be expecting me
to be all torn up over killing that Dakmorian. But the problem is, I’m not.”

She drew back and propped herself up on one elbow. Janeway did the same, meeting her eyes for the first time. Despite the dimness, she could clearly see her lover’s face in the reflected starlight. Lynne looked tense and a little defiant.

“I’m not torn up, Kathryn. I don’t feel one iota of guilt. I keep waiting for it to hit, but it’s been days now and I still feel the same. I’m glad I killed him, and I’d do it again in a heartbeat. It bothered me far more to hold that officer’s head while Tuvok ripped his brain apart.” The defiant look faded, replaced by confusion. “How can that be? What kind of person does that make me, that I can kill without conscience? I never gave much thought to killing someone, since it wasn’t anything I ever expected to do. But I would never have expected this...this total lack of remorse. I’m not who I thought I was. I’m not who you think I am.”

Janeway reached out and covered Lynne’s free hand with her own. God, it was such a relief to finally be able to address this. She could handle anything as long as Lynne was willing to talk about it.

“Lights, one eighth,” she said, and they both blinked as the soft lighting came up. “All right. Let’s get the most important thing out of the way first. I still love you despite what you just said. Okay?”

“Okay,” said Lynne, a tremulous smile breaking over her face. “Thanks. I didn’t really doubt it, but it’s nice to hear.”

“I’ll tell you as often as you want.” She lifted the hand in hers and placed a soft kiss on it. “Next, you need to understand that people react to their first kill in a lot of different ways. Overwhelming guilt is just one of them, and it happens to be the one that I—and probably a few others—expected you to feel. The fact that you’re reacting differently than expected doesn’t make you a bad person.”

“But—”

“Lynne, how many people did you kill that day?”

“One, but—”

“But you had plenty of opportunity to kill more. If you can put a Vulcan nerve pinch on someone, then I’d bet a month’s rations that you know how to kill with your hands as well. Am I right?”

“Yes.” Lynne’s voice was barely audible. “But you didn’t. And then there was the firefight. You could have
killed any number of men then. You used a stun setting on your phaser instead.”

“That wasn’t my decision, Kathryn. Tuvok set the phasers to stun. You know that’s standard procedure.”

“It’s standard procedure at first. The procedure changes along with the situation, and the day may come when you do set a phaser to kill. Or you may be forced to use a weapon that has no stun setting.”

“Which is what happened.”

“Which is what happened,” Janeway agreed. “If you’d had a phaser in your hand when you saw that Dakmorian aiming at us, would you have set it to kill before shooting him?”

“Well, no, but there wasn’t time. I’d have stunned him because it was the quickest thing to do.”

“You could have stunned him first and then killed him,” said Janeway offhandedly.

“What? You are kidding, aren’t you?”

“Does that mean no?”

“I can’t believe you’re even saying that. Of course I couldn’t do that.”

“Oh, so you couldn’t kill in cold blood.”

“No!” Lynne’s eyes narrowed. “That was a set-up, wasn’t it?”

“Maybe.” Janeway smiled at the look on her face. “You said you didn’t like yourself because you could ‘kill without conscience,’ as you put it. But you can’t. If you could, you wouldn’t have been so shocked at my question.”

Lynne considered this for a moment.

“Okay,” she said. “Point for you. But that still doesn’t address my main problem. Why don’t I feel guilty?”

“Don’t you? How did you feel about holding that officer’s head during the mind meld?”

She knew the answer already, and even if she hadn’t, Lynne’s expression told all.

“It was the most horrible thing I’ve ever witnessed,” she said, dropping her gaze to their clasped hands. “I felt like we were torturing him, and his only crime was being in the wrong place at the wrong time.” She raised her eyes. “That whole mission was just unreal for me. In the beginning it was almost like a game, you know? Everything worked out exactly as planned, and I even enjoyed myself when we hijacked that transport. I
mean, no one got hurt and it went just like clockwork. And I, um...god, this is hard to say.”

“Don’t worry,” said Janeway. “I’m probably not in any place to judge you.”

“I don’t know about that. Have you ever felt good stunning someone?” Lynne’s expression dared her to say yes. “I did. I felt great taking down those men in the transport. It was just so easy—a Velocity disc moves much faster than they did. They didn’t have a chance, and I felt... well, powerful, I guess. Totally in control. Everything was going perfectly, and we were going to succeed, and nobody was going to get hurt or die. Or so I let myself think at the moment. And then...” Her voice trailed off.

“And then Tuvok did the mind meld.”

Lynne nodded miserably. “And I held him down. I held him down while he screamed, Kathryn. And everything changed. I couldn’t pretend it was a game anymore. It was real, and I’d just helped Tuvok tear a man’s mind apart. He might as well have been dead. His blood may not be on my hands, but it...feels...like it,” she finished slowly. “Oh.”

Janeway waited.

“I killed two people, didn’t I? I mean, for all practical purposes.”

“Well, that’s not quite the conclusion I was hoping you’d come to,” said Janeway gently.

“But I don’t feel the same way about them. That officer—I hated it. I felt dirty when it was over. I feel dirty now. But I don’t feel anything like that about the other one, and he’s the one I killed outright.”

“The other was self-defense. A completely different situation. It’s not unexpected that you wouldn’t feel the same thing for both men. So, you killed a man in self-defense—in the process of saving me—and you don’t feel guilty. Before that you helped destroy the mind of a man who was just in the wrong place at the wrong time—also in the process of saving me—and you feel terrible about that. Is that a fair assessment?”

“Well...yes, I guess it is.”

Janeway squeezed her hand. “Then I can tell you with complete confidence that your moral compass is intact and that you’re perfectly normal. You haven’t suddenly become a bad person. You’ve just become a person who has crossed a line that can never be uncrossed. How you deal with that depends on you, and it’s okay if you aren’t overwhelmed with guilt
over the man you killed. I think you’re paying the price for the officer instead.”

“I guess,” said Lynne doubtfully. “But don’t you think it’s strange that I’d feel guilty about the man I didn’t kill, and not about the man I did?”

“No, I don’t,” said Janeway in a firm voice. “I think you’re feeling remorse for the action that, to your mind, was the more reprehensible of the two. The fact that it’s not the actual killing doesn’t mean that you’re lacking a conscience, or that you’re not a good person. You are a good person.” She looked into Lynne’s eyes, willing her to believe. “If you weren’t, we wouldn’t be having this discussion.”

“So you…” Lynne paused, cleared her throat, and tried again. “So you’re not disappointed in me?”

“God, no! Why would you even think it?” Startled by the question, Janeway needed a moment to regroup. “When I saw you and that Dakmorian fighting, there was only one thing on my mind. I needed you to live. I was glad you killed him, because it meant you were still alive. Are you disappointed in me because I felt that way? Do you think I’m morally lacking because I could actually feel glad that you lived and someone else died?”

“No, of course not.” Lynne held her hand up. “Okay, okay, I get it. There aren’t any easy answers, and what I’m feeling—or more importantly, what I’m not feeling—is okay.”

Janeway nodded. “There’s no script you have to follow. Life—and death—is never that straightforward.”

“Well, I knew the first half of that. I guess I have a bit to learn about the second part.”

“I hope you don’t,” said Janeway. “Learn it, I mean. That’s not something I ever wanted you to understand.”

Lynne looked at her closely. “Hey. You’re not feeling guilty about my part in this, are you?”

Janeway tried desperately to school her face into an expression that wouldn’t give her away, but judging by Lynne’s own expression, she failed miserably.

“Oh, Kathryn.” Lynne shook her head. “What a pair we are. I’m feeling guilty for not feeling guilty, and you’re feeling guilty for no reason at all. You know it’s not your fault that I was there.”
“No, actually I don’t know. You went down there for me. You killed someone for me. Would you have done it for anyone else on the crew?”

There was a long pause.

“I can’t answer that in the abstract,” said Lynne at last. “I wouldn’t know until I was faced with the situation. But I went after B’Elanna on the Tsians’ home world, so the answer is probably yes.”

They watched each other in silence, and Janeway realized something as she looked at her partner’s serious face. It was in Lynne’s nature to take risks for the people who were important to her. That wasn’t something that she, as captain, could control. Hell, she couldn’t control it as Lynne’s lover, either. She could only learn to live with it, just as Lynne would have to learn to live with the consequences of her own decisions.

“All right,” she said at last. “I’ll make you a deal. I won’t feel guilty for my part if you won’t feel morally bankrupt for yours.”

Lynne raised an eyebrow. “Emotional blackmail?”

“No, not at all. Emotional negotiation. A time-honored and respected practice.” Janeway flashed a smile, hoping to defuse the tension.

Lynne considered the offer. It didn’t take her long. “Okay, you got yourself a deal.” She reached out and gently pushed Janeway onto her back, immediately snuggling up as Janeway lifted an arm and pulled her in. “And I expect you to honor it, too,” she added.

“When have I ever not honored a deal?”

“When you could find some devious way around the intent while still honoring the letter of it,” answered Lynne immediately. She tilted her head, meeting Janeway’s eyes. “But I love you for that, too. Just don’t try it here.”

Janeway wrapped her arms around her lover and squeezed. “Never.”

She was happy to stay that way indefinitely, enjoying the feeling of Lynne pressed into her side and the sight of the dark head beneath her chin. It wasn’t a position she often got to enjoy, simply because of their very different body sizes. Usually it was her head on Lynne’s shoulder. But now and then Lynne sought her out this way, most often when she felt vulnerable, and Janeway was always grateful for what amounted to an expression of trust.

