

## The end is the beginning - Part 2 by Kadyan

### Chapter 1.

As soon as the door closed behind her, Seven put down her bag. Slowly, examining her new quarters on deck twelve section thirty two, she noticed the familiar standard furniture. Her trunk which had been transported earlier sat in the middle of her quarters close to the two seat sofa. On her left, a desk and a chair, near by, a small replicator. Not very useful to prepare a party but enough for her small needs. On her right, the single bed, a cupboard and the door leading to the sonic shower. What attracted immediately her attention was the other cupboard, the non standard one, just hidden in the corner outside of the sonic shower. She opened the door and found her small regenerator chamber inside. Rapidly, she checked it and relaxed; it was in working order. B'Elanna had kept her words and it meant a lot for her. Their fledgling friendship was often frustrating but it felt good after all the antagonism. Seven turned around again and let go a breath of relief. Her quarters were small but her own. On Voyager, as a fresh graduate from the Academy, she would have had to share but, on Explorer, designed for long deep space exploration, each crewman had his own quarters. Before she could do anything else, Seven heard the chime.

"Enter."

Klee entered and waited for the door to close behind her. Seven tensed. Not too sure about the protocol for breaking relationship, she fell back on her Borg composure and linked her hands in her back. She supposed she could have guessed Klee would want an explanation after their break up two days ago. Klee had tried to contact her but, between the TPG and preparing to come aboard, Seven had allowed no time for personal discussion. They had just met with all their friends before coming aboard and, with all the excitement going around, talking was impossible.

"Klee."

"I want...need to talk to you, Annika." Klee swallowed. It would not going to be easy. Annika's body language was defensive and Klee knew too well how Annika's logic could be so hurtful in this kind of interaction. She had to diffuse the tension first. "Nice quarters. Exactly like mine. By the way, I'm on the same deck, four doors from you. I think they tried to mix the cadet with the rest of the crew so we are lucky to be not so far from each other. Are you going to decorate?" Klee was babbling.

"I do not know. Decoration is irrelevant." Seven's icy voice answered. She was standing near her trunk and not moving an inch. Her blue eyes gave nothing. She knew she was behaving badly but didn't know any better.

"I'd like to decorate a bit. Would you help me? Give me your advice?" The light of surprise in Annika's eyes made Klee smile so she added quickly: "I know you don't love me, Annika, but I would like to remain friend. Can we do that?" It wasn't what Klee had prepared to tell her but Annika's demeanour was so far from relax that she had to wait for a better time to express her feelings. They had one year of exploration ahead, sure she would find the right time and the right place to talk to Annika, especially if she could enlist her friends to help her.

"Yes. I would like we remain friends. It was never my intention to hurt you, Klee." The ice in Seven's eyes melted a bit. "I have never 'made love' before and I want to wait for the right person. You are not this person, Klee." Seven knew she was hurting her friend but she could only tell the truth about her feeling. Lying was always so hard and the lie about her true nature made her feel guilty enough. She didn't need another one.

Klee's heart squeezed painfully in her chest. Before she could find the words to change Annika's mind, the door chimed again.

"Enter."

Klee caught two tears with the tip of her fingers as she watched Lieutenant Commander Torres entered the room. Immediately, she stiffened to attention.

"Seven, I came to..." B'Elanna, surprised to see another person in Seven's quarters, stopped in a middle of her sentence.

"Lieutenant Commander Torres," Seven said in a flat voice. Hearing her title, immediately, B'Elanna change her demeanour. Seven and were not buddies but had relaxed enough to use first name.

"Sir." Klee stared straight ahead.

"You are..." Torres asked Klee.

"Ensign Klee Tirell, sir. Alpha shift in enginery, sir."

"At ease, Ensign." B'Elanna hid a smile. These new graduates were all the same, ready to jump if she ordered them.. All but one. She shifted her sight to Seven who was looking like...Seven; erected, hands linked in her back, emotionless, a Borg drone. But B'Elanna knew better now. "You should report to Enginery, Ensign. The alpha shift begins in 10 minutes."

"Yes, sir." With a last glance to Annika, Klee left. She didn't know why but her half Klingon new Chief scared the hell out of her.

"It is not nice to frighten your staff, Lieutenant."

"Cut the Lieutenant crap, Seven. We are in your quarters and you and I share five years of history." Suspicious, B'Elanna paused and threw a dark glance at Seven. "Were you teasing me?"

Seven's answer was just a small lift of her lips and a special light in her eyes but it was enough for B'Elanna to understand. How could she have missed that before? It was there every day for, at least, the last two years on Voyager but she never saw it. B'Elanna had been so frightened by Seven's skills she had ignored the person behind the Borg drone attitude.

"So, do you like your new alcove?" B'Elanna said, smiling. Nicoletti, Vorik and she had been pleased with the speed they had connected Seven's alcove even with all the Borg technology that Seven has included. *Guess, habits die hard.*

"I did not have time to test it but I will run a complete diagnostic and will let you know."

"Yeah, do that. We had to modify the interface to hide your Borg algorithms..."

"You did not want to raise an alarm on the bridge with the new computer protocols which now detects Borg encryptions code."

What had angered B'Elanna before only made her smile now. She was curious. "Are you doing the same with your friends?"

"Lieutenant?" Seven didn't understand.

"Cutting them in a middle of a sentence?" B'Elanna explained. "Be so arrogant?"

"No. I learnt not to do that any more. I apologise, B'Elanna." Seven's lips lifted up. "I must have regressed to a former state in your presence."

Stunned, B'Elanna looked at Seven. "Is that a joke? Again?"

"I believe it is."

B'Elanna started to enjoy herself. Tom was going to be very surprised with her new attitude toward Seven. "So what is the story with your friend?" Without waiting for an invitation, B'Elanna popped down on the sofa. "She seemed upset."

Seven hesitated, debated a few seconds about the wisdom to tell B'Elanna everything. She needed a friend, someone who could explain how she could repair her friendship with Klee. Surprisingly, B'Elanna seemed willing so Seven sat down on the chair and started to speak about her feelings, the break up...

"She is in love with you," B'Elanna said softly after Seven had finished to tell her about Klee. "Only time can repair and, sometime, even time cannot help, Seven."

"I did not want to hurt her. She is my friend. I should not have kissed her."

"Maybe not. I guess you were experimenting...again."

"But she was not," Seven confirmed in a dejected voice. It was like with Chakotay but, this time, she really liked Klee. "I will never have a date again." Seven said, dejected.

"Don't say that. You have to experiment if you want to understand your emotions. We all do it at a time or another."

"When you are teenagers..."

"...yeah...mostly." B'Elanna conceded. "You are still learning your way through your emotions, Seven. Don't be too hard on yourself. Love is a very difficult emotion..."

Seven agreed with B'Elanna, she wanted to ask more question about love. A vision of Kathryn popped in Seven's head. Every time she thought about love, it was the same vision: Kathryn smiling to her with soft blue eyes looking at her. She swallowed. She didn't want to think about her Captain that way but couldn't stop herself. Seven's face hardened. "Could you please leave, B'Elanna? I have to regenerate before my shift."

B'Elanna hesitated. She was used to Seven's abruptness and didn't really mind but what surprised her was the pain she could see in Seven's eyes. Since there was nothing she could do, she left. The Chief couldn't be late for the beginning of the alpha shift, could she?

## **Chapter 2.**

Captain Kathryn Janeway was in shock. She had been looking at her computer screen for the last half an hour and still couldn't wrap her mind about what she had seen.

Like all good captain, she wanted to know her crew as best as possible but with 514 people onboard she hadn't had the time to check the files until today. They had been on their way to the departure sector for three days and were expecting to use the new drive tomorrow. Nechev's orders were clear: check what happened in the delta quadrant after the destruction of the Borg queen by an older Admiral Janeway from an other timeline.

The Captain had just wanted to check the files of the Engineering team for reassurance. Janeway trusted B'Elanna with her life but she had found B'Elanna's lack of concern about the new engine too strange to let it go. Usually, B'Elanna was as stubborn as a targ when she wanted something. Janeway hadn't understood why her Chief Engineer hadn't insisted more to have a Slipstream drive specialist. Now, she knew. They had a Slipstream drive specialist onboard but nobody had told her so. The specialist name was Annika Hansen and Janeway had almost missed the connection...almost. It had taken her 30 seconds to realise she was looking at a picture of Seven of Nine. The uniform and the new hair cut which was hiding most of the ocular implant had confused her, but not for long.

Thirty minutes later, Janeway was still looking at the picture of the woman she was in love with. Her mind was spinning with all the unanswered questions. What was Seven doing here? In a Starfleet uniform? What about Chakotay? Did Torres know? Of course, she had to know, she interviewed her staff personally. But why didn't she tell her? And Tuvok? Did he know? He had to know as well. Tuvok was too good an officer not to check everybody.

After five more minutes, Janeway pulled her command mask, cleared her voice and tapped her combadge.

"Janeway to Tuvok"

*"Tuvok here"*

"Could you come to my ready room, Commander?"

*"On my way, Captain."*

When Tuvok entered the ready room, seeing Janeway facial expression, he could tell she was deeply trouble. When he stopped in front of the desk, he had already deduced why.

Janeway didn't acknowledge Tuvok, she just turned her computer screen so he could see it. Tuvok said nothing, he just pressed his lips a bit harder. After all these years, she could read him pretty well. He knew and hadn't told.

Shock became anger. In a deep freezing voice, Janeway asked: "Why didn't you tell me Seven was on board? How could you? You are my friend. How could you do that to me."

Even if Tuvok knew the Captain would not like the answer, as a Vulcan, he was compelled to tell the truth. "It was her condition to volunteer to come aboard Explorer. We needed a specialist and Seven was already working with Dr Brahms and Lt Commander Torres on the Explorer engines. She was the most suitable candidate. I went myself to the Academy to ask her to apply."

"She didn't want me to know. Why? How did you know she was at the Academy? I didn't know it. What about Chakotay?" Kathryn Janeway was becoming angrier with each passing minutes. "I want answers, Tuvok, or do I need to order her here?"

"It would be better not to until we have tested the drive, Captain. You do not want her to be distracted before tomorrow."

Janeway could hear regrets in his voice and she calmed down. It wasn't like Tuvok to deceive her. *When he does something, he does it for a good reason*, she reminded herself and she had to understand which one. Janeway let part of the command mask goes. "Tell me, my old friend, tell me why..."

Again, Tuvok wondered why he had accepted a posting on a ship with mainly emotional humans. All these uncontrolled emotions were difficult to deal with, especially when they were Kathryn Janeway's. She was hurt and what he had to say would hurt her deeper. Nevertheless, if the situation was going to be resolve, he would have to explain his actions.

"Two weeks after her wedding, Seven came to talk to me on Vulcan. Even as she tried to remain emotionless, I could feel her despair. She had left Chakotay and needed advices. When I asked her why she had not talked to you, Seven told me you were not answering her messages." Kathryn closed her eyes and swallowed the bitterness in her mouth. "She had already been to see the Doctor whose advice was to follow her husband. I sensed there was another problem with the Doctor but Seven did not tell me about it and I did not pursuit it. When she told me she wished she had never left the Collective, I knew I had to help her."

"She said that?" Janeway whispered, distressed.

"Yes. She was like a lost child in an unknown world. My wife and I offered her a safe place to stay until she was ready to be by herself. She only left when she started the Academy a year ago."

"Thank you, old friend, at least, you were there for her."

"May I ask you a personal question, Captain?"

Janeway nodded.

"Why did you not answer her messages?"

"I didn't read them, I couldn't..."

"I know you are in love with her but I do not understand the logic in your actions."

Kathryn blushed but didn't try to deny the truth. "I didn't know my feeling for her were so transparent."

"They are not but I have known you for more than 20 years."

"Chakotay asked me to let her go." Janeway granted. It was still hard to remember that conversation.

"He was jealous and afraid she loved you back," Tuvok translated.

"What did you say?"

"I think you heard me the first time, Captain, so your question must be more about the fact that Seven is in love with you."

Kathryn blinked. "She told you that?"

"No. I do not think she is aware of it yet but her time at the Academy had helped her to grow. She had made friends, and friends, especially humans, have often the bad habit to show their emotions and interfered with them."

"I need to talk to her."

"May I advice you to wait, Captain. Seven is aware you will discover her presence aboard sooner or later. Right now, she needs to settle, to feel secure and to concentrate on the slipstream drive."

"What are you talking about, Tuvok?" Kathryn was alarmed.

"The crew members from Voyager's former crew had promised not to let a word slip about her Borg origin. I do not think she is trusting them yet."

"Why would she want to hide her Borg origin?" Suddenly understanding, Janeway lifted her hand. "Belay that. Seven didn't tell her friend about her Borg heritage and now she is afraid to lose them if they learn about it."

"Exactly."

Kathryn swallowed and took a deep breath. "Ok, Tuvok, I will not interfere...for now. Dismissed."

Kathryn Janeway ascended the two steps leading to the upper part of her Ready room. It was almost the same design as the one in Voyager but bigger. She looked at the distorted star field outside for a long moment. Seven was in love with her and she had let her down because she, Captain Kathryn Janeway who had never refused to face the Hirogen, the Borg, the Kazon and all the harsh species from the Delta quadrant, had been afraid to tell this wonderful young woman that she loved her with all her heart. Could she hide her feeling longer if Seven acknowledged her own? Ensign Hansen was in her crew and protocol frowned upon intimate relationship between a commanding officer and a crewman but, after all these years of emotional solitude, these months of depression, could she resist? Kathryn knew in her heart that she would not lose the occasion if it presented itself. Not now, not after her depression for losing the only person she had ever really loved. She just had to be a little bit more patient. She knew very well, that, when it concerned Seven "Resistance was futile."

