

~ Birds and the Bees ~

by Omega13

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General Disclaimer (NC-17 Rating)

This J/7 story contains graphic depictions of sexual interaction between two of my favourite fictional women. It also contains some m/f intercourse and violence - but not at the same time. The m/f action is vital to the plot, but comes with a little twist. The violence is graphic, but is also integral to the plot - so be warned. However, hopefully, the hot, angst-fuelled action, between our two intrepid heroes, as they struggle to find themselves, and each other, should, fingers crossed, make up for you having to scrunch your nose up at the warnings.

This story also contains the usual 24th century techno-babble-stuffy-thingy-bits, which thankfully, I don't need to warn you about... phew!

Star Trek Voyager and all of its characters (except the ones that I've created for your enjoyment) belong to Paramount Pictures and Viacom. That is, until they hop into my universe, and get involved in all sorts of reprehensible and definitely non-canon behavior.

This story also includes manipulated photos of J/7. They, in no way, belong to me, but are freely available on the web. So, I used them (cheeky, I know). All credit is given to their creators.

All feedback welcome.

Chapter One

"Diplomats Omahr and Sgurrin," Captain Janeway said standing. Her eyes narrowing, she watched both Gaelians move into the Ready Room. They reminded her of the ferrets her Grandma Elsa used to keep on her farm back in her home town of Bloomington, Indiana, but those were cute. The same couldn't be said for the two negotiators standing before her; they were tall, extremely broad with bald heads, grey mottled skin, protruding teeth and the most peculiar

bulging eyes.

Welcoming them into the room, Janeway's nostrils flared, their scent, she had found, over the last few days, bordered on the offensive. "Please sit down," she said, indicating to the seats either side of her.

"Captain," Diplomat Sgurrin responded.

The sound of the high pitched Gaelian's voice was piercing. It reminded Janeway of the cry of some predator that screeched in victory just before it ripped its victim open and fed on it. After three days of intense negotiation, it still shocked and grated on her nerves intensely.

After the first day of negotiation, nursing a severe headache, Janeway had thought about requisitioning Engineering to adapt the universal translator to ensure that the tone emitted from the negotiators was less of a shrew. She had also considered asking Maintenance to ionize the room to lessen their strong scent. But, after many years traversing the Delta Quadrant and countless first contacts, her honed instincts told her that Diplomat Sgurrin would be overly sensitive to such changes.

Even though Janeway found the Gaelians - in every way - physically unappealing, that couldn't be said for their uniform. It was a stunning, white, high-collared garment with a plunging neckline, and skin-tight trousers. On a more attractive species, it would have appeared extremely sensual, if not risqué.

"Thank you, Captain," Diplomat Omahr replied taking a seat to Janeway's right.

Sitting, Janeway's eyes were drawn to the Gaelian's uniforms. The material was unlike anything she had seen, it glowed white then slowly changed to a prism of subtle colors. Once it was explained that Gaelians used this method to encourage calm during negotiations, and when scanners showed no subliminal intent, she happily let trade negotiations begin.

Once the Diplomats were seated, Janeway asked, "Can I get you anything?"

Both Gaelians quickly shook their heads.

"No thank you, Captain," Diplomat Omahr replied politely.

Janeway's mouth quirked, she knew they would decline. On the first day of negotiations she had taken the Gaelians, as part of their tour, to the Mess Hall, where Neelix offered some freshly made Ktarian pudding. Diplomat Omahr, obviously not wanting to offend, sampled Neelix's food. Needless to say, the resulting grimace meant that neither Gaelian had accepted any offers of refreshments since, preferring to consume their own supplies which, to her surprise, appeared delicate and quite sumptuous.

Eyeing the captain, Diplomat Omahr queried, "How is your crew enjoying shore leave?"

"You have been more than generous and we are very grateful," the captain replied sitting down. Particularly you, Diplomat Omahr. She eyed the Gaelians aware that she still had no idea of what sex either individual was. On the face of it, they appeared an androgynous species.

Thankfully, Diplomat Omahr's voice didn't grate as much as the other ones. The Diplomat's sharp intellect, wit and adept negotiating skills had surprised Janeway. The Gaelian's grey and very unattractive appearance belied a light, warm and flirtatious personality, which she had warmed to, and, to her surprise, she found that there was something very alluring about the tall, unattractive Gaelian.

The captain glanced at Diplomat Omahr's uniform, it was slowly changing color. At first she had found the change distracting, but now, it was somehow...comforting.

"Your planet is very beautiful, and my crew is very appreciative," Janeway said. Tearing her eyes away, she inclined her head graciously, "Thank you."

"Captain, it is unfortunate that our protocols do not allow a more relaxed contact with our society," Diplomat Omahr said, frowning slightly. "But we do hope that it has not detracted from your stay."

"Right now, after several recent confrontations in this region of space, any shore leave is a welcoming hiatus for my crew," Janeway replied.

"Even if you are designated to an island and requested to remain within a strict perimeter?" Diplomat Omahr asked, with a note of concern.

Warmth filling her eyes, Janeway responded, "Even then."

"Captain," Diplomat Sgurrin screeched, "Today, we are very interested in visiting Voyager's Sickbay."

"Excellent," Janeway replied, ignoring the feel of neck hair rising and the immediate chill that ran down her spine. She couldn't quite understand why there was such a distinct difference in tone between both Gaelian's, but there was no doubt she found Diplomat Sgurrin's voice almost unbearable, "because, today, I am very interested in a resonator coil to upgrade Voyager's communications systems." She paused when Diplomat Sgurrin's extremely long, thick black fingernails drummed on the table. "Sickbay is our next stop," she added, looking at both Gaelians, "but let me first thank you for the early deposits of dilithium."

The drumming stopped. "As you know there are substantial deposits beneath each of our three moons," Diplomat Sgurrin replied, eyeing Janeway. "There are ample deposits residing on each of the upper mantles, and they are easily accessible." The Gaelian smiled, displaying a full set of very unattractive grey and deeply stained teeth.

Janeway, not for the first time, felt her stomach turn.

"But, Captain, as you know," the Diplomat added, eyes bugging even more, "everything has a price."

Spoken like a Ferengi, she thought. There was a sly, insidiousness about Diplomat Sgurrin that meant it wasn't only the voice that put Janeway's teeth on knife-edge. Fortunately, years of diplomatic training allowed her to harness as well as mask her feelings and use them to sharpen her negotiation skills.

"Correct," the captain replied smoothly, ensuring that her tone hid the bristling aggravation that was growing with Diplomat Sgurrin's poor and often clumsy attempts at negotiating. "And, as you know," she added smoothly, "your generosity has been rewarded with schematics of our transporter technology."

When Voyager first traversed through the Delta Quadrant, it became clear that much of Voyager's technology was unknown to many species. The Kazon, in particular, tried to gain access to their replicator technology. It became apparent, that in the wrong hands Starfleet technology could have disastrous consequences. For this reason, Janeway had refused to give technology away irresponsibly. But as the Gaelians were technologically advanced and a responsible species, and their existing transporter technology just needed refining, she had made it available as part of the trade negotiations.

"Thank you, Captain, for the schematics," Diplomat Omahr said gently. "They have been very well received."

"You're welcome," Janeway replied standing. "Now, I suggest we make our way to Sickbay. I'm sure that there is some equipment there that you will both find interesting." She smiled. "As well as our Chief Medical Officer being in attendance, I have also requested that another crewmember make herself available." Leading the Gaelians out of the Ready Room and into the turbolift, she added, "Seven has recently enhanced some of our medical scanning equipment. She will be able to answer any questions you might have."

"Ah, welcome," the doctor said to the Gaelians when they entered Sickbay. "I am Voyager's Chief Medical Officer, and this," he said exuberantly, flinging his arms out wide, "is Sickbay, the main medical center aboard Federation starships."

Thirty minutes later, arms crossed, the captain looked at the chronometer, and clenched her jaw. As yet, the doctor hadn't shown any medical technologies that would stimulate trade negotiations. Instead, he seemed to be wowing a captivated audience with triumphant medical tales of his discoveries of the many unknown illnesses and diseases in the Delta Quadrant.

Realizing that it might be a very long day, Janeway raised her brow wearily to the tall, slender form standing close to her. "Is it just me, Seven," she murmured, "or is the doctor's ego getting out of control?"

The blonde regarded her for a moment.

Janeway glanced at the cybernetic implants adorning Seven's left eye and cheekbone as she leaned in to her.

"According to B'Elanna Torres," Seven said, her tone low and intimate, "if the doctor was not a hologram she would perform a cranial adjustment."

Intrigued, Janeway returned Seven's gaze. "How so?"

Seven raised her ocular implant. "It would seem that, if allowed, she would remove his head."

Eyes lighting and sparkling with humor, Janeway quirked an eyebrow at Seven. "Is that so?" she murmured, and with a lazy smile continued to gaze at her. Recently Seven had sought to spend much of her recreation time with her. To the redhead's delight, she was finding Seven's evolving humor refreshing. "How about joining me for dinner in my quarters tonight?" she asked. Surprised by her impulsiveness, she paused. Very rarely did she invite anyone other than her first officer to dine with her, and that was only to ensure uninterrupted time to discuss ship's business. "I'm not the best cook," she continued, color rising in her cheeks at Seven's intense gaze, "but I can rustle up a mean-

From the corner of her eye, Janeway spotted a window of opportunity as the doctor launched into yet another monologue.

"And, since I was the only crewmember who could survive the corrosive atmosphere, it was up to me to retrieve the data module and save the day. Then of course there was the perilous mission to Lav'oti V..."

"Doctor," she said, moving quickly toward the EMH.

"Captain?" the doctor said in surprise when Janeway placed a hand on his shoulder and guided him to a biobed.

"As much as I think our guests are enthralled by your accomplishments," Janeway said, "I think we need to progress."

Over his shoulder, she smiled sweetly at the Gaelians.

Flustered the EMH looked at her. "Captain, I'm speechless."

"That's a result," Janeway said, still smiling.

As far as I am aware, we are progressing," the doctor said sounding miffed.

Janeway gripped the clearly peeved EMH's shoulder tightly. "I have a ship to run, Doctor." She added under her breath, "Get a move on!"

Chagrined, the doctor raised his brow at the captain, as she turned him towards the Gaelians.

"Please," he said, gesturing for the negotiators to join him. "This," he said proudly, touching the biobed, "is where I perform major surgeries." He smiled. "Sickbay has a large, sophisticated sensor cluster located directly above each biobed." He picked up a medical tricorder. "Working in conjunction with this tricorder, the sensor suite can give detailed information about a patient's condition."

Clearly curious about the equipment, Diplomat Omahr approached the doctor.

"Ah," the doctor said. Quickly, he removed the detachable probe from the back of the tricorder, and enthusiastically ran it over the surprised negotiator. "Let's hope we don't find anything too revealing."

"Doctor!" Diplomat Omahr screeched.

Janeway's jaw dropped, the sound was blood-curdling.

"Stop!" the Gaelian said, hastily stepping back. "You do not know what you are doing!"

"Diplomat Omahr," the Doctor replied. Still scanning, he hastily followed the negotiator. "I can assure you this equipment isn't harmful."

Retreating, Diplomat Omahr's eyes widened when the holofilter emitted a loud whining noise.

Stunned, Janeway watched Diplomat Omahr's holo-image begin to distort, fragment then disappear. She tried to shade her eyes when some sort of energy beam burst from the Gaelian. Her last thought, before slipping into unconsciousness, was that the species was far from androgynous.

Chapter Two

Computer," Janeway said. Unable to hide her irritation, her deep voice resonated loudly around the room, "Janeway-1-1-5-3-Red, clearance level 10."

"Access denied."

Wearily, the redhead stared at her console in her Ready Room. As her voiceprint and bio-signs were now no longer identifiable, the computer had locked her out of all critical and secure systems.

Janeway punched in manual commands, but the computer continued to challenge her identity.

As the computer could no longer rely on unique identifiers such as bio-signs or voiceprint to identify her, and, in order to ensure the ship did not easily fall into hands that would allow sabotage or security breaches, for several minutes, by isolating highly secure redundant access codes for areas such as the auto destruct sequence, the transferring of commands, and ejecting a warp core, it carried out rigorous tests to ensure she was who she said she was.

Methodically, the redhead fed in some real and redundant commands in a sequence that would uniquely identify her. Fortunately, it was a Captain's duty to have these commands ingrained in them.

At long last, the computer, after keying in several final string commands, accepted that she was the real Captain Kathryn Janeway.

Janeway exhaled deeply then tried a voice command again. "Janeway, authorization Alpha-Alpha-3-0-5."

"Captain Kathryn Janeway," the female voice responded, "you are authorized to resume full command."

The redhead closed her eyes. "Computer, begin log."

"Acknowledged."

"Captain's log, stardate 53049.2," Janeway dictated. "We've spent the last five days, situated in Gaelian space, in sector 379 of the Delta Quadrant." Eyes gritty, she looked at her access console. "As well as negotiating for dilithium, the crew seems to be making the most of our stay. God knows they deserve it." She sighed. "On first contact, the Gaelians made it known that they have rigid protocols regarding contact with other species. So much so, that for trade negotiations, they limited all contact to a team of two negotiating representatives from their Council of Diplomatic Trade." Suddenly feeling hot, she opened her uniform tunic then roughly pulled at the neck of her grey turtleneck. "Computer, pause log."

"Acknowledged."

Janeway groaned. Already the recently replicated uniform was feeling tight. She threw up her arms in annoyance. "Don't tell me I need a bigger size already." She growled. The sound was deep. "This time it'll have to wait. Computer, lower the ambient temperature by three degrees."

"Ambient temperature lowered."

Immediately she felt the coolness pump through the environmental filters into the room.

"Computer, resume log."

"Acknowledged."

"As a technologically advanced species," she continued, rolling her large shoulders a few times to relieve the growing tension, "the Gaelians are curious to discover the technologies aboard Voyager, which thankfully has allowed plenty of scope for negotiation." She lifted her cup of coffee. "They have been identified as a non-hostile species," she said, quirked a battle weary eyebrow. Pausing, she inhaled deeply the pungent aroma wafting from her cup. "I was made

aware by Security that our sensors detected that the negotiators were utilizing holofilters to cloak their true form."

Still shocked by recent events, Janeway's eyes narrowed. "So far, in the Delta Quadrant, Voyager has made more than two hundred first contacts, and once I was satisfied that the species was indeed non-hostile, I allowed full diplomatic access while aboard Voyager." She took a mouthful of coffee then grimaced, the bitterness was overwhelming. Much to her dismay, the physical change she was going through right now included her tastes buds. Frowning, she returned the cup to its saucer. "I had thought that during my long tenure I'd learned enough to trust my instincts." She raised her brow. "If a non-hostile species wished to hide their true form then that was entirely their decision."

Catching sight of her hands, Janeway faltered. Her stomach turned at the sight of them. They were twice their original size, and dwarfed the delicate, china cup. Swallowing hard to combat the sudden nausea, she slipped her hands underneath her. Her slate-grey eyes troubled, she leaned back heavily in her chair, and stared out of the window. Her tone filled with regret, she added, "But I was wrong."

"Transporter Room Two to Captain Janeway."

"Go ahead, Tuvok" she replied.

As head of security, the Vulcan was the only one with clearance to deal with this unwelcoming and very sensitive situation.

"The Gaelians have beamed aboard, Captain."

"Have them escorted to the Briefing Room."

"Aye, Captain."

"Computer, end log."

"Acknowledged."

Removing her hands from underneath her, Janeway placed her elbows on the desk and wearily put her head in her hands. Closing her eyes she groaned and, for just a few moments, tried to block out the absolutely astounding physical changes she was going through. Lifting her head, she stood slowly. Her tall frame looming over her desk, she carefully straightened her increasingly tight Starfleet uniform. Mustering every piece of resolve she had, she squared her shoulders and exited the room.

In the Briefing Room, Janeway watched the grooved lines around the holographic Chief Medical Officer's mouth move as he updated some of Voyager's senior crew, the two Gaelian trade negotiators, and Elder Duhr, a senior cabinet member from the Gaelian Council of Authority, listened.

"As you know, recent micro-cellular scans show that the Captain has been altered genetically." The partially bald headed EMH said raising his dark eyebrows. "We have attempted to revert the Captain to her original coding by destroying the mutated DNA using anti-proton radiation from the warp core. Unfortunately, although successful in a similar incident, in this case, there has been no response to the treatment."

Listening, tiredness seeping from her every bone, Janeway fought hard the urge to rest her head in her hands, and close her eyes for a few moments.

"The Captain," the doctor said, looking around the table, "is quite literally a different person. The physiological changes that have taken place over the last few days are astounding." He stood and approached the viewscreen nestled in the walls. He punched in a few commands and several images appeared showing Janeway's transformation.

"As you can see, the Captain is taller, well over six feet now."

"Six feet five point two inches," Seven interjected with a note of authority. Her angular features refined, she sat, straight-backed, in her chair.

The doctor blinked. "Yes, thank you, Seven," he replied with a note of surprise. He eyed the Borg for a moment then continued. "She is leaner." He touched the viewscreen, and flicked through several images.

Looking at the images, Janeway shuddered. She still found it difficult to absorb what was happening to her.

"As you can also see," the doctor said, "her shoulders have broadened out and her chest circumference has increased dramatically. Her breasts," he said moving a hand to the area in question on the viewscreen, "have all but disappeared; hardened muscle replacing them." Looking at Janeway, he lifted his chin. "There is no doubt that the Captain would be at her absolute physical peak...if she were a hybrid human male."

The redhead resisted a strong urge to cup where her breasts should have been and lament their loss. She had been unaware, until now that so much of her identity, was intertwined with being female.

The doctor paused for effect. "With Seven's help," he eventually continued, "and some of your most esteemed medical advisors," he looked at Elder Duhr, "we have tried to treat this condition with medical compounds, but have had no success." The doctor's brow furrowed. "Further analysis of the Captain's DNA shows that the rate of the genetic mutation has accelerated and will soon be complete. We are still exploring alternate treatments but at this time, it doesn't look good. Furthermore-"

Having heard enough, Janeway interrupted the EMH. "Thank you for the update, Doctor."

A muscle jumped in the doctor's jaw as he eyed her.

Yet another newly acquired human affectation, the redhead noted wearily. Many of which the doctor was adopting as part of his ever evolving sentience.

"Aye, Captain," the doctor replied taking his seat.

Carefully, Janeway eyed Tuvok, and Seven of Nine, who she had last seen hovering over her in Sickbay. They were the only two members of Voyager's senior officers along with the doctor and Chakotay, who were fully briefed on the situation. Fortunately, due to shore leave and the sensitivity of the problem, not all the senior officers were privy to what was happening to her and for now, until the situation was resolved, she wanted to keep it that way.

Aware that Diplomat Omahr had been watching her intently, since entering the Briefing Room, Janeway made eye contact. She was stunned when she found out that the Gaelians, in their true form, were an all female species. But, unlike their extremely unappealing holo-image, it appeared, by human standards, that the entire race was exceptionally beautiful. Far from being bald and extremely unattractive, they carried a full head of long, black lush hair, fine eyebrows and long dark eyelashes. Their eyes were seductively large and their face symmetrically perfect.

Intrigued, Janeway watched blood fill Diplomat Omahr's ears and the tip of her nose. They were clear signs of arousal. Signs, she knew, as heat suddenly filled her body, and her heart began to thud, that she wouldn't have detected a few days ago, or be responding to now.

Eyes locked, Janeway observed that the Diplomat was fine-boned with a regal forehead, startling green colored eyes that held hers intently, and the most incredibly desirable blood, red plump lips. The younger woman was without doubt, the most dark, lithe and exotic being she had ever encountered.

Her respiration increasing, Janeway abruptly broke eye contact. Taking a deep breath, she unconsciously glanced at Seven, and was surprised to see the ex Borg's eyes narrowing as she stared back at her.

A look of disapproval set on Seven's features as she locked eyes with Janeway. Slowly, her cool gaze turned from the redhead. "Diplomat Omahr," she said, almost challengingly as she stared at the Gaelian, "why did you choose Captain Janeway for your energy beam?"

Striking, almost feline green eyes focused on Seven. "It wasn't my intention," the Gaelian responded gently, her voice mellifluous. "This is unprecedented."

Tuvok stepped in. "Captain, it would appear that Diplomat Omahr's holofilter was disrupted when the doctor scanned her."

Elder Duhr looked at Janeway and raised an elegant hand as well as her fine, dark eyebrows. "Protocol dictates that when we encounter a new species we are required to suppress our Gaelian physiology. The holofilter enables this."

Janeway eyed the three Gaelians. Now that their true form was revealed, they had dispensed with their holofilters. It was clear that as well as being extraordinarily beautiful as a species, they were taller and slimmer than the average human.

"Our species has a highly developed sexuality," Elder Duhr continued, "where pheromones play an important role. As sexual expression is inherent in most aspects of our culture, Gaelian pheromones can cause a potent and powerful sexual stimulation in almost all humanoid physiology. This is the reason why we hide our true form, to discourage invoking a sexual response from other humanoid species."

Sexual response! A disquieting feeling of dread filled Janeway.

"Captain," Tuvok said, "it appears that is why the Gaelians have chosen to isolate themselves from regular first contact with alien species."

Elder Duhr smiled encouragingly at Tuvok.

Tuvok looked at the woman, his dark face framed by elegant pointed ears showed no emotion.

"That is correct," Elder Duhr responded. "For generations, it is our custom to avoid close contact with outsiders. But your story of crossing the galaxy intrigued us and we wanted to help you."

"Voyager and her crew are exceptionally resourceful," Seven said to Elder Duhr in a precise tone. "The warp core is designed to operate for up to three years before refueling. The reaction chamber is equipped with a compositor which allows the re-crystallization of dilithium. Nevertheless, assistance, where it can be found is welcome." She turned her gaze to Diplomat Omahr. Her eyes narrowing, she added with a definite note of reproof. "However, I believe in this instance, it would have been more advantageous had Voyager continued on its journey."

Frowning, Janeway glared at Seven, the ex Borg was studying Diplomat Omahr intently. Her diplomatic skills kicking in, she opened her hands expressively. "Elder Duhr, there is no doubt we are in a difficult situation, but I would hate to let this ruin any possibility of friendship between our people."

Openly staring at Seven, Elder Duhr redirected her gaze. She inclined her head at Janeway. "Captain, I hope you can accept the Council of Authority's sincere apologies for what has occurred. You have my word that we will do whatever we can to assist you during this difficult time." She smiled warmly. "In the meantime, please allow us to provide star charts which will provide a safe route through many sectors as you journey home."

Surprised and delighted, that Voyager would be kept safe for a little while, Janeway inclined her head. "What a wonderful offer, Elder Duhr. It is very much appreciated. Thank you."

The Elder raised her hand in way of dismissal. "It is the least we can do."

"Captain, I must inform you," Tuvok said, "that our visitors are currently wearing pheromone inhibitors, located behind their right ears." He looked at Janeway. "From what I understand, Gaelians are closely related to the human form. The primary differences are neurochemical, which includes a complex pheromone system. This, as we have witnessed, can create a problem when making contact with other humanoids."

"Thank you all for the update," Janeway said. "But, for the past two days, I have been locked up in an isolation bed transforming into some form of hybrid human male." She looked around the table. "For what purpose?"

A hush suddenly filled the room.

Feeling as if she had just dropped a photon torpedo, the captain looked around the table in surprise. No one seemed willing to offer an answer. She focused on the doctor, and watched him fill his lungs before exhaling slowly. An act that was quite pointless given that as a hologram, he was not required to breathe.

Janeway wanted to smile at yet another human affectation, but couldn't find it in herself. Right now, she was struggling to remain seated. The constant hormone rush in response to Diplomat Omahr, even though she wore a pheromone suppressor, was beginning to drive her crazy. What the hell is going on? her inner voice queried. She looked around the table. In no mood to be anything other than direct, she asked the Gaelians. "I am told that you are an all female society." She raised her brow. "Why then am I changing gender?"

"Captain," Diplomat Omahr offered, her green eyes and commanding presence captivating Janeway immediately.

"Yes," she replied.

"It is recorded in our history many millennia ago that we were once a two gender species, but through exposure to a new disease, the fertility rate of our male population rapidly declined. So rapidly, that it invoked a protogynous response from the females of our species."

The feeling of dread growing, Janeway swallowed hard.

The doctor jumped in. "Captain, female to male gender reversal is unusual but not unique. A species modifying their behavior in response to an evolutionary crisis has been known. Gender reversal is the way that the Gaelians have evolved, and is-

"Yes. Thank you, Doctor," Janeway interrupted. "Basic physiology is covered in the first year at Starfleet Academy. Please continue, Diplomat Omahr," she said ignoring the doctor's disgruntled expression.

The dark haired woman nodded her head graciously. "We have now evolved as a one gender species, and although same gender pairing are fundamental to our society there are specific times during our lifespan when we need to procreate." The Gaelian's alluring eyes widened slightly.

"Every fifty of your years a mating ritual is invoked where a bonded mate will induce what you would term a gender reversal with her partner."

Her mouth suddenly very dry, Janeway peeled her tongue from it roof, and swallowed - her adam's apple bobbed noticeably.

Diplomat Omahr added with a note of regret, "If she is not bonded," then a claim to mate is released in the form of a visible beam of energy." The Gaelian lowered her dark eyelashes for a moment before looking at the captain. "My partner died three years ago."

Janeway closed her eyes briefly then inclined her head at the Gaelian, hoping that even in the flux of her physiological state, her eyes conveyed her sympathy.

"You are intending to claim Captain Janeway for yourself, correct?" Seven asked.

Blinking and clearly taken aback, Diplomat Omahr offered gently, "Not quite."

Surprised at the clear hostility in Seven's tone, Janeway quickly shot the ex Borg a dark and warning look. "Diplomat Om-

"Then state your intentions," Seven said cutting Janeway off as her ice-blue eyes assessed the Diplomat dispassionately.

Seven, what the hell has gotten into you! Janeway thought. She made mental note to have a strong and very reprimanding word with her when this meeting was over. Leaning forward, she linked her hands together and said smoothly, "Diplomat Omahr, I-

"Not every Gaelian is protogynous," Diplomat Sgurrin said, cutting Janeway off for the second time.

Eyes narrowing, but aware that this was an unusual situation, Janeway closed her mouth. Her jaw tightening, she sat back slowly and forced herself to listen to the inept Gaelian. There was one bonus, of course. Her voice no longer screeched.

"Only Gaelian Alphas have the ability to reverse their gender for a designated period of time," the negotiator continued eagerly, addressing Seven. Pride filling her eyes, she added, "As part of the pair-bonding, they are selected based on their capability to effectively fertilize ova, which, I'm sure you will appreciate, is an important trait for a species that form life-long pair-bonds."

Janeway almost swallowed her tongue. Fertilize ova!

"It appears, Captain," the doctor interjected, "that your Alpha female status triggered Diplomat Omahr's mating response." He looked Janeway over. "And it is clear that you have been more than a little receptive to her call."

Resisting the urge to smack the doctor, Janeway gave him a force-ten look, and told herself to be

available the next time he ran a self-diagnostic. She was sure there would be a few sub-routines she could insist he remove, starting with his over-sized ego.

"Captain," Tuvok said frowning admonishingly at the doctor before looking at her. "Over the last two days, we have had many discussions with the Gaelian's top medical advisors, including Elder Duhr who, as you are aware, is also a respected exobiologist. It appears that your morphology will stabilize three days from now. However, at that time you will be required to mate."

Eyes widening, Janeway had to forcibly stop her mouth from hanging open in astonishment. Had she heard him right? Did he just say...mate?

"It appears, Captain, that Diplomat Omahr wishes to copulate with you," Seven said, her brow low, her formidable gaze focused singularly on the Gaelian.

Astonished, Janeway stared openly around the table.

Awkward silence filled the room.

The doctor filled in, "Your condition is not unlike the Vulcan pon farr," he said carefully.

Aware of how private a matter pon farr was for Vulcans and that Tuvok would be uncomfortable with any mention of it, Janeway glanced at her security officer. His eyes tightened imperceptibly.

"But unfortunately," the doctor continued, his voice growing more authoritative, "you cannot control it through medication. Your immune system is so strong it is neutralizing everything administered to you. I'm afraid, unless you go through a mating ritual in two days time, you will suffer from accelerated cellular degradation."

Frowning, Janeway looked at the EMH. "In English, Doctor."

"Cellular toxins would be released into your blood stream." The doctor answered. He swallowed. "Within a short period of time, you would die."

"Not necessarily," Tuvok said. "There is one other option, Captain."

Janeway looked at her security officer. "I'm listening."

Tuvok threaded his hands together; each finger neatly folding into the other. "Captain, a hologram may be the best way to deal with this matter."

"It is not improbable that the ritual can be simulated," Seven reported, shifting her gaze from Diplomat Omahr to Janeway.

Aware that, at times, Seven's blunt and arrogant behavior could be off-putting, Janeway had, given her heritage, allowed for it more than anyone else aboard Voyager. But, this clearly

antagonistic and frankly downright rude behavior toward the Gaelians was completely out of line.

Unhappy with Seven, Janeway ignored the ex Borg. She looked at her security officer. "Do you think it will work?"

"Yes," Tuvok replied. "It has worked in other circumstances."

The captain knew what Tuvok was referring to. Since being stranded in the Delta Quadrant, he had experienced pon farr. Neither medication nor disciplined meditation worked for him, and eventually a hologram was designed of his wife T'Pol to handle the situation. Vulcans consider pon farr so private that Tuvok had tried to pass his symptoms off as Tarkalean flu. She smiled briefly at the Vulcan, pleased that he was discretely offering her support with a solution that had worked for him.

"It's worth a shot," she responded.

"Captain," Seven said, "I-"

Cutting her off, Janeway looked at Tuvok and ordered, "Keep investigating."

Seven looked faintly surprised at the abrupt interruption.

Meeting the ex Borg's eyes squarely, Janeway silently conveyed to her, in no uncertain terms, that she didn't want to hear another word from her.

The blonde blinked as she searched Janeway's unyielding features.

Tuvok inclined his head. "I suggest that Seven, with Diplomat Omahr's guidance, create a hologram which will replicate a Gaelian mating ritual."

"Do it," Janeway commanded, breaking eye contact with Seven. She looked around the table. "It seems that we may have found a way to resolve this situation." Relief filling her, she added, "Diplomat Omahr, given the circumstances if you have time, at some point, I would like to find out more about what is happening from your perspective."

The Gaelian nodded. She gave Janeway a smile that almost lifted her off her feet. "I would welcome the opportunity, Captain."

Chapter Three

"Dammit!" Janeway muttered. "Enter," she called out in response to the request for access to her quarters.

Commander Chakotay, Voyager's first officer, entered. "Kathryn," he said approaching her. "How are you?"

Bending, Janeway rubbed her knee. "I've just banged my knee on the underside of my desk for the third time today. But, don't worry about that!" She straightened. "I'm great...just great...why wouldn't I be!" She looked at Chakotay then exhaling heavily asked, "What do you want, Commander?"

"I've just been informed."

At six feet-six, the redhead towered over Chakotay. "Informed of what?" she said a little too sharply.

"Of the situation."

"Oh...the situation," Janeway replied sarcastically. Her eyes narrowed. "What... that your Captain's a klutz?" She asked, looking down at the ex Maquis.

"Kathryn," Chakotay said, frowning.

Janeway held up her hand. "Have you been informed that your Captain can't get to grips with her new body?"

"It is to be expected, Kathryn," Chakotay said reassuringly.

"What being a clumsy dolt?"

"No," he responded gently, "Adapting to the rapid changes."

"Please...adapting!" Janeway replied. She shook her head. "This morning, I tripped over my feet." She mumbled, "My very own feet." She looked vulnerably at Chakotay. "And I bashed my head." She sighed and rubbed a tender spot on her forehead. "There is nothing about me that's me anymore."

Chakotay tried to hide his smile. "I know it's not easy-"

"Not easy!" Janeway interrupted. "It's a complete catastrophe, Chakotay." She held her head with both hands. "Amongst everything else, my spatial awareness has gone to hell. This morning I rolled over and fell out of bed!" She raised her brow. "And I practically tore the bathroom cabinet right off when I opened it." Her large hands dropped and pointed to her feet. "Did I mention the number of stubbed toes?" She pointed to her feet then to her desk. "Along with the number of knee bashings I've had to endure?"

Chakotay hid his smile. He shook his head.

Janeway sighed. "Right now, I feel like some primordial evolving creature."

The ex Maquis eyed her.

Janeway made her way to the replicator. "Can I get you anything?"

"No, thanks," Chakotay replied, taking a seat.

Keying in familiar commands, Janeway watched a mug of coffee materialize. She picked it up then moved toward the sofa where Chakotay was seated.

"Kathryn," Chakotay said, folding his arms as she sat, "Tuvok has informed me that the holoprogram has failed."

Crossing her legs, Janeway drank some coffee. She tried not to grimace at the bitter taste. This was her vice, and this mug would have to be dragged out of her cold, dead hands before she would give it up. "It would appear," she said, her voice deep and rough, "that a simulation of a Gaelian mating ritual may not work."

So I've heard," Chakotay replied, his mouth twitching upward.

"You find this situation funny, Commander?" Janeway asked, eyes narrowing.

Clearly taken aback, Chakotay replied quickly, "No." Unfolding his arms, he straightened. "Of course not."

"At ease, Chakotay," Janeway responded. She scratched her chin, it was smooth, the only upside so far. Touching it, a memory from what seemed another life filtered through of kissing her ex fiancée. She recalled the mild irritation that his stubble caused. Like the Gaelians, she had no body hair. But the hair on her head was deep red and shoulder length. It was lusher than she had ever known it. The only other hair was her eyebrows, and lashes. Aware that her first officer's way of conveying concern was through gentle ribbing, she stretched an arm casually across the sofa and offered, "I'd like nothing more than to take a few moments out from worrying about this situation."

Chakotay nodded. Relief filled his face. "It would appear that although you weren't responding to the simulation, you were responding to something," this time the familiar twinkle of mischief shone in his eyes as he added, "or... someone."

Janeway flushed as she recalled this morning's events.

"Captain," Seven said curtly when she entered Holodeck Two.

Startled by Seven's sudden appearance, Janeway swallowed then nodded. "Seven."

Since her severe reprimand, directly after the meeting with the Gaelians, the blonde had barely spoken to her.

In Janeway's Ready Room, Seven had informed her that she didn't accept that she had behaved inappropriately during the meeting. She let her know, in no uncertain terms, that humans lacked harmony, cohesion, greatness, and it would be their undoing. Her parting words, before stalking out were that she would never understand humans. They were erratic, conflicted, disorganized with a need to debate every decision, every question and every action. Every individual it seemed was entitled to their own small opinion, except her.

Tight mouth, Janeway recalled angrily watching Seven exit the room. As captain, she understood that the ex Borg's uniqueness meant that she brought fresh insight and often challenged established values and prejudices, but sometimes...the woman just drove her plain damn crazy!

Her long blonde hair drawn up in an austere bun, Seven moved purposefully and elegantly toward the controls console centered in the holodeck.

Watching her, Janeway felt stirrings in her lower regions.

Oh my God. No! Not again!

Groaning, the redhead quickly covered her groin.

"Are you discomfited in some way?" Seven asked, glancing up as she keyed commands into the console.

"No!" Janeway responded. Alarmed and flushing furiously, she hastily sat down and almost toppled over the edge of the bed. Quickly, she reached for a nearby pillow and slammed it down on her growing bulge.

Her fingers stilling, Seven gave the captain her full attention.