Absently Lynne caressed Janeway’s injured side, her fingertips gliding over the recently healed ribs. Janeway closed her eyes and basked in the sensations. The gentle touch was lulling her to sleep, and she wondered
vaguely if she should rouse herself enough to order the lights out. No, Lynne would do it. She sank further, until Lynne’s touch moved higher and brushed the underside of her breast. A moment later she felt a palm rubbing lightly across her nipple. Her eyes popped open and she glanced down to find green eyes looking back, an expression in them that she hadn’t seen since before Dakmor. Lynne pushed herself up and straddled Janeway’s body, a full grin blossoming on her face.

“I was wondering,” she said, “if we could find some other way to go morally bankrupt? Because what I’m thinking right now is probably considered immoral on quite a few planets.”

Janeway caressed the full breasts that were hovering within easy reach. This night, she knew, was going to end a lot better than it had begun.
Seven of Nine completed the calculation, altered the program she was writing, and set it to run. Normally she would have immediately begun work on the next program, but today she did something that would previously have been unthinkable: she stopped working and gave her entire mind over to the problem that had been occupying a significant part of it for six days now.

Revi.

Seven had adapted so quickly to having another voice in her mind that she could no longer remember what it had been like to hear nothing. Until Revi entered a regeneration cycle, that is, and then the silence hit her like a physical blow. She had immediately altered her own regeneration schedule to match Revi’s, in order to avoid the terrible quiet of her mind.

The problem was that Revi was sharing only her thoughts. Not her emotions. Not since the day after her initial regeneration, when the doctor had been like an open file to Seven’s mind.

Her first week in sickbay had gone very well. Since Seven was aware of her friend’s thoughts at all times, she knew that there had been no problems that Revi had not been able to quickly solve. She even knew what the problems were, and the solutions that Revi had devised. Their link
allowed her to assimilate medical information as well, an area of study in which she had formerly had little interest.

What she did not know was how Revi was feeling about working in a sickbay once again, about people depending on her to help them. Revi was shielding her emotions, and for Seven, the sensation of being held outside—especially after their initial intimacy—was doubly frustrating. It was taking up more and more of her mental processes, finally bringing her to this point: she was actually doing no work at all, instead devoting her entire cortical implant to consideration of the problem. Except, of course, that part of her implant that was always monitoring Revi’s thoughts.

The situation was unacceptable.

Her thoughts were interrupted when the Astrometrics doors opened and Lynne walked in. A frequent visitor, Lynne loved the images of astrophysical phenomena that Seven processed in her work. For months now, Seven had copied what she felt were the best images into a separate file, enabling quick access when her friend dropped by. Lynne’s understanding of the physics behind the phenomena was rudimentary at best, but her aesthetic appreciation was something that Seven enjoyed watching. Indeed, sometimes she even found herself sharing that appreciation. But not today.

“Hi, Seven! What are you working on?” Lynne’s voice was cheery, and Seven was surprised to note her own irritation at her friend’s tone.

“Nothing,” she answered.


“If you are referring to Astrometrics equipment, no. If you are referring to me, I am unsure.”

Lynne had been looking around the room, but this answer brought her up short. “What’s wrong?”

Her obvious concern washed away Seven’s irritation, replacing it with something much worse: vulnerability. “I don’t know,” she said. “That is part of the problem.”

“Okay, now you’re scaring me,” said Lynne, and indeed Seven could see the worry in her eyes. “Can you tell me what’s going on?”

“I wish I didn’t have to,” said Seven bitterly. “It would be so much more efficient if you could just link your mind with mine and see for yourself. It’s sometimes so difficult for me to explain, and it has been so...
satisfying to not be required to do so.” That wasn’t the word she wanted, but at the moment she could not verbalize her feelings. Her frustration increased.

“This is about Revi, isn’t it?”
Seven nodded.
“Is she all right?”
“I believe so. But she is no longer allowing me to feel her emotions, so I can’t be sure.”
“Ah.”
The one-word answer revealed nothing to Seven. “Clarify. What does ‘ah’ mean?”
Lynne leaned against a console. “It means I think you just told me what’s going on. Are you upset because Revi is no longer sharing her emotions?”
“I don’t know if ‘upset’ is the correct term. She shared herself so completely the first day after her initial regeneration, and it felt…normal. As if I had been missing a component to my cranial implant, and our connection had restored that component. But since then she has raised her emotional shields, and I sense nothing from her. Now it feels as if that component is missing once more. Where I would once have been unaware of its absence, now I am all too aware of it. And it is occupying unacceptable amounts of my mental processing time.”
“I don’t know why you say it’s difficult for you to explain things,” said Lynne. “You just gave me a very clear picture of what you’re feeling, in very few words. I know a lot of people who couldn’t express themselves half as well as you just did.”
“You understand?” Seven hadn’t hoped that anyone could.
“I think so. And I think I might understand what Revi is feeling, too.”
“Tell me.” Seven stepped closer, as if physical proximity could enhance her understanding.
“Whoa. I will, but stop looking at me like you’re about to eat me alive.” Lynne gently pushed her back a half step, and Seven tilted her implant toward her friend in confusion.
“The Borg have never practiced cannibalism.”
“It was a figure of speech. You’re just being extremely intense right now, and I needed a little breathing space.” She rubbed Seven’s upper arm and added, “I think Revi’s just scared.”
“Of what?”
Lynne raised an eyebrow.
“Of me?” But this was incomprehensible.
“A little. And of herself, I suspect. From what Kathryn told me about your interaction in her ready room, it sounds like Revi showed you some very emotional memories of her time with the Borg. Is that correct?”
“Yes. She showed me the role she played in assimilation surgeries.”
Seven did not see any reason to reveal more than that.
“Well, based on what little I know of her, and what I know of Human nature, I’d say Revi showed you the deepest, darkest part of her soul, and now she’s feeling scared and vulnerable as a result. You were virtual strangers, Seven. Normally a person would need a lot more time to build up trust before revealing something like that. I think Revi showed you more than she intended, and she scared herself. She’s making up for it now by retreating.”
This explanation did not clarify anything as far as Seven was concerned. “Your theory is flawed. We were not strangers. Our minds are linked; we share our thoughts and memories. I know Revi more completely than I know even you.”
“Do you?”
“Yes.” Seven was confident of this, at least.
Lynne looked at her thoughtfully. “Okay. If Kathryn were to tell me that she’s decided I’m not qualified to be a contractor with security and that she’s yanked me off the security detail, how do you think I would react?”
“Badly.”
Lynne laughed. “True. Can you be more specific?”
Seven imagined such a conversation between the captain and Lynne, and could easily predict the course of it. “You would reject her decision and attempt to convince her that she was wrong. Failing that, you would set about proving your qualification, no doubt in some ill-advised and misguided manner.” Lynne snorted. “You would not cease your attempts to prove her wrong until she either admitted her error, or you learned for yourself that her assessment was correct. In the time it took for either of those resolutions, I believe that your relationship with the captain would be strained.”
Lynne nodded. “You know me very well, Seven. That’s pretty much
exactly what I’d do. So, let’s change the scenario a little. Let’s say that Kathryn told Revi that she was not qualified to work in sickbay and was being pulled from the position. How would she react?”

Seven opened her mouth to respond, but closed it again as several possible scenarios ran through her mind. Revi had been doing well in sickbay over the last week, and might be outraged to have her professionalism questioned. But given how reluctant she’d been to take the role initially, she might also be relieved to have the pressure removed. Would she be saddened? Resigned? Or would she fight the decision?

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “I can envision several outcomes to such a conversation, but I cannot assign a greater probability to any one of them.”

Lynne’s voice was gentle. “In other words, you don’t know her well enough to predict her emotions or behavior.”

“I…no, I do not.” Seven found this revelation bewildering. She’d thought their mental link precluded the uncertainty that prevailed in so many of her interactions with other crewmembers. To find this was not the case was unsettling. She’d been so secure in the comfort of their connection—was that an illusion? A Borg connection was inclusive and straightforward, but their connection had the added complication of Human emotions and individuality. Apparently that complication introduced a high number of variables.

She looked unhappily at Lynne. “Our connection is not as complete as I had believed.”

“That’s okay,” said Lynne. “Really, it is. You and Revi are still way ahead of the game, you know. Your mental connection may not be complete, but it’s still much, much more than the rest of us ever have. You just need time to get to know each other on other levels. Time to build up trust and understanding. I’d bet that as Revi gets to know you better, she’ll drop some of that emotional shielding.”

“I still don’t understand why such shielding is necessary in the first place,” Seven said. Her frustration was returning—what was the point of their connection if they were required to complete the same time-consuming, confusing period of acquaintance that non-connected people went through?

“It’s necessary for self-preservation, I’d imagine,” said Lynne. “Revi can’t display her every emotion to you, not when she doesn’t know you
yet. None of us can do that, Seven. That’s what a friendship is—a process of discovery and understanding, and a gradual revealing of who we are. You of all people should understand that—you’ve known the crew of Voyager for nearly four years now, and yet you only reveal your true emotions to a few of us.” She touched Seven’s arm again and squeezed gently. “A very lucky few of us.”

Seven looked down at the hand on her arm. Non-verbal communication. Her eidetic memory recalled the exact meaning of the gesture, as Lynne had explained it two months ago. You’re one of my best friends and I’m feeling very affectionate toward you right now. A warm, secure feeling calmed her frustrations, and she put her own hand over Lynne’s.

“Because I trust you,” she said. “How do I induce Revi to trust me?”

“The same way that you and I got there—time. And I don’t think it will take long, either, not with that connection you have. Take her somewhere she’d like to go. Talk to her. Spend time with her. But you can’t ‘induce’ her to trust you. You can only demonstrate that you’re worthy of it, and let her make the choice.”

Suddenly the pieces of the puzzle came together. Seven knew exactly what to do; she had been practicing this technique for weeks. Now she could utilize her new skills on a real person instead of a hologram. Quickly her mind ran over the various programs they had utilized, and she nodded in satisfaction.

