

*Summary: Janeway takes Seven on shore leave with her. Where the women go, it seems trouble always follows.*

*Content disclaimers: Post "Prophecy" and sequel to my story "Roommates."*

# SHORE LEAVE

*by Lara Zielinsky*

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## Prologue

Twilight cast a glow over the protected hollow where *Voyager's* crew had established the pilgrimaging Klingons. Ringing with the sounds of construction over the last several days the valley now rang with the boom of Klingon voices in song and toast. Mingled with that, Captain Kathryn Janeway listened for the voices of her own crew.

Walking until she found a rock outcropping to sit upon, she settled and sipped her drink, grateful for the few minutes alone amidst the revelry. With the conclusion of tonight's festivities *Voyager* would break the planet's bonds, drop a buoy to mark the colony's existence – should anyone else happen by - then the crew would turn back to their own journey homeward.

A fragrant, moist wind whipped up suddenly through the valley, catching up the captain's loose hair with a flippant toss. Sighing she set aside her cup carefully and brushed her hand through her locks to smooth them. She looked out once more, identifying the moving shadows of her senior officers amidst the firelight from a roaring bonfire, and the glow of solar-powered lanterns along the trails between the constructed duranium huts.

Her helmsman, Tom Paris and Chief Engineer B'Elanna Torres remained the center of attention. The couple sat close, laughing and gesturing in conversation with the band of Klingons, young, old, male and female surrounding them. The half-Klingon woman's pregnancy, now in its fourth month, had been the focus of the Klingon group led by Koval. The pilgrims had believed her baby the fulfillment of a prophecy within their lore about a savior, the Kova Mok. No one appeared to believe that any longer, however, and the dissention had almost threatened morale on the ship. But she now noticed Koval passing the young couple a token with a more willing smile.

Since Naomi Wildman's birth in their first lost year, the *Voyager* crew had been struggling so much to meet their own needs that children had been strictly off-limits. Janeway, Tuvok and Chakotay, her first officer, had reluctantly but firmly drafted the restriction and ordered the Doctor to reinforce it with regular injections. But now, two years into regular contact with Starfleet, thanks to monthly communication with a long-range array adjusted by Lt. Reginald Barclay, Kathryn had reversed the decision.

Their situation was still dire, but the need to procreate was strong. And her crew had held up admirably so far. *Voyager*, she knew, might just have to prepare itself to become a generational ship. Looking around she saw many pairings, young science officers, engineers, exobiologists and herbologists sharing conversation, laughter and devoted touches. Certainly there were enough possibilities, she thought, wondering which of the couples would be coming to her next with the good news.

*We should probably plan our own welcome for the baby,* Kathryn thought, feeling her

throat tighten wistfully. She stood from her perch and made her way alone among the merriment toward the assembled throng's center: Neelix's generous spread of libations and diverse foods.

Monitoring the table, Neelix offered tastes to everyone who passed. A huskily built Delta quadrant native whose short mottled bewhiskered appearance was easily identified, the Talaxian served as Ambassador and chef in *Voyager's* center of social life: the Mess Hall. His eyes glowed orange from the firelight as he turned, catching sight of her. "Captain!" His manner was effusive and genuine.

She showed her teeth in a wide smile and offered up her mug. "I was just coming to see you."

"Something I can get for you? More Rimaki or Blood Pie? Or how about a leg of roast Kessek?"

She shook her head, passing her cup. "Just a little more wine if you don't mind." Turning to survey the assembly from the new angle, she noted, "Everyone seems to be having a great time."

The pop of a cork drew her attention back to him. She noted the label for one of the fruit wines from her own stock and smiled as he poured out. "They were a lively bunch. I'll miss them," he said conversationally.

Janeway recalled the evening she found Neelix, who had been temporarily rooming with her security chief, Tuvok. He had been entertaining a guest, one of the female Klingons. Still mildly alarmed by thoughts of Neelix and the energized Klingon woman she felt her smile falter, and managed a nod instead. "Time for us to move on though."

"Of course, Captain. Here you go." He passed over the refilled cup, then gestured at the table's spread. "Sure you won't have something?"

Looking closer at the platters, Janeway started to shake her head when she noticed a fruit-filled pastry. Reaching out curiously she asked, "Tarts?"

Neelix noticed her objective and nodded. "Yes, ma'am. According to Seven they're blueberry filled. Whatever blueberries are."

"An Earth fruit," she explained with a beaming smile. "One of my favorites actually," she added before gingerly taking a bite. *Replicated was never quite...right*, she thought before biting down, prepared for the differences in taste.

Flavor exploded in her mouth and Janeway was caught in a tidal wave of memory as she saw her mother at their Traditional settlement Indiana home baking pies. Strong pangs of mingled joy and loss choked her throat and she blinked, forcing herself to chew carefully before swallowing.

"How is it?" Neelix asked perplexedly studying her face.

"Try one," she offered. He waved it off.

"Seven offered me a blueberry when she was working," he said, shaking his head. "I itched for hours until the Doc gave me something. Apparently I'm allergic."

"I'm sorry," Kathryn offered sincerely.

He shrugged, acknowledging her sincerity with a lift of another item from a platter.

"Actually, my tastes run to the minced meat pie."

She grinned at him then took another pastry and stepped away from the table. Turning her back on Neelix Kathryn curiously took another bite of the pastry. *Seven made this?* She wondered where the tall blonde, a former Borg who served as her astrometrics chief, had deposited herself for the party's duration. She hoped, for Seven's sake, that she had not simply hidden in her laboratory or cargo bay for the duration. Kathryn had real hopes for the woman's burgeoning social skills.

She took another bite of pastry. *Especially if she can cook like this.*

Kathryn looked up just in time to note three Klingons headed for the refreshments table, but she was not quick enough to slip out of their way. The trio was boisterously loud and one's grandios hand gesture swept the air toward her face. She ducked that only to be caught in his return sweep. Rolling with the impact, she dove to the other side and leapt back to her feet. Now the Klingon's companions blocked her only exit route.

"Get out of my way!" one of them said.

She looked up and noticed his eyes were a little unevenly dialated and the usual swagger was exaggerated into a bit of a stagger. Erring on the side of caution around the drunk Klingon she said nothing.

He apparently expected an answer. Fetid breath washed her face as he bent close and snarled, "Won't move, eh?"

"Gentlemen, I--" Neelix began behind her.

"Excuse me." She managed not to flinch. Now that everyone had stopped moving, she took a large step to the right.

Satisfied apparently the Klingon nodded, and started forward with his companions toward the table once more.

His uneven gait however brought his path across her left foot. Their ankles caught up and the large Klingon and the small captain went down in a heap, the captain on her back. She startled with dismay when she felt a trickle then a flood of fluid, a drink of some sort, drench her short-sleeved gray uniform undershirt. The smell was sweetly thick and cloying. Blood wine.

The Klingon above her gave a roar of protest and she bit her lip against the dig his sharply-toed boot made in her thigh as he scrambled to his feet.

"Captain!" Neelix charged toward her as she rolled onto her stomach to push herself upright.

"Captain." She recognized Tuvok's almost unnatural calm as she found him in the crowd, coming up from behind her to assess the melee. Standing, she straightened her soggy top and ran a hand through her hair before addressing her security chief.

"I'm fine, Tuvok. Just an accident."

His dark eyes surveyed her; one eyebrow hitched in concern. She shook her head, a motion imperceptible to everyone around them except for the Vulcan whom she had known almost two decades.

One of the Klingons behind her said sharply to (she presumed) the one she had tangled with, "Gorak, that was their *captain*."

Crossing her arms over her chest as the wind's touch began to chill the wet shirt, Kathryn turned around. "No harm done. Excuse me, please."

They accepted her dipped head with nods of their own and she turned away once more, uncrossing her arms and dropping them at her side as she stepped up alongside *Voyager's* security chief. "You're in charge of crew recovery, Tuvok."

"Of course, captain."

"Good night, everyone." She offered a lift of her hand before wending her way out of the crowd, feeling a few gentle hands on her shoulders as she passed crewmembers who offered their brief, silent comments of support.

The pools of light gave way to a cloak of darkness and she reached up for her comm badge.

"Captain?"

Kathryn smiled fondly at Seven of Nine stepping from the light into the shadows with her. "Good evening, Seven."

"You are departing the festivities," the former Borg drone questioned.

She noted the younger woman's right hand was wrapped around a cup. "And you seem to be enjoying yourself." Seven offered a shy dip of her head that made Kathryn want to pull the younger woman close in a reassuring hug. "Go on back. I'm just headed back to the ship to change."

Seven's head came back up sharply. "You are leaving?" There was an atypical thread of sadness through the question, and a mesh-covered hand drifted up to brush at her face. Kathryn resisted leaning into the touch. In the next moment, Seven blinked, her gaze taking in the captain's dishabille. "You are covered in dirt and your shirt is wet."

The woman's brow furrowed in concentration as she tried to figure out what happened.

Noticing the slightly flushed cheeks and the slightly disarrayed platinum blonde hair, Janeway spared her the difficulty and smiled indulgently. We're just a little tipsy, hmm, Seven? "I just had an accident with some Blood Wine," she explained.

"I will come with you," Seven offered imperiously, her cup clattering against nearby rocks as she tossed it away.

Deciding that the young woman probably should not be left among the Klingons in her present condition, Janeway accepted that she invited herself along. The sooner she tucked Seven in, the sooner the former Borg could sleep off the alcohol's effects. "All right," she said at last, tapping her comm badge. "*Voyager*, two to beam up."

## Chapter 1

Materializing on the transporter pad on Deck 4, Janeway instantly reached out and steadied Seven, who looked dangerously close to swaying. The captain saw the querulous look on Crewman Gilmore's face when she started to step down leading Seven out. She shook her head sharply when the woman started forward as if to help, then gave no more thought to it as she focused on getting Seven safely to her quarters.

"Seven," she asked sharply getting the young woman's attention. She lowered her voice however when the blonde winced. "I know alcohol disagrees with you, but how much did you have to drink?" Seven rubbed her temple, obviously trying to think. That alone worried Janeway enormously. The former Borg was almost never at a such a loss. She seemed to be getting worse, rather than better. Kathryn wrapped an arm firmly around the Borg's corseted waist when they entered the turbolift as she requested, "Deck 3, captain's quarters."

Seven's arms slipped reflexively around Janeway's upper body to steady herself as the lift began moving, and she murmured in the captain's ear, "I missed you."

The warm breath and husky sound of Seven's voice made Kathryn groan. She brushed her fingertips over Seven's right cheek. "Sh... We'll be there soon."

Thankfully everyone else was still on the surface. Emerging on deck 3, Janeway need not fear embarrassing Seven in front of any of *Voyager's* other officers. "Just a little further."

"Captain... I am beginning to see two of you." Seven's voice was distinctly worried.

"Maybe we had better get the Doctor to look at you," Janeway reconsidered, as they gained entrance to her quarters. "You go lie down and I'll call him." Seven tottered away from Janeway, reaching abruptly for handholds that did not exist. She drifted on her no doubt "direct" path to the bedroom doorway. Kathryn rushed over and held Seven's elbow as she navigated through the opening.

The taller woman started to topple, and the captain was not prepared to counter the change

in their collective balance. With a surprised yelp, Kathryn fell with Seven, only just managing to get them both over the bed.

Seven adjusted quickly, trapping Janeway in a smothering embrace, and wrapping her legs around Kathryn's own before pressing her face into the pillow and groaning loudly. "Kathryn... hold me."

"I am," she answered, making a point of squeezing the shoulder tightly pressing into her chest. "Seven I should get up and call the Doctor."

Seven was silent for a long moment, so much so that Janeway suspected she had fallen asleep. "I watched you during the party," Seven mumbled.

"I didn't see you," Kathryn replied gently. She decided for the moment to just talk until the younger woman quieted from the alcohol's effects. The Borg's left hand moved over her stomach and Kathryn was reminded how wet her shirt was from the Klingons' Blood Wine. "I have to change."

"Stay with me. I want to sleep."

Apparently sleep included the requirement of Kathryn tucked up under Seven's chin because the captain was moved until her back pressed against Seven's chest and the longer woman's legs were tucked up under her thighs. Kathryn could feel Seven's hands roaming more freely. She squirmed but the woman was bigger and physically stronger. She couldn't budge, so she tried reasoning. "Let me up, Seven. I have got to get the Doctor here to see you."

"I don't like him," Seven grumbled.

"What?" *It has to be the alcohol talking*, Janeway reasoned as she nudged Seven off her carefully. *Seven and the Doctor have always gotten along.*

"Couldn't you just help me?"

"I don't know that I can," Kathryn replied honestly, suddenly caught by Seven's blue gaze as Seven turned her onto her back and loomed over her. "I don't know enough about your physiology. You could be really ill."

"I only had two mugs," Seven said.

"Of what? I've seen what champagne can do... this is worse than that."

"Blood Wine. The Klingon leader Koval pressed it on me when we were toasting Torres and Paris's baby."

"Blood Wine? God, Seven, most humans with strong stomachs can't take a lot of that. No wonder you're seeing double."

"My nanoprobes cured Tomin," Seven mumbled. "They will fix me."

*Tomin?* The name was familiar but Janeway could not immediately place it. Obviously someone Seven had helped cure of drunkenness. But Kathryn chuckled softly at the Borg's certainty. "Well they better get to work quickly before your stomach becomes upset."

As if the very mention prompted it, Seven's stomach rebelled at its contents. She swallowed reflexively and rolled away from Janeway, surprising the captain with the suddenness of her move. "Seven?"

"Excuse me," she managed to recall her manners as she bolted upright and staggered to the ensuite. Grasping the edges of the sink counter, Seven felt her throat and stomach convulse, and then she expelled an acid fluid into the sinkbowl. The sensation was distressing, and a part of her was detached, analyzing the unpleasant event even as she expelled more of her stomach's contents.

Janeway was beside Seven, her cool fingers brushing the hair from the Borg's hot forehead as she leaned over the sink. Sure hands moved past her and turned on the faucet. Delightful cool

water splashed on her face and dripped down her throat followed by the gentle stroking of fingers over her temples and cheeks. She moaned appreciatively then felt a cool cloth replace the captain's hands.

"Well, at least this will clear your system of the alcohol faster."

Seven's reply was weak. "It is uncomfortable."

"I know." The captain encouraged Seven to straighten up, and arranged her so that she leaned against a wall. Patient with the cloth, Janeway soothed the heat from Seven's cheeks. Contentment replaced the aches and Seven closed her eyes absorbing the feel of the captain's touch with relief.

Watching the captain from a distance at the party had caused something sharp to stab inside her. When the blood wine distracted her, and dulled the ache, she had considered it a medicine for her ailment and readily accepted another of the bitter brew when it was pressed on her. Seven's eyes blinked open as she felt her stomach settle. She lifted her hands to touch Kathryn's face, so very close to her own, with reverence. "You are beautiful," she murmured, tracing the ridge of Janeway's cheekbone where she'd seen the firelight play as she talked with Neelix.

"So are you..."

"No. I am imperfect... Borg..." A maudlin tone crept into her voice.

"What about `Borg perfection'?" Kathryn said.

"I no longer believe it. You are perfect." Seven touched lips that quirked up at the corners.

"The Borg were wrong."

"Oh, Seven..."

Seven swallowed and made a face against the acid taste. Kathryn's voice drew her back. "Let me get you a glass of water." Kathryn grasped Seven's fingers, pulling them away from her face.