### Chapter 3.

Sitting in the captain chair on the bridge, Janeway, as usual, seemed composed. Nobody could have told she was a bit anxious to test the new drive. Anything could go wrong and they could end on the other side of the galaxy or die.

"Arriving at the coordinates," Lieutenant Paris said at the helm. He turned to look at his captain. Everybody on the bridge was silent, waiting for the Captain to issue orders. Tuvok was sitting on Janeway's left reading his console, Porky sat in front of Tuvok, a bit on the left while Ayala mirrored the position on the captain's right. Operation and helm controls were directly in front of Janeway and Tuvok. Paris glanced at the operation consol, remembering his friend Harry Kim who wasn't here with them. The young Ensign, Rajik, who was occupying the post, was not as fresh from the Academy as Ensign Kim had been eight years ago but barely. Would he fit as well?

"Mister Rajik, send a message to Starfleet to tell them we have arrived at the coordinate and are preparing to use the slipstream drive."

"Yes, Captain." Rajik started to push button on his board. His head was bent in concentration. He was so eager to please like another Ensign a long time ago. Janeway taped her combadge.

"Janeway to Torres."

"Torres here"

"We are at the coordinate, ready to engage the slipstream drive, Lieutenant."

"*Enginery is ready, Captain, all the lights are green.*"

"Engage slipstream drive, Mr Paris."

"Aye, Captain. Engaging the slipstream drive."

"The tunnel is forming, Captain," Ensign Rajik told, excited. It was his first deep space mission on such a big ship and it was showing. Janeway hid a smile. This ensign with his dark hair and eyes reminded her so much of Harry Kim when he first came aboard.

"On screen, Ensign," Janeway ordered in a cool voice. "Here we go, Mr Paris. She is yours."

"I'm taking this new babe for the ride of her life, Captain."

"I expect a smooth ride, Lieutenant," Tuvok added, not liking the tone of Paris's voice. After seven years, he knew Tom Paris was one of the best pilots in the fleet, nevertheless, the lieutenant penchant for showing off was sometime ill advised.

"Don't worry, Commander, even the babies aboard won't awake. And...go!"

Flashes of colours marred suddenly the screen. It looked like watching an endless kaleidoscope where the ship was rotating slowly.

"Turn down the brightness a notch, Ensign," Janeway ordered to Rajik, "we don't want to end blind or with a headache."

The new vessel was vibrating lightly but nothing more.

"It seems like our ride will be smooth, Captain," Porky commented. He was trying to compare all the sensors data with the astrometric chart but it was an impossible task, Explorer was too fast.

Janeway was smiling. She relaxed in her seat a bit, checked her consol.

"Enginery signals an elevation of temperature in the warp core," Tuvok said. "No explanation."

The Captain frowned. "The warp core isn't supposed to be used at this time."

"Captain, the vibrations are increasing," Ensign Rajik said a few minutes later.

"Tom?"

"Everything looks normal with the new drive, Captain," Paris answered after checking the sensors on the helm consol.

"How long, Mr Porky?"

"We should reach the exit coordinates in nine minutes and twenty two seconds, Captain."

Janeway could now feel the increased in the vibration under her feet. Her hand was on her way to her combadge while she heard : "*Torres to the bridge.*"

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"How is it going, Seven?" Torres asked. She could see the concentration on the face of the former drone and it worried her. Torres was used to see Seven, arrogant, impassive, but never preoccupied.

"We have a divergence of .002 and it is increasing."

Knowing Seven's love for precision, B'Elanna tried to hide her smile. "I can live with that."

"No, you cannot," Seven replied, the steel in the tone ruffling Torres feathers but before she could get angry, Seven explained coldly, "if the divergence reach .05, we will be thrown out the slipstream drive tunnel and Explorer will be torn apart with the velocity."

Torres stared at Seven. The former drone never lied or emphasized the truth.

"How long?"

"2mn 32 s."

"It's before the estimate time for the exit coordinate."

"Yes."

"Lieutenant, the temperature of the warp core drive is increasing," Nicoletti warned from the other side of the room. She was in charge of everything which wasn't the slipstream drive. Torres had wanted the beta team ready to help in Enginery and the gamma team was on alert.

"What the hell!" B'Elanna shouted, "the warp core drive is at the minimum, the temperature shouldn't increase. Try to cool it down, Nicoletti." Turning back to Seven, Torres asked, "Can you compensate?"

"I have tried. Nothing is working. We must shut down the drive, Lieutenant."

"We wait as long as possible, Ensign," Torres said, reminding Seven of her rank. "Try to compensate."

"You must tell the Captain."

Annoyed, Torres stared at Seven. She knew this tone and didn't like it at all when Seven challenged her. At this time, the Klingon in her wanted to be stubborn.

".009 and 1mn 43s, Lieutenant." Seven added.

But Seven was right, she had to inform the Captain because they would have to leave the tunnel earlier. Swallowing her pride, she taped her combadge: "*Torres to the bridge.*"

"*Janeway here.*"

"We might have a problem with the new drive, Captain."

Seven lift her head looking at the chief engineer. Did B'Elanna understand the gravity of the situation?

"*What kind of problem?*"

"We will have to shut down the drive in less than..." Torres looked at Seven's console, "...1mn 20s or we will be eject from the tunnel and destroy."

The silence was deafening.

"Captain?"

*"Shut the drive when you must, Lieutenant."*

"Aye, Captain." Torres looked at Seven. "Happy, now?"

Seven ignored the pin, she just stated ".018, Lieutenant, the divergence is increasing faster."

"Chief, the temperature of the warp core is critical. It's going to go on line alone," Nicoletti shouted.

"Shut down the warp core!" Torres ordered.

".02," Seven updated in a mechanical voice. She briefly lifted her head from the consol to check around her. Her eyes made contact with François'. He looked tense. She nodded her reassurance. Seven turned her head on her right to check on Klee as well. Klee's eyes were on her. Seven kept the contact for a few seconds, trying to transfer her confidence, before going back to her consol. ".03, Lieutenant."

"We can't stop the warp core, Lieutenant, the automatic procedure isn't working!" Nicoletti spoke calmly but her voice was tense. She was used to stressful situation but she had just realised with her son and husband on board, the stake were higher than on Voyager.

".035"

In a blink of an eye, B'Elanna recognized the threat. "Seven abort the slipstream drive, I'm going to cut the power to the warp core manually before it starts itself."

Seven has been ready for the order. "Shutting down the drive, Lieutenant." Her fingers started to fly on her consol. Seven was now too busy with the slipstream drive to realise what was happening around her. A part of her mind was analysing the sequence and parameters to stop the slipstream drive without damage while the other calculated that damages to Explorer were inevitable. They had missed something about this new drive and she didn't know what.

"Jerry, you are with me. We have to cut the main power to shut down the warp drive," Torres shouted to the closest engineer.

One second later, without further warning, chaos erupted in enginery. The explosion threw most of the forty six people, alpha and beta shift, on the floor and shook the whole ship. At the last second, Seven had grabbed her station with her left hand and barely remained standing. Something stroked her on the face but it wasn't enough to knock her down. Clouds of smoke filled enginery while the extractors were working at full capacity. Some people were crying in pain but Seven ignored them. She could feel blood dripping from her forehead but ignore it as well like she ignored the pain on her side or people running around her. No matter what, she had to finish to shut down the slipstream drive or they would all be dead in a few seconds. As soon as she input the last command, she heard shouting and moaning. Plasma leaks were everywhere. At the same time Seven noted the vibration was stopping she heard: "Seven, what is the status of the slipstream drive?"

Nicoletti, now in charge, stood in front of her ignoring Seven's wounds. She needed answers and Seven was the only one with enough knowledge to give her some. Seven checked her consol. "It is shut down, Lieutenant. We are living the tunnel in three seconds. The stress to Explorer hull will be maximum." Seven looked around to check if anyone was available. "Klee, divert all power to structural integrity," Seven ordered without even referred to Nicoletti who looked at her with wide eyes. Seven expected anger because she hadn't respected the chain of command but she only saw relief. "Lieutenant, we need to shut down everything else," Seven added.

"I agree. Martin, Merk, shut down all the propulsion engines!" Nicoletti ordered to the section's chiefs who were now back at their stations.

While the warp core team took action, Seven noticed Torres lying on the floor a few feet ahead from her. She was not moving. There were burns and blood everywhere. Without another thought, she bent and taped the chief engineer combadge, hoping the transporters were still on line : "Medical emergency, one to beam to sickbay." Immediately, Torres vanished in the blue sparkles. At least, the transporters were still functioning.

"Seven, you need to go to Sickbay." Nicoletti ordered. Only her experience kept her from panicking. At least ten people of the enginery team were badly wounded and had already been transported to Sick bay. That was without adding the minor injuries to the one who have stayed at their post and who needed to be relieved.

Seven consulted her cortical node and released more nanoprobes in her blood stream. "I am functioning, Lieutenant. You need me here."

Nicoletti sighed but she was relieved. Yes, she needed Seven here even if she was wounded, not only for her skills but for her cool attitude. The arrival of the gamma team sent another flow of relieve. They were going to be fine. She nodded to Seven.

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"Tom, you heard B'Elanna, prepare to shut down the slipstream drive and to engage the warp core," Janeway ordered.

"Lieutenant Porky, calculate the new exit coordinates," Tuvok added. "Ensign Rajik, as soon as we leave the tunnel, I want a scan of this sector. We do not need any bad surprise."

Tuvok has just finished given his orders when a big shake engaged the safety harness and trapped the bridge crew on their sit for a few seconds. The harness could save a lot of injuries in any harsh situation but also might rendered the bridge powerless at a crucial time in a battle and Janeway was very annoyed during the two or three seconds she was helpless.

"Report," Janeway shouted as soon as the harness released them and jumped on her feet. Tuvok, always contained, was tapping on his consol to assess the damages. In the mean time, Tom Paris tried to access the engine to control the ship. "All the drives are off line, Captain. I can't even get thrusters."

"Breach on deck 17 and 18. Primary systems are off line. Engineery reports an explosion. Sickbay reports wounded. Lieutenant Ayala, reroute all the main systems to secondary systems. The maintenance crew is working on the breaches." Tuvok was reading the damage report as soon as they arrived and even as emotionless as a vulcain can be he felt worry.

"Where are we?" Janeway hated when her ship was powerless. "Mr Rajik, what about the sensors?"

The young ensign who had been shocked by the extensive damages came to his senses when he heard the whipping voice.

"They are off line, Captain. I am trying to reroute power from secondary systems."

"Mr Porky, where are we?" Janeway icy voice cut like steel in the heavy atmosphere.

"I...I don't know, Captain, without the sensors, I can't get a reading..."

Janeway thought of a time back on Voyager when her astrometric officer would have gave her an answer. Seven would know but Seven wasn't on the bridge any more, she was in enginery, hiding from her Captain. Suddenly, Janeway turned pale. An explosion in enginery... Suddenly, the only thing she wanted to know was if Seven was alive. She taped her combadge.

"Janeway to enginery"

*"Nicoletti here, Captain."*

"We need the engines and sensors, Lieutenant. We are dead in the water and we don't know where we are."

*"We are working as fast as we can, Captain, but the explosion did a lot of damage."*

"How long?"

*"We are still evaluating, Captain, I cannot give you an answer. We have to clean the plasma leaks before we can access some of the systems."*

"Torres?" Janeway feared the answer. If B'Elanna wasn't answering herself, that was bad.

*"...She is in sickbay, Captain, with six other member of the alpha shift and three of the beta shift... I don't know her condition."*

Tom Paris turned his head to lock eyes with his Captain, his eyes pleading.

"Keep me informed, Lieutenant, Janeway out."

Kathryn Janeway, the woman, recognized the pain in her helmsman figure and wanted to acknowledge his need to go to his wife's bedside but the Captain couldn't lose her pilot, not now, where they didn't know if there were enemies around. She just shook her head. After seven years on Voyager, Paris understood his Captain and, steeling himself, turned back to his station.

"Sickbay reports all the heavy wounded are stabilized. The light wounded are returning to duty. No casualty," Tuvok said five minutes later, his voice strong enough for all the bridge crew to hear. Relieved, Tom sighed heavily. B'Elanna was alive and not critical.

"Partial sensors are coming back on line, Captain!" Rajik was so exited, he was almost shouting. Tuvok lift an eyebrow. He would have to talk with the ensign to remind him of protocol.

"On screen." Janeway looked at the stars on the view screen and recognized none. It didn't seem they had cross this area of space with Voyager. "Lieutenant Porky?"

This time, her chief science officer had answers. "This is uncharted territory, Captain. No information available. There are two star systems less than 5 light years."

"Sensors are picking up an old warp signature. Unknown origin," Rajik added.

Before Janeway could even think about asking Seven, Tuvok tapped his combadge. "Tuvok to Ensign Hansen."

*"Hansen here, Commander."* The deep voice of Seven answered immediately.

"Could you access the sensors and tell us if you know where we are, Ensign?"

*"It will take few second, Commander..."* The voice became uncertain, *"I need to by pass my low clearance privilege."*

Tuvok looked at his Captain. Janeway acknowledged. "Do it, Ensign," Tuvok ordered.

"Captain! I'm detecting Borg encryption codes!" Ensign Rajik said in an increasing alarmed voice.

"There is nothing to worry about, Ensign." Janeway composed voice and face stopped dead the Ensign.