“I will take her on a date,” she announced.

Lynne’s grin was huge. “You go, girl. Make me proud.”

Seven felt her own lips curve into a smile. “I will do my best.” Having decided on a course of action, she saw no reason for delay. While continuing to monitor her conversation with Lynne, she extended her thoughts into the link.

: Revi. :

: Yes. : The response was immediate, as always.

: When your shift is complete this evening, would you wish to accompany me to the holodeck? I have a program that you might enjoy. :

A faint feeling of surprise, then interested speculation. Seven was surprised herself—these were the first emotions she’d felt from Revi for days.

: What kind of program? :

: It is based in Greece, on Earth. A restaurant on the edge of a sea cliff. The food is
satisfactory and the redshifted wavelengths of the sun are aesthetically pleasing. I believe you will find it more enjoyable than ingesting nutrients in the mess hall.

: You’re asking me to a sunset dinner? :
: Is that not what I just said? :

Now she felt Revi’s amusement. : How can I resist an invitation like that? Sure, Seven. Where and what time? :

During the conversation, Seven had been checking the holodeck reservations and had already made her own. : 1900 hours, Holodeck One. :

: Okay. I’ll be there. :
: Thank you. I look forward to it. :

Ending the active link with Revi, she interrupted Lynne, who had been attempting to caution her that the reality of dating Revi might be different from her prior experiences with holodeck dates programmed to respond positively.

“I appreciate your concern,” she said. “However, she has already agreed to a date tonight, so I do not believe that such concerns are warranted.”

Lynne’s brows drew together. “Wait a minute. When did you ask her?”

“Twelve seconds ago.” She watched as Lynne processed this information, shook her head, and began to laugh. “I fail to see what is amusing,” she said, while Lynne continued to chuckle.

“I’m just laughing at the rest of us—all of us poor slobs who have to do this the hard way. That must be incredible, being able to hear each other like that.”

“I don’t think of it as incredible,” said Seven. “It is merely a return to normalcy.”

Lynne’s smile slipped off her face. “I guess it is at that.” She patted Seven’s arm and added, “Well, good luck. I hope it works perfectly; you deserve it. So where are you taking her?”

Being deserving had nothing to do with the outcome of events, Seven knew. But she appreciated the sentiment. “To Kronos,” she said.

“Oh, yeah, that was a great program, wasn’t it? Sun, sea, scenery and privacy…” Lynne trailed off as her expression became thoughtful. “You know, Seven, you’re giving me an idea here, and that’s a scary thing.”

“Is this a figure of speech? Your heartbeat and respiration do not indicate fright.”

“No, but they might later,” was the cryptic answer.
Seven knew better than to pursue this line of conversation. When Lynne became evasive, very little would induce her to reveal more information. However, she had learned that the information would usually be presented voluntarily, at a later date.

They spoke for a few minutes longer, viewed what Seven felt was a particularly intriguing radiation signature from a distant star, and then Lynne left Seven alone with her thoughts. Which, she realized, were a great deal less frustrating and more pleasant than they had been half an hour ago. She checked the program she’d left running, nodded at its satisfactory progress, and began work on her next calculation.
“Hey, Fossil!” B’Elanna couldn’t resist goading her friend as she plunked her tray on the table and pulled up a chair. “What are you doing out of the brig?”

“Funny. You’re just hilarious,” said Lynne, shooting a glare across the table.

B’Elanna tried a bite of the roasted whatever—she hadn’t actually caught what Neelix had called it, and was somewhat fearful about asking for clarification—and found it to be reasonably good. Oh well, what you didn’t know couldn’t hurt you. Sometimes. Swallowing, she said, “Well, you seem to be doing your best to beat Seven’s record for Most Times in the Brig in a Four-Month Period. Though Tom still has the record for longest total time served in one sentence. Maybe that’s the goal you should shoot for.”

Lynne put her fork down. “Considering that my last trip there was due to decking Parker, aren’t you just a little nervous about pushing my buttons? I’d go to the brig with a smile on my face for the privilege of wiping that smirk off yours. And these folks—” she waved her hand to indicate the crew currently dining in the mess hall—“would no doubt applaud me.”

“No, they wouldn’t,” said B’Elanna. “They’d be too scared.”

“Well, I’m not.”
“Which is precisely why I like you. You’re feisty.”

Lynne slammed down the water glass she’d just picked up. “Feisty??” she said with an incredulous look. “No way. ‘Feisty’ is a term for shorties like you. You know, people you wouldn’t expect to be vicious because they’re so cute-looking. I think a better word for me would be, let’s see…” She snapped her fingers. “Intimidating.”

B’Elanna was still choking on her latest bite of food, stunned that Lynne would call her short and then compound it by calling her cute. When she could breathe again, she treated her friend to the most scathing glare in her arsenal. Lynne smiled innocently back at her, and eventually B’Elanna had to laugh.

“You’re about as intimidating as Naomi Wildman,” she said good-naturedly. “And I will kick your ass for that ‘cute’ comment.”

“Promises, promises.”

With the traditional introductory insults now complete, the two friends caught up on news. They hadn’t seen much of each other since Dakmor, and B’Elanna was dying to hear Lynne’s side of things. More than that, she wanted to know that her friend was all right after such an eventful mission. Lynne wasn’t Starfleet, nor was she Maquis, and B’Elanna was worried about how she would deal with what she’d been forced to do on Dakmor.

When Lynne finished her tale, B’Elanna asked the question that was foremost on her mind. “How are you doing now?”

“I’m fine,” said Lynne offhandedly. “The Doctor fixed me right up. Besides, I’ve taken worse hits from Tuvok during sparring.”

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it.” Sometimes Lynne could be intentionally dense.

Lynne looked her in the eye. “Did you mean, how am I doing now that I’ve killed my first man?”

And then sometimes she could be alarmingly direct, thought B’Elanna. “And people say I’m blunt.”

“I’ve been taking lessons from you and Seven. As for your question... I guess it’s safe to say that I’m better today than I was yesterday. Kathryn and I had a good talk, and I did some meditation with Tuvok this morning. It’s helped. Which reminds me, I’ve got a favor I wanted to ask you.”

B’Elanna knew she was being redirected, but she accepted it with a
good grace. “Okay, what is it? Ask and you may receive, depending on my mood at the moment.”

“Well, I was hoping I’d get more consideration than that, but I guess I’ll take what I can get. I need a holodeck program designed.”

“For Seven?”

Lynne got a strange smile on her face. “No, not for Seven. For me.”

“Okaaay. What did you have in mind?”

Lynne slid a PADD across the table. “That.”

B’Elanna looked at the holopic. “Well, that’s fairly simple.”

“With these additions,” said Lynne, reaching across to hit a button on the PADD.

Scanning the list, B’Elanna smiled. “This looks like a pretty hot date.”

“The hottest. And I’m willing to repay you for your time in any way I can. I’ve got some replicator rations saved up.”

B’Elanna waved off the offer. “I don’t take rations from friends.”

“You take them from Tom. I saw you take him for thirty rations last week at Sandrine’s. I didn’t know you could play poker that well.”

B’Elanna grinned at the memory. “I can, and he should have known better, and he’s not a friend. He’s Tom.”

“Poor bastard.”

“Too true,” agreed B’Elanna, still looking at the list. If she didn’t know any better... “So what’s this really for?” she asked.

“I can’t say yet,” said Lynne. “But when I can, you’ll be the first to know.”

The evasive answer served to confirm B’Elanna’s suspicions. “Well, I think I can have this ready in a few days. Good luck with it. For what it’s worth, I think you’ve already got it sewn up.”

The two friends looked at each other, an unspoken understanding passing between them.

“Thanks, B’Elanna,” said Lynne. “I really appreciate this.”

“Don’t thank me. I’m doing this for my own selfish interests. Janeway was worse than a bear in heat when you two had your argument. The sooner you get things settled, the better for all of us.”

“Great,” said Lynne sarcastically. “So I have the well being of the entire ship’s crew on my shoulders. Nothing like a little pressure.”

“Don’t worry, Fossil. You’ll do fine.” Oh yes, she couldn’t wait to hear how this one turned out. This was going to feed the gossip mill for weeks.
Seven was unsurprised to find Revi waiting outside the doors when she arrived. Punctuality was not a virtue for the Borg; it was simply part of the programming. Being ex-Borg did not seem to alter that particular bit of code.

“Revi,” she said. “Thank you for coming.”

“Thanks for inviting me,” said Revi. “I must confess I’m curious to see what sort of sunset dinner you’d program in the holodeck. For some reason, that doesn’t really seem your style.”

Seven selected the program from the control panel and stepped forward. As the doors slid open, she said, “I did not create this program. It was created for…training purposes.” She paused, allowing Revi to enter first, then walked in behind her. The doors closed and vanished, leaving them on a stone pathway along a sheer sea cliff.

Revi looked around appreciatively as they walked along the path. “Training purposes? For what?”

“B’Elanna and Lynne have been creating scenarios so that I may better develop my dating skills.”

“You’ve been learning to date on the holodeck?” Revi’s tone was amused.

Seven stopped walking, stunned and hurt that Revi, of all people, would laugh at her. “I did not expect that you would denigrate my efforts to regain my humanity,” she said. She kept her voice even and her face impassive, her usual defense against the judgment and misunderstanding of others. But she couldn’t control her thoughts or emotions, and watched as Revi stopped, shoulders slightly hunched, then wheeled around and walked back to her.

“Seven, I’m four kinds of an asshole, and this was a bad start to our evening. Can we restart this conversation from an earlier time index?” She raised her hand, pushing an imaginary panel with her finger, and said, “Training purposes? For what?”