Her palms sweating, Janeway straightened her broad shoulders, and tried to compose herself. Feeling extremely agitated, and knowing it must appear that she was behaving like a dim-wit she cleared her throat, and tried her damndest to find some self-possession. Clutching the pillow, she crossed her legs, and forced herself to relax. Casually leaning on one arm, she added in a deep baritone voice, "Why do you ask?"

From behind the console, Janeway watched a curious expression cross Seven's face as she observed her. Feeling her groin tighten under the ex Borg's gaze, she tried not to notice how lush and stunningly curvaceous Seven's body truly was.

My God. She's stunning!

She swallowed. Her bulge twitched.

Unable to believe what was happening to her, Janeway closed her eyes tightly.

She realized that Seven had no clue how to be deliberately beautiful and seductive but, in that outfit, right now, the sensual power she wielded over her was absolutely immense. Slowly opening her eyes, Janeway willed them not to focus on anything but Seven's face.

Immediately, they focused on the ex Borg's voluptuous breasts. Horrified, she dragged her eyes to just above Seven's head. Good God, I must have been out of my mind to allow a crewmember to wear an outfit like that!

Her bulge uncomfortably erect, a shocking image pushed into her mind of a heavily panting, naked Seven straddling her.

Whoa... Janeway thought in disbelief. A deep color crept up her skin.

Tilting her head, Seven eyed the captain curiously before responding with her usual efficiency, "Perhaps I should clarify." She raised her ocular implant. "I have been working on the simulation. And so far," she said, looking down at the data on the console, "I have created several matrixes, all of which are variations of the fully receptive Gaelian, Diplomat Omahr. As yet," she added with a note of inquisitiveness, "you have not responded to any one of them."

What do you expect with you around, darlin! Janeway's inner, newly discovered, pubescent voice piped up. The redhead bit her bottom lip hard and forced the little voice out. She wanted to smile at the ridiculousness of the situation, but the dire circumstances she was in - right now - forced her to stay very still. Her color deepening, she attempted to control her raging erection. "Seven," she responded weakly as she looked at her, "For now, can you accept that I don't fully understand it myself?"

"You do not?"

Alarmed when Seven focused on her, Janeway replied with what she hoped was just the right note of authority, "No, I do not, Seven."

"Unusual," Seven replied. "Humans normally depend on feelings and instincts to guide them. She raised her brow. "Particularly you."

Janeway looked sharply at Seven. She had picked up earlier on her contrary mood. The ex Borg's natural arrogance and defiance was shining through a little too much for her liking. Just as well she's not Voyager's morale officer, her inner voice said then sniggered. Otherwise there wouldn't be an escape pod left.

"What do you mean?" Janeway replied.

"I suggest you confer with Diplomat Omahr," Seven replied abruptly. Looking at the console, she keyed in some commands.

Janeway frowned. "Seven, what exactly did you mean?"

Lifting her head, Seven eyed Janeway. "I mean that since the simulation appears not to work. Diplomat Omahr may be able to offer you," she paused then raised her ocular implant, "relief in person."

Excuse me!

If they could, Janeway's ears would have flattened against her skull at the unexpected asinine comment. Her erection throbbing, anger suddenly filled her at the absurdity of the situation. Through no fault of her own she was not only filled with what seemed the overwhelming urges of an outrageously horny teenager, but a hologram of Diplomat Omahr was lying sprawled on the bed beside her - naked - and she wasn't responding to it. And, to top it all, she was being ridiculed by an insubordinate member of her crew - who, at this moment, was driving her sexually crazy!

Sweat beads forming on her forehead, Janeway felt as if she was trapped in a terrible skit from a very bad holonovel. She eyed Seven and knew that she should ignore the comment. Insubordinate or not, in her current predicament she was in no fit state to take on this sharp tongued woman verbally.

Grrrr...Damn this situation to hell! she thought in despair as Seven continued to stare at her imperiously. Her eyes narrowed. "I think you should consider rephrasing that statement, Seven."

"Why?" The ex Borg asked challengingly, her eyes making it clear that she had no intention.

"Why?" Janeway spluttered, her anger growing. Right then, she decided that exactly about now was good a time as any to let off some steam. She straightened. Staring back at the blonde, her voice low and dangerous, her eyes hooded, she qualified, "Well, let's start with you telling me exactly what you're implying?"

Eyeing Janeway, Seven clasped her hands behind her back. "Why?"

"Why!" Janeway exclaimed. "What the hell do you mean by Why?"

Seven stared at her.

This woman is impossible!

Her anger burgeoning, Janeway gripped the bed sheet, then gritting her teeth said slowly, "Seven, I want you to explain to me exactly what you meant."

Seven raised her chin. "I see," she responded. Slowly her eyes moved then fixed on Janeway's groin.

Ready to quite literally explode, the redhead's cheek muscles bunched.

"A meeting with Diplomat Omahr may help your current predicament," Seven said. Lifting her gaze, she locked eyes with Janeway. "Do you not agree?"

I don't believe it!

"Do you require further clarification, Captain?" Seven asked almost sweetly when Janeway didn't respond.

Clarification...! Oh...I tell you exactly who's going to get the best clarification of their life, right about now!

Hanging on to her spiraling temper by her finger nails, her inner voice tried to reason. She doesn't know that you are hiding an erection. She believes you can't have one! But, it didn't help, she was angry. Janeway spoke slowly, "Seven, I'm assuming that what your implying is that a meeting with Diplomat Omahr would help my current situation by providing further insight?"

Seven stared at Janeway. "Social lesson number twenty-six has illuminated that it is the right of an individual to interpret comments in any manner they choose."

This woman...this crewman... this...ughhhh...whoever the hell she is...is, was way...way...way out of line! Janeway's hands tightened around the pillow and the bed sheet. Who the hell did she think she was...!

"Seven do you want to know what would alleviate things right now and provide me relief?" she said, her tone laced with dark menace. "Seeing you in the Bri- "

"Perhaps," Tuvok said interrupting as he quickly entered the holodeck, "it would be best if we took advantage of an intermission." He looked at Seven. "I recommend an interval of ten minutes."

Janeway exhaled heavily. Relieved that she had been stopped from lashing out, she nodded, "Excellent idea, Tuvok."

Seven raised her ocular implant at Tuvok then keyed commands into the console.

"Seven of Nine?" Tuvok said.

Seven lifted her head sharply. She looked at the Vulcan then at Janeway, her blue eyes sparked with annoyance. Color rising in her cheeks, exasperation edged her tone. "This is the third time that it has been necessary for an intermission, and only I have been asked leave the holodeck."

"This is not a request, crewman," Janeway responded in her strongest command voice. "Dismissed."

The blonde eyed Janeway.

"Now!" Janeway barked.

Seven lifted her chin. "All right," she stated. "I will return at the end of this interval in precisely ten minutes."

When Seven exited the holodeck, Janeway placed a hand on her forehead and slowly blew out air. "Thank you, Tuvok."

"You are welcome, Captain."

Janeway ran a worrying hand through her lush red hair. "This is ridiculous," she said in complete astonishment. Eyes wide, she shook her head in disbelief, "When I think of all the bizarre situations we've been through in the Delta Quadrant, this has to be the weirdest of them all."

"We are Starfleet Officers, Captain," Tuvok said, raising his brow. "Were you not reminding a crewmember recently that weird is part of the job?"

Aware that Tuvok, in his inimitable way, was trying to lighten the situation, but unable to find even the slightest bit of humor in the current circumstances, Janeway shook her head. Unable to accept what was clearly taking place before her very eyes, she breathed in deeply then looked at her security officer. "Every time!"

Tuvok eyed Janeway for a moment. "It appears that we may have to accept that physiologically you only respond whenever Seven enters the holodeck to work on the holoprogram."

Eyes deeply troubled, Janeway lifted her chin. "Unbelievable!" Letting go of her vice-grip on the pillow and holding it loosely, she looked at the Vulcan then added with a note of uncertainty. "I'm not sure if she is still as unaware as we believe?"

"I do not believe that Seven is aware, Captain. However, it is clear," he indicated to the bed, "that the sight of a simulated Diplomat Omahr is not enough to entice and prepare you for the mating ritual tomorrow."

Janeway eyed the beautiful woman sprawled on the bed, naked, and in the most outrageous position. "But it should be," she said perplexed. "Why isn't it?"

Tuvok looked at Janeway and responded softly, "What do you believe, Captain?"

"I don't know, Tuvok." Janeway shook her head in disbelief. "All I know is that whenever Seven's near me, everything seems to...stand up!"

The redhead eyed the Vulcan as the dawning realization formed on her face. Astonishingly, it seemed, that the simple sight of Voyager's Astrometrics Officer in her tight plum colored outfit, was enough to bring her to her knees.

"Captain?"

"Sorry, Chakotay," Janeway replied. She raised her brow wearily. "I don't think I'm ready for this kind of conversation."

Inclining his head, Chakotay smiled. "Okay," he replied then looked her over. "Whatever else," he added with a note of approval, "you've got to agree you make a great looking guy; tall, muscular, handsome." He smiled. "You'd give me a run for my credits."

Relief flooding through her at the first real twinge of humor she'd felt in days, Janeway laughed a little. "I'd certainly turn a few heads if the crew were to catch sight of me."

"Not just the females either," Chakotay said, raising his brow.

Janeway looked at her first officer. "Is that an offer, Commander?"

Chakotay laughed, but Janeway saw the flicker of regret in his eyes and realized that he had finally given up hope on them ever getting involved romantically. The sense of relief that coursed through her body surprised her.

"No, Kathryn, just recognition that right now I have some stiff competition." He quirked an eyebrow then smiled. "I'll be glad when you get back to normal."

"Likewise."

"What about you and Seven?"

Surprised, she looked at her first officer. "I thought I told you I wasn't ready for this type of conversation?"

"Maybe so, Kathryn," he replied, inclining his head, "but you need to talk to someone besides your console."

Janeway eyed Chakotay. "Believe me," she replied eventually, knowing that it was only their trials and tribulations in the Delta Quadrant that allowed for such intimate conversation, but still barely able to hide her mortification. "I can't quite believe it myself."

"What?" Touching the asymmetrical tribal tattoo on his left temple, a genuinely confused look crossed Chakotay's face. "You mean you really had no idea?"

Suddenly perplexed, Janeway shook her head. "Why would I?"

"Well I can't say I'm all that surprised, Kathryn," the ex Maquis said then shrugged.

Janeway frowned. "You can't?"

"No."

"Why!"

"Well, I suppose if you were going to respond to any woman, I would have put my hard earned latinum on Seven."

Is he serious?

Stunned, Janeway stared at her first officer. "I'm her mentor, Chakotay! Under normal circumstances, I wouldn't be the slightest bit interested in her in that way, I assure you," she replied affronted.

Chakotay lifted his brow and an odd expression crossed his face. He looked at Janeway's shocked expression, and said by way of explanation, "Your relationship with Seven, may, at times over the years, have been highly contentious but, there is no doubt, you have an intense bond with our resident ex Borg." He tipped his head at her. "I can see the attraction, Kathryn. She's beautiful, highly intelligent, courageous," he gave a knowing smile, "and somewhat...top heavy."

Top heavy!

Janeway's eyebrows almost launched off her face. Wondering if her first officer was deranged, she stared at him incredulously. What the hell has gotten into him! And why is no one surprised that she was reacting to Seven in such a visceral way?

"There's something that's mysterious about Seven," he shrugged, "and there's something seductive about that."

What!

"Until today, I haven't given her attributes that much attention, Commander," Janeway countered coolly. Her eyes narrowed. "And clearly, unlike you, I have never seen it as that type of bond." She almost snorted. "Top heavy, indeed!"

Smile fading, Chakotay looked at Janeway intently. Face paling, he cleared his throat. "Kathryn, I'm sor-

"Never mind," she said waving a hand, and cut him off. Wanting to change the subject quickly she added, "Right now, all I want to know is how things are with Voyager and the crew?"

For the next hour, Janeway felt a little of her old self return, as they discussed trading

negotiations for supplies from the Gaelians, along with the extraction of dilithium.

After ship's business was complete, Chakotay asked, "You know there is very little time left, Kathryn," he looked at her and concern registered in his eyes. "What are the alternatives?"

"For now," Janeway replied, "Seven will continue to work on the holoprogram. Tuvok and I are meeting with Diplomat Omahr, planet side in one hour, to discuss the current situation and what alternatives remain." She cleared her throat then looked at her first officer. "In the meantime, I require some information."

Chakotay looked at Janeway enquiringly.

Adjusting to her new physiology was proving incredibly difficult. What she hadn't told Chakotay was that this morning, had been a horrible experience. Abruptly awoken from an extremely erotic dream and, due to her heavier body mass, she had rolled over and thudded out of the bed, bashing her head.

Disgruntled, holding her head and extremely pissed off, she had gotten up, entered her bathroom, and lights low, looked fully at her reflection for the first time, and saw the individual she was becoming. Her hair was a stunning deep red, her eyes sparkled a deep, intense blue that she had never seen before. Her skin had an amazing healthy glow. When she flexed her arms, she watched muscles ripple. Her stomach and chest were more defined than she thought possible. Her broad shoulders complemented her narrow hips, and her long legs were lean, with well-defined thigh and calf muscles. Her reflection showed a perfect physical human male. She was, she realized, as she stared at her reflection, stunning to look at.

Moving closer, Janeway examined her face, it had changed shape. Her jaw muscles were more defined and her brow was slightly lower, but otherwise, thankfully, she looked pretty much the same.

Staring at herself, Janeway had never felt so alien, so outside and at odds with her own body. Worst of all, for the first time, she had a fully formed and twitching appendage to deal with. As the genetic alterations accelerated, her genitals had swollen extensively, but now she had full-blown male genitalia. Blearily, as she stared at it, the one eyed monster, seemed to be taking on a life of its own, particularly, as she was to discover later that day, around Seven of Nine.

"As you know, I have been transforming into a hybrid human male." Janeway said. Waving a hand, she added, "I don't want to give you a biology lesson, but last night, my ovarian tissue degenerated fully and has been replaced by a certain appendage," she crossed her legs, "and testicular tissue."

Chakotay looked at her then nodded, obviously fully briefed by Tuvok and the doctor, and understanding completely. "How are you coping, Kathryn?"

"Let's just say that in some areas," she replied, "I'm learning completely new skills." Quirking an eyebrow, she recalled this morning's almost laughable attempts at trying to handle her new

accessory as she tried to relieve herself in more ways than one.

"Kathryn?"

Janeway looked at the dark skinned Native American. "Honestly, Chakotay. I don't know?" Letting her uncertainty and growing dismay show, she added, "This situation has left me reeling."

The redhead thought about her surreal discussion with the doctor this morning where, during her physical, he explained to her, in her quarters, with certain smugness that her new genitals were at the forefront of evolution. Astounded, she stared open mouthed as the EMH explained that the human male genitalia were one of the most anatomically functional among the many different species that had evolved to optimize fertilization success.

Prostrate on her bed, mouth still open, feeling the most disjointed she had ever felt in her entire life, she couldn't believe her ears when, scanning her, the doctor informed her, with some pride, that the reason her type of genitalia was so evolutionary in both form and function was that its shape allowed for the successful depositing of the sperm that was critical to successful mating.

Feeling light headed and more than a little incredulous, she watched the doctor close the scanner. Eyeing her up and down, he told her that she should be appreciative of her new form, particularly her genitalia as it was one of the better sets he had seen both in size and shape.

Janeway recalled his parting words as she escorted him briskly to the doors of her quarters.

"But, Captain, you should be thankful!" the doctor said, as she took him firmly by the arm.

"For what?" she asked, as the doors hissed open.

"At the very least, you should be thankful that your genitals haven't suddenly sprouted from either of your knees or under an arm like some other humanoid species."

Janeway raised her brow. "Dismissed, Doctor," she said pushing the EMH out.

The doctor stumbled out the doors.

"And in case you didn't know," she said, throwing his medical bag after him, "that's a Starfleet expression for get out."

"You have the grip of a Klingon warrior, Captain," the EMH said, brushing himself down.

"From you, I'll take that as a compliment."

"Just as well I'm a holographic projection," the doctor mumbled, picking up his medical bag. "Do you want to flog me as well?"

Eyes narrowing Janeway hit the control panel. "I'm glad we made time for this little chat, Doctor," she said sarcastically as the doors hissed closed.

The captain stared at Chakotay for a long moment. "This morning," she said, shifting slightly, "I'm dealing with a new physical attribute that I'm having difficulty controlling."

Chakotay grinned, and displaying dimples, put Janeway out of her misery. "So, in a nutshell, you want some advice on how to control certain," his eyes focused on her crotch briefly, "areas of your body."

Janeway looked imploringly at her second in command. "Any advice at this stage would be helpful, Chakotay."

The ex Maquis eyes twinkled. "Aye, Captain."

Chapter Four

Diplomat Omahr showed Janeway and Tuvok into her residence.

"Please, join me outside," the tall, stunning Gaelian said as she made her way toward the back of her dwellings. She was in uniform, and Janeway noticed that she wore, for the first time, the adornment of a red crested insignia of three interlinked circles on the right shoulder, indicating rank, she assumed. Clearly hiding their identity also included not revealing rank. She supposed it made sense if you wanted to remain as anonymous as possible.

The captain couldn't help but admire Diplomat Omahr's home. Wall after wall was adorned with beautiful artwork. "Your house is breathtaking," she told the dark haired woman as they walked through it.

Following a long corridor, they stepped out to the external quadrant of the Gaelian's habitat. The view was stunning. Many tall and dormant volcanoes provided a craggy and dramatic backdrop into the swollen green ocean. "This island is beautiful," Janeway said as she looked out across the rocky coastline.

The planet Sgurr Mohr is an M class planet, the fifth of eight planets in a white dwarf system. It was filled with vast forested continents and lush tropical islands. Diplomat Omahr's house was located on the beach front of one of those islands. Janeway breathed in deeply, enjoying the breezy, warm, air that whirled in from the ocean with sharp-scented yet fragrant scents.

"Thank you," Diplomat Omahr replied. "Wine?" she asked her guests.

"No. Thank you," Tuvok replied

"I would love some," Janeway responded.

"Sgurr Mohr is untamed," Diplomat Omahr said, pouring deep purple wine into two glasses.

"Because of the pull of the moons, powerful monsoons and hurricanes occasionally threaten our lands. But, through careful ecology, we have maintained the planet's wonderful landscapes over the last several millennia."

Janeway accepted the glass. Discreetly, she looked the elegant Gaelian over. Diplomat Omahr's heavy, dark hair hung in a single, long plait down the full length of her back. Her lips were the fullest red - similar to the Dorous flower; one of the rare things that the Ferengi prized for its aesthetic value alone. She was again reminded that Diplomat Omahr was, without a doubt, the most dark, lithe, exotic being she had ever seen.

Immediately, the redhead felt herself respond to the potent and overwhelming sexual charisma from the Gaelian. Trying to control her swirling emotions, she breathed in deeply. From the metallic glint behind her ear, she could see that the dark haired woman was wearing a pheromone suppressor, and she couldn't be more thankful.

"This is Ridian wine, a specialty amongst the Gaelians," Diplomat Omahr said. "It is much prized."

"How so?" Janeway asked, hoping that her voice did not display her inner turmoil.

"Ridian Island is located in the most southern hemisphere of Sgurr Mohr. The harvest takes fifty years to mature with little yield for all that effort." She sipped from her glass. Her eyes closed as she savored the taste. Slowly, she opened them. "But it is worth the wait."

Standing tall, Janeway thought she might keel over at the hormone rush she experienced when the Gaelian gently licked her lips. Her body pounded with desire. She was thankful that with Chakotay's instruction, the doctor had placed a discreet triangulated holofilter around her pelvic area to ensure that, as long as no one moved into her space, everything would appear as it should.

"Taste," Diplomat Omahr said gently, her green eyes seeking out and holding Janeway's.

The captain sipped the Ridian wine. Like everything she had encountered so far with this species, it was exquisite. "It tastes delicious."

The Gaelian dipped her head in acknowledgement. "Please," she said making her way toward a low slung sofa. "Join me."

Janeway followed the dark-haired woman, and Tuvok joined her. Settling down, she tried to put aside her churning emotions and concentrate on why she was here. She had arranged to meet with the Diplomat to find out more about the Gaelian culture and discuss their predicament. Although it hadn't been said, she was sure that the Gaelian must have been experiencing some after effects from the energy beam she released. With all the physiological changes that the beam was having on her, nothing as yet had been discussed about what was happening to the Diplomat. And she needed to know more. She needed to know what impact, if any, there was going to be if neither of them mated. "Diplomat Omahr," she began.

"Please, call me Omahr."

"Omahr," Janeway replied graciously. "You are aware why I wanted us to meet?"

Sitting, the Gaelian nodded. "If you hadn't asked, I would have requested a more private meeting." She looked at Janeway, her striking green eyes probing. "You have a great need to understand."

"You are a telepath?" Tuvok asked.

"No," Diplomat Omahr replied. "But all Gaelians are born psi-empathic." She looked at Janeway for a moment. "You want to understand our culture first?"

Janeway smiled slightly then nodded.

"Throughout our history we have had no conflict," Diplomat Omahr said, then sipped her wine. "Prior to becoming a space-faring race, we were what you might term a languorous species interested in art, philosophy, romance and science. My bond partner, Kohr, was a renowned artist."

Janeway sipped her wine and felt a deep sadness fill her.

Diplomat Omahr focused on the captain. "With our first warp-capable vessels we encountered a few humanoid intelligent species in neighboring star systems. It was then that we discovered what our openness to sexual contact truly meant. Sex, as you are now aware, is the central component in our adult communication, and most species that we encountered were unprepared for the intense and transforming experience of what you might call our sexual conversation." She looked at Janeway intently. "They became obsessed. Most went mad with lust." She frowned. "We had unwittingly thrown their worlds into complete turmoil."

The Gaelian stroked her wine glass pensively. "We were completely unprepared for the impact we would have on other humanoid species and their cultures." She sipped from her glass. "When we encountered a virulent disease that caused sterility amongst our species, a decision was made by the Elders that our society would no longer be an open culture. We became reclusive, intensely private, and wary of other species seeing us in our true form."

"Self-imposed exile," Janeway said to Diplomat Omahr.

"Yes, Captain," The Gaelian replied. She smiled genially and inclined her head. "We became a closed society."

Janeway lifted a hand. "Please, call me Kathryn."

Deep warmth filled the Gaelian's eyes as she responded, "Kathryn."

"Why did you choose the Captain?" Tuvok asked.

Diplomat Omahr raised her dark eyebrows. "It was unintentional," she replied, then frowned. "Involuntary." She sighed. "The few days we spent aboard Voyager during our negotiations were very interesting." She gave Janeway a look that could only be described as intrigue mixed with desire. "I got to know you, and being psi-empathic, I began to feel your emotions." She sipped some wine. "You are a very complex and unusual individual, and I am strongly attracted to you, Kathryn."

Janeway blushed. "And here I thought all along the reason you were flirting with me was to improve your bounty."

Diplomat Omahr smiled. "At first," she responded. Touching her long, dark hair, she added, "But the more time I spent with you, the more I realized that you are a woman of great depths."

Watching Diplomat Omahr, Janeway knew that Gaelians never cut their thick, luxuriant hair. Her respiration increased as the Diplomat fingered a few strands. Flummoxed, she swallowed a large mouthful of wine.

Diplomat Omahr looked at Tuvok. "In answer to your question," she said, "as you know, I have been un-bonded for what would equate to three of your years. We Gaelians live long, and since becoming a closed society, sex can only occur between bonded pairs."

"I assume that it is rare," Tuvok said, "that a Gaelian would actively choose to be un-bonded for such an extended period?"

Diplomat Omahr inclined her head. "Yes."

"It must take great discipline," Tuvok said, "to refrain from what should be a natural occurrence?"

The Gaelian nodded, and Janeway noticed for the first time tension around her eyes.

"But now I am entering into my gestation time," Diplomat Omahr said. She looked at Janeway, her dark eyes inviting. "At this moment, I am at my most fertile." She raised her brow. "Gaelians normally bond only once, and when my partner Kohr died unexpectedly, something inside me died also." She lifted her chin. "But now my physiology demands that I find a mate." She looked at Tuvok then Janeway. "Normally, prior to bonding, a selection of compatibles is brought together to initiate the mating ritual. The energy beam is targeted on the one that you are most attracted to. This then initiates a gender reversal."

"Was Diplomat Sgurrin selected as one of the compatibles?" Tuvok asked.

A surprised look crossed Diplomat Omahr's face as she looked at the Vulcan. "Why do you ask?"

Sitting with his hands resting on his knees, Tuvok inclined his head. "Although I am a touch-telepath, I have sensed hostility from Diplomat Sgurrin toward the Captain."

Intrigued, Janeway watched Diplomat Omahr's mouth tighten, and her eyes narrow.

"Diplomat Sgurrin was included in the gathering that was scheduled to take place on the night of the incident."

"Have you met the individuals of this group?" Tuvok asked.

"Yes," Diplomat Omahr responded. "As bonding usually occurs only once, great thought and effort is put into the selection."

"Diplomat Sgurrin is obviously aware of your attraction to Captain Janeway," The Vulcan stated. "She is displeased with it?"

"Yes," the Gaelian responded. She breathed in deeply. "Diplomat Sgurrin has wanted to bond with me since my partner died."

"You do not return her feelings?" Tuvok asked.

"You could say that," Diplomat Omahr replied. She added, "She is young." She bowed her head slightly. "Too young, but her desire is strong." A fleeting shadow crossed her eyes. "Refusal is difficult to accept at her age."

"Fascinating," Tuvok responded. "Due to the interruption in your holofilter, your physiology asserted itself and chose the alpha female you were most attracted to. And the one," he said, raising an eyebrow, "deemed to be the most fertile."

"No, not just the most fertile" the Gaelian responded, her green eyes filled with deep emotion. "Kathryn would be a perfect mate."

Janeway's slate-grey eyes widened. Shucks. You're such a stud, her inner voice declared. Trying to squeeze the life out of the growling and incredibly irksome voice, she swallowed some wine. "And now?" she asked. Her voice sounding a little high, she cleared her throat, "Where does this situation leave you, Omahr?"

The Gaelian looked at Janeway for a long time. A deep note of sorrow tinged her tone when she finally replied, "In truth, it leaves me wanting to mate with you, Kathryn." She shook her head. "But, however much I want to, it is impossible." She raised her brow. "Fertile Gaelians cannot conceive from a single intimate joining; we require dozens of connections with the same partner over our moons cycle.

Janeway searched through her memory and recalled from data files she had read this morning that the Gaelian moons cycle was equivalent to forty-eight hours.

"But," Diplomat Omahr continued, "even though your physiology is becoming powerful, as the mating ritual demands, it wouldn't work."

Tuvok looked at Janeway. "It is my understanding, Captain, that great stamina is required as mating takes place every fifteen to thirty minutes over the moons cycle."

Breathing in deeply, Janeway's eye widened with the new information. "Is that so," she responded, shocked.

"Yes, that is so, Kathryn," Diplomat Omahr replied. "The reason it is impossible is that Gaelian's have a genetic predisposition toward empathy. Our psionic abilities mean that we combine not merely our bodies and pheromones but also our minds during sex." She looked at Janeway. "During the mating ritual, my endocrine system will radiate an uncontrollable release of pheromones. At such great intensities, exposure could be fatal to a non-Gaelian." She sipped from her glass. "If it didn't kill you, then the past has taught us that the experience alone could be so overwhelming it might drive you insane."

Tuvok interjected. "The Gaelians find the combination of mental and chemical joining to be much more fulfilling than the mere physical act." He raised his brow. "From what I understand, they consider most humanoids to be sexually immature."

"Do they now?" Janeway replied, and tried to bite back the instinctive challenge in her voice. She looked at Diplomat Omahr. "What would happen if you or I chose not to mate?"

Diplomat Omahr's beautiful green eyes darkened. "There is no option, Kathryn." A look of concern crossed her face. "You must."

"I assume that scenario applies to the both of us?" Janeway asked.

The Gaelian hesitated then nodded.

The situation suddenly took on new meaning for Janeway now that she was aware that Diplomat Omahr might be in danger. "Say I decide to run the risk and go through the mating ritual with you," she said, "If it is successful what then?"

Tuvok tilted his head and looked at the Gaelian.

Diplomat Omahr's expressive, provocative eyes studied Janeway. "You would be bonded to me," the Gaelian replied. Resting her head delicately on her hand, she looked at the redhead intriguingly. "As a bonded pair, we could not be separated."

"Unless through natural causes such as death?" Tuvok asked.

The Gaelian nodded. "Only then."

"Then theoretically," Tuvok queried, "you could continue with Captain Janeway on Voyager's journey to the Alpha Quadrant?"

Diplomat Omahr smiled briefly as if the thought had occurred to her more than once. She shook her head. "Although we are a technologically advanced and space-faring race, once bonded we are bioformed during our gestation period." She looked at Janeway. "A Gaelian's pregnancy is almost two of your years. During that time we can only survive on Sgurr Mohr."

"By bioformed you mean that both parents are dependent on the planet's atmosphere and must stay there?" Janeway asked.

"Yes," The Gaelian replied. "Our physiology changes at a cellular level. We cannot tolerate any other environments other than our own." She smiled. "It isn't permanent. After birth, and the child's formative years, we are free to roam again."

"How long are a child's formative years?" she queried.

"About fifteen of your years," Diplomat Omahr replied. "The Gaelians developmental cycle matures and stops at your equivalent age of thirty."

"Leaving you with a youthful appearance throughout your life span," Tuvok stated.

"Yes." The Gaelian raised her eyebrow. "I am much older than I appear." She smiled. "We have a life expectancy of up to two hundred and fifty of your years."

"Indeed," Tuvok replied.

Janeway raised her eyebrows in surprise, realizing that Omahr must be at least fifty years old, but from the life experience in her eyes, the redhead knew she was much older. "So," she said eyeing the Diplomat, "in effect, one way or another you cannot leave this planet?"

"Yes," Diplomat Omahr replied.

Janeway pinched her nose at the sudden hopelessness of the situation.

"If we mated, and you survived the ritual, you would be required to stay here with me, and I am aware from the time I have spent with you, that would not be an option, Kathryn."

Janeway watched a glimmer of hope appear then fade in the stunningly beautiful eyes of the Gaelian. Aware that the mating ritual would begin tomorrow in alignment with Sgurr Mohr's sunset she was suddenly overwhelmed by despair. To her surprise, she realized that she was empathically picking up those feelings from Diplomat Omahr. They were connecting.

Janeway looked at the Gaelian. "You are also required to mate tomorrow." The deep sorrow she was feeling indicated that something was wrong. "Is there a problem?"

Diplomat Omahr looked at Janeway. Her eyes widened as she realized that she was becoming empathic to her. "No," she stated. The redhead felt a wall come down that disconnected the shared emotion. "Preparations for the mating ritual will begin after we are finished here."

Surprisingly, a sudden empathic surge of warmth filled Janeway as the Gaelian looked at her. "Kathryn, please do not worry about me." Diplomat Omahr said reassuringly. "This is, after all, my doing." She swallowed the remains of her wine then placed the glass in a small aperture next to her, and watched it dematerialize. "It is your welfare that concerns me." She looked at Tuvok. "I have heard from Seven that there are some problems with creating a hologram."

Janeway felt her heart sink and her color rise at the thought of discussing this problem.

"On the contrary, Diplomat Omahr, your parameters for the hologram were correct. It seems, however," Tuvok stated lifting an oblique eyebrow, "that the Captain does not respond as we would expect to a Gaelian hologram."

Diplomat Omahr laughed. It was a light, delightful sound that forced a deep flush and responding grin from Janeway.

"Don't be embarrassed, Kathryn," The Gaelian said, eyeing the captain's color with amusement. "It is unsurprising that your current physiology does not respond to a hologram, no matter how enticing she may be. Your intellect and evident growing empathic needs have disengaged you from just such a being." She looked at Tuvok. "The Gaelian mating ritual is complex. I had hoped that the hologram simulating the ritual would have been sufficient. But, it seems," she said to Tuvok, "that your Captain is embracing our ways much more readily than I thought possible." She smiled. "It would appear she requires more of the real thing in order to engage."

Diplomat Omahr stood then began lightly pacing the dome shaped room. "I thought your morphology was purely physical, but it appears that you are developing empathic abilities," she stated. "It is also highly likely that when the mating ritual begins, you will produce pheromones to stimulate your partner. This makes it much easier, Kathryn," she said, stopping to look at the redhead. "Normally, during the mating ritual, the female produces the most potent pheromones, which sustain orgasms for lengthy periods."

Yikes! Her pelvic region straining, Janeway carefully repositioned herself on the sofa. Orgasms! she flushed from head to toe. Don't think about orgasms. Don't think about orgasms she mantra'd, Please...do not think about orgasms!

Calming, Janeway forced herself to tune into what the Gaelian was saying.

"The male produces only enough to arouse her," Diplomat Omahr said. She clicked her fingers. "This means that you can participate in the mating ritual tomorrow without damaging your partner." She placed an elegant finger on her bottom lip and tapped it a few times. "Still, there is one obstacle," she added. "We need to find a willing participant from your crew."

Abruptly Janeway stood. Taller than the Gaelian, she looked down at her. "Pardon me?"

Diplomat Omahr looked up at the captain, and moving into her space said inquisitively, "I think we should look at your crew manifest to see who would be a worthy partner for you, Kathryn."

Worried that the Gaelian would come too close, Janeway stepped back. "Omahr...I"

"We have already taken this course of action, Diplomat Omahr," Tuvok said from his seated position.

"You have?" Janeway asked, astounded. "When?"

"This morning, when it became evident that a hologram would not be sufficient," Tuvok responded, eyeing Janeway. "It appeared the most logical step to take, Captain."

"A very logical step, Commander Tuvok," Diplomat Omahr replied. She looked at Janeway then asked, "Was there any individual in particular, shall we say, stood who stood out?"

"Yes," Tuvok replied. He stood. "This morning, I ran a complete profile of all the females aboard Voyager who would meet the Captain's needs, both in strength and endurance during the mating ritual." He raised an eyebrow. "There were several prospective candidates, and each of their profiles was incorporated into the matrix of a Gaelian hologram. These individuals were also asked to attend the holodeck during the parameter alterations."

Aware that there had been three female crewmembers entering the holodeck during the parameter reconfiguration, Janeway placed her hands on her hips. "This better not be what I think it is, Tuvok!"

"What was the outcome, Commander Tuvok?" Diplomat Omahr asked, looking at Janeway.

"The Captain did not respond to any of the simulated profiles or, indeed, the individuals."

Janeway's eyes narrowed. "Where does Starfleet protocol fit in to this?"

"I can assure you, Captain," Tuvok responded, "that at no time was Starfleet protocol breached." He lifted his chin. "It was agreed that in your current physiological condition, and out of Starfleet uniform, the selected candidates would not recognize you."

"Selected candidates?" Janeway repeated, shaking her head in disbelief. "Is that so, Tuvok." She stabbed a finger in the air. "Who agreed, and why wasn't I informed?"

"You were, Captain."

One hand on her hip, Janeway waved the other. "I was informed by Chakotay that crewmembers were required in Holodeck Two as their skills were needed for the repair of a failed access terminal."

Tuvok inclined his head. "That is correct, Captain."

Knowing that she had been far too preoccupied with her current situation to give anything more

than a cursory nod to Chakotay's request and the subsequent visits of the crewmembers, Janeway realized that she'd been had good and proper. She gritted her teeth then shook her head. Imagine falling for that old chestnut! her inner voice chastised. Even a first year cadet wouldn't fall for a scenario like the doors keep jamming.