"Ma'am?"

"This doesn't leave the bridge." Janeway looked at the Ensign and at her Science officer. Both nodded while Paris and Ayala smiled and relaxed. If Seven was helping, they would have answers soon.

*"Hansen to Commander Tuvok."*

"Tuvok here."

*"We are near the Ivory Empire... They are a brutal race and culture... It would be best to avoid any contact... The third planet on the closest star system has a strong... electromagnetic field and would provide protection against sensors..."*

*"You need to go to sickbay and that's an order, Ensign."*

*"You need me to help with the repairs, Lieutenant."*

*"I need you healthy, Seven, not stumbling on your feet."*

Seven was wounded. Janeway jumped on her feet, her hand almost on her combadge, when she heard Tuvok. "Ensign Hansen, report to sickbay immediately."

*"Yes...Sir."*

And not arguing? Janeway started to worry. She looked at the Vulcan's dark eyes. She was needed on the bridge, both knew that but, for the first time in her carrier, the woman behind the Captain wanted to be first. Janeway taped her combadge. "Nicoletti, we need the impulse engine, NOW. This is a priority."

*"Yes, ma'am."*

"Tom, as soon as we have impulse, set a course for the third planet. Mr Porky, give the helm the coordinates. I will be in Sickbay. Commander, you have the bridge."

Without waiting for the normal acknowledge, Janeway went in the turbolift. "Deck six." Her emotions were in turmoil. After more than a year she was going to face Seven. Her ship wasn't under attack, yet, and there was nothing she could do on the bridge beside driving everybody crazy with worry.

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The matrix of the Doctor almost overloaded when he saw Seven transported in Sickbay.

"Seven? What are you doing here?"

"I am wounded, Doctor, I need you to heal me in order to return in Enginery and assist with the repairs." Seven was composed. She had never forgotten what he had revealed to her the last time she saw him, neither has she forgotten his ill advice about her marriage. He had disappointed her...like she had disappointed the Captain and the Captain knew she was on board now. What would be her reaction?

"I see that. Nurse, help her on the biobed, please." The Doctor checked Seven with his tricorder and frowned. "You have third degree plasma burns and should have come to Sickbay earlier."

"I was busy."

"Hopefully, your nanoprobes have taken care of the life threatening burn on your right lung but they are depleted. I will repair your burns but you will need to regenerate."

"I am needed in Enginery, Doctor. My regeneration cycle will wait."

"I don't think so, Seven. Hum, some of your implants are misaligned. When was your last maintenance?"

"I have been repairing my implant myself for the last few months."

"Seven! Why didn't you come to see me?"

Seven tightened her lips but didn't answer. She wanted to flee but had to let the doctor treated her burns. She barely heard the door open but as soon as her enhanced hearing heard the foot steps, she recognized who had entered. Her heart rate accelerated.

The Doctor noticed her body reaction. "Seven?" He looked at her strangely before seeing the person who had arrived. "Captain."

Janeway couldn't keep her eyes from Seven. Her mouth started watering. Seven was only wearing her underwear and her skin seemed so smooth, so tempting even with the implants spreading from her stomach to her back. It looked like they were bounded up with her skin. She was beautiful. Then,

Janeway noticed Seven's tense body, the light blush who was spreading on her cheeks. Slowly, she walked the last few steps and stopped in front of her. For a few second, Seven averted her eyes.

"Captain." Janeway heard the chilly voice and almost took a step back...almost...but she saw Seven's eyes and the story they were telling was very different than the one she was hearing. She had missed her so much.

"How is she, Doctor?" Janeway asked while putting her hand on Seven's thigh. She heard the intake of a breath but nothing else. Seven didn't move an inch.

"When I finish with her burns, realign some of her implants and have a full regeneration cycle, she will be fine, Captain."

"My regeneration and implant realignment can wait. I must go back to Enginry." Seven wanted to argue further but fingers squeezing her thigh softly stopped her. "Let us be clear, Ensign. I need my crew at 100%. If the Doctor orders you to regenerate, you will comply."

"Yes, Captain."

"While I wait for you, I will check on the other wounded. How is B'Elanna, Doctor?"

Seven was stunned. The Captain was going to wait for her?

"She will be fine in one or two days. I have kept her sedated to stop her from suffering." The Doctor answered without a pause in Seven's treatment.

Like in a fog, Seven obeyed all the Doctor orders, lying, sitting, standing while he used the dermal regenerator and realigned her optical implant and shoulder implant.

"Ha, I am done, Seven, and don't tell me your shoulder didn't hurt and that your vision was clear before?"

"It was not life threatening, Doctor." Seven conceded but to bait him added "Pain is irrelevant."

"Seven, I..."

"Time to regenerate," Janeway cut him. "Dress up and follow me, Ensign." Silently, Seven replicated an uniform, dressed up and followed the Captain in the closest turbolift. "Deck twelve."

The slight lift of the optical implant indicated Seven was surprised. That pleased Kathryn who smiled faintly.

"Yes, I know where your quarters are. I noticed your name on the crew manifest two days ago but Tuvok convinced me to wait before contacting you." Janeway turned her head to look at Seven. Seven was staring at her, drinking in her. "I have missed you." Kathryn whispered, forgetting everything but those lonely months. When the turbolift stopped and opened the doors, she almost cursed. "I'm needed on the bridge. Go regenerate. When things are quieter, we will talk."

Seven nodded and left the turbolift.

#### Chapter 4.

Once again, Porky wasn't getting answers. He had tried the crew manifest, starfleet records and all told the same thing: Ensign Annika Hansen was born on the Tendara colony and entered the academy a year ago. Between that, nothing. Who was she? How did she know Borg algorithms? Had she been assimilated by the Borg? When? Where? Why no record? Some of the bridge crew haven't been surprised, including the Captain, when the Borg algorithms had shown off and nobody had objected to the Ensign bypassing security protocols.

Porky tried the medical database to check if by any chance he could be more lucky.

*"Access is restricted to authorized personnel only."* The computer answered in her musical voice.

Porky cursed and jumped on his feet. If he couldn't access the database directly, he knew someone who was the database and, if he remembered well his visit to sickbay, who liked to talk. He just had to ask the right questions.

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When he entered Sickbay, Porky saw the Doctor was busy talking to the nurse and the counselor. Trying to hide his impatience, he waited until the Doctor was done and noticed him. Nodding to the counselor who passed by him, he was too concentrated in the plan to extract informations from the Doctor to notice the strange look the counselor sent him.

"Lieutenant Porky, what can I do for you? I am rather busy at the moment." The Doctor said dryly.

Swallowing his pride, Porky smiled to the Doctor. He couldn't think about him as a human being and feared the day he would have to put himself in the hand of a hologram but he needed the...guy? Or whatever...

"I was wondering if you knew Ensign Annika Hansen."

"Why?"

"I was thinking to integrate her in my team. She seems good in science."

"Why do you ask me, ask Commander Tuvok, he is in charge of the personnel."

"Yes, I know that but I heard from some people that Ensign Hansen is a bizarre person," Porky lied.

"I just want to know, how bizarre? Nobody wanted to comment further so I am wondering if she is ...normal? And if not, I don't want her in my team."

Regretfully, nobody had told the Doctor not to talk about Seven's Borg background.

"I can assure you, Lieutenant, that she is as normal as you are for someone who has spent 18 years of her life in the Borg Collective. She would be a good recruit for any department."

Porky's heart started to beat faster. 18 years in the Borg Collective! But Ensign Hansen wasn't even 30 years old, that means...

"You were with her on Voyager," he guessed.

Forgetting the year estrangement between Seven and himself, the Doctor answered with pride. "Yes. She had been my pupil since. I am very proud of her accomplishments. I was the one to give her lessons about humanity."

Porky smiled. Ensign Annika Hansen was Seven of Nine, Tertiary Adjunct to Unimatrix 01. It was his lucky day. All the questions he had about the Borg were going to be answered. After that, he would have a year to complete his work so he would be ready to publish it when they return to the Federation. He would be famous and give conferences about the Borg everywhere.

When Porky left with barely a "Thank you", the Doctor frowned. He almost touched his combadge to warn Seven about the Lieutenant but one of his subroutine reminded him Seven was not very fond of him at the moment. He would have like to make things right between them but he didn't know how. He has sensed when she came to see him a year ago that his advice to go back to her husband hadn't been the one Seven expected. Zimmerman had programmed him to be very conservative and, even if, at that time, he could have presented himself as a good substitute for Chakotay, all his programming refused to comply. Because she was on board in a Starfleet uniform, he guessed Seven never took his advice. A small subroutine in the background of his program reminded him about the bad news he had delivered to Seven that same day and maybe this was part of Seven attitude toward him as well.

Even if he wasn't breathing, the Doctor sighted. Human feelings were very complicate and he was only a hologram.

## **Chapter 5.**

The Messhall was busy at this time of the day while the alpha shift was dining and some of the gamma shift were already eating breakfast. It was the only chance for Seven and her friends to gather. All of them but her had been affected to the alpha shift. After these last few crazy days where they had all pull double or triple shifts, things seemed to slow a bit. Lieutenant Torres was back in Enginery and today at 1500 impulse drive went back on line. There were still no warp drive, no weapon, no clocking ability and no slip stream drive and they were hiding near the third planet of the system for the duration of the repairs. Still making calculation about all the work they had left, Seven was silently chewing her salad while listening to her friends.

"So, when is the slipstream drive going back on line, Klee?" Mike asked between two mouthfuls of Irish stew. Everybody was anxious to have the new drive working soon. It meant the difference between a normal deep space mission and a 30 years trip home. At least they were not as far as Voyager had been.

"Don't ask me, ask Annika. SHE is the specialist after all."

"So, Annika, any idea of a schedule?" Mike was smiling and trying his most charming face. Seven lifted an eyebrow and turned up a little the corners of her mouth.

"The Captain has already asked me this question two hours ago and she did not like my answer so I suppose you will not like it either. Beside you should be more worry to get the warp drive on line as well as the weapons." Seven was becoming good at this banter with her friends. She was enjoying herself.

"We still don't have weapons?" Mike turned to look at Vratka.

"No." The Klingon answered in a deep voice. "And it seems the area is very dangerous. It's why we are still in yellow alert."

Mike who hadn't know about the extend of the damages blanched a bit. He worked for the science department and had been busy to check all the material after the big shake they had received.

"So when are we going to get the warp drive on line?" Vratka asked, serious.

"Come on, Annika, tell us!" Mike whined. He was scared and wasn't seeing the light in Seven's eyes.

Klee and François were laughing. Mike was so easy to tease.

"Maybe we could hang her by the feet and see how long it will take for her to spit it out," Vratak proposed. Seven's only answer was to lift her eyebrow a bit higher.

"I like your idea, Vratak," Mike pushed, sensing for the first time that everybody was hiding their fear behind some bravado.

Still smiling, Seven looked at him and again at Vratak. None of them were a match for her. "You can try, Klingon, if you are not afraid." She taunted him. "Maybe it is I who will hang you by your feet in front of everybody."

P'olt almost smiled. Vratak was proud of his strength but all of them knew Annika was as strong as he was.

"No need to show off, you two," Francois said a bit concerned, "I heard the Chief talk and say we will have the warp drive back on line in a week. Isn't that right, Annika?"

"It is accurate." Seven was more worried than she let on. She expected the warp drive to be back on line in a week but she had no idea about the slipstream drive. The entire network to the slipstream drive had been melted, even the backup system. Nobody at the TPG had expected plasma leak inside the two main enginery conduits. If the drive itself was undamaged, she would be able to give a timetable for the repairs but if the plasma had burnt the drive out... Seven didn't know if she could build another one out of here without a shipyard support. When the Captain had asked, she had told the truth. The worry in Kathryn's eyes had made her bite her lips. Seven had wanted to take back her words and promise her Captain that she would make the repairs.

"Why didn't you say so?" Mike complained. Sometimes, he didn't understand Annika. He was half in love with her but he was also relieved she hadn't chosen him. He couldn't understand how Klee was dealing with her coldness. Maybe she wasn't anymore. He had noticed some tension between the two of them and Valis had confirmed she had been aware of something either.

"It would not have been fun," Seven tried to tease to lighten her mood. Mike made a face while the others smiled.

Her tray in hand, Valis sat down on the empty chair at end of the table. "What a day!" she said smiling.

All of them immediately recognized her expression. She had learnt a juicy piece of gossip and was burning to share it with them.

"Valis..." Mike warned. "We are all tired so if you have anything to say that can cheer us up, tell it!"

Yes, they were all tired, especially those who were working in Enginery. Seven hadn't been able to regenerate a full cycle since the explosion and she had seen the Captain only to tell her bad news. To think about her Captain made her heart flutter. She swallowed her mouthful of salad.

"We have a Borg on board," Valis whispered, her eyes glowing.

"What?"

Seven froze.

"Are you kidding?"

For 32.4 seconds, Seven stopped breathing.

"How could that happened? We just arrived in the Delta Quadrant. There was no red alert."

"If there really were a Borg on board, I would know," Vratak commented, "the security would be involved."

"Not if she was a member of the crew," Valis confirmed, smiling.

"She?" Klee asked. She looked at Annika and frowned. The woman's face was as white as a sheet. "Are you all right, Annika?"

"I am func... fine." Seven blurted. Her voice was shaking.

"It's nothing to worry, Annika," François, thinking she was afraid to have a Borg on board, tried to reassure her. "If she is a member of this crew, she is no longer a threat."