Seven saw no point to this and opened her mouth to say so.

: Please. :

Her jaw clicked shut, and after a moment she repeated the words. “B’Elanna and Lynne have been creating scenarios so that I may better develop my dating skills.”
“That surprises me,” said Revi, looking at her intently. “I wouldn’t have thought that someone as brilliant and articulate as you would have to resort to the holodeck for dates. It doesn’t say much for your shipmates.”

“That’s truly what you meant to say?” Seven wanted to be convinced.

“That’s truly what I meant to say, and I’m sorry it came out so badly. I would never denigrate your efforts to regain your humanity, Seven. Honestly, I think you’re more Human than a lot of people I know, and I can only admire your attempts to improve even more.”

For the moment, Revi had unshielded her emotions, and Seven knew that she was completely sincere. “Very well, I accept your apology. Shall we find our table?”

“Just like that?”

“What do you mean?”

“I hurt your feelings, and you’re over it just like that?” Revi looked incredulous. “I mean, I can sense that you’ve dismissed it. But I don’t get it.”

“You’ve apologized and I have accepted it. Why would I not dismiss the situation? To not do so would be inefficient.”

Revi shook her head, a slight smile on her face. “Ninety-nine point nine percent of the Human race would not take your view of things.”

“I am accustomed to that,” said Seven as she began to walk once more.

“I guess you are.” Revi kept pace with her, and nothing more was said until they were seated at their table, on a private terrace overlooking the blue sea far beneath them. Revi shook out her napkin and put it in her lap, looking around as she did so. “So tell me about this place. Why did you choose it?”

“It is a replica of a restaurant B’Elanna once frequented in Greece. I find the architecture of the town beneath us very pleasing aesthetically. In addition, I enjoy the uniformity of the colors—the brilliant white of the buildings against the rocky cliffs and the blue water. It is unusual for Humans to choose a single color for their dwellings, yet they have done so in many Grecian coastal towns. I also enjoy the height and the openness here. It makes me feel…unfettered.” Seven stopped speaking, afraid she’d already said too much.

“Interesting,” said Revi. “Architecture is both mathematics and art, one of which is a Borg specialty, the other Human. Uniformity is a Borg
trait. Openness and freedom are certainly not.” She leaned forward, resting her forearms on the table. “You’re a fascinating combination of Borg and Human, Seven.”

“You view this as a positive attribute,” said Seven. It was not a question; she could sense that much from Revi. “That is not the usual reaction. Most of my crewmates fear that part of me which is Borg, though the situation has improved in the last year. I am fortunate in that there are a special few who have not judged me at all.”

“I’ll bet I can name two of them,” said Revi. “Captain Janeway was the first person I met since leaving the Cooperative who knew me as Borg and didn’t recoil. And Lynne didn’t seem to even notice my Borgness. It was—astonishing, actually. I saw a lot of fear and hatred in my travels.”

Seven well remembered Revi’s passionate outburst in Cargo Bay Two. “You said you would give anything to have what I have now.”

By the look on Revi’s face, she remembered that conversation equally well. Even if she hadn’t, Seven’s thoughts would have presented her with a clear image. “I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that—"

“Good evening, ladies, would you like something to drink before you order?”

Both women looked up at the waiter, who hovered expectantly over them.

“Sparkling apple cider, please,” said Seven, for whom ordering in restaurants had become routine. After her hours of practice in the holodeck, she could hardly believe that it had once been so difficult for her.

“That sounds good to me too,” said Revi. The waiter nodded and left them alone.

Revi eyed Seven across the table, her manner somewhat nervous.

“One principle I’ve learned in my lessons here on the holodeck,” said Seven, “is that the likelihood of a waiter arriving at one’s table is directly proportionate to the importance of the conversation.”

Revi laughed. “It’s been a while since I was in a restaurant with good company, but from what I remember, you’re too right. Honestly, I don’t know why you’re dating on the holodeck. You’re better at this than I am.”

“I’ve improved greatly,” said Seven, who was feeling unaccountably warmed by the compliment. “If you had witnessed my first real date, you would understand just how much.”
The waiter brought their drinks and took their order, and for the next few minutes Seven described her disastrous first date for Revi’s entertainment. She could simply have remembered the date and let Revi read those memories, but in this setting, she wished to employ her hard-won conversational skills. In addition, she had discovered that—for reasons she still did not fully understand—her descriptions were often humorous to others. Lynne said it was her deadpan delivery combined with her total recall, and indeed, when Seven recounted her response to the lobster dinner ordered by her date—“This creature has an…exoskeleton,”—Revi burst out laughing. By the time she had completed her recitation, describing how she had dislocated her date’s shoulder while attempting to dance, Revi was wiping tears off her face.

“Oh, Seven, thank you,” she gasped. “I haven’t had a laugh like that in...well, I don’t know how long. That was hilarious.”

Seven was quite pleased at the result of her efforts. “I’m glad I could entertain you,” she said, and curved her lips to communicate her sincerity. It was unnecessary, of course, since Revi could easily determine what she was feeling.

“You can entertain me any time,” said Revi warmly.

The waiter chose that moment to deliver their food, and as they began eating, Seven asked Revi about her work in sick bay. She found herself listening with total concentration, not just to Revi’s words, but also to her thoughts and the tone of her voice. The combination was fascinating; her previous dates seemed dull and lifeless by comparison.

: Is this a date, Seven? A real one? : Revi had caught that thought.

Seven looked at her companion, sitting across the table with an expectant look on her face. With a shock she realized that she was no longer seeing Revi in terms of empirical characteristics, but had somehow developed a more subjective view of her. She found Revi beautiful.

Lynne’s voice came back to her, from the day that her dating training had first been outlined. You’ll know you’re attracted to someone, Lynne had said, when you suddenly start seeing them in a different way.

She saw no reason to prevaricate. With the Borg there had never been any pretense, and the propensity of Humans to be less than fully honest was a trait she found most frustrating. The idea of not having to watch her words—or in this case, her thoughts—was extremely appealing. She abandoned speech and dove into the familiarity of mind-to-
mind communication, answering Revi’s question with her usual directness.

: Lynne and B’Elanna defined a date as a social setting in which two people determine their romantic attraction for each other, based on what they learn about each other’s work, personalities, ethics, life history, and physical traits. By that definition, this is indeed a date. And based on what I have learned of you so far, I am romantically attracted to you. At least, I believe that is what I am feeling. It’s not something I have yet experienced, so I have no basis for comparison. :

Revi’s eyes were wide, and Seven caught a confused jumble of thoughts. A moment later, the confusion cleared and a single thought came through. : Do you mind if I look? :

: Please do so. I would appreciate your input. :

Revi closed her eyes briefly, and when she opened them again, something in her gaze had changed. She smiled, but her facial expression did not denote happiness. : You’re right, Seven. That is what you’re feeling. It’s a beautiful thing to see, though I can hardly believe it’s directed at me. :

: Why not? :

: Because you could have anyone you want. :

Seven frowned. Revi was attempting to conceal part of her thoughts, but she couldn’t shield them the way she could her emotions. Seven had clearly seen that Revi thought she was not good enough.

: I do not understand why you wish to hide your thoughts from me. Nor do I understand why you would consider yourself unworthy. You are uniquely suited to me, Revi. And you are a remarkable person. What about you would not be worthy? :

Revi dropped her fork and looked down at the table. : I don’t know if I can do this. :

: Please explain. : Seven didn’t need to sense her emotions to know that something was not right. And as her companion continued to study her plate, Seven became aware of faint emotional impressions. Revi’s shielding was leaking.

At last Revi looked up. : It’s funny, you know. I was a big fan of mind-to-mind communication before, because I never cared what anyone in the colony saw in my mind. They could judge me or not, and it didn’t matter. But it matters now. :

: I do not understand. :

Again there was that sad smile. : I care what you think about me, Seven. If you judge me, it will hurt. :
: But I have not judged you. : Seven was getting more confused the more Revi explained.

: No, not yet. But you don’t know me that well, either. :

Seven sat back in her chair with the force of both Revi’s thoughts and her own realization. : This is why you have been shielding your emotions. :

Revi nodded. : Partly. And partly because I don’t want to burden you. And partly because I still don’t know you that well. : She shifted her gaze to the town below them, sparkling against the deep blue of the Mediterranean Sea. Seven could hear her admiration of the setting.

“Revi,” she said clearly. Revi’s head snapped around at the unexpected sound of her voice. Seven reached out to touch her Human arm, and for just a moment she felt not only her own physical sense of the touch, but Revi’s as well. It was a new and very intriguing feeling, the tactile equivalent of looking into a mirror.

“I have not known you for long,” she said, “but I do not believe there are time constraints on friendship. And I consider you a friend. In the beginning you asked if I would let you ‘get to know me better.’ At the time I was uncertain of my feelings regarding you, but that is no longer the case. I would like very much for you to know me, and I wish to know you as well. Perhaps when you are more comfortable with me, you’ll believe me when I say that I will not judge you. And perhaps then you will allow me to see all of you.”

She gathered her thoughts and projected them with all the strength she had, together with her feelings of friendship and concern. Revi’s eyes closed at the onslaught, and a few seconds later Seven was flooded with emotions as Revi intentionally dropped her shields. Fear and hope were warring for dominance, along with affection for Seven and a feeling that was a more tentative version of her own romantic attraction. And behind it all, like the low-level hum of background radiation, there was an old and very painful grief.

She had barely sorted through and identified the various feelings before they were gone again. Revi opened her eyes, and for a moment they simply stared at each other.