She braced herself back against the counter, feeling the cool duranium against her palms as she waited for Janeway to return. When she did, offering a small glass of clear liquid, Seven took it cautiously, then sipped. The acid taste washed away and she took a breath, grateful that the burning in her nose subsided. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Now, come on. Lie down. I'll see if the Doctor has something he can give you for the inevitable hangover."

"Hangover?"

"Nature's punishment for overindulging," Janeway explained, her hand on Seven's elbow was rubbing in a motion completely distracting Seven to the point that she stopped walking toward the bed. "What?"

"Your hand."

"Oh. Sorry."

"Do not be. I enjoy your touch."

Janeway's smile in reply was a revelation; faint, almost shy, before she turned aside her gaze and gave a little shake of her head. She was drawn to the captain's auburn locks, overwhelmed by a desire to feel the silk slipping over her fingertips.

Kathryn's eyes closed at the contact and Seven was curious. Feeling emotion choke her voice she whispered painfully, "Do you enjoy my touch?"

"God, you're emotional when you're drunk." Janeway's eyes opened quickly and she quickly leaned up and pressed a kiss to Seven's cheek. "Now, come on, get in bed."

"Only if you will join me."

"I really think it best I didn't," Kathryn protested, urging Seven down onto the cool sheets with her insistent hands.

She felt a compelling question slip from her muddled mind to her tongue. "I want to be human enough for you."

"You are... Seven, you've come so far." Janeway pulled the covers up around Seven's shoulders, tucking them in gently.

"Then why will you not love me?"

"I do. Seven, please... you're tired. So am I. Get some sleep. You'll see things more clearly in the morning."

"I see only that you do not wish to be with me." Seven's brow pinched as she flew back to the Klingon festivities. "I saw... so many couples together... yet you never came to me." Janeway's encouragement rolled Seven onto her side, the comfortable position the young woman had found on the third night rooming with the captain. The memory of that night seemed fleeting. She clutched the pillow under her head and sighed.

Janeway sighed too. Gently she rubbed Seven's lower back, encouraging through touch for the younger woman to finally relax and fall asleep. The rooming arrangement was just over a week old, and now, with the Klingons safely settled, it would end.

Seven would be expected, as everyone else will, to return to their original quarters as they resumed their journey to the Alpha quadrant. Many crew no doubt were looking forward to the resumption of their previous lives.

Brushing Seven's hair as she undid the blonde's twist, Janeway admitted that she didn't want to go back to the way things had been. Seven's breath slowed and evened. Gingerly Kathryn rose from the bed and retreated to her ensuite where she finally changed her shirt for a clean one.

As the fabric pulled off over her head she caught a whiff of the wine reek. *How can she desire me when I smelled like this?* she wondered idly. Tossing the shirt into the recycler, she paused at the sight of her reflection.

The tired blue eyes looking back at her shied away from her appearance. Her cheeks were reddened and she vainly ran thin fingers through her hair, noting the fading color. *You are old, Kathryn.*

She went to the ensuite doorway and leaned hard against the frame, watching the moonlight spill over Seven's golden face and hair as she slept. *She's so young,* Kathryn lamented.

Shaking her head she reviewed the strange path of their evening conversation. Drunk. Seven had gotten herself drunk over her. Kathryn sighed. The implications were terrifying.

She wondered if it had been a good idea to give into her attraction to the former Borg so quickly. Seven had fallen quickly into an expectation Kathryn worried wasn't healthy.

She slapped at the wall, pulling the power only at the last moment so she didn't make any noise. The frustration welled up and overwhelmed her. *Who am I kidding? I fell just as hard.*

She remembered their sexual play-filled Velocity match four days earlier and blushed. *Too far... too fast,* she thought. But then another look at Seven and she grasped her arms across her chest helpless to stop the flood of overwhelming caring that filled her. She tapped her comm badge. "Captain to Sickbay."

"Sickbay here."

"Doctor, could you report to my quarters right away? Seven's in need of something for a hangover."

"A hangover? Captain, she didn't drink at the party, did she?"

"Apparently she did. And more than she should."

"I'll be right there. Sickbay out."

She heard the sound of the transporter in her outer room and walked through the bedroom, motioning to the bald-pated physician. "In here, Doctor."

"Why isn't she in her alcove?"

Kathryn explained quickly while he scanned Seven with concern. "During the Klingons stay, several families took over the cargo bay, so I offered to let her stay here."

"She still has a lot of alcohol in her system. What did she have?"

"Blood wine."

"Captain, weren't you watching out for her?"

"I wasn't with her."

"I see. So you just found her like this?"

"Actually she found me, but... Doctor, can you do something for her? She said something about her nanoprobes... Helped someone named Tomin."

"Ah yes..." The Doctor smiled then grimaced. "I... know exactly what to do." With a quick series of taps on the hypospray he pressed it to the exposed skin of Seven's throat. "That should do it."

"Thank you, Doctor."

He stood and moved away from the bed. "When was the last time she regenerated, Captain?"

Tucking the covers around Seven, Janeway stood again as well. "I don't know. With the settlement work I haven't seen her much, and don't know what her schedule was."

Together they walked out to the living area to continue their conversation. "Encourage her to regenerate during her next off-duty shift. It'll help clear the rest of the effects of the blood wine from her system."

"I'll give her tomorrow off," Janeway assured.

"All right."

"Thank you, Doctor."

"Just doing my job." He tapped his emitter on his shoulder. "Good night, Captain."

"Good night." He faded from sight, leaving Janeway in the quiet and dark. Taking a deep breath, she returned to the bedroom and slipped onto the bed, turning on her side and studied Seven sleeping peacefully until her own exhaustion overtook her.

## Chapter 2

"Tom, Harry, make ready all stations for launch." Captain Janeway strode forward from her bridge seat and leaned on the back of her helmsman's chair with a smile. "Ready to say goodbye to your Klingon friends, Tom?" she asked him brightly.

"Yes, Captain."

She turned back to look at her first officer Chakotay who knew the next part of the procedure but instead looked uncertainly down at his right hand console instead.

Janeway looked over to Harry Kim, "Harry, how are all stations reporting?"

"All stations report ready for launch, Captain," Kim replied crisply studying his board. He cast a surprised glance at the back of the first officer's head before turning his gaze to the captain. "We're ready."

"All right then." She stepped back from Paris's chair as he turned it around and continued his calculations. "At your signal, Tom."

"Aye, aye. Planet escape in ten... nine..."

Janeway slipped back into her seat, planting her hands with an eager smile on the arms. "Time for things to get back to normal, don't you agree, Chakotay?"

"Past time," he said, and though his tone was light, his face was grim until she turned full to look at him, obviously hoping she would not note it.

She questioned him with an expression inviting him to speak further, but he declined by dropping his gaze to the console between them.

Paris concluded his countdown and the ship lifted from the surface, the viewscreen revealing the changing atmosphere... from the openness of the stratosphere to the thin hydrosphere and finally the blue-blackness of the ionosphere before planetary gravity released them with a jolt and they were escaping orbit into space.

"Do we have a final report on the mission ready, Commander?" she asked quietly.

"Just about. Neelix is concluding the tally on ship's stores."

"Ready for a meeting at 11-30 hours?"

"I'll tell him."

"Good." Three hours would be enough time to review the department reports that were completed. Due to being out late the evening before she wondered if Chakotay had managed more than a passing glance at them himself. She glanced toward him to ask but he was studying his console.

Deciding he was already reading, she stood. "I'll be in my ready room," she said.

He nodded. She nodded toward Tuvok, who keyed his board and followed her into her personal haven off the starboard side of the bridge.

"Good morning, Tuvok," she offered when the door had closed behind him. She continued walking toward her replicator intent on her morning coffee.

"Good morning, Captain."

"Any insights to offer on our last mission?" she invited before requesting, "Coffee, hot," she murmured toward the replicator. As it appeared she slipped it off the surface and turned around, lifting the cup from the saucer and sipping.

"My security reports were complete."

"Tuvok, come on. I know that. How's... crew morale?"

"That would be a more appropriate question for Mr. Neelix, I believe."

She set the coffee cup on her desk and gestured him down into the chair opposite as she settled. "So, how is Neelix this morning?"

He raised an eyebrow at her. "At present he is moving out."

"Of course. Not helping, Tuvok?" He did not react. Insight hit her. "Would I be able to gather that a lot of crewmembers are busy moving out rather than at their duty posts?"

"That would be correct."

"Didn't *anyone* get along?"

"Four crewmembers on deck 7 and three on deck 8 have requested to remain where they moved during this last mission."

She sat down hard. "That's it?"

"Affirmative."

"After seven years only 14 people found it acceptable to live together?"

"That would appear to be correct."

"Do you think it affected performance?"

"In some areas."

## Shore Leave by Lara Zielinsky

She pondered a moment. "We only just got underway again, but perhaps Mr. Kim and Seven can find us a suitable planet for shore leave."

"I will inform them of your decision."

Janeway pursed her lips in concentration then nodded curtly. "No. Seven was ordered off duty today. I'll work with Kim."

"As you wish."

Standing, she followed him out onto the bridge and gestured to Kim. Tuvok took over from his junior officer and she stopped at Ops. "Harry. I'm putting you on a special assignment. Come on."

"Yes, Captain." Closing out his board, Harry Kim followed his captain into the rear turbolift.

"Astrometrics," she called to the computer as the turbolift doors closed.

"Captain?"

"Yes?"

"What're we going to look for?"

"A place for shore leave, Mr. Kim."

He grinned eagerly. "Yes, ma'am."

"Crunch time, Harry? Was your rooming situation that bad?"

"I... Well... I'm just looking for some time alone, I guess."

"You're roommate was..."

He looked uncomfortable as they emerged on Deck 6 and walked the corridor toward Astrometrics. "Moved out this morning."

"Who was it, Harry?"

He prevaricated for another moment but when she fixed him with a sharp look he blurted, "Commander Chakotay."

Janeway remembered the evening Seven had told her about a conversation with Kim about the rooming. She recalled her embarrassment when she learned Seven had explained their rooming as "sleeping with the captain." With aplomb she nodded and said only, "Commander Chakotay was difficult to get along with?"

"I shouldn't say."

"Harry, one of the special things I've appreciated about *Voyager* is that we're family almost more than we're crewmates. I hope that you and Chakotay patch things up now that you're not on top of each other all the time. I need you both at your best."

"Yes, ma'am." He looked like she'd beaten his favorite dog... or that he was the dog.

She patted his shoulder and turned to the astrometrics console. "Now let's find some place for you to play that clarinet, hmm?"

His smile was weak, but there. Resolute, they stood shoulder-to-shoulder scanning the nearby systems on *Voyager's* present course for a suitable class-M world... maybe even a little civilization to explore.

When 1130 hours came around, the senior staff assembled in the conference room. Neelix's report was tough. Housing and feeding and then settling the Klingons had cut significantly into the ship's supplies. They'd need to find someplace to procure more.

Janeway flipped on the monitor, revealing the planet she and Harry had discovered, and contacted, from Astrometrics. "Brilaria Two. We've contacted the government. Looks promising."

Harry grinned. "More than that. They've invited us to the capital as well as given us the equivalent of tourist brochures," Harry replied with excitement. "They've got it all. Amusements,

pristine wilderness, parks, cultural areas. Anything anyone could wish for."

"Sounds like fun. Captain, are you sure we can spare the time off?"

"As Neelix revealed, it won't all be fun and games. We do need a lot of supplies," Kathryn answered readily. "But absolutely. The crew worked above and beyond the call helping the Klingons put together their settlement and meeting their needs with limited resources. I think that deserves a break."

"All right, then Tuvok and I will get the rotations roster together." Chakotay pushed upright. The dark pall surrounding him had lifted a little, but Janeway could see there was still more bothering him.

"I volunteer to start the supply negotiations, Captain," Neelix spoke up from the back of the room. "It should all be pretty straightforward."

"Thank you, Neelix." She looked around and stood up. "Any other business?" When no one responded she patted the tabletop with her open palm and said with a smile, "Enjoy your vacation time, people. Dismissed."

With an undercurrent of questions toward Harry about coming by Astrometrics and checking out the scans for that "perfect vacation", the crew departed. Janeway called Chakotay back.

"Chakotay?"

"Yes?" He turned around at the door.

"Did you find everything in your quarters all right?"

There was a definite pause before he nodded.

Concerned she lifted a hand to touch him, then pulled it back and put it on her hip instead.

"What was broken?"

"What makes you think anything was broken?"

"That look on your face right now. Come on, Chakotay. It wasn't easy, I know, but we did what we had to. So what broke? I'm sure ship's stores can replace it, or we'll replicate it."

"It's repairable. Don't worry about it."

She studied him for a moment longer. His face gave away nothing. Finally she nodded. "I thought we were friends, Chakotay."

The tall man's shoulders shifted ever so slightly downward, but he said only, "I've got to go meet Tuvok."

"Sorry I kept you."

She leaned forward against a chair as he left and sighed, squeezing the cushioning in frustration. "That went well."

Janeway left the Mess Hall with a smile. Following dinner as *Voyager* slipped into orbit around Brilaria Two, she had conferenced with Neelix to offer suggestions for the negotiations he was undertaking in the morning. Perhaps it was his age, similar to her own, or the fact that in his life he had seen so much, but she respected him enormously, finding his approach to decision-making similar to her own.

They had assembled a list of materials *Voyager* could easily replicate, or spare, in exchange for the things they needed. He would have to assess their comparative worth on his own. Smiling as she recalled his assurances, she tapped the panel to enter her quarters.

The emptiness hit her. Quickly she scanned the room and noticed Seven's satchel missing from next to the low table. She started to reach for her comm badge then stopped.

No, if Seven wanted to be alone, she had a right. She probably had felt so refreshed after regenerating that sleeping paled in comparison. Kathryn pulled off her uniform tunic and went to

the replicator, tossing the jacket over the chair as she passed. "Apple cinnamon tea, hot." Taking the cup, she settled on the sofa primly and lifted the china to her lips. The aroma seeped into her soothingly and she spent some time reviewing the day. Still puzzled over Chakotay's unexplained troubles Kathryn rolled onto her side on the cushions. "I wonder what really happened."

With no answers forthcoming she took another breath to relax. Then she sipped from her tea, and was reminded of Seven's scent. It had been curious when she first identified that Seven's scent was distinctly like roast cinnamon. It wasn't a soap... or a perfume. The scent had been just as strong that morning after a week of knowing Seven only took sonic showers and had never once utilized anything like perfume. It was just a natural odor. Putting aside the cup on the table, Kathryn curled into the sofa's cushions missing the blonde's warmth.

Drifting half-asleep, and knowing that Neelix wouldn't appreciate the captain declining shore leave and looking over his shoulder, Kathryn began to consider what she wanted to do on the surface. She quietly mulled over the city center. Shopping didn't appeal. Neither did lounging on a beach. The water sounded nice though.

She considered how many years it had been since she brushed off her scuba gear. Yes, she thought. A diving trip. The Brilarian northern springs boasted dozens of water-filled caverns. With a smile at her decision, she stood and walked over to her desk terminal. "Computer, bring up the map of the Brilarian northern continent system of springs."

"Working. Done."

Sitting down before the readouts, Janeway mapped a trek for herself that would put her in the middle of the largest springs by midday. She could pitch camp and test the spring shallows before sundown.

### Chapter 3

"Regeneration cycle complete." Seven of Nine's eyes snapped open and she stepped down from the raised platform. Following her first cycle that morning, under the Doctor's orders, she had reported for a follow-up medical check. He indicated she would require a second cycle.