Eyes narrowing, Janeway glared at the Vulcan.

"It appears that the old ones are still the best, Captain," Tuvok said evenly.

If she didn't know better, Janeway would have sworn there was a touch of satisfaction in the Vulcan's tone. "So, it seems, Commander," she replied. "So it seems."

Tuvok looked at the Gaelian. "However, from the Voyager crew manifest, Captain Janeway did respond to one individual."

Janeway's color flushed deeper. Don't Tuvok!

"Let me guess," Diplomat Omahr said. "Your Astrometrics Officer, Seven of Nine?"

Tuvok inclined his head. "Indeed," he replied. "It appears that for the mating ritual, Seven of Nine, more than any other female crewmember aboard Voyager, matches the Captain requirements."

Diplomat Omahr smiled at Tuvok. "Excellent."

"Jeez, well that's all right then, isn't it?" Janeway said, holding out her hands. "Glad, we resolved that pesky problem!"

Surprised by Janeway's tone, Diplomat Omahr looked at the captain.

As if knowing what was to come, Tuvok lifted his brow in a resigned manner.

The color draining from her face at the sheer audacity of her Security Officer, Janeway stared at the Vulcan. "Tuvok," she said. She forced herself to bite back her next comment; remind me to update you on the ensign duties of a busted commander when we return to Voyager. Instead, she said, "let me make one thing clear. I will not, under any circumstances, compromise a member of my crew." She glared at the Vulcan. "Am I making myself clear, Commander?"

"Very," Tuvok responded languidly.

"Kathryn," Diplomat Omahr said gently. "I understand exactly how you feel at this moment." She touched Janeway's arm. "If there were any other option, I am sure your crew would have found it."

Her green eyes grew large as she focused on the captain.

Her pelvic region becoming painful, Janeway was reminded immediately of how exceptionally beautiful this Gaelian was and how physically responsive she was to her. Uncomfortable, and painfully embarrassed by her erection, she quickly found her seat.

Diplomat Omahr looked at Janeway for a moment. Slowly, her eyes dropped to the redhead's groin. She smiled slightly. "The mating ritual is near," she said returning to her own seat. "In truth, there is no time to find another solution other than the one Commander Tuvok is presenting."

Janeway clenched her jaw. "You mean the one where I," she struggled, "violate a member of my crew."

Diplomat Omahr's fingers gripped the arm of her chair. "When I met your Astrometrics Officer, I sensed immediately that she has feelings for you."

Janeway nodded. "I'm not only her Captain, I am also her friend."

"I am aware of that, Kathryn," Diplomat Omahr responded. Her fingers spread out on the arms of the chair in soothing strokes. "But what I felt from Seven was a stronger emotion than friendship." The Gaelian looked into Janeway's eyes. "She is very attracted to you."

Janeway's eyes widened.

"I concur, Captain," Tuvok said. Standing, he placed his hands behind his back.

"Et tu, Tuvok?"

"Excuse me?"

"First Chakotay, now you," Janeway said to Tuvok. She shook her head. "This is absurd."

"Captain?" Tuvok replied.

"Perhaps," Janeway conceded, "Seven does find me attractive in my current form, but regardless, she is young, and unformed. Emotions are still very new to her." Reflexively, she pinched her nose. "She has no life experience. God only knows what something like a mating ritual would do to her."

"Captain," Tuvok responded, lifting his chin, "I would be negligent if I did not point out that it is in you Seven trusts. It is you that she solicits for advice. It is you that she holds in high regard." He unclasped his hands. "It is you she is concerned for when her actions meet with disapproval. And, it is you that she is curious enough to ask questions about."

Janeway raked a hand through her hair. "Even more reason why I shouldn't take advantage," she said. "Clearly, she sees me as her mentor-"

Tuvok interrupted. "On the contrar-"

"What you're suggesting," Janeway said cutting the Vulcan off, "would violate every principle I hold dear."

"In my opinion, Captain," Tuvok replied, "if Seven is a willing participant, then logic dictates that no violation will take place."

Shucks...I guess if you put it like that, Janeway's inner voice said smoothly. Surprised, at the inappropriateness of such a comment, the redhead strangled the life out of the little voice.

"Enough, Tuvok," she said. Her heartbeat quickened as she glared at her security officer.

"Surely, you of all people, understand why I can't allow her to participate in such a ritual?"

"Captain, is it not you who advocates that part of becoming human is learning to have compassion for those who are suffering?" Tuvok asked. "You alone have encouraged Seven to become an individual. It seems that now would be the prudent time to allow her to exercise that individuality."

"Vulcans are indeed an enlightened species," Diplomat Omahr said. "Commander Tuvok is right. Why don't we hear what Seven has to say?"

"No," Janeway responded. Feeling shaky, she breathed in deeply. "I can't allow that."

"Why?" Diplomat Omahr asked.

Janeway's vision blurred. "I have an obligation to my crew...to Seven."

"I'm curious, Kathryn," Diplomat Omahr said. "If her very existence relied on it, would you allow Seven to refuse your help?"

Janeway grasped her forehead. "I-" The room swayed. Lurching forward, breath short, she attempted to suck in air. Her last memory was of Tuvok and Diplomat Omahr reaching for her.

Chapter Five

"Captain," Chakotay said, with a clear note of exasperation that was edged with tiredness. He along with some of the senior officers had presented evidence to Janeway that she had picked apart. The holoprogram, as a solution, was clearly no longer an option. "No matter what way we look at it, you do not respond."

Yesterday, during the meeting with Diplomat Omahr, Janeway had collapsed. She had been out cold until this morning. Normally, due to the rapid physiological changes, a Gaelian transforming would remain in stasis until the ritual. But, she had insisted on only spending a few days behind an isolation field in Sickbay. Although the majority of changes had taken place in the first two days, the physical demands that she had placed on herself, according to the doctor, as she left his care, were putting her body under great stress.

Placing the flats of her hands on the table, Janeway looked at her senior crew. "We've thought our way out of worse situations than this, right?" She firmed her jaw. "So, think, people. Think!"

Tuvok eyed the redhead. "Captain," he said, "the ritual is approaching." He tilted his head. "We have approximately four hours until sunset." He paused. "I suggest we now accept that the holoprogram is no longer viable and move on to the practicalities of the ritual."

"Agreed," Chakotay, Harry, and the doctor replied in unison. This morning, once it was clear that there wasn't going to be an easy solution, after leaving sickbay, Janeway had organized for her most technically gifted, yet underrated, holoprogram designer, Harry Kim, to get involved. Even the Hirogen, when they had taken over Voyager and commandeered the Holodecks, recognized Harry's talents, but most of the crew, it still appeared, preferred the shabby work of Tom Paris's light-weight holoprograms to Harry's exquisitely detailed and refined ones.

Fully briefed regarding Janeway's predicament, Harry was ordered to assist Seven in the hope of finding a solution.

"That will be all," Janeway said to the young ensign. "And thank you." She raised her brow. "Harry, I needn't remind you that this matter is of the highest security."

Standing, Harry nodded vigorously. "No, Sir." He blanched. "I mean Ma'am. Uhhh...Captain."

Janeway knew that Harry found her appearance unsettling. She smiled reassuringly. "Then enjoy the rest of your leave, Ensign. Dismissed."

Harry hurriedly nodded to the senior crew seated around the table, then hastily exited the Briefing Room.

Tuvok looked at Janeway. "After our meeting with Diplomat Omahr yesterday afternoon, and during your time in Sickbay, Seven met with the Diplomat, and was told what may be required of her."

Janeway closed her eyes then groaned inwardly. There it was, finally, the announcement that they had been dancing around while Harry was here - that their captain needed the assistance of a member of her crew to get her through this ordeal.

Embarrassment and shame followed by outrage rushed through Janeway. She wanted to look at Seven but couldn't. The blonde had been exceptionally quiet during the long discussions, only responding to technical summations about the holoprogram.

"May I remind you all," the doctor said, "now that we have finally gotten around to the crux of this meeting, there is also B'Elanna, who matches the remit for physical strength and endurance required for the mating ritual."

Increasingly uncomfortable at where this discussion was going, the captain eyed the EMH

sharply.

"There is a minor detail that you may have forgotten, Doctor," Chakotay said.

"Oh?" The doctor said, raising brow. "Pray tell."

"B'Elanna Torres is in a relationship with Lieutenant Paris," he replied, his eyes darkening.

The doctor nodded. "You're right, that could add a glitch to the master plan of saving the Captain, I admit. But not to worry," he said, his mouth thinning, "it appears we have someone else waiting in the wings."

"Actually, Doctor," Tuvok replied, frowning at the EMH's evident contrariness. "You needn't have reminded us. B'Elanna's matrix was added to the hologram, and sensors revealed that the Captain showed the same response as she had with the previous three crewmembers." Pausing, he looked at Janeway, and said with as much delicacy as a Vulcan can. "It is clear, Captain, that you physically respond to only two individuals - Diplomat Omahr and Seven of Nine."

The straightforward and un-convoluted brief statement from Tuvok, humiliated Janeway beyond comprehension. As deep color crawled up her neck, she wanted to laugh outrageously and ask Seven what she made of all of this. She wanted the ex Borg to argue with her, as she had so many times. To tell her that she had appraised the situation and it would be an inefficient use of her time. That asking her to be part of the ritual was a foolish and futile decision.

But Janeway couldn't look at Seven. Feeling as if she had just been publicly disgraced, she pushed out of her chair, and moved toward the viewport. Her back to her senior crew, staring out at space, but seeing nothing, she groaned internally. Why the hell did this have to happen to me?

Color flooding her face and cheeks, Janeway closed her eyes briefly. Throughout her adult life, she had never been sexually interested in women. Even as a cadet where sexual advances had arisen due to the close bond shared with some female colleagues - she had been indifferent. Since being stranded in the Delta Quadrant, five years ago, she had convinced herself that, as captain, being intimate with - what she had always assumed would be a male - was a luxury she couldn't afford.

A feeling of utter helplessness filled her. A consummate professional at smoothing things over, Janeway couldn't find it in herself to turn around and say something reassuring to her senior crew. Completely mortified, and somehow deeply disappointed that she needed help in this way, she continued to stare out of the window, as the room filled with awkward silence.

Looking out, Janeway's brow rose in confusion. Her response to the Gaelian, she could understand, since it was Diplomat Omahr that had caused her morphology. And it was also no surprise, that in her current state, she would be attracted to other women, but why only Seven and no other female aboard Voyager? Why only her?

As the silence grew, Janeway pressed a hand to her forehead and wondered what Seven would

make of her captain now. Growing shame and deep embarrassment filled her that she was pulling the younger woman into something murky and very inappropriate.

Feeling a strong need to keep Seven out of this, Janeway turned around to face her senior crew. A tension spot gathered in her temples. She retook her seat and looked around the table. She avoided any eye contact with the blonde. "Regardless, of any discussions with Diplomat Omahr or anyone else," she said, her baritone voice low and powered with command, "no ritual will take place with any member of this crew, is that clear?"

"Captain, permission to speak freely," Chakotay said, placing his hands on the table.

Eyes hardening, Janeway regarded her first officer. "Permission denied."

The ex Maquis shook his head. "Then I'll be blunt. It's crunch time." He looked Janeway squarely in the eyes. "You told me once that it was your arrogance that got Voyager stranded in the Delta Quadrant. That it was your short sightedness and selfishness that caused you to make an error in judgment."

Outraged, Janeway's shoulders stiffened at her first officer's blatant insubordination.

"You said that your error meant everyone aboard Voyager was paying for it." Chakotay paused. Clearly aware that he was walking on dangerous ground, he added carefully, "Kathryn, don't make that error again. Don't let this be about protocols."

"Commander, maintaining protocol should be enough to remind you of exactly why Voyager's crew has gotten this far." Eyes like steel, Janeway's jaw clenched. "Objection duly noted."

"I know we've had our disagreements in the past, but this isn't about rules and regulations," Chakotay said. He looked at the straight-backed ex Borg. "This is about what's right and wrong."

"Understood, Commander," Janeway said, the veins in her neck now standing out.

"Is it, Kathryn? Or is this all about Captain's pride?"

Bastard!

"No it is not about Captain's pride," Janeway bit back. She struggled to keep her voice even as her temper flared. "It's never easy, but if we turn our backs on our principles we stop being human."

"Does that logic comfort you?"

For a moment Janeway forgot about the individuals seated around the table and looked directly in the ex Maquis eyes. "What's happened to you, Chakotay?"

"I was about to ask you the same question," he replied, his eyes never leaving her.

"This is a calculated risk."

"It's a bad call."

Janeway raised her brow. She'd had enough of this. "Like I said, your objection is duly noted."

"Even you have to admit that your bond with Seven is unique, completely different from everyone else," Chakotay continued. "You've seen things in her that no one else could. You told me that you didn't know why, and you couldn't explain it. That it was just instinct. That there was something inside you that believed in her. Well, now it's time to put that trust to the test." He continued to look intently at Janeway. "You need to believe in her now."

Her slate-grey eyes studying Chakotay, Janeway realized that if he continued with this clear act of defiance, she was well within her rights, and physically powerful enough, to drag him to the Brig herself. She wondered fleetingly if he would go quietly. Deep inside, a small part of her hoped that he wouldn't.

"I appreciate your candor, but let me be just as blunt," Janeway said. Her voice dropped several octaves, and her eyes narrowed to pin points. "You're out of line."

Chakotay's mouth thinned. "It's time you faced reality, Captain. Stubbornness alone isn't going to resolve this. There is no solution with the holoprogram. The way I see it, you only have one choice, and that is to go through the ritual with Seven."

Eyes livid, Janeway breathed in deeply. "Unacceptable."

"There is no alternative," Chakotay responded defiantly.

"There is always an alternative, Commander!" Janeway said. She slapped a hand down on the table. "We just need to find it."

"You are in error, Captain," Seven said. Her tone even and precise, as always, but her ice-blue eyes showed deep disquiet.

Seeing the unease in Seven's eyes, Janeway reined in her temper. She's not used to seeing you losing control, her inner voice told her. Breathing in deeply, she gave a considered response. "I appreciate your opinion, Seven, but I disagree."

Seven raised her ocular implant. "Your situation is now desperate, would you not agree?"

The dull ache in her temples growing, but glad that Seven was engaging with her, Janeway decided to answer honestly. She nodded. "Agreed."

"When faced with a desperate situation one must adapt," Seven stated. "You can no longer sustain this course of action." She tilted her head slightly. "It would appear, Captain that you

need to adjust your strategy."

"Seven," Janeway said, suddenly feeling lightheaded. "Starfleet has in place rules on nonstandard behavior for a reason."

"You are misguided, Captain," Seven responded, the unease leaving her eyes. "I understand your willingness to risk your life for Voyager and her crew, but I cannot understand your willingness to throw it away when allowing a crewmember to participate in a ritual that poses no risk."

For the first time, Janeway let her command mask slip a little. "It is too much to ask."

"Is the mating ritual not a small price to pay?" Seven asked.

"A small price indeed," the doctor declared. "Or is it?"

"Doctor," Janeway said, her voice low and menacing. She knew that the EMH had feelings for Seven, but his lack of cooperation during this meeting had been bordering on offensive. Glowering at him, she wondered if she should throw him in the Brig too. "I would tread a little more carefully if I was you."

Looking sheepish, the doctor lowered his head.

"As a key member of this crew," Seven said, "you deserve to live, Captain Kathryn Janeway."

"Duly noted, Seven," Janeway replied, touched by Seven's desire to help. "And I-"she abruptly stopped.

The room suddenly swaying, Janeway gripped the edge of the table, and swallowed. Trying to focus, she lurched forward into darkness.

Chapter Six

Janeway slowly opened her eyes. Warily, she lifted her head and looked around. Seven was talking to the doctor in his office. Groaning, she rubbed her forehead and felt her hand tremble. Her passing out was becoming an occupational hazard, she realized as her eyes fluttered closed.

When she opened them, Seven was standing over her.

"Captain, how are you...feeling?"

"What happened?" Janeway asked, her body aching.

"You collapsed in the Briefing Room," Seven replied, placing her hands behind her back.

Janeway blinked a few times. "This seems to be becoming a bit of a habit."

"Indeed," the doctor said, his head popping up over Seven's shoulder. "The time for the mating ritual is close." Sickbay's stark light reflected off his bald head as he moved and stood in front of Janeway. "The reason you keep blacking out is that your body is preparing itself and cannot cope with all your other endeavors."

Janeway sat up on her elbows. "Doctor, I already ache all over," she said feeling her awareness and attraction to Seven grow immediately with her close proximity. "Don't make it any worse."

"Like I said," the doctor stated as he held up a hypospray. "Your body isn't coping."

"Doctor, let's forget the lecture," Janeway said distractedly. "Just give me something."

The doctor smiled tightly at her. "If you insist," he replied, pressing the cool metal to her neck.

Instantly, Janeway felt relief.

"Captain," the doctor said, holding the empty hypospray. "I want to apologize for my behavior earlier." He looked ashamed. "It was inappropriate."

Janeway nodded.

"The Captain and I require a moment alone," Seven said to the EMH.

The doctor looked at Seven carefully then nodded.

Sitting up, Janeway studied them both. Her gut instinct told her that the doctor had taken an ear bashing from Seven for his earlier behavior and this little rendezvous between her and Seven was pre-arranged. Wondering how quickly she could get out of Sickbay without the doctor utilizing a force field, she eyed the exit doors and wondered if she should make a run for it.

Looking over her shoulder, Seven watched the doctor disappear into his office. She turned her head to Janeway. "Captain," she said then paused.

Janeway looked at the blonde distractedly. Aware that with Seven around there was no chance of making a sharp exit, she slumped forward then hung her head. "Yes?"

"Do you not want me?"

Taken aback, Janeway lifted her head and stared at Seven. Mouth slowly gaping, she blinked a few times. Knowing that she should be used to the blonde's bluntness, but unable to do anything right now but stare at her, she eventually answered, "Seven...I..." She cleared her throat. "You have to understand that it is not a matter of wanting you. It is-"

"You copulated with Tom Paris," Seven interrupted as if ready for any line of argument. Tilting her head slightly, she added, "It appears that you have no regrets about the copulation, and subsequently it has not affected your relationship aboard Voyager."

Feeling a new knot of tension form in her temples, Janeway carefully eyed the statuesque blonde. "Seven, we had both crossed the transwarp barrier and evolved into lizards," she said dryly. She rubbed her forehead and grimaced. "Thankfully, I have absolutely no memory of my time with Tom."

Standing close to the captain, hands still firmly clasped behind her back, frame erect, Seven responded. "Then the only difference, this time, is that you will be cognizant of your actions."

Janeway pinched her nose. "Seven, right now, I'm not the Captain you know and trust."

Seven looked at her quizzically. "You are afraid that your physiological changes mean that your individuality has also changed?"

Eyes brightening, Janeway hoped that Seven was seeing where she was coming from, she nodded.

"Your changes are simply physiological, Captain," Seven responded, her clear blue eyes studying Janeway. "Who you are, your experiences, influences, and history remain the same." She raised her ocular implant. "You should view this as an interesting opportunity, a chance that few gender-tied individuals will experience." She tilted her head slightly. "I go back to my original question. Do you want me?"

Janeway wanted to ask the same question - do you want me? But for some reason she was apprehensive that the ex Borg would respond analytically. That she would tell her that no, she didn't, but that it was her duty, or that of course she was attracted to her now she was a hunk of a male.

The captain suddenly wished that Seven wanted her in her natural state. Frowning, she wondered where the hell that had come from. "Seven" she responded. "That's not what it's about. The last few days have been extraordinary to say the least."

Seven inclined her head. "Agreed."

Janeway eyed her. "Normally, when couples," she hesitated, "make love, it's because they are attracted to each other and in most cases they want to pursue a romantic relationship which hopefully will be filled with emotional resonance." She paused. These kind of conversations were normally a no go area for her, but she needed more than anything for Seven to realize that her rejection of her offer wasn't personal. "If there is no emotional resonance attached to a sexual encounter then sometimes, particularly if one is inexperienced, it can lead to bad psychological effects after the encounter."

"You are worried," Seven responded, raising her brow, "that I will not cope emotionally?"

Janeway nodded.

"You think I am emotionally immature?" Seven questioned, frowning.

Oh boy!

"No, Seven," Janeway said, wanting to reach out and touch the younger woman, but knowing she couldn't trust herself not to throw her on the table and demand that she let her prove how much she wanted her - protocol be damned. "Not emotionally immature," she answered. "Think of it more as innocent."

"Perhaps you can convince yourself of that, Captain," Seven replied. "Innocence implies that I am blameless and inculpable, but my involvement with the assimilation of millions of individuals does not place me in that grouping." She looked imperiously at the redhead and added, "It appears you doubt my ability to fulfill this task."

Janeway shook her head, and her heart sank at the word 'task'. "Seven," she said, eyeing the ex Borg expressively, "this isn't a test. I'm proud of you, proud of whom and what you've become, and the vital role you play aboard Voyager. It's not that I doubt your," she paused and cringed inwardly, "ability to carry out such a task." This time she reached out and placed a hand on Seven's arm, and squeezed it gently. "But it's much more than a task, and I believe asking you to do this is too big a sacrifice."

"I will adapt." Seven replied. She looked down at the muscular arm holding hers then looked at Janeway. Her eyes wide, filled with a need to communicate, she added, "I can do this, Captain."

Janeway wondered if Seven truly knew what was being asked of her. "Do you realize what you would be required to do?"

"I have discussed this matter thoroughly with the Doctor and Diplomat Omahr," Seven replied matter-of-factly. "We would be expected to mate every fifteen to thirty minutes. Although I will not possess either empathic or psionic abilities, it is not considered a necessity. My stamina and strength will suffice along with a heightened sex drive due to the pheromones you will release." She looked at the captain, and added with a note of pride, "I am an excellent match for you."

Trying not to wince, Janeway raised her brow. Seven sounded as if she was outlining the merits of why she should be selected for an away mission. "Is that so?" she replied dryly.

"Diplomat Omahr has informed me that the chosen ritual area has been prepared. When we are ready, she will send the transport coordinates." Seven paused then added, softly, almost vulnerably, "I am ready...are you?"

Janeway exhaled. She should have known that trying to dissuade Seven would be a feat that in her current predicament was proving too much. She was struggling. Thankfully the holofilter was still in full operation; otherwise with one glimpse at her groin, Seven, she was sure, would insist they proceed. Probably on this very biobed, her inner voice said sniggering gleefully.

Feeling like she was drowning, Janeway didn't know how the hell the average human male coped

with these constant sexual urges. As a female, there was no doubt that, in the past, she had a healthy sexual appetite, but these new urges for Seven and Diplomat Omahr were completely different. She mentally saluted all the men she had ever known intimately; who had always shown constraint and allowed her to set the pace.

Frowning, extreme thoughts and flashing images of Seven, deliciously naked ran, through her mind. A stray thought of what color Seven's nipples might be, and what it would feel like to hold those large breasts in her hands and kiss her senseless filled her mind - her mouth suddenly watered at the thought of sucking on one of Seven's full, ripe, nipples.

Feeling her erection strain for freedom, Janeway swallowed then groaned. Sucking nipples! Good God! She frowned. Why is happening to me? She shook her head. I'm going crazy. Completely and utterly bonkers!

"What is wrong, Captain?"

"Nothing," Janeway responded throatily as she chased the images out of her head. "Nothing at all," she added then cleared her throat. Eyes downcast, she focused on the floor with intent and wondered what the hell she was going to do. Flushed by Seven's proximity, she felt as if she was literally losing her mind. All she knew was that right now sexually charged, rampant, hormones were raging through her body and she was struggling to contend with the erection that seemed to leap into position whenever Seven was around.

Aware that her need to mate was now asserting itself fully, and wanting to touch her groin desperately, Janeway's head dropped. Gripping the edge of the biobed, her shoulders sagged.

"Once, when I was a drone," Seven said softly after a long silence, "I was separated from the collective for a short period of time." Moving close enough for her right hip to brush against Janeway's thigh, she continued, "I experienced panic and apprehension." She paused, then added with a note of vulnerability, "I am feeling that way now."

Taken aback, Janeway lifted her head. Surprised not only by the ex Borg's initiation of touch, but also by her complete sincerity, she grasped the biobed tightly. She looked over at the doctor, who was within earshot but appeared to be busy. She looked at the ex Borg. She squared her shoulders. "I'm not sure you understand the full implications, Seven."

"On the contrary, Captain," Seven replied, looking at Janeway intently. "I understand completely. Your collective needs you." She hesitated. Her blue eyes filled with deep emotion. She breathed in deeply. "I need you," she added, color rising in her cheeks. "I have grown to enjoy your... companionship."

The heat of Seven's hip now pressing firmly against her thigh was searing. Surprised at the sudden intimacy, Janeway felt her command mask falter. "But Seven," she said, desperately trying to stay in control, "you have never engaged in...sexual intercourse."

"Captain, I have, up until I was severed from the Borg, knowledge of the sexual behavior of all

assimilated species." She paused, and as if reading Janeway's mind added, "Physically, I am uninitiated but mentally I am not." She lifted her long, lean neck and added, "As with Lieutenant Paris there will be no lasting effect on my part."

Janeway wasn't sure how long she could keep this up. She had a six-foot ex Borg bombshell pressing against her and offering herself for the good of her collective. Right now, as a male, she found it almost impossible to resist. C'mon Katie, her inner voice piped up. Don't you know by now that resistance is futile? She wants to take one for the team, and what's wrong with that? Isn't that what you've been telling her all along - that sometimes, the needs of the many must outweigh the needs of the few - of one?

Gritting her teeth, Janeway wished that she could throttle that hideous little voice and bury it in the nearest black hole. She sighed inwardly, and thought back to Voyager's time in the void where she offered to stay behind to close the spatial vortex in order to protect the native species from the Malons, who were using their space as a dumping ground for waste and poisoning them. She almost had a mutiny on her hands as, one by one, all of her senior officers refused to let her sacrifice herself. It was the first time she truly realized how much the crew, and subsequently the survival of the ship, depended on her and her leadership skills.

What choice do I have? she thought. This moral dilemma, she knew, was not going to be easily resolved. If she mated with Diplomat Omahr, chances were that she would lose her mind during the ritual, or be forced to remain on the planet, if she survived. If she refused to mate with Seven, she was condemning herself to death, and potentially her crew, who she knew, after such a long tenure in the Delta Quadrant, needed her.

She thought of what her father would do, and his subtle drawl suddenly filled her head. The basis of a good commanding officer, Katie, is not only understanding that sometimes you must sacrifice yourself and others, but that no matter how hard it is, sometimes, you must carry out an order that goes against your better judgment. Do what you have to do to get your crew home, Katie. That's an order.

Janeway breathed in deeply then exhaled slowly. A deep warmth, then ache, filled her. The loss of her father still hurt tremendously. She knew that he would tell her just to get on with it. Feeling her resolve snap, she whispered. "Are you sure about this, Seven?"

Seven raised her ocular implant. "I am sure, Captain."

They both turned around when medical instruments clattered to the ground. Mouth open, holding an empty tray in his hands, the doctor stared at the captain with an expression of disbelief.

"Doctor," Janeway said. Hopping off the biobed, she moved toward the EMH and stopped in front of him. Gently, she closed his mouth. "I assume there's no need to update you?"

"Hmpff... Captain, I...I-"

"Doctor," Janeway interrupted. "I need your assistance." She looked at Seven and although it was

against every principle she had, she knew if Seven could step up to the dais then so could she. Towering over the EMH, she placed an arm around his shoulders and guided him toward his office. "Let's start with debriefing me fully on the mating rituals of the Gaelians."

Chapter Seven

Janeway breathed in deeply. Although uncomfortable in this new body, she had never felt so restless, or so alive. Standing in a habitat designed specifically for the Gaelian mating ritual, on Sgurr Mohr, she knew that soon all her inhibitions would be lost as the drive to mate snaked through her. Unfortunately, she had been left with no choice but to carry out the ritual planet side. In order for the ritual to commence, she needed to feel the silvery touch of the planetary moons on her body, and no simulation of this setting worked aboard Voyager.

She leaned against the open fire. Who was she? What was she about to embark on? She shook her head. And with a crewmember no less - one of the strongest, but most vulnerable. Closing her eyes, the same arguments and doubts that had been going through her mind since the beginning of this debacle continued to ricochet in her head.

The light wisp of material as it moved forced her to open her eyes and turn around.

Seven stood before her in a shimmering, almost translucent, negligee.

Anticipation and overwhelming excitement suddenly filled Janeway. Standing looking at the vision before her, her heart tried to hammer its way out of her chest. She caught her breath. She couldn't recall ever seeing Seven look more beautiful. Her blonde hair down and her body, beneath the shimmering outfit stunning. She gazed hungrily at the beautiful ex Borg. Her eyes were drawn to the neckline of the negligee; they followed the clear outline of Seven's full breasts, the narrow waist and down to the thatch of light curls that were caught by the flickering flames.

"Do you approve of my outfit, Kathryn?" Seven asked.

Unsure if she could speak, Janeway averted her eyes and nodded.

"Diplomat Omahr suggested that this outfit would be the most appropriate for this setting."

Janeway took a deep breath. "You look incredible." She blinked several times when she saw a faint smile wisp over Seven's lips. It seemed that Seven was far more prepared for this than she was. The arguments that raged in her mind were fainter now, and less coherent. As the moment drew near, her desire was taking over.

The sight of this magnificent woman, barely clothed, forced Janeway to close her gaping mouth. Her body responded immediately. Breathing in sharply, she watched Seven carefully move toward her, slow and deliberate. She knew instinctively that she was moving this way to ensure that she didn't change her mind and stop the ritual.

At full height, Janeway towered over Seven, and she was strong enough to sweep her off her feet. And, right now, as she sniffed the air and smelled Seven's growing scent, she wanted nothing more than make love to her.

The heavy beat of life filled Janeway's ears. She knew that there were only moments left before all three moons came into view. She had so little control over this new body it frightened her. What if she hurt Seven? A precondition to her finally accepting this ritual was that Tuvok would carry out discreet audio surveillance. No matter how much assurance she received, she couldn't run the risk of harming Seven.

When the moon's, one by one, peeked out and touched her skin, Janeway eventually drew up sharp. Eyes glowing, she looked at the Seven, her fingers itched - it was time.

"Kathryn," Seven said quietly. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," she replied, her voice shaking with desire and deeper than she had ever heard it. Her mouth watering with anticipation, it registered somewhere that she hadn't called her Captain.

Janeway was immensely grateful that Seven understood this situation required intimacy.

The moons light now full on her back, she watched Seven carefully place a hand on her chest, and connect with her.

The touch caused a burst of pheromones to be released.

Seven jolted in surprise. Her eyes, seeking Janeway's, widened then closed.

Janeway groaned. Seven shook as a strong sexual response to the pheromones swept through her. Moaning, she leaned into her.

Smelling Seven's stronger scent, the captain folded her arms around her. Lifting her, she instinctively suckled her neck, and tried to resist biting down, but couldn't. The bite, she knew, wouldn't be painful as pheromones also acted as pain soothers.

Seven quivered, and then shuddered violently as Janeway broke through skin and tasted her blood. The bite - highly erotic for both of them - also created a link between their nervous systems and began the invocation of the ritual.

Janeway lifted her head and bayed. Moving quickly, she carried Seven, as if weighing nothing, up to the bedding where they would mate.

The redhead had never felt more alive, more in sync with her environment. Relying completely on instinct, she laid Seven down and watched the pre-orgasmic waves that the pheromones were causing vibrate through the ex Borg in preparation for their joining.

This is happening too quickly, Janeway thought. But at this moment it felt so right. Stripping, she

watched Seven writhe on their bedding.

Standing naked and exposed, Janeway felt a sudden wave of apprehension as Seven eyed her.

Eyes growing wide, clearly surprised, Seven uttered a surprising, "Oh!" Then let out a hungry moan. "Hurry, Kathryn."

Janeway's body responded immediately. She looked down at the protrusion that had felt nothing but alien to her - until now. Rock hard, her embarrassment and awkwardness were quickly replaced by a desperate need. Dropping to her knees, her shadow fell over Seven as she shredded her negligee.

Gazing longingly down at Seven's naked, full breasted, beautiful curvaceous body, years of enforced celibacy and sexual frustration accumulated, and her groin tensed sweetly in gratification that it would soon be over.

Consumed by a rush of excitement so strong, she could barely draw breath, Janeway, involuntarily, released another intense burst of pheromones.

Seven cried out and reaching for her, attempted to pull Janeway down on top of her.

The redhead's mind almost went into warp drive when she heard Voyager's ice maiden keen with frustration as she resisted.

The sound of desperate need mixed with complete and utter abandon drove away any remaining doubt. Responding to her baser instincts only, standing firm in the warm air, her erection brushing against her hard stomach, hungrily, she lowered herself on top of Seven.

Immediately, Seven spread her legs and began moving beneath her.

The feel of Seven's body writhing under her was driving Janeway insane. Aware that this was Seven's first time, she shook her head and tried to focus - tried to stop herself from losing complete control.

But Seven's hands moved quickly, reaching down she grasped Janeway's cock tightly and frantically tried to position it for entry.

Eagerly, Janeway moved her hips.

Dammit, Katie. This is her first time! her inner voice yelled, trying to rein her back. Blinking, she stopped and swallowed convulsively. "Seven...I..."

Eyes wide, Seven arched her back. She groaned impatiently. "Please."

Her throat tightening, Janeway placed her brow on Seven's, and said throatily with the last vestiges of control, "I don't want to hurt you."

"You will not," Seven responded, pushing her hips upwards.

Breathing heavily, Janeway lifted her head and looked intently at the blonde. Eyes wide, Seven blinked. She stared up at her, "Kathryn...please."

Unable to control her lust, holding her gaze, Janeway positioned herself and slowly pushed into Seven.

Eyes unwavering, focusing completely on her captain, Seven caught her breath then flinched when Janeway hit a barrier.

Their eyes locked. "Seven," Janeway said, breathlessly. Terrified that she would hurt her, she stilled. "I..." She swallowed visibly.

Mouth open, breathing shallowly, gazing into anxious eyes, Seven ran her Borg exoskeleton hand up Janeway's back then sensually through her hair. Carefully, she placed it above her own head in offering. "Please, Kathryn."

An understanding passed between them. Carefully, Janeway placed her hand over Seven's exoskeleton one and held her wrist firmly to ensure that it wouldn't tear her apart during the throes of their love making. Eyes searching Seven's face for any hint of discomfort, she slowly pushed passed the barrier and entered her.

Seven moaned as Janeway entered her fully. The intensity in those blue eyes was breathtaking.

With her human hand, Seven cupped Janeway's cheek and looked deeply into her eyes.

The connection was sublime. Gently, eyes wide with emotion, she slowly and seductively, rubbed her thumb over Janeway's bottom lip.

The touch electric, the tight confines exquisite, Janeway gasped. Her hips moved once, involuntarily.

"Uhhh..." Seven uttered. Eyes rolling back and closing briefly, she moaned deeply.

Mesmerized, captivated, ensnared in the moment, Janeway caught the delicate thumb between her teeth and, sucked it slowly into her mouth.

The action incredibly erotic, a look of intense hunger crossed Seven's face. "Kathryn," she whispered, moving her hips.