: I can’t do that on a regular basis, Seven. Not yet, anyway. But I wanted you to understand. :

: Thank you. I do understand. And I hope that one day I will earn your trust. :
Revi looked startled, then smiled. *I can tell that you’re appreciating the irony.*

*Yes.* Out loud, Seven continued, “Shall we begin the process of ‘getting to know each other’?”

“I think we’ve done pretty well already, but what did you have in mind?”

“There are many things about a person that are not reflected in their daily thoughts or emotions,” said Seven, who had only recently realized this. “Those things require a discovery process, whether two people have a mind-to-mind connection or not. If you do not object, I will begin by asking you questions.”

Revi picked up her glass of cider and relaxed against the back of her chair. “All right. This sounds interesting. What’s your first question?”

Seven looked her in the eye, remembering something Captain Janeway had asked early in their acquaintance, when she had wondered out loud about a little girl named Annika Hansen.

“What is your favorite color?” she asked.

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**Chakotay leaned against the bulkhead,** waiting for the holodeck. He had reserved this time earlier in the week, and was looking forward to a good round of boxing to clear his head. He didn’t like butting heads with Janeway, and he didn’t like the way Revi Sandovhar had obviously snowed her. The Captain was brilliant, but she had an unfortunate blind spot when it came to people in distress. Her innate desire to help others had often led the crew into bad situations, and he was certain it was happening again. He still couldn’t believe Janeway had put Sandovhar into sickbay over his objections. How could she not see what that woman was capable of?

The holodeck doors opened and he pushed off the wall, anxious to get started. Then he stopped in his tracks as the prior occupants exited. He hadn’t checked the panel to see who had been in there, and it was an unpleasant surprise to see Sandovhar and Seven walking out together. His eyes narrowed as he took in the minimal space between the two, and the way Seven was actually *smiling* at something Sandovhar had just said. Seven never smiled; what the hell was that all about?
“Good evening, Commander,” said Sandovhar cordially.

“Commander.” Seven’s voice was cool as usual.

He muttered a greeting and watched as they walked away. No words passed between them, but they looked at each other as if they were having a conversation. Just before they rounded the corner, he was shocked to see Seven reach out and touch Sandovhar’s arm.

Stalking into the holodeck, he angrily called up his boxing program and set it for the highest difficulty rating. He was going to beat the shit out of his opponent today. And when he finished, he was going to figure out some way to convince Janeway that she was harboring a viper—a predator who had, by the looks of it, already sunk her fangs into a member of their crew. Because nothing could explain Seven’s uncharacteristic behavior except the one thing he had feared from the beginning—Sandovhar was obviously using mind control.

His opponent materialized, and after knocking gloves in the ritual greeting, he launched himself into a blazing attack. The sound of leather hitting flesh brought a grim smile to his face.

Sandovhar, he thought, you picked the wrong ship.
Kathryn Janeway stood in front of the holodeck doors, feeling a prickle of uncertainty and expectation. Ever since Lynne had finally opened up about the events at Dakmor, she’d been acting a bit strangely. Nothing that Janeway could put a finger on, but something just wasn’t right. It had been nearly a week now, and she was just about ready to call her on it. But then the invitation had appeared on her computer.

Lynne’s note had simply asked her to come to Holodeck One at 1830 hours, and to wear something formal. It was the latter part that left her wondering. In their time together, she’d only seen Lynne in formal wear on the Tsian planet.

At first she’d pulled out her dress uniform, but then realized that Lynne would have specified that if she’d wanted it. Instead she put on a dress that Lynne hadn’t yet seen: a full-length, backless, silky gown with a slit nearly to her hip. She felt a bit self-conscious walking through the corridors, but held her head high as she made her way to the holodeck. Whether in uniform or formal wear, the first rule of a captain was the same: Never let them see you sweat. She’d mentioned that to Lynne once and had been taken aback by her partner’s sudden explosion of laughter. When Lynne could breathe again, she’d explained that never in a million years would she have expected a *commercial* to survive into the twenty-fourth century.
Janeway smiled at the memory as she stepped forward. The doors opened, revealing a surprising scene.

She was on a mountain. Steep, rocky slopes fell away from her on three sides, while ahead of her a smooth path wound its way up a slight incline, its end hidden from view by a large boulder. Looking down, she could see the shadows of deep woods clustering the flanks of the mountain. The treeline appeared to be nearly a thousand meters below, and immense fields of snow and ice blanketed the slopes in between. Yet the path ahead of her was clear, and the air was warm with just a faint breeze. Overhead, the sky was a blue so dark that it was nearly violet.

*I’m supposed to climb a damn mountain in formal wear?* She shook her head as she followed the path upward. It was an easy walk, really, and she was abreast of the free-standing boulder in no time. Stepping around it, she stopped dead at the view before her.

While the slopes behind her had led to forest and then valleys, this final slope looked directly into a wild, icy mountain range. Everywhere ahead of her were breathtaking peaks, hanging valleys, and glaciers. Not a wisp of cloud could be seen, and the pure, arctic white of the snowy peaks was dazzling against the blue sky.

A small table waited at the edge of the summit, draped in white linen that echoed the icy peaks all around her. It was set for a formal dinner and laden with covered silver serving dishes. At the center of the table was an arrangement of greens surrounding a bud vase, which was curiously empty.

All of this she took in at a glance, but what really drew her eye was the woman in a full-length, brilliant red gown, standing at the edge of the precipice. For once Lynne’s hair was down, moving slightly in the soft breeze. She was gazing at the view and seemingly unaware of Janeway’s presence.

Janeway moved down the path, admiring the way her partner’s sleeveless, backless dress clung to her form and showed off her toned body. As she drew within arm’s reach, Lynne turned around, a brilliant smile breaking over her face.

“Wow,” she said, putting a hand to her chest. “You look stunning. I can hardly breathe.” Holding out a single rose, she added, “Thank you for coming.”
“Well, I couldn’t resist a mysterious invitation like that.” Janeway reached for the rose. “And you look...edible.”

Lynne blushed and tried to ignore it. “Careful with this. I replicated it with thorns intact.”

“Why?” asked Janeway, gingerly taking the stem. Nobody replicated roses with thorns; there wasn’t much point to it. So to speak.

“Because the most beautiful things in the universe exact a price from those who would appreciate them. And that’s the way it should be.” She leaned in and placed a soft kiss on Janeway’s lips before stepping back and tugging her free hand. “Come on.”

They walked the few steps to the precipice, where the full view revealed itself. As they stood in silence, looking out over the rocky peaks, Janeway turned Lynne’s enigmatic words over in her mind. She was sure there was a serious implication in there somewhere. Holding her rose up, she enjoyed the delicate scent.

“If you hold the rose carefully, you won’t be pricked by the thorns,” she said. “So what would the price be then?”

“That is the price,” answered Lynne. “The very fact that you can’t simply pick it up without caution. The fact that you have to take time with it, and treat it carefully, or you’ll get hurt.” She waved a hand at the scene before them. “Mountains give you amazing beauty and a sense of peace and serenity that can’t be found anywhere else—but they can kill you just as well, so you give them the greatest respect and tread very carefully as you climb them.” Her gaze grew intent. “And you are more beautiful than anything I’ve ever seen, but you’re also more dangerous to me than anything I’ve ever known.”

Janeway felt a twinge of fear. “Are you saying that you’re paying a price for being with me?”

“Of course. Just like you’re paying one for being with me. But I’m not concerned about actual costs. Just potential ones.” She indicated the rose in Janeway’s hand. “The actual price for holding that is the care you have to take with it. The potential price is getting pricked if you don’t.” She turned back to the view. “All my life I’ve paid the actual price for mountain climbing—having to train and plan carefully and never, ever take a climb for granted—and as a result I’ve never had to pay the potential price, of being seriously hurt or killed.”
“And with me,” said Janeway, following her reasoning, “the actual price was your decision at Earth. So what’s the potential price?”

Lynne faced her once again, this time gently clasping her hands around Janeway’s and the rose. “You hold my heart in your hands, Kathryn. I can’t get it back, and I can’t walk away without leaving it behind. You have the ability to shatter me. I’ve never given anyone that kind of power before. And while it’s a thrill on the one hand, on the other it scares the hell out of me.”

Janeway stared in astonishment. Lynne hardly ever opened up quite like this, and the rare occasions when she did were usually preceded by long talks and a few drinks. Yet here she was, minutes into the evening and laying open her heart and soul.

“You look a bit stunned,” said Lynne with a half-smile. She dropped her hands to Janeway’s waist.

“That’s a fair assessment. I hardly know what to say, except that the price you’re describing applies to me as well. You hold the same power over me. And I would never hurt you.”

“Yes, you will. Maybe not intentionally, but you will. It can’t be helped; it’s just part of the deal when two people hold each other’s hearts. I’ll hurt you, too, though I’ll do my best not to. And I’ve been thinking a lot about how much I’ve hurt you already.”

Janeway nodded. “The day before Dakmor.”

“Yes. And afterward, too.”

“Afterward?” Janeway searched her memory and came up blank. “Not that I can recall.”

Lynne looked over at the snowy peaks, and Janeway watched the muscle in her cheek jump as she clenched her jaw. “I heard you that night.”

“What night?”

“Five days after Dakmor. You asked if I would ever let you in.”

The penny dropped. “I thought you were asleep.”

“I know.”

Janeway took a moment to absorb that. It hurt more than she’d have expected. All she could say was, “Why?”

Lynne turned back, her eyes full of guilt. “Because I didn’t have an answer. At first I was pissed because I thought I was letting you in, and yet that didn’t seem to be enough for you. But then I thought about it and
realized that I wasn’t, not really. And that got me to thinking about why I wasn’t. Which is why we’re here now.”

Janeway looked around them. “Okay, I’ll bite. Why are we here now?”

“Because I needed this environment to explain.”