"How can you be sure of that? We have been taught at the Academy that the Borg are the most dangerous species. That they are evil. Lieutenant Ayala had made us run some holodeck simulation with the Borg and all of us had ended assimilated. Nobody can compete with the strength of a drone."

"Ok. You made your point, Vratak, but I don't think we should be worried about a drone being on board. Do you see anybody with an armour here or regenerating? I think Valis is pulling our leg." Klee crossed her arm on her chest and looked at Valis, a grin on her face.

"Hey! I didn't lie! I just heard in the corridor that someone used Borg algorithms the day we were thrown out the slipstream. Even the Captain has ordered the bridge crew to keep it quiet."

"Why would she do that?" Mike was stunned. He had never imagined the Captain to hide a threat. She was the destructor of the Borg. She knew too well they were very dangerous.

"Beside, I saw Porky read something about the Borg in the lab. When I approached, he switched off his screen," Valis commented. "He seemed rather excited."

“Porky excited? THAT I can’t believe!” Mike said. “This guy is as warm as a Borg drone! I never saw him smile.”

“He wrote a paper on the Borg, fancy himself as a Borg specialist. I bet he is burning to put his hand on the drone we have here.” Valis lifted her hand. “Don’t ask for a name, I didn’t hear it but I am guessing it must be one of the Voyager’s former crew.”

Seven was dying inside. She feared it wouldn’t take long to Lieutenant Porky to seek her out and everybody would know. He had been on the bridge during the incident. The fact that he had not contacted her before that very day was the only hope she had. But even that... She hanged her head in defeat. She would lose everything...again. Seven didn’t know if she would have the strength to be hated again and ignore it.

“Annika?” P’olt voice was flat. She had noticed Annika’s reaction and had been concerned with the fear and despair she had seen in her eyes. Usually, Vulcans felt no concern but she liked Annika. They shared a love for logic and precision, talking to her was like talking to an other Vulcan. She knew Annika made a conscientious effort to repress all her emotions when talking to her. P’olt had not been surprised when Annika had admitted she had Vulcan friends.

Seven felt trapped in a nightmare. “I have to go.” She was standing and turned to move away only to be stopped by the sight of someone beside her. “Lieutenant,” Seven acknowledged and started to move around him.

“Are you Annika Hansen also known as Seven of Nine, Tertiary Adjunct to Unimatrix Zero One?” Porky asked on Seven’s retreating back. Immediately, the noise in the Messhall went down to level zero. All eyes where on Seven. She stopped and slowly turned to face Porky. He was smiling like a cat in a front of a mouse. She felt so uncomfortable that immediately she went back to her Borg demeanour. Her back straight, her face blank, she answered :

“I am Ensign Annika Hansen, sir.”

“But you are also known under your Borg designation, aren’t you, Seven of Nine?”

“We are aboard a Starfleet vessel, sir, any Borg designation would be irrelevant.” Seven biggest fears had come from an outsider. She had always thought it would be one of Voyager’s former crew who would expose her. She had been wrong. They had all promised and, surprisingly, kept that promise.

“I want to talk to you about the Borg,” Porky continued, ignoring the bewilder expressions around them. “We are in an area of space known to the Borg. I need information.”

“I already gave all the relevant information to the Captain, sir. If you would excuse me, I need to report for duty in Enginery.”

Seven started to turn again. She was loosing her icy countenance and wanted out.

“You are going to follow me and answered my questions, Ensign! Is that clear?” Porky ordered.

Seven just turned her head to look at Porky. She lifted her chin in defiance. “I will not comply, sir. All information about this space sector is in the database. If you want specific information about Borg technology, this is classified. You do not have the proper clearance, do you?”

Porky blushed. This Borg drone was going to obey. He has questions and he would have answers. His career depended on it.

“If you don’t obey my orders, I will put you on report, Ensign,” Porky warned.

“As you wish... Sir,” Seven spat. She was becoming annoyed, very annoyed with this pathetic human being.

“Problem, Seven?”

“Lieutenant Paris,” Seven acknowledged but said nothing more. She was still standing, hand clasped in her back, in the middle of the Messhall. Her hand hold to each one so tightly, her knuckles were white. She swallowed...hard.

After four years working with her, Tom Paris noticed right away Seven was upset. He had heard almost all the conversation and knew from B’Elanna the subject was a sensitive one for Seven. That this jerk chose to expose her in front of everybody...

“No problem, Lieutenant, I just ask the Ensign for information and she refused to answer. You heard it, didn’t you?” Porky smiled weakly. Maybe he should have waited to meet the Borg in a less public area but he was so excited to learn Seven of Nine was on board. The Seven of Nine from Voyager.

Not far from there, Lieutenant Ayala discreetly taped his combadge.

“I heard a superior officer threatening a crewmember to extract classified information.” Tom Paris was not smiling. He felt very protective of Seven, especially after the two baby-sit sessions her daughter had with the former drone. He had seen them together. The love on Seven’s face had not been faked and Miral had been asking often for Seven since. That was enough for him to step in.

"You misunderstood, Lieutenant, I don't want classified information, I just want first hand information about the life in the Collective, assimilation techniques and so on," Porky replied, smiling. It was his life opportunity and he wasn't going to let it escape.

Seven closed her eyes. Only the tight grip she had on her feelings at all time stopped the tears from falling. She was scared to look at her friends and see the disgust on their face. Seven would have like to terminate Porky's life if she hadn't acquired so deep respect for life in the past few years.

"Are you aware of what you are saying, Porky? Seven is not a drone anymore, she is as human as you are..." Paris looked Porky in the eyes and added, "or maybe not, she is more human than you are."

"That's enough, Mister Paris," the dry voice of Janeway cut through them. Lieutenant Ayala had alerted Tuvok who had alerted her. He seemed to think anything concerning Seven should be handled by her now. Porky opened his mouth to explain but she lifted her hand to stop him. The Messhall wasn't a place for explanation between senior officers. "I will see you both in my Ready room in 30 minutes. Dismissed."

Both men straightened up and left the Messhall. Seven hadn't moved. She was looking at her Captain, barely holding her hurt at bay.

Kathryn recognized the pain swimming in the blue eyes. She wanted to comfort Seven but not here. She couldn't allow herself to demonstrate her feelings toward the woman she loved so deeply in front of her crew.

"Seven, come with me." Janeway ordered and started to leave.

"I would prefer to go to my quarters, Captain." Seven replied, unmoving. She didn't want to defy her Captain's orders but she had no strength left to deal with more emotion at this time.

Janeway turned her head and nodded. "I will walk you to your quarters, Annika," she added in a gentle voice. Without thinking, Kathryn put her hand on Seven's back to incite her to move. Their eyes met in a silent dialog. All those years living together, fighting together, arguing with each other had left a profound respect and understanding between them. Now, Seven read more than that in the blue grey eyes but she didn't know what it was.

The warmth of Kathryn's hand on her back removed all the fight left in Seven. She swallowed and said in a small voice: "I will comply, Captain."

## **Chapter 6.**

"Annika is a Borg drone?" Mike couldn't believe what had happened in front of his eyes. "I cannot believe that."

"Neither do I, he is mistaken," Klee confirmed.

"We have known her for several months and she never acted as a drone. She acted weird sometimes but never like any Borg we saw on simulation." François was as stunned as everyone in their group. The Messhall wasn't silent anymore, everybody was commenting on the event.

"Annika didn't deny it." P'olt's voice cut deeply.

"And Paris and the Captain seemed to know her. Why did they call her Seven?" Valis asked.

"She said it's a nickname when I asked. Many people call her Seven aboard Explorer." Klee didn't budge. She couldn't be in love with a Borg, could she?

"If I recall, only the one who have been on Voyager. Sorry, Klee, but I think you made out with a Borg." François's eyes were sad for his friend.

"Lieutenant Porky called her Seven of Nine. They talked about her at Starfleet Academy. They said she had been severed from the Collective by Captain Janeway." For P'olt and her Vulcan logic, everything was falling in place: Annika's cold logic, her intelligence, her knowledge and her problems with human emotion.

"It is why she is so strong, stronger than me," Vratac conceded, "she is still part Borg."

"What are we going to do about her?"

"What do you mean, Valis?"

"Do you still want to be friend with a Borg, Klee?" Valis smiled sweetly at Klee. She loved to provoke people and Klee was too easy.

"She is our friend. She has helped us with our studies whenever she could. I am not going to let her down when things get rough."

"Good!" Valis smiled, "so what do we do to help her?"

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Janeway entered her Ready room. She was in a hell of a mood. Seven hadn't let a single emotion going through her Borg attitude. She had been polite when Kathryn had left her in front of her door but

nothing more. Kathryn had been hurt by the coolness, more than she should have been and this lack of control made her angry.

Janeway didn't know exactly what happened but, from what she had seen, she could guess a lot. This prick had dare to ask Seven about the Borg in the middle of the Messhall. She tapped her combadge.

"Janeway to Tuvok."

*"Tuvok here."*

"Bring them in, now."

*"Yes, Captain."*

A few minutes later, the two men entered the Ready room and stood at attention in front of her desk. Janeway, a cup of coffee in her left hand, was sitting. She seemed at ease but her eyes told otherwise. They were the colour of a thunder storm on the ocean. Tom Paris knew the look and he wasn't moving or saying anything until his Captain asked for it. He remembered very well every time she chewed his ass and every time he felt like a two years old. But Porky wasn't pervious to her way, he didn't really know her.

"Captain, all of this is a misunderstanding..."

"Did I give you permission to talk, Lieutenant?" Janeway's voice could have cut through durallium.

Lieutenant Porky clamped his jaw up and straightened a bit further. He tried to control his breathing. Never such a diminutive woman had made him freeze in his sweat.

"Lieutenant Paris, care to share what happened in the Messhall?" Paris's eyes met Janeway's. He couldn't read them but he knew he couldn't cover for the other guy either.

"Lieutenant Porky asked information about the Borg to Ensign Hansen. When she refused to answer, he threatened to put her on report. I stepped in at this time, Ma'am. I thought it was wrong to ask that in the Messhall. She was with her friends, Captain." If Paris thought Janeway's face was cold before, he had been mistaken. She was throwing daggers when she looked at Porky.

"I don't know how you learnt Ensign Hansen had been Borg but you will never ever ask her about the Borg. Do I make myself clear, mister Porky?"

"Yes, Sir!"

"Annika Hansen is Starfleet and you will treat her like any other Starfleet. If you want to remain a senior officer aboard this ship, I suggest you comply."

"Yes, Sir."

"Dismissed!" When the two men turned their back, she added, "Not you, Lieutenant Paris."

"Ma'am?" Tom was surprised to see a shadow of a smile on the Captain face.

"I want to thank you, Tom." Tom Paris didn't seem to understand so she added, "to stand by Seven."

"What he did wasn't right, Captain. None of Voyager's former crew said a word about Seven's Borg background and this guy opened his big mouth in front of everybody. She is my friend and nobody can bad mouth my friends."

Janeway was surprised to hear that. She knew Tom had said negative remarks about the Borg before. "I didn't know you consider her your friend, Tom."

"I know what I said about the Borg, Captain, and I still believe there are mindless automaton, but Seven isn't a Borg anymore. You should see her with Miral, it's even sweeter than it was with Naomi."

"She...baby-sits for you?" Janeway asked, surprised B'Elanna trusted Seven that much.

"Yes, Captain," Tom smiled, "she is great. Miral adores her."

"I bet," Kathryn mumbled. "Thank you, Tom, you are dismissed."

When Tom left the Ready room, Janeway's command mask crumbled. While the door was open, Tuvok entered. She had no time to compose herself. He saw the raw pain on her face before she could hide it.

"Yes, Commander." Janeway's voice was harsh.

"Do I need to keep an eye on Lieutenant Porky?"

"For what?"

"I do not think he is the kind of man to let an opportunity slip."

"You think he will countermand my orders and seek Seven out."

"Yes."

"Very well. Ask Lieutenant Ayala to keep an eye on him. Dismissed."

When Tuvok didn't move a finger, Janeway frowned.

"Do you have anything to add, Tuvok?"

Tuvok took a deep breath. Dealing with emotional humans was hard for him but the Captain was his friend and she needed a logical advice. "Seven might need you right now, Captain."

"She didn't want my assistance when I left her at her quarters' door." It was still painful for Kathryn. She had been willing to comfort Seven but had been rebuked.

“Seven might not be aware she needs to talk to someone but logic dictates she must be distraught and in need of a friend.”

“Thank you, Tuvok, I will take that under advice. Now, if that’s all...”

Finally, Tuvok turned and left her alone. Kathryn put her face in her hands and reined in the tears that were threatening to fall.

“Computer, locate Ensign Hansen.”

*Ensign Hansen is in her quarters.*

“Is she alone?”

*Yes.*

“What is she doing?”

*Ensign Hansen is sitting on the floor.*

Emotions roared immediately in Kathryn. Seven? Sitting on the floor? That wasn’t Seven at all. Why had she left her alone? Janeway took her decision in a split second.

“Computer, site to site transport in Ensign Hansen quarters.” Janeway felt her body disintegrated in the familiar blue light. It took her just a second to find her bearing once she was put whole again. The noise was deafening but she ignored it, turning around until she localized Seven sitting in the corner of the room, her arms hugging her knees. *Oh, Annika!* Janeway’s heart went out to her beloved and she knelt on the floor pulling Seven in her arms, tucking her head under her chin.

At the beginning, Seven didn’t react. She was sobbing her heart out, thinking that again she had lost everything. After a few seconds, the comforting beating of a heart under her ear reached her. Her mind cleared a bit and it was enough for her to recognize the smell of Kathryn. She let go of her knees and tucked her arms around the waist of the woman who meant more than life itself, pulling her closer.