The intimacy overwhelming, Janeway groaned when Seven's internal muscles contracted around her. Fighting desperately the urge to thrust her hips wildly, she watched color fill Seven's cheeks. Focusing on the pure unadulterated desire shining from those deep blue eyes, she exhaled heavily. The feeling of being inside this woman was absolutely indescribable.

Eyes wide and filling with desperate need, Seven whispered, "I...uhhh...I need you."

Janeway's eyes widened at the declaration. Feeling as if she was fragmenting inside, a low guttural moan involuntarily left her, and she began thrusting gently.

Hips rocking, groaning gratefully, Seven's head fell back and her blonde hair splayed. Moaning, eyes wide with wonder, mouth open, breathing heavily, she stared up at Janeway. Groaning, she wrapped her legs around her and dug her heels into thigh muscles. Holding her gaze, she began to move with her.

Soon, her body shaking, her hand flexing spasmodically, Seven gripped Janeway's buttocks and set a rhythm.

Holding her gaze, waves upon waves of pleasure filled Janeway as she thrust into Seven. This feels so natural...so right...so incredible.

Hip rocking, Seven moaned.

Wanting the blonde beyond anything she had ever experienced, Janeway's hips moved with Seven's. Enthralled, her poor, feeble senses assaulted, her heart tried to beat its way out of her chest, when Seven sucked fully on her bottom lip then bit down on it and moaned.

It was an act that was so deliciously provocative, it almost undid Janeway. "You are so beautiful," she whispered.

Seven's eyes widened in surprise then filled with pleasure.

Janeway tried to find some control, tried to take it slowly, but this joining wouldn't allow it. Grunting, she thrust deeper.

Shuddering, eyes heavy with desire, hips pumping, groaning, refusing to break eye contact, her face a mask of intense pleasure, Seven whispered breathlessly, "Kathryn."

Janeway gasped then released a long moan.

Strong, demanding fingers dug into Janeway's flesh as Seven's internal muscles clamped spasmodically around her. Her face suffusing with color, she cried out.

Biceps bulging, her breathing quickening, a surge of exhilaration shot through Janeway.

"Please!" Seven said huskily, as if she knew that one word - from her - would bring her captain begging to her knees.

Grunting, slick with perspiration, desperate, but determined that Seven would experience release first, Janeway quickened her pace.

Completely focused on Janeway, her beautiful breasts swaying, her eyes sparkling with pure wanton lust, Seven now panting with each thrust, tensed. Her eyes widened.

The hair on the back of Janeway's neck stood when Seven's fingers stopped dragging across her back and dug deep. Body tensing, a look of surprise then absolute astonishment filled the blonde's eyes. Swallowing, she uttered, "I..." The words were lost when, as Janeway thrust into her, her voice rose several octaves, "...uuuhhhh..."

Staring up in wonder at her, Seven swallowed. Her face masked in complete and utter ecstasy, she released the most wonderful deep and gut wrenchingly erotic moan that Janeway had ever heard.

The wonder in the beautiful blonde's eyes was so spectacular, Janeway wanted to devour her whole. Knowing that somewhere Seven's analytical mind was grappling to make sense of this amazing experience, and wanting to force that part of her brain into surrender, she shortened her strokes. Leaning forward, she panted into the Seven's ear, "I...want you...to...come...for me...Seven."

"Come?" A shadow of confusion fell across Seven eyes, but her body reacted instinctively to the command. Wonder shining from her eyes, hips surging upward, she released the most incredible escalating sound as her orgasm hit. "Uuu...uuuhh...uuuhh...uuuhhhhh..."

Head snapping back, eyes closing, body taut, a wonderfully slow, deep, fulfilling cry was liberated from within, as Seven came long and - oh so very - hard.

The moment sacred and exquisitely captivating, Janeway's excitement went into over drive. Eyes rolling back, the unstoppable welling-up of her own deep climax overtook her. She cried out when her scrotum tightened, exploding, she spilled out and into Seven - connecting them.

Hips thrust in a prone position; euphoria swept through them as their orgasms caught and held them for long, inextricable moments, intent on bonding their very souls.

Eventually, when their climax subsided, her arms wobbly, Janeway slumped forward. Exhausted, and unable to believe the way this woman made her feel, she began to ease out of Seven. Never, ever, ever had she experienced anything like that!

"Stay," Seven said, her voice ragged and spent.

Breathing heavily, their smells strong and surrounding them, Janeway looked at Seven.

Gently, Seven ran a hand along her captain's shoulder and neck then carefully brushed away strands of hair that were sticking to her brow. Tenderly, she tucked red hair behind Janeway's ear, and eyeing her intently, whispered, "Please."

Janeway's stomach tightened then fluttered. Her breath caught. Muscles trembling, she looked

down into the most beautiful, heavily sated blue eyes she had ever seen.

Cupping her captain's cheek, eyes smoldering Seven whispered, "Kiss me."

Janeway, unconsciously, licked her lips as she focused on Seven's generous mouth and full pink, moist lips. She watched them part in anticipation. Bending her head, she kissed Seven's cheek then trailed her lips slowly to her mouth.

It was meant to be a gentle kiss, warm and sweet, not designed to ignite the full-body hormone rush it did.

Lifting her head, lips tingling, Janeway stared at Seven in surprise.

Eyes wide and barely breathing, Seven whispered, "More."

Her stomach knotting, Janeway gazed down at the blonde. Unable to resist the plea, her mind completely shattered by the absolute overwhelming intimacy that they had just shared, and still holding Seven's exoskeleton hand above her head, she placed her mouth on Seven's and kissed her soft full lips slowly, teasingly.

Seven moaned and wrapped her fingers around Janeway's neck.

Slipping her tongue in Seven's mouth, Janeway felt her jolt then pull back.

The blonde looked up at her in surprise.

"It's all right Seven," Janeway said, slowly, thickly. She willed her fragmented mind to pull itself together, but she was lost completely to this woman. "Kissing involves tongues," she whispered weakly.

Seven quirked her ocular implant. "Yet another activity the Doctor has omitted when discussing intimate relations."

Still too shocked from their explosive connection, Janeway didn't respond.

Moaning, Seven pulled Janeway to her and kissing her deeply, entwined their tongues eagerly.

Seven's mouth was so hot and demanding that Janeway wasn't aware that her hips, with Seven's encouragement, were moving gently. The complete eroticism of the kiss and Seven's growing desire forced her to gasp when she hardened in response to Seven's inner muscles contracting.

I can't be - not this quick, surely?

Oh my God! she thought as incredible sensations suddenly exploded within her.

Involuntarily, Janeway released a burst of pheromones.

Ripping her mouth away, gulping for air, Seven thrust her hips fully. Undulating, she ran her hand through Janeway's hair and whispered as she found her mouth again, "I need you."

Her pulse quickening, her stomach tensing, Janeway's head clouded with lust.

Lying on top of Seven, buried deep inside her, Janeway reached for the firm breasts pressing into her chest. She cupped then caressed her right breast.

Seven moaned.

Eyes rolling back, Janeway groaned heavily at the feel of Seven's breast in her hand. Her mind delirious, she instinctively pulled on her erect nipple as she kissed her throat. "You have the most beautiful breasts," she whispered hoarsely.

Seven moaned and drove her hips upwards.

Swallowing, Janeway worked on Seven's breast, pulling the nipple as she thrust into her.

"Uhhh...." Seven cried out, wrapping her legs around Janeway her voice rose higher, "Please!"

Groaning, Janeway let go of Seven's breast, and lifting herself up, pushed into her - bumping her swollen clit with each stroke.

Mesmerized by the woman beneath her, and her continued whispered pleas, Janeway looked down. Her chest expanded and her breathing became erratic at the sight of Seven taking her fully, deeply, eagerly.

The feel of Seven was so wonderful, that, closing her eyes, she tried to savor this; being here, caught with this beautiful woman giving herself so freely.

"Kathryn," Seven said, her tone low, ragged and charged with sensuality, "look at me."

Janeway's eyes snapped open at the command. Incredibly aroused, sweat dripping from her, she felt hot - oh so very - hot. The sweetness and unexpected vocalness of this woman was driving her crazy. An overwhelming connection filled her as she looked deeply into beautiful blue eyes.

Holding eye contact, breathing in the same air, their hips thrusting, Janeway tried to hold on as Seven juddered underneath her.

Completely focused on her captain, a look of desire mixed with incredible vulnerability crossed Seven's face. Groaning, she pulled Janeway's head down, and with her hot, wet, full lips, kissed her deeply.

Thrusting her tongue into Janeway's mouth, Seven suddenly pulled away, and called out with a note of surprise and deep gratification, "Kathryn!"

Body arching then stiffening, her mouth moving, her hand gripping Janeway's shoulder, her voice strangled, she cried out as she slipped over the deep cavernous edge.

Panting, her body trembling, barely recovering from the last orgasm, Janeway tried to focus, tried to find some control and hold back, but overcome by the amazing sensation of internal muscles contracting, and seeing Seven come so intensely, she followed. Deep inside her, she exploded.

Her eyes rolling back in ecstasy, feeling lightheaded, blood pounding in her ears, slumping forward, blackness enveloped Janeway.

"What happened?" she asked groggily coming around.

Naked, kneeling next to her, Seven looked at her with concern. "It appears we copulated too quickly the second time." She tenderly wiped Janeway's forehead with a damp cloth. "We need to allow an interlude between each session in order for you to regain your strength," she added, stroking her head gently.

Pushing herself up on her elbows, Janeway wasn't sure if she had ever seen anything more beautiful than Seven kneeling over her, naked, full breasts prominent, face flushed and alight with concern mixed with desire. A word formed in her head 'perfection'.

Janeway felt herself harden.

Feeling light headed, she lay back down. From the doctor's briefing, although she would release pheromones regularly, she understood that it would be Seven who would set the pace. But given that she hadn't allowed the transformation to take place in stasis, she knew her energy levels weren't as they should be. She wondered half amusedly if her old ticker would survive this much stimulation. Who cares if it doesn't! Her inner voice said excitedly. What a helluva way to go, Katie!

Knowing that she should at the very least be slightly bashful, but somehow not, Janeway smiled. "If you want me to survive this experience, we definitely need to slow the pace."

Seven's face paled. "Survive?"

Janeway grinned then laughed. "I'm not about to keel over just yet, Seven." You bet your goddam Starfleet Captaincy you are not, missy! Ignoring the over-excited gleeful whooping of her aggravatingly horny inner voice, she added, "But I'm not as young as I used to be."

Seven eyed Janeway's groin. "On the contrary, Kathryn, it seems your physiology would contest that statement."

Janeway looked down, she blushed. She was very much erect and already preening for attention. The elevated hormones in both of their bodies were, she knew, creating a sense of elation. She

also knew there would be recriminations, particularly on her part, once they resumed their normal duties. Self-consciously, she reached down to cover her groin.

"Do not," Seven said reaching for her hand and stopping her.

Surprised at the deep emotion in Seven's eyes, Janeway fought the urge. What was the point after what they had just shared? Squeezing her hand she nodded. Feeling suddenly impish, she smiled. "Right now, it would appear that you are the one in control, right"

Seven glanced down at Janeway's erection. Amusement shone in her eyes when it twitched in response. "It would appear so."

"So, for my sake," Janeway said, linking her fingers through Seven's, "let's just take it easy."

Seven inclined her head. "Kathryn, the amenities are plentiful here," she said as she looked around. "We have access to a warm spring to bathe regularly and food and water to replenish our strength." She lifted her ocular implant. "It seems that the Gaelians also understand that pacing oneself is important in order to...maximize the experience."

Janeway grinned then wide eyed watched Seven do something extraordinary.

The blonde slowly smiled at her.

A surge of joy filled Janeway. She had never seen Seven smile before. Whatever the impact of this mating ritual, when they returned to Voyager, was something that she truly couldn't think about. Right now, she just didn't care.

Sitting up, she reached for Seven's hand. "Let's utilize some of these wonderful facilities then." Standing, she took Seven in her arms and hugged her then, lifting her off her feet, kissed her thoroughly before leading a very breathless and surprised blonde towards the refreshments.

Chapter Eight

In the Briefing Room, with her senior officers, Janeway listened as Seven provided an Astrometrics update on an asteroid eddy Voyager was investigating. It had been almost three weeks since they had left Gaelian space.

Janeway glanced down at her hands, and felt the now familiar wave of relieve that they were completely back to normal. She smiled inwardly, pleased that shortly after leaving orbit, she had returned to her old self with no overly lasting ill effects.

The captain wrapped her hands around her coffee mug and listened as Seven continued, composedly, with her report. Lifting her mug, she avoided looking directly at the blonde, and tried to block, as she had done over the last few weeks, thoughts about the intimacy and the wonderful emotional and sexual connection they had shared during the mating ritual.

She knew only too well that it was completely down to the blonde's intervention that she was alive. It had taken Seven four days of regeneration before she was able to resume her duties and a week in stasis for her. When she came out of stasis, all her inhibitions and fears returned - like a photon torpedo hitting its target - the guilt exploded within her.

Janeway held in a sigh and drank from her mug. She had fully expected that, after the mating ritual, her libido would return to normal, and her view of Seven, once her own physical form had been restored, would return to one of friendship. But, somehow, it hadn't. Instead, she was left with some sort of unquenchable gnawing need whenever she was around the blonde. So, she had done something - which was extraordinarily out of character - she had avoided Seven.

Swallowing coffee, Janeway carefully focused on the ex Borg and took in her beauty. Immediately, she felt her respiration increase. Unable to stop herself, she noted Seven's pale skin, touched with high color on her cheeks, her blonde hair, her fine features; her long neck, her lithe...and incredible body.

Stop this...dammit!

Janeway made a mental note that she should prioritize the doctor with creating a new look for Seven, preferably something similar to a heavy duty space suit that the crew wore when fixing the outer hull.

Janeway reminded herself, again, as she had, a hundred times or more, over the last three weeks, that although she was sure Seven wasn't gender biased, her first physical attraction and subsequent sexual encounter hadn't been with a female, but with a very tall, physically strong, strikingly athletic male - the perfect hybrid human male.

The irony wasn't lost on her of how much Seven would have appreciated such perfection. And how much that perfect male had, in the most amazingly romantic environment, and on a constant high of pheromones, induced the most incredible and overwhelming sexual response in her.

Placing her coffee mug down, Janeway frowned and suddenly recalled a chat she was privy to in the Mess hall with B'Elanna and Seven, where the blonde told the half-Klingon that she failed to see the benefit of monogamous relationships as it limited one's romantic interactions to a single individual.

A disturbing thought ran through Janeway's mind before she quickly chased it away. What could you give her anyway, Katie? She had Adonis. Why would she want a small, slight, puny female, like you?

The captain's mouth tightened. This is impossible!

Feeling suddenly uncomfortable, but keeping her command mask tightly in place, Janeway averted her eyes, and focused on her coffee mug. Although incredibly grateful to Seven - the mating ritual was well and truly over, and thoughts about her Astrometrics officer, other than platonic, were completely inappropriate - and very unwelcome.

She also reminded herself - again - that as Captain of Voyager, she had to stop this ongoing indulgence. She had a ship to run, and there was absolutely no room for anything else. Absolutely none!

But, if Janeway ever allowed herself just the slightest edge to contemplate their time together, she would, no matter how objectively she tried to view the experience, not be able to deny that of all her intimate relationships - which in the majority had been deep and intense - none of them had come close to those few days she'd shared with the woman sitting across from her.

She's coping fine, isn't she? Lifting her eyes, Janeway watched Seven read evenly from her PADD. Yes she is. Remember, it was her who reassured you, before leaving the mating ritual, that there would be no need to worry about any ramifications from our time together.

A strong sense of failing Seven filled Janeway.

C'mon, this is Seven...Borg enhanced bionetic implants, nanoprobes, eidetic memory. You underestimate my ability to adapt...we're talking about, she reassured herself. She's fine. In all likelihood, she's notched up our time together as nothing more than a valuable and interesting experience. In this matter, she'll find her own way.

Absently drinking her coffee, Janeway thought of the number of meaningful relationships she'd had throughout her life. After all, didn't I?

Lost in thought, it took her a moment to realize that Seven had stopped talking. Her slate-grey eyes widened with concern when the color suddenly drained out of the younger woman's face.

"The tornado phenomenon is forming an interfold between space and subspace," Seven continued. She paused, then swallowed. "The phenomenon is releasing substantial discharges of plasmatic energy..."

Again, she stopped talking.

"Are you all right, Seven?" Janeway asked, concerned.

Eyes wide and skin tone almost grey, Seven looked up from her PADD, and made eye contact with Janeway for the first time since the meeting began. Quickly, she raised a hand to her mouth. "Captain...I..." She faltered then swallowed convulsively. "I believe I am...unwell."

Mouth open, Janeway watched Seven retch then lurch forward and throw up all over the briefing table.

Tuvok tapped his combadge, "Computer prepare for a site to site transport on my orders."

"Acknowledged."

Tuvok looked at the captain.

Mouth closing, Janeway quickly nodded.

"Seven of Nine to Sickbay."

Tom whistled slowly when Seven dematerialized "I saw her eating breakfast this morning," he said, touching his receding hairline carefully. "She was eating Neelix's Talaxian tartar made from bloodworms." He laughed, at the little Talaxian's miffed expression. "From what I've heard she isn't the only crewman reporting to Sickbay this morning."

Janeway stared hard at Tom then looked around the table at the remainder of her senior officers. She waved a hand. "Dismissed."

Clearly sensing Janeway's annoyance, all the senior officers rose quickly.

"Tom," Janeway said drumming her fingers on the table, "a word."

Exiting the Briefing Room first, Tom stopped. The rest of the crew quickly shuffled passed him. B'Elanna squeezed his arm as she hurried by. Turning slowly, he looked at Janeway. "Captain?"

Janeway rose and walked around the briefing table to stand in front of the increasingly uneasy sandy-haired man. She was aware of the rumors flying around about her and Seven, and knew that Tom and B'Elanna from a betting and gossip standpoint respectively were desperate to substantiate exactly what had occurred. But, thankfully, all they knew was that she and Seven had been on a highly classified away mission.

In order to protect Seven, Janeway intended to do everything in her power, including enforcing a lengthy stay in the Brig for anyone who took it upon themselves to do a little data digging. It was very rare that a crewmember would attempt to access classified information, but not unheard of. And, in this instance, Tom was not far from her mind when it came to someone using unscrupulous methods to access data that might be considered salacious. She had a hunch that no matter how many Borg encryption codes bolstered the highly classified mission, finding out the facts about her and Seven would prove to be too irresistible for him.

"I know you think that wisecrack earlier was amusing," Janeway said. "But, let me assure you, it wasn't." Her eyes narrowed to slits. "In future, when you're in a room with me, make sure you check your attitude at the door...mister." Lowering her voice, she stepped into his space. "Is that understood?"

Clearly aware that his response had been entirely inappropriate, Tom stepped back. "Yes, Captain. Understood."

"Oh and one other thing Lieutenant," Janeway said, her eyes radiating anger. "When a crewmember is in such physical distress, I expect not only absolute professionalism but also, in your case, use of your medical training." She moved toward the exit. "Now, get this place

cleaned up." She quirked an eyebrow as the doors slid open. "It's only appropriate that your medical training should come in useful for something."

"But, Captain, I..."

"That's an order," Janeway said. "By the way," she added. "A word to the wise, Mister Paris, there will be a mandatory ninety-day sentence for anyone found tampering with classified mission reports."

Her hunch was, it seemed, spot on. Her lips twitched as the doors slid closed on a stunned and increasingly pale Tom Paris.

Janeway headed for the turbolift. "Deck five," she commanded and wearily leaned against the turbolift wall. She knew that Seven had only recently started ingesting food. She rolled her eyes knowing full well that over the years more than one crewmember had reported to Sickbay from Neelix's cooking.

Feeling a lot like her old self, she smiled and wondered how the little Talaxian would respond when she gently teased him.

Pushing out of the turbolift and through the sliding doors of Sickbay, Janeway nodded at the two crewmembers leaving. "Ensigns," she said, as they passed her. Smiling faintly, she wondered if they were also casualties of Neelix's Talaxian dish.

Janeway spotted the doctor holding a medical tricorder over Seven as she sat on a biobed. "Report," she said, approaching them.

The doctor swung around to look at Janeway, "Captain...I..." He closed his mouth then looked at Seven.

Relieved that Seven's color had returned, Janeway carefully placed a hand on the blonde's shoulder. Her fingers tingled enticingly. Seven's shoulders stiffened. This was the first physical contact they had had since their time on Sgurr Mohr.

"Doctor, while you try to form a diagnosis," Janeway said, her voice deliberately light, "I'll find out how the patient is, shall I?" She looked at the blonde. "Seven," she said her tone soft and full of concern, "how are you?" She smiled. "I hope this won't put you off Neelix's food too much. It also took me a while to adapt to his," she quirked an eyebrow, "culinary creativeness."

Head held low, Seven lifted it to look at Janeway. Eyes wide, she responded slowly, "I..." she swallowed. She looked at the EMH. "Doctor, I require your assistance."

Janeway frowned. She looked at the doctor, and was puzzled when he averted his eyes. Concerned, she looked at Seven then asked gently, "Are you all right?"

Although she owed so much to Seven, when she came out of stasis, the guilt of her actions, when

the pheromones were all gone, was overwhelming. On her first duty shift, she was informed that they had received a communication. It contained news that had rocked her hard.

"Enter," Janeway said when she heard the chime.

"Captain," Chakotay said, entering the room. "I thought you'd want to know this right away." He stood at her desk. "Two days after leaving Gaelian space a communication probe tracked Voyager down." He held out a PADD. "I think you'll want to see this."

Janeway looked up at her first officer and sensed from the look on his face that it wasn't going to be good news. Reaching out, she took the PADD. "Thank you, Commander."

Chakotay nodded then quickly exited the Ready Room.

Janeway stared at the PADD for a moment before activating it. The screen filled with the image of Diplomat Sgurrin. To her surprise, the dark haired Gaelian wore her hair loose. She looked stunning but deeply troubled. Janeway could see from her surroundings that she was located in Diplomat Omahr's residence.

"Captain Janeway," Diplomat Sgurrin said, sitting elegantly.

Janeway was caught immediately by the deep sadness in her voice. "I'll make this brief," the Gaelian said. "As you have no doubt noticed, my hair is loose." She touched it, fingering a few dark strands. "It is a tradition that when a Gaelian loses their love, they free their hair." She smiled slightly then grimaced. "Omahr is dead."

Janeway paled. Her fingers tightened around the PADD.

"Omahr was unable to produce another energy beam," Diplomat Sgurrin continued, her dark eyes wide and filled with sorrow. "It's not unheard of," she added, then almost whispered, "but it's very rare."

Janeway's heart clenched.

"Did you know that she was a practicing physician?" The Gaelian asked. "One of our best," she added. "Medical technology was a special interest of hers." Her eyes narrowed. "And when Voyager orbited our planet and wanted to open trade negotiations, I requested that she assist the Department of Trade." She paused. "You probably weren't aware, Captain Janeway, that my full name is Sgurrin Mohr," she said with the aplomb of knowing that the name alone cleared a path for her.

Eyes widening, Janeway's mouth tightened. Her stomach dropped at the Diplomat's next words.

"As you know, our society is based on what you would term an oligarchy." The Diplomat stared out at Janeway. "Throughout Gaelian history, my family has ruled."

That would explain the overwhelming self assurance and arrogance that oozed from the Diplomat, Janeway realized, her eyes narrowing.

"We Gaelians, over our life span, may be requested to work in different areas." Diplomat Sgurrin said lifting her brow. "And as medical technology was Omahr's specialty, it wasn't too difficult to arrange." She closed her eyes briefly. "It is unusual for a Gaelian to desire a bonded partner." Diplomat Sgurrin stated. "The inclination tends not to be there." She caught her bottom lip. "However, it was with me."

And I bet that a spoilt brat like you can have anything you desire. Janeway thought, her slate-grey eyes darkening.

"Do you have any understanding of how long I waited for her to be mine, to bond with her, Captain Janeway?" Diplomat Sgurrin asked, her voice rising slightly. "Do you know how much I loved her?" Color filled her cheeks. "I repressed all my emotions and desires while waiting for her." Her eyes glowed. "All obstacles, including her bond partner, had been removed and I was close."

Stunned, Janeway stared at the screen. So, Diplomat Omahr's partner's death wasn't as accidental as she had been led to believe.

"I resent you, Captain Janeway," the Gaelian continued, "for just sweeping into our lives, interfering then leaving devastation in your wake. And because of you she is dead!" Her eyes filled with rage. "I tried to convince Omahr to go through the mating ritual with you when I discovered that she couldn't produce another energy beam. That, at the very least, would have allowed me time to find an alternative solution."

Janeway thought back to the day she visited the planet and met with Diplomat Omahr. Her instincts had told her there was something wrong. It appeared that the Gaelian fully understood that she wouldn't be able to mate again, and for some reason had chosen to protect Janeway by telling her she was preparing for a mating ritual. Sorrow filled the redhead as she realized that the Gaelian had no doubt empathically sensed her underlying sense of honor, and understood that it wouldn't have taken much to persuade Janeway to attempt the mating ritual with her.

Eyes wide, Diplomat Sgurrin shook her head. "When she refused, I instructed the Council of Authority to mandate that a mating ritual take place, but I was refused," she sneered. "I approached my parents to overrule the decision," her eyes narrowed, "but they refused to interfere."

The Gaelian's loose hair billowed as she stood and moved next to a painting. "This is what you have taken from me," she said, pointing to a large painting on the wall.

Squinting, Janeway whispered, "Omahr?" The painting was of the beautiful, naked, dark haired woman lying sensually on her bed, looking completely sated. An image of Seven, in a similar position recently, filled her mind.

Janeway caught her breath as a mixture of desire and great sadness filled her.

Diplomat Sgurrin's face suddenly filled the viewscreen. "We should have been together, Captain Janeway." Wide, angry eyes stared out at the redhead. "Do you know she died the moment your mating ritual ended?"

Her mouth filling up with saliva, Janeway covered it with her hand. She wondered if she might vomit. She wished that somehow she had been able to make contact with Omahr before leaving Gaelian space. But to avoid unnecessary delays it was agreed with her first officer that they leave orbit as soon as she was placed in stasis.

Her face suddenly empty of emotion, Diplomat Sgurrin continued, "She was connected to you." She frowned unhappily. "Her body linked with yours. While you were having pleasure, she was having pain." She closed her eyes briefly. "If the Gaelian mating call is not responded to, then the body and our social rules are unforgiving. No interference. The body is allowed to turn on itself." Her eyes narrowed. "She didn't have an easy death." She gave a conciliatory smile. "I hope you think on that, Captain Janeway, for a very long time."

The communication ended abruptly.

"Captain?"

Blinking Janeway looked at the doctor. "Yes," she responded.

"Did you hear me?" the doctor asked.

"Of course," Janeway answered, clearing her throat. "Continue."

"At first," the doctor said. "I thought Seven's symptoms presented as some sort of intestinal parasite."

"Indeed," Seven said. Frowning, she added with a note of arrogance, "Then let me alleviate your ignorance, Doctor."

Janeway closed her eyes briefly. She was fully aware that although Seven and the doctor were 'close' friends, the friendship, given their penchant for abruptness, sometimes had a rancorous edge to it. Reluctantly, she removed her hand from Seven's shoulder, and mediated, "Seven, I believe what the Doctor is trying to say is-

"If you consider my carrying a child similar to that of an intestinal parasite," Seven said coolly,

ignoring Janeway as she eyed the EMH, "then I should inform you, Doctor, you may need to update several of your medical subroutines."

Wondering if the ship had just hit an ion storm as the ground seemed to be moving beneath her, Janeway placed a steadying hand on the bio bed - she clearly had missed something here - parasite! - child!.

"Excuse me?" she said gruffly, color draining rapidly from her face.

Eyeing Janeway, the doctor swallowed - hard.

Blindsided, the captain looked from the EMH to Seven's calm face. She must have misheard, surely? "What?" she asked, and prayed that somehow she had.

Eyeing Janeway's incredulous face, the doctor said quietly. "Captain, my apologies," He glanced at Seven reproachfully. "I intended a more subtle approach."

Janeway's face blanched completely.

"I do not have an intestinal parasite," Seven said as if imparting some educational information to Janeway. "I am pregnant."

Pregnant!

Stunned, Janeway resisted the urge to shake her head and laugh at the absurdity of it. She frowned then swallowed. Her mouth dry, she asked, "Is this some sort of...prank?"

Watching Janeway intently, Seven responded, "It is not, Captain."

Flashes of the time she spent with Seven flooded Janeway. No. It can't be! Astonished, she looked at the blonde. Pregnant! No... she can't be pregnant! "A child?" she eventually whispered. "Our child?" She swayed. "Impossible!"

Seven slipped off the biobed and reached for Janeway. Placing an arm around her waist, she steadied her. "Impossible is a word that humans use all too often."

Unable to think clearly, Janeway uttered. "How?"

The doctor, looking relieved, cleared his throat, "Well, Captain, it is quite simply a matter of the birds and the bees. You see during your transformation, you-

Feeling suddenly queasy and not wanting to listen to the doctor babble on to cover his nervousness, Janeway said shakily, "Belay that."

The doctor's mouth pursed. "It seems, Captain," he said gently, "that your physiology during your time with Seven was more productive than we expected."

"Productive enough to impregnate me," Seven added as she positioned Janeway next to the biobed.

Janeway's knees buckled. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. For a moment, she thought she might pass out. She was only vaguely aware of Seven lifting her up onto the bed.

"How the hell could this happen?" Janeway asked, incredulously.

"Captain?" Seven said quietly, her voice filled with concern.

Sitting, but fighting the urge to flop back on the bed and throw her hands out in despair, Janeway nodded. "Productive was not part of the deal, Doctor," she said, glaring at the EMH.

"Captain, I..." the doctor responded moving toward her.

Janeway focused on Seven. Her eyes filled with concern and something more - apprehension. Completely at a loss for words and aware that Seven would be frightened with this new knowledge, she asked, "Are you all right?"

"I am unsure," Seven responded quietly.

Janeway's heart clenched. What have I done to her? Her eyes filling with deep remorse, she whispered. "I'm so sorry, Seven." Steadying her nerves, she sucked in air then looked at the EMH who was hovering over her. Quickly her command mask fell into place. How could he have let this happen? She thought, outraged.

"Seven would you excuse us for a moment," Janeway said slipping off the biobed. "Doctor, a word in your office."

Janeway moved quickly toward the doctor's office. Inside the segmented area from Sickbay, she turned to face the EMH then moved into his space. "How could you let this happen?" she asked, her voice barely hiding her anger. "I thought you gave Seven a compound to ensure nothing like this would ever happen." She threw up her hands. "And why has it taken three weeks to discover this?" She looked at him. "Didn't you examine her?" she hesitated. "Afterward?"

The doctor nodded vigorously. "Yes, Captain."

"A thorough examination?"

The doctor admitted almost unwillingly, "Not quite."

Feeling the color drain fully from her face, again, at such negligence, Janeway stared at the EMH.

"Seven was exhausted," the doctor said quickly. "As were you, Captain." He sighed. "She

desperately needed to regenerate. She barely let me run a medical tricorder over her before insisting that I examine her after she regenerate."

Not needing to be reminded of how exhausted they both were, Janeway inhaled deeply. "And after she regenerated, it didn't occur to you to examine her then?"

"I would have gladly examined her, Captain. But Seven has been avoiding me." He frowned. "I wasn't sure if she needed time alone after such a profound experience." He looked at Janeway. "I thought it best to allow her to come round in her own time."

"What about her weekly diagnostics?"

"Captain, Seven has had eighty-two percent of her Borg implants removed," the doctor responded, concern showing in his eyes. "Her metabolism is fully functioning, she regenerates less. She is becoming very human. I have, as I've had to with many of the crew, including you," he said, raising his brow admonishingly, "been forced to accept that regular physicals will not happen. Most crewmembers will only willingly come to Sickbay if their medical complaint is strong enough to necessitate it."

"You're her physician, dammit! It should have been your priority." Janeway closed her eyes and sighed deeply before opening them. "I never thought I could possibly put myself or one of my crew in such an untenable position." She shook her head. "She is so young, so unformed. Isn't what happened bad enough, and now this?"

"Captain," the doctor said gently, "I'm sure Seven has never seen your time together in a negative way."

Suddenly tired and appalled that this should happen, Janeway shook her head. "Doctor," she said, then paused. Anger washing through her, she eyed the EMH then added carefully, "How can we handle this situation?"

A look of confusion crossed the doctor's face. He blinked several times as he looked at her.

Janeway squared her shoulders then pinched the bridge of her nose. "If only I had found some other solution."

"Captain, contrary to what you might think, there was no other solution."

Janeway placed her hands on her hips. "I repeat, Doctor. How can we handle this situation?"

Shock crossed the doctor's face. He stared at Janeway. "You mean-"

"I do not wish to terminate."

Surprised at the interruption, Janeway and the doctor turned to see Seven standing in the doorway. She witnessed something she had never seen with the strong and self-assured ex Borg -

a look of complete and utter helplessness crossed her face.

Janeway clenched her fists at her stupidity. She hadn't meant a termination, she was angry and just wanted to nail the doctor for his complete incompetence but, caught up in the moment, she had completely forgotten that Seven would overhear them. "Seven," she said, moving quickly toward her, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean for you to hear this discussion."

"So it would seem," Seven said staring down at Janeway. "Captain, I am carrying a child." A look of wonder crossed her face. "Our child." She arched her ocular implant. "I am aware that you may not want to be involved." Her blue eyes narrowed. "That is your decision." She moved her face closer to Janeway's. "But let me make this clear, it will be your only decision concerning this child."

Seven eyed Janeway for a moment then turned and exited Sickbay.

The loss of Diplomat Omahr had pained Janeway deeply, and she took the news of her death personally. The abject waste of such a beautiful, warm, enthralling individual and the circumstances of her and, possibly her partner's death, drove Janeway to want to turn Voyager around and go sort that good-for-nothing malicious Gaelian, Diplomat Sgurrin, out, and not necessarily the Starfleet way.

Immediately after receiving the communication, she had configured a small comms probe with Sgurr Mohr's coordinates for the attention of Elder Duhr. In it she included Diplomat Sgurrin's message and relayed her concerns. She asked that the Council of Authority carry out an immediate investigation. But she was woefully aware, as she launched the probe into space that given the light years Voyager had traversed, it might never reach them. She realized as she watched the small probe vanish that there was pathetically little she could do, and it almost broke her.

Affected immensely and unable to cope with the guilt of Diplomat Omahr's death, Janeway buried herself in work. The guilt was double-edged, with the ending of the mating ritual came all the recriminations that she had so successfully ignored during their time together. This, more than anything, had forced her to push everyone away - in particular, Seven of Nine.

Deep down, she had known that distancing herself from the ex Borg so soon after their time together would be detrimental, but she couldn't help it. She had convinced herself that it would be okay. Seven was Borg - she would adapt. Even though her rationale told her that, given the circumstances, she couldn't have saved Diplomat Omahr without sacrificing herself, she was still wracked with remorse that she hadn't tried harder to save the Gaelian

Frustrated, Janeway ran a hand through her hair. Right now, she was forced to accept, that her actions had hurt Seven deeply. Regretting her recent behavior, she exhaled slowly. She couldn't blame Seven for being angry with her, she should have been there for her.

Self awareness, she was told once mostly comes from humiliation. And at that moment, she was not only humiliated but deeply ashamed. After the mating ritual, she had hoped that she would've

been strong enough to support Seven as her Captain, but she hadn't. What had been stirred up in her had left her so stunned, she realized at that moment, that she had used Diplomat Omahr's death as an excuse to push Seven away.