Janeway waited, but nothing more was forthcoming. She was starting to feel a bit impatient. “Well, that’s great. So are you going to explain anytime soon?”

“I already did.” Now those eyes were looking more than a little mischievous.

“Lynne…..” The name came out as a growl.

A grin broke over Lynne’s face as she held up her hands. “Okay, okay! God, you’re easy.” Her expression turned serious again. “The cost, Kathryn. I’ve been afraid of the potential cost of completely opening up to you. Of giving you so much power over me. And, I guess, of you maybe not liking what you see once you really see it all.”

Janeway opened her mouth to protest, but Lynne shook her head. “Please, I need to get this out.” She took a deep breath. “The funny thing is, I thought I’d already accepted all that when I came back from Earth, and that I was already giving you everything. I didn’t even realize that I was still holding back until I heard you that night, and it was a shock to think that I could be so blind about my part in our relationship. I think that sometimes, there’s so much going on in my head that I forget I haven’t shared it with you. And other times, I don’t particularly want to share, because what I’m thinking or feeling doesn’t really do me a lot of credit. And I want you to think the best of me.”

Janeway held her gaze, willing her to accept the truth. “When I say I love you, that doesn’t mean that I love the best parts of you and would rather not know about the rest. It means I love you, period. All of you. But if you don’t let me in, if you don’t let me really see you, then you’re denying me the chance to truly love you. Do you understand that?”

“I do up here,” said Lynne, tapping herself in the head. She moved her hand to cover her heart and added, “But this is the problem. Sometimes my heart overrules my intellect, and unfortunately, sometimes that heart just runs scared. But I promise, Kathryn, I promise that I’ll do my best to open up more. It may take some practice, and you’ll probably have to push me sometimes, but I want to let you in. I don’t want to hurt you anymore.”
Janeway wanted to believe; she really did. The doubt must have shown in her eyes.

“I know,” said Lynne. “Talk is cheap. So I was hoping that my actions might convince you.” She leaned down and plucked a small box from its place of concealment behind a rock, then dropped to one knee, her gown pooling around her. As Janeway watched in shock, she opened the box, revealing two bands of gold, both inlaid with green and blue gems. They were the inverse of each other: one with green gems bracketing blue, and the other with blue bracketing green. Pulling out the ring with the brilliant green gem at its center, Lynne looked up, her expression tense but determined.

“This ring represents my heart in your hands,” she said. “And I want you to hold that heart forever. Kathryn, you asked me if I would marry you, someday, when I felt comfortable with it. I know you were being careful because of my fears, and I loved you for it. But I’ve realized that my quarters aren’t the only security I have left. You are my true security, and I’ve been an idiot not to go to you when you asked. So I’m asking you now. Will you marry me?”

Janeway opened her mouth, but her voice had apparently gone on vacation. Leaning over, she grasped Lynne’s forearm and urged her upright. When they stood face to face, her voice finally returned.

“Don’t you get on your knees for me or anyone,” she said fiercely. “Your pride and your strength are two of the things I love most about you.” A tear escaped, and she swiped it away impatiently. “And yes, I’ll marry you in a heartbeat.”

She switched the rose to her right hand and held out her left. Lynne set down the box with the remaining ring and straightened, taking her hand. Carefully she slipped on the ring, and when she looked up, her blazing smile left Janeway weak in the knees. Leaning forward, Lynne captured her lips in a soft, gentle kiss.

When they separated, Lynne wiped away a few of her own tears. “Thank you,” she whispered.

Without answering, Janeway gave her the rose, retrieved the second ring from the box and took Lynne’s left hand in her own. “So this ring represents my heart in your hands?” When Lynne nodded, she said, “Then I should have given it to you months ago, because you’ve been holding that heart for a long time already.” She slid the ring on and stared
at it, then flipped their hands over to stare at her own. So much meaning packed into such tiny little objects, she thought.

“I love you,” she said. “And I’d tell you that you’ve made me the happiest woman in the world, but that seems kind of small-minded. But I do think it’s quite possible that I’m the happiest woman in the quadrant right now.”

“Nope. It’s a tie,” said Lynne, her voice shaking. “And I love you, too. Thanks for being so patient with me while I was busy being a fool.”

“Never a fool.” Janeway lifted their clasped hands and kissed Lynne’s finger, just below the ring. “Just scared. And that’s okay.”

Lynne’s lips trembled, and Janeway knew she was barely holding it together. Strangely, seeing her so near a loss of control calmed her own nerves. Perhaps it was because it showed that her partner wasn’t holding back; that she was allowing Janeway to see her in all her imperfect glory. She squeezed their clasped hands tightly and then let go. Putting her arm around Lynne’s waist, she turned them both back toward the view and rested her head against her partner’s shoulder, enjoying the moment and allowing Lynne time to pull herself together. Her—fiancée?—had surprised the hell out of her, but then, that was what Lynne did best. She knew one thing for sure: life with this woman was never going to be boring.

“So where are we?” she asked after a while.

“The Canadian Rockies,” answered Lynne, her voice steady once more. “I love this mountain, because it keeps its secrets for the truly deserving. You don’t get this view until you’ve made it all the way to the top; there aren’t any viewpoints on the way up. When I found the holopic in the ship’s database, I knew it was where I wanted to take you.” She squeezed Janeway’s waist. “This is my world, Kathryn. It’s what I wanted to share with you when I asked you to climb with me on the Tsian home world. So this holoprogram is sort of the literal definition of the mountain coming to Mohammed.”

“I thought Mohammed went to the mountain.”

“He did. But you’re much more stubborn,” said Lynne, which prompted a pinch to the ribs. “Hey!” she laughed, pushing Janeway out of reach. “There’s no need to attack me for speaking the truth.”

Janeway advanced on her, holding her hands out threateningly. “Mohammed would say that truth takes many forms.”
Lynne quickly moved backward, putting the table between herself and Janeway. “Yes, and my current truth is taking the form of ravenous hunger. Can I interest you in dinner?” She pulled out a chair.

Stepping up, Janeway planted a kiss on her lips and sat down. “Don’t think I don’t recognize this for a diversion. But I’m hungry, so I’m letting you off.” She put the rose in the bud vase and smiled at her partner’s attention to detail.

Lynne scooted her chair in and walked around to take her own. Pulling the cover off one of the serving dishes, she began ladling out a delicious-smelling soup. “So,” she began conversationally, “when shall we have the ceremony? And who do we invite?”

“That’s going to be a tough one.” Janeway cringed at the thought. The only places on the ship big enough to house the entire crew were the shuttle bay and the largest cargo bay, and she’d be damned if she’d get married in either of those cavernous spaces. No, it had to be the holodeck or the mess hall, which would limit guests, which meant they’d have to make choices. “No matter what we do we’re probably going to offend someone.”

“Oh, sure. That goes without saying. Isn’t that part of the wedding tradition?”

Janeway laughed, and they spent the rest of the meal discussing options for their upcoming nuptials. The only hiccup in an otherwise perfect evening occurred when Lynne said that she wanted to keep her quarters until they were actually married. “Call me old fashioned,” she said, her eyes pleading, “but I’d just rather wait.” Janeway’s first reaction was disappointment, but after a moment’s thought she understood, and the look of relief on Lynne’s face when she said so made her quite certain that she could wait as long as it took. Which, hopefully, would not be too long.

The sun slipped below the horizon as they were finishing their dessert, lighting the peaks around them with a rose color so brilliant that Janeway couldn’t help but comment on it.

Lynne looked up from the dessert wine she was pouring and said, “Yes, I told B’Elanna that there had to be alpenglow.”

“Alpenglow?”

Smiling, Lynne handed Janeway her wine. “You’re such a flatlander, Ms. Indiana. Alpenglow is the color that mountain peaks turn after
sunset. The ice and snow reflect the late, scattered red light from the sun. But living your life in the Midwest and then in space, I guess you’d never see it.”

“Don’t be getting that superior tone with me,” warned Janeway playfully. “I understand the physics better than you ever will.”

“True,” Lynne admitted. “But I don’t need to understand the physics to see the beauty.”

That shut Janeway up, and they both watched the light change as they sipped their wine. When the rose color began to fade and the first few stars winked into life, Janeway suspected their time in the holodeck was over. Lynne’s sigh confirmed it.

“It’s time to go.”

Janeway nodded. They stood up and joined hands, watching the last of the alpenglow fade.

“I timed it to match the sunset on Earth,” said Lynne. “In San Francisco.”

Janeway looked at her partner in surprise. “So you did. I hadn’t thought about that.”

“I wanted it to be symbolic of the last of our old life. Tomorrow we start a new life, Kathryn. With each other. I’m looking forward to a future with you.”

“Past, present, and future,” said Janeway. “They all run together. And you’re with me in all of them.”

Lynne squeezed her hand as they turned down the path, rounding the boulder and nearing the spot where Janeway had first come in. Pausing, she said, “Computer, end program.”

The computer chirped its confirmation tone as the mountains faded to a familiar yellow grid, exposing the holodeck doors in front of them. Janeway felt a sense of loss, but Lynne’s warm hand in hers and the rings on their fingers were proof that it had really happened—her sometimes reluctant partner had finally given all of herself. This evening had brought a fundamental change to their lives, and she wished they could keep this newfound intimacy to themselves. But she knew that the bridge crew would bombard her with questions as soon as word got out, and she had no illusions about how long they could keep it quiet. She looked wistfully at Lynne.

“Can we come back?”

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Lynne gave her a delighted smile. “I was hoping you’d ask. It means a lot to me to share my world with you. We can come back any time you want.”

