

The end is the beginning by Kadyan

Part 1

Chapter 1.

Kathryn Janeway, former captain of the Federation Starship Voyager, sat on the bench she had just cleaned of snow. This year was so different from the last one. When they had arrived on Earth just before Christmas, surprising everyone, they had been the endless talk on the news. Interviews of the families, interviews of the crew, how they destroyed the Borg Queen... A year had passed by and nothing had been as she had expected. She had felt so guilty because she had stranded her ship in the Delta quadrant for seven years. During all these years, she had had only one goal: getting home. And now that she was home, her life was meaningless.

Kathryn looked at the snow that covered her mother's garden and all the fields around. Everything was frozen outside and inside her. How can one life so full have become so empty? She didn't know...didn't want to know. But now she had reached a point in her life where she had to decide. *When has everything gone wrong?* She knew when : the day Chakotay had asked her to step back and let Seven go. She had been hurt by the request on that day, a week after they had arrived on Earth, but she had stepped back. When she had received the invitation for their wedding, she had discarded it and didn't attend. Seven had tried to contact her but she had never acknowledged, read or answered any of her messages. She had stepped back all right. Was it enough for Chakotay?

Janeway had felt betrayed by her First Officer. He knew Seven was important to her, a friend. How dare he ask to let her go? *Why did I let her go?* Kathryn has asked herself this question for a year but never really dare to answer it. And today wasn't a good day either to answer that question. For a few more minutes, she watched the dogs playing in the snow, disturbing the perfection. A small smile reached her lips. Would Seven have assimilated the dogs to stop them from destroying perfection? Kathryn felt her throat ache at this thought. She couldn't help thinking of her former Astrometric Officer. Couldn't help remembering she had promised this beautiful young woman to bring her here, home, to Indiana...but it has never happened.

Kathryn heard the patio door creaking, the crushed snow under a foot. She bit back the tears that were threatening to fall, composed herself.

"Katie, you are going to freeze over here. You have been sitting on this bench for almost an hour!"

That long! No wonder her mother was worried.

"Sorry, Mom, I lost track of the time."

"So I see. May I ask what made my older daughter sit outside in the middle of winter?" After the euphoria to finally getting her daughter back, Gretchen has started to worry. Kathryn was going deeper and deeper into depression. Was she the only one to notice it? What about the counsellor? She knew Starfleet has forced her to go to counselling. Sure, the man has seen that Kathryn Janeway, the famous captain, daughter of an admiral, wasn't doing well but it hadn't changed anything. "I made some fresh coffee. Want to go inside and share a cup with me?"

"Sure, Mom." Kathryn answered without enthusiasm. Gretchen hid her shock. Katie, her Katie, casual about a cup of coffee? Things were wrong, very wrong.

Side by side, they walked into the house, removed their coats before going into the kitchen where Gretchen poured coffee in two big mugs.

"Want to talk about it?"

"No," Kathryn answered straight away. She saw her mother tense, the sorrow in her eyes; "but maybe, I'd better."

Kathryn drank a big mouth of a very hot coffee to steady her nerves. "Necheyev offered me to become an admiral."

For a few seconds, Gretchen's heart beat stronger. This promotion was well deserved after everything her daughter had been through. She started to congratulate Katie when she saw her eyes.

"You don't want to be an admiral," Gretchen said, her voice flat.

"I am a starship captain, I don't want to be an admiral sitting behind a desk!" Captain Janeway exploded. "They want to kill me!" She hit her thorax with her fist to validate her point. "I have been asking for another vessel for nine months. Each time, they found excuses to say 'not yet'."

Captain Janeway was walking up and down in front of the table. Her mother has never seen so much anxiety, so much energy, so much despair in her daughter. Even after seen the death of Justine, her fiancé, and of her father, it hadn't been so bad.

“You can always refuse.”

“Can I?”

“It’s your call, Katie. They cannot force you to do what you don’t want. When your father became an admiral, we talked about his promotion. I wanted to be sure that it was what he wanted and it was, never doubt that. Do what your heart wants, not what others want for you.”

Kathryn froze in her track. *What my heart wants? I can never have what my heart wants! It’s too late. She belongs to another.* For the first time in years, Captain Kathryn Janeway understood. She had been able to fool the counsellor when he had asked about her feeling for Seven of Nine because she had been able to fool herself...until now. It wasn’t a mother-daughter connection or a pupil-mentor one, it was a lover connection, a one sided connection.

“Oh, Mom! I have been a fool!” To her mother’s horror, Kathryn sat on one of the chairs and cried. Gretchen couldn’t resist, she took another chair and pulled her daughter in her arm to comfort her. Kathryn cried for the loss of the love of her life, for missing opportunities.

After her breakdown in front of her mother, finally, Kathryn Janeway knew what she had to do.

The next morning, she asked for a meeting with Admiral Nechev and Admiral Paris before driving to the transporter station, a few minutes from her mother’s house. When she stepped on the dais in full uniform, she didn’t know what her future would be but she knew what it wouldn’t be. She had sacrificed so much to this uniform, for the four pips. She wasn’t going to lose it to satisfy some admirals.

Going from the transporter station in central San Francisco to Starfleet Headquarter took her less than five minutes. For the first time in months, her walk was confident. Kathryn squared her shoulders under this new black and grey uniform before entering the conference room on level 10.

The room was still empty and she ordered some “coffee, black” from the replicator. She had time to finish half her mug before the two admirals entered. Admiral Paris was smiling while Admiral Nechev just nodded to acknowledge her.

“Admiral Janeway, glad to see you!” Admiral Paris said before noticing she was still wearing the four pip of a captain. He frowned.

“Captain.” Admiral Nechev saluted. “I hope you are here to give us an answer. We need seasoned officer to reconstruct the Federation and you are one of the most famous.”

And you want to show me around like a puppy! Kathryn bit her bottom lip to cut her answer.

“Admiral Nechev, Admiral Paris. I have come to refuse your proposal. I don’t want to be an admiral. I belong on the bridge of a starship.”

A deep silence welcomed her words. The two admirals exchanged a look before Nechev spoke.

“Captain...I don’t think you understood us well. It’s your decision to accept or refuse the promotion. You can be an admiral at the Headquarter or a captain in any office on Earth. That’s the only choice we are giving you. After what happened with the Equinox, nobody at Starfleet Headquarter is certain that it will not happen again.”

“You won’t give me a captaincy for one misstep in seven years!” Janeway roared. For the first time in her career she was losing her cool. “After all we had to endure in the Delta Quadrant! We survived when the odds were against us and came back home, for Christ sake!” Janeway calmed down a bit, “But you already know that. So, that’s it? I am sentenced without a trial. Yes, a trial would have been bad for the image of Starfleet. I won’t be a puppet that you can show off whenever you want!”

“Captain! You’re forgetting yourself!” Nechev cut. Janeway looked at her with disdain but stopped speaking. Starfleet has been her life and now Starfleet was betraying her. So pathetic. She had lost everything to Starfleet but enough was enough.

“Kathryn, your father would have been so proud of you. He would...”

Janeway cut Paris. “I will resign. You will have my letter this afternoon.”

“But...” Admiral Paris was at lost for words. Before she had time to leave Nechev asked her.

“What will you do?”

“With my resume, I don’t think it’s going to be a problem to get a command on a ship from a private company.”

“A freighter? You would accept to command a freighter?” Admiral Nechev was shocked. She had thought they had trapped her, put down her restlessness.

“You leave me no choice. I know where I belong. Even the bridge of a freighter is better than a desk here.” Her hoarse voice still reverberating, Captain Kathryn Janeway closed the door behind her; leaving two stunned admirals in her wake.

“How could we have missed that?” Nechev asked in a very dry voice. She was at her most dangerous when she was speaking quietly and Owen Paris was fidgeting in his chair. “You told me you knew her.

You were certain that she would accept this promotion happily even after she told everybody she wanted to be back on the bridge of a starship! A freighter? Losing our best captain to a private company? We cannot afford that, not after the war with the Dominion. When word of her resignation will be heard, she will have dozens of offers. We have to act quickly.”

“I was so certain she would accept. Everything pointed in this direction, even the counsellor report,” Admiral Paris explained. “My son tried to warn me when I told him we wanted Janeway to become an Admiral but I didn’t listen. I bet he knows her better than me now.”

“Owen, we cannot afford the luxury to ponder on this decision, we have to act...now.”

“She will know that we don’t want to let her go. She will doubt our intentions and maybe refuse them by pure stubbornness.”

“Not if we offer her the dream of a life time.”

“You are thinking about the USS Explorer.” Nechevov nodded. “It’s not even finished! The ship is not going to be ready for another six months.”

“So she will be a very busy captain for the next six months. She will have to familiarize herself with the schematics, choose the crew. We have to think, Owen, and use her the best way we can. She could be more useful in the next six months than she has been in a year. I think we don’t see the whole story there but I will be damned if in six months, I will not be able to understand this woman!”

“But, the counsellor...” Admiral Paris argued.

“I know the counsellor’s report as well as you do. He said she is restless, depressive and that, in her time in the Delta Quadrant, she lost the private part of herself but she brought her crew home with minimum loss.” In a calmer voice, she added, “I don’t know why but I think the counsellor missed something, something she isn’t telling. Something I have six months to discover before we set her loose.”

“If she accepts our proposition.”

“She will, trust me. Now, before I go to freeze myself in Indiana, tell me how your project with the Borg woman is going...”

Keeping her tears at bay, Kathryn left Headquarter and went directly to the transporters facility to beam to Indiana. *I will not cry* became a mantra in her head. *I brought my crew home!* She drove the few kilometres from the station to her home in a fog. *I am proud of my accomplishment.* Even the snow on the road didn’t slow her down. The car sled a few times but, every time, Kathryn compensated.

“The Borg, the Hirogen, the Kazon didn’t slow me down! It’s not a damned snow or a few admirals that will do it!” she shouted at the top of her lungs just before she jumped out of the car in front of her home. She went inside, removed her shoes and coat.

“Katie! You are home early. Phoebe just arrived a few...”

Ignoring her mother and her sister, Kathryn climbed the stairs, entered her room and slammed the door behind her. Pacing, she thought about what happened at Starfleet. *I brought them home and I am proud of it. How can they do that to me!* Suddenly, she stopped in front of her bed. All the tears from the last months of frustrations came back. Sobbing, she fell on the bed. *I am so miserable without her.* Kathryn hugged her pillow for comfort. She didn’t hear the door open or feel the weight on the bed, only the gentle hand of her mother caressing her hair.

“I resigned, Mom, Dad would have been ashamed of me,” she said between sobs.

“Oh! Katie! Don’t believe that. Your dad would have been so proud of you. Against the odds, you came back from the other side of the galaxy. You accomplished the impossible.”

‘Impossible is a word humans use too often’ Seven had said and she was right...as usual. Kathryn hugged her mother. She was 45 but the comfort to be in her mother’s arm just for a few seconds stopped her sobbing.

“Tell me, Katie. What is this about?” Gretchen asked in a hushed voice.

“They refused to give me a ship. Told me I would be an admiral or a nobody behind a desk. I told them to go to hell and resigned. I still have to write that damn letter to make it official”.

Gretchen looked at her daughter. That was the official story but the sorrow in Katie eyes has been there for longer than that, almost from the beginning. She had been happy for a week or two and, after that time, the shadow had fallen in her eyes and had never left. But why?

“The sorrow I see in your eyes is not about a starship, Katie, it’s about a loss. Do you want to tell me about it?” Gretchen pushed.

“No.”

Just one word but the iron resolution was there. Captain Janeway was there. *Will she ever leave Kathryn? Let her be only a woman?* her mother thought. She had prayed for the soul of her lost daughter so many times in the last years.

"Your sister is there. Come down. We will speak about her new exhibition, her crazy friends...anything but Starfleet."

"Give me a minute."

"Ok."

Gretchen went down the stairs, directly into the kitchen, where she knew her younger daughter was waiting.

"What was that about, Mom?" Phoebe asked. "You told me it was important for me to come but you never told me the reasons."

"Kathryn resigned from Starfleet today."

"What? She resigned from her whole life? Is she crazy?"

"I thought you would be relieved," Kathryn stated from the door step, "you never understood why I wanted to follow Dad's steps."

Phoebe averted her eyes. Yes, she has never understood her sister before but the war against the Dominion, the losses of so many young men and women, their sacrifice to protect them had changed everything. She murmured "They gave their life to protect us. They never faltered, they just died for their ideals...so many of them..."

Captain Janeway took a deep breath. The memorial in front of Starfleet Headquarter had torn her inside when she had stood in front of it. So many names, so many friends...all dead. She had not been there to help. No, she had lost her ship 70 000 light years away. In the seven years it took them to come back home, a war has started and ended. They were lucky the Federation was still there. The Dominion had almost won.

"Let's sit down, girls, we cannot change what happened." Gretchen handed a cup of black coffee to Kathryn and poured another one for Phoebe and herself.

For a few hours, they talked about everything but the issue of Kathryn's resignation. As the hours flew, Gretchen could see the despair in her daughter's eyes grow.

The light noise of a shuttle landing in their courtyard drew their attention. Gretchen looked at Kathryn but her older daughter just kept her gaze on her coffee cup. Only someone with high command privileges in Starfleet could have flown into an area forbidden to all air traffic. Gretchen stood and went to open the door. Even if she didn't know her very well, she recognised the petite woman with the Nordic figure straight away.

"Admiral Nechev." "

"Mrs Janeway."

Gretchen's welcome was guarded. Nechev understood. She had hurt her daughter and was not the most wanted person here. "I came to make amends," Nechev said quickly "we cannot lose her," she added quietly. Gretchen nodded and stepped aside helping her with her coat.

"Miss Janeway, Captain," Nechev tried to smile to Phoebe. "Going from 17°C to -10°C is a bit of a shock." Gretchen came back from the kitchen with a cup of coffee. "Thank you."

"What do you want?" Phoebe asked aggressively. "Don't you think you have hurt my sister enough?"

"Phoebe!"

"What, Mom? She pushed her to resign and now she comes here for whatever reason!"

"Stop that, Phoebe!" Captain Janeway said, her command mask firmly in place. She was wondering why Nechev took the time to come here. *Guilt, Admiral?* Captain Janeway pushed her despair deep down and fixed her blue-grey eyes on her superior.

"I think..." Nechev took a deep breath. "We were so sure you wanted to follow your father's footsteps that we never took the time to listen to you. For that, I apologise."

Captain Janeway couldn't believe her ears. Nechev apologising? The tough Nechev? The one that have every captain sweating with just a look? After what had happened that morning, she decided that she had the right to push her a bit.

"So you came here to give me a ship."

"There is a problem with the counsellor's report. He..."

"He is a damned idiot! He asks the same question every time in a different way. You and I know that on the bridge of a ship, you are the one who is ultimately responsible for whatever action is taken. This idiot wanted to know about my private life. There is no private life for a captain!"

"May I finish?" Nechev asked dryly. "The counsellor's report is very accurate. He sensed that you hid Kathryn behind the captain and think that you need to be relieved of duty until this part of yourself is back." Nechev lifted her hand to stop Janeway from speaking. "He is an idiot, I give you that, and we can't lose you to some dumb private company. But you need time to deal with all the feelings you bottled up over there."

“Admiral...”

“Hear me out, Kathryn.” The use of her first name surprised Janeway. “In six to eight months, the USS Explorer should be ready. It can be yours. The first ship in the fleet with Quantum Slipstream drive, 514 crewmen, almost half of them civilians, the best shields and weapons in this quadrant. If you want her, you will have to work for her.”

Lost, Kathryn looked at her mother. Gretchen was smiling. Then at her sister who had a frown on her brow. Was she as doubtful as she was? The slipstream drive...

“Seven of Nine was very familiar with the theory. She tried to make it work when we were in the Delta Quadrant,” Janeway started.

“The Theoretical Propulsion Group has already had access to the data of your Borg drone, Captain. They are using it to complete their calculation.”