There was no doubt, Janeway realized, as she swallowed, a sudden bitter taste in her mouth, that she had left Seven completely and utterly out to dry.

Somewhere deep inside, if she ever admitted it, Janeway was terrified to face what her time with Seven had truly meant to her.

"Doctor," she said, looking across at the EMH who suddenly appeared fascinated with the PADD he was holding. "Question," she said, moving closer to him. "Why didn't Seven's nanoprobes activate?" Her eyes narrowed. "That, along with the compound you gave her, should have prevented any," she chose the word carefully, "accidents, right?"

Janeway watched the doctor fidget with the PADD. "Doctor?" she said, standing in front of him.

The Doctor slowly placed the PADD down and looked at Janeway. "We reprogrammed Seven's nanoprobes to accept any substance that had your DNA coding."

Janeway looked astonished. "Why?"

"Captain," the doctor replied. "Even though Seven is a former Borg, her physiology is still highly adaptable." Frowning, he added, "During the mating ritual, there was an understanding that you would both engage in extended physical contact. Contact," he added gently, "that she had never experienced." His brow rose. "We had to take every precaution that during," he hesitated, "passionate moments, where her control may have been compromised, that her Borg physiology did not try to take over." He looked at Janeway intently. "Simply put Captain, we had no way of knowing that at her most vulnerable, Seven's tubules would not activate and try to assimilate you."

"We?"

"Seven and I."

"And the compound you gave me to inhibit my fertility?"

"Your immune system was off the grid, Captain." He sighed. "It clearly didn't have the desired effect."

A storm brewing in Janeway's slate-grey eyes, she stared hard at the doctor. "I think that's a bit of an understatement, don't you Doctor?"

"Yes," the doctor responded, his fingers now fidgeting with a medical instrument. "I suppose you could say so."

"And the child?"

"It seems that the nanoprobes have assimilated your genome." The doctor lifted his chin. "As such, the nanoprobes accept the child as part of Seven's physiology."

Janeway breathed in deeply. "Doctor, ensure that Seven has everything she requests and needs." Her eyes narrowed. "Understand this, I expect you not only to keep me updated but I want daily reports of her condition and any," she lifted a hand to her mid-section, "fluctuations." She moved closer to the EMH. "Be assured Doctor, that your handling of this matter is now subject to investigation." Her eyes hardened. "Consider yourself on report." She ran a hand down the front of her Starfleet uniform. "In the meantime, I hold you personally responsible for Seven's welfare. Is that understood?"

Janeway watched the doctor visibly swallow. "Entirely, Captain."

Exiting the turbolift at Deck Three, Janeway made her way to her quarters. She tapped her combadge.

"Janeway to Chakotay."

"Go ahead."

"Commander, you have the Bridge."

"Captain, is everything all right?"

"Just carry out my orders, Commander."

"Acknowledged."

"Computer log me as unavailable due to personal priority."

"So Logged."

In her quarters, Janeway headed for the replicator. She quickly keyed in a command, and a full glass of whiskey appeared. She swallowed a few mouthfuls of the amber liquid then rubbed the cold glass against her forehead. She tapped her combadge. "Computer, locate Seven of Nine."

"Seven of Nine is in Astrometrics."

Normally, in times of difficulty, Janeway would go to a member of her crew, comfort them, offer her command shoulder to lean on. Instead she made her way to the sofa and, feeling bewildered, slowly sat down. She stared at her glass for a long time and realized that there was no Starfleet protocol, no personal point of reference to help her deal with this situation.

It was clear that Seven wanted to keep the baby. And why wouldn't she? Janeway's inner voice

responded. She's no longer a member of the collective. She's an individual, as you keep reminding her. Why, as an individual, would she not want to hold onto the most precious gift in life?

Janeway shook her head. Even still, she couldn't grasp the enormity of the situation. Seven of Nine was carrying a child - their child!

Janeway stood, then moved over to her access console. "Computer, access Ensign Wildman's files and prepare a list of her requirements, both ship's and personal, from her first trimester with Naomi Wildman onward. Also cross reference this list with her medical requirements during this period." She touched her brow. "Computer assign authorization code Janeway-8-4-1-Alpha-6-5 to this data."

"Assigned and complete."

Janeway keyed in a command string to access the data. She raised her brow. The list was extensive. She was aware that the requirements of the child, Naomi Wildman, would be different from Seven's requirements, but it was a starting point. And she was fully aware that she desperately needed somewhere to start.

Chapter Nine

"Report," Janeway commanded as she entered Sickbay.

"It is nothing, Captain." Seven said sliding off the biobed. "The Doctor's response to every flux during this trimester is becoming extreme." She looked at Janeway. "I was unable to consume my nutritional supplement this morning." She eyed the EMH coldly. "Neelix informed the doctor of this, and subsequently the doctor ordered me to report to Sickbay then evidently decided to inform you." She added haughtily. "It would appear that there are more hands involved in my pregnancy than in the running of the ship."

Due to her new dietary requirements, out of necessity, Neelix had been informed of Seven's condition. Ignoring the sarcastic comment, which Janeway had been experiencing from Seven since she found out about the pregnancy, two weeks ago, she asked, "Is there something wrong?"

"Nothing," Seven announced. Placing her hands behind her back, she took her usual erect stance. "My nutritional requirements are," she hesitated, then swallowed, "unpredictable at this moment."

"In what way?" Janeway asked, relieved that Seven hadn't simply marched passed her and out of Sickbay.

It was clear that Janeway was firmly out in cold space. There was no doubt that her need for distance since the mating ritual and the perceived rejection of their child was a step too far. Although Janeway wasn't sure how to get back in favor with Seven, she'd be damned if the blonde thought she would continue to keep her out.

"The baby," the doctor interjected, "it would seem that, although only five weeks old, is one of the few aboard Voyager who loves Neelix's cooking." He looked at Janeway. "Who would believe it? And this morning our resident chef got upset when Seven didn't touch her food." He filled a hypospray. "It appears that the child has a Klingon's appetite; the gorier the food, the better." He smirked. "Fortunately, we know that Seven's parentage isn't in question." He looked at Janeway. "Any relations you wish to tell us about, Captain?"

A flicker of exasperation crossed Janeway's face. Right now, she desperately wished she hadn't granted the EMH sentience, but had somehow just continued to think of him as another hologram. His dereliction of duty regarding Seven, at the very least, would have allowed her to reprogram him. Instead, she was forced to accept that due to his sentience, mistakes would be made. However, as a sentient being, and a member of Voyager's crew, Janeway was entitled to exact punishment, and that's exactly what she did by stripping him of the Starfleet Medal of Commendation that he'd received for his part in repelling raiders who wanted to strip Voyager of essential components.

Janeway knew the doctor was still smarting from the loss of his commendation, and although she hated to admit it, she continued to draw some satisfaction from that. She gave the doctor a force-ten look. "Haven't you got duties to be attending to?" she asked, glowering.

"Yes, Captain," the doctor replied. He quickly administered the hypospray. "That should stop any further feelings of nausea, Seven."

The EMH turned and quickly headed for his office.

"That was unnecessary, Captain."

"What?" Janeway asked, eyeing the EMH's back as he hastily retreated.

"Your treatment of the Doctor recently has been questionable."

Wanting to keep any dialogue going, hands on hips, Janeway looked at Seven. "How so?"

"You hold him responsible for my being pregnant. You consider that if he had taken the right precautions after the mating ritual, you would not be burdened with this situation. You take great pleasure in punishing him for his perceived mistake." Color filled Seven's cheeks. "What you do not seem to comprehend is that the doctor gave me the compound, instructing me that for maximum effect, I needed to administer it just before we initiated the mating ritual. I intentionally did not take it or allow the doctor to examine me."

"What are you saying?" Janeway asked, bewildered. "That you wanted this to happen?"

"It was not a matter of want, Captain," Seven responded with a note of detachment. "It was simply a matter of allowing nature to take its course."

As if the child was reaching out to her, Janeway felt her stomach flutter. She flushed and felt a sudden warm pleasure emanate from inside her. Instinctively, she knew, with their proximity, she was picking up Seven's feelings for their child. During the mating ritual she and Seven had connected through their nervous systems and this connection should have ended with the ritual. However, lately, the feelings she was having whenever she was around Seven told her that maybe, like the Gaelians, she and Seven might be experiencing a similar sort of connection, where both parents were connected during the pregnancy and the early formative years of the child's life.

A mental image filled her of them holding their child. Overwhelmed by the great depths of emotion she was experiencing, Janeway decided that she would request that the doctor carry out a scan to see if there was a specific bio signature from Seven to which she was responding. Whatever Seven's reasoning for allowing the potential to become pregnant, the baby was here and, instinctively, she knew that it was critical that she be a part of Seven and their child's life.

"Seven, however much you think I'm angry at this pregnancy and carry feelings of resentment," Janeway said stepping closer, "you are wrong." She reached out and placed a hand on Seven's arm. "I admit it was a shock, but only because it was so unexpected."

Placing both of her hands on Seven's arms, Janeway instinctively knew that her next words were possibly the most important of her entire life. "Seven, I regret not expressing how important and meaningful our time together during the mating ritual was. As captain of this ship I have, over the years, buried the part of me that needs intimacy. You brought that back into my life." She let her command mask drop fully. "I truly don't know what that means because, since our time on Sgurr Mohr, I've been experiencing things I've never felt before." She squeezed Seven's arms tightly. "But I do know that I want to be part of your and the child's life."

Staring at Janeway, Seven's eyes suddenly filled with moisture. A surprised expression crossed her face and she blinked a few times.

Is that tears? Janeway thought in alarm, Oh my God, she's crying!

Aware that hormones would be playing havoc with Seven's emotions, Janeway instinctively reached up to wipe away the trembling tears that were threatening to fall from her dark blonde eyelashes, but Seven grabbed her wrist and held it. "You want my child?" she asked, holding her wrist tightly... painfully.

Aware of how strong Seven was and surprised at the vice-like grip, Janeway frowned then responded, "Yes."

"I do not believe you," Seven stated, tilting her head slightly in her customary way. Tears slowly sliding down her cheeks, pain shining from her eyes, she dropped Janeway's hand and wiped away her tears.

Comfort her...dammit! Janeway's inner voice cried out.

Janeway reached out, but Seven stepped back.

Disturbed that she was clearly not allowed to comfort her, rubbing her wrist, Janeway stared at Seven. As the blood flow increased, a sinking feeling filled her.

Standing erect, Seven linked her hands behind her back. "Does Unimatrix 325, Grid 006 sound familiar to you, Captain?"

"Yes," Janeway replied. She thought back. "Voyager studied the birth of a nebula there." Witnessing Seven's growing distress, her heart rate increased as she added carefully, "And we lost One."

"I lost One," Seven corrected, her face bleak.

Deeply troubled by the response, Janeway raised her brow. The memory of the unique Borg filled her mind. Aboard Voyager, a transporter malfunction caused Seven's nanoprobes to assimilate the doctor's mobile emitter and along with the sampling of an ensign's DNA, a new 29th century Borg male drone matured in a maturation chamber. Aware that the drone posed significant security risks, but troubled by the ethical ramifications, and intrigued by the uniqueness of the individual, Janeway rejected the idea of termination. Instead, she assigned Seven the role of mentor to Voyager's new fully adult crewmember...One.

It became clear to Janeway that Seven's individuality was very different from One's, who although a superior Borg, had no actual experience of the collective, and to her growing unease he quickly became interested in them. To her regret, even though Seven had dampened his proximity transceiver, One's cranial implants adapted and created a secondary transceiver which contacted the Borg.

With a Borg sphere fast approaching, Janeway was forced to give One a crash course on the destructiveness of the Borg Collective.

Standing on the Bridge, the sphere less than three hours away, Janeway witnessed the depth of the connection that One shared with his mentor when he expressed a desire to join the collective. He asked Seven if she would like to return to the Borg. Had Seven offered a simple yes, she knew, without doubt, that Voyager and her crew would have been assimilated. The helplessness and heart clenching fear that struck her during those few tense seconds still left a bitter aftertaste in her mouth. Seven's response as she locked eyes with Janeway was the sweetest answer she had ever heard - Voyager was now her collective.

Forced to destroy the sphere, One returned to Voyager with serious injuries, and to Seven's absolute horror, refused medical help. Instead, he chose to end his existence. On the biobed in Sickbay, Janeway found out later, he had told Seven his reason was that now that he had made contact, the Borg would not stop until they found him.

Janeway had always pondered whether One realized, ultimately, through their search for him, the Borg would also find Seven. And, even though his existence was brief, he understood that he

could not allow that. Somehow, she knew, he had grasped the concept of love and with that - self-sacrifice.

"I understand that One's death had an immense affect on you, Seven."

Over time, Janeway realized that the role of mentor allowed the ex Borg to experience a variety of profound emotions such as the awakening of a strong maternal instinct driven by the realization that it was her nanoprobes that caused One's birth. Unfortunately, all too soon, those maternal feelings were crushed with deep emotions of loss.

The redhead suddenly realized that the loss of One might have left a strong unfulfilled maternal need in Seven.

"You considered One to be a mistake also."

Eyes widening in surprise, Janeway was immediately aware that she had made a terrible error in handling Seven the way she had - expecting her to roll over when she told her she cared about her and the child.

Janeway was suddenly bombarded by emotions from Seven. Empathically, she was picking up on the multiple emotions she was feeling right now. The anger at the recklessness and subsequent loss of her parents to the Borg causing her to be assimilated at a very young age filled her. The isolation of being a newly disconnected drone from the Borg, and the feelings of rejection from Voyager's crew were almost overwhelming, followed by feelings of abandonment by Janeway, who had used her for the mating ritual then pushed her away, leaving her to sort through complex emotions alone.

"Seven," Janeway said huskily. She paused then swallowed. Feeling strong emotions continue to pour into her from the blonde, she breathed in deeply then exhaled. Not sure if Seven was aware that she was now able to connect with her empathically, she said carefully, "This is quite different."

"Is it?" Seven responded coldly, clearly unaware that Janeway was caught in the deepening whirlpool of her emotions. "From what I understand, Captain, it is the same."

The loss of One suddenly filled Janeway. She felt a complete sense of helplessness followed by a chasm of loneliness. It was becoming clear, from the outpouring of emotions, that loss, rejection and abandonment were strong in Seven's life.

Janeway felt deeply ashamed.

"You and the crew tolerated One, as you have tolerated me." Seven's eyes narrowed. "I have always been aware that you have seen the scientific value in studying the Borg, as my parents did." Anguish filled her eyes. "One was not just a drone to me. He," tears spilling, she faltered. "He was unique. As this child is." She paused then added bleakly, "You do not want this child, Captain, but yet you appear ready to accept the situation, and now wish to assist me. However, I

am fully aware of your preferred option," she almost choked, "termination." She straightened. "As such, I believe that you will only ever tolerate my child. That you will attempt to force humanity on her, and insist that she understand what it is like to be human over everything else," her eyes narrowed, "as you have with every other drone that has come aboard Voyager."

Janeway swallowed. "No, Seven," she responded. "I have never just tolerated you." She stopped and took a breath. "I admit that I saw the scientific benefit in fully understanding One. He was, as you pointed out, unique. But it was never intended to be detrimental. I assigned you as his mentor to teach him about humanity, in the hope that he would understand what it meant to be an individual. And to-

"Learn what it means to be human," Seven interrupted. She almost sneered. "And that is what you want to do with my child. But she will not be fully human. Human qualities are flawed. She will also be Borg, and because of that she will never be equal."

Never be equal? Is that what she believes? Janeway thought in alarm. Stunned, she watched Seven exit Sickbay.

Chapter Ten

"Captain," Chakotay said, as he entered the Ready Room. "Is everything okay?"

Wearily, Janeway lifted her head from her hands. "I'm fine, Chakotay," she replied. She stretched her neck then massaged it. "Just feeling extremely tired. "I haven't been sleeping well."

The ex Maquis eyes twinkled. "You never do when we traverse through a quiet part of space."

Janeway breathed in deeply. "Believe me, a red alert is the last thing I need right now."

"Then if that's not the reason what is?" Chakotay asked, taking a seat in front of her desk.

Elbows on her desk, Janeway clasped her hands together then looked at her first officer. "You picked a lousy time for a meaningful conversation, Chakotay."

Chakotay didn't respond.

Unclasping her hands, Janeway leaned back in her chair. "It's this damn situation."

"By situation you mean Seven?"

Janeway nodded.

"She's learned the human quality of stubbornness." Chakotay grinned. "I wonder from whom?"

Janeway looked at her first officer then sighed. "She's seven weeks pregnant, and I can't get anywhere near her. Other than when she's on duty, she refuses to speak to me." She leaned

forward. "She believes that somehow I, and everyone else aboard this vessel, think that because she was Borg, she's considered unequal."

"That doesn't surprise me."

Taken aback, Janeway looked at him. "But hasn't she said herself that the crew has accepted her and integrated her into their collective?" she asked with a note of exasperation.

"Although that may be true for the senior officers, and for some of the crew she is exposed to in Astrometrics and Engineering," Chakotay responded, "there is no doubt that many of the crew still shy away from Seven."

A troubled look crossed Janeway's face. "Do you know, Chakotay," she said after a moment, "I just never considered it before." She ran a finger along her desk, and added thoughtfully, "Remember our encounter with the Think Tank?"

Chakotay nodded. "If I remember right, my ancient Olmec figure was on the list of things they requested in exchange for their help."

Janeway nodded, remembering Kurros and his small, but divisive group known as the Think Tank, who sought out problems to be solved. Only it turned out the group created the problems in the first place.

"Along with Neelix's recipe for chadre'kab."

Chakotay grinned. "A grave error on their part, and that's probably why we managed to out-think the Think Tank."

Janeway's lips twitched.

"What made you think of them, Kathryn?"

"As you know, they wanted Seven," Janeway replied pensively. She recalled when Kurros arrived in her Ready Room in isomorphic form, and handed her a list of commodities that the Think Tank wanted. One item that the cheeky little pip squeak had the audacity to ask for was Seven of Nine. Of course, she refused the terms of payment, telling Kurros that bartering for one of her crewmembers was out of the question. But he asked that the question be posed to Seven, and what could she do, but ask? After all, wasn't Seven an individual?

"Maybe I should have encouraged her."

"Why" Chakotay asked, frowning. "They were more devious than the Ferengi."

"That's not what I mean," Janeway replied. Placing her chin on her palm, she remembered that moment in her Ready Room when, after relaying the request, Seven asked her how she wished her to proceed. She recalled her throat closing over and wanting to request that she tell their

would-be pocket-sized savior that her ship wasn't a recruitment vessel, and that he was to take his proposition and shove it out the nearest airlock. But she couldn't, and she didn't. Instead, she told Seven, like a good captain should, that the decision was hers.

"It's clear that I have overlooked Seven's needs in the past."

Janeway recalled the relief she felt when Seven told her she'd declined the offer. She raised her brow. If she was honest, she realized that maybe that was the first time she truly feared losing her.

"You've always kept a close eye on her progress."

Not sure if she heard a hint of envy in his tone, Janeway eyed her first officer. "Do you know, they told her that she could become one of the greatest intellects in the galaxy, and offered her the chance to pursue perfection?" she said. She laughed hollowly. "And here I haven't even got around to offering her basic accommodations."

"Kathryn, you're being too hard on yourself," Chakotay replied. "This is new territory for you. You're not used to dealing with your own emotions, let alone Seven's."

Ignoring the quip about her own emotions, Janeway replied. "And the child's," she said, clasping her hands together. "It appears that with the pregnancy there's a bio signature linking all three of us."

The ex Maquis looked at her compassionately then gave her an encouraging smile. "It seems rather ironic given how often we have discussed the problems surrounding crew fraternization and having children, that you, along with Samantha Wildman, would take the lead.

Janeway raised her brow at the gentle ribbing. She breathed in deeply. "I would have asked you to have your head examined if you had told me that a three-week mission would result in me becoming a parent."

"Are you ready to be a parent?" He asked curiously.

Contemplating the question, Janeway caught her bottom lip and thought for a long moment. The thought that because of their joining a new life had been created still stunned her. She and Seven had actually created a baby!

"I've always assumed that I would be a parent," Janeway eventually replied then quirked an eyebrow, "Just not the father, so to speak." She looked uneasy for a moment. "I know Mark desperately wanted children," she frowned, knowing that she had disappointed him with her lack of commitment. "But, I just kept putting him off." She looked at Chakotay. "He made me promise that we would set a date for the wedding when I returned from my first away mission with Voyager." She smiled forlornly, remembering how Mark had booked their favorite restaurant for the evening of Voyager's return and she knew he had every intention of her committing to a date that evening, come what may. "He knew that once we were married, all

being well, children would soon follow."

What she didn't add was that although she expected to become a parent - at some point - the idea had never really enthralled her. Not the way it did...now.

Chakotay nodded. "He knew that once you committed, you would give your all." He raised his brow, and said with a touch of emotion. "He knew you well, Kathryn."

Janeway nodded. "Yes he did." She frowned. "This new development has me worried, Chakotay. I may have stirred up a Tracnians' nest. Now that their Captain is having a child, many of the crew that has paired off may decide they want to be parents." She held out her hands expressively. "What kind of lives will we be giving children aboard a vessel that's not equipped with any sort of child care facilities and that is more often than not travelling through hostile parts of space?" She shook her head. "We only have one child aboard, Naomi, and even then the crew is very protective of her. Even Seven can't resist her. The more children that are onboard, the greater the likelihood that our focus will shift from getting this ship home to protecting our loved ones...our children." She looked at him questioningly. "If that happens, in all likelihood, the crew will want to settle here in the Delta Quadrant."

"Maybe, Kathryn, but either way, we have to face the reality that we're a long way from home, and priorities inevitably will change." Chakotay shrugged. "If we don't settle, then we have to consider that we will need a replacement crew, and becoming a generational ship is one way around that problem."

Janeway nodded, and replied unhappily, "Is that the best *raison d'être* you have, Chakotay?"

"The pitter-patter of tiny feet will be a welcome sound along these hallways, Kathryn."

"Or the bewailing of the doctor as he treats yet another child who's stuck their finger into an EM conduit or inserted a plasma injector where it shouldn't be."

Chakotay laughed. "Having the Doctor pull a few extra duty shifts would be reason enough for me."

Janeway smiled. "And me." She looked at her first officer. "Voyager, becoming a generational ship, who'd have believed it?" She exhaled slowly. "Let's hope it doesn't come to that Commander. Somehow, we'll get this crew home."

Chakotay nodded. "How is Seven?"

"Adapting," Janeway replied with a hint of irony. She pulled on the sleeves of her uniform. "With the baby growing, the connection is getting stronger." She looked at Chakotay. "From what I understand, in Gaelian society, the second parent plays a pivotal role in providing support and comfort during the full term of the pregnancy to the mother and the baby." She clasped her hands together. "Seven's attuned to the baby, and I'm attuned to Seven and the baby." She raised her brow. "Soon, the pregnancy will begin to show and there are certain practicalities that we

need to be dealing with."

"But you need to get close to her?"

Janeway nodded then quirked an eyebrow. "I think I'll need to utilize a tractor beam for that."

Chakotay grinned.

"Whatever happens, she can't continue to reside in Cargobay Two," Janeway said, raising her brow, she lifted a hand expressively. "Maybe she's right Chakotay." She sighed. "Maybe I have somehow treated her as a non-equal."

Janeway stood and made her way to her coffee pot, which Neelix provided fresh each day, on the upper level of her Ready Room.

"When would I ever allow a member of this crew not to have the very basics, like accommodations?" She shook her head and, lifting a delicate china cup, poured from the pot into it. "I've always prided myself in being the type of captain that has a heightened awareness of her crew and their needs, who has the ability to look beyond what a crewmember offers professionally and engage with them as individuals, to find out what other potential they may have and nurture it."

Her cup empty, Janeway shook the pot.

"There's no doubt that you're a compassionate leader, Kathryn. But, most of the time, you're used to dealing with clear rules and codes of conduct," Chakotay responded with a note of concern. "It's acknowledged with the crew even here in the Delta Quadrant that as Captain of this vessel you run a tight ship, and you expect every crewmember to uphold certain behaviors and standards." Smiling, he touched his tribal tattoo. "And they do...most of the time."

Intrigued, Janeway stared at her first officer. If anyone knew what was going on intimately with this crew, it was Chakotay. His affable nature and regular fraternization with them meant that she was often privy to information she wouldn't normally know. However, right now, she wondered about the things he clearly knew that she wasn't aware of as Captain.

Janeway put the pot and empty cup down. "Two hours into my duty shift and it's finished." She made her way to the replicator.

"One more cup and you'll jump to warp drive."

Keying in commands, Janeway watched a steaming hot mug of coffee appear then turning offered her first genuine smile since her first officer entered her Ready Room. "Isn't that my line?"

"The best form of flattery is imitation," Chakotay said. He added gently, "You're stressed, Kathryn. But whatever you feel right now, it's important that you understand that you have a

natural born gift for this role. I realized some time ago that by being a captain of a starship vessel, you were fulfilling your destiny." He looked at her intently and added with great sincerity, "I couldn't think of a better Starfleet officer to be guiding us home than you, Kathryn."

Returning to her seat behind her desk, Janeway studied her first officer. She had always admired the stillness of the man and his sense of heritage. "Thank you, Chakotay. Your words mean a great deal to me."

The ex Maquis inclined his head.

Janeway sipped from her mug. "Tell me," she asked, knowing she would have to deal with it at some point, "does the crew know?"

"Yes," Chakotay responded. He inclined his head. "It was only a matter of time."

Janeway nodded. "How much do they know?"

"Mostly everything," Chakotay replied. "There are even bets on what you morphed into."

"What's the favorite?"

"A lizard."

"Don't they know that's passé," Janeway responded, raising her brow. "I'm surprised they couldn't think of anything more original." She half smiled. She knew that no matter how classified the away mission was, the adept questioning of B'Elanna with Seven meant that the news got out. Fortunately, Seven had realized what Voyager's chief engineer was up to before she told her of the pregnancy.

A complete dressing down along with a PADD detailing her re-assigned duties in maintenances if she - ever - coerced a crewmember to divulge classified information again had tempered, in the short term Janeway was sure, B'Elanna's need for gossip. And surprisingly, later that day, the half-Klingon even apologized to Seven.

Janeway had to accept reality - such a scandal couldn't be kept under wraps for too long. It was inevitable her crew would find out. Gossip flowed through the very bio-neural gel packs of the ship, she was sure. "Do they know about the pregnancy yet?" she asked.

"No. Still only some of senior officers so far," Chakotay replied. "But the crew is aware of the growing tension between you and Seven - and watching keenly."

Lifting the mug to her mouth, Janeway rolled her eyes then nodded. "Let's hope we can keep that nugget of information private for a little longer"

"Sickbay to Captain Janeway."

Tensing immediately, her mug at her mouth, Janeway responded, "Go ahead, Doctor."

"Seven has reported feeling ill, Captain."

Placing her coffee mug down, Janeway nodded at her first officer, communicating silently that he had the Bridge. She pushed out of her chair, "On my way, Doctor."

Entering Sickbay, Janeway watched the doctor run the medical tricorder over Seven as she approached the biobed.

"Doctor," Janeway said to the EMH. "What's the problem?"

Seven stared straight ahead refusing to acknowledge her.

"Captain," the doctor replied, placing the medical probe he was holding in its resting place behind the tricorder. "Good to see you."

Feeling suddenly nauseous, Janeway placed a hand on her stomach. "It's good that someone's pleased to see me."

Since Seven discovered that Janeway was empathically linked to her, to her dismay, the blonde had researched the Gaelian datafiles on how to block an empathic link, and with usual Borg precision had been very efficient at jamming the connection, but not completely. When in close proximity, Janeway sometimes picked up on Seven's symptoms.

Ice blue eyes eventually glanced at her. "Captain," Seven said, acknowledging her presence.

"Seven," Janeway responded. She resisted the urge to touch her shoulder, and comfort her. Instead, she looked at the EMH. "Doctor, what's wrong?"

"It seems that the baby is suffering some stress."

Alarmed, Janeway frowned. "Stress?"

Eyes wide, Seven stared at the doctor. "Elaborate."

"There is no imminent danger," the doctor responded reassuringly. "Consider this more of a warning."

"Clarify," Seven stated.

"Your cortisol levels are steadily increasing, Seven," the doctor replied, looking at the ex Borg.

"If you don't mind lying down, I would like to explain why." He reached for some sensor nodes. "I believe I know what's causing this."

Color suddenly high in her cheeks, and clearly too upset to argue, Seven proceeded to stretch out on the biobed.

Attaching sensors around Seven's stomach, the doctor looked at Janeway. "If you don't mind standing just right here, Captain," he said, pointing to a section of the bed that was in line with Seven's abdomen.

Intrigued, Janeway moved into position.

"Each time Seven has reported to Sickbay for medical treatment during her pregnancy, I have scanned the fetus." He cleared his throat when Janeway and Seven frowned at him. "Baby," he amended. "This morning when she arrived in Sickbay her symptoms presented as fatigue." He looked at the captain. "It seems that Seven's regeneration cycle is being interrupted."

"Doctor," Seven said, looking at the EMH questioningly. "From my research, this symptom is not unusual during pregnancy."

The doctor nodded. "That's right, Seven," he responded soothingly. "However, for want of a better word, sleeplessness is not the reason for your increased cortisol levels." He positioned a medical viewscreen next to her bed. "When compared, the scans present a consistent pattern."

The doctor punched in a few commands, and Janeway watched biorhythms appear on the viewscreen and fluctuate.

"Although we've already established that there's a bio signature, it seems that the baby only stops exhibiting signs of stress when the Captain is around." The doctor touched the screen and his finger followed the spikes and drops in the pattern. "As you can see, the baby is aware whenever you are in proximity, Captain."

Fists clenched, Seven studied the patterns on the view screen. "You are correct," she said, sounding miserable.

Janeway's heart sank. Tired, and beginning to feel more than a little troubled by Seven's clear rejection, she asked, "Where are you going with this, Doctor?"

"Unlike some of us," the doctor replied, looking Janeway up and down, "you seem to have a calming effect on the child."

"Careful, doctor," Janeway replied, her slate-gray eyes narrowing. "I'm not in the mood."

The doctor breathed in deeply. "Captain, as we know, during your morphology, you were exposed to extreme neurochemical changes, as well as exposure to a complex pheromone system. It is clear that your child has been exposed to these changes also. Although you have

returned to your normal physiology, you were a hybrid when she was conceived." He looked at Janeway. "As to be expected, her heritage includes some Gaelian traits."

Janeway nodded.

"Seven would you mind if the Captain placed her hand on your mid-section?"

Seven stiffened. "Is this necessary, Doctor?"

"Seven, the baby is exhibiting signs of stress. Occasional high levels of cortisol will not be a problem. However, if she remains under stress for extended periods of time, it may be too much for her, and affect her wellbeing."

Seven glanced at Janeway with a concerned expression. "Proceed."

"Captain," the doctor said. "Would you mind?"

Janeway hesitated then carefully placed her right hand on top of Seven's abdomen. Immediately, she felt a sense of stillness fill her, followed by an overwhelming sense of harmony. Stunned, she realized that she was connecting directly with the child. Mouth dry, suddenly she was consumed with deep warm emotions of parental love.

Through the connection, Janeway felt a soothing emotion pass from her to the baby.

"As I thought," the doctor said, looking at the viewscreen and watching the spiked biorhythms flat line. "As a Gaelian second parent is," he added with a touch of self-satisfaction "you are an integral part of the gestation period for this baby."

Her hand on Seven's stomach, her senses filled with a deep and growing love for the child, Janeway watched the screen for several minutes then turned to look at Seven. To her surprise, she was sound asleep.

"As it seems you are to Seven also," the doctor added, quietly. "Have you been experiencing sleep deprivation, Captain?"

"Yes, increasingly."

The doctor nodded. "I thought so."

Instinctively Janeway placed her other hand on Seven's stomach. She half smiled and knew instantly that the baby approved. "Tell me, Doctor. What's happening here?" The connection with the child touching her deeply, she lightly stroked Seven's abdomen.

"As you know, Captain," the doctor responded, "there is an extremely strong bond between a Gaelian child and its parents. Due to the species highly developed sexuality, it is considered customary for regular physical contact between the parents, particularly during the gestation

period. This helps the child develop their psi-empathic abilities. I believe the same is happening here." He looked at her. "I don't know to what degree she will develop these abilities, but quite simply, she is stressing because she misses you, Captain."

Not sure how to respond, Janeway stared at the EMH. Instinctively, she knew by touching Seven's abdomen that the doctor was right and the baby needed her. She also knew that she no longer viewed Seven as just a member of her crew, and, perhaps for the first time, she was prepared to accept that she never had.

Suddenly feeling overwhelmed by the situation and what it meant, Janeway quickly removed her hands. "If what you say is true, Doctor," she said, folding her arms, "And I believe it is. How do we proceed?"

"As you can see, Captain," the doctor responded, touching the screen "the fluctuations began again as soon as you removed your hands."

Unfolding her arms, Janeway stared at the screen and watched spikes appear.

Seven began to stir.

The doctor replaced Janeway's hands on Seven's mid-section.

"Doctor," Janeway said, her hands lightly resting on Seven's abdomen. "You can't seriously think that we can spend our entire time like this?"

"Of course not," the doctor replied. "But, I believe that the baby requires a certain amount of contact each day. Call it reassurance." He looked at Janeway. "Please continue."

Stroking Seven's abdomen, Janeway watched her fall back to sleep. "Has Seven ever slept before?" she asked curiously.

The doctor stopped tinkering with the viewscreen and looked at Janeway in surprise. He picked up a tricorder. "No. I don't believe she has."

"Will it cause any problems?"

"No," the doctor said, scanning the ex Borg. "If anything, I think she now needs to supplement her regeneration with sleep."

Janeway nodded. "I need to allocate her accommodations."

"The Captain's quarters?"

Her hands stilling, Janeway stared at the EMH. "Don't be ridiculous, Doctor," she replied. "Seven barely looks at me. Besides, it would be inappropriate."

"She's carrying your child, Captain," the doctor replied, then muttered under his breath, "How much more inappropriate can it get?"

"Doctor," Janeway said, almost growling.

"Captain," the doctor replied. "Isn't it clear that right now Seven needs you?" He looked at the ex Borg and, sounding fiercely protective, added, "I know she's stubborn, but the reality is that this is completely new ground for her. Regeneration is no longer sufficient for her and the baby. As well as sleep there will be other new requirements like supplementing her diet, not to mention the physiological changes she will experience."

Janeway watched the doctor begin to pace up and down.

"She will get bigger, Captain," the doctor continued. He stretched out his arms. "Her stomach will grow, her breasts will enlarge. She will suffer mood changes, an increase in appetite." Abruptly he stopped pacing and looked at Janeway. "And there are also the needs of the child to consider. If we are to follow Gaelian tradition, which I believe we must for now, she will require both parents to be within close proximity. Of course, each trimester means that she will grow stronger and her bio signature will sense your movements around the ship." He smiled. "You won't have to be in the same room all the time."

Janeway gulped. She stared at the doctor incredulously. "Are you telling me," she said, eyes wide, "that not only am I required to share accommodations with Seven, but that during this pregnancy I will have to limit my movements?"

"I don't see why we can't boost the bio signature, but you will be required to have regular physical contact."

Janeway looked at the doctor warily as the overwhelming reality of the situation began to hit home. "Meaning exactly what?"