*"Your body's not ready to work on just sleep alone," he said.*

Seven kept her disappointment to herself. She had rather liked sleeping, she thought. A sense of leisure in awakening, and the warmth of covers against her skin, and the loose fit of the pajamas the captain had replicated all combined to have made the experience pleasant.

The previous afternoon on her way to the mess hall for her supplement, she had noted several crewmembers toting bags. Inquiring, she had learned they were returning to their quarters now that the Klingons had been moved off-ship. Wanting to be in compliance with the ship's orders as well, Seven let herself into the captain's quarters and collected her few belongings, returning them to the cargo bay.

Stepping up to her console, she brought up her messages and noted that the day had been given to her for shore leave. In fact one-third of the ship had been assigned shore leave for the next week on a planet they now orbited named Brilaria. She accessed Borg files on the planet and read: "Species 3245. Brilarian. Encountered two hundred years ago. Unremarkable. Moderate technology. Not assimilated." She unknowingly breathed a sigh of relief and read further through *Voyager's* files,

noting that the captain herself had compiled much of the research, along with Ensign Kim.

Seven considered the last trip of leisure she had taken. The Chief of Security and she had

left *Voyager* aboard a shuttlecraft to more closely study a star phenomena. Instead of reaching that destination they had been captured by the organizer of a series of intersystem physical competitions and forced to compete. She shook her head. No offense against Tuvok, but she would not suggest such a trip this time, not wishing to tempt a similar outcome.

"Seven of Nine to Icheb."

"Icheb here. Go ahead."

"What is your location?"

"I am on the planet at coordinates 194 by 208. Near the city center."

"What is your purpose?"

"I am `shopping' for a gift for Lt. Torres's baby. Perhaps you would like to join me?"

She smiled faintly at the younger Borg's invitation. "For a short time. Wait there. I shall join you in a moment."

"Icheb out."

With unknowing interest buoying her steps, Seven reported to transporter room 3 on Deck 6 and requested beaming to Icheb's coordinates.

"Sure, Seven." The console operator, a Bolian named Blue, smiled brightly and offered, "Enjoy your time off."

Regulations, even in a technologically advanced society, required transport locations to be out of the way. Natives tended to be very surprised to have people suddenly materializing in their midst. In this instance Seven had been transported into an alley, just off the main street of Brilaria's capital city.

Walking to the end of the space between the buildings, she emerged onto a sunlit sidewalk, neatly sidestepping a woman pushing a child transport. "Excuse me," the woman said, brushing quickly past.

"Seven!" Icheb, in informal attire, very similar to the natives around him, jogged among the pedestrians and stopped in front of her. "Good to see you!"

"Good morning, Icheb." Politely she followed as he walked along the street, occasionally glancing in the windows of shops. "What are you looking for?"

"I am attempting to locate `the perfect gift' for Lt. Paris and Torres's offspring." He paused at a particular window and cupped his hands around his face to block the light more efficiently. "Let's try in here."

She nodded at his questioning look and followed him inside the shop. Within, the shelves and racks were filled with brightly colored fabrics. On closer inspection she realized, "This is a clothing shop for children."

Icheb nodded. "Perfect." Together they moved among the selections. Icheb pointed out tiny sets of overalls, very similar to the clothing worn by Azan and Rebi, the Borg twins who had recently been returned to their home world. Seven fingered the material for a few moments lost in memory then shook her head.

"We should find something unique."

So they continued searching. Approximately a half hour after stepping inside, Icheb located small pajamas. Seven approved and the purchase was made. At the desk where Icheb paid the amount of currency requested, the native woman, dark curling hair bound up in a pile on her head, asked, "Don't you want some booties for the baby's feet?"

"For what purpose?"

"To keep his little feet warm," came the reply, as she pointed toward another corner of the

store.

Seven explored the racks of 'booties' unsatisfied with either their appearance or their ability to keep a child's feet warm. In the end, she decided to memorize the form and construct her own gift for Torres's offspring.

Icheb tucked his gift under his arm and the two Borg stepped out onto the street once more, shading their eyes from the sunlight. "I'm going to see what else is here," Icheb remarked.

"Thank you for permitting me to accompany you," Seven declined. "However I believe I will look for something else to occupy my time."

"Sure, Seven. See you back aboard."

She stood quietly contemplating the experience as she watched him walk away and disappear among the bustling crowd.

The close crush of the shop had bothered her. Looking down the street Seven noticed a place where it opened up into green space, and turned curiously in that direction.

"Hee-yah!" Seven's gaze shot upward as she entered the open green area. Once passing through the trees, she had a clear view of a group of males and females uniformed in slick green or blue athletic skin-tight suits feet strapped to small devices providing anti-gravity lift. They looped and whirled in the air, chasing with small gray paddles, after a speeding small red ball. She winced sympathetically observing the close pass of two players both diving for their elusive quarry.

Standing back, she observed play for several minutes, identifying a number of *Voyager* crewmembers among the teams which slid in and out of play in groups, apparently a tournament format of some kind, the victor remaining in the air to take on all comers.

After witnessing a maneuver that knocked dark-haired Harry Kim off his anti-grav propellers, Seven decided against attempting to join the play. Dropping her eyes she realized there was a small crowd that had begun to gather around her location. She lowered her hands from shielding her eyes and identified others from *Voyager* in the group.

"Tuvok?"

"Seven."

She noted that while he was not attired as the players, he was outfitted in a sleeveless top and tight pants, perhaps his own comfortable version of the game's suit. And slung over his left shoulder he carried a small pack. "Are you engaged in this game?"

"I am not."

"What activity have you chosen for your shore leave?"

She followed quietly as he began moving away from the crowd. Idly she noted their direction was still further from the city onto paths that led to the wilderness beyond. "I have chosen to explore their natural beauty," he explained.

"A laudable activity," she commented. "The cardiovascular benefits alone..."

"Yes. Seven, was there a particular reason you accompanied me?"

She sighed. "I am uncertain what would be appropriate for shore leave."

"I have found that doing something that is of interest to me, it does not matter what others would think. I have been refreshed, and that is, after all, the point of shore leave."

"What would the captain do to refresh herself?"

"The captain reported her whereabouts would be at a set of springs due east of here." He pointed.

*Alone*, Seven thought. She glanced toward the ridge where Tuvok had indicated. "What is she doing at the springs?" she thought to ask.

"Diving I believe. She is quite fond of the sport and her manifest of equipment included the appropriate gear for such activity."

"I would like to see this diving," she thought, not realizing she had spoken aloud until Tuvok replied.

"You are her pupil in many things. Perhaps she would not mind a demonstration." If his voice held any inflection regarding knowledge of the change in the captain and Seven's rapport, she did not notice it though she looked curiously at him for a long time. "I must be going," he said finally.

"Thank you for your company," Seven offered in farewell. "I will see you back on *Voyager* in three days."

"Give my regards to the captain when you find her."

"I will." Seven began the hike toward the ridge, wondering if the captain would be as Tuvok suggested, pleased to see her, and perhaps teach her this 'diving' skill. She found herself looking forward to seeing Janeway again, having only a vague recollection of their interaction the previous night, and not much of it very dignified.

At the very least, Seven decided, she owed the captain an apology. Then she would move on... practice her cooking, or some other activity aboard ship.

Seven's walk brought her to the opening of an abrupt lake. Assembled in the grasses at the water's edge was a starfleet-issue personal habitat. The sound of splashing drew the Borg's gaze out over the water just as she was about to enter the habitat.

A figure bobbed in the shallow area near a rocky outcropping. Wet red hair was pinned under a swimmer's mask when the head came up out of the water, gazing downward at something beneath the surface.

Strong arms moved into powerful strokes, carrying the body across the water, directly toward Seven's position. She froze in fascination as the wetsuit-clad figure rose from the water, standing full-height. Water streamed off the suit's red shoulders and down the body-hugging ebony length. Bare feet stepped out onto the grass and wiggled -- Seven checked a second time just to be certain -- in the grasses. Her gaze slid up the form and came to rest on the auburn head.

Finally slender hands dropped a tube assembly and lifted off the mask, blue eyes becoming evident as they lit on her. "Seven!"

"Captain."

"What brings you by? Something wrong with the ship?" She glanced toward her comm badge, still pinned to her tunic lying against the grass near Seven's feet.

*Always concerned for her command*, Seven thought with admiration. "No, there is nothing wrong with the ship. I only wanted to apologize for my behavior last night."

"It's all right, Seven. Everyone overindulges every once in a while." Janeway fluffed her hair carefully with her fingers and went on, "You are all right though? You were gone by the time I woke." Janeway hesitated and Seven wondered. "Your things were gone when I returned to pack for shore leave."

Seven watched Janeway strip out of the wetsuit, smoothly muscled arms revealed, shortening her breath. Her chest tightened anxiously then released when she found the older woman wearing a one piece black suit underneath. "I will fetch you a towel," she offered, leaning into the habitat and coming up with a square of the standard issue Federation blue drying cloth which she passed to Janeway.

After patting her face, neck and shoulders dry, Janeway shrugged. "Well, I'm about to make myself some dinner if you'd like to stay for a bite?"

"I should leave you to your shore leave and return to the ship."

"I gave orders for you to take shore leave too, Seven. Why don't you stay?"

"Many crew would prefer to be alone."

"I don't mind."

"We are no longer 'roommates'. You are not required to spend time with me."

"I spent time with you Seven because I like you. We're friends..." Again the hesitation. "I thought, we were... becoming more."

"You are referring to our sexual play?"

Janeway blushed. "Not only that." Turning away from Seven she seemed to collect herself then turned back. "Would you please stay, at least for dinner? I... maybe we ought to talk."

Seven looked puzzled at Janeway, who seemed uncertain but nevertheless reached out and took Seven's hand in her own, leading her inside the habitat.

The quarters were cramped, Seven having never had to experience the single occupancy habitats, but there was a portable replicator, an air mattress which served as a bed and a sizable packing crate containing other necessities which the captain quickly arranged as a table, setting utensils and glasses on the top. She called up a pair of dishes then asked, "Pasta all right? I tend to eat high carb meals on dive trips."

Seven nodded, a bit stunned by the turn of events. She took the plate Janeway passed her.

"Go on. Sit down." Janeway settled on the floor of the habitat, tucking her feet under her, gesturing for Seven to sit opposite. She picked up her fork; Seven followed suit. "Well?"

Seven skewered pieces of the white sauce-covered pasta curls and tasted them. "The meal is satisfactory."

Janeway grinned. "Great. Eat up. Maybe I'll take you into the springs for a swim before it gets too dark."

When the meal was over, Kathryn recycled their waste. Seven followed her back out into what was rapidly turning into an evening sky. The sunset fragmented in the atmosphere, spreading the light spectrum spectacularly across the sky in oranges, reds, golds, and finally blues, edging toward violet.

"I should call up and request a wetsuit for you if you're going to dive," she said idly, having paused at the doorway of the hut to watch Seven standing in the open space, turning with her gaze focused on the sky.

The words broke the silence and Seven dropped her chin turning to look at her. "I do not believe I have ever seen a planetary sunset," was all she said.

Janeway felt a lump catch in her throat. *A child of the stars.* "It is beautiful."

"The light refraction is... astonishing."

The captain reached out and put a hand on Seven's forearm. "Look out over the water." She directed the former Borg's gaze where the water, touched by a light evening breeze, offered up a rippled reflection of the sunset. "Nice?"

Seven nodded. "You wish to go in now?"

"No. We need to let our food settle. Besides it'll be dark soon. It'd be better to just start in the morning."

"I would like to stay."

"I thought you might." Kathryn nudged Seven's shoulder. "You could take off your shoes and slip your feet in the water. I'll be right back."

The captain disappeared inside the habitat as Seven studied her feet. "Janeway to *Voyager*."

"*Voyager here, captain.*" The captain thought she recognized Marla Gilmore's voice over the comm.

"I need some extra supplies. Beam me directly to my quarters?"

"Certainly, Captain." The transporter effect captured her. When Janeway opened her eyes she was in her living room. Quickly she replicated the wetsuit and a bathing suit for Seven's dimensions and a set of light clothing. She ruminated about the undergarments for a moment then decided it was her place. Finally she ordered up a weight-belt, fins, mask and snorkle assembly. *A lot of replicator rations for all that*, she thought, then smiled. *Some concentrated time with Seven would be worth every one though.*

"Captain to transporter room."

"*Yes ma'am.*"

One to beam to the following coordinates. She ticked off the lake's location and found herself back inside the habitat. Tucking the wetsuit and water gear aside for the moment, she stepped out into the semi-darkness and identified the golden head by the water's edge. "You could change if you like," she called out.

Seven turned and Janeway could see that she had taken her advice to sit at the water. One knee was tucked up against her chest and the other foot clearly dangled off the rocky ledge into the water. In a display of graceful power, Seven rose to her feet, walking across the ground on bare feet. The blue biosuit glittered slightly as she approached. "Thank you."

Passing over the small bag. "There are some things in there."

Seven nodded and entered the habitat. Janeway was near enough to the doorway to glance inside, but restrained herself from doing so. Seven had moved out of the quarters that morning for a reason. Until Janeway found out why she was not going to pressure Seven into continuing their intimacies.

Though she wanted to. Desperately. However, since their first night together, when Janeway had reconciled personal desires and duty to take Seven into her own heart, they had only curled up together night after night, close but not intimate. Due to the work to establish the Klingons' colony both had fallen into bed too tired for anything more.

She crossed her arms over her chest, holding on to the memory, looking up as the first stars became visible in the night sky. *I wish I may, I wish I might, have the wish I wish tonight...*

She heard light steps behind her. Despite her height, Seven really could move with the lightness of a predator, Kathryn thought as she turned around. She however had become attuned to those soft footsteps crossing her living space before a weight would unsettle the bed mere moments before...

Strong arms wrapped around her shoulders, tugging her back against a lean body, body heat easily mingling between her back and Seven's chest. "Thank you," came whispered in her ear.

Kathryn did not question what Seven was thanking her for, only that the chance had come to feel the young woman's touch again. She nodded, too moved to respond for the moment.

## Chapter 4

The shoulders and back pressed against Seven's chest shuddered delicately in her grasp. For a moment Seven considered that she had expressed her appreciation for the garments incorrectly and loosened her grip. But Kathryn's hands lifted, covering her own, keeping her in place. Seven attempted to discern a pattern to the light tracing the other woman was doing over the Borg mesh

and skin of her left hand and forearm. "Kathryn?" she asked quietly.

"I missed you," Janeway said softly. The comment was inaudible to anyone other than Seven, who was grateful at that moment for the Borg enhancements to her hearing. She was able to detect not only the words, but also the tremor in the usually strong voice that accompanied the admission.

Seven bent her head and brushed her cheek against Kathryn's, feeling the silk of her auburn hair against her skin, but also letting Kathryn feel the totality of being surrounded. "If you missed me, why have we not had until now to spend time together?"

"You were bothered by my not being with you at the party. And I'm sorry about that. If I had known.."

Seven frowned. "I do not recall telling you anything about the party.."

"When you were...inebriated," Kathryn offered, sounding diplomatic. "You expressed distress that we were not a 'couple' at the party."

"I do seem to recall thinking something like that...briefly. However, I am aware that it was an official function. You were required to be elsewhere."