Anger sized Kathryn. Nobody had the right to call her Seven a drone. “Don’t call her that! Seven is not a Borg drone anymore! She is a human being that has lost 18 years to the Borg. Her marriage is proof of that. Even if she is with her husband on the other side of the quadrant, I am sure she would help if you’d ask her nicely”

Surprised with the outburst, Nechev watched the captain carefully. Was it possible that nobody had seen what was obvious? Nechev tested her theory a bit further. “Annika Hansen gave us all the data. You’re saying she is human? I only saw a Borg drone when I talked to her...no emotion.”

“She was scared. We talked a lot about those interviews but I guess it wasn’t enough. Believe me, Admiral, she has a tender heart. How could have she been the best friend of Naomi, the only child of Voyager, if that hadn’t been the case?”

Phoebe looked at her sister then her mother. She was shocked. Her sister was in love? Gretchen glanced at Phoebe and shook her head. This was not a discussion to be held while an admiral was in the house.

Nechev didn’t answer Janeway’s question. She had no doubt now. The counsellor’s report took another meaning. He didn’t know, couldn’t have known. The months to come would be very interesting.

“So, are you interested to take command of the USS Explorer?”

“Could I think about it? I need more information.”

Nechev nodded and stood.

“Think fast. We need you on the project. Someone has to find a way to deal with the Chief Engineer in charge of the engine room. She is making Utopia Planetia engineers crazy.”

“Sorry?”

“Lieutenant Commander Torres is difficult. I have received too many complaints about her. But I guess, after seven years, you know how to deal with the woman.”

For the first time in many months, Captain Kathryn Janeway laughed.

Chapter 1.

Hands locked behind her straight back, Seven of Nine, Tertiary Adjunct to Unimatrix Zero One, was waiting for the beginning of the test. Her cool demeanour hid well how scare she was feeling. *I will adapt* had become her mantra for the last twelve months. She was alone on this choice of her. When Captain Janeway didn’t come to her wedding and stopped answering her messages, Seven had known that she had failed the most important person of her life. Captain Janeway, Kathryn, as she called her in her mind, had withdrawn because Seven had disappointed her. Seven didn’t understand why or how but the fact was there. Seven used to deal with facts and act on them logically. It’s why after a month of marriage she divorced, went to Vulcan to talk at length with Tuvok, and applied for Starfleet Academy.

But, as Tuvok had logically pointed out, she was not a normal cadet. Her Borg background and her experience as Astronomic Officer on Voyager gave her much more knowledge and training than the average cadet. Tuvok had arranged a meeting with Admiral Paris to explain the situation. When Owen Paris had wanted to give her a full commission of senior lieutenant straight away, Seven had refused, explaining that she wanted to belong. She didn’t tell them that she wanted Captain Janeway to be proud of her again but it seemed they understood her need for discretion. After a few hours, the three of them had come with an efficient plan. Cadet Annika Hansen, born in Tendara colony, would pass all the theoretical exams ending the Starfleet Academy formation. From her results, they would decide where her weak points were.

Seven didn’t like to have any weak point and passed all the exams with a rage that was unfamiliar to her. She got all of them with flying colours but one. Tuvok knew she would fail the ethical and philosophical exam. He had discreetly explained the problem to Admiral Paris even before the results were known. Seven had been upset by the results. They proved that she was not perfect anymore. She was becoming more human, weak.

As she was waiting to attend the practical exam in Engineering, Seven, Cadet Hansen, remembered her last conversation with Tuvok few months ago.

"Admiral Paris and I have decided that you will attend the last year of Starfleet Academy part time. You will pass all the practical exams for this year and attend all the ethical and philosophical class of the entire four years training. We want you to attend also all the fourth year class in First Contact. In your spare time, Starfleet would be grateful if you choose to accept to work with the Theoretical Propulsion Group on the Quantum Slipstream drive."

And Seven had accepted. Everything to make Tuvok proud and, maybe, one day, Kathryn would be proud as well. So she was there, with eleven other cadets, in front of holodeck doors, waiting.

"Cadet Fodel, you will be acting Chief Engineer. The other will follow your lead," Commander T'sol, a Vulcan, said.

Seven didn't know her classmates very well. Socialisation had never been her 'forte' and her schedule at Starfleet Academy was so bizarre that, except for the two classes she had to attend, she often found herself doing practical training with people she didn't know. As they were entering the simulation, she trusted that Commander T'sol had put the better cadet in charge. A few minutes later, she was doubting this assessment. They were under attack and the ship was jerking more and more often. Shields were failing and Cadet Fodel hadn't given one order that would improve the situation. Seven grinded her teeth to jump into action. This cadet was inefficient and his actions put the ship more and more at risk.

"Warp core breach in three minutes"

All the cadets looked at Fodel who stared at his panel with horror on his face. Everybody was waiting for his orders but nothing came out of his mouth.

"Warp core breach in two minutes"

"Shield at 10%," shouted the cadet on Seven's left.

"Reroute power from the secondary systems," Seven ordered, taking command. They were under attack and the priority was to maintain the shields. At the same time, she was tapping rapidly on her panel to assess the origin of the impending core breach. Her hearing told her that something was wrong. For a second, she lifted her head and saw that the others were still frozen in front of their panel. Swallowing her anger, she checked her eidetic memory for the name of the others cadets. One popped in her head.

"Cadet Tirell! Assist me!" No answer. "Cadet Tirell!"

"Warp core breach in one minutes thirty second"

Cadet Tirell looked at Seven.

"Reroute power from the secondary systems. We have to maintain the shields...NOW!"

Shaking her head to clear the fog from the nightmare, Cadet Tirell started to reroute power to the shields. At the same time, Seven's fingers were flying over her console.

"Warp core breach in one minute"

"Shield at 5%," Tirell announced in a shaky voice.

"Reroute power from life support to the shields," Seven said in a cool voice tapping her panel without pause in an attempt to stop the core breach.

"Warp core breach in thirty seconds"

"Evacuate Engineering!"

The hysterical voice of Fodel set everybody on panic but Seven. All the cadets started for the door. Cadet Tirell had barely moved a feet to follow them when the cold voice stopped her "Stay at your post! Monitor the shields!"

"Warp core breach in twenty seconds"

"Shields are holding. Life support is failing," Cadet Tirell told. She was gripping her console very hard. Only the cool voice was keeping her at her post. She swallowed hard.

"Warp core breach in fifteen seconds"

"You are doing well, Cadet," Seven encouraged, fingers still moving faster than the eye could follow. "We will save this vessel". The ship was not shaking anymore. That means the attack had stopped.

"Warp core breach in ten seconds"

"Try to reroute power to life support from the secondary manifold."

"Nine"

"What the point, we will die anyway."

"Eight"

"Do it, Cadet!"

"Seven"

Terrified, Tirell started to work and reroute power.

"Six"

A little smile on her lip, Seven pushed the last button. Cadet Tirell had forgotten she was in a simulation. She hadn't. She had never like holodeck because she couldn't forget that everything was not real.

"Warp core breach contained."

Tirell's fingers stopped in mid air. Incapable to comprehend the last words of the computer, she looked at the other cadet. She didn't even know her name. She had seen her before in one of her classes but never thought further than that this woman was nice on the eyes.

"Life support, Cadet!" Seven reminded her.

At the same moment, Tirell focused back her attention on her panel, she heard:

"Computer simulation terminated."

The Engine room vanished to be replaced by the grids of the holodeck. The door opened and the two women started to the door.

"You did well, Cadet Tirell! You will be a fine addition to any crew," Seven whispered. Cadet Tirell squared her shoulder and smiled.

Seven had often listened to Voyager's senior officer praise some crewman but had never done it herself before, never had the need to do it, although she could remember her pleasure when Janeway praised her on the efficiency of her work. Seeing the pride in the cadet's eyes, knowing this pride was there because of her words was satisfying as well.

"Cadet Hansen! Who do you think you are? I was in command. I gave you an order. You had to follow it!" Cadet Fodel was angry with himself, with his failure either. Waiting outside the holodeck, all his classmates pitying him, had not done a good thing for his nerves, especially when these two cadets had stayed behind and accomplished the mission.

Seven, annoyed with this pitiful human being, her head high, just looked at him as if he was a cockroach.

"You were not doing a good job commanding, Cadet Fodel. You were not in control, were you? If it had been only for you, the ship would have been destroyed with you as well as everybody on board also."

Something snapped in Fodel's head when he heard the cool tone reminding him of his failure. Enraged, he wanted to hurt her like she had hurt his pride. He closed his fist and punched Seven's face. Seven caught his fist in her left hand, stopping it just five centimetres before her face. Her enhanced force could have crushed the fist to pulp but she thought about her ethical classes, the strong must protect the weak, not hurt them. Keeping his fist locked, she started to describe what she thought of his abilities. "You are weak and pitiful..."

"That is enough! Cadet Hansen, release him immediately," Commander T'sol ordered in a contained voice. Seven complied.

"Cadet Fodel, your attitude is unworthy of a Starfleet Officer. You will report to Commodore Parell immediately."

Ready to defend himself, Fodel opened his mouth to explain, to lie, but the other cadets' attitude stopped him. They were looking at him with disgust. Without another look, he left.

"Cadet Hansen, could you explain what happened in there?"

"I stopped the core breach and Cadet Tirell kept the shields on line...Sir" Seven chastised herself. Even after six months of training she had problem to add this little word when speaking to a senior officer.

"I know that. What I want to know is how you did it? Nobody had stopped the breach in this simulation before."

"I agree, it was a difficult task. Very challenging."

"You shouldn't have been able to do it. This particular program is not made to test engineering skills."

Seven looked confused. That was a Practical Engineering exam, was it not?

"I do not understand, sir"

Commander T'sol looked at her. He had been warned that Cadet Hansen had a special way of thinking but that she was so brilliant Starfleet had made a special training for her.

"This program was made to put cadets in front of failure. Any one has to fail at a time or another, better in a simulation than on a real fight."

Seven still didn't understand but restrained herself to comment further.

"You and Cadet Tirell did well."

"Thank you, sir."

"Dismissed."

One by one, the cadets entered the corridor. Cadet Tirell took a step following her classmates but stopped. She turned her head. Cadet Hansen had not moved. She seemed hesitant.

"Why don't you come with us to the mess hall? It's lunch time anyway."

Still hesitant, Seven nodded and joined Tirell. They walked quietly side by side for a long moment.

“So, what is your name?” Cadet Tirell asked.

Seven hesitated for a fraction of a second, “Annika Hansen, Cadet Tirell.” Even after few months, her human designation still felt awkward to use.

“Klee Tirell. And call me Klee, Annika.”

Quietly, the two women entered the mess hall, put some food on their plate and sat by the others.

“That’s Annika Hansen,” Klee said in a smile, “she seems a bit shy so I count on you to put her at ease, boys...and girl”.

Seven blushed a bit. She has never been good with socialisation and she almost jumped on her feet to leave the table just before she saw the teasing in the dark brown eyes looking at her.

“I’m Mike Rawling. Glad you could put this pompous ass in his place”.

Seven was confused. “I do not understand.”

“Fodel is an ass. We sure are better with him gone,” another cadet explained. “By the way, I’m François Laforge.” He extended his hand. One by one, all the nine cadets shook Seven’s hand and introduced themselves.

“How did you do that? Even the Commander was impressed,” Vratok, the half Klingon, asked. Seven remembered an answer Lieutenant B’Elanna Torres had given to her one day.

“I have a knack for techniques.”

“I am SO glad to know you, Annika,” Mike Rawling beamed. All the others cadets but Seven and P’olt, the Vulcain, laughed.

“Explain!”

“Take care, Annika, Mike is just so bad with techniques that he is going to pump you dry for your knowledge,” Klee replied.

“I do not mind...”

“Really?”

“...as long as I can pump him dry for the ethical classes,” Seven added in a small smile that just curled her lips.

“I can help you with that!” Klee blurred immediately.

“Hey, she asked ME! Find yourself a new girlfriend somewhere else!” Mike countered.

Seven was becoming more confused every second. “I am nobody’s girlfriend. It is not what I proposed.”

Seeing the confusion on the beautiful face, Klee put her hand on the top of Seven’s and smiled. “He is just kidding, Annika. You will get used to him and the others. None of them can remain serious for more than a minute. I am the only one you can rely on.”

“Oh, come on, don’t listen to her, Annika. She is a sweet talker. If you don’t take care, you will be in her bed before the end of the day.”

“Get lost, Laforge. You are just jealous!”

Among all the glances, laughs, Seven began to relax. She had experienced humour before but never in so relaxing an atmosphere. For the first time in her very short human life, nobody expected a ‘faux pas’ from her.

“Where are you from, Annika?” Cadet P’olt, the only Vulcan in their group, asked. She hadn’t participated in the banter but had not dampened the mood either.

Seven didn’t want to tell lies but for the last hour she had enjoyed herself and didn’t want this sensation to end.

“I was born on the Tendra colony but lived on starships all my life.”

“Like me,” Vratok said. “When you grow up on a starship, you see things differently.”

“Is there where you’ve got wounded?”

Klee Tirell’s question was gentle but Seven tensed. On Voyager, she had been proud to be Borg. The Borg Collective had been her only family for eighteen years. She remembered how long it had taken the crew of Voyager just to accept her, not even to like her. These cadets liked her and she felt warm inside with this knowledge.

“Yes. I...I prefer not to speak of my past.”

Seven was expecting some probing, some reaction but nothing came. They just smiled at her.

François Laforge held his glass in front of him. “To Annika. The only cadet who had kicked the ass of the Starfleet Academy program. May she remain our friend for a long time.”

“Hear, hear!”

“And help me with the engineering part!” Mike added.

Chapter 2.

Feeling better than she has ever been in the last few months, Captain Kathryn Janeway, dressed in full uniform, entered Admiral Nechev's office.

The woman who sat behind her desk gazed at her with her blue eyes, before a small smile curled on her lips. With her hand, she showed Janeway an armchair and waited for her guest to be seated.

"You will start immediately," Nechev handed Janeway a PADD "Those are your orders. You will report to Utopia Planetia shipyard and organize everything as you see fit. The Federation Starship Explorer will leave in eight months for a two year deep space mission in the Delta Quadrant. You can choose your senior officers from this list." Nechev handed her another PADD. "We are selecting the civil staff as we speak. We are trying to pick up the ones who don't have children yet but I cannot guarantee that. Anyway, you will have a school, a kindergarten and everything to go with it on board."

Janeway opened her mouth for the first time since her entrance. "Children in the Delta Quadrant? In the Quadrant where everybody wanted a piece of Voyager? Starfleet is out of its mind!" Janeway busted out.

"Captain! Don't make me regret this decision. Some high ranking officer in Starfleet didn't want to give you this assignment so soon after your return. I read the logs. You went through hell but protected your ship and your crew. You will do the same with your new ship but, this time, you will have an advantage: you will not be lost and you will benefit from the technological upgrades of the war with the Dominion. I trust you. That will be all, Captain."

Still stunned, Captain Janeway swallowed her pride and stood up. She was almost by the door when she turned around and asked in a low voice "How did you know?"

Nechev looked at her with a frown on her face.

"How did you know I came to your office to accept this command?" Janeway repeated.

Nechev smiled and hesitated to answer. She could have toyed with Janeway but discarded this idea as soon as it crossed her mind.

"The light was back in your eyes," she said and grabbed another PADD, effectively dismissing the captain.

Grinding her teeth for the thousandth time since her return to Earth, Janeway left Nechev's office and Starfleet Headquarter. Still stunned, she stopped at the small garden in front of the entrance and sat on a bench, her eyes looking at the big glass wall in front of her. From this distance, she couldn't read the names but knew so many people whose name were there, friends, colleagues, young, old, crewmen, admirals. Nothing, not their skills, nor the technology, the weapons, nothing had made any difference, they were all united in death. Kathryn noticed that she still have the two PADDs in her hands. She was alive and had orders to follow. She couldn't afford to let her heart live on infinite regret. She had made a decision a long time ago and had to adhere to it, even now that they were back, especially now...