"Meaning," the doctor replied, "that you will be required to do what you're doing right now every day."

Hastily, Janeway removed her hands from Seven's abdomen. Feeling suddenly trapped, chained like a prisoner, she backed away from the biobed. "No," she said quietly, but forcefully. "This is unacceptable."

The doctor moved closer to the redhead. "Do you remember Captain," he said, "when I struggled with the guilt of Ensign Jetal's death"

Feeling lightheaded, Janeway placed a hand on her mid-section, and took a deep breath. "Of course I remember."

Focusing, she breathed in deeply and recalled the conflict the doctor went through after a shuttlecraft was attacked and both Ensigns Jetal and Kim ended up on the operating table in

Sickbay. With an equal chance of survival but limited time to act, the doctor was forced to choose one of them to save. As time passed, Voyager's EMH was overwhelmed by guilt believing that he had, no matter how inadvertently, let Ensign Jetal die to save his friend, Harry Kim. The result was a clash between those parts of his program which compelled him to act impartially and ethically.

"For two weeks you set up an around the clock vigil. You insisted that a crewmember stay with me at all times," the doctor said, looking at Janeway with deep gratitude. "During that time, you were with me as much as you could be," He raised his brow. "You were there for me when I needed you, offering a sounding board and a familiar presence while I struggled to come to terms with my decision."

"You're a member of this crew," Janeway responded, trying to pull herself together. She looked at the EMH, surprised at his willingness to touch on one of the darkest moments in his short existence.

"Though my chance of recovery was uncertain you stayed, allowing me to eventually come to terms with what I had done," the doctor said quietly, moving to stand in front of Janeway.

"You have Seven to thank for that, Doctor," Janeway responded. "She convinced me that you had reached a point in your personal development where you deserved the chance to evolve beyond the constraints of your program, beyond being regarded as a piece of technology," she paused. "She convinced me that you deserved to be treated as an equal." Janeway looked at the doctor for a long moment, and feeling suddenly calm added, "From a friend," she touched his arm, "you should always expect nothing less."

"Thank you," the doctor replied. He briefly covered her hand with his own. "Although it was one of the most unsettling experiences I have ever had, it was also one of the most defining, and you helped shape it, Captain. You helped shape me."

Janeway recalled Seven in her quarters at two in the morning, trying to convince her that the doctor was an individual, an equal. She remembered her blunt words that made her reconsider over-writing his program.

"It is unsettling. You say that I am a human being and yet, I am also Borg, part of me not unlike your replicator. Not unlike the Doctor. Will you one day choose to abandon me as well?"

"Captain," the doctor said. "Do you remember the poem *La Vita Nouva*?"

Janeway blinked for a moment. "Yes," she replied, "It's one of my favorites. It was included in a book of poems I gave you."

"You gave it to me at the vigil," the doctor said. "It helped me enormously."

Janeway nodded then whispered the words that she had hoped would help the doctor, "In that book which is my memory, on the first page that is the chapter that is the day when I first met

you, appear the words - here begins a new life."

"A new life," the doctor repeated.

A new life, Janeway thought. I don't want her to feel abandoned anymore. She grasped the EMH's shoulders and looked at him intently. Her voice low and husky she said, "I think we'll have one hell of a battle convincing Seven to move into my quarters, Doctor."

Eyes lighting, the doctor nodded.

"Apart from a tummy rub," she said releasing him, "what else will Seven and the baby require?"

Chapter Eleven

Leaning against the command controls near Seven's Borg alcove, Janeway watched her regenerate.

"Regeneration cycle complete," the computer announced.

Seven opened her eyes, and looked at the redhead.

"Captain," she said, acknowledging Janeway's presence.

"Good morning."

Seven inclined her head. Stepping down from the dais, she headed straight to her workstation.

"Physical contact is not scheduled until oh-eleven hundred. "It is now oh-six hundred. How may I assist you?"

Janeway quirked an eyebrow. "Oh, I know what time it is, Seven," she replied languidly. "When does your duty shift begin?" she asked, approaching the workstation.

"In one hour," Seven answered. Keying in commands to her console, her eyes widened and her fingers stilled. She swallowed. "However, in that hour, I require time to digest my nutritional supplement." She glanced at Janeway. "The child seems to enjoy large quantities of protein."

Janeway laughed. "My mother experienced the same," she said, her eyes warming as she looked at Seven. "She said she could have eaten a horse when she was pregnant with me."

"Equus ferus caballus is a hoofed ungulate mammal, a subspecies of one of seven extant species of the family Equidae. These mammals can weigh up to two-thousand pounds," Seven said looking haughtily at the redhead. "I can assure you, Captain, the probability of my ingesting this species is highly unlikely."

"It's a figure of speech, Seven," Janeway responded. "It simply means that, like you, she was carrying a child with a very healthy appetite." She grinned. "Me."

Seven looked at Janeway for a long moment before inclining her head. "I see." She keyed in commands to her workstation. "You do not report for duty until oh-nine hundred."

"I have something on my mind."

Busily keying in commands, Seven asked, "Are you having trouble sleeping?"

Janeway nodded. "You could say that," she replied huskily.

Fortunately, the doctor had been able to boost both Seven's and the baby's bio signature, allowing Janeway the freedom to move around the ship. But, in exchange, she and Seven were required to have some form of physical contact twice a day. Over the last week, it had proved awkward, Seven reporting to the Ready Room, erect, grasping her hands behind her back, telling Janeway to proceed. Or when she wasn't on duty, Janeway was required to report to Sickbay to carry out her 'task' as Seven liked to refer to it.

Yesterday, Janeway had proposed a new arrangement to the ex Borg. "I've come to ask if you have considered my offer?" she said, noting with some concern the darkening shadows under Seven's eyes.

"I agree that Cargobay Two does not serve as private quarters," Seven replied. "However, Captain, I do not wish to reside in your quarters."

Janeway leaned on the workstation and, propping her chin on her hand, eyed the blonde lazily. "You are eight weeks pregnant, Seven, and as the pregnancy progresses, whether you like it or not, we need to ensure that there is no distress to our child. You know that we'll be required to spend longer periods of time together."

"I understand that, Captain," Seven replied, her response a little too sharp for Janeway's liking. "That is why I am working with the doctor to boost the bio signature to allow you complete freedom of movement, and to limit the demand on your time regarding physical contact with my child."

Janeway raised her brow. Ouch! That one hurt.

"In the meantime, it would be efficient to choose crew accommodations close to your quarters." Seven tapped in a few commands. "Ship's records show that there is..." eyes widening, she studied the console. She looked at the redhead. "It appears that there are no available crew accommodations on Decks Four, Six, or Eight."

Janeway drummed her fingers lightly on the workstation. "Is that so?" she replied, eyes hooded. "Deck Nine was closed for power conservation, and many of the crew have been asked to double up."

"I presume that is a recent request, since crew accommodations were available yesterday?"

Seven asked, frowning.

"Yes. Very recent," Janeway responded. "And, as accommodations are tight, I wouldn't bother asking if you can bunk up with anyone either." Her voice lowering, she added, "The answer will only be no."

Seven looked at Janeway for a long moment. "Am I correct in assuming," she said, placing her hands behind her back, "that no accommodations will be available to me, occupied or otherwise, other than the Captain's quarters?"

"Yes, Seven," Janeway replied slowly. She smiled sweetly. "Your assumption is correct."

The redhead knew she was taking a terrible gamble, coming here and 'ordering' the ex Borg to move into her quarters. But she trusted her instinct that the pregnancy was affecting Seven emotionally and physically. Unlike a typical human pregnancy, where the mother wouldn't really feel the baby until later the later stages, Seven was very connected and the new demands were, from the shadows under her eyes, taking their toll.

Janeway only hoped that Seven's resolve to stay angry with her was weakening. She kept reminding herself of the doctor's words - Seven needs you. Although it was increasingly difficult to believe it from the consistently frosty reception she received. But trusting her gut, she believed that if she stood firm, and held her ground on this matter then Seven would relent eventually, at the very least, for the benefit of their child.

"When you come to my Ready Room later," Janeway said, straightening, "I'll show you the requisition list I've prepared for your move into your new quarters." Exiting, she added over her shoulder to a rather stunned ex Borg, "You can let me know what you think, and what else we may need to add."

Chapter Twelve

"How does this feel, Seven?" Janeway asked, both hands gently caressing Seven's abdomen.

Lying on the bed, stomach exposed, Seven slowly opened her eyes. Hazily, she focused on Janeway. "Captain?"

"When we're here, in our quarters Seven, as I've already requested, please call me Kathryn."

Seven nodded slightly then closed her eyes.

"Am I doing this correctly?" Janeway asked gently.

Languid blue eyes opened and assessed her for a moment. "Kathryn, you are well aware that as the second parent, this activity is necessary for the child. She finds your touch soothing as well as reassuring."

"I understand that, Seven," Janeway responded. Applying some more massage oil that the doctor had prepared, she wondered if she would ever be able to convince Seven to refer to the baby as their child. Fingers splayed, she glided them gently over the small bump that was Seven's abdomen. "But how do you find it?"

A small involuntary moan escaped from Seven. Her eyes rolled back then closed.

Good, obviously.

"Seven?" she asked, aware that at these moments, whether the blonde admitted it or not, it wasn't only their baby that adored her touch.

Slowly Seven opened her eyes. "It is irrelevant how I find it," she responded, distractedly. "All that matters is that the child finds it beneficial."

Irrelevant, is that so?

Raising her brow, Janeway hid her smile.

Well let's see, how irrelevant this is.

She moved her hands where she knew she would elicit a moan.

"uhhh..." Seven responded drowsily.

Even though she had gone to great lengths to ensure that Seven's every need was met when she moved the reluctant ex Borg into her quarters, convincing her that it would only be for the term of her pregnancy, Seven still continued to keep Janeway at arm's length. She knew that she had desperately hurt the blonde with her rejection of her after the mating ritual and her initial response when she discovered she was pregnant. Janeway knew, more than anyone, that she deserved to be dragged over a warp core because of her behavior, but she hoped that this new situation would close the rift between them - somehow.

Her hands stroking Seven's abdomen, she easily lulled the blonde to sleep. Watching her features relax, Janeway smiled. She wasn't someone who was overly introspective, and if she was it tended to be about her responsibilities as captain rather than any sort of analysis about her personal life, but if she was honest, her feelings had changed completely for Seven.

Lifting a hand, Janeway carefully touched the small starburst implant located under Seven's right ear, and re-familiarized herself with its feel. During the mating ritual, she had touched, kissed, and caressed every part of this very beautiful young woman. Stroking the implant lightly, she breathed in deeply, and unconsciously parted her lips.

Gently, she ran her finger from the starburst to Seven's long dark-blonde eyelashes. Brushing through them, she enjoyed the light ticklish feel on her fingers. Moving slowly, she trailed fingers down Seven's cheek to her full, luscious, slightly open mouth.

Suddenly, Seven threw her right arm over her head, and her sleeveless, light, sleeping top rode up past the underside of her breast. Groaning quietly, Janeway's fingers itched to be re-familiarized with the hardened dusk-pink nipple that peaked out from under the top.

Longing shot through Janeway as she eyed the spots that she had licked, sucked, and applied pressure to push the blond over the edge. She closed her eyes and tried to block out her intimate knowledge of Seven's erogenous zones.

Eyes closed, she tried to focus on what she had desired once, and thought of her past lovers - Justin in particular. And how she had taken great pleasure in his physical prowess; his maleness. But now, she realized opening her eyes - her mouth immediately watering at the sight of the blonde, her desire was for something completely different. Unable to stop herself, she recalled how highly sensitive Seven's breasts were to her touch.

Pupils dilating, Janeway's mind was suddenly filled with overlapping memories of Seven groaning and throwing her head back as she came. Flushing, her heart began to thud, and she fought the urge to lower the straps of the thin top and expose Seven's breasts fully.

Feeling a rush of moisture between her thighs, she sucked on her bottom lip. Eyes half-closed, she thought back to their last encounter and allowed herself to recall, for the first time since the mating ritual, what it was like to make love to this beautiful woman.

Lying on her side, at the edge of the large, circular volcanic rock, which housed some sort of geothermic spring in the center of the habitat where she and Seven had spent two days, Janeway rested her head on her arm and smiled when Seven broke through the surface. Feeling completely mentally and physically exhausted, her heart still managed to thud heavily against her ribcage at the sight of the lithe blonde.

"Kathryn," Seven said, her blue eyes shining. "I am still unsure of the composition of this liquid." She lifted her hands, and the light, oily substance sparkled as it ran through her fingers.

Not particularly interested in anything but Seven, Janeway indulged the ex Borg. "If we can, we'll take a sample back to Voyager. I'm sure that it has lots of wonderful components," she said wearily.

"I believe it does," Seven replied.

Janeway stared at the captivating substance. Right now, all she knew was that it was beautifully fragrant and had multiple properties. Not only did it act as a healing agent, quickly repairing any marks left from their passionate lovemaking, but it also soothed any muscle soreness and tender spots, and acted as some sort of energy enhancer, leaving them both refreshed and charged whilst

in it. But the biggest surprise of all was how sensual it was to the touch, and how wonderful it was to make love in. Staring at it, Janeway realized that if she wasn't such a hard-nosed scientist, she would believe that it was simply a magical substance in a magical place.

"Kathryn," Seven said, her voice low and seductive, "it is time."

Still barely able to move from their previous exhausting session, Janeway could only lift her eyes to look at Seven. "Already?" she asked weakly.

Making her way toward the redhead, Seven slowly smiled.

Janeway tried to smile back, but only the edges of her mouth lifted.

Holding on to the rock-edge, Seven reached out to touch her.

"Please, Seven," Janeway said, knowing that even the lightest touch from the blonde, would invoke a pheromone release. Unable to move a muscle, and needing just a few more moments, she added throatily, "Have I told you about my home town?"

Slowly, Seven placed her hand with the other. "Repeatedly," she responded. "You have given a chronological account of your life from childhood to adulthood." She raised her ocular implant and looked at Janeway softly, intently. "You have shared many personal and key events that have influenced and shaped you." She hesitated. "Thank you."

Warm feelings flooded Janeway as she made eye contact with Seven. She responded with a surprising tremor in her tone, "You're welcome." She eyed the blonde, adoring how connected she felt to her and how amazing she looked, floating, beside her, naked. She whispered, "This will be our last time."

Her eyes filling with a dark emotion that Janeway didn't recognize, Seven closed them briefly then looking at the redhead, nodded.

"Seven," Janeway said. Caught off-guard by the sudden deep emotions that filled her, she swallowed several times. This beautiful woman had, without question, without hesitation, rescued her. She had offered her the most valuable gift she could - herself - in order to save her. Clearing her throat, she added raggedly, "It is you that I want to thank."

A glimmer of tenderness flashed in Seven's eyes.

Janeway had no way of understanding what effect their time would have on Seven, and during the last two days, because of her consistent sense of elation, she had been unable to think about the complexity of their situation in any logical manner. Right now, all she could acknowledge was that what they had shared was extreme and overwhelmingly profound.

"You are welcome, Kathryn," Seven responded. She gave Janeway a smile that filled her with a sense of joy. The feeling was so strong that it made the redhead believe that nothing else in her

entire existence mattered more than Seven.

Eventually, feeling the need to lighten the mood and tease, Janeway asked, "Have I mentioned your outfit?"

"My biometric unitard," Seven corrected. "Yes," she replied, warmth filling her eyes, "You have mentioned that my body hugging suit does not leave much to the imagination."

Janeway's eyes widened with delight. "I have?"

"When I replied that it was efficient, you responded by telling me that the only efficiency you could see was in making short work of a striptease," Seven said, amusement shining in her eyes.

"No!"

"Yes." Seven responded, "You have also mentioned that you believe it is time for a change of outfit as specific parts of my anatomy are accentuated, and that you find it distracting."

Janeway laughed. Loving how easily they now intimately bantered, she corrected, "The crew. I mentioned that some crewmembers find it distracting."

Shoulders sinking into the oily substance, Seven smiled seductively as she eyed Janeway. "I wonder?"

"You wonder what?"

"Nothing," Seven replied softly before ducking her head.

Janeway's body started to shake.

Emerging, Seven looked at the redhead. "It is time, Kathryn."

Muscles cramping, Janeway nodded.

Her eyes filling with earnest longing, Seven gestured. "Come, quickly. Join me."

It was like this whenever Janeway tried to push past the mating time. No matter how hard she fought it, she had no control. Goose bumps showing, her muscles twitching, she shakily slipped into the spring.

Aware that Seven was following her wishes and keeping her distance until she entered the spring, Janeway smiled when she quickly moved to her, and wrapped her arms around her.

Hugging Seven, Janeway immediately released pheromones.

Clinging to her, Seven moaned then shuddered with desire.

Slowly re-invigorated, Janeway moved Seven to a shallow point and pressed her against the rock-edge. She kissed down the length of the ex Borg's slender neck, sucking and teasing beautifully delicious skin as she made her way to full, wonderful, firm, breasts. Salivating, she sucked a fully erect nipple and puckered areola into her mouth.

Seven moaned.

Cupping Seven's voluptuous breasts in her hands, Janeway reveled in the luscious feel of them.

Running her hands through Janeway's hair, Seven pressed the redhead into her. Her hips writhed. "Oh, Kathryn," she whispered. Lightly, she pressed on Janeway's shoulders, making it clear what she wanted.

Trailing kisses, Janeway slowly made her way between Seven's legs. The blonde immediately spread her thighs, exposing her pink delicate folds. Eagerly, hips undulating, she familiarly cupped the back of Janeway's head.

Janeway resisted the gentle pressure. Leaning back, she ran her hands up the blonde's thighs and, with her thumbs, slowly exposed her. Incredible, she thought as she stared hungrily at the swollen clitoris and slick laden juices that coated Seven's lips and inner thighs.

The air filling with Seven's wonderful musky scent, Janeway felt the urgency increase in Seven's grip. Spread open, arching back, the blonde whispered hungrily, "Please."

Janeway succumbed. She leaned in and her lips brushed Seven's. Taking the ex Borg's engorged clit between her teeth, she gently ran the tip of her tongue along the hood before sucking it fully into her mouth.

Seven released a low sound of deep pleasure in the back of her throat. Her exoskeleton hand grasped the rock, the other, stroked Janeway's cheek before sliding into her hair.

Loving that Seven was so responsive, Janeway closed her eyes. It was a revelation to discover that she loved doing this. Although the same couldn't be said for Seven. The ex Borg hadn't responded as enthusiastically when she went down on her. Eyes watering Seven informed her, as she stretched her jaw, that her mouth felt as if it had just been probed by an unpleasant interrogation tool.

Smarting from the imprinted teeth marks, Janeway recalled clutching her tender groin and heading quickly for the spring as Seven, following, informed her that she wouldn't be doing that activity again.

Moisture flowing, the taste delicious, her tongue and teeth practiced, Janeway indulged. Rakishly, she ran her fingernails up and down strong thighs. Nibbling, she teased Seven's clit out from under its hood.

Sucking, probing, lightly biting, Janeway teased Seven relentlessly. With languid strokes, she ran the flat of her tongue from Seven's clit to her opening, and eventually with a grateful moan from the blonde, pushed inside. Exploring, she pressed her tongue and mouth into the wet warmth of Seven and slurped up her every response.

"Uhhh..." Seven muttered. Her head falling back, thighs trembling, she gushed.

Quivering with needy pleasure, Janeway's head firmly locked in position, juices flowing, sucking, Seven's hips surged. Crying out, her human hand flexed and twitched in Janeway's hair.

Her excitement off the grid, Seven moaned loudly when Janeway grasped her hips firmly, and skillfully sucked on the unveiled and fully exposed clit.

Her thighs trembling, her hips pumping, Seven, Janeway knew, was ready to explode.

Janeway loved this connection, loved when Seven lost all awareness and, living in the moment, relied completely on instinct.

Grasping a fistful of hair, tremors passing through her, Seven's thighs began to shake uncontrollably. She groaned loudly as she thrust into Janeway's mouth seeking release.

Suddenly, Janeway felt the blonde's toes curl as she licked and sucked.

Seven, holding Janeway's head tight, levered up and, thrusting her hips forward, keened as a powerful orgasm ripped through her.

Eventually, Seven's hand eased from her hair.

Gasping, Janeway slowly broke away. Wiping her mouth, she stood. She knew she should be gentle at this moment, cradle Seven in her arms, but she couldn't. Wanting her, needing her, her erection throbbing, she kissed Seven's long neck and breathlessly murmured in her ear, "I need you to turn around."

Breathing heavily, Seven shivered. Eyes heavy-lidded, she hazily focused on Janeway before turning around.

Her body taut as the need to mate peaked, Janeway gasped when a burst of white hot desire shot through her when Seven, bending, pushed her firm buttocks provocatively into her before spreading her thighs.

Eyes widening at the sight of how wet, open and ready the blonde was, Janeway thought she might pass out when Seven reached around and wrapped her long fingers around the shaft of her cock, jacking it as she tried to position it.

Janeway groaned. Quickly, she placed her hands over Seven's to stop her.

Seven shivered then groaned. "Hurry, Kathryn," she whispered with an unmistakable burning need.

Seven's response was amazing. Often, she would come two or three times to Janeway's one. Excitement surging through her at Seven's hunger, Janeway pulled back her hips. Breathing hard, she positioned herself behind the blonde, and rubbed the head of her cock over her soaking, swollen, clit, eliciting shudders and long moans from her as she slowly penetrated her.

Head dropping, Seven groaned heavily as she took Janeway's length.

Eyes closing, Janeway's lungs emptied as she slid into Seven. No longer surprised by the fierceness of her desire for the ex Borg, she breathed in deeply and tried to find some control to allow her to savor the delicious tight confines. Bending, she pressed her chest into the blonde's back then cupped her firm breasts and slowly teased her hard nipples. "Tell me what you feel."

Body flushed and glistening, hands gripping the rock-edge, Seven moaned and arched into her.

Lazily, Janeway kissed along Seven's shoulders then sucked the nape of her neck before grasping an earlobe between her teeth. "Tell me" she said throatily.

Shuddering, unable to form the words, Seven continued to moan when Janeway's hips began to move.

Running her palms over Seven's flushed, wet skin, Janeway released a grunt of pleasure as she thrust slowly into her. Her eyes rolled back when Seven's inner walls tightened around her. Buried deep inside, she straightened then pulled out slowly, her nostrils flared when she breathed in Seven's scent. Eyes widening, she watched the blonde's hot, slick juices flow out as she slid in.

Unable to control herself, Janeway gripped Seven's hips, and thrust into her.

Locked together, Seven's warm, trembling, naked body eager, Janeway felt her throat constrict as deep emotions filled her. The pleasure and connection with this woman was beyond anything she had ever experienced. In here, even the strangeness of her new body was tolerable. Being connected to the ex Borg in such an intimate way, left her free of everything but her overwhelming craving.

Reaching for the Seven's breasts, Janeway repeated as she thrust, "Tell me."

Seven moaned deeply with each thrust.

Breathless, Seven's full breasts bouncing in her hands with the force of her thrusts, electric sensations swept through Janeway. Putting her mouth to the blonde's ear, she whispered, "I need you to tell me."

Seven groaned.

Knowing that Seven was holding out for as long as she could, Janeway bit her earlobe sharply.

Seven cried out.

"Tell me."

"Complete," Seven replied throatily. "I feel complete."

The answer, as they both knew, elicited a deep response from Janeway. Straightening, she thrust her hips faster, each stroke sending a shiver up Seven's spine.

Hips bucking, breathing hard, Janeway felt those now familiar feelings rise all the way up from her toes. Not sure when, over the last few days, she had begun to want some verbal response from Seven, but knowing that it drove the younger woman crazy, she asked, "Tell me what you want."

Seven's breathing hitched. Hips moving faster, she groaned.

"Tell me," Janeway said.

Seven threw her head back, grasping the rock-edge, she desperately pumped her hips as her internal muscles contracted. "You...know what I...want."

"Tell me," Janeway said, slowing her movements.

Seven began to shake. "Kathryn, please," she begged. "Do not...stop." Giving Janeway what she wanted, she added breathlessly, "I want to...come!"

Thighs trembling, her hands firmly holding hips, riding Seven, Janeway felt the blonde's internal muscles clench as the first ripples of her orgasm threatened. Her eyes closing briefly, she gave Seven the words that would send her over the edge, "Then come for me, darling."

Hips jerking frantically, Seven threw back her blonde, disheveled head and keened.

Sweat dripping from her brow and running down her jaw, euphoric feelings swept through Janeway's entire body. Face contorted, rising on her toes, thrusting, she cried out as she, along with Seven, hurtled towards orgasm.

Eventually coming down, but still tingling all over, Janeway caught Seven as her knees buckled. Holding her, she slowly withdrew. Straightening, she gently turned her around. Smiling languidly, she smoothed blonde hair.

Wrapping her arms around a boneless Seven, Janeway kissed her fully, gently, thoroughly.

Brought back when Seven moved, Janeway wondered if she would ever be the same again. Looking at the blonde, she thought that tomorrow she would replicate pajamas that were a little less revealing. Gently, she rested her thumb on Seven's lips before sweeping it slowly, lightly, devotedly over the moist, open mouth. A shiver ran up her spine when Seven's tongue peeked out and ran across her bottom lip, lightly touching her thumb.

Janeway groaned inwardly. She felt her heart speed up and a tingle of desire slither down her spine. She was alert to Seven's every nuance. She was filled with a desire. The desire to be close to her, to touch her skin, to feel her pulse point, to kiss her lips, to wrap her hands around her waist and hold her tight, to press against her and feel those luscious breasts once more, to smell her, to taste her.

Breathing heavily, Janeway gathered her shattering resolve and gently removed her thumb. Placing it in her mouth she sucked on it. She watched Seven sleep for a while before taking up her new sleeping post on the sofa in her living quarters.

For the last several nights she taken up this position and, although Seven had reluctantly moved into her bedroom, over a week ago, she continued to treat her new residence as a place to sleep only.

Restlessly, Janeway settled down for the night.

Chapter Thirteen

"Captain," Ensign Kim said when Janeway entered the Bridge.

Janeway looked around Voyager's nerve-center. "Relax Harry," she said as she eyed the large bank of consoles at the rear of the Bridge. Instinctively, she checked the data-readout screens. Pleased that the Bridge was in normal operating status for the night shift, she made her way to the central command area.

"How are things, Harry?" Janeway asked. Recently, she had signed an order allowing Harry Kim, twice a week, to serve as Voyager's commanding officer during the night shift. It was a big responsibility.

"Fine, Captain," Harry replied. Quickly, he vacated her chair.

"Please," Janeway said. Standing in front of her chair, holding out her hand, she encouraged the ensign to re-take his seat. Hesitantly, he did.

The captain took the command chair next him. "This isn't an official visit, Harry" knowing that he was extremely on edge, she added, "I'm just a little restless."

In reality, Janeway wanted to show her support. Recently, on the night shift, Harry had gone

through a harrowing time, and this was his first return to duty. A few days ago, he had received a distress signal from a nearby planet. In response, after approval from Chakotay that it would improve his leadership skills, he diverted Voyager, and led an away team and discovered an alien probe-like device.

Harry, B'Elanna and the doctor determined that it was a complex, damaged weapon with artificial intelligence and with sentient consciousness. They agreed to beam it aboard. But when aboard, even with extra security measures, the device hijacked the doctor's program and through him, insisted that Voyager enable it to fulfill its mission of mass destruction.

Through using persistent diplomacy, technical analysis and citing the doctor's growth as an artificial intelligence, Harry was instrumental in reasoning with the warhead that it must abandon its new mission or fail its original mission to protect its people by causing a second war. It eventually stood down and later destroyed itself along with some newly arrived warp-capable warheads that had picked up its signal.

"How's things," She asked him. Harry had always been her star pupil, and it was clear he was developing not only into a wonderful individual, but had the makings of an excellent commanding officer.

The ensign looked at her. "We've picked up a nebula on long-range sensors."

Janeway's lips twitched when slowly Harry relaxed his grip on the arms of the chair. "On screen," she ordered.

The nebula appeared on the viewscreen. Janeway leaned forward. "Report."

"There are unusually high levels of omicron particles within this nebula, Captain," Ensign Tabor responded from the tactical station.

"Understood, Mister Tabor." Janeway looked at the viewscreen. "Magnify," she requested.

Janeway studied the image then looked at Harry. "Are you thinking we should collect the omicron particles to provide additional antimatter reserve, Mister Kim?"

"Absolutely," Harry replied, then grinned.

"Mister Jenkins set a new course. There's nothing like a nebula to raise the spirits, is there Harry?"

"Nothing like it, Captain."

"We're approaching the perimeter of the nebula," Ensign Jenkins said, some minutes later, as he worked the navigation controls.

"Sensors are picking up intermittent gamma and thermal emissions, Captain," said Ensign Tabor.

"It's nothing our shields can't handle," Harry responded, looking at the nebula then at Janeway.

"Good. It's all yours, Harry," she replied, getting up from the command chair.

"Thank you, Captain," Harry responded. "I won't let you down...this time. Slow to one-third impulse," he commanded.

"You're coming along just fine, Harry," Janeway replied. Smiling, she exited the Bridge.

Janeway exited the turbolift and headed to her quarters, turning the corner, she met Chakotay.

"Kathryn," Chakotay said, smiling.

"Commander," Janeway replied. "Going somewhere?"

"I'm on my way to Holodeck Two, Sandrines to be exact." He lifted his brow. "Tom and I have a game of pool lined up."

Janeway nodded. "I see," she replied. She bit her bottom lip.

"Kathryn," Chakotay said. "Is everything all right?"

Janeway raised her brow. "Just feeling a little restless. That's all."

"How's Seven?"

"Asleep."

"How are things between you now that you're sharing quarters?" Chakotay said. "I hear you've been prowling the ship's hallway's most nights."

Frowning, Janeway placed a hand on her mid-section. "It's been a few weeks," she replied. Not in the mood to elaborate, she added, "For Seven, adapting to the new situation has been slow, but we're getting there."

Chakotay touched Janeway's arm. "I don't mean to interfere, but maybe a little time out is what you need, Kathryn. Fancy joining us?"

Blinking a few times, Janeway tried to recall the last time she had played a game of pool. Too long. She looked at Chakotay then grinned. "Why not?"

"Good," Chakotay replied. "If I remember rightly, I still haven't beaten you."

Entering the turbolift, Janeway laughed. "Let's hope tonight isn't your lucky night, Commander."

"Computer open this door!"

"Access to these quarters has been restricted."

What? Janeway shook her head. This is unbelievable!

"On who's authority."

"Seven of Nine."

"Computer, security override, Janeway-Authorization-Sigma-4-7!" she said her voice low, and angry.

"Access denied."

Several authorization codes later, unable to believe that she had been locked out by Borg encryption codes, Janeway leaned against the doors of her quarters.

"Computer, override using the following manual commands." she said, after a few moments. Straightening, she punched commands into her door control panel. She sighed with relief when the doors finally hissed open.

Furious, she entered her quarters. As the doors slid closed behind her, she was hit by an unusual dimness. Frowning, she tried to make out what was in front of her, but the lights were too low. Not wanting to wake Seven and, intending to deal with her in the morning, she forced herself to calm down. Quickly, she made her way toward the storage area where she kept her bedding.

Bending to retrieve it, she whacked her head off an unexpected object. The pain excruciating, she bit back a howl and, staggering back, thudded hard into yet another unexpected object. Unbelievable pain shot up her right leg.

Muffling a scream Janeway grabbed for her leg. Tottering, she lost her balance. Lurching forward, she fell, head first, into her repositioned armchair.

"Kathryn!" Seven said, rushing out of the bedroom. "Are you all right?" she asked, making her way quickly to Janeway.

"Seven!" Janeway muffled from her armchair. Legs splayed in the air, her head trapped, she tried

to straighten. "Help me!"

Seven, grasping Janeway's shoulders, yanked her out of the armchair.

"Computer, lights to ambient." Janeway barked.

Standing unsteadily on her feet, her hair pointing in all directions, her uniform tunic hanging off one shoulder, her grey turtleneck up past her abdomen, her trouser legs hanging unceremoniously around her shins, Janeway looked less like a dignified starship captain and more like a wild-eyed creature who had just received an electric charge from an ion storm. Eyes wide, cheeks flushed, livid, she stared at the blonde incredulously.

Clasping her hands behind her back, standing erect, Seven looked at Janeway coolly.

Throwing out her arms, Janeway just managed to bite back a few choice expletives before exploding in astonishment. "What the hell is going on here?"

Seven regarded her. "Clarify?"

"Clarify!" Janeway said. "Unbelievable...Clarify, she says!"

The redhead felt a surge of anger, and wondered what it was about this woman that drove her so crazy. Eyes sparking, she raked her fingers through her tangled hair. "When I left here a few hours ago," she said, trying to bring some order to her disheveled mop, "the furniture was in the same place it's been for the last five years!"

Seven raised her brow and stated casually, "That is why I moved it."

Bewildered and still a little dazed, Janeway looked at the blonde. "How?"

"By picking up the individual pieces and moving them," Seven replied evenly.

Janeway glowered at the blonde, her voice lowering, she said, "You know perfectly well I mean why?"

"After five years, the room required a change of view." Seven raised her ocular implant. "It seemed an efficient use of my time since I could not sleep."

Scowling, Janeway tried to rein in her temper. "Seven, if it makes you feel more comfortable, I don't mind you moving furniture, but just not in the damn dark!"

"I did not move the furniture in the dark."

It was clear to Janeway that Seven was finding this whole situation amusing. The ex Borg's natural arrogance and defiance in full display, Janeway's eyes narrowed to pinpoints.

Seven eyed her then sniffed the air. "You have been consuming alcohol," her voice hardened, "in Sandrines with Commander Chakotay."

Straightening her uniform tunic, Janeway replied, "I've had a few drinks." She almost growled. "Are you monitoring me?"

"No," Seven replied, then lowered her dark-blond lashes. "When I awoke," she hesitated, "you were not in your quarters. I requested your location."

Blood still pumping angrily through her veins that not only had Seven locked her out of her own quarters, but moved furniture that almost knocked her unconscious, Janeway fixed her trouser legs, and didn't notice the hint of jealousy in Seven's tone. She moved toward the replicator. "Coffee, black," she commanded.

Lifting the mug, Janeway turned around. All her anger immediately dissipated when she noticed, for the first time, Seven's nightwear. The redhead caught her breath at the sight of the ex Borg standing erect, long-legged, in a short, sleek, almost sheer, negligee, sleepy and slightly disheveled, dusky pink nipples erect, breasts full and firm, and a triangulated area very visible.

Janeway swallowed. She looked anywhere but at the ex Borg. "Seven," she said throatily. "I was having difficulty sleeping," she didn't add, as she was most nights recently, "and decided to visit some sections of the ship."

Seven looked at Janeway disdainfully. "Including Sandrines?"

Janeway's eyes narrowed. She didn't like having to justify herself. "Yes," she replied, steel in her voice, "including Sandrines."

Seven blinked, and to Janeway's surprise, her demeanor changed. Lifting her chin and sounding a little dejected, she replied, "I see."

"Seven," Janeway responded, her tone softening as she approached the ex Borg. "Next time you find my absence upsetting-

"I was not upset, merely curious," Seven interrupted. She squared her shoulders

Is that so, Janeway thought. So curious, you locked me out of my own quarters. "All right," she said, nodding. "Then, in future, just contact me to satisfy your curiosity." She added dryly but with a note of ice, "Try to refrain from encrypting the doors."