They walked out of the holodeck and strolled down the hall, still holding hands. There were quite a few crew members out and about, since many of the alpha shift crew were just now leaving the mess. All of them shot startled looks at the couple, who certainly stood out in their formal dresses. Janeway simply smiled at them and kept walking. She hit the call button for the turbolift and offered a silent request that the lift be empty.

It wasn’t. The doors slid open to reveal B’Elanna Torres, whose eyes quickly scanned the two women. A large grin spread over her face. “Oh yeah, it was a hot date, all right,” she said. “Going up?”

Janeway looked at Lynne, knowing that B’Elanna would spot their rings in an instant, if she hadn’t already, and that their engagement would be all over the ship in no time.

“I think our future starts here,” she said.

“I think you’re right. And in that case...” Lynne pulled a surprised Janeway to her and took her mouth in a possessive kiss. Janeway’s initial shock at the public display soon faded, and she threw propriety to the wind, returning Lynne’s kiss with passion. They finally parted, staring at each other, and it was several seconds before Janeway’s heart rate came down to what she considered a safe level.

She turned and stepped into the lift, where a stunned B’Elanna was doing a fairly good impression of a fish. Lynne followed her in.

“Deck three,” said Janeway, grinning to herself. It wasn’t often that she got to put that expression on B’Elanna’s face. She reached out without looking and took Lynne’s hand.

“Oh my god,” said B’Elanna from behind them. “You did it! Kahless on a crutch! Congratulations!”

Janeway rolled her eyes and turned around. “Didn’t take you long,” she said.

B’Elanna grabbed Lynne’s hand and examined her ring, grinning widely. “Nice job, Fossil!”

“Thanks. And by the way, thanks for not taking my rations. I put them to good use.”

“I guess you did!” B’Elanna let go of Lynne’s hand, reached out for Janeway’s and then froze. Janeway just smiled and lifted her hand.
“It’s okay, B’Elanna. I’ve got a feeling that I’ll just have to walk around like this until everyone gets tired of looking at it.”

Hesitantly, B’Elanna took her hand. “They’re beautiful, and I couldn’t be happier for you, Captain. Or you, Fossil,” she added, looking at Lynne. “You two were made for each other.”

Gently, Janeway pulled her hand from B’Elanna’s grasp and took Lynne’s instead. “I agree,” she said warmly.

The turbolift came to a stop, releasing Janeway and Lynne to the relative peace of the corridor. Lynne waved at B’Elanna as the doors closed, then turned back with a laugh.

“You realize that the news will be all over the ship by the time we get to that door,” she said, indicating the entrance to Janeway’s quarters.

“I know. Of all the people to run into! But I hadn’t planned on keeping it a secret, so it doesn’t really matter. Are you worried?”

“Oh, no. Besides, I think B’Elanna knew from the moment I asked her to create that holoprogram. I’m amazed she’s managed to keep it to herself this long. So maybe running into us on the turbolift was an act of mercy for her.”

The two women chuckled at the thought of B’Elanna dying with the news she couldn’t reveal—until now.

“I’ll bet she leaves that turbolift like she was shot from a torpedo launcher,” added Janeway as they entered her quarters.

Lynne let out a belly laugh. “No bet!”

Her laughter died away as they looked at each other, and the expression on her face changed to something altogether different. “I’ve been itching to take that dress off you,” she said. “Slowly.”

Janeway shivered at the sudden drop in her tone. Stepping forward, she slipped her arms around her partner and reveled in the contact with Lynne’s warm, bare back. “I know the feeling. But there’s a lot less to take off you, so why don’t I start?”

She slid her hands up Lynne’s arms and inside the dress at the shoulders, slowly moving them down to graze the tops of her breasts. The ribs under her hands expanded as Lynne took in a sharp breath. Janeway looked up into brilliant green eyes and paused, momentarily taken aback at the depth of love she saw there. Dropping a soft kiss onto a bare shoulder, she tucked her head under Lynne’s chin and nestled there, feeling warm and loved and utterly content.
“Welcome home,” she said. “Though it may be a while before you can call it that.”

Lynne squeezed her tightly. “Haven’t you figured it out yet?”
“Figured what out?”
“Home isn’t a place anymore, Kathryn. It’s a person. You’re my home now.”

Janeway pulled away to look at her. “When you decide to open up, you go all the way, don’t you?”

“I don’t ever want you to doubt us again. Or doubt me.” She ran her hands down Janeway’s back, brushing soft fingertips against her spine. Janeway shivered, feeling goosebumps rise all over her skin.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “That means a lot to me. And the only thing I’m doubting right now is whether I can wait until we get to the bedroom before I start stripping that dress off you.”

A slow smile made its way across Lynne’s face, and she turned for the bedroom. “Then I guess we’d better get moving.”
Alison Nechevyev stared at the monitor on her desk, a feeling of foreboding curling in her gut. In her six years as Chief Executive Officer of the Hamilton Foundation, she had never been summoned to a meeting with the board officers. In fact, so far as she knew, there had never been a formal meeting of just the board officers. She hadn’t even known they were in the building until just now, when she’d received the communication ordering her to the executive conference room.

She rose, pulled a PADD out of her desk, and made her way out the door, thinking furiously. Why would the Chair, Vice Chair and Secretary of the board be asking her to meet with them? The full board had just had its quarterly meeting two weeks ago, and everything had seemed fine. She’d gone over the progress of the currently funded projects and described upcoming projects that her staff had recommended for funding. It was all business as usual, just as it had been for six years. She was scrupulous about upholding the mission of the Foundation, so the grants she approved were never in question.

And yet, the only reason she could think of for her summons to this meeting was that she was being fired. Why else would the three most powerful people in the Foundation be upstairs right now, waiting for her?

She arrived in front of the closed conference room door, its polished wood gleaming dully in the late sunlight that streamed through the hall.
Windows. Taking a deep breath, she squared her shoulders, opened the door, and walked in. During her annual summer visits with her aunt, the Admiral, she’d learned a great deal about handling people. One of the most basic principles was to project confidence whether you felt it or not.

The first thing she noticed when she entered the room was that the officers were all at one end of the long conference table, a wooden box resting in front of them. The glass of water marking her place was in lonely isolation, one seat removed from the others. Without pausing, she scooped up the glass as she walked by and carried it with her to the chair right next to Elise Hamilton. Setting the glass down, she pulled out the chair and sat, looking expectantly at the officers. She could see a quick look of annoyance on Brian Hamilton’s face, but Elise gave her a very slight, approving smile.

“Dr. Necheyev, thank you for coming,” said Brian.

*As if I had any choice.* “It was my pleasure,” said Alison. “Though I confess to being somewhat surprised at your invitation.” *Your command, actually.*

“Don’t worry,” said Elise. “You’re not being fired.”

Alison glanced at her in surprise. The Vice Chair carried her wealth and power well, and her sense of humor was often a welcome counterpoint to her uncle’s more overbearing manner.

“You surely didn’t think that, did you?” asked Charles Fornay from across the table. He was Brian’s son-in-law, and had worked his way into the post of Secretary of the board. Genial and outgoing, Charles tended to be a flirt despite his successful marriage and three children.

Alison smiled at him. She liked Charles and thought he was fairly harmless. He might flirt, but he never meant it seriously.

“Offhand, I could only think of two reasons for this meeting,” she said. “So since you’re not firing me, when can I look forward to my raise?”

Both Charles and Elise laughed, but Brian seemed unamused. White-haired and holding himself with the erect bearing of a career diplomat, Brian Hamilton was the undisputed patriarch of the family. In all her board meetings, she had never seen him smile and wondered if he were even capable of it.

“The purpose of this meeting is a great deal more important than your salary, Dr. Necheyev,” he said. “And I don’t have much time this evening, so I’ll get right to the point.”
When don’t you? “Please do,” she said pleasantly.
“I assume you are familiar with the name U.S.S. Voyager.”
Alison was completely thrown. What the hell could that have to do with this mysterious meeting?
“Of course. It was big news when it disappeared.” Unfortunately, since then the Dominion War had made disappearing ships all too common, and Voyager had faded into obscurity. It had briefly flashed back into the public eye when its crew made contact via an alien communication array, but hadn’t made the news since then. She probably knew more about it than the average person, thanks to her aunt. Janeway had been a favorite captain of the Admiral’s. “Has the crew made contact again?” she asked.
“Not exactly,” answered Brian. “We’ve made contact with them.”
As Alison stared at him in confusion, Elise clarified matters. “More specifically, Starfleet has made contact with them through MIDAS.”
“Really? Fantastic!” The development of MIDAS, or the Mutara Inter-dimensional Deep-space transponder Array, had been largely funded by the Foundation, and it was always good news when a grant paid off like that. “I can’t wait for their report, then. Their last report said that data transmission time could be reduced from years to days by using a hyper-subspace concept, but it said nothing about real-time transmissions.”
“The physics are irrelevant to this meeting,” said Brian. “What is important is that Voyager reported the news that we’ve been waiting for. They’ve picked up new crew members in the Delta quadrant: two ex-Borg, which I’m sure Starfleet is already salivating over, and one Human female. The Human’s name is Lynne Hamilton.”
Alison’s eyes went wide. “That’s a hell of a coincidence. Are you going to tell me she’s a relation?”
“We think so,” said Elise.
“We will believe it when it’s proven,” snapped Brian.
Alison looked back and forth between the two. This appeared to be an old argument.
“Oh, come on,” said Elise. “What else could explain it? There aren’t too many Humans floating around the Delta quadrant, much less Humans with that name.”
“We have dealt with con artists before,” said Brian. Elise just snorted and rolled her eyes.
“That’s true,” said Charles in a conciliatory tone, “but I have to agree
with Elise. The only way this could be a con is if someone has developed faster-than-warp travel with private funding, and managed to keep it a secret.”