B'Elanna Torres was still having another fit with the shipyard engineer in charge of the installation of her engines. It was HER engines room on HER ship and this P'tak understood nothing. The fierce half-Klingon had fire in her eyes when Captain Janeway entered the engine room. When she recognised the raising temper in her Chief Engineer, Janeway smiled to herself. They have had so many disagreements, especially at the beginning, that Janeway couldn't recall them all. But their disagreements had been nothing to compare to those between B'Elanna and Seven. What she saw now just paled in comparison. Just B'Elanna being herself, protective of her engines. Janeway smiled.

"Your men understand nothing!" Torres was shouting "If they cannot read plans, they have nothing to do building those engines."

"Lieutenant Commander Torres."

"What?" Torres barked, barely turning to check who dared to interfere with her. When she recognised the small form, her mouth hanged open for a few seconds. "Captain?"

The man in front of Torres couldn't believe that anyone could shut up this stubborn engineer. Lieutenant Andrew had complained to his superior so many times about Torres' attitude and knew that his superior had dressed her down as many times. Seeing someone able to stop the mouthy engineer only by speaking her name was kind of shocking. Who was this petite woman with auburn hair? Of course, he recognised the rank and her face wasn't unknown but he couldn't place her name. Andrew heard her ask in a husky but normal voice. "Can you explain what this is about, Lieutenant Commander?"

Torres was so surprise to see her Captain that she stood almost at attention before her temper got on the way. Waving her hand in the direction of Lieutenant Andrew, she spitted "This P'tak and his bunch of..."

"Lieutenant Commander Torres!" Janeway warned in a low voice.

Torres took a deep breath to calm herself.

"Lieutenant Andrew and his men are unable to read the plan to build the engine properly, Captain."

Janeway looked at Andrew who flushed deep red. He was not a bad engineer but the plans coming from the TPG were unreadable. He had to improvise and, each time, Torres proved him wrong.

“Why is that, Lieutenant?” Janeway asked the man who snapped at attention.

“The plan from the TPG are unclear, Captain. They come without explanation and my men and I are unfamiliar with the slip stream drive technology. Before the arrival of Lieutenant Commander Torres, I asked many time for one of their scientists to come down here to explain and work with us but they refused. Lieutenant Commander Torres seemed to understand the plans but we still don’t understand, Ma’am.”

“B’Elanna, why didn’t you take time give them explanations?”

“No time, Captain, HQ asked for this ship to be ready in six months. If...”

“If you don’t take the time, do you think this ship will be ready and space worthy in six months?” Janeway cut.

Torres opened her mouth and closed it immediately. “No, Captain.”

“So, see to form these men. They don’t have your experience with the slip stream drive.”

“What about the orders, Captain?”

“I will deal with HQ. I prefer to command a good ship with a little bit of a delay than to come back after few days limping to a space station.”

A big smile broke in B’Elanna’s face. “Your ship, Captain?”

Janeway smiled as well and nodded. “I will need a good chief engineer. By the way, do you know some one who could be interested?”

“You bet I am, Captain.” Thinking about her husband, B’Elanna added “Maybe you would need a good pilot as well, Captain.”

“A good pilot would be fine,” Janeway smiled. “Meet me with Tom in my office at 1900 if it’s possible.”

“I will contact Tom.”

Happy to be working again with people she considered family, Janeway left Engineering to continue her tour on her ship.

“Who was she?” Lieutenant Andrew asked.

“Captain Kathryn Janeway,” B’Elanna answered, still smiling. If she wasn’t mistaken, Janeway just gave her and her husband a job on this experimental starship where family could live together. Starfleet had proposed them many commissions aboard a starship since their return but none had been on a ship with family or on a ship where she or Tom couldn’t both get a good job. After seven years in charge of Voyager’s engine room, B’Elanna knew she didn’t want to be outranked when her beloved engines were concerned. Neither Tom or she wanted to leave Miral, their daughter, behind. So, they had decided to wait for the right opportunity. That her former captain came forward to them didn’t really surprise her. When word would be out that Janeway would command the Explorer, B’Elanna expected to see more and more of the former Voyager’s crew. The only one who would not come would be Chakotay. Voyager’s former First Officer, who was her friend, had taken a job in an anthropology research group and seemed happy to live in a far away planet. B’Elanna never understood why he and Seven got married in the first place but tried not to begrudge Chakotay’s happiness. She didn’t care about the ex-drone happiness and she had never asked any news about her. Of course, at the end, the two women had almost got along but still she didn’t really care one way or another.

“Captain Janeway of USS Voyager?”

The voice of Andrew pulled back B’Elanna from her deep thoughts.

“Yes”

“And she is going to captain this ship?”

“It seems so.”

The look of wonder froze B’Elanna mind. Andrew was going to apply. No way she would let this happen. She didn’t want this guy near her engines when they would be in space and in trouble. And B’Elanna knew there would be trouble. Anywhere Janeway went, trouble followed her.

Chapter 3.

“Hey, Annika! Wait!”

Seven stopped walking away and turned. “Cadet Tirell. May I be of assistance?”

“Ow, Annika, drop the cadet thing, would you? We have met almost everyday for the last month and you still don’t want to call me Klee. What is wrong with me? Don’t you like me at all?”

Even if Klee Tirell was smiling, Seven could see the hurt on the other woman face. It had never been her intention to hurt Cadet Tirell...Klee. She was a nice woman, very beautiful and each time the two women had a drink in the mess hall, Seven had seen all the attention Klee had received. She didn’t want to annoy Cad...Klee.

"I like you. Nothing is wrong with you...Klee." As usual, Seven's voice was flat, devoid of emotions and Klee wanted to shake her just to check if something could crack her cool demeanour. She had a feeling Annika was more than this cold shell but didn't know how to go under the armour and, because of her failure to reach the other woman, she was becoming angry with Annika.

"If nothing is wrong with me why do you keep running away and never want to do anything with me but a drink after class and only if I force you?"

Seven was speechless. Klee was angry with her but she couldn't understand why. Nobody around her had ever acted like Klee.

"I want to be your friend, Annika...and maybe more if you'll let me." Klee's voice was gentle now that she could see incomprehension in Annika's blue eyes.

"You are...attracted to me?" Seven murmured, insecure.

"Yes. When I look at you, I melt. You are so beautiful."

"I am not."

Stunned, Klee didn't know what to say. She had never expected Annika to say that.

"Believe me, you are. Could we continue this talk somewhere else?" With her hand, Klee showed the corridor. "A more private place?"

Intrigued but a little bit scared, even if she would never admit this to anyone, Seven fell back on her Borg demeanour. "I will comply."

"Relax, Annika, it's just a chat between friends. The Moon Cafe at 2000 hours? We can talk over dinner."

This time, Seven just nodded and gave a little smile to Klee before leaving her. Her heart was pumping wildly in her chest. Was that a date? Was it possible for two women to be on a date? To share a relationship? Accessing her eidetic memory, Seven calculated that 95% of the species encountered by the Borg had same-sex pairing possibility and the 5% left where genderless or multiple-gendered. For the first time in her life as a human, Seven decided to be late for her work at the TPG. She had some research to do on same-sex pairing in the human race before her evening date and the Starfleet Library seemed a good place to start.

After one hour research, Seven had assimilated all the data available on homosexuality and, in this 24th century, same-sex pairing was fairly common. So why did the Doctor not teach her that during her dating lessons?" In fact, he showed her only the list of male crewmen and, at this time of her humanity, it had seemed perfectly normal to Seven. One dated to chose a mate. When one has a mate they can copulate and create sub unit...children. Only after the wedding, just before Chakotay and she prepared to copulate, she had asked how they would deal with the child they were about to create. Chakotay had almost dropped dead and answered that children were not on his mind for a nearby future but nonetheless they could make love. Seven hadn't understood and had asked for explanations. After she had heard him out, she had refused to copulate with him. Chakotay had been angry and tried to force her. Seven had sent him across the bedroom. Everything went downhill from this point and they had divorced a month later. At this evolution in her life, Seven hadn't seen the necessity to copulate if it was not to create sub unit. This feeling was starting to change, especially when she looked at Klee.

For the last few months, even if it was inefficient, Seven had allowed 42 minutes each day to research relationships. She had alternated between reading romance or psychological essays and observing people, discretely. Even more than two years later, she remembered B'Elanna's anger when she had learnt that Seven had collect gigaquads of data on her relationship with Tom Paris.

Seven still didn't understand all the data she had assimilated about relationships and romances but the most unfathomable data was love. Maybe Klee Tirell could explain what love was.

The small dinner outside had been simple, some talks about the Academy, some salad and bread and a huge ice cream for Seven. Klee had smiled in wonder when her classmate attacked the desert as if her life depended on it.

"You enjoy ice cream," Klee teased, pointing at the now empty cup.

"Yes." Seven sensed she should add something, "I discovered desert only a few years ago and now..."

"You can't get enough of them."

"Precisely."

Klee was surprised. How was that possible not to know ice cream? She wanted to know better this beautiful woman. Everything about her seemed a mystery. But at the same time she was so brilliant that Klee felt shy.

"Klee," Seven prompted, "you said you wanted to be my friend."

"Yes, that's true."

"You are attracted to me."

It was not a question and Klee flushed a little before answered, "Yes."

"Are you in love with me?"

Seven's icy blue eyes were fixed on Klee's face. She saw the embarrassment and the deep breath.

"Not yet. But if we continue dating, hopefully, I shall be."

Seven was stunned. Her insecurities came back immediately. Hadn't Chakotay said the same thing and acted the same way.

"You want to be in love with me?"

Small smile on Klee's lips. "Yes."

"But why?"

For the first time, Klee Tirell stopped thinking with her hormones. She looked at Annika and what she saw behind the cool mask surprised her. Innocence. At that instant, she realised she couldn't deal with Annika in the same way she had in her past relationships. She didn't want to hurt this woman.

"Because you are beautiful, intelligent and kind."

"No, I am not."

Seven showed her left hand, the one with the Borg mesh intertwined with her flesh, pointed to her left eyebrow where the implant could be seen.

"You have been in an accident, Annika. And this metal enhance your beauty."

"There is more 'metal' inside my body. You said I am kind but you are wrong. I have killed a lot of people and will kill again if it is necessary," Seven didn't add that she had never been punished for what she had done and that the guilt she felt, still feel, would never leave her.

"Maybe," Klee conceded, "but it's in your past. I only see you here and now and who I see is someone who helped me, who helped other classmates, who is vulnerable behind this icy facade and is very attractive."

"Can you tell me what love is, Klee?" Seven blurted.

"Wow! You don't ask an easy question, do you?" Klee blew, "I don't know how to answer THAT."

"Try...please" Seven felt very vulnerable but she had to understand.

The quiet despair in the blue eyes pushed all the common answers out of Klee's mind.

"Love is when things feel right, as if the other person is part of you. When you are together, the future seems brighter and the past insignificant. When you kiss or touch, it's like melting."

Klee was curious. Annika had told her she had been married and divorced but had been shy on the details.

"Didn't you experience something like that with your husband?"

"No."

"So why did you marry the guy?"

"He seemed the right mate to choose at that time."

"Mate?"

"To copulate and have sub...children. He was handsome, gentle. Our children would have been perfect."

Klee was horrified. "Mate? Children? What about love, Annika?"

"How can I love when I do not know what love is?" Seven felt desperate again. She didn't know why. It was illogical. Love was illogical but everybody spoke about love like if it was the goal of the mankind.

"You will know when you meet love."

The certainty in Klee's eyes calmed Seven. "You know what love is," Seven questioned.

"Yes."

"But you are alone." Seven felt uncomfortable.

"She didn't feel the same. She found her love with someone else."

"You still love her."

"A part of me will love her until death," Klee confirmed, sadly.

"But you still find me attractive and want to copulate with me."

Klee frowned. "I do find you attractive and would like to make love with you but only if you are attracted to me as well."

"I do not know." Seven answered with anguish.

Klee felt it was time to light the mood. "Some of our classmates are meeting on Saturday night. Do you want to come? It will be dinner and dancing. We will have fun and maybe you could ask the others some embarrassing questions," Klee teased.

"I would like that," Seven teased back.

"I'll pick you up at 1900."

Chapter 4.

“Ladies and gentlemen, let’s conclude this meeting. Now that all of you know what I expect from you, I just want you to think about recruiting the crew. My desk is already hidden under thousand of demands. I simply don’t have the time to deal with each of them if we want to leave on schedule. It’s simply impossible. Options, Tuvok?”

Even if Tuvok was surprised Janeway didn’t want to recruit her crewmen herself, nothing showed on his face.

“We don’t have a say in picking up the civilian, still it leaves 278 Starfleet crew members to select. I learned from Admiral Paris that Starfleet Command expects us to select at least 45 cadets fresh from the Academy and around the same amount of less than two years experience crewmen.

“You can’t be serious!” B’Elanna hissed immediately. “How can I keep my engines running if I have to hold the hand of half of my staff?”

Janeway tensed but, before she could calm down B’Elanna, Tuvok answered, “Lieutenant Commander Torres, I am aware of the problem so many inexperienced crewmen can pose. Should I remind you this problem will not be only in engineering but in every department of this ship. We simply do not have a choice.”

“B’Elanna, I’m also aware of the problem but, after the war with the Dominion, Starfleet has so little personal with experience left that it will have to do,” Janeway confirmed, “it will be the responsibility of each senior officer to train the most inexperienced crewmen and to keep an eye on them.”

B’Elanna was still very unhappy but, at this point, there was little she could do. “Can we at least select some competent people to supervise the rookies?”

“Why don’t you pick them yourself, Lieutenant Torres? So at least, if you make an error, nobody will hear you complain about it for the next two years,” the Doctor cut in.

“Doctor,” Janeway warned. She was glad to have Voyager’EMH with them on this trip but she would appreciate if he could let his sarcasm on Earth.

“I think the Doctor’s idea to let the senior officer choose their people is interesting. Maybe we should give it some thought.” Tuvok said before anyone became more emotional. It was his job as a first officer to remain calm in any situation. As a Vulcan, he had no problem controlling his emotions even if, some times, he found himself disturbed around some humans. Janeway was his friend but she had a knack to put him slightly off balance.

“That’s a great idea, Tuvok!” Tom Paris jumped, “I won’t mind choosing the other pilots and the holodeck specialists.”

“For that I am sure, Mister Paris will choose well his partners in crime,” the Doctor muttered.

“Hey, Doc, I could choose your medics as well,” Paris teased.

“Gentlemen, it’s settled. The senior officers will select their staff. If there is any problem, check with Tuvok. I will be too busy with Starfleet Command and all the other problems I am sure you will put in my way. Anything else?”

“What about the Chief Science Officer and the Chief of Security?” the Doctor asked. “Have you already selected them?”

“Tuvok,” Janeway prompted.

“Lieutenant Ayala will be the Chief of Security aboard Explorer.”

“That’s great news, Tuvok. At least, we know he won’t let us down and will select the best.”

“Yes, Mister Paris, I am pleased as well that Lieutenant Ayala asked for the job. The Chief of Science should be Lieutenant Porsky. Captain Janeway agreed to his request this morning but we have not received an answer from him yet.”

“Porsky? Never heard of him,” B’Elanna said, “Is he good?”

“He seems so. His Starfleet record is impressive.”

“I met him. He is very thorough,” the Doctor confirmed, “He wanted to know everything about the Borg. Said he wrote some article about them. He is supposedly a Borg specialist.”

“What do you mean, Doctor?” Janeway frowned. She hadn’t read anything about that in his record.

“We all know that you are the specialist for the Borg, Captain. You met the Borg quite a few times, this guy just read about them.”

“Maybe the guy expects us to meet the Borg in our way back to the Delta Quadrant,” Tom joked.

Janeway ignored him. Her heart was hurting but she had to put thing straight even before the mission begin.