Dark emotions gathering in Seven's eyes, she responded, "You were in Commander Chakotay's private quarters."

Oh God! Janeway thought. She pinched her nose and sighed in some confusion. Is this what this is all about?

Seven took a deep breath. "You have known Commander Chakotay for several years now, correct?"

Raising her brow, Janeway looked questioningly at Seven. "Yes," she replied. Not quite sure why the blonde was interested, she added, "since arriving here in the Delta Quadrant."

"I am aware that as you share command with Commander Chakotay it is required that you seek his counsel regarding ship matters," Seven said. A flicker of uncertainty crossed her features. "However, I did not know that you also sought his counsel on personal matters."

Janeway gently touched the growing bump on her head. "What are you implying, Seven?"

Seven tilted her head. "Do you make a habit of visiting your First Officer in his private quarters during your off duty time?"

"No," Janeway replied as she fingered the tender spot. She looked at the blonde, and felt her lower regions stir. She cleared her throat then looked away. "Not his quarters, here. He normally visits me here."

"Here?" Seven responded. Her tone sharp enough to cut through one of Voyager's outer bulkheads. She added, "He visits you here?"

The veracity of Seven's response surprising, Janeway focused on the blonde and frowning, replied. "Yes, sometimes."

Janeway's eyes widened when color rapidly filled Seven's cheeks.

Her eyes fierce, Seven unclasped her hands. "State the nature of his visits."

Confused, it took Janeway a few moments to realize Seven's trail of thought. "No," she said, quickly. "No, it's nothing like that."

"Then why does he visit... here?" Seven asked, moving closer to Janeway.

"He doesn't visit here," Janeway swallowed, as ice-blue eyes studied her, "for that," she finished weakly.

"Are you...intimate with Commander Chakotay?" Seven asked, standing close to Janeway.

"What?" Surprised, Janeway stuttered, "Normally...he only comes here-"

Looking upset, Seven interrupted, "He comes also?"

Oh my God!

Realizing that word now had a different connotation for Seven, Janeway finished hurriedly, "For

dinner. He comes here only for dinner...to discuss ship's business." She exhaled heavily. "There's nothing clandestine about our relationship." She reached out and touched the blonde's arm gently. "As well as colleagues, we are friends, Seven. That's all."

"Friendship alone does not explain why, when you should be sleeping, you would choose to reside in the Commander's quarters, rather than here."

"I wasn't residing in his quarters," Janeway responded, her jaw tightening in frustration.

"You spent exactly two hours and twenty-nine minutes there."

What the hell...?

Unused to justifying her movements, Janeway took a breath. "It wasn't arranged, Seven. I met Chakotay on his way to Sandrines. We played pool with Tom Paris, and he invited me in for a drink and a catch-up on our way to our quarters."

"Catch-up?"

"A chance to talk, Seven."

Seven frowned. "You can talk to me," she said, her voice hitching.

To Janeway's absolute horror the ex Borg burst into tears.

"Seven," Janeway said. Astonished, she hastily put down her untouched coffee mug and quickly took the blonde in her arms. "Don't cry," she whispered, hugging her.

"Why can you not talk to me?" Seven said, then sobbed.

"I can, Seven. I can," Janeway whispered, holding the distraught blonde.

"Then why have you chosen not to?" Seven asked, her arms wrapping tightly around Janeway.

"Shhh, Seven," Janeway murmured, surprised by this show of need. "Everything's going to be fine, I promise."

"I do not understand what is happening to me," Seven said with a note of bewilderment. She buried her head in Janeway's shoulder and continued to cry.

"You're eleven weeks into your pregnancy. It's normal, Seven," Janeway responded gently. "Just hormones, that's all." She murmured soothing sounds as she held her.

Holding Seven tightly, Janeway frowned. The ex Borg had a tendency to use absolute logic. And, right now, she was still largely incapable of perceiving 'shades of grey'. Most things were one way or entirely another, and until recently she would rarely describe anything with

emotional resonance. All knowledge and actions were either relevant or irrelevant. These emotional fluxes, Janeway realized were not only completely new, but probably sometimes frightening.

Janeway sighed inwardly. With Seven continuing to keep to a tight schedule, and working long hours, as she was prone to do herself, they had now gotten into the practice of only returning to their quarters when Janeway turned up at Astrometrics looking for her. After they had eaten, usually in the Mess hall, she would encourage Seven to return to their quarters and get ready for bed.

It was clear that over the last few weeks, things had been difficult for Seven. Struggling to keep her hands off the younger woman, after each of their evening sessions, and unable to sleep, Janeway had taken to roaming her ship late at night. She suddenly realized that Seven was obviously keeping tabs on her, and the late night roaming was being construed as withdrawing from her.

Janeway stroked Seven's back, soothing her until she was quiet. Gently, she wiped away all evidence of her tears before guiding her into the bedroom.

Steering Seven toward the bed, Janeway pulled back the bed sheets.

"Kathryn, I apologize for my behavior," Seven said, her face tight, tiredness seeped out in her tone. "These types of emotions are new and," she hesitated before sliding between the sheets, "surprising." Settling, she added, "You will remember, however, that there is no need to liaise with Commander Chakotay. You may speak to me the next time you are having difficulty sleeping."

Janeway's mouth quirked, she tucked the sheets around Seven then sat next to her. Gently, she placed her hand on Seven's abdomen. Immediately, a sense of calm filled her. The emotional connection she felt with their child still astonished her. "Yes, I'll remember," she replied, rubbing her abdomen soothingly.

"Good," Seven responded, sleepily.

"Night, Seven. Sweet dreams."

"Goodnight, Kathryn," Seven replied, then closing her eyes, promptly fell asleep.

Rubbing Seven's abdomen, Janeway bit gently on her bottom lip, and realized that she needed to be more attentive to Seven needs. After all, this was all new to the younger woman, and although she was adapting well to changes like sleeping and living in Janeway's quarters, it was clear that the emotional changes were unsettling for her.

Eventually, after some time had passed, Janeway nudged herself, and made her way to the bedroom's ensuite bathroom. Quietly, she carried out her ablutions. Entering her living space, she replicated nightwear before retrieving her bedding. At the sofa, she prepared a make-shift bed.

Before turning in, she made her way to her console and lowered the lights manually.

In keeping with her status, Janeway's quarters had the best view from the ship. At the sofa, undressing, she looked out of the three-window unit, and took in the grand view of space.

Putting on her nightwear, the redhead was unsure how to proceed. She knew that she would need to be more attentive, pay closer attention to Seven's changing moods, but although they were sharing quarters, and spending 'intimate' time together she was fully aware that, emotionally, Seven was keeping her distance and it was difficult to know how they should continue. She simply didn't know what Seven wanted.

Slipping between the sheets, Janeway understood that she needed to keep whatever she felt, which she was still unclear of herself, hidden. She knew that she was very strongly attracted to Seven. Strike that, crazily attracted to the blonde. But she had no doubt it was completely to do with the situation they were in. She sighed. Anyway, this wasn't about her and her convoluted emotions. It was about Seven and their baby. The redhead resolved that she would need to be there for Seven, in whatever capacity she needed her.

You'll need to tread carefully from now on, she thought. This is the first time that she's been so emotional. Reaching down, she gently rubbed her bruised leg. By the looks of it, it won't be the last either. Next time you decide to have a few drinks with the boys, make sure you agree to it with a very tetchy blonde first.

Chuckling at the paradigm shift in her world, Janeway closed her eyes and settled down for the night.

Chapter Fourteen

"Enter," Janeway said when the door of her Ready Room beeped. "Seven," she said, from behind her desk when the ex Borg entered.

"Captain," Seven responded.

Janeway looked at the time on her console, it was another hour before either of them would be off duty. They had already had 'physical contact', and another session wasn't due in their quarters until later that evening. Expecting some sort of update, she looked at her Astrometrics Officer expectantly.

Taking her usual erect stance, Seven placed her hands behind her back. Focusing on a spot directly above Janeway's head, she stood in silence.

Increasingly disturbed by the silence, Janeway slowly placed the PADD she was working on down. Frowning, she stared at Seven. Eventually, she asked, "Is there something wrong?"

"There is nothing wrong," Seven offered. Glancing at Janeway, she raised her ocular implant. "I have finished my duties and," she paused, "I simply felt the need to join you."

"Ah," Janeway replied. Over the last week, since Sandrines, Seven's behavior had noticeably changed. Clingy, her inner voice summed up. She's becoming clingy, and you love it.

Aware that it had taken a lot for the ex Borg to admit her need for some sort of contact, Janeway stood and made her way around her desk. "Please," she said moving toward the sofa on the upper level of her Ready Room, where her coffee pot along with fresh flowers was on display, "join me."

Seven followed her.

"Can I get you anything?" Janeway asked, sitting,

"No, thank you," Seven replied. Standing, she clasped her hands behind her back.

Janeway leaned back on and looked at the statuesque blonde for a moment, then reached for her coffee pot and poured coffee into her cup. "Please," she said, indicating that Seven take a seat.

Slowly, she sat next to Janeway, and placed her hands on her lap. "You seem to overly enjoy the substance," Seven said, looking at the coffee pot with disdain.

Janeway smiled. "You might want to try it someday, Seven. It keeps you sharp."

Seven frowned. "Perhaps one day."

"Seven," Janeway said, "I'm glad you dropped by." Taking a moment, she sipped from her cup. During their contact time, the focus was always the baby. "I think we need to discuss your attire." She looked at the ex Borg, and added gently, "Although you are still very neat, now that you are in your second trimester, your pregnancy will soon be noticeable."

Nodding, Seven ran a hand over the small bump in her abdomen. "I have been working on the design of several outfits." She eyed Janeway. "Perhaps you would like to review my choices."

Thank God. At last, she's decided to get rid of the cat suit! Janeway smiled. Maybe then, I'll manage to get a good night's sleep. "I would love to."

"Tonight?"

Janeway nodded. A warm glow spread out from her stomach. "Yes, tonight would be fine."

"I thought we could also dine in your," she corrected, "our quarters, instead of the Mess hall. I have decided to replicate Neelix's recipes. With a mixture of metabolic enzymes and protein extract, my required nutritional intake can now be served in liquid form."

Janeway smiled. "I'm not sure how happy Neelix will be when he discovers that you won't be eating his home cooking anymore."

Seven inclined her head. "He may not, but I will be." She grimaced. "Consuming his food has been an unpleasant experience."

I'm sure the entire crew would agree with you on that one. Janeway's mouth quirked. "I know how difficult it has been for you," she said sympathetically. "It hasn't been the best introduction to food, has it?"

Seven visibly swallowed. "Fortunately, I have adapted."

Janeway put her cup down. Pleased that Seven had initiated contact, and not wanting to break the connection by letting her leave on her own, she said, "Seven, my duty shift is almost over. Why don't we head back to our quarters now?"

Concern filled Seven's eyes. "I did not mean to interfere with your duties, Captain." She frowned. "I only required a few moments of your time."

"I know that Seven," Janeway replied. She reached over and carefully patted the blonde's leg. She felt an instant connection. "It's a Captain's privilege to finish early on occasion."

Warmth filled Seven's eyes. "I see."

Chapter Fifteen

Stirring, Janeway felt movement on top of her. Confused, she opened her eyes, and was swamped with tresses of blonde hair. Fighting back her gag reflex, she carefully removed hair from her mouth and face.

"Oh," she muttered, when Seven, snuggling into her, placed a hand on her left breast. Trying to fight down her immediate arousal, Janeway slowly, moved her head and looked down at the tousled blonde, splayed out, sound asleep.

Her groin throbbed.

Since Seven had moved into her second trimester, Janeway was finding it extremely difficult to control her libido. Her desire for the younger woman was becoming difficult to resist.

Taking a moment, the captain luxuriated in the memory of holding the blonde this way during the mating ritual. But having Seven here, on the sofa, was a new arrangement.

Last night she had wearily arrived in her quarters very late and headed to the sofa for some well earned respite.

Over the last few weeks, Janeway had barely spent any time, other than what was required, with Seven. Recently, Voyager had been involved in helping the Varro sort out problems with their warp engines. They were a species that lived on a generational ship which had housed them for

the last four hundred years. While assisting them, Voyager had been infested with ship-eating, synthetic parasites. That not being bad enough, a love-sick, Harry Kim, and the ensuing problems with the xenophobic Varros, caused her more than a few headaches.

For those few weeks, Seven spent as much of her off duty time aboard the generational ship. As an expectant mother, the Varros were unusually accommodating. Apparently, understanding that on a ship such as Voyager, Seven was limited in the number of families she could interact with, and they allowed her to observe, intermingle, gather data and engage fully with them.

Over those few weeks, Janeway couldn't believe the number of PADDs that arrived on her desk with Seven's findings.

Five days ago, they had docked at a Zarkonian outpost to trade. Normally, Janeway enjoyed cultural exchanges and making new friends, but right now, the trade negotiations were protracted with many excessive requests for minimum return.

Seven moved and shifted her full weight onto Janeway. Her chest tightening, she whispered. "Seven."

The blonde moaned, but didn't stir.

"Seven," Janeway repeated, beginning to wheeze.

Seven still didn't stir.

Janeway shook the blonde's shoulder. "Seven," she said, now struggling to breathe.

Rousing, Seven lifted her tousled hair and sleepily looked at Janeway. Eyes widening, she froze for a moment and stared at her before springing to her feet. "Kathryn," she said, with a note of astonishment. "I..." Dazed, she looked around the room then at the bedroom. "I have no memory of leaving the bedroom."

Her breath evening out Janeway smiled. "It's okay, Seven," she responded soothingly.

Seven frowned. "I have an eidetic memory. I should recall leaving the bedroom."

Janeway stood. "Seven," she said, moving toward the replicator. "It's nothing to worry about."

Seven clasped her hands behind her back. "It is a symptom I have not anticipated."

"Coffee, black," Janeway said. Yawning, she stretched as the coffee mug materialized. Looking over her shoulder, the redhead swallowed. She had suggested to Seven, several times, to wear pajamas instead of the slinky negligees that she seemed to now prefer, but Seven refused, countering that she enjoyed the freedom that her chosen nightwear allowed her.

And who are you to argue? Janeway's inner voice stated. Sucking on her bottom lip, she groaned

inwardly when her groin contracted and slick moisture formed between her thighs. Good God! Is this never going to end?

Throughout her adult life, Janeway had been in relationships. If she thought about it, she hadn't really been single since her early teenage years. Somewhere, there had always been a love interest. What could she say, she was a passionate woman. But over these five years, she had, unhappily in the beginning, come to terms with not having a love life.

As time passed, particularly with the demands of the crew and the ship, she had found it quite liberating in some ways, although, there was one major drawback, her sex life had been dryer than the sand dunes on Mars.

There were times, however, when her baser needs demanded satisfying and, usually, a few chapters of a good old bodice-ripping holo-novel, in bed, helped fulfill that need just nicely. But, if she was honest, her desire for Seven was becoming unbearable. Since the mating ritual, her sexual needs and urges had gone from the occasional want to a constant need. So much so, that over the last few days her clitoris and labia had swollen and were now very sensitive. Just last night, she had noticed that a small lump had appeared at the nape of her neck, and dark markings on her left arm.

Janeway knew that she should see the doctor, but the idea of him poking around her groin - again - was completely unappealing. She would, when she got a moment, look at the Gaelian datafiles, and find out if the physical changes were a known reaction for the second parent. The more immediate worry was that she also now smelled differently - sweeter.

Worried that Seven's olfactory senses would pick up on her constant state of arousal, Janeway had, over the last few days, taken to showering, changing her underwear and clothes, and ionizing her body, far more regularly in the hope that the ex Borg wouldn't notice.

Picking up the mug, she said, as she tried to rein in her growing desire and restore her equilibrium, "Can I get you anything?"

"No...thank you," Seven responded.

Janeway sipped from her mug. Sighing gratefully, she took a few more mouthfuls. "Why don't I have a shower and we can discuss it over breakfast?" she asked, refusing to look at the statuesque blonde in her extremely provocative and oh so skimpy outfit.

"Breakfast is unappealing," Seven responded. She moved to the sofa and abruptly sat down.

Coffee mug in hand, Janeway kept her distance. "I know that you've read the Gaelian database extensively."

"Thirty thousand gigaquads of data to be exact."

Janeway smiled. "Is that so?"

"Yes, that's so," Seven replied, distractedly.

Surprised, Janeway looked at Seven. Her Borg heritage meant that she rarely used contractions in her speech.

"You have read nothing?" Seven asked curtly, looking at the redhead.

"I wouldn't say I've read nothing." Janeway took a sip from her mug. "The last few weeks have been extremely busy."

Seven inclined her head. "I understand that there are times when your duty as Captain takes priority. However, twice over the last ten days, you have been unavailable when Naomi Wildman and her mother have invited us to join them for dinner."

Encountering the generational ship, couldn't have come at a better time. Through word of mouth, it was confirmed to the crew that their Captain and Voyager's Astrometrics Officer were now sharing quarters.

Janeway knew, only too well, that in certain situations, gossip was the best method of satisfying the minds of the overly curious. As she had no intentions of answering any questions, she had encouraged an informal announcement by the senior crew to their departments of the change in their Captain's living arrangements and Seven's pregnancy. But, in particular, she didn't want to answer any questions from a precocious child named Naomi Wildman.

To Janeway's surprise, the crew didn't seem overly bothered by the change in her personal life and living arrangements. She supposed the gossip trail had run its course a long time ago. The only noticeable effect was an immediate increase in requests for shared accommodations. Thankfully, being Captain meant that she could pass that problem onto Commander Chakotay.

Feeling the beginnings of a headache, Janeway responded. "Seven, believe me, I haven't avoided it."

"Dining with Naomi and her mother will provide an opportunity to observe parental love," Seven said. "Over the weeks, I have given you many PADDs with necessary information regarding this."

Janeway frowned. "And I apologize if I haven't read the data as quickly as you would have liked."

The redhead watched Seven's shoulders tense. "Why?"

"Seven," Janeway said, raking a hand through her hair. "Is it enough to say that right now this is a new experience for both of us, and I've been hesitant in approaching it in an overly analytical manner?"

"Explain."

Janeway pinched her nose. Hopefully, the negotiations would wrap up today and she would have time to spend with Seven and talk to her more fully about their child. Recently, she had let the younger woman set the pace with their discussions, which, to date, given their busy schedule, had been slow with Seven preferring to hand her PADDs rather than discuss things. The redhead decided that was something she needed to rectify. "Well," she said, "as both you and the Doctor are fully briefed on your pregnancy, I-"

"Correct," Seven interrupted with a touch of arrogance in her tone. "We are fully briefed, as should you be."

Janeway's eyes narrowed. She sipped her coffee. "Seven, I'd know if there is anything I should be concerned about. You or the Doctor would inform me."

Seven frowned.

"The truth is," Janeway added, "I would prefer to listen to you talk about our baby." She breathed in deeply. "And I would prefer discussing our baby with you. Knowing everything including the minutiae from a PADD lessens the experience for me."

Blue eyes studying Janeway, Seven responded, "Lessens the experience?"

"Seven," Janeway said, feeling her headache begin to bite. "Our baby connects with me. I know when she is content or disgruntled. I feel all of her growing emotions." She sighed. "And if you would let me, I would feel yours too."

Seven didn't say anything. Instead, her long blonde hair tumbled around her face as she wrapped her arms around herself.

Frowning, Janeway noticed that Seven was shaking. Alarmed, she placed her coffee mug down and moved quickly to the blonde. Kneeling in front of her, she brushed hair away from her pale face and cupping her cheeks, asked, "What's wrong?"

"I feel unwell."

"I'll call for the doctor," Janeway said, looking into troubled, blue eyes "Computer, alert the..."

"No!" Seven said, shaking.

Startled Janeway looked at her. "What's wrong?"

"The symptoms have begun."

Stricken, Janeway stared at the ex Borg. "Tell me precisely what's going on, Seven."

Seven struggled. "My requirements have changed."

"In what way?"

"If you had read the data I gave you, you would know."

"Tell me, Seven."

"The data would have informed you," Seven responded with a note of anger, "of my needs."

Needs!

Wide-eyed, Janeway looked intently at the blonde. "For now, can you accept that I'm sorry. And that in the future, I'll give whatever data you hand me to read a priority status?"

Teeth gritting, Seven nodded.

Relief flooding through her, Janeway exhaled then frowned. Seven was shaking badly now. "We need to contact the Doctor."

Seven glanced at the bedroom. "He would only recommend certain actions for these symptoms."

"What actions?" Janeway asked, her head throbbing. "What symptoms?"

"The same symptoms you suffered during the mating ritual when you did not mate at the requisite time." Blushing, Seven added hesitantly, "We need to make love, Kathryn."

Blindsided, Janeway stared at Seven in astonishment.

Of course, she does! It would be a natural step in a Gaelian pregnancy and it's clear with all the PADDs she's been handing me, and the slinky negligees she's been wearing, that she's been trying to tell me that. If only I'd read the damn data, she wouldn't be suffering like this...dammit!

Surprised by Seven's unusual hesitance, but knowing that if her symptoms were anything like hers during the mating ritual, soon, she would be in a great deal of pain. "Let's move into the bedroom," she said briskly. Grasping Seven's arms, she stood.

Holding the blonde, feeling her body shake, Janeway realized that Seven would soon be quite ill. Worried for her and their baby, she quickly moved toward the bedroom, and laid her on the bed. Slipping in beside her, she held Seven briefly then soothingly ran a hand over her stomach, connecting them.

Seven's nostrils flared, she breathed in deeply then groaned. Her head fell back. "You are aroused," she said as if finally understanding.

Not knowing what to say, Janeway tried to explain. "I...Its...I..."

Seven moaned. "I cannot bear this." Shaking, her face tight, she whispered. "Touch me!"

Janeway swallowed.

"Please...Kathryn!"

Keeping all the doubts in her head at bay, Janeway focused only on what she needed to do right now. Carefully, she lifted Seven's negligee. Her eyes widened at the sight of ripe, full breasts. Slowly, she moved her hand over the slight swell of the younger woman's abdomen, and down into the light blonde curls at the apex of her thighs.

Seven gasped and immediately opened her legs. Exposed, she looked into Janeway's eyes and said quietly, vulnerably, "Please, Kathryn, hurry."

Janeway knew intimately each stage of Seven's arousal, and aware that she needed to be touched right now, quickly placed a hand between her thighs.

Holding Seven's gaze, an understanding passed between them. Suddenly, Janeway felt all sorts of emotions. Seven was allowing her to connect. Breathing in deeply, she realized that it was her arousal that had caused Seven to react like this.

Unexpectedly, Janeway was swamped with deep emotions that hit her fast. So fast, they culminated into a screeching sensation that almost put her teeth on edge. Suddenly, the unnerving sensation stopped, and her headache was gone, replaced with an overwhelming surge of desire.

Her hand between Seven's velvety thighs, her own groin throbbing, she felt the slick, warm wetness of Seven's juices puddle on her fingers as she tenderly touched her clit.

Gazing at her defenselessly, lustfully, Seven moaned then pleaded, "Please."

Feeling as if she might crawl out of her own skin, and aching with desire, Janeway reached deep inside herself for control. Emotionally connected, she knew exactly what Seven wanted her to do - verbalize. She whispered, "What do you want?"

Seven's breathing hitched.

"Tell me."

Seven groaned. Hips moving, eyes connecting, she whispered, "You know what I want."

Shaking with need, her throat convulsing, Janeway rubbed her nose against Seven's and whispered, "Tell me."

"Uhhh...my breasts...touch...them."

Feeling as if she was coming home, Janeway lowered her head and placing her lips tenderly around the blonde's right nipple, sucked it into her mouth. Giving Seven what she wanted, she gently bit down.

Head snapping back, Seven cried out in pleasure.

Lips drawing back from her teeth, Janeway said, "Tell me."

"Uhhh-"

"Tell me what else," she said, more forcefully.

"I want to..." Seven swallowed, "come!"

Janeway closed her eyes briefly. The words that were used to connect them so many times in the past had been spoken. Groaning, she increased the pressure. Saliva pouring out of her mouth, coating Seven's breast, she licked and sucked furiously. Working Seven into a frenzy, she knew that no matter how often she heard the unadulterated half-sobbing, lustful cries from the blonde, it would never be enough.

Hips pumping, Seven's exoskeleton hand reached out, and grasped the bed, she moaned when Janeway expertly worked her clit. Clutching, she held onto the smaller woman with her other hand.

Eyebrows lifting, Janeway heard a cracking sound of the bed frame.

"Inside...Please!"

Seven groaned when Janeway entered her.

Mouth open, eyes closed, cheeks flushed, absorbed completely in her release, shuddering, Seven cried out in abundance as she came long and hard.

Watching her adoringly, Janeway realized that there was months of pent up frustration in Seven's release.

Panting, the emotional connection making her need for release almost intolerable, Janeway quickly removed her hand from between Seven's slick thighs and worked it between her own soaking wet ones. Spasms sweeping through her, her orgasm exploded.

Afterward, slowly, Seven eased out of Janeway's arms, and turned on her side.

"Seven?" Janeway croaked, breathing heavily. Surprised and confused, by the clear rejection, she rose on her elbow and looking down at the blonde, whispered, "What's wrong?"

Seven turned her head to look at Janeway. Flushed, eyes wide and sparkling, voice choked, she responded over her shoulder, "You do not want this."

Mouth open, struggling for words, Janeway stared at the blonde. The younger woman had never looked more stunning than she did at this moment. Astonished by her beauty; her wide eyes, her flushed cheeks, her full mouth, the redhead was incapable of doing anything but appreciating it.

Eyes searching Janeway's, disappointment shining through, Seven quickly turned her head away. "I am a burden to you," she said forlornly, "nothing more."

Still feeling the heat from her intense orgasm, Janeway blinked a few times. "A burden?" She shook her head, and placing a hand gently on Seven's shoulder asked, "Where is this coming from?"

Seven shrugged off Janeway's hand. "The crew of Voyager," she replied coolly.

Completely confused, Janeway asked almost stupidly, "The crew?"

"Yes," Seven answered. "Several crewmembers in the Mess hall were discussing our situation, or to be more precise, your predicament."

Deeply concerned, Janeway moved closer and folding blonde hair behind Seven's ear, whispered. "Tell me."

Eyes closing, Seven breathed in sharply.

"Tell me what they said," Janeway asked. Carefully, she placed a hand on Seven's abdomen, and when she didn't reject it, began stroking it. To her disappointment, the only connection she felt was with the baby. Seven was blocking her.

Silence filled the room as the minutes ticked by. Janeway waited patiently, all the while stroking Seven's abdomen.

Eventually, Seven turned her head to look at her. Pleased to see that the tension around her eyes had gone. "Tell me," Janeway encouraged tenderly.

"I am aware that sometimes I am still socially inadequate and that I am seen by most as logical and emotionless." A hurt expression crossed Seven's face. "It appears that some of the crew think of me not only as a mindless drone but," she said, as if the term was new to her, "an ice maiden."

Aware that she had referred to Seven as an ice maiden, Janeway winced. "Were they aware that you could hear them?" she asked, trying to bite back the sudden anger, at hers, and others, insensitivity.

"No."

"Your enhanced hearing allowed you to overhear them?"

Clearly upset by what she'd heard, Seven replied in a small voice, "Yes."

Her hand making small patterns on Seven's abdomen, Janeway asked, "What did they say?"

It was several minutes before Seven responded. "That, as Captain, you are only fulfilling an obligation now that I am pregnant." Looking straight ahead she added, "They discussed for some time how you had always been more tolerant of me than the rest of the crew, and concluded that you did not deserve, in their words, to be burdened with a hard-assed, Borg ice maiden just because you wanted sex."

Eyes narrowing, Janeway gritted her teeth and forcibly stopped herself from tensing. That wisecrack may cost several of my crew dearly. If I could, I would take every one of those words back, Seven, I swear.

Janeway wondered how many insensitive and downright prejudiced remarks Seven had overheard over the last few years. She sighed and checked herself from asking for the crewmembers names. She reined in her growing anger. Once she had names, there was no doubt that some of them would find their own sorry asses hauled from regular duties and assigned to lowly maintenance tasks for the next several months, if not the remainder of the voyage.

"Seven," she said, continuing to slowly rub her abdomen. She breathed in deeply when a sense of contentment filled her. At least, our baby's happy. She gently spooned the blonde. "Sometimes, things are said without fully understanding their impact. Often, particularly in a group situation, things are said for the perceived humor."

Seven turned her head and looked at Janeway. "I fail to see the humor in those comments."

"Humor is subjective, Seven, and as such often indefinable. Sometimes, caught in the moment, people say the strangest things. Things that they believe will endear them within a group environment. And most of the time, even though they know they might have said something wrong, they intend no ill will."

"Banter," Seven said. Turning her head away, she looked straight ahead.

"Yes."

"It is flawed."

"It is a human condition."

"Yes." Janeway raised her brow. "You are unhindered with many human conditions."

"And for that, I am grateful," Seven responded. She added coldly, "Humans are flawed."

Not wanting to shy away from this sensitive, but increasingly harmful belief that being human was a negative, Janeway nodded. "Yes, we are." She sighed gently. "But although people can say unconstructive things, they can also say wonderful things," she paused, waiting. Eventually, Seven looked at her.

Intrigue crossed Seven's blue eyes. "Explain."

"Well," Janeway said, leaning her chin lightly on Seven's shoulder, "let's start with how valuable a member of this crew you are." She looked deeply into Seven's eyes. "As your Captain," she said, lowering her voice, "I want you to know that Voyager would never have gotten this far without you."

Watching Janeway, Seven raised her ocular implant, but didn't reply.

"The Astrometrics lab has allowed the crew to plot routes that have taken several years off our journey. That was down to you."

You clever girl you, Janeway thought.

"Ensign Kim assisted me."

Janeway nodded. "True, Harry helped. But it was down to your ingenuity, your hard work and commitment that our time has been shortened in the Delta Quadrant." She added, "You discovered the Hirogen communications network which allowed Voyager to reach out across thousands of light years and touch the Alpha Quadrant." Her eyes widened with gratitude. "You allowed us to call home, Seven. Tell our families, our friends, that we're still alive. You have no idea what that has meant to the crew, to me. "

Janeway smiled warmly when Seven's blue eyes sparkled with pride.

"You've developed a technique that allowed your nanoprobes to be modified to save Neelix after he had been dead for several hours." Janeway's hand slipped to Seven's arm and she grasped it. "You saved him, Seven."

Looking at Janeway, Seven's ocular implant rose and humor crept into her tone. "That may not have been a wise choice, given the unpalatable food I have been forced to consume recently."

Janeway wished that the crewmembers, specifically the ones talking so negatively about Seven, could see the real woman that she saw right now. There was no doubt that Seven was a paradox - arrogant, but also warm, passionate with a wit that was getting dryer by the day.

"You helped me with the Omega molecules."

Seven looked intently at Janeway.

Janeway added, "You helped me destroy them, even though it was against your wishes." Watching the expression on Seven's face change, she whispered, "You witnessed the Omega stabilizing, Seven."

Eyes wide, Seven responded, "For three point two seconds, I saw perfection."

As do I, Janeway thought, looking down at the blonde.

"You took responsibility for the lives of an entire crew, in stasis, for a month. And they trusted you enough to get them and Voyager through the nebula safely."

"The Doctor assisted me."

"Yes, but his mobile emitter was affected and eventually he was offline. Ultimately, it was down to you, Seven."

Looking at Janeway, Seven hesitated. "It was then I understood the need for...companionship."

Pleased that Seven was beginning to understand, Janeway added, "You returned control to me, to the ship, when you helped disable the holograms that the Hirogen were running."

"You are a strong and resourceful leader, Kathryn" Seven said, looking at her. "You would have found a way."

Janeway looked deeply into Seven's eyes. "You saved Voyager from the Borg Queen."

"You came after me."

Janeway recalled the almost suicidal mission. Don't you know I would never leave you behind? "Because I knew, in here," Janeway said, pressing her hand lightly down on Seven's abdomen, "that something was wrong."

"You trusted your instinct."

"Yes." Janeway nodded. "Trust yours, Seven. Know that you are cared for deeply aboard Voyager."

"Transporter Room Three to the Captain."

Janeway sighed, and reaching over Seven, touched the console at the side of her bed. "Go ahead."

"The Zarkonian Committee has arrived."

"Show them to the Briefing Room."

"Aye, Captain."

"They are early." Looking down at Seven, Janeway touched her cheek gently then stroked it. There was no point in telling Seven to stay in bed, she would be ignored. "After the Zarkonians have gone, can we talk?"

"Yes," Seven replied as she searched Janeway's eyes. "I would like that."

Chapter Sixteen

"Doctor," Janeway said, entering Sickbay.

"Captain," the doctor replied, coming out of his office. "How may I assist you?"

"Have you read any of Seven's data PADDs recently?"

"Yes," the doctor replied. Raising his brow, he looked down at the pile of PADDs that Janeway was carrying. "I helped her gather data."

"Is that so," Janeway replied, her voice dangerously low, she dropped the PADDs on the nearest biobed. "You helped her with this much?" she asked pointing at the pile.

"I agree that there appears to be a great deal of information," the doctor responded, looking at Janeway's increasingly unhappy face. "But, Captain," he said, making his way to her, "if you've taken the time to read the PADDs, you will realize the data is invaluable. They contain Seven's findings and itineraries."

"In case you haven't noticed, Doctor," Janeway said, lifting her hand. "I'm a Starfleet Captain not a data archivist."

The doctor looked around the empty Sickbay. Focusing on Janeway, he swallowed. "I admit we may have been a tad over-zealous."

"A tad!" Janeway responded. She held up several PADDs. "There's multiple itineraries, with multiple variations, on every situation possible from Seven's pregnancy to our child's adulthood." Shaking the PADDs, she looked at the doctor. "Scenarios on what action should be taken for red alerts, for encounters with hostile and friendly species, for returning to the Alpha Quadrant. There are even probability variables on her Starfleet entrance exams requirements depending on the year we make it back to the Alpha Quadrant and what subjects might be popular." Her eyes narrowed. "You've helped Seven hypothesize every possible scenario, every known outcome for our child's existence." Dropping the PADDs, she placed her hands on the biobed. "You, more than anyone, realize the dangers we face not only here in uncharted space, but with someone like Seven."

Nonplussed, the doctor looked at her. "I'm not sure I understand what you mean, Captain."

Janeway's face tightened. "Right now, Seven's vulnerable, Doctor. When it comes to protecting her own, you know only too well, she'll do anything, no matter what the risk. And overloading her with every known outcome while she's pregnant and fully-loaded with hormones is almost suicidal." Eyes darkening, she looked at the EMH.

"The PADDs were intended to be informative, Captain. That's all."

"The data contained in those PADDs has introduced risk," Janeway said. She enlightened a confused looking EMH. "When it comes to protecting your own, reducing risk is natural. Simply put, Doctor, I don't want a retaliatory course of action every time I refuse to drop Seven and our child off at the nearest M Class planet whenever we hit a bump in the road."

The doctor looked at Janeway.

"From now on," she said, "I want you to keep things simple. Let's just deal with Seven's pregnancy first, is that understood?"

The doctor nodded slowly. "Understood."

Janeway looked down at the pile of PADDs. "I don't have the time to read them." She looked at the EMH. "You've obviously discussed everything with Seven. I want a summary."

"Captain?"

"I want you to summarize every PADD and give me a simple report." She held up her hand. "I'm not interested in anything scenario based, Doctor. Let's leave that where it belongs...in the future. Just give me a summary and let me know if there's anything I should be concerned about." She frowned. "I want to nip any potential issues in the bud." She looked at the time display above a biobed. "You have six hours, Doctor. Is that clear?"