Caressing the blond hair, Kathryn sighted. So many lonely nights, she had dreamed to hold Seven in her arms. She couldn’t resist kissing Seven’s head. Minutes passed by and Kathryn started to be aware of the loud noise in the room. She almost asked the computer to lower the noise by half but stopped herself. She knew this noise. She had experienced it when B’Elanna, Tuvok and she had been assimilated while helping Axum and his friends from Unimatrix zero. It was the noise of thousand voices speaking together on a warp core noise background...like in a Borg cube. If Seven had created a record of that, it meant... Kathryn swallowed, hard. It meant Seven was missing the Collective and she was drawing comfort from her childhood’s noise.

“Oh, Seven... You are not alone, I’m with you, my love,” Kathryn whispered. She buried her face in the soft blond hair and cried for Seven.

## **Chapter 7.**

The loud buzzing of the chime pulled Janeway out of her drowsiness. She was feeling a heavy weight on her chest. Slowly, Kathryn opened her eyes to see blond hair against her chin. In a second, everything came back to her. She had fallen asleep sitting on the floor with Seven in her arms. The noise of the chime reminded her someone was at the door requesting entrance. Without thinking, Kathryn croaked “Come.”

She had expected B’Elanna or Tuvok not an Ensign which name she didn’t remember. Janeway saw the surprise on the woman’s face when she noticed the Captain and Seven on the floor in a corner.

Immediately, Klee stood up at attention. “Cap...Captain. I...I didn’t...”

“At ease, Ensign. Are you one of Seven’s friend?”

“Yes, Captain, I was in the Messhall when... I am Ensign Klee Tirell, Captain.” Klee was rooted in place. She didn’t know what to do. What was the Captain doing on the floor with Annika? She watched the Captain moving gently Annika off her body trying not to awake her.

“What happened to her, Captain?” Klee was starting to worry. She had never seen Annika like that.

“I think she is asleep but I’d like to be sure,” Janeway tapped her combadge, “Janeway to sickbay.”

*“Sickbay here, Captain.”*

“Could you come at once in Seven’s quarters, Doctor?”

Janeway had barely cut the transmission the Doctor matrix appeared in front of her. When he saw Seven, the Doctor pulled his tricorder and knelt near her. “What happened, Captain?”

“There was an incident in the messhall and Seven was very upset. I guess she fell asleep. Too much emotions,” Janeway added to explain. “Is she really asleep?” Seeing the long face of the Doctor, Kathryn was worried. It was uncommon for Seven not to be fully alert. If she remembered well, sleep was not easy for the Borg drone Seven has been.

“Yes, but she is very tired and in need to regenerate. I guess she had been too busy mending the ship and forgot to replenish her nanoprobes.”

Janeway looked at him. Seven never forgot anything, both knew that. What was he saying? “She didn’t come for her follow up check-up like it’s protocol after been injured?”

The Doctor sighted. It always surprised Kathryn to see the detail of the Doctor programming. “She is still upset with me, I guess.”

Janeway waited for an explanation. “I gave her a bad advice and told her some bad news when she came to see me just after her wedding. I... She is my friend and I couldn’t help her, Captain. I failed her.” The Doctor was distressed and Janeway didn’t need another nervous breakdown on her hands right now, especially from a hologram.

“Thank you, Doctor, Klee and I will take care of her.” The Doctor seemed ready to argue but seeing the glare in his Captain’s eyes, he promptly took back his matrix to sickbay.

“Could you help me, Ensign? We need to awake her before she can regenerate. Could you bring me a wet towel?”

“Yes, Captain.” Klee disappeared right away in the bathroom.

“Seven, wake up!” Kathryn shook Seven’s shoulder but Seven didn’t move a bit. Only when Klee came back and gave Annika’s face a quick wash, she opened her eyes.

“Captain? Klee?” Seven whispered. She couldn’t wrap her mind to why both women were looking at her with worry in their eyes. She tried to stand up but wasn’t able to without help.

“You need to regenerate,” the Captain said.

“I..”

“It’s an order, Ensign. Don’t even try it.”

Seven, too weak to further protest, clamped her mouth and let both women lead her to her bedroom.

“Your alcove is in there?” Janeway guessed.

“Yes.” Seven answered weakly. She didn’t understand why she felt so outside herself. Her only comfort in this time of uncertainty was Kathryn’s strong arm around her waist.

“Ensign, would you mind to open the closet while I held Seven?”

“Of course, Captain.” Klee waited for the Captain to assure her balance with Annika who was barely able to remain straight. After a few seconds, she let go of Annika and opened the closet. It was empty save for a dais and a panel with Borg encryptions which were glowing in green. Klee stepped aside and helped Captain Janeway to position Annika on the dais, facing the room.

To Klee surprise, Janeway tapped easily a sequence on the panel. Seven went rigid and closed her eyes. “I will be there when you awake,” Janeway whispered like Seven could hear her. She stepped down the dais, noticing the Ensign was still close to Seven and looking at her with some distress in her face.

“Ensign?” Janeway called.

Klee straightened her shoulder and stepped down as well. Uncertain of what to do, she looked at her captain. She had never seen Annika so weak and it perturbed her. Annika was always in control, always sure of everything. From the first time they have met, she had been an example for their small group of friends.

“Will she be OK, Captain?”

“I hope so, I really hope so,” Janeway answered without looking at the Ensign. She couldn’t leave Seven out of her sight. She was drinking in her. Her heart was beating so fast she was afraid the ensign could hear it. “She will need her friends to reassure her. I hope you are up to it, Ensign Tirell.” Janeway pinned Klee with her command look.

Klee stopped breathing. Suddenly, she could feel the sweat going down her back. “Yes, Captain. Annika is my...friend and I will not let her down.” She had almost said ‘my lover’ but it wouldn’t have been true and Klee didn’t think her Captain would be happy with this piece of news. Not with the way Janeway was looking at Annika. Deep in her heart, Klee understood why Annika had been reticent to go further in their relationship. Janeway was in love with Annika and she would bet that Annika was in love with Janeway but she would tell nobody. She would keep the hurt for herself and help the love of her life to find love.

“Good to hear it. Dismissed.”

Klee opened her mouth but closed it immediately. An ensign, straight out from the Academy, had no right to even discuss an order. She left.

Relieved to be alone and Seven regenerating, Kathryn turned around to look at the room. It was pretty bland but she supposed Seven, even if she was willing, had no time to decorate. She made out the small piano. *Was Seven playing piano?* Kathryn sighted. How could she have distanced herself from Seven for a year and lost all the opportunities to watch her grow? Her attention was attracted by the holoframe nearby the bed. She picked it up. Her breath caught in her throat when she realise it was a picture of herself. *Seven was sleeping with a picture of her on her bed stand?* Tears swelled in

Kathryn's eyes. She looked at Seven one more time. *She is so beautiful and I didn't fight for her. I love her and I let her go? Never again.* Sobbing, Kathryn bent over and fell on the bed. How could she have been so foolish?

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Her regeneration cycle completed, Seven opened her eyes and blinked. Someone was sleeping on her bed. She froze. Not just someone...Kathryn. She was sleeping over the cover, her fists clenched under her chin. She looked younger and so beautiful.

Carefully, Seven stepped down the dais and approached the sleeping form. She wanted to touch her, to hold her and never let her go. Instead, Seven sat on the bed and hold out her hand to gently touch Kathryn on the shoulder. It was almost a caress.

"Seven..." the husky voice said when Janeway opened her eyes and saw the woman she had dreamt of for so long bending over her. She couldn't say another word. Everything had been too much this last year. Janeway sat and pulled Seven immediately into her arms. If Seven was surprised, she adapted very well and pulled Kathryn against her as well. She breathed the familiar scent with delight. Her right hand moved up to touch gently the auburn hair.

"Oh, Seven..." Kathryn caressed her cheek against Seven's just before turning slightly her head and kissed the soft skin.

"Kathryn..." Seven closed her eyes. She had dreamt of this but never thought it possible. When she felt the soft lips on her own, she almost fainted. Opening her lips, Seven welcomed Kathryn tongue touching her own.

Janeway was lost in her feelings. She was kissing Seven and Seven was kissing her back. For almost an eternity, they kissed, never stopping, never thinking. Out of breath, Kathryn retreated a little. She let her head fall on Seven's shoulder. Seven was caressing her back, opening her uniform jacket, gliding slowly her hands under her sweater. Kathryn stopped breathing and kissed Seven again more urgently. When she felt fingers caressing her breast, Kathryn broke the kiss to take a shattering breath. "Oh, God, Seven... I want you...so much...it hurts."

Hearing the sweet words, Seven couldn't wait, using her enhance force, she ripped open the sweater, the trouser, leaving Kathryn naked on the bed. Without waiting, she did the same with her uniform and, once naked as well, let herself been pulled into Kathryn's embrace. The sensation of their two naked bodies touching each other almost made her cortical node overload. She couldn't think. For the first time in her life, Seven was only pure emotion. Her world narrowed to the woman she was with. When fingers touched her intimately, Seven felt a burning so deep she came immediately.

Kathryn pulled her hand from between Seven's leg and straddled her partner, rubbing her clitoris against Seven's belly. Seconds later, she cried out her pleasure and let her body fall in the welcoming arms. Everything was moving fast, too fast but she didn't care. Seven was in her arms and it felt right.

## Chapter 8.

"I have been waiting for this moment for the last three years," Kathryn said, her head on Seven's shoulder. With her right hand, she was caressing Seven's belly, marvelling at the soft skin under her fingertips.

Stunned, Seven straightened a bit. She couldn't believe her ears. She swallowed...hard. Controlling her voice, she said in a flat tone: "You did not say anything."

"No." Janeway lifted her head and looked into Seven's eyes. She could see the hurt behind the Borg mask. She has always been able to read Seven well. How could she have missed the feeling between them all those years?

"Why?" Seven asked, uncertain.

"At the beginning, I was...scared and after, you became involved with Chakotay. I didn't want to intrude."

"Is it why you never answered any of my messages?"

Janeway hesitated. She didn't want to reveal the heated conversation between Chakotay and her. "Yes. It was too painful."

"I wrote to you when I left Chakotay. You could have told me then."

"I...didn't read any of your messages. I couldn't." Janeway stayed quiet for a few seconds. Patiently, aware she was not finished yet, Seven waited.

"I loved you so much but I didn't really understand that at the beginning. I was hiding from my feelings, I didn't want to analyze what I was feeling. Only after Chakotay... anyway after the wedding,

it was too late. I fell into depression. Nothing meant anything. Losing you was worst than losing my life.”

“Chakotay asked you to leave us alone.”

Kathryn froze. Seven knew? How?

“How...?”

“B’Elanna.” Kathryn remembered that evening a few months ago where she poured her heart out.

“When?”

“A few months ago. When I decided to apply for Explorer, I went to see her. She came to my apartment the day after to help me with my portable regenerator. We...talked.”

Kathryn couldn’t believe her ears. She knew Seven baby-sat for Miral but she didn’t know B’Elanna and Seven were friends enough to talk about such a thing.

“What did she tell you exactly?”

“Chakotay asked you not to come to the wedding and to leave me alone with him.” Seven repeated exactly. “When she told me that, I felt such anger toward Chakotay and such pain in my heart...” Kathryn buried her face in Seven’s shoulder. “I think it is then I started to understand my feeling toward you...but it took me almost a year to realise what was really in my heart...”

Kathryn lifted her head, waiting.

“I love you, Kathryn Janeway.” Seven added, tightening her hold on her new lover.

Slowly, Kathryn kissed her beloved until they were both breathless.

“We need to get ready for our shift.” Janeway’s voice was husky. Even as she was saying that, she knew she had to have Seven another time before she could let her go to work. She was too aroused to wait for tonight.

“If it is what you really want.” Seven could see the desire in Kathryn’s eyes and wasn’t surprise when she felt fingertips slid between her legs.

“No, it’s not what I really want,” Janeway answered before losing herself again into a heated kiss. Seven quiet moaning enflamed her desire further. When, after a bit of foreplay, she entered Seven, she almost came herself.

From the sheer pleasure of her lover’s touch, Seven’s left hand dug into the mattress while she came, hard. Never had Seven imagined she could receive such pleasure and survive it. Her mouth was dry and her body boneless but she could only think of one thing: reciprocate. Seven rolled Kathryn on her back, grabbed both her hands in her left enhance one to hold them out of the way and started kissing, licking, touching her lover until Kathryn was begging to be taken.

When she walked to engineering that morning, Seven couldn’t understand why she was feeling so light. She has read about it in the database but thought it was a figure of speech. And this smile she couldn’t keep off her face even if she tried... *Is that love? I am in love...and Kathryn loves me back.* The small smile grew up immediately.

Unaware her happiness was glowing on her face for everybody to see it, Seven entered engineering and went straight to her console. She had work to do and couldn’t let so sweet memories distract her but Kathryn’s kisses, Kathryn’s caresses kept popping up in her mind.

“Hi, Annika.” Klee’s voice was uncertain. She felt a flutter in her heart when Annika’s smile disappears from her face. Klee has spent a good part of the night thinking about the Captain’s attitude toward Annika and hadn’t liked her conclusion a bit. They were in love.

Seven straightened her shoulders, never interrupting the flux of data she was entering in the console’s pad. A slight apprehension replaced the elation she has been feeling for the past hours. Anger toward Klee surged in her. She refrained it. Klee wasn’t responsible for her fears.