“Doctor, you and me, all of us, know that there is only one specialist of the Borg, Seven Of Nine, and she is not around. If Lieutenant Porsky wants to come with us only to have an opportunity to an encounter with the Borg, he is going to be very disappointed because I have every intention to keep clear of them if they still exist. Is that understood? You have your orders, dismissed.”

Kathryn Janeway tried not to think too much about Seven of Nine while the Senior Officer left the room. She shouldn't think about her, it was too painful. Kathryn wanted the pain to stop but didn't know how. She had never felt so lost even at the time of Justin's and her father's death. She had felt guilty to not be able to save their life, yes, but hadn't felt lost like everything else didn't matter. It took her a few seconds to realise B'Elanna was still in the room, waiting to be acknowledged.

"Yes, B'Elanna," Kathryn chastised herself for using the name. They were on duty after all.

"Captain. Tom and I wanted to invite you to dinner Saturday night. If you are free, of course." Even after all the years stranded together in the Delta Quadrant, B'Elanna was still impressed by her commanding officer. She had to summon her Klingon side not to squirm under the Captain's stare. The smile that broke out on the other woman's face put her at ease. She was glad she had made the proposal.

"I would be delighted to have dinner with you and be able to play a bit with my goddaughter."

B'Elanna laughed. "You could propose to baby sit, Captain, but I am sure after Saturday night, you will not want to!"

"That bad?"

"You will see by yourself. 2000 hours?"

"Fine with me, B'Elanna."

B'Elanna smiled and left the room while Kathryn requested another cup of coffee from the replicator. She couldn't see the smile disappearing from her Captain's face, couldn't know what it cost Kathryn to be Captain Janeway.

Sinking on her office chair, cup in hand, Kathryn closed her eyes. She had thought that another command was the solution against her depression but, except at the beginning of this assignment, it hadn't been the case. Her mind kept drifting to Seven. As usual, when the absence of the other woman was too strong, she opened her top desk drawer and took the small frame out. She switched it on. Seven's picture was smiling at her. In this photo, only the face of Seven was visible but it was easy to see she was naked. Kathryn had saved this picture from the Doctor's day dream when he had had problem with his program and started to dream of Seven posing naked for him. Of course, as a doctor, he knew Seven's body very well and the representation of the day dream Kathryn had seen in the holodeck while B'Elanna and Harry had tried to sort everything out, had left her flushed. Seven was so beautiful even with all the implants intertwined in her flesh.

Kathryn pressed a small button on the side of the frame and the photo zoomed in. Again, this wonderful body was in front of her eyes and, like the first time, Kathryn's mouth went dry. Mesmerised, Kathryn had problem breathing, her skin went hot, she was aroused. When that had first happened to her that day on the Holodeck, she couldn't believe it. From that day, her felling for Seven grew and never stopped even after they stopped to see each other. Taking a deep breath, Kathryn switched the frame off and put it back in her drawer. She was on duty, for God sake, and Seven was a married woman! Angry with herself, Janeway took the first PADD lying on her desk and started to work.

Chapter 5.

At 1900 hours when Seven heard the chime, she was ready. She stopped the ambient noise she was playing and said: "Come"

Klee entered. She was wearing a deep red blouse and a jean. With her dark hair down, she was stunning and she fully appreciated the look Annika gave her.

"You are beautiful," Seven murmured, feeling a bit uneasy. She had never realised Klee was so beautiful and looking at her made her stomach churned.

Klee smiled and approached her. She couldn't understand the sudden sadness in Annika's eyes but felt she had to tell the truth as well, "YOU are more than beautiful, you are stunning."

"I am not," Seven said dryly. She felt so ugly with her Borg implants she couldn't see what other saw when they looked at her.

Klee was very surprised to hear such loathing in Annika's voice. This woman never stopped to amaze her!

"You are. This light blue shirt matches the colour of your beautiful eyes and this white tight chino shows just enough of your perfect body that every man and woman will be watching you tonight. It would be an honour to be your date."

Seven felt the sincerity in Klee's words but couldn't forget her implants. Chakotay had never been able to forget them. He had never held her left hand, had never come close to her ocular implant or the starburst implant on her right cheek. Fortunately, they had never got to her abdominal implant. Lightly, her fingers touched her ocular implant just above her left eye. Looking at her, Klee understood what was going on in Annika's mind. She reassured her again.

"They don't make you ugly, Annika, they even make you more beautiful. They are like jewellery. Everybody thought so before you told us about the accident."

Was it possible? Seven thought. "Beauty is irrelevant."

"No, it's not. But if it is, why are you so upset?"

"I am been illogical," Seven acknowledged in a hoarse voice. "They remind me about what I have been through."

"If you have problem with your implants, why don't you let your hair down? It would hide them a little," Klee proposed. She wanted to know everything about Annika but sensed her questions wouldn't be welcome. She had to lead Annika to trust her first. If that ever happened.

Seven did as told and removed the pins that were holding her hair in a tight bun. She was feeling so insecure that she put her Borg face on and looked at Klee coldly. The switch was so sudden that Klee's confidence faltered a bit before she understood what was going on. It had happened so many times before, why hadn't she noticed it? Annika's icy demeanour was only an armour to protect her. She smiled and came closer to Annika. Klee slipped her hand inside the silky mane to rearrange it and, for a second, forgot to breath.

"You know, if you really want to hide your implants better, you should cut your hair shorter."

Seven looked at her with incomprehension. The Doctor had stimulated her hair follicles after she had been severed from the Collective and she had never given it a thought before today.

"I know a good hair dresser," Klee continued, "if you want I can make an appointment for you. I am sure he will find a haircut to hide your implant if it's what you want. Do you have a brush?"

Seven was lost in the past. The Doctor had chosen so many things for her, the length of her hair, her biosuits, her shoes, her dates...

"Annika !"

"What?" Seven answered, startled.

"A brush...for your hair..."

"Yes. Wait here," Seven ordered.

Klee smiled and replied "Yes, ma'am."

Seven went in her bedroom, closed the door carefully, so Klee wouldn't see her alcove, and took a brush from the bathroom. She realised what the other woman had in mind only when Klee took the brush from Seven's hand and asked her to sit on a chair.

"You cannot brush my hair."

"Why not?"

"I can do it."

"Let me...please."

Uncomfortable and nervous, Seven sat. After a few minutes, she had relaxed and even forgotten why she didn't want Klee to brush her hair, it was heaven. She was a small girl again and her mother was brushing her hair. Her mother was smiling, telling her a story about knight and princess. The feeling to be loved was overwhelming and Seven jumped out of the chair.

"Annika?" Klee was more than concerned. "Did I hurt you?"

"No. My...my mother used to brush my hair."

"Mine did too." Klee still didn't understand why Annika looked so scared.

"Before today, I did not remember that. I liked it. When she brushed my hair, she used to tell me a fairy tale," Seven said in a tone of wonder, "she used to love me."

Her voice was so low that Klee almost didn't hear the last words. There were a lot of things that didn't add up in Annika Hansen's personality. It was often like the woman didn't understand who she really was, didn't understand her emotions. Klee blinked. Suddenly, everything became crystal clear, the cold and superior attitude, the weird questions, the child-like innocence. Annika didn't understand her emotions. She was feeling them and they scared her. Klee was accustomed to flirt, to tease, to push the women she was attracted to but, for once, she didn't know how she would deal with Annika. This woman was so different from any other she had met. She had a lot to think about.

"The others are waiting. Should we go?" Klee asked. She understood Annika needed a break from this strong memory.

"I am ready."

"So let's go. Don't worry, Annika, we will have fun. Let the guys do the talking and they will dig themselves in...with a bit of help from us, of course." Klee laughed. Seven smiled.

Chapter 6.

Self conscious, Kathryn smoothed her dress again before pushing the chime. *Why did I choose to wear a dress?* She didn't want to wear her uniform for a dinner between friends but she could have made better

choices than a dress. Nice comfortable slacks and a floating tank top, may be. The door slid open. Anyway, it was too late. Straightening up, she entered the room.

"Captain, I'm so glad you accepted our invitation," Tom said warmly, extending his hand to grab the bottle and the small parcel Janeway was handing to him.

"The pleasure is mine, Tom, and when we are not on duty, call me Kathryn. You too, B'Elanna," Kathryn added in a rare warm full smile. "Is that Miral? She is so big now."

Miral was crawling on the floor in the direction of the visitor. A new visitor was always interesting. Kathryn saw the small cranial ridges not as pronounced as her mother's and she recognised the fierce temper in the shining dark eyes looking at her.

"Maybe you could baby-sit one day...Kathryn?" B'Elanna prompted, teasingly. Kathryn blanched. Baby-sit?

"Yeah, Kathryn, you are Miral's godmother after all." Tom hid his smile. Janeway was so cute, so different, when she was caught unaware in a difficult personal situation.

Founding her voice, Kathryn barely had time to squeak "I will have to think about it," before Miral grabbed the bottom of her dress to help herself stand. In a quick reflex, Kathryn pulled the toddler in her arm before her dress ripped. She didn't know what to do with the small girl who was wriggling in her arm, grabbing her hair, her necklace.

"Come here, Terror, before the Captain decides to through you out an air lock," B'Elanna teased. Miral didn't agree with this decision. The visitor was her toy and she had no fun with it yet. She started to scream and kick. Before she became deaf from the loud screaming, Janeway reacted quickly. After all, she had defeated the Borg, the Hirogen, with her fast thinking, she could deal with a toddler.

"Give her the gift, Tom. It's for her."

Tom, as all fathers with a bad tempered child, reacted faster than lightning. He put the small parcel between the small girl hands. The screaming stopped immediately. The silence almost shocked Janeway. Surely the bridge during a Borg attack was a better place to be. She pulled a deep breath.

"And you want me to baby-sit, Ensigns?"

Tom gulped, B'Elanna smiled. He could remember when Captain Janeway had demoted him. It was not a pleasant memory. She had been very angry with him to disobey her orders even if his only goal was to save a planet made only of water. He had been fascinated with this big sphere of salted water and had refused to stay out of it as ordered. He didn't want to disappoint her again.

"Isn't what godmothers are for, Kathryn?" B'Elanna asked, emphasising on the name. Tonight, there would be no captain, no lieutenant, no rank. "Don't worry, she is going to bed soon. This diner is not a trap," B'Elanna teased again.

"What did you get her?" Tom asked, trying to lift the mood. Miral was only starting to remove the paper.

"A music box."

"A music box?" B'Elanna prompted.

"You look surprised. My mother told me a music box is a good gift for a small girl."

"You asked your mother?"

"A spanner would have been better," Tom explained. "I don't think a music box will survive long. She is a LOT like her mother."

"What are you saying, Tom?" B'Elanna warned.

"Our daughter has the heart of an engineer...like her mother." Tom smiled ill at ease. He didn't want to start an argument in front of his Captain. Kathryn smiled at him and nodded. His breathing calmed down a bit. He hadn't dug a bigger hole...yet.

"Why don't you give us something to drink before you make a mess of yourself, Tom? What do you want, Kathryn?"

"Whisky soda."

The dinner was nice. Kathryn was enjoying herself. B'Elanna and Tom had a knack to tell stories about their daughter. She especially loved the one with Admiral Owen Paris. He was a very considerate man, a friend of her father. In a way, it was strange she had never met Tom before their encounter at the penal colony when Janeway had asked him to help her track the Maquis rebels. The age difference, maybe. They talked about the new vessel, their new vessel.

"I received a message from Chakotay this morning," B'Elanna said. The smile left Kathryn's face. B'Elanna knew something was at odds between her Captain and her former First Officer. They were friends on Voyager but, now, this friendship seemed to be gone. "He said you couldn't give him the post of the Chief Science Officer because you already gave it to someone else a month ago. But during this week meeting, Tuvok said you just gave it to Lieutenant Porsky. I found that odd but kept my mouth shut."

Tom kept quiet. He watched Janeway hesitating. Was she embarrassed? Did she lie to Chakotay? Janeway wouldn't lie to a friend, would she?

B'Elanna stared at Kathryn. When she saw the mask of command slammed on the previous relaxed figure, she knew something was on.

"I didn't want him," Janeway admitted, "it would have been a demotion for him," she tried to justify.

"But you lied to him. Why?" B'Elanna demanded. "He is your friend."

"No, he is not!" Kathryn's voice contained more anger than she wanted to let on. "What he asked me to do when we arrived in the Federation, no friend would have asked. And he dared to request a job on MY ship? Over my dead body!" She stood up, walked to stop in front of the window. The view was nice. A lot of trees and, in the far sight, the ocean.

B'Elanna and Tom were shocked. It was so rare for Janeway to lose her temper. It had happened once or twice. B'Elanna remembered Janeway when she went after the Equinox. She was like a possessed woman. Captain Ransom had betrayed everything Janeway believed in and she had wanted revenge. To think she experienced as strong emotions against Chakotay was painful for B'Elanna.

"What did he ask?" B'Elanna prompted, ignoring the warning looks her husband was sending.

"He asked me not to go to his wedding. He asked me to stop my relationship with Seven," the Captain answered, defeated.

B'Elanna didn't understand. Why would Chakotay demand that? He knew Seven needed Janeway guidance. All the ship knew of their mother – daughter relationship. B'Elanna found the other woman an arrogant bitch but she also knew that Seven of Nine, the former Borg drone, needed help to regain her humanity. Janeway had always been there for her.

"Why? Seven was devastated when you didn't show up at her wedding. She almost cancelled the damn thing. It was only because everybody else told her otherwise that she agreed."

Kathryn's head went up. She hadn't known that. To protect herself, she had withdrawn from Voyager's crew, Voyager's family until now. She hated Chakotay. He had stolen everything from her.

"He was jealous," Kathryn spat.

"Of you? That guy has always been an ass," Tom said. "You were a mother to Seven. How can a guy ask the mother of his bride not to come to the wedding?"

"Only if he has reason to be jealous," B'Elanna answered, gently. She watched Kathryn and saw everything in her eyes. Love, despair, jealousy. How could she have missed that?

"He has no reason." Kathryn's voice was so low it was hard to hear her. "Seven wasn't aware of my feelings and I would never have acted on them, it would have been inappropriate. As you said, she saw a mentor, a mother in me, nothing else."

"How long have you been in love with her?"

Kathryn sighed but memories rushed back. "I guess from the first time I met her on this Borg cube," Kathryn smiled, remembering the first time she had laid eyes on Seven. "She was arrogant as hell when she circled around us, telling us her designation. She wasn't even beautiful with the exo-armour but something in me got caught up and, as time passed by, my feelings grew."

"You have to tell her," Tom murmured, "she would want to know."

"Would she? An old Starfleet captain who has nothing to offer is lusting for her. Why would she want to hear that?" A single tear ran along Kathryn's cheek and she let it fall.

The sorrow she saw in front of her was so deep, it cut B'Elanna's heart. Her Captain, Captain Kathryn Janeway of the Starship Voyager, who had always been strong in front of the adversity, was crying for the lost of her love and there was nothing they could do.

Later, that night, Tom was comforting his wife. "Who could have guessed? Janeway in love with Seven."

"We should. I could have if I had not been so furious with Seven every time. If I hadn't been so jealous..."

"What are you talking about?"

"I realise now I have been unfair to Seven. Janeway was like a mother figure to me and her attention switched to Seven when she arrived on board. I felt abandoned. The fact that Seven was so beautiful and intelligent didn't help my insecurities. I should have seen the love between them."

"Janeway's love for Seven," Tom specified.

"You know, the more I think about it, the more I think Seven was in love with Janeway as well."

"You've got to be kidding! Why did she marry Chakotay if she was in love with the Captain?"

"I don't know. Maybe she didn't know she was in love, maybe she was scared...who knows? Anyway it's too late now to do something about it. We'd better sleep. We have a hard day tomorrow."

"B'Elanna, it's Sunday. You are not going to work."