Kathryn's hands moved over Seven's mesh covering again, and the former Borg was beginning to understand the action for temporizing, or at least, a stalling tactic while Janeway considered what to say. "I wasn't *required*," she said softly. "I did not consider that you would want me around. I'm sorry for that."

"I have very much enjoyed our interactions. Why would you consider that I would not want you around?"

"You moved out, didn't you?" Kathryn's question was accompanied by a quickly turned head. Implacability covered over a pained expression almost too quickly for Seven's human eye to see. But she did see it. And Seven realized that Janeway had been hurt by Seven's departure from the captain's quarters.

"You are upset that I have returned to the Cargo Bay," she ventured. "I thought it was expected. You did issue a general order for the crew to discontinue the emergency status engaged when the Klingons came aboard."

"Everyone stopped immediately. Yes, I know." Janeway appeared saddened by the fact, dropping her chin and moving her gaze from Seven's face. "I just didn't think you would be one of them."

"Did you think I would not follow orders?" Now Seven recognized hurt running through her response. "I have tried very hard to not disappoint you in recent months. Your opinion of me, and my adaptability, means a great deal to me."

Janeway blinked, returning her gaze to Seven's, her teeth catching at her bottom lip for a moment. "I haven't been disappointed in you for months, Seven."

"Then my efforts have been successful," Seven concluded. "So, why would you expect I would disregard this order?"

The other woman's throat moved in a swallow before she spoke, and again, Seven felt fingertips moving over her Borg mesh. She turned her palm over then and captured Janeway's fingers, stilling them. Blue-gray swirled for dominance as Kathryn's gaze lifted, and she offered a rueful, hopeful smile. "I thought perhaps I...that is, that sleeping agreed with you. That you might... stay?"

Seven felt a gentle pressure form somewhere deep in her stomach, the sensation filling her with a pleasant warmth, and she felt the muscles of her face curve into a generous smile. "You... want me to stay...with you?"

Kathryn blinked. Seven's response surprised her. "Did you find the Cargo Bay suitable after staying in my quarters? Did you have trouble adjusting to regenerating again?"

"Regeneration is an automatic process. It does not require adjustment," Seven reported factually. Janeway stiffened in her arms, her expression unreadable.

"You didn't, ah, feel anything different?"

Seven considered the experiential data between sleeping and regenerating and began to list them. "I cannot wear anything loose, as I did while sleeping. It would become entangled in the alcove's mechanisms."

"I see." Kathryn leaned against the trunk of a nearby tree and sank slowly to sit on the ground. "Anything else?" She patted the ground next to her in invitation.

Seven accepted the invitation as she considered further differences. "I cannot lie down in the alcove."

"And you enjoyed that when you were...in bed?"

"Yes," Seven said, feeling Janeway's hand slip into hers as their legs aligned. "I 'enjoyed' lying prone. Awakening is a very different experience as well. After regenerating it is a very instantaneous alertness. I found I became accustomed during the past week to awakening slowly and identifying where our bodies were touching," she explained, noting with a half smile as their knees currently brushed, and Janeway's shoe lightly brushed the skin of Seven's calf just above the ankle.

"I am fond of the textures of your skin," she said, moving her own fingertips now over Janeway's bare thigh.

When she glanced toward the silent captain, Seven found her head down. Auburn hair fell forward to obscure the other woman's face from Seven's observation. With her right hand, Seven reached across her body and smoothed her thumb and forefinger over Kathryn's chin, lifting it so she could meet her eyes.

Janeway was swallowing again, and the motion drew Seven's gaze intently to the mulberry lips. With a sudden sensory vividness that made her wet her lips with her tongue, she recalled their taste, wanting to taste them again now. "Would it be permissible for me to kiss you?" Seven asked, delighting in the warmth of the other woman's skin under her Human hand.

"I...wouldn't mind," Kathryn whispered. Her right hand came up and cupped Seven's cheek, the contact drawing Seven in closer.

"Thank you," Seven said, for an entirely different reason than she had at the beginning of this conversation. Then she brought her lips against Kathryn's and felt them both tremble as she deepened the kiss as she had learned from their sexual play.

"Oh, God, no. Thank you, Seven." Kathryn's arms were suddenly around Seven's shoulders, gripping her in a possessive hug that soon found fingers trailing through hair, loosening the bun Seven customarily wore, until her hair fell to her blouse collar, tickling her own neck as it moved with her own motions, trying to keep her mouth upon Kathryn's with such a hunger she was almost frightened. She gripped Kathryn to calm her own fears, and found security in their heated lengths molding together.

She had not realized, until Kathryn squeaked, how they had moved to lie against the ground, and Seven had rolled atop her, to finally move her kisses from Kathryn's mouth, down her throat and inhaled the scents that clung to the compact body from her earlier diving explorations. She had become familiar, night after night, wrapped around the woman as they slept, of the subtleties of

Kathryn Janeway's natural body scents and found herself intrigued by the changes wrought by fresh spring fed waters laced with the minerals of a planet's mantle. "You are a delightful sensory experience, Kathryn Janeway," she murmured.

A throaty chuckle shimmered the skin of Kathryn's neck under Seven's lips. "So are you, Seven," she replied, and Seven felt the chest beneath her palms expand as Janeway inhaled and buried her nose in Seven's hair. "So are you."

"We have not engaged in sexual play in nearly eight days," Seven pointed out, knowing she wished to engage in some now. "However, if it is not appropriate, you must tell me and I shall stop."

"Stop?" Kathryn exhaled and lifted Seven's chin to meet her eyes. "Don't stop. We can make love any time you want," she offered.

"I have wanted since our first time, to repeat the experience."

"You didn't say anything," Kathryn said.

"I didn't know I could say anything. You would crawl into bed looking and sounding exhausted. It was important for you to sleep since you cannot regenerate to regain your energy more quickly."

"I did appreciate being able to sleep," Janeway admitted with a soft smile and vague nod. "However," she went on, gently pressing her lips to the corners of Seven's mouth between words. "I would've loved making love just as much...even more."

"It is nice to know that you did not want to cease our interaction."

"Does that mean you'll consider moving back in?"

"No," Seven replied, while her fingers found their way under Kathryn's blouse, and Kathryn's moved under hers. The small hands stilled against her stomach. "I do not have to consider it," she explained.

"What about regenerating?"

"If my implants continue to function at normal levels I require an eight-hour cycle only once every 72 hours." Seven felt it important to mention, "In the event I am damaged, however, I will require more time."

"But the rest of the time?"

Seven smiled, understanding the unspoken invitation in a way she could not explain, as Kathryn's gaze went more blue, deepening almost to violet. "The rest of the time, I could spend sleeping with you."

Kathryn's face took on a slow, brilliant smile. The expression caused a reaction deep in Seven's chest, radiating to her groin and she squirmed a bit to relieve the tension gathering in her center. Janeway's hands seemed instinctively drawn there following Seven's shiver and small hands felt almost unbearably hot cupping against her groin. "That seems to settle things," Kathryn said, her voice dropping to a husky roll over Seven's senses. "For now."

As the two women began playing on the ground, exploring one another after a week of denial, Seven suddenly felt very pleasantly *unsettled*.

## Chapter 5

Seven rolled over, and the odd sensation jolted her from sleep. She blinked into the half-light of the room and identified the habitat's bedroom. She and the captain had retired when the starlight sky, a mesmerizing scene as they sat at the edge of the springs, still could not keep at bay the auburn-haired woman's yawns. Wrapping around the compact form, Seven had found sleep

easily.

Identifying the sun's light slipping in through an opened window, Seven sat up, holding the covers to herself as she looked around for Kathryn.

"Sleep well?" A husky voice drew her eyes to a shadowed alcove with a sink and small toilet. Janeway was half-in and half-out of a slick black insulated wetsuit. A blue stripe streaked down each side, from under her arms to her bare feet.

"Yes. Did you?"

"Yes, I did." Kathryn slipped onto the edge of the bed, tucking a leg up underneath her. She reached for Seven's hands resting on the covers. "Are you ready for a swim?"

"Thank you for letting me join you, Seven" said honestly.

"I'm sorry I didn't invite you straight out. I wanted to. I just..!" Seven's lips soothed over her own making her silent. Seven knew how uncertain Janeway had been. They had talked long after making love, Seven discovering that Janeway suffered herself from the same fears as Seven, about finding acceptance for who she was, outside of what she needed to be. Now reassured anew by Seven's kiss Janeway left the bed drawing Seven with her. "Come on. Bathing suit first, then I've got a wetsuit with your name on it."

Leaning back into the small dressing area, she emerged again with a cobalt blue bathing suit. "I hope it fits. I used the dimensions from your biosuit pattern we stored in my replicator."

"Thank you." Standing nude, Seven considered the garment and then slipped it on. Kathryn helped her adjust herself inside the lined cups and tightening the support strap across her back. "Suitable," she assessed.

Seven watched Janeway's lips quirk and realized she had said something amusing. But then Kathryn's gaze turned serious, and her eyes darkened with a memory of the previous evening's passion. "Wetsuit's next." Her voice sounded almost regretful. Seven too was considering another activity, even though she was interested in learning swimming and scuba to be able to share something special with Kathryn.

They both turned their minds to the coming dive expedition and Seven covered her suit with the wetsuit. It did indeed fit properly even to the length of leg, leaving tapered elegant feet ready for fins, which Kathryn produced next. "Hang on to these. We'll put them on in the water."

By the door, Janeway sorted their mouthpieces, the snorkel, masks, fins and weight-belts, handing one each to Seven for the younger woman to carry. "We'll work in the shallows, until your comfortable with the breathing technique."

Bare feet padding through the grass and smooth rocks, Janeway led down a moderately worn path to the springs. She set down her gear and settled at the ledge, dangling her feet in the water and indicating Seven should do the same.

"Wet feet are easier to slip in the rubber," she explained. "Besides it gives us a chance to decide if the water'll be too cold for a dive."

"It is 20C," Seven informed her, after only a momentary dip of her foot beneath the surface.

Curling up for a moment on the spring's edge, tucking her chin over her bent right knee and wrapping her forearms around her calf, Janeway studied Seven inquisitively. "Is every part of your body enhanced with sensors, Seven?"

"My skin's behavior is still largely regulated by my nanoprobes and they constantly report temperatures and environmental information." Seven finished securing on the second of her fins and slipped into the water. Kathryn was only a moment behind her. They walked around the shallows getting accustomed to the flows and the cool temperature. Seven watched her feet and adjusted to

the feel of the rubber shifting in the light current, occasionally off-setting her balance. Kathryn's firm grip, surprising Seven with its assurance and strength, kept her on her feet.

"The nanoprobe is the reason you don't sweat, right?"

"I will eventually perspire. However my threshold for that involuntary excretion is much higher than most humans."

Janeway thought about other excretions and blushed, deciding to end the questioning.

"Ready to try breathing?" She dunked herself, partly to cool her heated face and partly to dampen her hair so she could slip her mask over her face. Then she helped Seven adjust her own. She collected Seven's hair back into a low ponytail to keep the bulk of the golden mass from swirling in her face.

She demonstrated placing the snorkel's mouthpiece and securing the tube to the side of the mask. Pulling hers out though, so she could speak clearly, she nudged Seven's shoulder. "All right. I'll stay up here... Drop your face in the water and keep the seal against your lips while you breathe normally." Holding Seven's left hand, Kathryn rubbed her right shoulder encouragingly she moved beneath the water. She brushed fingers over the opening of the snorkel and felt Seven's warm exhalations traveling up through the tube. "Good. Keep it up."

Keeping hold of Seven's hand, though switching so she could settle her own mask in place with her stronger left hand, Kathryn dropped her face under the surface and searched out Seven in the clear water. She offered the woman a thumbs-up signal and squeezed her fingers lightly. Then pointing to the surface she indicated they should rise.

Removing the snorkel as Seven did the same, she explained, "Snorkels are for shallow dives. The breathing technique with the air recyclers is the same and they will allow us to go much deeper."

"I understand."

"Shall we practice? There are some interesting lichen formations we can swim along to get you used to observing things underwater."

Seven nodded and the two walked along the bottom, faces in the water, fingers intertwined. She reached out and experienced the velvet touch of the wet lichen and marveled at the smoothness of the craggy rocks and coral formations. Learning to look around, she spotted the dark opening to the spring itself, bubbles flowing out in steady streams.

When they came up, she suggested, "Perhaps we can try the recyclers and tanks now?"

"If you're certain."

"You came to dive."

"I don't want you to get hurt."

"I will not. You are here."

Kathryn accepted the confident smile and nodded. "All right." She led the way back over to the ledge where their equipment and towels lay. Seven reached for a weight-belt and Janeway stayed her hand. "Not yet. If it's that deep, I don't want to go just yet. Adjusting these can be tricky. We'll keep it simple for your first dive."

Seven nodded. Kathryn hefted a tiny tank. Used in conjunction with the aquatic breather it would help a diver adjust to pressure changes by changing the recycled oxygen's pressure as it moved through the recycler and into their lungs. It was considerably smaller than it might have been three hundred years ago, but water depths still plagued human physiology with pressure problems. While securing it and the tubes up around Seven's shoulders, until the mouthpiece was in front of her, the experienced diver explained, "It's just like the snorkel except the air mixture can be

regulated. We won't go deep enough to need to change the pressure, but by adjusting it a diver can swim beyond the 1 atmosphere in depth."

"That is over one hundred ten meters," Seven commented.

"Yes, it is. We won't go down more than thirty meters today I think." Seven took the mouthpiece from the other woman's fingers, enjoying the feel of their fingertips touching for a brief moment. She tucked the molded apparatus between her lips, and breathed steadily. At Kathryn's questioning look she nodded, indicating her readiness. Her own lips turned up at the captain's smile. The captain settled her own tank and tubes and mouthpiece. Observing the thumbs-up, Seven slowly lowered herself into the water.

Completely submerged, Seven found it relatively easy to move. Further below the surface and able to turn in any direction, she was astounded by the difference in the view.

She felt a tap on her shoulder and looked back to see Kathryn gesturing. The smaller woman "sat" in the water, fins pointed toward Seven, moving her legs and flapping the fins. She understood the message that the fins were helpful for propelling her as Kathryn flipped over and with deceptively slow strokes darted quickly away until she was not much more than a dark form in the clear water. She followed, testing the motion and finding it easy to replicate.

Despite the mouthpiece, Seven could clearly tell Janeway was smiling when she finally swam up alongside the compact captain. With a flip of her fins, Janeway was off again, encouraging Seven to follow as they started slowly toward the rock formations around the springs opening. The natural light from above began to fade away, leaving the women in a graying twilight. Seven felt more than saw Janeway return to her side, and then a strong smooth hand slipped into her own.

Kathryn could not believe how much fun she was having. The pace was leisurely and Seven new to the skill, which kept the captain keyed on her partner as much as their surroundings. She drew Seven down, and showed her how to hold herself in place, "sitting" on the rocks on the bottom. She pointed out the few small groups of fish-like creatures wiggling past. Their structure and schooling behavior was so reminiscent of their Earth counterparts she could almost believe, here, below the surface of the water, that they weren't on some alien planet thousands of light years from home. Instead, in one of the springs she had enjoyed diving as a young high school and Academy student. She looked toward Seven and her smile grew even more delighted. *A love to share it with makes it perfect.*

Seven observed everything around them with a fascination that bespoke both her intellect and her emotional youth. Kathryn would have sworn the blonde giggled when she brushed her fingers across the sides of a large grouper-like fish. Their hands slipped together again, this time initiated by Seven herself. She turned to look up at the masked face. Gesturing to the surface she smiled when Seven only shook her head, continuing on again to explore further. The younger woman was not yet ready to leave.