“Ensign Tirell. How could I help you?” Seven asked in a cold and flat voice. The voice of a Borg drone. Klee felt a chill. Her heart became heavy. She was in love with Annika but Annika would never love her back because she was herself in love with someone else...with the Captain... Klee swallowed.

“How are you?” Klee dared asking.

“I am functioning. I have work to do and so do you.”

“I know. I just wanted to tell you...” Quickly, Klee rethought what she had wanted to say but could never tell, “...what this jerk said yesterday in the mess hall change nothing. You are my...friend and nothing will change that...ever.” Klee took a deep breath after her little speech and waited expectantly.

Seven was taken aback. She had thought she had lost all her friends and now Klee was saying she has been mistaken? Was it possible that her friends forgave her the lies about her past? Awaking in Kathryn’s arms has put what had happened the day before in the background and suddenly, Seven was very aware of everybody knowing about her Borg origin now. Understanding Klee’s gift to her, she stopped what she was doing and turned to face her friend.

"I...thank you." was the only answer she could think about.

Despite of her sadness, Klee smiled. She wanted to reach out for this beautiful woman who was almost speechless in front of kindness. Slowly, she just put her hand on Annika's arm and squeezed lightly. Klee's heart was bleeding. Annika would never be hers. She wanted to say she understood why Annika had refused to make love with her. She couldn't even hate the Captain, not after seeing the tenderness toward Annika in Janeway's touches. All those words were almost out off her mouth when she heard:

"How is it going?" The strong voice of the chief engineer asked.

"Everything is under control, Lieutenant Commander Torres." Seven replied. "I need two crewmen to realign the coil and we should have the shield back on line."

B'Elanna frowned, she looked at Seven. Something was going on. Seven was glowing and Tirell looked like someone had killed her favourite puppy. B'Elanna was curious but couldn't ask in front of all her people what was going on.

"Take Tirell and Velluti. How long before we get the shields? The bridge is growing impatient."

"1h 22mn." Seven answered in a calm and precise voice.

B'Elanna smiled, showing her sharp teeth. She remembered this precision annoyed her so much when Seven arrived on board Voyager so many years ago but, now, it was like a comfortable glove.

"The Captain will be happy."

A full smile spread on Seven's lip. "Yes, she will." Nothing could make Seven happier than to please her Captain.

B'Elanna stared at her, mouth opened. She has never seen such big smile on the Borg face before. She looked side way at Tirell to check if the ensign was as surprised as she was but Tirell was looking at the floor, embarrassed. A thought popped in Torres mind. Was it possible? Janeway and Seven ? B'Elanna brain was boiling. She has never imagined Janeway acting on her feeling toward Seven. But Seven was just too happy and after what happened in the mess hall last night, she should be miserable. There was only one thing that could have made the Borg happy despite Porky revelation. B'Elanna rejoiced for her two friends. Tom would be disappointed to lose his bet and she would have one free evening all by herself...when all the repairs are done, of course. B'Elanna sighed. Suddenly, she felt annoyed with all the work and problems to address.

"What are you waiting for, Tirell? Do you need me to hold your hand? Go with Velluti in jeffreys tube 23 and realign the coils!"

Klee's head jerked up. She swallowed. "No, m'am, yes, m'am. On my way, m'am." Klee left without wasting another second. She didn't know why the chief's mood has changed so fast but she didn't want to be the one to suffer because of it. In less than a second she was on her way to the jeffreys tubes.

"It is not nice to scare the fresh out of academy crewmen, lieutenant commander Torres," Seven said without looking at B'Elanna. Her fingers were flying on the board again, so fast B'Elanna started to feel a headache coming only by looking at them.

"And it's not nice to hide things from your friend."

Puzzled, Seven turned her head to look straight at B'Elanna. Her fingers slowed but never stopped. "B'Elanna?" she whispered not understanding what it was about.

"You and the Captain?" B'Elanna answered in a low voice. "Nice, by the way," she added smiling.

Seven blushed furiously. Her fingers stopped completely. "How do you know?"

"You were smiling when you walked in engineering and almost never stopped until this minute. It fits you, you know. I'm happy for you two." B'Elanna squeezed gently Seven's shoulder.

"Thank you," Seven answered softly. She looked briefly around to check nobody was nearby. Suddenly, she needed to talk. "I am happy. I have never imagined happiness would be so physical. I feel joy and fear mix together deep down in my body."

"Fear?"

"I am afraid Kathryn will change her mind," Seven confessed.

"She won't," B'Elanna tried to reassure her. "She has loved you for so long she will not let you go knowing you love her. That would be foolish!"

"She is the Captain."

"Yes, but, trust me, if this time comes, I won't let it happen!"

Seven nodded. She has never think B'Elanna would be such a good friend, not after the way she talked about her before. Finally, willing to let her fears down, she turned back to her board and completed her calculations...smiling.

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Just before the turbolift door opened, Kathryn pulled back the mask of command on her face. It was hard. She was feeling so overjoyed, she wanted to jump and shout at the top of her lung that Seven loved her. To be in love and loved back, Kathryn didn't think it could have happened, not now, not after so many years of loneliness and misery. The doors opened. She walked on the bridge straight to the captain chair. Nothing felt the same, everything seemed new. It reminded her that first day on Voyager's bridge: her first command. She was elated.

Tuvok looked at her friend and lifted an eyebrow. He hadn't think with the state Explorer was in, the Captain would be smiling and happy, even if she tried hard to hide it. There was only one logical explanation: she had acted on her feelings for Seven. He was surprised, as much as a Vulcan can be surprised by something.

"Report" Janeway said after a few seconds.

"The repairs are on the way. Lt commander Torres indicated the shield should be on line in 1h 20mn."

Janeway nodded. She trusted B'Elanna but would feel a lot better when shield and long range sensors would be back on line. "What about the sensors?"

"No indication of any timetable, Captain. The damages are extensive."

Janeway pressed her lips together. She hated feeling this helpless." "I will be in my ready room. You have the bridge, Commander."

"Coffee, black", Janeway ordered as soon as the door closed behind her. She appreciated the replicator was just on her right when she entered her ready room. She didn't have to cross the room like in Voyager to access her drug, she could get it right away. She just has her lips on the cup when the door chimed. A bit annoyed, she took a sip and acknowledged.

Tuvok entered.

"Yes, Commander."

"I would like to submit a promotion, Captain."

"A promotion? We've left the Federation's space for less than a week and you already have a promotion in mind? You surprise me, Tuvok." Looking at the impassive face of the Vulcan, Janeway sipped her coffee slowly, wondering.

"I suggest we promoted Ensign Annika Hansen to the rank of lieutenant junior. She has refused it before because she didn't want to be affected on the bridge but she has earned it at the Academy as well as with her work aboard Explorer. The old crew of Voyager used to receive orders from her as a senior officer but, now, they are the one to give her orders. They feel uncomfortable with this and it is disrupting the good functioning of the ship."

Kathryn smiled. Only to hear Seven's human name made her smile. She got it bad, very bad. Yes, Seven deserved to be lieutenant but Janeway hesitated. Suddenly she was afraid to make a decision out of favouritism.

"She has earned it, Captain," Tuvok added. No answer still came out of Janeway so he added, "if you are concerned about your relationship with her, I can assure you it will not be a problem, Captain."

Janeway blushed. How could he have known? "My relationship with her?" she said in a warning voice.

Tuvok lifted a bow. He had known this individual for more than 20 years and wondered why she was still surprised by his Vulcan abilities. "You are too happy," he answered, "after yesterday, it is logical to conclude something positive happened between you and Seven."

"If I didn't know you better, I would say you are happy for me, Tuvok."

"There is no need to be insulting, Captain."

Janeway smiled. She knew him well and the glow in his eyes didn't escape her. He was happy for her. If her first officer saw nothing wrong with the captain in a relationship with a crew member, she could put her last doubts to rest.

"She told me she loves me, Tuvok. I didn't think I could, one day, be this happy," Kathryn confessed. "I don't think it's right for me to promote her."

"It is illogical no to grant her the same rights as any member of your crew," Tuvok countered.

Janeway drank a little more coffee. Was it true? Could she be denying Seven a promotion because she, Janeway, believed it was not her place to do it? This relationship was going to be very difficult but she couldn't deny it felt so right.

"Ok, Tuvok, but let's not make a big ceremony."

"May I suggest you promote her during the next staff meeting? I have already asked Ensign Hansen to join Lt Commander Torres to report on the damages."

The conference room filled up quickly. Everybody has a lot of work to do and they wanted to be on their way as fast as possible. Porky sat down almost at the same time than Seven; He couldn't keep his eyes away from her, he was fascinated by her remaining Borg implants. Seven ignored him. He was nothing but a minor inconvenience. Her friends still accepted her and, most of all, Kathryn loved her.

As usual, Janeway cut back to the chase. Her ship was dead in the water and she didn't want to be discovered with her pants down by this aggressive race.

"Shields are back on line," Janeway started, "thanks the good work of your team, B'Elanna. Could you give us some dead line about the other systems?"

"We will have partial weapon and sensors by midday and the warp engine tomorrow. I will let Sev... ensign Hansen give you the update on the slip stream drive."

"Seven," Janeway said in her throaty voice.

"The SSD manifold is fused. We need another one in order to be able to use the slip stream drive again."

"Do we have a spare one?" Paris asked immediately. He was anxious to be on his way. To sit at the helm with no engine on line was no fun.

"No, we do not." Seven answered in her precise tone.

All the room went silent.

"Could we replicate one?" Tuvok asked in a calm voice.

"No."

Janeway looked intensely at Seven. Why Seven didn't tell her this morning? She felt betrayed but she forced herself to ask: "When did you learn that?"

"15.8 minutes ago when the computer completed its diagnostic."

Seven hadn't known this morning. Despite the situation, Janeway felt relieved. It was Voyager all over again. They had survived it, they would survive again. She had to believe it, all her crew had to believe it. She took a breath and opened her mouth to speak reassuring words.

Just before Janeway could speak, Torres blurted: "We can build one."

Janeway released her breath. Annoyed, her eyes went from B'Elanna to Seven. "Why didn't you say so, Lt Commander."

"Because construct a new SSD manifold will be long and complicated," Seven answered.

"How long?" Tom asked.

"Around two months." B'Elanna cut Seven before she could intervene looking at her with dark eyes.

"That is inaccurate, Lt Commander Torres." Seven was annoyed but kept her voice composed. "We will need two month and eleven days to construct the new SSD manifold if we can find some Thyrelum mineral."

"We will find some, **ensign**," Torres accentuated Seven's rank to let her know who was really in charge. The fire flashed in Seven's eyes before it switched to something else and a thin smile appeared on her face but she subsided.

Janeway watched carefully the exchange between her two officers. Both were brilliant engineer and they seemed mostly to get along on this new starship if the gossip she had heard was accurate. They even seemed to enjoy arguing. Kathryn wondered if she wanted those two to get along too well. Maybe she could use this moment to remind everybody who really was in charge.

"Ensign Hansen, stand up!"

Seven went immediately on her feet, hands linked behind her. Janeway stood up, followed by Tuvok.

Nobody understood what was happening and all waited quietly, watching the Captain approaching Annika Hansen.

"Tuvok." The throaty voice asked. Kathryn kept her eyes locked with Seven. She could read a lot of thing in them, doubts, love, questions...

Tuvok handed her a small box. Janeway took it and opened the cover. She removed one dark pip. Stunned, Seven looked at Janeway. She was speechless and, for just a few second, Janeway smiled and enjoyed the moment, remembering all their argumentations.

"As Captain of USS Explorer and by the rights...I promote you this day to the rank of lieutenant junior, effective immediately." Janeway fixed the pip nearby the first one, caressing Seven's skin on the way. Only Seven's sharp intake of breath showed her the effect she had on her. Janeway smiled and shake Seven's hand "Congratulation, **Lieutenant**."

Torres jumped on her feet and slapped Seven on the back. "Well done, Seven. Now, you will have to buy a drink to all the engineering crew...but, don't forget, I am still your boss."

"It is an impossible task to do, lieutenant commander Torres. Nobody can forget you." Seven's lips curled up.

"All right everybody, back to this meeting," Janeway said before Torres could answer. "So we have to find Thyrelium and build the manifold. Lieutenant Poky, as soon as the scanners are back on line, start to scan for Thyrelium."

"Yes, Captain."

"We are not going to be trapped in the Delta quadrant again," Janeway confirmed, "we will find Thyrelium. If not tomorrow, the day after tomorrow or in a month, but we will find it. Is that clear to everybody?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Yes, sir."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Anything else?"

Seven wanted to add something about the species' territory they were in but she thought it was not her place to talk.

"Dismissed."

Most of the senior staff were outside the conference room when Janeway in a quiet voice asked "Seven..."

Seven stopped and turned back toward Janeway. As soon as they were alone, Kathryn stood up. Slowly, like if she was uncertain of the proper thing to do, she walked toward Seven.

"How are you doing?" Kathryn asked gently.

Seven swallowed. Her body was feeling hot and her stomach was churning. She took a deep breath. "With you near me, I am feeling aroused and I am uncertain of what to do."

Kathryn laughed. She had been expecting many answers but not that one. She would have to remember Seven was straight forward to the point of been rude.

"Oh, love, you are such a wonder," Kathryn touched Seven's check with her fingertips.

Seven frowned. "It was not the answer you wanted. I have disappointed you."

"Never," Kathryn whispered, sliding her finger toward Seven's neck. "You will never disappoint me when you are honest, love. I guess I forgot you never dissemble." She kissed Seven, tasting the sweet lips. Seven took Kathryn in her arms and deepened the kiss. It wasn't professional but both women needed it.