"No, but Miral will awake in five hours and we have to go to your parents' for the barbecue party. Before that, we have to find a gift for your mother's birthday and try to find a way to keep Miral quiet at the party so your parents will not run away next time we need a week-end off."

Tom growled.

Chapter 7.

Seven was feeling nervous. She wondered if P'olt, the Vulcan, was as nervous as she was in this kind of setting. Seven knew that even if Vulcans suppress their emotions, they can feel them and recognised them for what they are. P'olt was young and inexperienced, not like Tuvok who was over one hundred years old. Maybe starting a friendship would be easier with P'olt than with Klee. For a few seconds, she remembered Klee's soft touch when she had brushed her hair two hours ago. It was unsettling. Seven tried again to pay attention to what Ark Valis, the Bajoran of their group, was saying. She replayed the conversation from her eidetic memory to check if it was important. It was not. Vratok seemed as bored as she was. *Do Klingons dance?* They were all expected to go dancing after this light diner and a few drinks. Seven hadn't danced since her wedding and she had been very disturbed at that time. She knew Vulcans didn't dance. Why had everybody agreed to go dancing if some of them didn't dance? Was it part of friendship?

"I hope you will keep a dance for me, Annika."

Stunned but always composed, Seven looked coldly at Mike Rawling. "I will not." Her automatic answer shocked all the cadets. They knew Annika was blunt but up to a point. Seven's uncertainties kicked back. She shouldn't be here with them. How could she have expected these people to become her friends? She was Borg and couldn't have friends. "I will...leave. Excuse me." At least, she could remember the Doctor's teaching and be polite.

"Annika, wait!" A hand grabbed her left arm. Seven could have freed herself but Klee's hand was not restraining, it was gentle. "If you don't want to dance with Mike, it's fine. I wouldn't dance with him even if my life depended on it."

"Ow, Klee! That hurt! I am not that bad," Mike teased back. His hand was on his heart like if he was wounded but the smile on his face told otherwise.

Seven was still standing. She didn't know what to do. After the first shock of her answer, they were all smiling again. Even P'olt had a gleam in her eyes which told she was amused. "You are being facetious." Klee smiled at Seven. "Sit, please."

Still uncertain, Seven sat. She was very uncomfortable but tried to make amend. "I am sorry. I did not intend to hurt you. I am unaccustomed to socialisation. I have tried on many occasion but I...", this admission wasn't easy for Seven, "...have failed most of the time."

"I concur. Socialisation with human is a difficult activity. All the volatile emotions involved are very disturbing." P'olt was glad to have at least one cadet who was as disturbed as she was with emotions.

"Indeed." Seven liked Vulcans. They were so logical it was easy to talk to them. "Maybe a game of Kalto could interest you?" She was feeling better now P'olt had admitted the same insecurity.

"It would. You would be a very fine opponent. Could we schedule a game next week?" P'olt had observed Annika Hansen from the beginning. She had found her logical, efficient and discrete, very high qualities for any Vulcan. She was almost excited, as much as a Vulcan can get excited, to assess her in this highly logical Vulcan game.

"Kalto!" Vratok spat. "There is no honour in such a game."

"I guess you don't like it because you have to be seated so long," François teased. Klingons and half-Klingons were not known for their patience.

"A combat with a Ba'tlet is more rewarding."

"You cannot make first contact with a Ba'tlet, Vratok!"

"Can you make first contact with a game of Kalto, Klee?" the Klingon replied.

"I am not good at Kalto but I see your point," admitted Klee, smiling.

"First contact is diplomacy and diplomacy is talking," Ark Valis was smiling as well. She was in her element.

"You will be a good diplomat, Ark Valis," Seven said coolly.

Mike Rawling started to laugh aloud followed by Klee and François. "She has you cornered, Valis."

"I don't understand why you are laughing, guys, maybe you will laugh less when I am aboard the Starship Explorer on the way to the Delta Quadrant to make first contact with many species and you are still here, laughing and patrolling the border."

Everybody around the table stared at the Bajoran. She had surprised them as she knew she would and was enjoying herself.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Mike almost shouted.

"The USS Explorer is not ready yet," Seven explained.

"But it will be when we graduate," Valis countered. "And I heard some posts will be opened to the fourth year cadets."

"How did you hear that?"

Valis smiled to Klee. "My diplomatic abilities can come in handy sometimes. And guess who will be in command of this new ship?"

"Come on, Valis, tell us!" Mike burst. He loved the Bajoran but sometime she put up to much of a show for her own good.

"Janeway."

Seven's heart started to flutter loudly. She knew Captain Janeway was in charge of the new ship but even to hear her name made her ill at ease.

"Janeway? As in Captain Kathryn Janeway of Starship Voyager?" François, a big smile on his face, was beaming. He admired the woman so much. She was a legend.

"There is only one Janeway," Klee teased, "and if you flush every time you see her, maybe you are not ready to apply on this mission, François."

"It would be a great honour for all of us to serve on her vessel," Vratak added in a very serious voice. The Klingon in him was ready to give his life to defend the legendary Captain Janeway. No greatest honour could come to him.

"Annika, you know about the new vessel, don't you. What can you tell us?" P'olt prompted. Maybe Ark Valis was the one to break the news about the new vessel and her captain but her logic told her that Annika Hansen knew about the vessel itself.

Seven sighed. She didn't like to disappoint her friends. "The Explorer is classified," and she would not say a word about Captain Janeway. She didn't want them to know the captain was disappointed in her and had stopped to be her friend. She wanted these people as her friends, needed them as her friends. Seven was a bit disgusted to be so needy, it was a weakness and the Borg part in her hated this weakness.

"But you know about it." François Laforge was excited and straight to the point.

"Yes. The TPG had been working on it. I have been working on it."

"You work for the TPG?" Klee looked at Annika. She was wondering if one day she would really know this woman. Annika was intelligent, beautiful and kind. How was it possible to find again this rare combination somewhere else in the galaxy?

"Part time. This is why I am attending the Academy part time as well." Wanting her friends to understand, Seven added, "They wanted to give me a lieutenant commission and work full time for the TPG, I wanted to attend the Academy, we made a deal."

"You refused a lieutenant commission?" Vratak was stunned. He would give everything to have the honour to be given a lieutenant commission.

"Why, Annika, this is most illogical?"

Seven was the focus of everybody and it made her very uncomfortable. She tried to keep all her emotions out of her voice when she whispered: "I wanted to understand Humans better, to make friends and I thought Starfleet Academy was the place."

"It's a good place to make friends, that's for sure, even if some of them are a bit weird," François teased, his sight covering all of them.

"You shouldn't dishonour your friends if you want to keep them," Vratak said seriously.

"He is teasing us," Klee explained, always the peacemaker. She didn't want this nice evening to end badly.

"I think Vratak is the one who is teasing." Four years arguing with B'Elanna Torres had, at least, taught Seven to recognise a pissed half Klingon and Vratak didn't fit the bill.

"Vratak? Was it a joke?" Valis needed confirmation. Nothing she had learned about Klingon culture at the Academy talked about joke or teasing. Klingons were warriors, period! Even Vulcans were better. At least, they had a sense of humour.

Vratak flushed a bit. He looked at Annika. How did she know? "Yes." Seven gave him a shadow smile. Klee saw it and, strangely, she felt jealous.

"Are we all going to apply for the Explorer?" Mike asked.

Six enthusiastic "Yes" burst out. Of course, they all wanted to go with the legendary Captain Janeway.

"Annika? Don't you want to apply?" Klee felt hurt and she wondered why.

"It would be a good experience, very valuable on our record," P'olt confirmed. "If we can serve a few years under Janeway in a deep space mission, we will have our pick of ships when we come back."

"I may be more useful to work for the TPG full time."

“Come on, Annika, you are the best of us. We will need you if we want to stay in one piece. An engine room wouldn’t be the same without you. If you apply to engineering. Of course, with your credentials you can work wherever you want, tactical, science, even the Bridge.”

Mike Rawling wasn’t usually good with compliments but he felt protective of Annika. He knew he didn’t stand a chance with the woman but he wanted to remain her friend.

“He is right, with your credentials, you will be given the Bridge. It is usually the best cadet who gets this position and you are the best cadet from this promotion.”

Seven heard Vratak, heard the pride in their voice when they spoke about her and she felt warm inside. These people really liked her. She would have like to be seated at her piano so she could express her emotions to them, for them. Her only choice at the moment was to say “Thank you.”

“Think about what an adventure we could all have. I read some of Voyager’s logs and I can tell you Janeway isn’t one to back off. She had made more first contacts in seven years than any other captain in their career. We have to get on this ship!” Valis’ eyes were sparkling. She imagined herself with Janeway on a first contact mission and saving the negotiation.

“Come on, Annika.” Klee touched Seven’s hand and squeezed it a bit.

“I will think about it.”

“Yeah! Good. It’s settled. We will all apply. Now, let’s go dancing!” François shouted as he stood up.

Vratak, P’olt and Seven, sitting in a cosy corner, were watching their comrades on the dancing floor.

“Do you dance, Annika?” Vratak was curious.

“No,” struggling to soften her answer, Seven added in a shamed voice, “the last time I danced, I tore a ligament in my arm’s date.” She didn’t want to tell them about her awful wedding.

P’olt lifted one eyebrow. From their tactical training, she knew Annika was strong but she was wondering how she could have injured her date.

“What did you do?” Vratak voice was deep but kind.

“My inexperience for this activity prompted a wrong move.”

“Annika! Come and dance with me.” Klee was a bit out of breath after the few fast dances but, now that slows started to begin, she didn’t want to waste time. The three alcoholic drinks she has had were just enough for her to find her nerves to ask Annika for a dance.

“I do not know how to dance.” Seven tried to resist.

“I will teach you,” Klee answered, grabbing Annika’s hand. “It’s easy. Come.”

Seven was curious enough to comply. Maybe dancing with a woman would be easier. She noticed she was not as nervous to dance with Klee as she had been with Lieutenant Chapman.

“Let me lead.” Klee pulled Annika’s arms around her neck and put her own gently on Annika’s hips. They were so close that with each slow move, their body kept bumping into each other. They were the same size and Klee, a small smile on her lips, watched Annika’s blue eyes darken when she pulled her closer.

Seven blushed. She felt very warm and checked her cortical node for any malfunction. Her pulse rate had increased by 22,4% and her breathing was faster by 5,7%. Klee’s symptoms seemed identical as her own. When Klee turned her head and her lips touched the soft jaw, all the air left Seven’s lung. She pulled back.

“What are you doing?” Seven was struggling with her body reaction and her voice came as cold as a Borg drone. But it didn’t deter Klee. By now, she knew the colder Annika was, the more she felt.

“Kissing you.”

“Why?”

“I told you I am attracted to you. Aren’t you attracted to me as well, Annika?”

“I do not know.”

“Maybe we could date and find out.” Klee pulled back Annika in her arms gently. “And we can kiss a little if you like,” Klee whispered in Annika’s ear.

“I..” Seven didn’t have time to answer before soft lips brushed against hers. She closed her eyes and welcomed the softness. None of Chakotay’s kisses had ever felt like that. Seven closed her eyes and let the soft lips guide her.

“Ow shit,” François said in a low voice. He was watching the two women on the dance floor.

“Yeah.” Mike was disappointed as well even if he thought he never had a chance with Annika.

“She made her choice,” Vratak confirmed.

“It is only a kiss.”

“A nice kiss, P’olt. I wouldn’t mind been kissed like that.” Valis was smiling. She wasn’t into women but if she had she would have fallen for Annika as well. Klee was as beautiful as Annika but Annika carried an air of mystery. She was different from anyone she had ever met.

"If they become a couple they will not want to spend as much time with us," Mike complained.

"I do not think we have to worry about it."

"What are you saying, P'olt? Do you have problem with your eyesight? Because the two more eligible women of the Academy are having a go together."

"Nothing is wrong with my eyesight, François. But I do not think a kiss is a ring engagement." All P'olt classmates were looking at her. P'olt wanted to sigh but Vulcans do not sigh. "Annika is struggling with her emotions and logic dictates that she will not engage in a deep relationship."

"Logic? Love has nothing to do with logic, P'tol!"

"I agree with Mike," Valis didn't think Vulcans could judge love.

"P'olt is right." Vratok surprised them. "Annika is a very logical person and she is having problems to adapt to Earth. How can we help her?"

"How can we help them, you mean."

"They will need the support of their friends, Valis. Annika will need us to be ready to answer any question even the weirdest. Are we ready to do that?" P'olt looked at them. "I am."

"Yes"

"Yeah."

"It will be an honour."

Valis only nodded.

Chapter 8.

"Cadet Hansen?" a first year cadet stopped almost at attention in front of Seven. He was feeling insecure. One of the last year cadets would be his commanding officer when he started his duty and he didn't want to anger any of them. Especially Cadet Hansen. He knew she was more than a normal cadet. As an assistant to the desk duty officer, it was his job to know the one in power and everything pointed at the fact this woman had her entrance in the high command offices.

"Yes."

"You must report to Commodore Parell office immediately."

Seven lifted her left eyebrow, the only sign of surprise on her composed face. She nodded and excused herself to the two friends she was with.

"What did you do, Annika?" Vratok asked in a very deep voice. He was concerned. Nobody got called to the Director of the Academy Office without a very good reason.

"Nothing. We will finish this lesson later, Mike. I will return as soon as possible. Stay here."

"Yes, ma'am," Mike Rawling answered seriously but his eyes were shining. Seven sighed. She had been rude...again. She was learning as fast as possible all the complex interactions but it never seemed fast enough. The fact that her friends had adapted to her way of speaking and teased her with it was anyway comforting. She didn't feel too much of an outsider.

On her way to the Commodore office, Seven thought she was glad the others didn't know of her time with the Borg. She knew she lived on a lie and they would despise her if they learned it but, for the time being, she was enjoying their warm company. Compared to the attitude of the crew in Voyager, it was refreshing. She thought about Klee and the warm kisses the two of them had exchanged during the last eleven days. Seven felt more with Klee's kisses than with Chakotay's. Maybe males were not for her. If she had known that, if the Doctor had told her when she had started to date on Voyager, things would have been different. Klee wanted more but Seven wasn't ready to make love. Her body was hot and excited when she was in Klee's arms, kissing deeply, but her mind hold her back. Maybe she was afraid to disappoint Klee like she had disappointed Kathryn?

As soon as she arrived, the Commodore secretary showed her to the conference room. Seven almost frowned. This was not a meeting with Commodore Parell.

The only man in the room was standing, her back to her, looking outside. He wore the red of command. The corner of Seven's lips curled up a little as soon as she recognised him. She straightened up and linked her hand in her back.

"Commander Tuvok."

Tuvok turned back. "Cadet Hansen." If the cadet had been a normal cadet, he would have proposed her a seat to relax but Seven of Nine preferred to stand. Even after five years outside the Collective sitting was not a comfortable position for her. "How are you doing?"

"I am functioning at normal parameters."

If Vulcans smiled, Tuvok would have smiled. He felt Seven was like another daughter for him. He enjoyed her logic and her almost always composed attitude. She never overwhelmed him with human emotion.

"I heard that your performance at the Academy is above standard and your performance as part of the TPG team is impressive. Doctor Brahms is very satisfied with your work."

Even if these compliments sent a surge of pleasure in Seven's system, she was never at ease with this kind of praise.

"If I am above standard, it is because they are not high enough."

Tuvok thought he had endured all the emotion he could stand for a day. As a First Officer, he would have to interact with the new crew more and he was trying to learn to compliment as well as reprimand them.

"You are aware we are recruiting for the new vessel. A lot of your classmates have already applied. I was wondering if you would apply."

"I have not decided yet, Commander." In a fraction of second, Seven calculated all the possibility for the presence of Tuvok. "You want me to apply," she added, dead pan.

"Yes."

Seven's emotions were in turmoil but she stood straight, impassive.

"Why?"

"It is a great opportunity for a cadet to start his career on a new vessel with a new mode of propulsion," Tuvok explained.