She settled back, lacing her hands across her stomach and watched the watery world around them flow past as Seven explored a bed of fernlike vegetation. Her body sense prickled, prodding Kathryn from her lazy position. Cautiously she scanned the vicinity. A larger dark swimming form circulated in the vague gray of the spring opening. It seemed to be nibbling around the opening as a bottom feeder. Instinct suggested they move away carefully before it considered them as delectable as the small fish it was mauling.

Janeway grasped Seven's arm and held her hand out flat then gestured upward, the signal to rise slowly. She prodded Seven off the rocks and disturbing the water as little as possible, moved

her fins, inexorably allowing her body to rise to the surface. Following, Seven's head broke the surface just after her.

Seven removed her mask and they shared a smile, stroking easily side-by-side back to the rock ledge where they helped each other off with their tanks and pushed themselves out of the water. Stripping out of their wetsuits, they lay on the ground, bodies loose and minds drifting like the cloud formations in the sky. Their damp skin warmed quickly in the sun.

"That was a fascinating experience."

"It's been a long time since I indulged that particular hobby," Kathryn said. "I don't always have a partner to go."

"Who was the last person you took diving?" Seven asked, stretching out alongside Kathryn and resting her head on her upturned palm and studying the captain's relaxed posture and face with fascination.

"Hobbes... um... Mark Johnson... he... was my fiancé. We dove into the caves of Mars as we had as children. His way of sending me off safely. A ritual before each of my cruises, I guess..." Kathryn's voice trailed off in memory.

"Fiancé? Someone you were going to marry?"

"Yes." Seven's face took on a shadow and she started to turn away from Kathryn. "But, Seven?"

"Yes?" Definite upset was clear in the low tone.

She rubbed Seven's arm, right along the edge of an implant, feeling the tension in the muscles. "Mark married someone else about two years ago." She paused, setting her thoughts in order before beginning. "Do you remember when *Voyager* got the first messages from home?" Seven nodded. Janeway continued rubbing Seven's arm, inching her way toward the young woman's shoulder and turning onto her side to face her. "Chakotay is the only other person who knows this. My letter was from Mark. He said he waited... the longest of almost anyone. But then... he married a woman he works with. It hurt for a long time. He hasn't written me since."

"Do you receive personal letters in the new monthly datastreams?"

"Admiral Paris wrote last month." Seven looked askance at her. Janeway shook her head. "For once, it wasn't business. He was my mentor in the Academy."

Seven's eyes took on a soft cast as she obviously considered the term 'mentor', Janeway's word for their relationship up until recently, and Janeway blushed as she considered what Seven might be modifying the term to mean now. She shook her own head and continued her explanation to Seven.

"My... sister wrote in the one before that." Too late, she felt the darkness slip over her remembering her sister's news, and hurried to change the focus of the conversation. She rolled casually over Seven's shoulder, hoping the intimacy would encourage Seven. "Have you received any letters?"

"No." Her inflection seemed to Janeway to be just slightly disappointed. The conclusion was reinforced by Seven's further detail. "My... connections... have apparently decided not to contact me."

"I can inquire if Starfleet was able to find a relative... if you want?"

"I do not know whether I want to or not."

"Sometimes family is all we have, Seven," Janeway said gently.

"*Voyager* is my family. No one else... knows me." Seven rolled onto her side and asked, "I will share in your family news instead. Tell me about your sister's letter."

Janeway frowned. That had not been her intention. "I... well..."

## Chapter 6

Seven felt an odd reaction in Kathryn's body to her question. The muscles tightened across the other woman's chest and arms where she was bracing herself in a half-reclining position. The azure in her eyes was rapidly shading toward gray.

It had been this same woman, the 'captain' quickly returning after a long, wonderful time of Seven sharing time with 'Kathryn', that led to Seven being left alone in the captain's quarters for over two hours after Janeway forlornly insisted it wouldn't work. Yet again Seven found herself angry with the Doctor for not preparing her for dealing with the hurt. She wondered how she could prevent her own hurt as well as alleviate Kathryn's.

She suspected Janeway's unease would not be resolved with a bouquet of flowers and a whispered, "I love you." So Seven tried the only thing she could. She rolled over so she was gently cradling Kathryn's side, laid her right hand gently across the taut stomach and coaxed to be let in. "Please?" she asked quietly. "Please." She pressed her full lips against Kathryn's hardened jaw then slid them over the tightly compressed mulberry lips. Again it was sensation only, but to Seven it did seem that Janeway began to soften, even shudder gently. "Tell me about your sister's letter."

Curling into Seven's body, Janeway lifted her hand to cup Seven's right cheek. The older woman briefly deepened the kiss, enhancing their contact - Seven could feel Kathryn's hips slide against her own. She caught a hitched breath of her own trying to escape as the sensation jolted her own desires awake. When they parted, Kathryn's eyes were once again a pure sapphire, soft and open. "I haven't been able to tell anyone," Kathryn whispered, her voice harsh as she tried to hide her pain.

Seven did not pause to congratulate herself on her success. Instead knowing how much she always appreciated Kathryn's ability to help her sort out her own difficulties, Seven offered the same in return. Gently she caught the older woman around the waist, soothing her larger hands against the curves. "I will listen," she promised in solemn reassurance.

Kathryn choked a bit before beginning, and her eyes brimmed with the shine of unshed tears. *What would this news be that it could hurt her so much?* Seven wondered and she tightened her grip.

Finally Kathryn began. "She's living in San Francisco now..."

"Is she presenting art work, or attending school? You mentioned she was an artist."

Kathryn blinked. "I didn't think I had."

"When we were first in the da Vinci holoprogram together and I expressed interest in the Maestro's paintings you revealed the information about your sister. You said 'Phoebe would be ecstatic'."

"Oh." Janeway fell silent. Seven worried her speaking, when she had said only that she would listen, had concluded Kathryn's willingness to share. "I apologize for interrupting. Continue."

Kathryn's melancholy features briefly quirked into a smile, gone again just as suddenly. "Phoebe's married. She lives there with her new husband."

When no further information was forthcoming, Seven prompted. "Is this all?"

"I don't have any idea who he is," she replied. "She's my sister. What if he's awful to her?"

What if he doesn't let her paint? What if she has...children?" Kathryn swallowed and her face looked as if she had swallowed something terribly bitter. "What if I never get to see her again?"

Seven was puzzled by the litany of questions. "Did she indicate who he is? Did she write that he is 'awful' to her? Has she stopped painting?" She shook her head. "And what would children have to do with your upset? In the natural course does not marriage produce children?"

Kathryn blinked. "You don't understand," she tried, once again feeling the aching blow from her sister's letter. "It wasn't supposed to be this way."

"How was it supposed to be?"

"Phoebe was the free spirit. She had vowed never to be married. She had plans to paint until she was too old and unable to see the canvas. I was the one who was supposed to marry...Mark..!" She shook her head. "I'm 30,000 light years away from her...I asked her to tell me about her new husband. But I'll have to wait a month to know. And my mother...didn't write at all."

She winced. She had not planned on revealing that particular hurt. But once she had started rambling, she realized her thoughts had run away with her tongue. Seven however said nothing about the changed topic. "Why would marriage end her other endeavors?" Seven paused, composing another question. "Though you do not have the chance to know for certain now, marriage to Mark Johnson would not have ended your career in Starfleet, correct?"

Seven's question in turn made Janeway reflect. Mark had been behind her when she took command of *Voyager*? He planned to remain planet-side doing his research, but he had never said once that she could not go. He had groused about Molly. But he had never said, 'No.' "But Phoebe might not have chosen someone as understanding."

"She is your sister. You were raised in the same environment. Raised by the same parental figures who gave you both the same rules, and values."

Seven shook her head. "If you would not have been swayed from your path, it is unlikely that Phoebe could have been swayed from her art."

*That apparently, was that*, Janeway thought wryly, looking at Seven's calm features. "You think I'm being foolish."

"You miss your family. As you indicated to me last evening, sometimes it is all you have. However, it is very unlikely that Phoebe would have chosen a mate who would have stifled her art. More likely she chose someone who appreciated it and her. Common interest was one of The Doctor's first criteria for choosing a mate. As much as I have a problem with his methods, that information, at least, was not in error."

Kathryn was grateful for the opening to a different topic. "You mentioned you dislike The Doctor, that's twice now I think. I always thought you got along. He helped you adjust."

"I have found his advice useless however when it comes to dealing with a long-term relationship such as ours has the potential to become. The Doctor taught me about dating, dancing, eating... 'small talk'. We did not discuss what happens afterward. We never discussed copulation in our lessons, which left me at a disadvantage in my first encounter with you. The Doctor's lessons were idealistic and impractical. You are hurting, yet I cannot see offering you materials such as flowers and flowery words will make you feel any better. It is frustrating not knowing what to do to help you." Seven took a breath to continue, but Kathryn's fingers across her lips silenced her.

The captain was stunned. As she had continued, Seven's voice grew harsh and angry, revealing frustrations of which Kathryn had been unaware. "Regardless of The Doctor's instructions or lack thereof, Seven..." she inhaled and exhaled, letting go of her distress at her sister's life moving ahead when her own had not. "You're doing a marvelous job helping me." Cupping Seven's

face in both palms, she traced the reminders of Seven's time in the Collective gently; the optical implant node surrounding her left eye, the claw-like starburst under her right ear. "I still miss my family," she offered. "But I'm really glad I have someone to tell when the loss hits me again."

"They are not lost, Kathryn. Just 30,000 light years away."

"You say that like it's nothing."

"It will be nothing to the new slipstream drive."

Recalling their conversation and the evening looking at the calculations Seven had been working on a week ago, Janeway asked, "What else have you done on the drive, Seven?"

"After we corrected the muon flow calculations I concluded my report, and have delivered the proposed specifications on the engine alterations to Lt. Torres. It is the chain of command to address my reports to the Engineering head first."

"Why didn't B'Elanna mention it to me?"

"You have not seen her since I delivered my report, and the Klingon resettlement diverted her attention from Engineering. I doubt that she has completely read the report."

Kathryn smiled then; a smile that promised a long vigorous night to Seven as she leaned forward and explored the full lips with barely restrained passion. "Seven...about those gifts to make me feel better?" Kathryn threw her arms around Seven's shoulders and pushed the young woman back against the ground. "You just gave me the best one in seven years. No..." she came up for a breath. "The best one in a lifetime."

"I did?" Kathryn settled her body over Seven's with delight, squirming as their bodies melded together against the ground. Seven's pale blue eyes darkened and her nostrils flared as passion awakened.

"You definitely did. Thank you," Kathryn assured, proceeding to thank Seven as thoroughly as the young woman's body could stand. In the end, Captain Kathryn Janeway conquered even the Borg. Seven's nanoprobes collapsed in surrender, and a sweat-laden, sweet-smelling young woman lay quiescent in Kathryn's arms following the rise and fall through bliss.

In the afterglow of their lovemaking, Seven listened once more as Kathryn, finally free of the jealousy of her sister, told Seven what was in the rest of the letter. "She was actually talking about children," Kathryn revealed. "I'd love to be home to have a chance to meet them before they grow up too much."

"And her art?"

"She didn't mention it. But she's living in San Francisco now. She took over my apartment on the Bay as a studio. She asked me if it was all right." Kathryn blushed. "I got angry."

Seven's lips pursed against Kathryn's temple. She did not have a sister herself, but as conscientious as she knew Kathryn to be, her sister could be little different. Such anger would hurt Phoebe. "Have you sent the letter yet?"

Kathryn shook her head. "No. It's in the next packet to be transmitted."

"That will not go out for ten more days. Good. I will extract the letter then you will remove the anger. And tell her how happy you are that she is taking care of your things. She obviously has hopes that you will return home as well."

Kathryn buried her face against Seven's breast, as Seven cradled her back in her hands with soft circular strokes. "Yes, Mother," Kathryn offered on a wry chuckle.

"You mentioned that your mother did not write." Kathryn's quick inhalation told Seven that she had hit upon another sore spot. "Do you know why?"

"She's sick. According to Phoebe she's extremely ill. She's been this way for months. Now

she doesn't leave the house because the disease has stiffened her muscles and made her very nearly paralyzed. Phoebe has her under doctor's care, but unless she can go to San Francisco, I'm scared she won't survive."

"What could she have contracted that would be incurable?" Seven asked, genuinely puzzled.

"Rydovan's Syndrome. It isn't incurable, just difficult, like Mother. She won't allow Phoebe to take her to Starfleet Medical. She has benefits there, being my father's widow, and my mother, but..."

"Ah. She is as stubborn as you are when it comes to being treated by doctors," Seven surmised dryly.

Kathryn gave a short bark of laughter. "Oh no, Seven. My mother's much worse."

Seven fell silent for a moment. "Do you believe you can talk your mother into treatment?"

"If I was there, I would certainly try."

"If you were not *there* per se but able to speak with her, would your persuasion be effective?"

"Seven..." Seven quieted Janeway with a gentle squeeze.

She admonished softly as she ticked over circuits and reroutes in her mind, "I am thinking."

"What are you thinking?"

"I will make my report to Engineering when I have completed my research," Seven pointed out. "I do not wish to 'get your hopes up' if it will not work."

"Get my hopes up? Seven, you've already planned our engine conversion so we can reach home, in mere days instead of years."

"It will still take nearly a year to implement and test the changes," Seven corrected. "Your mother might be deceased before then." She saw Kathryn swallow reflexively, pained at the thought of her mother's death. "I will not put you through that if I can help it."

"So what are you thinking?"

"If you could speak with your mother directly..."

"But we've only got the MIDAS array aligned once a month to receive and send packets to Headquarters."

"There is perhaps a way to align with the MIDAS array more...regularly," Seven offered cautiously. She was still puzzling through the mechanics of the alignment and was reluctant to say more. "I must work on the idea further."

Kathryn was silent so long that Seven spared her a glance from her internal calculations and studied the averted face in profile. Her palm as light against Seven's chest and she stared off unfocused. Auburn hair was in tumbled disarray around the solemn features, and Seven wondered aloud, "What are you considering?"

"How lucky I am that I made the choice to make a deal with the Borg, and got you."

"I am fortunate as well," Seven replied. She accepted Kathryn's kiss, not one of arousal but of gentle communion. When they separated, Kathryn leaned back against Seven's chest, encouraging the younger woman's hands to encircle her torso.

Lost in their thoughts, the women leaned against the ground, studying the sky and letting the clouds carry their emotions into the stratosphere as night descended on their quiet glade.

When Kathryn's stomach informed her that the sunset meant they had not only missed lunch but also dinner was late, they retreated to the habitat and prepared a light meal.

"It is our last night on the planet," Seven said. "Why do we not enjoy it outside?" Seven carried the tray of food and Kathryn led the way back to the spring carrying their cups of drink.

"I'll take you for a night dive," Kathryn suggested too. "So eat up. We'll go into the underground caverns. The tricorder suggests that there is a large one on the other side of the tunnel we saw earlier."

"I look forward to it," Seven responded just before Kathryn leaned over and soothed her mouth across Seven's lips. The captain's tongue licked out, removing sauce. Seven edged hers out also, finding the tangy tomato sauce at the corner of the other woman's mouth. The experience made her groin clench and she felt arousal sharply pulsing through her veins. "Though perhaps we could 'stay in' tonight?" she asked, hopefully.