"I needed that." Still in Seven's arms, Janeway smiled. "But now, you have to go back to duty, lieutenant."

Hearing her title, Seven removed her arms and straightened up. A too rare bright smile on her lips, she answered "Yes, Captain," and left the room.

*You are in trouble, my dear Kathy*, her inner voice whispered. "Being with Seven is worth every trouble," she answered to herself.

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It was the end of the afternoon and the tension on the bridge was abating. Since the sensor and some weapon had been back on line, moral had improved exponentially. The bridge crew was feeling in control again. Tomorrow, they would have propulsion and leave this place to start to look for Thyrelium. Tuvok was checking the current reports on the repairs while Ayala was testing the weapon system and Rajik was trying to improve the range of the sensor array. While he was trying every algorithm he had ever learnt to get a better range, some spots bipped on his consol. Immediately, his heart ran faster and he had problem finding his voice.

"Captain! Sensors are showing three ships on an intercept course!"

Janeway didn't even turn to look at Rajik, her instincts worked for her. "Red alert! Raise shields! Time to intercept?"

"12 minutes and 45 seconds."

"Bridge to Torres."

*"Torres, here."*

"I need weapons and propulsion. We have 3 ships coming in 12 minutes and we are still dead in the water."

*"I need more time, Captain."*

"We don't have this luxury, Commander."

Janeway could hear Torres ask questions and get the answers. Nothing was positive.

"I can give you partial phasers and thrusters only, Captain."

"I'll take it." Janeway cut the com. "Tom, try to get us out of here."

"We cannot outrun them with thrusters only, Captain."

"Do what you can."

“Yes, ma’am.” Tom sighted inwardly. He could almost hear Janeway grinding her teeth. She knew he couldn’t work miracles but she had to ask anyway.

“Tuvok, any suggestion?” Janeway asked in a low voice.

“None, Captain, odds are against us. Logic suggests we will be dead or prisoners in less than 12 mn.”

Shaking her head, Janeway answered : “Not if I can help it, Commander.” In a strong voice, she addressed her chief of security : “Lieutenant Ayala, ready weapons. Everything you have, I want it ready. We will not go down without a fight. Those ships will regret to have ever encountered us!”

“Yes, ma’am.” If his Captain wanted him to throw everything, even stones, at these ships, he would do it.

In Engineering, Seven was aware that with the warp engine off line, they didn’t have any possibility to escape those ships. They would all die or be captured. Torres was shouting orders to try all the solutions they have already discarded a few days ago in a futile effort to make the warp core work. All, but the one nobody thought about, except her. Could it work? She had used it so long ago while she was still Borg, she was afraid she couldn’t do it anymore but Seven didn’t hesitate long. She couldn’t let Kathryn die with all her friends, not now. She extended her left hand, the one with the Borg implant, and ejected her tubulures. They locked on the console in front of her. Using her cortical node, she bypassed all the computer defences and started to download instruction into the main frame.

“Seven! What are you doing?” Torres shouted from the other side of engineering as soon as she realised Seven was using her tubulures. Hearing the alarm in their Klingong chief engineer, all the personnel looked at Seven. Klee watched Annika with her mouth hanging open. Her mind knew what were assimilation tubulures, she had even seen some at the Academy but her feelings were telling her Annika couldn’t do that.

“Seven! Stop!” The angry voice of Torres reached Seven’s mind. She let the cortical node at work while she answered B’Elanna.

“I am saving the ship, Chief.”

B’Elanna’s eyes blinked and took a deep breath. She knew Seven and trusted her. “How?”

“I am opening a singularity with the deflector dich,” Seven explained slowly, still downloading instructions.

“The fluidic space? Are you out of your mind?” B’Elanna grabbed Seven’s left arm but couldn’t even moved her an inch.

“Do you have another solution, B’Elanna? Do you want to see Miral dead?” Seven asked.

“You do not fight fair.” Torres was suddenly subdued. If Seven could save the ship and her daughter, who was she to try to stop her?

*“Bridge to Engineering. What’s going on? All the controls have been rerouted to engineering.”*

“You want to explain that one to your beloved?” B’Elanna asked Seven with humour in her voice.

Seven flinched. Kathryn’s voice seemed angry. She swallowed but touched her communicator.

“Hansen here, Captain.”

*“What are you doing, Seven.”*

“I am opening a singularity so we can escape the Ivary ships into the fluidic space, Captain. It is the only course of action to save the ship.”

For few seconds, Seven heard nothing. Torres was watching her with big opened eyes, waiting for Janeway reaction.

*“Carry on, lieutenant.”*

“Yes, Captain. We will be in fluidic space in 4.72 minutes. May I suggest you ask the Doctor to prepare the special nanoprobes, Captain?”

*“Janeway out.”*

For a little while, nobody moved or talked in engineering. When the tubulures went back in Seven’s hand, a big breath filled engineering. Everybody started to check the reading on their consoles and only the old Voyager’s crew could really know what the fluidic space means: species 8472.

“Do you think she is pissed of at you?” B’Elanna asked gently.

“I do not know.” Seven didn’t want to think about what she had done without authorization. Even at the beginning, the Captain was angry when Seven argued with her, but now they were lovers... Seven knew there was a big chance Kathryn would reject her. After all, she had by passed her command and Seven knew, as Klee had told her, trust was the foundation for a relationship. Surely, Kathryn knew by now she couldn’t trust Seven.

“The helm is back on line, Captain,” Paris said as soon as he saw the green light.

“The aliens ships will be on range in 6.45 minutes!”

“The singularity is open, Captain.”  
 “Pull us in, mister Paris. Full thrusters.”  
 “Aye, Captain. Full thrusters.”  
 “Entering the singularity in 10 seconds...9...8...7...6.....2...1, we are in.”  
 “Bridge to engineering”  
 “Torres, here”  
 “Close the riff, we are in.”  
 “Right on it, Captain. Close it, Seven.”  
 “Janeway out”  
 “The rift is closing, Captain. Sensors are losing contact with the alien ships.” Rajik was trying to understand the sensor reading but nothing made sense. The only thing he knew they weren’t in their galaxy anymore, they were somewhere, a place without stars.  
 “Tuvok, contact the Doctor. We need him to modify some nanoprobes to fight species 8472.” Janeway ordered.  
 “Do you expect a fight, Captain? Last time we meet species 8472, we had an agreement.”  
 “Yes, we do and I expect them to abide to it but a little preparation is always better, don’t you think, Tuvok?”  
 “It is logical, Captain.”  
 “Mister Poky, I suggest you to go with Commander Tuvok. If you are so interested in Borg technology, you can go and help the Doctor with the nanoprobes?” It seemed like a suggestion but Poky understood better. He swallowed and stood up. He didn’t really comprehend why he had crossed the captain but all his instincts screamed to keep a low profile.  
 “Commander,” Poky started in the turbolift, “I read all Voyager’s logs before coming on board and I am familiar with species 8472 but I never read we had an agreement with them.”  
 “It is not a written agreement, Lieutenant. In our last encounter with species 8472, Captain Janeway convinced them we were not a threat but it was never question for us of going back in their space.”  
 “The captain expect them to react badly to this action,” Poky translated.  
 “Captain Janeway is known to cover all her bases and keep a few surprises.”  
 “You have known her for a long time.”  
 “We served together on many starships. Is there a point to this questioning, Lieutenant?” Tuvok asked, even as the turbolift doors opened.  
 “She is angry with me and I was wondering how I could fix it. I need your advice, Commander.”  
 They were walking to sickbay and many people could hear them but Tuvok chose to answer anyway.  
 “You have betrayed her confidence with your actions toward Lieutenant Hansen yesterday. I am warning you that you must stop at once. Many people feel very protective of Seven of Nine, myself included. I consider her like a daughter.”  
 Poky almost missed a step. His past experience has taught him to never cross a vulcan...or a starship captain. He dipped his head. “I will try to remember that, Commander.”  
 The doors to sickbay opened just before the two men could reach them. The Doctor was already busy.  
 “I am aware of the situation, Commander. We are back in fluidic space with our little friends. I have already started to modify the nanoprobes but I will need time and personnel to have enough ready.”  
 “The lieutenant will give you a hand, Doctor. Could you tell me when you will have enough nanoprobes for five torpedoes?”  
 “Whose idea was it to bring us back here? The Captain? Now you want a weapon at once! I am only a hologram!”  
 “We did not have choice, Doctor. Lieutenant Hansen opened the singularity...” Poky explained.  
 “Seven? She is the one who...”  
 “Lieutenant, Doctor! The nanoprobes.”  
 “Yes, Commander. You will have enough nanoprobes for five torpedoes in 42 minutes.”  
 “Thank you, Doctor.” Tuvok turned and left the two men. He thought it was better if he could check with Torres and Seven about a way to escape species 8472 in case it became necessary.

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As Seven stopped in front of Kathryn’s door, she felt her inside turned to jelly. She swallowed, took a deep breath and pushed the chime. When she heard Kathryn’s voice telling her to enter, her heart missed a beat. She was nervous; more nervous in fact that she had ever be. It was as if all her future depended of this moment. B’Elanna has understood perfectly and has ordered the Borg to take a break

and talk to the Captain before the stress got the best of her and made her make mistakes. Seven didn't like to make mistakes.

When she heard "Come", Seven stepped inside Janeway's quarters but stopped as soon as the door closed behind her. She linked her hand in her back and waited. Janeway was still in uniform. She was seated on her sofa with a drink in her hand. Seven could smell the syntehol from where she stood. Both women were silently looking at each other. Was it only this morning they exchanged those wonderful kisses?

"Are you very angry at me?" Seven asked in a small voice. She wanted to cry, to beg Kathryn not to send her away, to plead that she would never do that again. Anything, just to hear the smoky voice speak to her in the same tone as this morning. How could things go wrong so fast? Ashamed, Seven lowered her head.

"I should." Anger has left Kathryn as soon as she saw Seven's anguish reflected in her eyes. She stood up and walked to stop in front of the woman she loved. How many time had they argue on Voyager? "As a Starfleet lieutenant, you need to be an example for the crew and to obey orders, not to take matters in your own hands. This is unacceptable!"

"Yes, Captain." Seven couldn't summon the force to watch Janeway in the eyes. She looked straight ahead, seeing the brownish colors of the fluidic space.

"But, as your lover, I understand why you did it. You wanted to save the ship and your friends."

This time, Seven looked at Janeway. She lifted her head. "I wanted to save YOU...only you"

"I know." Janeway sighed. She loved this woman so much she could forgive her everything even by passing her command.

"Am I still your lover?" The uncertainty was back in Seven's voice.

"Do you still want to be?" The husky voice asked from very close.

Seven closed her eyes and dipped her head. Her lips were almost touching Kathryn's. "Yes." With this kiss, everything which wasn't personal feeling was forgotten. There would be time later to address Seven's insubordination but not now. Now it was their time. None of them knew how species 8472 would react and they could be dead tomorrow.

The kiss was sweet and hard, deep and soft. Seven's hands started to roam on Kathryn's back while the woman in her arms was removing her jacket. Without hesitation, Seven lifted Kathryn in her arms and crossed the room to the sofa. She didn't want to lose time and go to the bedroom, she wanted Kathryn naked against her...now. The emotions were so overpowering, even her nanoprobes couldn't regulate her heart beat. She wanted to...

*"Red alert, Captain to the bridge!"*

"Oh, God." Disappointed, Kathryn touched her lover cheek softly. Seven blinked. She was so lost in her world of passion, she had problem to come back to the reality. "Seven? We have to go. I guess our friends finally showed off." At least, it was what Janeway expected.

When Seven straightened up, Janeway leaped on her feet. "You are with me." She was out of her quarter even as she was pulling back her jacket. Seven followed her. In the turbolift, Kathryn wondered how could Seven looked so immaculate while she felt so dishevelled.

"Report" Janeway asked as soon as the turbolift doors opened.

"4 vessels are on their way to intercept us." Tuvok answered, standing up from the command chair to sit in the first officer chair.

"How long?" Janeway sat in her chair. She looked at the view screen but could see nothing more than changing colors. In the corners of her eyes she was aware of Seven sitting in the engineering chair and accessing the board.

"10 mn 11 s"

"Tactical?"

"Special torpedoes, ready to launch, Captain," Ayala said. "Phasers are still off line."

"Tom, can you manoeuvre?"

"We still have only thrusters, Captain, and in this fluid, they're even less useful than in normal space."

The Captain flinched. "Seven, I want you to be ready to open another singularity to bring us back in normal space."

"The other vessels will still be there, Captain. They will destroy us."

Janeway glared at Seven. "I gave you an order, Lieutenant Hansen!"

Seven swallowed. She wanted to argue but what she could read in Janeway's eyes made her complied. "Yes, Captain."

"They are hailing us!"

Janeway and Tuvok exchange a glance. Species 8472 was hailing them? That was new.

“Open a channel.”

On the view screen, the familiar face of Boosby appeared. Janeway wasn't fooled for a minute even as she remembered fondly the Academy gardener. This was not her Boosby but a member of species 8472 in disguise. She put her best smile on her face. “Boosby, I am so glad to see you so far from home.”

“Don't be sarcastic, young lady, you know as well as I do that I am not Boosby.” The man was kind of angry. “What are you doing in our realm? We had an agreement.”

“Yes and we wanted to stick by it but we ran into trouble and had to escape.” Janeway saw the man looking to his left. He nodded. Someone was speaking to him.