"I will not comply, Commander. My work with the TPG is very important. The USS Explorer is only the prototype for a new line of vessels. Doctor Brahms would not appreciate if I leave her team."

"As a ranking officer I could order you to report to the USS Explorer but as your friend I would prefer to convince you, Seven. Doctor Brahms told me she would be more comfortable if someone from the TPG were with us. She agreed you are the most suitable candidate because of your knowledge and because you are Starfleet. If anything happened with the Quantum Slipstream drive we will need you. If we encounter the Borg we will need you."

Seven swallowed. "Then, the rumours were accurate, you are going back to the Delta Quadrant."

"Yes." Tuvok knew why Seven was resisting. He had to find a way through her fear. "With your expertise the enginery team will be at peak efficiency. Without you, we may not succeed in our mission."

Seven thought fast. Tuvok was right, they needed someone familiar with the slip stream technology. If anything happened to them and she wasn't there, she would never pardon herself. "If I come," Seven answered in a small voice, "I do not want the Captain to know about it."

"It will be difficult. As a junior lieutenant, she will have to approve of your posting."

"How do you know the rank I will have in two months time?"

"Your results have been outstanding. You will graduate top of your class with the honour of the jury. It is the tradition to reward such an accomplishment with a junior lieutenant rank and a place on the bridge."

"Then, the tradition must be changed. I will not comply to your request if the Captain is aware of my presence." Seven didn't add she doubted Captain Janeway would accept her in her crew if she knew.

Tuvok believed Seven was illogical but didn't know any other way to deal with it.

"I will talk to Admiral Paris. You could be assign to engineering."

"Thank you, Commander."

"But you must talk to Lieutenant Commander Torres. She is the one who has to agree with your application form."

Seven swallowed hard. Convince Lieutenant Commander Torres would not be easy. "I will comply."

Chapter 9.

"Miral, come here!" B'Elanna shouted. She just grabbed the toddler before Miral could open her new toy. This daughter of her was behaving far much like herself. "I told you not to open your toy. If you open it, it will stop functioning."

Miral was fighting her mother. She didn't want to be hold, she wanted to play with her toy and playing, for her, meant destroying it in small pieces. "MINE!" she shouted.

"If you planned a romantic dinner with me," Tom teased, "better let her play. Her quarter part Klingon is showing off again."

"And what that's supposed to mean, Tom? You knew when we married that our children would be part Klingon." B'Elanna was really pissed off now. Tom looked at the nice table setting. He had expected Miral to be in bed at this time so that he could enjoy a romantic diner with his wife.

"B'Elanna, I didn't mean anything..." The door chimed.

"Now, what?" B'Elanna was angry and shouted "Come!" It took her half a minute to recognise the woman who entered her quarters. Tom was as surprised as she was to see Seven of Nine in casual clothes and with short hair.

“Lieutenant Commander Torres, Lieutenant Paris, Miral,” Seven said feeling very nervous. To hide it, as usual, she squared her shoulders and linked her hands behind her back.

“Seven? Come in,” Tom offered, cheerful, “have a seat.” If he was surprised to see the ex-Borg, he didn’t show it. Seven didn’t move. She sensed she had interrupted something.

Miral was still trying to get out of her mother’s arms but not so fiercely. She seemed fascinated with the visitor.

“If the time is not suitable, I will come back at an other time.” Seven offered.

B’Elanna was still pissed off by Tom’s earlier attitude but she was more curious about Seven’s presence. They hadn’t seen her since the wedding.

“No, come in, have a seat.” B’Elanna put down Miral who immediately crawled toward Seven. The silence was deafening while the three adults watched the toddler arrive in front of Seven, grab her pants to help her stand and pull herself on Seven’s knees.

With Miral in her arms, fascinated, Seven forgot her old adversary was in the room. She looked at the small girl and smiled. Gently, she kissed her cheek. “Hello, Miral. You have grown up a lot,” Seven said in a soft voice.

B’Elanna was stunned. She looked at her husband to check if she wasn’t imagining things but Tom’s open mouth told millions. Who was this woman? Not the Borg Ice Queen they knew. B’Elanna watched her daughter grab the ocular implant but Seven’s hand stopped her. Her Klingon blood rushed in her vein when she thought Seven would harm Miral but immediately stopped herself when she saw the gentle way Seven was holding Miral’s hand.

“If you pull too much it is painful, Miral. You can touch it but gently.” Seven helped Miral touch her ocular implant, her starburst implant and her hand implant. After a few minutes, the toddler got bored and started feeling sleepy.

“I guess it’s bed time, my daughter,” Tom said grabbing the toddler who didn’t resist.

Still surprised to have witness this hidden side of Seven, B’Elanna didn’t know how to deal with the ex-drone. They had antagonised each other for four years and even if their relationship had been better the last months they had spent in the Delta Quadrant, B’Elanna had never understood why Chakotay married her.

“Do you want anything to drink?” B’Elanna offered, expecting the usual answer *‘I do not require liquid supplement at this time’*.

“A glass of water, please.”

Again, B’Elanna was stunned. A glass of water? And please? What had happened to the arrogant bitch?

“She is asleep, thanks to Seven,” Tom told with a sigh when he came back.

B’Elanna put the glass of water in front of Seven and sat opposite her in the couch. A few seconds later, Tom joined her with two glasses of wine.

“So, what’s up? How is Chakotay?” Tom forced himself to be cheerful.

“I would not know. Chakotay and I are divorced.”

“What?” B’Elanna was wondering if this evening would become any weirder. “He never told me.” She was hurt. Chakotay was her friend or so she thought. If his marriage was in trouble he would have told her. “When did it happened?”

“29 days after our marriage.”

“What? Wow, stop, Seven. You mean you divorced 29 days after your wedding day?”

“It is exactly what I said, Lieutenant Paris.”

“Call me Tom.” Tom said, more to have time to think than to be friendly.

“He never told anybody,” B’Elanna explained.

“Indeed.” Seven didn’t understand why Chakotay had kept the news from his friends.

“Does the Captain know that?” B’Elanna knew the answer but she wanted to see Seven’s reaction.

“I do not know. The Captain had refused any contact with me since just before the wedding. As you know she did not come,” Seven’s voice was raw. The absence of Kathryn for this important day was still very painful. “I have disappointed her.”

“How so?” Tom burst.

“I do not know but she never answered any of my messages,” Seven took a deep breath, “It is not why I came here tonight.”

“So why are you here?” B’Elanna was always very direct and knew Seven was even more direct than she was.

“This afternoon, I applied to be posted on the Explorer, in Engineering.”

B’Elanna frowned. “We don’t take civilian in Engineering.”

“I will not be a civilian. My Starfleet training will be over in two months and I expect at that time to be an Ensign.

"What the hell are you talking about?" B'Elanna was feeling frustrated.

"You've been studying at the Academy for the last year." The reality was started to dawn in Tom. "My father knew it. It's why he's asked me a lot of questions about you last year."

"I did not know that. But Admiral Paris and Commander Tuvok helped me to design a special training."

"Tuvok? He knew all along? He is going to be in a lot of trouble if Janeway finds it out."

Seven was surprised and a little angry by B'Elanna's outburst. "Why? Because she would not have let him help me when I desperately needed a friend?"

"What are you talking about? Of course not! If Janeway had known, she would have helped you. She is your friend, Seven."

"A friend who did not come to my wedding and who never answered my messages when I needed her," Seven said in a very dry and cold voice. She was in turmoil so she clung to her Borg persona to keep control.

"It's not what you think but we won't make progress if you don't tell us the whole story," Tom explained gently. "We are your friends, Seven, and you didn't tell us. We didn't know or we would have helped."

Tom seemed sincere enough. Seven looked at B'Elanna who just nodded. Seven had never thought to go to them for help when she was so desperate, maybe she had misread their feelings about her. Nevertheless, she needed B'Elanna's approval if she wanted to board that new ship even if that means opening her heart and getting hurt. What did Klee tell her "Talking about emotion is half part of dealing with them?"

Seven drank a bit of water, relaxed in the chair.

"I was not in love with Chakotay when I married him. I did not know what love was, is. It is a difficult concept for me to grasp. Referring to the talking I heard between different female crewmen, he was handsome and a suitable mate. We could have had beautiful children together..."

"Children?"

"B'Elanna, let her talk," Tom warned.

"I started to date him as an experiment but when I saw you with your daughter, I knew I wanted children so when he asked me to marry him, I accepted. For me, at that time, marriage meant children. The wedding day was the second, not the third worst day of my life." The first had been her assimilation day with this awful pain and the second when Janeway liberated her from the Collective. "Captain Janeway did not come and I felt like crying. I did not want to do it without her but Chakotay and the Doctor convinced me and I complied. When we were about to copulate that night, I asked Chakotay if we were going to conceive sub-unit, children, and his answer was 'no', that he did not want children. I was stunned and angry so I told him if he did not want children, what was the point of copulation. I refused."

"You refused to make love with him on your wedding night?" Tom interrupted.

"Who is stopping her, now?" B'Elanna was amazed. "I bet Chakotay was not happy."

"No, he was not. He tried to force me. I threw him across the room and left our apartment to go back to mine."

"Holy shit! He tried to violate you? I guess I know why he didn't tell us. The son of a bitch!"

Seven was surprised B'Elanna took her side. "He could not have violated me. I am stronger than he is."

"What did you do after that?" Tom was beginning to understand.

"I regenerated."

"Yes, no, I mean, in the next days."

"I sent a message to Captain Janeway but she did not answer so I went to see the Doctor. He had been a good friend during our time in Voyager. I explained to him what happened. He said I had to talk with Chakotay, that he was my husband and that husband and wife have sex together. I told him about having children and he said..." Seven paused. She swallowed, looked at her feet, "he said that I could never have children. The Borg had removed my reproduction organs. They had no use for them. I was...angry with him that he had never told me before. I left and never went back to see him."

Seven wiped the tears from her right eye before lifting her chin to stare at B'Elanna. "You hated me because you hated the Borg. Do you not think I have more right than you to hate them? If I could remove my implants I would do it. I almost did it."

"You would die without them," B'Elanna's voice was soft. She stared at Seven. Seven stared back.

"Yes."

Such a small word but so full of meaning. The silence was heavy, heavier than Tom could bear. His eyes were shining with unfallen tears. Seven had wanted to die and nobody knew that. They had left her alone, fighting for herself. He wasn't proud of himself.

"What did you do after that?" B'Elanna asked.

"I went on Vulcan to see Tuvok. He was my last chance. He had always been good with me. He helped me, opened his home for me. He convinced Admiral Paris I needed a year at the Academy to settle on Earth. They drew a special part time program for me. I will graduate in two months."

"And you want to work under my orders. I am not sure I can do that," B'Elanna lifted a hand to stop any argument, "Don't get me wrong, you would be an asset to my department. You are good but if I remember correctly, you are also confrontational, arrogant and rank means nothing to you. So why would I put myself in this kind of misery?"

"Because now I am better with the chain of command, I am very good in my job and I am familiar with the new propulsion drive."

"It changed a lot from your time in Voyager," B'Elanna argued. Tom was watching the two women and counting points.

"I know. You have been very good at following my plan lately," Seven smiled.

"What?"

Advantage Seven of Nine.

"I am working part time for the TPG, especially for the Quantum Slipstream drive of the USS Explorer."

"All the plans are signed by Doctor Hansen."

"My human designation is Annika Hansen."

Still shocked but able to think on her feet very fast, B'Elanna acknowledged that it would be very useful to have Seven with her for this first jump and she still felt a bit ashamed not to have help a former crewmate.

"Okay. I will accept your application."

Game to Seven of Nine.

"Thank you, Lieutenant."

"Call me B'Elanna when we are off duty."

Seven nodded. "There is an other thing..." She hesitated.

"Yes?"

"I would prefer you do not mention my presence to the Captain. I do not want her to refuse. I want to win her confidence again."

"She will know eventually," B'Elanna said gently even if she didn't understand Seven's reservations.

"Only when she read the monthly crew reports," Tom added. "Especially if Tuvok don't tell her before."

"He promised me he will not," Seven confirmed. "It would also be a great favour if you do not refer to me as a Borg when I am aboard Explorer. Many of my friends from the Academy have been accepted on Explorer for their first posting. They do not know I am, was Borg. I do not want to lose their friendship."

"Okay. I will speak to those who were on Voyager with us but I cannot guarantee anything."

"Great. So it's settled? You know what, Seven, I'm glad you are coming with us. You saved our ass so many times that I would have been worried to go back in the Delta Quadrant without you, especially now that Miral is with us," Tom cheered.

"You are bringing Miral?"

"It's a ship with families," B'Elanna confirmed. "Maybe you will want to baby-sit?" she teased, expecting a 'No'.

"Maybe," Seven answered coolly but the small smile at the corner of her lips gave away the pleasure she was feeling at this prospect. B'Elanna, shocked, stared at her.

"Wonderful! Maybe I will finally be able to have a romantic dinner with my beautiful wife once we are on the way."

Seven stood up. "I will leave now."

"What about your alcove?" B'Elanna asked. "Don't you need to regenerate anymore?"

"I do." Seven hesitated, "I have built another alcove, smaller than the Borg one. I will need to install it in my quarter. I would ask for your help at that time."

"I will check with Tuvok in which quarter he intends to affect you. If you send the specifications, I will put a team on the energy conduit."

"Thank you, B'Elanna. I will send you the specifications tomorrow. Tom, it was nice to see you again."

"Like wise, Seven, have a nice Sunday."

Seven turned to get out but stopped at the threshold. B'Elanna had been nice to her tonight, maybe she could dare to ask. She turned back.

"I am trying to construct a portable regeneration unit but I have some difficulties with some of the components, could you assist me...if you have time."

B'Elanna had never been able to let a challenge pass and if Seven couldn't fix it, it was a challenge.

"I am available tomorrow afternoon."

"1400 hours in front of the Orion tower?"

"It's where you live?"

"Yes."

"See you tomorrow."

Seven nodded and left.

"Wow! I've never seen her so vulnerable, so...human," Tom said still looking at the closed door.

"Nope and I start to wonder whether this human side has always been there." B'Elanna was standing in front of her husband.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't think a year on Earth had made her more human. It has just cracked the Borg mask. I guess it's what Janeway saw all along and why she fell for her. Neither us, nor Chakotay saw that side. We have been blinded by her action in the Collective, by her Borg side."

"Chakotay, what an asshole!"

"Yes. I could rip his heart out and feed it to my targ. He abused her."

"I wouldn't go so far. She is an adult."

"With a child heart. I see that now. I have been so blind, Tom, I could hit myself. Janeway has been honourable. She had tried to protect her even against herself but Chakotay, grrrr, that p'tak! How dared he?" B'Elanna was so angry with herself now that she saw the truth. She had been obsessed by Seven of Nine and never seen Annika Hansen under the Borg shell. That was not honourable. Her Klingon ancestors wouldn't be pleased with her. She had to find a way to make amend.

"I will tell her tomorrow."

"What?"

"What Chakotay asked Janeway. She has a right to know."

"You can't do that. She will guess Janeway is in love with her," Tom explained. "The Captain won't be pleased to have her secret betrayed."

"Did you see her guilt, Tom? She thinks she had let Janeway down. We can't let her think that. It wouldn't be right, Tom."

"No, it wouldn't," Tom agreed. He wasn't sure any more that this mission would be good for his career.

Chapter 10.

B'Elanna looked around her. The landscape around the Orion Tower was breathtaking, the view on San Fransico bay incredible. She had already tried to ring Seven's flat but there was no answer. She was 5 minutes early and wasn't surprised the ex-drone wasn't there. Seven was always so punctual, it was unnatural. B'Elanna had often problem to track time and it had been a source of conflicts with Tom and his family. When she was on a project, nothing else existed. Tom was worried about their new assignment. He feared that, when they are in space aboard Explorer, B'Elanna would have no time for him and their daughter. B'Elanna was sure they would manage.