"I have a better idea," Kathryn said. She finished her meal, and stood, presenting Seven with her hand. "Come on, let's get into our suits and find that cavern."

## Chapter 7

Kathryn watched Seven carefully during their descent into the spring opening. Surrounded by the alien waters, the captain still felt at home somehow, at peace for the first time in many years.

She thought about her last dive, with Mark, off the coast of Australia among that continent's massive, beautiful reefs. It had been their last trip together before she retrieved Tom Paris from the penal colony and reported to *Voyager* to ship out.

They had played among the dolphins and played catch among the reef formations. She felt herself choke a little as she wondered if his new wife would let them all go diving again someday. Shaking off her thoughts, she continued to follow Seven down through the shaft.

The larger woman was momentarily caught by the current and thrust back toward Kathryn. Knowing this could have happened was why the older woman had remained paced behind her partner. With calm skill she drifted to Seven and reached out, gripping her by the hand, stopping the unfortunate tumbling. She maneuvered to the side of the shaft, out of the path of the forceful current's blasts, pulling Seven with her.

Nervous blue eyes met hers and Kathryn caught the silently mouthed 'thank you' from the full lips. Tucking the breathing tube back for Seven, Kathryn tucked her fingers against the young woman's lips and shook her head with a smile. She gestured down. *Was Seven willing to continue?*

The blonde was apparently comfortable with continuing, however this time insisting that Kathryn lead, positioning herself behind the smaller woman and nudging her shoulders. Grinning, Kathryn patted Seven's hand and nodded, dropping her body into the shaft again. They hugged the lichen-slick tunnel wall until it began to level out and rise again. As it rose it split. Flipping on her wrist light, Janeway scanned the openings. The one to the right seemed to widen rather than narrow. It must lead to the cavern that her tricorder had detected the day before, she guessed, gesturing for Seven to follow as she led the way with a determined kick.

Stroking easily, they entered the wide aperture and began rising toward the changes in lighting. She paused for a minute wondering if somehow they had gone completely under the interior of the rock formation and were about to emerge on the other side, at some spring opening on the far side from the camp. *Well it'll be a hike back*, she decided, not minding the image of walking with Seven hand in hand through the woodlands back to their campsite. She nodded in agreement with her

decision. *Whatever we find*, she thought, *Seven will have never experienced it.*

When her head broke the surface, Kathryn had to admit to having never experienced anything like this herself. Treading in a wed silence she turned, taking in the sight of the massive

cavern into which they had emerged.

The arching walls crowned at the top with an opening to show them one of the planet's two moons through the aperture. Its reflective light danced on the water, a beautiful sight. But it was what the light did to the walls that absolutely took Kathryn's breath away.

The walls, which went up further than the height of *Voyager's* engine room, flickered as the light refracted and cascaded through the angles and edges of mineral crystals. Feeling her muscles protesting the steady treading after the long dive, Kathryn tore her eyes from the sight and brought her gaze down, searching for a rock shelf or some other place to emerge and rest.

She spotted a rock outcropping likely big enough to comfortably rest both herself and Seven, though she knew the former Borg could probably tread for a while longer. "Seven?"

"Yes?"

"Let's get out and rest over here."

"Do you wish to explore the tunnels?"

"What tunnels?" Kathryn had been so amazed by the glittering surface she had not seen any openings leading out beyond the cavern.

"There are several small tunnels we can walk once we emerge from the water. I thought that is why you wished to leave the water."

"Well, it sounds like a fine idea," Kathryn said, groaning just a little as she pulled herself onto the chosen rock outcropping. "But no. I'm ready for a bit of a rest."

Seven nodded, and Kathryn watched as the lean, lanky body rose from the water. Dappled in moonlit water and the reflection of the crystals around them, Seven seemed a goddess of lore, rising mightily with easy grace above her supplicants. After only another moment though, soft very warm blue eyes were even with hers and Kathryn could have sworn Seven was smiling, though her lips were not curved in the least. "Then we will rest," the blonde said softly, leaning back as she lifted her feet and stretched out on the rocks.

Kathryn heard the simple invitation in the voice and watched the quietly temporizing hand against Seven's suit as the blonde tried to decide what to do, exactly how to rest, when she obviously felt no similar need.

Entranced by those fingers moving over the smooth surface and too easily remembering the texture and colorations of the skin beneath, Kathryn too suddenly felt little need to rest. She reached out, scooted over and tucked her hand around Seven's own. "I think this cavern is beautiful," she said. "What do you think? Worth the dive?"

Seven's gaze, as Kathryn watched, flitted over the cavern's interior, interested but obviously not awed. Her head swiveled and as Kathryn was caught in the gaze she watched awe enter those eyes at last. She was caught breathless as Seven's left hand slipped from hers on Seven's lap, and Seven's right drifted up, cupping her cheek, and drawing her face close for examination. Her chin was lifted, and she was assessed, seriously, then a glow entered Seven's eyes.

"I think *you* are beautiful, Kathryn. *Nothing* compares."

Reverent fingertips traced Kathryn's features as she closed her eyes to swallow down the lump in her throat. Fingertips then traced over her eyelids and she forced them open just in time to find Seven's mouth descending to hers.

Seven spoke once again, her breath warm against Kathryn's lips. "You are Alpha and Omega to me...The first and the last...Perfection."

Her lips were covered then, offering Kathryn all that Seven was in that touch of their mouths. Then Seven's hands were everywhere. Kathryn gasped as her passion was awakened,

satiated, then kindled again. Over and over again Seven worshiped her as the goddess Kathryn had imagined the blonde to be. The moonlight refracted by the water and crystals surrounding them danced across their bodies, chased by kisses and touches, until the second moon ceased offering its light through the overhead aperture.

Kathryn lay cradled in Seven's arms, the longer woman's body her bed against the rocks. Seven's arms shielded her from the cool night air. She pressed impossibly closer, unheeding of implants, wanting only to crawl inside Seven and never leave.

She shivered involuntarily and groaned a soft protest as Seven shifted, lifting them both back to sitting on the rock shelf. "You should return to your suit," the former Borg insisted. "You are cold."

"I was quite happy exactly where I was," Kathryn protested. Seven did smile then. Kathryn laughed as the eyebrow arched over with her optical implant rose in question. "All right, I'll get dressed." She trailed her fingertips lovingly over Seven's own exposed flesh. It was also cool to the touch. "You should too."

Without a word they recovered themselves putting their bathing suits and wetsuits back on. Standing, they finally looked toward one of the tunnels Seven had noticed earlier.

"Shall we see where it goes?" Kathryn asked. Seven dipped her head in agreement and the two women tucked away their scuba gear against the cavern wall, leaving a transponder on it so they could retrieve it later. Wrist lamps in place they entered the tunnel, Kathryn reaching out and taking Seven's hand as the darkness closed around them.

Kathryn stepped carefully on the lichen-covered floor, pausing when she felt lifeforms shifting the moss-like substance in their scurries across the same surface. Seven's lamp focused ahead of them. She used her own to illuminate the near ground. "What's that?" she asked, noticing an impenetrable darkness that seemed to absorb Seven's light. It appeared to be perched in the upper corner of the tunnel where they traveled.

Seven stepped in front of Kathryn, between the captain and what she examined. Cautiously, she offered her left hand into the space, feeling the dramatic change in temperature as her hand vanished from sight.

"It is a black hole, but very weak," she reported calmly though she withdrew her hand with some difficulty. "I could retrieve the tricorder to be certain." She looked over her shoulder to find Kathryn peering at the hole. It measured less than a foot in diameter, but the swirls of light from their wrist lamps continued to be drawn inside to some vanishing point out of sight.

"Fascinating," Kathryn said. Seven smiled as she watched the scientist in her lover rise to the fore. "Where do you suppose it goes?"

"We would not fit in the aperture," Seven replied reasonably. "I could scan it with the tricorder. It would give us some idea."

Kathryn blinked and shook her head. "No. I'm not interested in getting into any trouble today. We'll just have to leave this mystery behind."

"As you wish."

Slim fingers wrapped around Seven's arm. "I wish for a lot of things, Seven. But trouble, on a gorgeous night like this, isn't one of them." She stepped around the blonde and began to lead again deeper into the quiet tunnel.

Seven took a step, starting to follow. A sudden change in the air flow around her made her look back and up.

The black hole was gone.

Stifling her curiosity, she quickly caught up to her captain.

## Chapter 8

The passageway grew narrower and darker angling downward. Seven moved closer to Kathryn in their progress. The wrist lamps grew dim, finally only glowing barely centimeters from their hands. Kathryn reached back to ascertain Seven's presence and slid her hand down Seven's arm until their fingers tangled.

"Captain?"

"Just assuring myself you're covering my back." Janeway's throaty explanation floated back to the younger woman in the darkness.

Seven engaged her infrared vision, finding the bluish-gray input less disconcerting than the utter pitch blackness. However, she became immediately aware of their predicament. "Captain, stop moving."

"What's wrong, Seven?"

"If you proceed less than one meter in any direction you will step into any of a dozen singularities currently surrounding you."

She felt the tremor in their mutual grip moments before Kathryn spoke again. "Advice?" she requested in a clipped, and now Seven recognized, uncertain tone.

"I will attempt to talk you around the fissures back to my position. Then we will proceed in a reverse manner and leave this tunnel."

"Well, since that looks to be my only option, you're in charge. I can't see anything at all."

"I will not fail you," Seven promised.

Exact edges were hard to distinguish in the infrared so Seven realized that she would have to guess at the amount of space Kathryn had available to maneuver. She pondered the problem in silence.

Too long. Uneasy fingers moved in her own. "Seven?"

"I am still here." She studied Kathryn's silhouette. "Can you turn around exactly in place?"

Anxiously she observed Kathryn's feet as the woman managed to turn 180 degrees, stepping across her own feet. The woman then started to step toward her.

"Captain!"

But it was too late. Janeway stepped down, directly into the nothingness of an open fissure. Seven hung on to the woman's hand, tumbling in after her. She maintained her grip, dimly aware that, should they survive this, she likely will have broken several of the more delicate bones in the slender hand.

There was nothing for her infrared vision to decipher in the cold, transitory realm of subspace. Then suddenly there was too much. Brightness exploded on her vision as she slammed into some obstacle.

And blacked out.

\* \* \*

Kathryn became aware of her surroundings only in bits and pieces. She lay face down against a cool, dry and manufacture-smooth surface. A floor probably. And the sensations were under her left hand as well as her right cheek so she guessed she was sprawled across it.

Under the pads of her right fingers however the surface was spongy, or at least similar to a pillow. She flexed her fingers, discovering agonizing pain in the effort that constricted her throat and made her want to throw up. Biting it back hurt too much and she whimpered.

The surface under her right hand moved then. Sounds began to intrude. Her hearing though seemed dulled. She felt, then finally heard, the rhythmic patting of something against her right shoulder. Finally she heard a sound like water trickling over rocks. The trickling faded to reveal a voice, offering words to her ears in a gentle whisper.

Several were indistinguishable, then she recognized her name. "Kathryn?" More words fell into place. "Open your eyes and move very carefully."

She tried. Pain lanced through her skull and she squeezed her lids tightly waiting for the spasms to pass.

Pressure she recognized as fingers, sifted through her hair, and massaged what felt like a bump the size of a small shuttlecraft rammed just behind her right ear. She gasped in pain, actually hearing her own exhalation. "Ungh." Not satisfied with unintelligible, she tried again. "Ow."

*Oh hey, she congratulated herself. You're making progress. Now let's see if we can't sit up.*

As she tightened the muscles in her right hand and arm, baring her teeth to mentally push past the pain, Kathryn tried to force herself up. She blinked away the tears and gradually the area around her came into focus. Sterile whiteness made her think of *Voyager's* sickbay and she thought perhaps Seven's reflexes had saved them, providing a timely beam-out. She flexed her features into a pleased smile.

"Why are you smiling? This experience is most unsettling."

Janeway twisted her neck to bring her eyes into line with the speaker. Seven came softly into focus. The former Borg drone's porcelain features were quite disturbed. "You're all right, aren't you?" Janeway asked. "We're aboard *Voyager* thanks to.."

"We are *not* aboard *Voyager*," Seven cut her off curtly. "I do not know where we are. And we could sink at any moment, unless you stop moving."

Janeway froze. She looked carefully past Seven as the young woman moved closer to her. The edge of where they were situated seemed to be bobbing in what looked like rough seas, the dark swirls and tiny wave caps jostled their perch.

She took a closer look at their location. The surface, to her admittedly only human senses, appeared to be porcelain, white and smooth. It tilted as Seven moved again. Janeway followed the line of Seven's body down to find her pulling her feet away from the water splashing over the side.

Turning in place, Kathryn tried to identify where they were. There were no marks on the surface and it appeared to be perfectly circular. The surface was also indented where she sat, in a perfect circle.

"Seven, what are we doing on a tea cup saucer?"

## Chapter 9

Janeway watched Seven with growing amusement over the next several minutes despite their predicament. The long-legged woman kept slipping toward the edge with the saucer's bobbing. Each time her feet splashed in the water, Seven scooted backwards.

With her most recent maneuver, Seven scooted back and planted her right hand on Janeway's thigh to hold on. She so clearly reminded Janeway of a puppy afraid of the water that the older

woman put a gentle hand over Seven's, loosening the grip and offered softly, "Seven, relax. What are you afraid of? You are in a wetsuit after all."

"We have no idea what is in the water." Seven arched her eyebrow, with the ocular eyepiece, giving the rough liquid surface a skeptical scan. "If it is water," she concluded with annoyance.

Kathryn considered that and moved toward Seven to peer over the edge. Seven's hands wrapped strongly around her shoulders. "Thanks," Kathryn said, patting Seven's left hand with her right hand on her left shoulder.

A closer look did not improve her understanding of their situation. Light penetrated no further than a few meters and then the depths became a forbidding black. She reached toward it, yelping when Seven's hand pulled it back suddenly.

"My apologies," Seven offered. "However, I believe it unwise to interact with it."

Janeway sighed, and half rolled over, looking back at Seven. "How else are we going to determine what it is?" She pointed out at the endless watery surroundings. "We're going to have to start paddling in *some* direction."

Seven fell silent considering their predicament. Leaning back, Janeway thought how much she loved watching her lover think. Seven's eyes narrowed as she studied the murky surface then her exoskeleton-covered left hand. The blue eyes cleared and she shrugged, absolutely humanly, making Janeway smile. Then Seven pulled up her left sleeve and plunged her hand into the water, up to the elbow.

"It is...warm," Seven reported with consideration. "20 degrees Celsius. It's molecular makeup is indeed mostly water...an oxygen atom paired with two hydrogen. There are suspensions in the water...of various compounds."

Janeway puzzled over the analysis. "So, it's not similar to a class-M ocean?"

Seven shook her head. "It's warmer and it's salts content is negligible."

"Then what is it?"

Seven removed her arms, shook it free of excess and readjusted her dive suit's sleeve again. "According to my library files, it most closely resembles Black Currant tea."

Kathryn blinked and looked at the surface again. Then she sprawled backward, looking up at the sky of their new environment. "So, let me get this straight," she began with a sigh. "We're floating on a saucer in the middle of a sea of tea?" She shook herself and sat up again. "Well then let's pick a direction. We're bound to find an edge somewhere."

"Why would logic dictate such an outcome?" Seven asked, though she followed Janeway's example, taking up a position on the edge. She used her hand, as Janeway did, to paddle themselves forward. Though forward was purely relative. Her internal compass could not seem to identify a north, south, east or west to provide any sort of orientation for their experience.