“Nevertheless,” said Brian, “we will proceed on the assumption that she is not a relation until she proves otherwise.”

“I hate to interrupt,” said Alison, who really didn’t, “but why are you concerned with her relation to you when it’s unlikely that you’ll ever meet her? Last I heard, Voyager was almost sixty thousand light years away.”

“They’ve closed it to thirty-four thousand,” said Elise.

“That’s remarkable,” said Alison, keeping her surprise off her face with practiced ease. She couldn’t wait to talk to her aunt; the Admiral must be thrilled. Well, as close to thrilled as she got, anyway. “But they’re still over thirty years out.”

“That’s where we come in,” said Brian. “The Hamilton Foundation is altering its mission, Dr. Necheyev. As of today, our mission is focused solely on any possible technology that can bring Voyager home. New propulsion methods, spatial folds, induced wormholes—we will fund anything that is well thought out and promising.”

This time, Alison knew her astonishment was showing. The Hamilton Foundation had operated on the same mission for hundreds of years—first to get Humans into space, and then to make space travel ever more efficient, safe and comfortable. To change its mission now was slightly less shocking than the Mars Base suddenly deciding to remove its dome.

“We’re changing our mission?” she said faintly. “What about the projects currently being funded?”

“We will honor our commitments through this fiscal year,” said Charles. “All projects must reapply for funding beyond that.”

Alison was still trying to wrap her brain around this unbelievable development. “Okay, wait a minute,” she said, abandoning her normal professional tone. “This makes no sense. I can only assume that the Foundation is pursuing this course due to Lynne Hamilton’s presence on Voyager, correct?”

All three officers nodded.

She looked at Brian. “But you just said you plan to assume she isn’t related until she can prove otherwise. So why are you altering the Foundation’s mission if she’s assumed to be a fake?”

“We aren’t all assuming that,” muttered Elise.
“I am altering the Foundation’s mission,” said Brian, ignoring his niece, “because I was ordered to do so.”

Alison stared. “Who orders the Chair of the Foundation to do anything?”

“The founders,” he answered.

Oh, that’s helpful. Alison wondered if she’d made a mistake eating those Bajoran leftovers the night before. It was great food, but maybe the spices were affecting her brain. Because this whole meeting only made sense as a dream or hallucination.

“Uncle Brian, perhaps you should show her the PADD,” said Elise, gesturing at the wooden box resting before them.

Everyone at the table turned their attention to the innocuous box as Brian rested his large hands on it. “This has been in the Hamilton family for over three hundred and fifty years,” he said. “But it was never opened until last year. The founders sealed the box in a time capsule and left explicit instructions regarding when the capsule was to be opened. Each time a new officer was seated on the board, that officer was shown the capsule, told the history of the Hamiltons, and given a letter to read. The letter was from the original founders and laid out the purpose and mission of the Foundation. We three,” he indicated Elise and Charles, “were the first to actually see the box and its contents. And you,” he leveled a stern look at Alison, “are the first person outside the family to even know of its existence. But recent events require that we bring you into this.” He opened the lid, pulled out a PADD, and handed it to her. “Play it.”

Frowning, she took the PADD and hit the playback button. Immediately the small screen was filled with the image of a striking woman, her green eyes alight and her hair pulled back in a French braid.

“Hi, Mom; hi, Dad—I sure wish I could talk to you face to face,” the woman said.

Alison watched in increasing astonishment as the woman told her story. She could only be the Lynne Hamilton the officers had mentioned, but this whole thing was just unbelievable. After several minutes of the most outrageous tale Alison had ever heard, the woman on screen told her parents that she couldn’t come back home again, and the screen went blank. Alison looked up.

“Keep watching,” said Brian. “It picks up again. The PADD has been in
storage for over three and a half centuries; it’s not surprising that some of the data was corrupted.”

As she turned back to the PADD, the image appeared once more.

“I have to get this to the lawyer, so I’ll say goodbye now. Once you’ve both heard this, I’m going to ask you to destroy the PADD. My friend Seven rigged it for a self-destruct. Take it outside, press the top left button three times and get yourself a good ten meters away. Please do this—it’s vitally important that this technology doesn’t get out of your hands.

“That’s about it,” the woman said, and began to cry. “God, I wish I could hug you both one last time. Consider this a long-distance hug—across both years and miles. I love you both desperately, and I am so grateful that I got to have you for parents. You’re the best. I hope you’ll be happy for me—and if you ever want to see me again, go outside at night and look up. I’m in the stars.”

The screen went blank again, and this time when Alison looked up, Brian was holding out his hand. In a daze, she gave him the PADD as her brain churned furiously. “Obviously her parents didn’t destroy the PADD,” she said. “Are they the founders you mentioned?” Although she’d worked at the Foundation for six years, she’d never learned anything about how or why it was originally established. She’d been told that all early records were lost during the Third World War. Apparently that was a lie.

“Yes. John and Elizabeth Hamilton established this Foundation in her name. They decided to do everything they could to make sure that their daughter was rescued.”

“But they already knew she was rescued,” Alison objected. “She told them in her message.”

“True,” said Brian, “but they also knew that her presence back on Earth had the possibility of altering the timeline.”

“So you’re saying that they established the Foundation for the sole purpose of ensuring the original timeline?”

“That is correct. The Foundation has always operated on the guidelines set forth by John and Elizabeth Hamilton. And now that Voyager has Ms. Hamilton aboard, those guidelines specifically instruct the Foundation’s activities to focus solely on bringing it home.” He reached into the box again and pulled out an archival unit. The sealed transparent aluminum sheets protected several pieces of paper, covered on both sides in old-fashioned longhand writing.
Alison took the unit and squinted at the ancient writing. “This is a bit hard to make out.”

“Here is the text.” Brian slid another PADD over to her. She activated it and scanned the text. It was a letter from John and Elizabeth Hamilton, confirming everything she had just learned. Halfway down the text column, though, she came upon something new.

*We did not destroy the PADD as our daughter requested, though we have taken steps to make sure it does not pollute the timeline. In the event that Lynne returns to Earth, the PADD can be used to confirm her identity. We chose to keep it in case the enclosed DNA sample does not survive. In addition, we have included a list of questions that only Lynne would be able to answer. At the time of Lynne’s return, should her DNA be confirmed and the questions answered correctly, she will immediately receive the full balance of the trust fund. The current managerial system will be dissolved unless she chooses to continue employing fund managers. At this time, Lynne will also assume her rightful position as Chair of the Foundation Board.*

*In the sad event that Voyager does not return to Earth, the trust fund is to be dissolved and the funds therein transferred to the Foundation corpus. This action shall not take place until the year 2475, one hundred years after Lynne arrives aboard Voyager.*

The text became legalese for several paragraphs, referred to private messages to be given to their daughter upon her return, and then ended. Alison handed it to Brian, sat back in her chair, and looked at all three officers in turn. “What trust fund?”

This time it was Charles who answered. “The Hamiltons set up a trust fund for their daughter at the same time they set up the Foundation. The two funds started out with the same amount of money, and utilized the same investment strategies. Throughout the existence of the Foundation, one of the main duties of the three board officers has been to manage the trust fund. Each officer receives a yearly salary consisting of two and a half percent of the fund’s gains each year, so the Hamiltons built in an effective means of making sure the fund was handled carefully.”

*I should say! She was stunned yet again—it was getting to be a positively common state of existence for her this evening. If the trust fund contained the same amount in its corpus as the Foundation, then two and a half percent of the annual gains was a salary that could buy and sell*
small planets. She looked at the three board officers with new eyes. These people were richer than God. And if the woman on Voyager was indeed this Lynne Hamilton, then she was richer than God ever imagined.

“I am sure you can now understand our caution,” said Brian. “The information you have learned here has been kept under strict secrecy for generations, but there’s no guarantee that something hasn’t slipped out over the years. That’s why we must be so careful about imposters.”

“Yes, I can see that,” said Alison thoughtfully. “But with that PADD and the Hamiltons’ letter, I don’t see how the woman on Voyager could be anyone but the real Lynne Hamilton.”

“I agree,” said Elise. “But Uncle Brian sees conspiracy everywhere.” The elegant woman aimed a very inelegant grin in the board chair’s direction.

*I’ll bet he does,* thought Alison. *If that really is Lynne Hamilton, he’s out of a job. And they’re all out of an income.*

“I agree it is unlikely that she is not who she says she is,” said Brian. “But we cannot be too careful when dealing with this kind of money. People have lied, cheated and killed for far less.” He turned his gaze on Alison. “And now we will leave you to your duties. You will begin implementing the new mission immediately, starting with a press conference. You will, of course, treat everything you have learned in this meeting with the utmost secrecy. Nothing of this must ever leave this room.”

“Hold on,” said Alison in alarm. “I can understand about the trust fund, but how do you expect me to explain this sudden shift in our mission statement without telling the truth about the Hamiltons? Do you realize the kind of enemies we’re about to make? This is a political antimat ter bomb.”

The smile Brian gave her was the first she’d ever seen on his face, and she hoped it was the last. It was not in the least bit pleasant.

“That, Dr. Necheyev, is your problem. You are the public face of the Hamilton Foundation. Dealing with problems is why we hired you.”

The three officers rose. Charles tucked the box under his arm and gave Alison an apologetic smile. Elise patted her on the shoulder. A moment later, Alison sat alone in a very quiet, very empty conference room.

“Shit,” she said. “I knew I should have majored in landscape architecture.”
FURTHER ADVENTURES

The further adventures of Kathryn Janeway and Lynne Hamilton can be found on the Fanfic page at my website, fletcherdelancey.com.

You can email me at fletcher@mailhaven.com or find me on Twitter (@AlseaAuthor) or Facebook (fletcherdelanceyauthor).