"B'Elanna Torres," a voice called behind her, "sorry to have kept you waiting."

"I was early."

"Nevertheless, I am one point two minutes late. The transporter room was busier than I had anticipated."

B'Elanna didn't want to start the afternoon arguing with a control freak. "No problem. The view was entertaining."

"I agree. The view is quite pleasing."

"Oh, I was expecting something like 'the view is irrelevant'," B'Elanna teased.

"After my time on Voyager and on Earth, I learnt that sometime beauty can be relevant. Shall we go?" Seven asked already walking in the direction of the tower's entrance.

B'Elanna shook her head but followed. The Ice Queen could be so annoying. She was starting to regret her offer to help.

"So you live here?" B'Elanna tried to fill the silence while they used the turbolift.

Seven lifted one eyebrow. It was so obvious she lived here that she didn't bother to answer the question.

"How did you get the place?"

"Doctor Brahms was helpful."

They went out the turbolift and walked a few meters to a door. B'Elanna watched Seven enter a very long code before the door opened.

"Borg encryption codes?"

“Yes.”

A light sound erupted in the flat.

“Computer. Halt the music,” Seven ordered. The sound stopped.

B’Elanna was intrigued. It wasn’t music but the sound was familiar. Nevertheless she hadn’t heard enough to recognize it. “Wait. Play it again.”

“Why? I use it for relaxation when I am alone.”

“Play it.”

Seven hesitated but, after a deep sigh, complied. “Computer, play music Seven Unimatrix zero one.”

The light sound erupted again. B’Elanna was surprised not only by the name of the composition but by the mixed sounds.

“You used a warp core sound as a background. Voyager’s warp core. I would recognise it everywhere. What are the other sounds? It’s like there is only one but also many at the same time.

“Voices.”

“Voices? You mixed a Voyager’s warp core noise with hundred of voices? Why?” As soon as the question left her lips, B’Elanna got her answer. “You miss the voices of the Collective.”

“I grew up with them. I find them soothing,” Seven admitted, defensive.

“You didn’t miss them on Voyager.”

“It is not because I never play this partition on Voyager that I did not miss the voices, Lieutenant. Cargo Bay Two was not a good place to play any...music.”

“Yeah and in Cargo Bay Two you had at least the noise of the warp core. This place wasn’t insulated so it was stronger than in normal quarters.”

Seven didn’t explain that when she felt too alone in Voyager, she used to go in the Jeffries Tube nearest the warp core. In fact, she spent a lot of her free time in this particular Jeffries tube. She didn’t really want to elaborate and explain her loneliness to B’Elanna, so she stopped the music.

“Nice place. A bit blunt,” B’Elanna commented while moving around, “A piano? Do you play?”

“Yes. The problem I have with the portable regenerator seems to come from the power coil. It delivers too much energy for my implant to absorb and drains the battery too soon.”

“Back to business, I guess. Show me that portable unit.”

Seven showed B’Elanna the way to her bedroom. Nobody had been in her bedroom before, even Klee, and it made her a bit nervous, not that it showed but she had to dig in her Borg composure a bit more.

B’Elanna watched around. She noticed the small single bed pushed along a wall, a big table with several drawers and a standard cupboard. The only decorations were small frames hanged on the wall in front of the table and the one by the bed. “That’s your new alcove? It’s a lot smaller than the old one. I thought we would have problems to fit it in your quarters but now that I see it, I do not worry.”

“I am trying to make a new one even smaller. I would like to be able to fit it in a cupboard.”

“You want to regenerate in a cupboard?” B’Elanna was stunned.

“I would let the door open while I regenerate.”

“But you want to be able to hide it when you are not.”

“Precisely.”

B’Elanna was confused. She had always thought Seven was proud to be Borg. Still unseetled by this new aspect of Seven, she watched her opening a drawer and pull out different pieces she put on the big table. B’Elanna spent a few more seconds looking around to study the pictures. All of them were from Voyager: the senior officers, Seven and the Doctor, Seven and the Captain, herself with Tom and her daughter, Harry playing his clarinet, Naomi, Neelix. Her instinct told her who would be on the small frame by the bed. She turned and went to grab it. The Captain was smiling at her. *I should have bet.*

“Will you assist me or continue to invade my privacy, Lieutenant?”

Even with the contained attitude, B’Elanna saw the fire in Seven’s eyes. That was unusual. She had never seen Seven upset about her privacy before.

“Sorry. Just curious. So, show me the circuitry.”

They spent one hour talking, constructing and arguing but at the end they had a pretty good idea how to solve the problem.

“I will have my team work on the two coils tomorrow and deliver them to you at the TPG. With two power matrix modulating the coils, the tension should remain stable for a longer period of time.

“Thank you, B’Elanna.”

“Don’t thank me, buy me a drink.”

“You want to go out and have a drink with me?” The incertitude in Seven’s voice was enough to make B’Elanna guilty. She should have tried to befriend the woman earlier.

“Why don’t you replicate us something to drink while we sit on your couch and chat a bit?”

Seven didn't know how to handle a friendly B'Elanna. Yesterday's chat had been unsettling and she didn't want another like that so soon.

"What do you want?"

"Prune juice."

"Computer, two prune juice," Seven ordered as soon as they entered the living room.

B'Elanna sat on the couch, relaxing. She didn't know how to engage the conversation about Janeway so she decided to be blunt. "We had a dinner with Kathryn last week..." Seven felt her heart sink. She looked at the floor. "...and I asked her why she looked so miserable." *What? Kathryn was miserable?* Seven's head went straight up. B'Elanna hid her smile. She had been so sure that she would get Seven's attention with this bit of information.

"Why?" Seven dared. "She has everything she wished for. A new ship, a..."

"She doesn't have you," B'Elanna cut her gently. "She misses you."

"She didn't..."

B'Elanna took a big breath. "Chakotay told her to back off just before your wedding."

Seven opened a mouth but no sound went out so B'Elanna continued. "He asked her not to come to the wedding and to leave you alone with him."

Finding her voice again, Seven stated coldly, "Why did she listen to him if she did not want it? She had never let anyone take a decision for her before." Seven was angry, at Chakotay, at Kathryn.

"It's not that simple, Seven."

"It is. She is the Captain, she decides."

Emotions flooded Seven. Why had the Captain agreed with Chakotay's demand? Her cortical node sent a flux of nanoprobes to compensate but the human part in Seven was overwhelmed. She couldn't fight those emotions, she had to release them. Seven knew only one way to express these feelings. Forgetting B'Elanna was there, she jumped on her feet and activated the piano. Her fingers started to run on the keyboard.

Through the music, B'Elanna understood the anger, the anxiety. When the piece finished, Seven was her usual self, composed.

"Seven... You never disappointed Kathryn" B'Elanna said in a gentle voice, "Chakotay was jealous of the bond you two had. He didn't want to share." B'Elanna almost added that the Captain loved her but, for once, she restrained herself. It was not her place to reveal this kind of thing.

This new piece of information was even more overwhelming for Seven. She wanted to cry, to shout but she just played a new piece. Sorrow. B'Elanna was shocked to understand Seven's emotions so well through the music. She was not a music fan. Klingon and music didn't mixed well, except for the battle song, of course.

When the music stopped, B'Elanna dared one question. "What do you feel for Kathryn?" Seven looked at her, hesitated and slowly touched the piano keys again.

That new music touched B'Elanna deeply. Tenderness, passion, love. She would have dreamed to have someone express so deep emotions for her.

"You love her," B'Elanna stated when the music ended.

"I do not know," Seven whispered, "I do not know what love is. I cannot understand the concept. I...tried." Seven was distressed. Klee had tried again and again to explain to her what love was but the concept was too foreign for her. A single tear followed her cheek and fall down on the piano.

"Believe me, you understand it very well and if your music is the reflection of your feelings, you are in love with Janeway."

Seven was silent. Was it possible that what she felt for Kathryn was love? That it was love all along? All these years of longing? Was it why the concept eluded her? Because she already knew what love was?

"You have to tell her."

"No!" Seven shouted. In a more restrained voice, she added, "I cannot."

"Why not?" B'Elanna asked, staring at Seven.

"I cannot tell her because she is not in love with me. She would reject me. I...cannot afford that." Tears were running on Seven's right cheek now.

"How can you say that?" B'Elanna jumped on her feet and stopped in front of Seven. She almost took Seven in her arms to comfort her.

"If she had been in love with me, she would not have 'backed off', she would have fought for me."

B'Elanna couldn't argue with that. If she had been in Kathryn's place, she would have fought for the love of her life against everything. She wanted to throttle Kathryn for being a coward and Seven to be so logical about her feeling. There was nothing she could do now but, aboard Explorer, she and Tom would think of something.

"Let's have a drink somewhere," B'Elanna proposed, surprising Seven.

"We are already having a drink," the now composed voice stated.

"In a Café, somewhere public where we can talk about anything but personal things," B'Elanna explained. "You have had enough of emotion for a day and so have I."

"You want to go out with a...Borg?"

"Yes. And we have to move before I change my mind. Is there a coffee shop around here?" B'Elanna almost shouted. She was so used to deal with an emotionless drone that two days of emotion display from Seven were started to get on her nerves. She didn't like to be wrong and she was realising she had been so unfair to Seven all those years.

"There is a nice tea house two blocks from here. I like to go there. It is just by the beach with only the waves for company.

"Let's go."

B'Elanna and Seven looked at the ocean. Seven, sitting her back straight, drank slowly her tea while B'Elanna was already on her second cup of Vulcan coffee. They were making small talk about San Francisco, Starfleet Academy. B'Elanna smiled. Seven lifted her left eyebrow.

"I was just thinking that for someone who once told me that small talk was irrelevant, you are pretty good at it."

"I had to learn. My friends, some of my friends, are seasoned chatters. I adapted."

"Only some of your friends?" B'Elanna remembered when Seven had talked about her friends last night but she was still surprised that the ex-Borg had made friends after only a few months on Earth while she hadn't be able to make any, the Captain didn't count, on Voyager in four years.

"P'olt is a Vulcan. She does not speak much."

A Vulcan? Ok, B'Elanna could understand better now.

"Vratak is like you, half Klingon, but he is more in the Klingon culture than you are. He does not like small talk much but, like P'olt and me, endure it for friendship. Mike, François, Valis and Klee are the real chatters. You will learn to know most of them."

"Yes?"

"You agreed to have Klee, François and P'olt in your team."

"I did?" B'Elanna searched her mind. P'olt, a Vulcan, ok, she remembered. It was always good to have Vulcans because they keep their cool in any situation.

"Klee and François? What are their names?"

"François Laforge and Klee Tirell."

"Yes, I remember them. They have a spotless file and seemed to know their way around engines when I asked specific questions. Are they good?"

To anyone, B'Elanna wouldn't have asked to pass a judgement on their friends but she trusted Seven to be impartial. Yes, she trusted Seven. She had trusted her for a long time. Not from the beginning but a few months later. She knew Seven was good at her job and she felt better to have her on board.

"They are not as brilliant as you or I but they will do their job."

"You are still so arrogant, Borg." The tingling of B'Elanna's eyes smoothed the sharp in her voice, "but you are right, you are brilliant and I trust you around my engines."

"Thank you, B'Elanna Torres," Seven answered in a low voice. That was the best compliment she could have had from B'Elanna. A tear appeared in Seven's right eye and she removed it before it could fall.

B'Elanna was still surprised to see Seven getting so emotional. She had never seen her cried before today. "I'm sorry."

"Explain."

"I should have told you that before but I didn't think you cared."

"I did... We were not supposed to have an emotional talk here," Seven added.

"You're right," B'Elanna smiled. "So when is your training over?"

Seven's lips curled up. "We have a real mission on the school starship programmed for next week. A real captain is in charge but the crew is composed only of cadets. It is why I need the portable regenerator."

"What will be your function aboard?" B'Elanna saw the sparkling in Seven's eyes and the small smile growing. "No way!"

"Yes, Lieutenant, I will be the Chief Engineer."

"Khalesh protect them!"

Chapter 11.

"Nicoletti, Vorik, you are with me," B'Elanna shouted as soon as she entered Explorer engine room. They went directly in her office. B'Elanna appreciated the bigger space in this starship. She even had a small couch in a corner. She waited for her people to be sited.

"The Captain agreed with my organisation. So it's confirmed, Nicoletti, you will be in charge of the Beta shift and, Vorik, you will have the Gamma shift. I'm glad you volunteered for Explorer. I feel better to have you under my command and you can spread the word that I am glad to have so many of Voyager former crew to volunteer."

"With ten fresh cadets from the Academy, it's good to have season crewmembers, Chief," Lieutenant Nicoletti said. She was glad to be back under Janeway's command and, she liked Torres, even with her fast temper. She had to deal with more or less competent engineer in the last few months and it had been hard to keep her mouth shut at some point.

"Do you know if someone from the TPG will assist us on this first mission with the new drive, Chief?" Vorik felt out of his depth with the Slip Stream drive. He was familiar with it because, as well as the old crew, he had worked on it aboard Voyager when they attempted to try it. He also knew they had almost perished in the attempt.

"It would be nice, Chief," Nicoletti confirmed. She had talked with Vorik and heard a lot of remarks from the personnel. "A lot of people feel a bit anxious with this new drive."

"I know and I have a good news. We will have a TPG specialist onboard." A deep breath escaped Nicoletti and B'Elanna could have sworn that even Vorik seemed less tense. "But there is a catch. Ensign Hansen will graduate from the Academy next month. She is our specialist but her rank is going to be an obstacle. A fresh ensign cannot order around season officers..."

"I will talk to my team," Vorik replied straight away.

"Don't worry, Chief, they will understand what is best for them," Nicoletti teased.

"I will talk to them myself. There is another catch... Ensign Annika Hansen is better known to us under her Borg designation."

"Seven of Nine?" Nicoletti blurted.

"Seven of Nine. How will you feel about working with her again?"

"She is very efficient," Vorik replied.

"Good because she will be on the Gamma shift under your orders, Vorik."

"May I speak freely, Chief," Nicoletti asked. B'Elanna nodded. "She used to give orders all around engineering on Voyager, she often bypassed your own orders and even the Captain's. How are we going to deal with an ensign who knows our engines better than we do? She is going to be arrogant as hell."

"She promised to behave but it's up to you to make that work. You will outrank her. Ha, another thing, she would prefer the old crew not to spread the fact that she was Borg. Make sure of that."

"Yes, Chief."

B'Elanna took a deep breath. "She also doesn't want the Captain to know she is onboard. Not yet. It's why I affected her on the Gamma shift. Of course, I will need her on the Alpha shift when we activate the new drive for the first time. I also need volunteers to install her alcove in her quarters."

"You can count on me and my team, Chief," Vorik answered immediately.

"That will be all...Oh, Vorik? By the way, congratulation for your lieutenant commission." B'Elanna pointed to the second pip on Vorik's collar.

"Thank you, Chief."

Vorik left B'Elanna office but Nicoletti lingered.

"Something on your mind, Nicoletti?"

"You seem happy to have Seven in your Engine room. It's surprising."

"I know. I met her yesterday and she was very different, more open, less arrogant."

"Her husband influence?" Nicoletti had attended Seven and Chakotay's wedding like most of Voyager's former crew.

"They divorced a month after the wedding." Undisturbed, Nicoletti nodded. "You don't seem surprise," B'Elanna added.

"They didn't look right together. I don't even understand why they've got married in the first place. Chakotay was an experiment to Seven and I'm sure he knew it."

"What are you saying, Lieutenant?"

"Seven had the hots for Janeway. There was even a pool going on in the lower deck. You had to know that, your husband held the bets. Why doesn't she want the Captain to know she is onboard? Janeway was in love with her and I could bet my uniform she still is," Nicoletti smiled.

"Nicoletti, you will shut your mouth! I don't want to have this kind of rumours on my engine room. And make sure, everybody in your team shut up! If the Captain hears anything, she will have your ass, but she will get it only after I am done with you, understood?"