She began to regret indulging the captain's desire to explore the caverns under the lake.

"Because if this is a 'cup' of tea - certainly not my personal choice - then it stands to reason that we will find the 'cup' edge soon."

"May I remind you that we have no concept of scale? We could be paddling for days with no apparent changes in the scenery."

Janeway's voice was dry when she responded. "I was trying not to think about that," she admitted while still she pulled at the water with her left arm. "Think positively," she encouraged.

Seven reached across the distance separating them and caught Kathryn's right hand in her left. She offered a winsome smile when the older woman looked curiously at her. "I am positive I am happy we are still together."

Kathryn blushed under the blonde's sky blue regard. "Me too," she replied, finding her voice softened with deep emotion. "You're very good at being romantic," she added thoughtfully.

"I observed you many times as you pursued romantic encounters," Seven said softly. "You enjoyed those things from others. When I turned to my own thoughts of being with you, I endeavored to learn to be as you required."

Eyes filling with tears, Kathryn pulled her arm from the water, and wrapped herself around Seven, in the middle depression of the saucer. Legs around legs and arms around each other's backs, she whispered against full lips before kissing them. "I love you." A deep kiss followed, mouths gradually opening, tongues dueling as she and Seven found a moment of connection in the sea of tea. "You are all I will ever require."

Their bodies slipped around one another and Kathryn felt herself becoming aroused. She arched into Seven, feeling the other woman's body return the gesture. She clung tightly to the younger woman, feeling a reassurance envelop them both from the contact.

Seven, who had stretched out a little to meet Kathryn's body, felt her feet dip again into the liquid. She kissed Kathryn softly. "I will get out and push the saucer ahead of me for a while. We must return to *Voyager*."

Kathryn blinked at the change in demeanor. "Why?"

"I do not wish to make love to you on a saucer in a sea of tea. I would prefer such a thing to occur when we can take the time to be thorough."

The promise in that statement made Kathryn chuckle throatily and she hid it against her partner's throat. Then she kissed the pale skin and released Seven. "I'll trade places with you when you get tired."

Seven's stint as the little saucer's propeller lasted hours. The Borg-enhancements in her body made her endurance phenomenally long. Kathryn remained on her stomach, gaze meeting Seven's, watching for every sign of trouble, hands resting on Seven's forearms to gauge if she were tired before she spoke.

"I love you," she said again, feeling it to the depth of her soul in that instant. "More than I ever thought possible."

"Anything is possible," Seven replied succinctly, but her eyes were dancing with the enjoyment of hearing those words.

They talked quietly, Kathryn using the verbal chatter to continually gauge if Seven was tiring. Now that their own predicament was at least progressing in some manner, she wondered aloud, "I wonder what the rest of *Voyager* is doing now?"

"We can have no idea until we determine if there is any way to contact them," Seven said carefully. "Kathryn, it will do you no good to worry about that."

The captain sighed. "I know, but...I still do. I worry about every one of them."

"You have a deeply compassionate heart," Seven assessed. "It softens the hard decisions you must make as captain."

"You've been watching me for a long time, have you?" Kathryn said easily.

"I have been watching you since the day you severed me from the Collective. At first it was to learn ways to defeat you. Then it became about finding ways to aid you."

"You're getting winded," Janeway realized as Seven's last statement came almost without breath.

"I am not physically tired," Seven assured her. "I am simply moved by how much I have come to care for you."

With a cry of pleasure and anguish, Kathryn hugged Seven's shoulders and neck and Seven kicked harder through the water, determined to bring the captain back to her ship, and make love to her at the first safe opportunity.

## Chapter 10

The bright sunshine on her face made Kathryn drowsy.

"Kathryn?" Seven's call stirred her.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Where was I?"

"You were relating the events with Commander Chakotay and Seska who made him believe that her child was his."

"We all did," Janeway admitted, sounding a note of regret. "Only The Doctor disproved it. And that wasn't until after Seska had betrayed *Voyager* to the Kazon." Kathryn ached as she remembered telling Chakotay who had been secluded in his quarters after Seska vanished with the baby. "He wanted so much to be a father, I think."

"He has feelings for you," Seven revealed.

"He did," Janeway clarified.

"Did you?" Seven asked. To Janeway the woman sounded a little uneasy about the possible answers.

But, while Kathryn considered Chakotay a valued confidante as first officer, nothing about her relationship with him had ever felt in the least romantic. "No," she said finally.

Seven did not respond. The former Borg continued propelling their small saucer - an actual oversized teacup saucer - forward through the sea.

Suddenly the saucer tilted and jerked, sending Janeway sliding toward the edge. But her own safety did not jump first to her mind. Rolling onto her stomach quickly she grasped Seven's forearms to prevent the tired woman from going under the surface.

Despite her cybernetics Seven had obviously reached the end of her formidable endurance. The blue eyes that met Kathryn's however continued to glint with the steely refusal to give up. "Just rest up here," Kathryn coaxed. "You can't regenerate. At least you need to sleep."

Though she stood on a starship deck as this woman's captain, she used none of the command that usually laced her husky voice. There was only a plea as she stroked her thumbs over the blonde's straining wrists.

Seven's response however was matter-of-fact. "I will rest when we reach land."

"But that could be hours."

"It will not."

"How do you --?" Kathryn's protestation was cut off by the blast of a horn. Turning around she identified the silhouette of a seagoing vessel moving quickly toward their position.

An elated thought of rescue was quickly tamped down with the caution of one who has endured too often the approach of a 'friend' only to discover foes. "Do you think they see us?" she asked Seven.

The other woman stopped paddling, tilted her head to the side to view the vessel with her optical implant's more detailed resolution. "There are two rotund individuals on the deck pointing urgently at our position."

"So your answer is yes?" Janeway turned a wry grin on her often too literal companion.

"That is correct."

"State your intentions," Seven demanded of their would-be host.

A faintly amused smile fell to Janeway. *Is she always like this?* Flitted through her mind.

"Seven, I think you're mistaken. I don't see, or sense, Borg."

Seven frowned; she looked more intently at the faces that began surrounding them. "I was certain..." Kathryn offered her shoulder an encouraging squeeze as she felt Seven falter.

"It's all right." To their rescuers, Kathryn offered, "We're tired."

"I offer you our hospitality - " he seemed to stumble over the concept - "Zophir will show you below."

"Can you tell us where we are?" Kathryn asked.

"This is the Gray Sea," he answered. "We will put into port by nightfall at Orusk."

Janeway nodded; the names however meant nothing to her. A glance at Seven found the young woman still disconcerted, examining the faces around them. "Do you recognize the names, Seven?" she prodded quietly, as they followed Zophir, a rotund male dressed in not much more than rags for clothes, to a stair leading into the ship interior.

They were closely quartered inside, Kathryn feeling Seven's warm body against her back. Zophir paused in front of a metal door. After pushing it inward, he stepped back, never speaking. After a moment not hearing any voice in her head, Kathryn let her curiosity lead her forward.

She eased around the edge of the opening to look inside the space beyond. Two narrow beds, on metal frames, stood alone in an otherwise non-descript room of gunmetal gray walls.

"Seven?"

Understanding the undetailed request, Seven examined the room in her own way. But obviously her mistake above-deck still gave her general doubts. Her assessment held a note of uncertainty. "The room appears safe." She looked at Zophir again, rubbing her temple distressingly.

"Thank you," Janeway said. Their escort nodded and withdrew.

Alone with Seven once again, Kathryn led all the way into the room, taking her own second look around, even as she directed the young woman to sit on one of the beds.

## Chapter 11

One porthole beckoned from the exterior wall. Janeway looked out to see they were just above the water line. "Well we'll be dry for a while anyway," she mused aloud. Turning back, she found Seven hunched over her knees sitting on the edge of the bed frame.

Easing down next to her lover, Kathryn grasped her right hand while Seven intently studied her left. "What are you looking for?"

"Captain, I know that I saw implants on those individuals. They *are* Borg. They must be. But now their cybernetics are gone. This must be another manifestation of Unimatrix Zero, but I cannot make my own implants vanish."

"Which would suggest that you have theorized incorrectly."

The possibility pained Seven briefly, then lifting her left eyebrow she offered starchy, "That is unlikely."

"No, it isn't. Listen, I'm not criticizing you. You're exhausted." Seven's skin, normally pale, was almost pasty white and her lips were tightly drawn to hide her efforts at normalcy. "Please rest." She curled her palm around Seven's left cheek, stroking implant and skin in equal, soothing measure. "I'll keep watch."

Seven held Kathryn's gaze for several moments longer, but finally, slowly, she laid back on

the bed surface. But her need for solace was plain, in open crystal blue eyes. Kathryn lay down beside her, pressing her body in close, wrapping her arms around Seven's shoulders, tucking her legs around Seven's. Finally the young body relaxed, coaxed by the warmth of her lover.

Mindless of the time, Kathryn moved her fingertips through Seven's hair at her temples, and circled over her stomach in lingering strokes. In the awareness that she was falling asleep, Seven also felt the captain's alertness, knew instinctively that Janeway was considering her own theories about their situation, and what possibilities existed for returning them to *Voyager*.

Her systems may be failing, Seven accepted, always the realist. As she snuggled closer though, she became awash in the moment Janeway's lips caressed her temple. She trusted this woman's humanity, with all its possible fallibility, far more than any perceived, pursued or attained Borg perfection.

The revelation was far easier to comprehend now than she would have imagined possible three years ago when she was first severed and left in chaos.

"I don't believe in the Borg anymore," she whispered, needing to share this self-revelation with the person who meant so much to her journey. She lifted her head, finding gray-blue meeting her gaze. "I only believe in you."

She could see her words fed something inside Kathryn. The woman grew soft in her arms, gaze brimming with unshed tears.

Softly their lips melded. Kathryn's parted first. Seven deepened the kiss, tasting the inner satin of her mouth, gladly breathless when they parted.

Kathryn continued to hold Seven, holding herself together in the process, as the young woman finally slept.

She did not know how they would return to their shipmates. *Time to put a little fact behind all that trust she's got, Katie*, she scolded herself. Easing back, she brushed Seven's forehead free of hair and pressed a last tender kiss against the skin.

Determinedly she left the small bed and straightened, hands on hips, renewing her study of their quarters. Specifically she searched for any panel that might conceal a communications console or other computer access point.

Grating she located, and removed, seemed to lead only into ductwork for the ship's ventilation. The porthole was immovable. The only way in or out it seemed was the door they had come through. The only way to communicate appeared to be located elsewhere.

Uncertainly she tried the door, finding it unsecured. So they could conceivably come and go as they pleased.

A glance up and down the corridor proved to her they were alone, at least for the moment. Now all that remained was seeing to Seven; seeing to it she was unharmed from her immersion in the tea sea, and rested from her insistent swim.

Seven felt the vibrations of the floor; as there was no other noise, or sensation, she surmised that it was that movement that awakened her from a surprisingly sound slumber. She kept her body still however, gauging her surroundings little by little. Kathryn had risen from beside her and now paced the cabin floor, her jaw drawn tightly, her lips pursed and her arms crossed over her chest as she pondered their predicament. Perhaps, Seven thought, recognizing her captain "rising to the occasion", she had been unfair in letting Kathryn work through this alone.

Testing her implants again was a first step, she decided, consciously sending a fault signal through her optical implant and blurring her vision as she studied her left hand, laid across the pillow.

When her vision cleared she found Janeway standing over her. "Why aren't you sleeping?" Thin hands saddled narrow hips and Seven had decidedly unhelpful thoughts of pulling her lover back down onto the narrow bed.

"I could inquire the same of you." She lifted her enhanced brow to emphasize the question.

"Is the bed uncomfortable?" Janeway persisted. Seven sighed inwardly. When Kathryn sounded these notes of concern, her voice quiet, earnest, the equality of their relationship fell backward to teacher and mentor.

Seven refused to let that occur. "The bed is not uncomfortable. However, you are." She sat up and reached out, taking Janeway's stiff hand gently off her hip. "Share what you are worried about." Kathryn's jaw began to set again, a mechanism Seven was familiar with, each time they began an argument. "Please," she added, heading off the consternation.

Janeway's shoulders lowered, rounding and vulnerable. It was nothing as dramatic as a headlong rush, but Kathryn, all pretext gone to confidence, sank to the mattress beside Seven. Sagacious gray became anxious blue as her captain's shell was held together only in the sudden comfort of Seven's arms, wrapped around her back, cradling her head against her breast.

Small hands flexed against her waist, but Seven knew not to push. One of Kathryn's strengths was her ability to think her way through a situation. Seven had discovered over years of disagreements and even the occasional agreement that she could offer focal points in this process, but trying to take the problem entirely away from Janeway only made her more furious. "You wonder where this boat goes?" she asked cautiously.

"I'm more concerned about what you said topside." Kathryn did not pull back but directed a thumb up and behind her shoulder.

The mention now bewildered Seven. "But you discounted my observations as fatigue."

"I'm not so sure anymore." Janeway nudged Seven's hands apart, tracing both flesh and implant as she tried to explain. "I trust your observations, Seven. Fatigue or not, you saw *something*. I don't want them to cause you harm if we're right and there is some sort of charade going on here." Seven watched Janeway look away, to the door, caution etched in her features as she continued the stroking of their entwined fingers.

Gray was partially back in Kathryn's eyes when she turned back. Her voice was quietly firm when she requested, "Tell me exactly what you saw."

Seven closed her eyes - an affectation she did not need to assist recall, but which Humans employed to quiet their mind and offer a "tapestry" upon which the memories could play more clearly, blocking out distractions. Useful, she thought now, since Janeway's earnest gaze was a potent distraction.

Kathryn's fingertips soothed through the hair at her temple again and she exhaled once to relax. Seven slowly recounted the sensations and blurred images which had befuddled her earlier.

"My arms shook pulling my weight up the ladder." Kathryn's hand moved over her cheek. "My foot slipped from a rung." Another hand gripped Seven's right in alarm; she rubbed her thumb over the back assuring Janeway she was not alarmed by the memory. "My left auditory implant buzzed slightly."

"Had you hit your head?"

"I do not recall doing so."

Janeway did not answer immediately. Then with a squeeze to Seven's fingers, she encouraged, "All right. Go on. Tell me what you saw when you looked at them."

"It was...fuzzy." Seven's nose curled at the inaccuracy of her description. "It was staticky."

"But you clearly saw Borg?"

"As though the clothes they wore were simply over the usual exoskeletons."

"Like the Doctor's holographic layering photography?"

"That produced clear separate layers. Bone, sinew, muscle, skin, in succession. This..."

Seven shook her head. "All the layers were visible simultaneously."

"Did the images ever clear up?"

"When you asked if I was all right and I shook my head."

"Did you see any of them *do* anything while we spoke?"

Seven frowned. Her attention had been entirely on Janeway as muscles, and implants all fired danger warnings and she had shouted. But...Her brow furrowed more deeply as she retrieved and more closely examined the particular memory engrams. Four individuals surrounded them. Two more climbed the rigging, but...it wasn't rigging. "I saw...a radio tower," she offered, tone questioning her own inference. "Behind you...on the raised deck, there was another person." Her mind could not label the individual's features from any particular race. She shrugged, at a loss.

"What did this person do?" Janeway asked.

"Steer the ship." Seven nodded at her chosen description. "A wheel. The hands rested on a wheel."