“You have no propulsion, almost no weapon, your shield is barely holding and most of your sensors are burned out. We could destroy you in less than a minute.”

“Our torpedo bay is working,” Janeway warned. Hearing the threat, Boosby lifted his head. His eyes narrowed.

“And I guess those torpedoes are loaded with the Borg nanoprobes.”

“I like to be prepared,” Janeway smiled.

“And so do we. Our organisms are no longer subject to the devastating effect of this Borg weaponry.” He smiled.

Janeway barely kept her command mask. That was bad news. They had no means of defence from species 8472 now. She looked at Seven who shook her head.

“I see even if it's a newer and more powerful ship you still have your Borg with you and some of your crew.” Boosby was looking at Tuvok.

“We are explorers.” Janeway was trying to buy time. She stood up and walked few steps. “We went home but after a while it's good to go back to space and go where no one has gone before.”

“30 seconds.” Ops announced. Rajik was barely able to keep his voice steady.

“They are breaking their attack trajectory.” Ayala announced. His voice was cool but anyone knowing him could hear the relief in the deep tone.

Janeway lifted her brows in surprise. Boosby smiled. “We had an agreement and while you make repairs, I don't suppose you would give me a tour of your new vessel?”

“You are always welcome, Boosby.” Janeway smiled, relieved. “Could we say 18 hundred hour and I should be able to give you the full brass tour?”

“We have an agreement, Captain. I will come with 2 of my people.”

The screen went blank. Janeway turned on her heel to look at her people. She took a full minute to make eyes contact with each of them to convey reassurance.

“Ok, people, we have work to do and little time to do it.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Ayala, I count on you and your best people.”

“Yes, ma'am. You can count on my men.”

“Rajik, you keep your eyes on those ships.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Seven, go back to engineering to work on the repair.”

Seven only nodded and left immediately the bridge.

“Poky, work with the doctor to find another weapon.” Poky opened his mouth to tell her it would be impossible but Janeway lifted her hand to stop him. “I don't want to hear it, mister Poky.”

Poky greeted his teeth. “Yes, ma'am.”

“Tom, while I am with our guests, you will have the bridge.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

“Tuvok, you are with me.” Janeway departed to her ready room, followed by Tuvok.

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For the second time in five minutes, Seven let the spanner fall on the Jeffrey's tube floor. Surprised, Klee looked at her.

“What's going on?”

“Nothing.”

“Come'on, Annika, I know you. You are never this clumsy.”

Seven sighted. Yes, she was distracted and that annoyed her.

“I am worried.”

“About the repairs?”

“No. About species 8472.”

"Why? They didn't attack us. They seem friendly enough when they visited engineering."

"It is a dangerous species."

"You fear them."

"They were the only one to be able to stand up to the Borg. Without the help of Captain Janeway, they would have destroyed us...and everybody in this galaxy."

After a year at the Academy, Klee was used to translating Annika words. "You don't trust them. You think they are trying to deceive us."

"Yes."

"Did you speak to the Captain about that?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"I have no proof."

"So the Captain didn't believe you."

Seven pressed her lips together. She had tried to speak with Kathryn but was dismissed. That stung.

"No."

Klee sighted. "Annika, she is the Captain, she has to take some risk to get us out of trouble."

"I know." Seven tried again to remove the fused relay and failed again. "This relay is..." She made a fist with her left hand.

Klee took gently the hand who almost stroked at the relay. "Annika...it doesn't mean she doesn't love you." It was very hard for Klee to help Annika with her feelings but she had to. "You have to separate work and love if you want to build a relationship."

Seven looked at Klee with wide eyes. "Explain."

"When the Captain is the Captain, you have to work with her like if you weren't in love with her. You have to remain professional and give her advices but never interfere with a command decision. When the Captain is off duty, that's different. You can speak your mind and argue with her, if you need to. But you have to separate your lives or, in the end, your love won't be enough."

"I...I will have to think about that."

"Yes," Klee smiled "and in the mean time, let's go to eat. Our friends should already be in the mess hall and I'm starving."

Seven hesitated. "I am not sure I should go with you."

"Why not?"

"After yesterday's incident..."

"Forget it. Come on, let's move. I'm sure they are wondering where we are."

Seven wasn't that optimistic but she was ready to trust Klee. After all she had better practice with this friendship thing.

As soon as they entered the mess hall, Seven felt all the eyes on her. She wanted to run away but, squaring her shoulders, she swallowed and followed Klee who has already spotted their friends.

"Hey, guys!" Klee said.

"Hi, girls!" François smiled. "Come and sit with us!" He said with a big wave from his hand.

"Congratulation, lieutenant." Vratok offered as soon as Seven sat.

"Thank you." Seven's voice was faint.

"What do you want to eat, Annika? I will go and pick it up." Klee proposed.

Seven looked at her as if she had problem to comprehend what Klee was saying. Right now, eating was very far from her thoughts, she wanted to flee but she forced herself to answer.

"Some tomato soup, please."

"Coming right away!" Klee answered cheerfully.

"How are you doing, Annika?" Valis asked with compassion. She had noticed Annika wasn't feeling comfortable.

"I am fine. Thank you."

"I wanted to smash this jerk head!" Mike stated.

"So did I. If he had not been a superior officer..." Vratok added, his hand doing a smash in the air.

"We were concerned when you left." Valis explained.

"You were?" Seven couldn't believe her ears. "Why?"

P'olt surprised everybody when she replied "Because you are our friend. Is it not what friends do with each other?"

"I thought..." Seven was looking at all her friends and most of them where smiling. "I thought you would not be friend with me anymore." She added in a small voice.

"Because you were Borg." Mike stated. "It doesn't matter, Annika, you can't be held responsible for something you did when you weren't aware of it."

Vratak and Valis nodded. They completely agreed with what Mike was saying.

"You are our friend, Annika." Klee reinforced. "You have been our friend for the last year. You helped us and it was often hard for you to be so patient..."

"Especially with Mike!" François teased. Mike punched him softly in the shoulder.

Seven smiled a little. "Thank you all. I am..."

"Sorry to interrupt." The throaty voice said from behind Seven. "but I need to talk briefly to Seven."

"Captain." Seven immediately jumped to her feet.

"At ease, Lieutenant. Could you come to my quarters by 2100? I need to talk to you."

"Of course, Captain."

"Carry on." Janeway turned on her heels and walked outside the mess hall leaving Seven a bit stunned.

"What was that about?" François asked. "The Captain invited you to her quarters? You are lucky."

Klee swallowed. She knew the women were in love but she couldn't stop her heart to hurt when she thought about it.

Valis was watching Klee and noticed immediately something was wrong but she said nothing. She glanced at Annika and was surprised to see that she was still standing and looking at the door. What was going on? Of course, the guys were oblivious to what just happened.

"Annika?"

"Annika!"

Seven looked at Valis. "Yes."

"Sit down." Valis was smiling. Seven sat. "You seem to be getting on very well with the captain," Valis teased.

"I have known her for 4 years." Seven answered reluctantly.

"And you never said a word!" François was annoyed. "You were part of the biggest adventure in Starfleet and you kept silent."

"Even when, at the Academy, they taught us about the Borg or species 8472." Vratak added.

Valis felt sorry she has brought everybody's attention on Seven. She wanted her to speak about Janeway, not to be put in a defensive position.

"Come on, guys, we agreed not to blame Annika about all she hid to us." Klee was feeling protective of Annika. "She needs our support not our criticism."

"Yes, Ok, sorry, Annika," François said a little ashamed of himself.

"I understand," Seven answered more at ease now that everybody seemed to accept her for who she was. "It was difficult for me not to acknowledge what I knew but I needed to protect myself."

"We understand, Annika." Valis squeezed lightly Seven's hand. P'olt nodded in agreement.

"So what about species 8472?" Mike asked Valis.

"What do you want to know?"

"Everything! Aren't you with the diplomatic delegation, Valis?"

"I sat only on one meeting and the Captain did all the talking but Vratak followed them everywhere during their visit of the ship."

Vratak groaned inwardly. Trust Valis to keep out from hot subjects! "They looked ok," he said muttering.

"I heard they were big and ugly," Mike added to the talking.

"They are!" Seven cut in, "but they hide behind a human form."

"I thought they took a human form because their normal one couldn't survive in our atmosphere."

"That's not true, Klee, it's because they are so ugly we couldn't look at them and survive the sight!" François joked.

They were all laughing, even Seven was smiling. Species 8472 was a dangerous species but mocking them was a good way to fight their fears.

"I have to go," Seven said suddenly, standing up. "I must not keep the Captain waiting." And she left the messhall.

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B'Elanna walked confidently down the corridors toward the messhall. She was starving and she felt in no mood to be stopped before she got anything to eat. It had been a good day in engineering and she finally was confident everything but the slip stream drive would be repaired by the next day. When she saw Seven getting out through the messhall doors, B'Elanna almost ignored her but something on Seven's face made her stop and ask "Hey, Seven, where are you going?"

Seven blushed a little bit. B'Elanna hid her surprise. *Seven was blushing? That was interesting! What could possibly made the Borg blush?*

"The captain asked me to be in her quarter by 2100. I do not want to be late." Seven started to take a step but remembered that her friendship with B'Elanna was still fragile. She stopped to add "Enjoy your meal, B'Elanna." And stated again only to be restrained by a hand grabbing her biceps.

"No so fast!"

Seven frowned and looked at B'Elanna's hand. "Explain!"

B'Elanna was starving but at that moment, she was more curious. "Oh, come on, Seven! Is it a date? Is it business?"

"The Captain did not tell."

"2100 hours? So, it's a date." B'Elanna smiled.

"I hope so." Seven answered quietly. She wanted to hope but was afraid to. Everything was moving too fast. "I must go if I do not want to be late."

"Like that?"

"Like what?"

"Aren't you going to change into nicer clothes?"

Seven was puzzled. She wanted to reply that what she was wearing was irrelevant but a year on Earth had taught her, it was not. "What is your advice?" Seven knew time was flowing. "I do not want to be late."

"Late is good."

"Is it?"

"Yes. When you go on a date, late is normal."

"Ah."

"Come, we will find you something nice to wear. Kathryn is going to blow an artery!"

"What about your meal?" Seven inquired.

"Later!"

Once again, Kathryn looked at the clock. Once again, she couldn't believe it: Seven was late. Already 15mn late. Kathryn had changed out of uniform half an hour ago and she was wondering if Seven was coming or not. Maybe she preferred to remain with her friends.

"Computer, where is Lieutenant Hansen."

*Lieutenant Annika Hansen is leaving her quarter.*

Finally!

"Computer, where is Lieutenant Hansen."

*Lieutenant Annika Hansen is in the elevator D13.*

"Computer, deem the lights one half!"

Kathryn heart was beating faster and faster. Maybe her dress was showing too much for a woman her age. Maybe Seven would notice nothing different.

When she heard the chime, Kathryn was still self-deprecating.

"Come."

If she had more doubts, all of them disappeared when Seven entered. Seven was beautiful. Kathryn swallowed. The way Seven was looking at her made Kathryn blush. Suddenly the room was too warm.

Seven couldn't breathe. Kathryn's dress was so tight and showing way too much for her to keep her cool. Feelings were drowning her. For the first time in her life, Seven acted on an impulse. She walked toward Kathryn, stopped in front of her, almost touching. Her sight went from Kathryn's eyes to her cleavage. Suddenly, Seven's fingers gripped the silky material of Kathryn's dress and tore it open. Kathryn gasped but didn't protest. She was thrilled to see this wild side of Seven. She had barely time to caress Seven through the thin shirt she was wearing before Seven lifted her in her arms and carried her to the bedroom. Wasting no time during the short trip, Seven took possession of Kathryn's lips, never stopping, even when both went down on the bed. Seven wanted Kathryn and nothing was going to stop her especially with Kathryn murmuring encouraging words.

"Take me, love, take me...now," Kathryn whispered.

"Soon..." Seven answered when she released temporally Kathryn's lips.

"I am sorry," Seven said later after both had caught their breath. They had made love sometimes wildly, sometimes tenderly but always passionately.

Janeway lifted her head from Seven's shoulder. "What for?"

Seven swallowed. "The way I rushed on you. I do not know why I had acted like that. It was like...someone else was in my place." Seven sighted. "I am explaining badly, I am sorry."

Kathryn smiled and put her hand against Seven's cheek. "No need to be sorry to desire me, love. It's flattering and exciting."

“You are not angry?”

“No way!” Kathryn laughed. “I’ve never made love so freely in my life. I’ve never thought I could be that wild! Tonight was a revelation.”

Finally, believing Kathryn was sincere, Seven left a small smile split her lips. “I am pleased.” She tightened her hold on Kathryn and whispered: “Do you want to make love again?”

“Oh, God! Again?”

“Is it too soon? Are you tired?”

Janeway looked at the clock. “We’ve been at it for three hours, love, I’m not so young anymore.”

“You are young and beautiful.”

“Thank you,” Kathryn answered shyly. She knew Seven would not say anything she didn’t mean and it made her heart beat faster, “but I need to rest for a little while.”

“You can sleep if you want.”

“What will you do?”

“Look at you?”

Kathryn smiled. She put back her head on Seven’s shoulder. “Do you really think you can repair the slip stream drive?” she muttered.

“Of course. As I said we just need to find Thyrelum and we will go home.” For the first time, Seven realised that “Home” has more meaning now Kathryn and she were together. The woman in her arms was her true home, together they could face the Borg or species 8472 and still find their way home.

“Good night, love.”

“Good night, Kathryn.”

*Thanks to MP for beta reading*