Nicoletti straightened "Yes, ma'am. I meant no disrespect, Chief. I just want to help."

"Help? Help what?"

"Help them to get together. We owe the Captain and Seven so much to have brought us home. I owe them to be reunited with my husband and my two sons."

B'Elanna hesitated. She wanted to help as well but didn't know how. "I understand your feelings but we cannot interfere. Dismissed."

Captain Janeway was sitting in her ready room, a cup of coffee in one hand, a PADD in another, when the door chimed.

"Come."

Tuvok entered and stopped in front of the desk.

"Have a seat. How is it going?"

Tuvok handed her a PADD with all the reports but knew his Captain preferred a short oral report. "All the personnel have been selected. They start to arrive onboard in two weeks."

"Will all the quarters be completed in time?"

"Most of them. The civilian quarters will be completed as well as all the public areas. They will have to complete the Starfleet crew quarters but the fresh graduates will be here only two days before the launch. Each of them had agreed to shorten their graduation vacation to be there on time."

"It seems you have everything under control, Commander. What about the Slip Stream drive?" Janeway was a bit worried about the new drive. Nobody had tried it on such a big ship before and that made her nervous. What was going on with Starfleet? Testing a new drive on a ship with civilians and children.

"Dr Brahms is confident there will be no problem."

"Does she come with us or give us some specialist?" the Captain insisted.

Tuvok had thought about this question and knew how to answer without lying. "She said all her team is fully occupied at this time and she cannot spare any of them." Seven wasn't a full time member of Dr Brahms team and it was well known from the beginning that she would move on sooner or later so he wasn't really lying. "We have the finest engineering team of the Fleet, Captain, they will manage."

"Thank you, Tuvok. You will have to tell it to them."

"I will."

"So, tell me, T'Pel, your wife, is coming with us this time?"

"Yes, she is. She knows you well and she doesn't want to spend another seven years waiting for me when we get lost."

Kathryn laughed. She really enjoyed Tuvok's dry sense of humour. He had been a dear friend for so many years that she could read him almost as well as his own wife.

"I will try not to strand us for that long."

"Knowing you, it will be a difficult promise to keep."

"Ah, Tuvok, I am so glad to have you as First Officer. You will keep me in line."

"I will try in spite of the difficulties of the task."

Going back to business, Janeway said, "I am spending the weekend with my mother and sister. If there is any problem, contact me there. I have an early meeting with Nechev on Monday morning, so don't expect me before lunch. Plan a tactical meeting for Monday 1400 hours with Lieutenant Ayala and yourself. I want to be clear on what weapons Starfleet has provided us and what we should have."

"Yes, Captain. Have a nice weekend."

"You too, Tuvok."

Kathryn climbed the few steps leading to the entrance of her mother's house and opened the door. "Hey, Mom, I'm home." She had barely finished her sentence when her mother came out of the kitchen. Kathryn smiled. Was there a time when her mother wasn't in the kitchen? She took a deep breath and smelt the divine aroma of a home cooked meal.

"Hello, Katie, you are early," her mother smiled, giving her oldest daughter a big hug. Gretchen didn't want to embarrass her daughter but every time she saw her it seemed a miracle to have her back and the hug had become a normal way to say hello. "Phoebe is coming tonight but she will be a bit late."

"How is her show?"

"You will have to ask her but from what she already told me she is doing well. She sold almost all her paintings."

"I can't really understand why she based her show on Voyager. I didn't think that, after more than a year, people would still be interested. I didn't even get to have a look at them and now it seems it's too late. Apparently, time is moving faster than I am," Kathryn sighed.

"I have a record of all your sister's paintings if you are interested. We can look at them while dinner is cooking if you want." Gretchen wondered what would be Kathryn's reaction towards some of the pictures.

“Yes, good idea, Mom,” Kathryn brightened, “Let me put my bag in my room and grab a cup of coffee.”

“I’ll fix the coffee, go get some more comfortable clothes.” Gretchen pointed at the uniform.

“Be back in a minute.”

Gretchen watched her daughter climb the stair. Her steps were lighter than a few months back, she was happier but still, there were some shadows in her eyes, some unresolved things.

Gretchen shook her head a little. She would have to tread carefully if she didn’t want to upset her daughter who was so private. Once again she was surprised how different her two daughters were. Phoebe was so open, so willing to talk about every thing from her work to her personal life and Kathryn was the complete opposite. Gretchen took a big PADD from a cupboard and set it on the table before she went to fetch two big mugs of black coffee.

“Ok, I’m ready,” Kathryn said entering the living room. She was wearing jeans and a soft green sweater. “I want to understand why my sister is so famous.” Kathryn sat by her mother. She watched the first few paintings in silence with a small smile on her lips.

“She really caught the essence of our trip, didn’t she? I guess she accessed the Astrometric log to be so accurate. This nebula was a small wonder.”

Gretchen flicked her thumb on the PADD and a painting of Kathryn herself showed up. She was in a full uniform, arms crossed in front of her.

“My God. Do I look like that?”

Wisely, Gretchen didn’t answer. One by one all Kathryn’s former senior officers showed on the screen. She let Kathryn set the pace with the paintings. Gretchen watched her smile warmly at Harry Kim and Tom Paris paintings. She laughed at B’Elanna Torres painting. It appeared the woman was covered with some fluid and her hair was in disarray. Most catching was the fire in her eyes.

“She often looked like that, you know, still does. Without her, we would have been unable to keep Voyager flying.”

The next picture was Chakotay and Kathryn flicked her thumb to get rid of it fast. Gretchen saw the flash of anger in Kathryn’s features but said nothing. The smile came back with the always serious Vulcan, Tuvok. “He had been a very good friend over the years, I am glad he is going to be my First Officer aboard Explorer. There is nobody I trust more. Phoebe had done a good job catching the seriousness as well as the hidden flash of dismay every time he has to deal with human emotions.”

The next one was the Doctor looking very serious, very full of himself. “This hologram has more ego than all my staff together. He gave me more headaches than he could cure but he saved our life so many times that I don’t really care about the headache. It’s a shame he couldn’t be our CMO on the Explorer. Starfleet Command didn’t want to hear a word of what I was saying. He is going to be only the backup for the Chief Medical Officer.”

Kathryn put back the PADD on the table. “I knew Phoebe was talented. I never imagined she was that talented. She caught the essence of everyone.”

“There is still one painting,” Gretchen said flicking her thumb on the PADD. She heard the intake of breath while Seven of Nine painting appeared. Everything was there, the implants, the biosuit, the small smile but what caught Kathryn was the insecurity hidden in the eyes. Kathryn could do nothing except stare at the painting. Her heart was shattering but she still stared.

“She is beautiful,” Gretchen whispered, missing nothing of her daughter’s reaction. All the pieces from the last few months came together. “How long have you been in love with her?”

“I don’t know...too long.” Kathryn’s finger caressed the screen softly. “We are home because I wanted to save her life, Mom. The Admiral, my future self, knew which button to push were I was concerned. When she told me Seven was going to die I couldn’t accept it.”

“She was you, a future you,” her mother acknowledged gently. “She was in love with her as well.”

“And she forgot the Temporal Prime Directive and made me forget it as well. In any reality, I have lost her. She wasn’t to be mine.”

“In this reality, she is alive, Katie.”

“And married... to my former First Officer...”

Gretchen caressed her daughter’s cheek to comfort her. She had never expected to see the day where Kathryn would rush in her arms, bury her head on her shoulder and sob like a small child.

“I love her and she is gone. How will I ever be whole again, Mom?”

Chapter 12.

As an acting Chief Engineer, Seven had her quarters to herself. They were small on this reconnaissance vessel but functional. That was enough for Seven. She was not very tired but knew she had to regenerate whenever she had time. The portable regenerator had been working fine even if it was not as powerful as

the normal one and she had to remain plugged longer. As Chief Engineer, it had been easy to divert some more power to her quarters to charge the battery but she doubted she could fool a good engineer on a normal vessel. She knew in the near future she would have to deal with her friends learning she was Borg. Seven dreaded the moment. Would she lose them all? Would they despise her for what she was? What she had done in the past?

Seven was removing her uniform jacket when the door chimed.

"Come."

A big smile on her face, Klee entered her quarters followed by all her friends. Vratok was carrying a big cake while Mike handed the bottle of Champagne.

"What is that for?" Seven questioned.

"We thought a little celebration was in order," Valis explained. "We will head home tomorrow and we know you saved our asses today. Even the Captain was running in circle, not knowing what to do."

"He is young and had never encountered this kind of spatial anomaly before. I did. So I knew how to counteract the gravital pulls." Seven didn't add she had encountered this anomaly during her time with the Borg and before the Borg could adapt, half the cube was gone. Indeed, it had been a tense situation today while the plating had started to leave the hull until Seven had shut down the warp core, inverse the shield polarity and ordered full thrusters to the helm.

The Captain had been angry with her because she hadn't informed him of her actions. She had taken the dress down about following the chain of command in stride. Staying at attention, Seven had resisted to argue with him like she used to do with Captain Janeway. She almost smiled at that memory but caught herself in time. Nevertheless, at the end, he had thanked her.

"Was the Captain angry?" François asked.

"Yes."

"Are you on report?" To be on report at this time of their training could be bad enough to have Annika expelled from the Academy and Klee wasn't sure how she would reacted if her girlfriend wouldn't get posted on Explorer with them. Klee enjoyed the heavy kissing and petting with Annika even if it was frustrating to stop only there. After two months together, all of their friends teased them about having sex. Klee's face had been bright red when after the first teasing from Mike, Annika had announced without shame that they didn't have had sex yet, they were only kissing. Hot, wet kissing and Klee was exploding from inside each time.

"No, I am not. I guess saving the ship and her crew spoke in my favour."

"It is a logical assumption, Chief," P'olt said. Seven smiled. She liked the subtle way P'olt teased her. It reminded her of Tuvok. Seven was pleased to serve again with Tuvok on the new ship. She expected to enjoy T'pel's company and a good game of Kalto as soon as she would be settle in her new job. They had got along very well when she had lived in Tuvok's family for a few weeks.

Chapter 13.

Klee and Seven were sitting on the bed in Klee's room at the Academy. On first appearance, everything looked fine but, after a few months dating, Klee was starting to know how to interpret Annika's body expressions. Since their first dance together, they had been kissing and petting a lot but every time Klee wanted to go further in their relationship, Annika had resisted.

During Klee's roommate absence, they had kissed. Each time Klee kissed Annika, she was in heaven. Her full lips were so soft. Klee's hand slid slowly on Annika's body from her shoulder to her breast. The groan she heard sent her senses on overload and Klee, still kissing deeply, pushed Annika to lie fully on the bed.

When she felt the soft covers of the bed on her back, Seven tensed. She didn't know why but, even if she enjoyed kissing and touching Klee, her mind, telling her something was wrong, refused to allow her to go further. Each time, images of Kathryn floated in her mind. She broke the kiss and removed herself from the bed. Standing straight, her hands linked in her back, Seven was looking at Klee who was still on the bed, watching her. She could see frustration, disappointment in the other woman's eyes and that hurt her heart. She was used to disappoint people but it was harder when she cared for them.

"I am sorry, Klee," Seven whispered. Tears in her eyes, she fought these unwelcome emotions, "I cannot. It does not feel right." Seven wanted to find the words to explain what she was feeling but it was too hard. From the beginning, it has always been difficult for her to put her new born emotions into words. Even now, after five years, it was still difficult to welcome her feelings and to abandon the logic that had lead all her life before Captain Janeway had snatched her from the Borg.

"Annika, I don't understand. If you don't want me, why are you willing to kiss and spend time with me?" Klee was very aroused and very annoyed. It was difficult for her to keep her temper. Anyone but

Annika who would have done the same thing to her, she would have called her names but one look in Annika's eyes and Klee melted. "Explain, Annika," she whispered.

Seven looked down at her feet. The smile of another woman appeared before her eyes, a auburn hair woman with a beautiful smile. Seven lifted her chin. "I do not know, Klee. I like you very much, you are my friend."

"But you don't love me." A big hand crushed Klee's heart. She took a deep breath and asked, "Is there someone else?" Seven hesitated and before she could answer 'No', Klee, in a firm voice, said, "There is someone else. Who?"

"There is nobody else." Seven replied. The certainty in her voice made Klee falter.

"So you just don't love me, you don't even want to give it a chance."

Seven saw the hurt in Klee's eyes and wanted to smooth it. She held out her right arm to caress Klee's face but Klee grabbed it to stop her. "I am not a dog you can pet!" Klee said angry.

"I...", at a loss of words, Seven straightened her shoulders and put back on her icy demeanour. "I must go."

"Annika! Wait!" Klee jumped off the bed to stop her girlfriend but Annika had already left the room. Klee ran after her and caught her in the corridor. She tried to grab Annika's arm but was stopped when Annika's left hand held her wrist. "We need to talk, Annika." Klee whispered gently.

Seven didn't want to talk. She was too confused. If B'Elanna was right, she loved Kathryn. Even if Kathryn didn't love her back, she couldn't stop herself to love her. She had tried and failed. "I cannot do that. I cannot continue to hurt your feeling. Our relationship is terminated," Seven explained in a cold voice. She didn't know how to make things right and was afraid to lose Klee's friendship but she couldn't continue to function like that. Because she had nobody to turn to, she had only one idea: go back home and play piano.

"You can't be serious!"

"I am." Seven let Klee's arm go and left, leaving a stunned Klee hanging in the corridor.

Chapter 14.

"Is that our ship?" asked Mike, in awe. His eyes were as large as saucers. He had studied the schematics but, like the others, nothing could have prepared him for the reality.

"Yes."

They all stopped on the long corridor leading to Explorer. The ship beyond the windows seemed frightening for those young Starfleet officers fresh outside the Academy.

"She is big." Mike swallowed.

"And the best ship in the fleet," Valis added. She was smiling. This would be a hell of a deep space mission and she was in. "We will go where nobody has gone before."

"514 men and women with 278 Starfleet crewmen, six shuttles, slip stream drive and warp drive, twelve phaser banks and ten torpedo launchers, a cloaking device," Seven recited. "It is an impressive vessel with all the latest technology."

"And we're going to work on it," Klee gulped.

"Just don't blow it," Vratak teased.

"I won't if you know how to protect it," Klee teased back. "Anyway, as rookies, I'm sure we'll only clean the plasma relay for the whole trip."

"It would be effective to stop you from blowing the ship," the Vulcan suggested.

"Maybe it is YOU, P'olt, who will blow the ship!" Klee smiled.

"I don't think Captain Janeway would be very happy if some fresh officers from the Academy blow her ship," a deep voice behind them said.

They turned and, seeing the rank on the collar, straightened up immediately. Except from Seven, none of them knew who the man, a Vulcan, was, but the rank of Commander spoke volume enough.

"You should report to your commanding officer immediately and not engage in a futile conversation."

"Yes, sir!" the seven voices snapped.

"Dismissed."

Without another word, they all turned around and started to follow the corridor. Seven was worried about Klee. They had had no time to talk since their break up two days ago but Seven knew Klee still cared deeply for her and had been hurt. Seven needed advice but she didn't know who to ask for help. 'Kathryn' came to her mind but she discarded this idea as soon as she thought about it. Maybe B'Elanna...

"Ensign Hansen, a word, please."

Seven stopped in her tracks. She caught the worried look of Klee and François. How a Commander could know the name of their friend?

"Commander?"

“I just wanted to tell you everything had been prepared for your arrival. Lieutenant Commander Torres had rerouted more power to your quarters and she and I briefed Voyager’s former crew. They all agreed not to talk about your time with the Borg,” Tuvok explained.

“The Captain?”

“Is unaware of your presence...for now.”

“Acceptable... Thank you, Commander.”

“Dismissed.”

To be continued.

PS: Thanks to MP and Danyelle for Beta reading and correction. All the remaining mistakes are mine.