"Our course changed while we spoke?"

"They came off course to rescue us. Perhaps they were simply returning to that course?"

Janeway did not negate that theory. She asked instead, "When *Voyager* is angled away from a signal, we usually turn into it, right, to make a clearer connection?"

"I align the sensors to a more direct angle, or amplify the receiver's range."

"Mmm hmm. After the ship was turned, the jumbled images you saw cleared up."

"Yes," Seven affirmed though Janeway had not couched it as a question.

Then Janeway was silent for a long time. She curled around her own knees, upraised and rested her chin on them, as she considered the door, then Seven, then other unseen things. "Seven, when you're on *Voyager's* holodeck, can you tell?"

Seven's brow furrowed once again in quandary. "Do you mean do I know it's an illusion?"

Janeway shook her head. "Not exactly. *I* know it's illusion, but I still see only what is projected. When a program is in effect I can't see the structures, the grid, the consoles. I can find them when I ask for their appearance, but I can't see them otherwise." She exhaled. "When you are on the holodeck, is it like what you saw on the ship's deck?"

There was a crash at the door and the two women sprang to their feet, to face the onslaught as four large bodies flung themselves through the shattered metal door.

## Chapter 12

Starfleet training and Borg reflexes answered the call of adrenaline. With the sounds of metal stressing and ultimately shattering, Captain Kathryn Janeway and Seven of Nine were launching headlong into their intruders.

Kathryn felt hands, cool and stiff, grappling with her legs and feet while she concentrated on kicking and punching anything that came close. Her feet found stability on the floor and she pushed forward, dropping beneath a reaching fist. She had an advantage. It was easier to punch a moving object than to grab hold of it.

Somewhere behind her, she thought she heard Seven growl and the sound of crunching bone.

The frame of the door she held vibrated abruptly as the Borg threw one of their attackers against the inside wall. She looked up to find a clear path to the hatch. "Come on, Seven!"

"Seven?"

Kathryn heard the question from one of those surrounding them, just as something heavy impacted her head.

Blackness engulfed her vision and sounds of struggle faded into silence as Janeway lost consciousness.

Picking up the limp body, Janeway's assailant addressed Seven again. "You are Seven?"

Warily, Seven straightened from her fighting stance, surprised to see those around her take a step back. Flexing her human hand, certain it had been broken when it connected with a firm torso, she measured her breathing. Not answering the question posed to her, she demanded, "Give me the captain, and I will let you live."

Perhaps it was a foolish threat. More likely their captors would simply now subdue her. But her Borg logic currently was severely outweighed by her humanity seeing Janeway's limp form.

She hoped her Borg reflexes were up to backing up her big mouth. She flexed her left hand, neuro-receptors signaling a call to her nanoprobes.

"Are you the one called 'Seven of Nine'?" he asked again. The emphasis to his question jiggled Janeway like a rag-doll.

The truth might unlock a few things. "I am Seven of Nine," she confirmed.

"The individual Annika Hansen?"

Here she shook her head. "I was *born* Annika Hansen," she corrected. "The Borg changed that."

Several around her put their hands on their hips and spat on the floor. She curled her lips at the unsanitary action.

"You have allegiance to the Borg?" The one holding Janeway threw the unconscious woman at Seven's feet.

She knelt quickly, assessing injuries, venom for his act, and the Borg, in her words to him. "There is *no* allegiance." Tenderly she lifted Kathryn's head, caressing a bruise as she checked that the many bones in her neck were intact. "The Borg took my life from me." Seven cradled Janeway in her arms, lifting the slight form smoothly as she regained her feet, bearing her burden to the bed. "Get out of my way," she growled to the obstructing others.

"The Borg took our lives as well," the leader said to her.

"They endanger us all!" Another pushed him aside and lunged at Seven.

Cleanly she took him off his feet with a sweep of her leg. He thudded onto his back against the deck where he remained as she planted her foot in his chest. "What is going on here?"

"You have been our inspiration," their leader replied.

"I have," she arched an eyebrow at them.

"We have been perfecting another Unimatrix, all united in one goal - breaking permanently from our Borg lives, as you did."

"I was *severed*," she pointed out. "Your efforts have been *imperfect*."

"Did she detect the deception?" He nodded toward the bed.

"No. I did. Your 'signal tower' is faulty."

He considered her words for a moment. "Are you willing to help us?"

Seven stood up, keeping one cautious eye on the others around the captain as she asked, "Where exactly is 'here'? Is this place created by the tower?"

He grinned. "No. It is the key to our success so far."

"Is this a reality or a projection like Unimatrix Zero."

"It is very real. You, and your captain, intersected our reality when you came here."

"The black holes."

"We created them. And live our lives inside them...free of the subspace transmissions from the Hive."

"Well, your little reality is cutting into ours." The captain's throaty voice rasped with grogginess. Seven stilled her movements with gentle hands. "Ow."

"Lie still," Seven advised Janeway. Turning to the leader she advised him sternly, "We will have to perfect your system, or close it down."

"You would return us to enslavement?"

"No," Janeway assured, leaning heavily on Seven as she gingerly sat up. "We won't."

"But unless we shut down their system, we will never get home."

"Seven," Janeway chuckled, even as she winced. "We're together. Consider how seldom we *can't* solve a problem."

Seven responded to the jibe with a smile. "Perhaps you are right."

Pushing past the pain her head, Janeway stood and addressed the leader. "Let's go see what we can do."

### Chapter 13

"What do you think we can do?" Seven asked Janeway, her voice as low as possible since they were surrounded by Borg, marching up the gangways of a seagoing ship.

"How do you suppose they came up with the idea to 'hide' from the Queen inside a black hole? Their homing signals, even communications, still penetrate subspace."

"Then she must know they are here."

"Why hasn't she shut it down yet?" Janeway asked.

"Perhaps she has been trying?" Seven explained more succinctly when Kathryn's brow creased in an uncomprehending frown. "They create black holes to hide in. What if the black holes we encountered were *her* attempts to find *them*?"

"Any ideas how we can shut the door on her?"

"Two black holes cannot coexist within the gravity influences of each other. Their forces would tear one or the other apart," Seven stated. Her brow furrowed and then her expression went starkly pale.

No slouch with stellar phenomena or their consequences, Janeway's own expression blanched. Her voice was dark. "More often *both* are destroyed."

She looked around as they emerged onto the ship's deck. The tower generating their black hole cloak was plainly evident now. She even saw the projectors which holographically turned what was in truth a Borg cube, into having the appearance of a large seagoing freighter.

Wondering about the sea itself, its unusual chemical makeup, she glanced out at the expanse now. Storms raged on the horizons all around them, and she noticed where the "sea" was punched out, revealing the swirling electromagnetic eddies of the formidable space phenomenon.

*How had they breathed? How had they survived?* Then she recalled that the Borg had assimilated races aware of such advanced concepts as particle synthesis, which even the Federation has not mastered. In essence they could create an entire world, atmosphere and all - as long as the technology was working.

She turned back from the gunwale, seeing Seven follow the renegade Borg leader up a short set of steps to the pilot deck, where consoles and controls obviously were located. She followed him as easily as she had Axum, in Unimatrix Zero, and Janeway felt a spurt of jealousy as the two conversed at length.

Seven questioned the technology's parameters, its limitations, and the symptoms the Borg had observed when it faulted. Finally she nodded tersely as Janeway sprinted up the steps to join her. There was clearly only one thing to do. "It can be done," she informed Janeway.

She did not elaborate, not wanting to argue what was about to take place. There were, in Seven's mind, three clear, and conflicting, goals technologically: stop the Queen's incursions, secure the renegade's new "home", and return the captain to her ship. Seven half-suspected that Janeway would give up the third for the benefit of success on the other two.

Seven was not willing to do that.

Janeway studied her. "What do you plan to do?"

"Succeed," Seven replied, skirting giving details.

"Seven?"

Timing was crucial. With one eye on the storms exploding ever closer around them, the Queen's search becoming more and more accurate, Seven pointed to the railing. "It will not be smooth sailing."

Kathryn, and it was indeed her lover not her captain looking at her now with an open expression of adoration, in the soft touch on her arm. "You know what I want here, right?"

Seven nodded, not voicing the details.

"Then whatever happens, know that I love you. I always will."

Seven did not nod. She hoped that her expression was enough to explain her feelings. In the end though she grasped Janeway's hand on her arm, lifted it to her chest resting it over her heart, watching as the blue eyes softened more, feeling Seven's heartbeat against her fingertips. Then she lifted the finely boned hand to her lips and kissed the backs of the fingers as Janeway wrapped her fingers around Seven's in silent response.

"You can repair it?" The Borg leader interjected his concerns into their moment.

Janeway's hand dropped from Seven's soothing over her lower back as the blonde turned to the console. She answered him. "We'll work on it."

Just then, Janeway's head snapped around at the crackling sound of a flash storm directly off the ship's port bow. Whipped up rain, lightning, thunder that shook the deck and winds pulled at them, synthesized effects of the electromagnetism generated when one black hole passed through another.

Seven was ignoring the visual cacophony, her hands and eyes searching over the readouts for whatever it is she planned to generate for the renegades' defense.

As that storm faded, another burst to life starboard, close enough that the captain felt her skin tingle. The Borg around her seemed unaffected. Whether it was their implants, or some physiological enhancements, they could survive to some extent in the vacuum of space.

She would not.

Swallowing down the realization that, despite Seven's efforts, Janeway would die in this venture, she lifted a hand against Seven's back, rejoicing in the feel of muscles moving under her wetsuit. Seven looked over her shoulder, askance at her, and shook her head. "The Queen's hunt is becoming more accurate." Presciently, another storm whipped up almost directly over their heads. Wind, rain, electrified air, whipped at them.

"How?"

"She is locating on the frequency of their generator."

"So do we spike the power of our black hole, and hope to bust hers up?"

"Simplistically that is my plan," Seven explained. She reached now for two separate control pads, rapidly punching in commands simultaneously. Then she jumped backward, grabbing Janeway around the waist, sending their entwined bodies plummeting off the pilot deck, past the surface deck, and onward to the surface of the dark sea.

Several things happened at once.

Janeway's startled cry faltered as above her she witnessed the breach, a rip between two black holes as each vied for superiority. The storm seemed to envelop them, winds whipped them up and down, carrying them dangerously close to the ship's side, and then yanking them away, in a heart-dropping plunge and retreat.

Suddenly Seven turned her around, the storm's effects no longer touched her as the blonde woman pressed her into her chest, painfully tight. Turning her head so she could breathe, Janeway screamed again.

She was certain the swirling mass was the very mouth of Hell snarling up to swallow them whole.

"Seven!" Seven clamped her hand over Janeway's mouth. And sensation was no more.

## Chapter 14

Seven of Nine's internal chronometer kept her aware of the passage of time. In the blackness of space there was nothing else. She had been floating for more than seven days. Two days ago her epidermal layer had frozen solid, making her hold on her burden, Janeway's unconscious body, permanent.

At least her few sensory inputs that had not failed felt Janeway's rising and falling chest pressed against her own. The energy field that her nanoprobes had erected upon impact with the vacuum of space kept the absolute zero of space from penetrating.

But more time in this environment, and it would not matter if the cranial implant S.O.S. beacon was intercepted or not.

All that would be found would be their corpses.

With nothing but time to reflect now, Seven had reexamined her thinking during her and the captain's last minutes in the renegade Borg environment. The Queen *would* have found them. She had witnessed for herself the implosion of the two black holes, knowing without remorse that the Queen, and several million Borg, had certainly perished.

Had Seven not plunged them through the aperture she opened, they also would be dead now rather than clinging to life.

She had not had time to locate *Voyager*, or even triangulate the black holes positions for reference later. Now she began cataloging the stars, their relative densities, distances and positions, hoping to recall a match with star charts she had been working on *Voyager* prior to shore leave.

There was stronger movement in the circle of her arms. With supreme effort, Janeway lifted her chin. blue-gray eyes filled with pain and impending loss met her own austere expression. There was no way for the two of them to speak, but Seven understood the thoughts behind the alarm, recognition, sadness, and finally acceptance, which mobilized the captain's stiff facial muscles in succession.

Janeway moved her hand scant centimeters across Seven's chest finally resting splayed over the Borg's left breast. The enhanced muscle continued to beat, as slowly as her own, a pace very close to that of a stasis-enclosed Human. But their gray pallor - evident in her hand against Seven's chest, and in Seven's face looking down upon her - indicated how imperfect this semi-stasis would be in keeping them alive much longer.

Thoughts chased themselves around in her head too, a sign of oxygen-deprived delirium. Pinning them down, she did not wonder where they were, or what would inevitably happen, but rather she found herself reliving the dive in Brilaria Two's springs.

Water swirled around her limbs, varieties of fish nibbled at her exposed hands and feet making them tingle. Sunlight sparkled down into the depths, illuminating Seven beside her. The blonde's face went alight with wonder.

The sparkles intensified, enveloping them both. Light exploded on her senses, and she shut her eyes tightly against the shock.

"Captain! Seven!"

Seven opened her eyes and found the Doctor bending over her on the floor. "Your arrival was fortuitous."

"Readings identified a subspace explosion and while we did try to raise you and the captain after a full crew recall failed to turn you two up, Commander Chakotay said that Janeway would never forgive us if we didn't investigate."

"What distance are we from Brilaria?"

"Nearly 15 light years. Took us 3 days at high warp. We weren't expecting to encounter the S.O.S. signal you initiated." He frowned at the readings on his tricorder. "How did you get out here anyway?"

"Long story," Janeway's rough, raw voice interjected. "Later."

"Agreed," the Doctor said, gesturing to Tom Paris and a medical-conscripted ensign to lift the captain off Seven. "You are both suffering from severe dehydration and frost-bite."

Seven remained on the floor unable to do more than brush the captain's limp hand as they lifted her away to a biobed. The Doctor draped a special blanket over her, and Seven began to feel the warming effects in her fingers and toes. Tom returned, offering her assistance to sit up, legs splayed before her. "Helluva shore leave, huh?" he inquired.

Seven struggled to her feet, aided by Tom, and leaned on the biobed where Janeway lay. The captain's eyes were open again. Her color was still unnaturally pale, but she smiled when she met Seven's gaze. The captain's faculties were not recovering as quickly, despite her words a moment ago. In her eyes, Seven saw the request.

Taking the weakened hand in her own in a firm grip, Seven relayed the captain's silent request: "Doctor, inform the bridge to scan for all Borg activity in the region."

Janeway's lips, cracked from the cold and now, in the warmer sickbay, trickled blood. Seven brushed the red stains from her chin with a gentle thumb.

The Doctor relayed the message; Chakotay reported back within moments that Harry Kim reported no activity on any bands, subspace or otherwise, to indicate the presence of Borg.

The Doctor then moved Seven aside, but the captain would not release her hand. "Seven should regenerate, Captain."

Seven shook her head. "I will do so later, when the captain is out of danger."

Janeway blinked her appreciation, continuing to cling to Seven's fingers as the Doctor probed, and gradually warmed her organs, from the inside out.

*Next time, Kathryn, when you want to take shore leave, take a hot bath instead.*

She felt her lips crack a smile at her inner voice's reprimand and squeezed Seven's fingers, drawing the young woman's gaze to her. She nodded an indication to come closer. She whispered, "Go." With a gentle breath, she added, "Later..our quarters."

Seven's radiant, gentle and loving smile stayed with the captain, even after the blonde nodded and walked slowly from Sickbay.

**THE END**