Flummoxed, the doctor started to protest. "Captain, I..."

"Do it," Janeway said, exiting Sickbay.

In her ready room, Janeway looked up from the report. "Thank you, Doctor. It is very concise, and to the point." She added dryly, "It's good to see that from the gigaquads of data there is nothing I need worry about."

"Captain," the doctor responded. "I hope you understand that although Seven and the baby are in excellent condition, this is new ground for all of us." He shifted in his chair. "As we know this isn't a typical human pregnancy, and there will be things," he hesitated, "physical things that will need to be taken care of."

If this morning was anything to go by, Janeway couldn't agree more. "Understood," she replied.

"Can I be frank, Captain."

"When are you not?" Janeway asked, sardonically. "Go ahead," she said placing the PADD that the EMH had given her down.

"I am aware that although Seven is residing with you, currently, you are only sharing quarters. There is no physical intimacy."

Surprised, Janeway looked at the EMH. "Seven has discussed this with you?"

The doctor nodded. "As well as her physician, I am her friend."

Janeway nodded. "When did you discuss this?"

The doctor raised his brow. "Just a few days ago."

Wanting to hear him out, Janeway didn't alert him to the change in circumstance. "What is it you want to discuss?"

"Captain, obviously, we can't predict fully what the baby's requirements will be because of our nonexistent knowledge on Gaelian, Human, Borg hybrid babies. But although, it appears, the baby will be mostly human, she will possess biological differences." The doctor pursed his lips. "Captain, I have to warn you, now that Seven is in her second trimester, there will be a noticeable change."

Janeway inclined her head, aware that she had wanted to discuss those very changes with him, she said, "I'm listening."

"I've run a full synaptic analysis. Seven is now experiencing heightened emotions. There are also other things that she will be experiencing now that her estrogen and progesterone levels have increased."

Clasping her hands together, Janeway placed them on her desk. "What things?"

The doctor cleared his throat. "It is not unusual for a human female during pregnancy to experience an increase in her sex drive. But with Seven it appears things will be quite different."

Intrigued, Janeway looked at the EMH. "How so?"

"Well," the doctor responded. He crossed his legs. "Seven's sex hormones have increased by four times that of a typical human female. Meaning, her sex drive will increase dramatically." He looked at Janeway. "According to Gaelian records, after the first trimester, the intimate bonding of parents encourages the baby's wellbeing."

"I see." Janeway swallowed. Leaning forward, she asked, "And if there isn't regular intimate bonding?"

The doctor grasped the arms of the chair, and raised his brow. "Seven will experience increasing levels of discomfort becoming nauseous and eventually unwell if her needs are not attended to. Simply put, Captain, Seven will need to make love frequently otherwise she will quite literally crawl up the bulkheads."

"I see," Janeway responded. She unclasped her hands and pinched her nose.

"You as the second parent will also experience change," the doctor added. "You may experience some physiological changes as well as your libido increasing. You may have an increasing desire to be close to Seven, to protect her. He paused and picked at something on his trouser leg.

Frowning, Janeway watched the doctor. He can't be serious? She rolled her eyes incredulously. Holographic lint!

"You will also experience increasing discomfort if your needs aren't also attended to."

"Discomfort such as headaches?"

The doctor nodded. "Exactly," he said, then did a double take. He opened his mouth then closed it.

Janeway quirked an eyebrow at him.

"I have detailed my findings." The doctor handed Janeway a PADD. "I suggest you read it."

"Oh don't worry, Doctor," Janeway responded, taking the PADD and glancing through it, "this time, I will."

"Captain," the doctor said as Janeway's mouth slowly hung open. "I think you should prepare yourself for what may lie ahead."

Shocked, Janeway stared at the PADD. She frowned. "Unsatisfied sexual urges may lead to aggression."

The doctor nodded. "Seven is going through a profound physical change. What is accepted as the norm among Gaelians may not be considered the norm among humans."

Janeway eyes narrowed. "Exactly what norm are we talking about?"

"Well," the doctor said then cleared his throat, "norms like having an extremely active sex life." He hesitated. "A minimum of three times daily is recommended."

Janeway swallowed hard. "Otherwise?"

"Otherwise," the doctor replied. "Seven's behavior will become unpredictable."

"I see," Janeway said, eyes widening.

"Similar to a Gaelian second parent, your connection is both neural and bio-chemical. As the pregnancy progresses in order to strengthen the bond you will experience an instinctive need to," the doctor raised his brow, "satisfy Seven."

Unable to resist, Janeway asked, "Doctor, do you know if Seven's response is purely due to her current physical condition?"

The doctor looked at Janeway for a long moment. "Seven is completely compatible with you, Captain," he replied gently. "Otherwise, she could not respond in this way."

Not wanting to discuss this complex situation any further with the doctor, Janeway nodded.

"It's curious," the doctor said, looking at the redhead, "that you didn't ask about your own response."

"Doctor," Janeway said, her voice lowering, "Let's stick to what's relevant." Sighing, she raked a hand through her hair. "I can't be seen to slope off every five minutes with my Astrometrics Officer." She shook her head. "We need to find an alternate solution, one that doesn't harm Seven or the baby." She looked at the EMH. "There must be some natural compound, some inhibitor." She clasped her hands together again. "Have you done any research on this?"

"Yes," the doctor responded. "But not regarding stopping the process."

"I'm not talking about stopping it, only slowing it somehow," Janeway said, then stood. "Search the Gaelian data files along with every other data file you can find." She made her way around her desk and, perching on the end of it, looked down at the EMH. "We need your help, Doctor. Give this top priority."

"I will, Captain," the doctor responded, looking up at Janeway. "I have been studying a natural compound that won't have any lasting effect. But, convincing Seven may be difficult. She is very protective of the baby and may refuse to take anything that she deems is not advancing the child's natural development."

Janeway nodded. "Let me worry about Seven."

Standing, the doctor looked at Janeway. "You do realize what time it is?"

Janeway frowned. She looked at the chronometer on her console, it was late. She closed her eyes briefly. Oh boy. Other than a short contact session during a break in the negotiations where she had also dropped off the PADDs at Sickbay, she had made little time for Seven.

"Thank you, Doctor," Janeway said, folding her arms. "Dismissed."

The doctor gave Janeway a curt nod then exited her Ready Room.

Janeway waited until the doors closed behind the EMH. "Computer locate Seven of Nine."

"Seven of Nine is in her quarters."

Quickly Janeway signed out of her console then exited her Ready Room. Arriving at her quarters, a dull ache began just behind her eyes.

Headache!

Chapter Seventeen

Standing outside her quarters, Janeway wasn't sure what kind of reception she would receive after promising they would talk as soon as the Zarkonians left. Apprehensively, she gave the entrance command to her quarters and felt immediate relief when the familiar chirp sounded.

Yes!

Pleased that there was no more drama, she smiled. But when the doors slid open, her smile faded fast.

Whoa!

Standing at the replicator, holding a glass to her forehead, long, silky blonde hair loose and slightly disheveled, Seven was breathing heavily, and...as naked as the day she was born.

Shocked, Janeway instinctively looked either side of the hallway before scampering into her quarters. Relief filled her when the doors quickly hissed closed behind her. She could only imagine the tongue wagging sessions amongst Voyager's crew if anyone ever caught sight of the blonde like this. She could hear the first wave of gossip - No wonder the Captain couldn't wait to move Seven in with her! You should see the friggin reception she gets in the evenings!

Throwing out her arms, she exclaimed, "What the hell is going on here, Seven?" she asked, her eyes like saucers. "Why are you so...so...naked!"

Seven placed her glass down then slowly turned and faced the redhead.

Janeway caught her breath. A shockwave of desire pulsated through her at the sight of the lithe, wild looking, full breasted, woman. Seven's entire skin was flushed and it made her implants stand out. Her ocular implant over her left eye, the starburst below her right ear, the implant on her right bicep, the exoskeleton of her left hand, the implant that ran down her left leg - all of them glowed in the low light.

This, half human, half Borg was the best of both, Janeway realized, swallowing. Seven really was stunningly beautiful.

Focusing on Janeway, Seven's normally clear blue eyes were large, dark and menacing. Her breathing labored, she almost growled. "You are late."

Suddenly feeling incredibly hot, Janeway pulled at her uniform collar. Knowing the younger woman was upset and wanting to keep the situation calm, she closed her eyes and rubbed her forehead. "Seven...I..."

Janeway gasped, eyes flying open, she grunted in surprise when she was forcibly lifted and slammed against the bulkhead near the entrance doors. Stunned, the air forced from her lungs, she grabbed at Seven's shoulders and raking her hands over hot, burning skin, tried to push her away.

Janeway's strength was no match for the ex Borg.

Her face a mask of desire, Seven, quickly pinned Janeway's arms to the wall, she held them easily. Swiftly, with her exoskeleton hand, she shredded her uniform tunic.

Stunned and still winded, Janeway pushed at her, "Seven!"

There was no response.

Hoping somehow to reach the fevered blonde as she tugged, pulled, then ripped her clothes off, Janeway used her strongest command tone that would have made even her senior officers scurry for cover. "What the hell do you think you're doing!" she bawled, struggling to free herself.

But, despite her best efforts, Seven continued to hold her easily and, with great aplomb, ripped off Janeway's grey turtleneck exposing her breasts.

"You are late," the blonde muttered. Breathing heavily, she cupped Janeway's right breast. Moaning, she did something that surprised the redhead - her thumb circling the hardening nipple - she seductively licked her lips.

The pleasure shining from her eyes surprised Janeway. Somewhere, deep in her psyche, it registered that she had been wrong in thinking that, as a female, Seven wouldn't be interested in her.

Speechless, her insides churning, panting with the exertion of trying to break free, wide eyed, Janeway watched incredulously when Seven's fingers, strong and demanding, rolled and pinched her nipple before sliding down into the waistband of her uniform pants, and shredding them.

Shocked, her throat working but no sound coming out, Janeway watched her pants, now in tatters, pool around her right leg. Closing her eyes in disbelief, she heard a snap, and felt her

underwear give way. Eyes flying open, she watched the flimsy material soar across the room.

Lifting her ocular implant, Seven looked challengingly at her. Making it clear who was in control.

As Seven's hand roamed sensually over her body, a well of excitement rushed through Janeway. Catching her bottom lip, she tried to stop her mind from scrambling completely, but there was wildness in the blonde's eyes that unhinged her - she looked ravenous.

Spreading her fingers, Seven slipped them between Janeway's thighs.

As if she had been hit by a phaser, Janeway jolted. She bit back a moan when fingers circled her clit then slid inside.

Slowly, Seven lifted her hand and showing Janeway her slick fingers, did something that shocked her completely - she licked them.

Her inner voice sniggered. Clearly no problem sucking you off this time round, it said gleefully.

Mind-boggling lust coursed through Janeway. Stunned, soaking wet, shivering with desire, she could barely believe what she was witnessing or how much this show of aggression and dominance was turning her on. Dismayed and wanting some control, she thrashed and tried to break free, but Seven's strength overpowered her.

"Stop this...Dammit!" Janeway tried to command.

Seven pressed her burning flesh into Janeway. "I cannot," she whispered hotly into her ear. "You belong to me."

Her groin clenching spasmodically at Seven's words, Janeway groaned.

Their eyes locking, Seven looked predatory. Her body flushed, the swell of her growing abdomen showing, her dusky-pink nipples darker than usual, her chest heaving, she gazed hungrily at Janeway as she kicked her legs wide apart, then pushed between her thighs.

Unable to believe her level of excitement, Janeway's eyes rolled back and shuttered closed.

"Look at me." Seven commanded.

Knowing the deep need inside her was now pouring out, Janeway dropped her head.

"Comply!"

Eyes popping open, Janeway's head jolted up at the command. She gasped when an electric surge of excitement shot through her.

Positioned between her thighs, Seven pulled Janeway's hips forward. Looking down, she breathed in deeply then said throatily, eagerly, "Your smell is exhilarating,"

On fire, Janeway groaned heavily. Drenched, she lustfully arched her back - surrendering a full view of her need.

Dark-blue hooded eyes absorbed Janeway, then locked eyes with her.

A gut-wrenching deep need pulled at Janeway. Powerless, desperate, so wanton and needy that she would give up anything to Seven, she released an explosive whimper.

Hot, raw, unadulterated, desire shone from Seven's eyes. Slowly, she pressed into Janeway's very swollen, hyper-sensitive, clit making her body jerk.

Wrists held tight, pinned against the wall, an overpowering surge of sexual excitement flowed through Janeway when Seven's began to grind.

Helpless, hips grinding into her, Seven's forcefulness filled Janeway with an extreme sense of wild abandonment. Kicking off the remains of her uniform pants, she hitched her legs around the ex Borg's strong thighs, and opened herself up to her.

Releasing a deep moan of pleasure, Seven ground their naked bodies together. She moved her hand from Janeway's hip to her buttocks. Holding her, juices flowing, she, slickly, ground into her.

Gasping for air, the sense of euphoria filling her indescribable, somewhere, in the back of her mind, Janeway realized that, as during the mating ritual, they were joining.

Grinding, eyes locked, the concentrated fire in Seven's eyes stole Janeway's breath away.

Sweating from exertion, the smell of their strong sex made the redhead's mouth salivate. The copious amounts of juice was creating slick electric thrills each time Seven pressed into her open and exposed vulva.

Janeway was being driven crazy.

Weak with desire, thighs shaking, lightheaded, the pleasure intense, Janeway moaned uncontrollably. Never had she been so forcibly taken, never had she been so exposed - never ever - had she wanted this so much.

Moaning, the need to come building. Shuddering, teeth gnashing, Janeway shook her head from side to side. Her orgasm pounding, a scream building, she tried to bite it back. She had never screamed when making love. "Oh God," she said, arching her back, writhing, pushing, grinding. "Oh Yes!" she cried out as Seven pushed into her - opening her, engulfing her swollen clit, exposing her, stripping her, forcing her to abandon everything but her crippling, overwhelming, desperate need. "Oh Seven!" she yelled. "Yes... Yes-"

Tensing then releasing, Janeway screamed as the most intense orgasm ripped through her, taking her breath, her mind and every piece of resistance with it.

Slowly, her mind fractured, her mouth open and gasping for air, she returned to her body. Breathless, tremors passed through her as Seven, moaning, let go of her wrists. She gripped onto a low light on the wall with her exoskeleton hand. Panting, breasts heaving, all control gone, she pushed into Janeway - hard.

A crushing sound, from the low light, filled the room as Seven ground into her hungrily.

Moaning now, her juices coating Janeway, Seven thrust forward, her voice cracked. Coming, she cried out loudly, hoarsely, desperately. Body convulsing, her orgasm swept through her.

Exhausted and deeply sated, Janeway watched the aftershocks rumble through Seven. Head flung back, she moaned and grinded, drawing out every last piece of pleasure she could.

It blew Janeway's mind that each time their orgasms were long and intense, and the connection so sublime.

Eventually, shuddering breaths were the only noise filling the room.

As the dangling low light cast shadows over them, Janeway unraveled her legs from around Seven.

Weakly, Seven rested her brow on her captain's. "Each time is overwhelming," she said hoarsely.

Her heart full of tenderness, Janeway responded quietly, "I know."

After a few moments of shared silence, Seven straightened. Gently, she took Janeway's hands and placed them on her abdomen.

Immediately, the redhead felt an emotional high followed by an overwhelming sense of happiness.

Cupping Janeway's face, Seven carefully brushed away sticky red strands of hair and kissed her - gently, sweetly, adoringly.

Pressed up against the wall, in the most extraordinary position she had ever found herself aboard Voyager, Janeway melted under the kiss. Savoring every moment, she eagerly kissed the ex Borg back.

Slowly they re-discovered each other.

Janeway stiffened when the comm system buzzed. Pulling her mouth away, she looked at Seven regretfully. "Janeway here," she answered, her voice sounding high.

"Captain," Commander Chakotay replied, "our scanners have detected a vessel."

Janeway frowned. She cleared her throat, and stilled Seven's hand as it lightly stroked her cheek. "That shouldn't be an unusual occurrence, Commander," she said, looking into Seven's eyes, "given our location."

"Understood, Captain. But, this vessel is Gaelian, and we have just received a communication."

"I see," Janeway said. Interest sparked in her eyes. "Channel it directly to my quarters, Commander."

"Aye, Captain."

"Janeway out."

"Seven," Janeway said, after a moment, "I think we should move."

Reluctantly, Seven let her go. She breathed in deeply. "It would be advisable that we shower first."

Picking up her shredded clothes, Janeway's face turned scarlet when the heavily scented smell of sex filled her nostrils. "Yes," she responded. "Why don't you go first?"

Seven eyed Janeway then curtly nodded before heading for the bedroom.

Sure that Seven was about to suggest they be efficient and share the shower, Janeway bunched her tattered clothes to her abdomen, and breathed in deeply. Suddenly, she felt exhausted and bewildered. She had no frame of reference for what was happening here, and really no idea how to handle it.

Clearly, Seven's dominance was driven by her increasing sex drive. Janeway realized that there was absolutely no point in reprimanding the blonde for ambushing her in the way she did. As any protest would be incongruous to how she had responded. It was more than evident to both of them that she had loved every minute of it.

Janeway bit lightly on her bottom lip, and frowned. She could only hope that she wouldn't be expected to expel that type of energy several times a day, otherwise she wouldn't have enough oomph to boil a leola root never mind run a starship.

Twenty minutes later, showered and refreshed. Janeway, with Seven next to her, activated the console at her station, and keyed in the necessary commands to retrieve the much anticipated message from the Gaelian.

"Captain Janeway," Elder Duhr said, her very beautiful face filling the viewscreen, "We received your communique."

A deep sense of pleasure filled Janeway at the welcoming sight of the Elder.

"I am staying at the Wuchranin and suggest that we meet there tomorrow, at your convenience, to discuss matters further. Please be aware, Captain, that the Gaelian Council of Authority treat the matter that you have brought to our attention very seriously." She dipped her head. "I look forward to hearing from you."

Short, but oh so very sweet, Janeway thought. The idea that Diplomat Sgurrin may have escaped justice filled Janeway with a deep sense of unease. The fact that Elder Duhr, had tracked them and travelled almost one hundred lights years, restored her faith that somehow, even in the Delta Quadrant, without the Federation's very legal competencies, justice could still prevail.

Standing, Janeway placed a hand on her stomach. Surprised at the sudden butterflies, she made her way to the replicator. "Coffee, black," she said to the console.

"Why does Elder Duhr wish to meet at the space station?" Seven asked frowning.

"I don't know, Seven," Janeway replied, lifting the mug. The location of the meeting of no interest to her, she shrugged, and offered dryly, "Maybe she doesn't trust our...equipment."

Drinking some well earned black nectar, Janeway watched Seven make her way to the sofa, and take a seat. Dressed casually, her face flushed, it suddenly struck the redhead, now that Seven was experimenting with casual dress, how youthful she looked in her pink shirt and grey pants. It was also a dark reminder of how young the blonde actually was.

Gone, while in her quarters at least, was the austere bun, replaced with long, lush, shoulder length hair. Gone, permanently, was the cat suit replaced with a preferred uniform of dark slacks and a dark turtleneck top, designed to countenance a growing figure. Gone, for tonight, was her usual air of arrogance, and superiority.

She looks free, Janeway's inner voice said. And don't forget young. Very young!

She's only twenty-six! Janeway thought, catching her bottom lip. There's eighteen years between us. Cradle snatcher! her gnawing doubt spat out.

Sitting in her usual erect position, hands folded in her lap, demure. "Do you wish to discuss our," she hesitated, "the current situation?"

Preoccupied, by how youthful Seven looked, Janeway took a moment to answer. "Yes."

Seven inclined her head.

Surprised at the hesitancy, Janeway sipped from her mug. She's reaching out, she needs this. Our baby needs this too. Put your doubts aside. She needs you.

Janeway approached the younger woman and sat near her.

Unwilling to make eye contact, Seven looked down at her hands.

Janeway sipped from her mug. Why it still surprised her that Seven could nail her to the wall, quite literally, when she wanted something, yet struggle when engaging in intimate chat was beyond her. It was as clear as day that she was just a young, inexperienced girl.

The redhead closed her eyes briefly. Stop this! Young, maybe, but she's not inexperienced, not anymore because of you. Now drop it!

It was almost impossible for Janeway to allow herself to believe that she was naturally attracted to Seven. The idea that at her age and stage she could feel such passion that had the same intensity that one experienced as an adolescent seemed foolish and extremely naïve to her. It was absurd that she would naturally be attracted to someone so young and so...female.

Watching Seven, Janeway's stomach flipped. It was so silly these feelings, she told herself. It was the circumstances that were making her feel this way, surely?

She dismissed any further thoughts. But, somewhere, deep inside, Janeway knew that if she ever interrogated her feelings with any rigor, she would find some very unsettling truths. Leaning back on the sofa, she crossed her legs, and said casually, "I spoke with the Doctor today."

"In your Ready Room," Seven responded.

Instinctively, Janeway's eyes narrowed at the idea that Seven was still keeping tabs on her. "Yes, in my Ready Room." She sipped some coffee. "We briefly discussed your requirements now that you are in your second trimester."

Janeway watched a pleasant hue of pink snake up Seven's neck and spread to her cheeks. "You have been fully briefed?"

The flush on her cheeks, and the sparkle of her amazing blue eyes, made Janeway catch her breath, she felt stirrings below. She quickly clamped down on it, utilizing a technique that she had been working on recently. She ran through a list of unwanted sexual partners and found that thinking about Chakotay lodged between her thighs was like being dowsed with Terillian ice water - a substance that with just one drop could freeze your entire body in an instant.

"Not fully briefed, Seven," Janeway replied. "After tonight though," she added, quirking an eyebrow, "I definitely have a good idea of what is going on, but I would prefer it if we discuss things from now on."

Blushing furiously, Seven lowered her head.

Tickled by the blonde's unusual bashfulness, Janeway said quietly, "Talk to me, Seven."

Seven looked at Janeway for a moment, then nodded. Sitting back, one hand on her lap, she took a casual position, stretching an arm across the sofa.

She's changing, Janeway thought.

"We should agree on a name," Seven said, "for the baby."

Janeway itched to hear Seven say 'our baby'. At least she had stopped saying 'my baby', and she guessed that would have to do for now. "Have you anything in mind?" she asked before sipping her coffee.

"Yes," Seven replied. "I suggest that since we are now a unimatrix of three, she be given the designation Three of Three."

Janeway choked on her coffee.

"However, I would recommend that her designation be shortened to Three."

Wiping her mouth, shock crossed Janeway's face as she stared incredulously at the ex Borg.

Seven raised her ocular implant. "I am being facetious, Kathryn."

Janeway blinked. You don't say!

Seven lowered her eyes. "I thought Marika would be an appropriate name."

"Marika," Janeway replied. She tried to remember where she knew that name from. She breathed in deeply, when she recalled why the name was significant to Seven.

Not too long ago three former Borg members of Seven's unimatrix required her help. Although separated from the collective, they were still connected to each other via a neural link which meant their thoughts were still one, and it was overwhelming them.

Through joining Seven to their neural link, they hoped to regain lost memories of an incident when, some years ago, their Borg ship crash landed. They believed that this incident held the key to the reason why they were still linked. With Seven's assistance, they discovered that the memories were not lost because of the crash but due to Seven re-assimilating them. It appeared, that the surviving Borg drones were regaining their pre-assimilation memories, and wanted to disconnect from the collective.

Unlike the other three drones who were adults when they were assimilated, Seven's returning memories were of being a frightened little girl. Seven's fear of abandonment caused her to forcibly re-assimilate the drones, creating a subset neural link between them and within the collective.

In the end, breaking the neural link between the three meant they would die within a matter of

weeks. The only other choice was to allow them to re-join the collective where they would live out their lives as drones. The decision was made that no matter how short, they should live as individuals.

Out of the three, Marika was the only one who refused to forgive Seven.

Janeway's heart went out to the younger woman. Although a fairly recent event, it was clear that the guilt of forcibly re-assimilating the three drones gnawed at her.

"Marika Willkarah" Janeway said softly.

Seven head dropped. "I was responsible for linking them together, for their suffering."

"Seven," Janeway said her voice full of sympathy. "Your actions were completely understandable."

Marika was married, an engineer," Seven said. Her eyes brimming with regret, she looked at Janeway. "Prior to becoming a drone, she worked on the Starship Excalibur. She had children."

Ah! Janeway thought. Nodding, she now understood that the guilt was double-edged. The Borg might have taken Marika's individuality the first time, but Seven also taking it meant that she had to consider what she had forced Marika to leave behind for the second time.

"When I told you I was uncertain if I should help them," Seven said, looking at Janeway, "you asked if I considered them family."

Recalling the conversation in her Ready Room, where she told Seven that an individual would often do things for family that they wouldn't consider doing for anyone else, Janeway replied, "I remember."

"During the mating ritual, you shared many stories about your family and growing up in a traditionalist home on Earth." Seven looked at Janeway, and a brief flash of yearning crossed her eyes. "It is apparent that you have a strong attachment to your past." She hesitated. "Do you miss your family?"

Instinctively, Janeway knew that she would have to handle this topic very delicately. Seven, after all, had very little experience of family. "Yes," she responded carefully.

"In what way?"

Janeway looked at the ex Borg, and replied gently, "There are lots of things I miss. But what I miss most is the familiar settings and the sounds of my mother's farm. The noise of my family preparing food, and the conversations we used to have around the dinner table. I miss my mother and sister, my family, desperately, sometimes."

"Is separation...painful?"

Of course it's painful, Janeway's inner voice stated in surprise.

Janeway was suddenly reminded with an astonishingly horrifying thud that because Seven was assimilated at the age of six, she wouldn't know, wouldn't remember with any real clarity what it was like to be fully embraced and loved within a family unit, and the pain of being separated from them.

The word love with all its connotations ricocheted around Janeway's mind. Seven wouldn't know any of the flavors and shades that love came packaged in, she realized angrily because for eighteen years, she had served as a drone.

The pain that seared through Janeway was so strong it took her breath away. At that moment, more so than any other, since Seven had come aboard Voyager, Janeway understood fully what the ex Borg had been robbed of. Her jaw tightened. It was completely and utterly unforgivable.

Anger coursing through her, Janeway took a moment. "Yes," she said, ensuring her tone was even. "It is very painful."

The redhead watched Seven's eyes fill with intrigue, and a desire to know.

"There are times," Janeway added, knowing that at this moment, Seven needed to connect with the person behind the captaincy, "when I am so filled with resolute hope and optimism that I will get Voyager and the crew home that nothing can stop me." She raised her brow. "And then there are other times, usually after a vivid dream about being home, that I realize that it may all just be wishful thinking." Emotion filled Janeway's voice as she opened up. "In those moments, it is impossible to deny how far home really is, and I get terribly discouraged."

Seven raised her ocular implant. "According to my calculations from stardate 48317 when Voyager arrived via a displacement wave in the North-Western hemisphere of the Delta Quadrant, the journey home to the Alpha Quadrant would indeed be wishful thinking as it approximated a distance of seventy thousand light years at maximum cruising speed." She looked pointedly at Janeway. "Not allowing for encounters with hostile species, route deviations, astronomic obstacles and other anomalous delays."

"Oh," Janeway responded. Not exactly the most soothing words she'd ever heard. But, then what did she expect, Seven was so young.

"Stardate 50999," Seven said, "Voyager successfully crosses territories inhabited by hostile species such as the Kazon and the Vidiians. Although no great distance is bridged, the crew consider it to be a difficult and an almost impossible achievement."

Frowning, Janeway looked at Seven.

"Stardate 51008, Voyager reaches the Nekrit Expanse, where no cartography exists as it is an unknown area of space for the crew and their navigational guide, Mister Neelix. In the Nekrit

Expanse, Voyager encounters the Borg, and through a tenuous alliance, and assistance from Kes, crosses Borg space. Distance bridged, nine-thousand five-hundred light years."

Her frown clearing, the corners of Janeway's mouth lifted just a little. She may be young, she thought, realizing what Seven was trying to do, but she has wisdom that transcends age. She looked at the blonde, and quirking an eyebrow said, "Stardate 51030, Voyager adds a new member to her crew."

Seven eyed Janeway.

Looking away, Janeway's brow drew together, "Stardate 51978, Voyager encounters Arturis, and his alien vessel disguised as a Starfleet prototype starship with new technology known as the quantum slipstream drive." She shook her head slightly. "This technology will allow Voyager to cross the many tens of thousands of lights years between her and the Alpha Quadrant in mere hours rather than decades."

"51978.2," Seven said gently, her eyes seeking out Janeway's and holding them, "just before Arturis boards Voyager, Captain Janeway and Seven of Nine are in Holodeck Two playing a game of velocity. The Captain wins six out of the ten rounds, frustrating the former drone who, with her cybernetic enhancements of visual acuity and stamina, believes she should win every round."

Janeway smiled a little, remembering that they were butting heads more than usual before the debacle with Arturis.

"Stardate 51981.6," Seven continued, a shadow crossing her eyes, "B'Elanna Torres informs Seven of Nine that if the slipstream flight is successful, being Borg, means that she will face more adversity in Federation space than any former Marquis aboard Voyager. She also informs her that they can be social outcasts together." The blonde frowned. "Seven of Nine finds this knowledge disconcerting. Will she, a single Borg among billions of individuals in Sector 001, adapt to human civilization?"

Oh Seven. I had no idea then that you felt so alone.

"Stardate 51981.8," Janeway said gently, "Seven of Nine informs her Captain that she doesn't intend to return to the Alpha Quadrant that, instead, she intends to stay in the Delta Quadrant, and fend for herself. Her Captain and friend, realizes that she is unsettled regarding what type of reception she will receive in the Alpha Quadrant. She reassures Seven that she doesn't belong in the Delta Quadrant, and asks that she trusts her."

They exchanged a deep, meaningful look.

"Stardate 52144," Seven said, quietly, "after Arturis's plot is discovered, the crew of Voyager constructs their own quantum slipstream drive. Although, the slipstream flight fails and the mission is aborted, Voyager, in its brief time in the conduit, traverses a great distance. Distance bridged, ten-thousand light years."

"We shaved fifteen years off our journey home," Janeway said, suddenly reminded and appreciating the distance that Voyager had covered in this quadrant. She sipped her coffee.

"Stardate 52169, Voyager utilizes transwarp technology. Distance bridged, twenty-thousand light years."

And it nearly cost me you, Janeway thought. She closed her eyes briefly, and thought of her last encounter with the Borg Queen where she 'appropriated' a transwarp coil from an incapacitated Borg vessel.

"Stardate 53068.2," Seven said.

That's today, Janeway thought then smiled.

"Voyager has traversed a distance in five years that was projected to take a minimum of forty." Seven tilted her head. "Not an insignificant distance, correct?"

Janeway grinned. "Correct."

"It seems that your positive belief in resolute hope and optimism has served you better than a negative belief in wishful thinking."

You sweet talker, you!

Janeway laughed. "Well I guess if you put it like that, Seven."

The ex Borg smiled slightly.

Janeway caught her breath at how much she missed that smile and how beautiful Seven looked.

Looking at each other, they sat in comfortable silence for a few moments.

"May I ask you a question, Kathryn?"

Drinking her coffee, Janeway nodded.

"You were engaged to marry when Voyager was stranded in the Delta Quadrant, correct?"

Trying not to choke a second time, Janeway swallowed hard. Someone had been doing their homework. Nodding, she cleared her throat. "Yes, to Mark Johnson."

"Do you also miss him...desperately, sometimes?"

An eidetic memory will always get you in the end, Janeway thought. To buy some time, she drank her coffee slowly. "In the beginning, yes, I did miss him," she responded eventually. "But

as time passed, it lessened."

"He terminated your...intimate relationship."

Janeway looked at the blonde. She had a very disapproving look on her face. "It was the right thing to do, Seven."

Seven's eyes narrowed. "He abandoned you."

"He didn't abandon me, Seven. He was devastated," Janeway said, recalling the Dear John comm she received from Hobbes. "Being stranded in the Delta Quadrant has meant that many of the crew and their loved ones in the Alpha Quadrant have been left with a terrible dilemma." She sighed. "Do we accept that we are separated from our loved ones forever or do we hold on to the hope that someday we will be with them again?"

"What do you accept?" Seven asked, watching Janeway intently.

"I have accepted that Mark is not a part of my life anymore," Janeway said. Placing a hand to her throat, she felt, for a brief moment, the difficult emotions she experienced, as she had with Jason.

"Explain."

Janeway raised her brow. She knew from Hobbes's comm that he had held out hope longer than most. "He had to move on."

"I would not abandon," she hesitated, "the one I loved."

Touched by the sincerity in Seven's eyes, Janeway nodded. "And I believe you, Seven. But Mark is a good man. He didn't abandon me. He just had to let go of the past." She paused, and gathered her thoughts. "Over the years, the crew of Voyager has become a family unit. And, even though we are a very strong unit, it is still my obligation, to not only hold this family together, here, in the Delta Quadrant, but to get them back to their immediate family, to their partners, their children, their parents and siblings."

Leaning forward, Janeway put her mug down on the coffee table, and slowly placed a hand on Seven's knee. "It is very important that you understand what I'm about to tell you, Seven," she said, squeezing the blonde's knee. "You are a part of this family, Seven. You are not alone."

Removing her arm from along the back of the sofa, Seven placed both hands in her lap. "Two-point-seven years ago, you had no knowledge of my existence."

Janeway knew Seven needed to hear this, she said softly, intently, "And now I couldn't imagine a day without you."

Surprise crossed Seven's face. She looked at Janeway for a long moment, studying her. Eventually, seemingly satisfied with the redhead's response, she dipped her head.

"Marika is a good name, Seven."

"Marika Janeway," Seven said gently, as she looked at the redhead intently.

Warmth filled Janeway. She's letting me in. She grinned. "Marika Annika Janeway, might have a better ring."

"Perhaps," Seven offered.

Janeway's stomach rumbled.

"Have you eaten?" Seven asked.

The redhead shook her head. "Today's been extremely busy."

And wonderfully surprising.

Seven rose quickly. "I shall replicate some food for you." She moved elegantly toward the replicator, and keyed in some commands. "I have been working on a number of food supplements."

Janeway smiled. Coming up behind the ex Borg, she watched a small drinking glass materialize. "Thank you, Seven, but I prefer to eat solids for my main meal."

Seven turned and looked at Janeway, she raised her ocular implant. "It would be wise to consider altering your diet. It would appear that your digestive tract may have difficulty breaking down bio matter. There are occasions, during sleep, when you make uncharacteristic noises that produce a sulfide compound."

Taken aback, eyes widening, Janeway flushed.

"Flatulence, I believe," Seven said, her eyes twinkling, "is the correct term."

Embarrassed and Indignant at being teased about having gas, Janeway quickly accepted the glass that Seven handed her.

"Until I know your exact requirements, I suggest," Seven said, keying in commands, "that you consume this nutritional supplement and add an additional food item such as an omelet."

"Glad to see your sense of humor is coming along nicely," Janeway said dryly.

"Humor is not difficult," Seven replied, eyeing the redhead. "I am often amused by the behavior of humans."

"I'll keep that in mind," Janeway mumbled, staring grimly at the glass in her hand.

"Consume." Seven said to her.

Grimacing at the glass, Janeway looked at Seven and tried fluttering her eyelashes. "I don't think so, Seven."

Completely ignoring Janeway's ploy, Seven stated, "Comply."

Blinking, Janeway looked at the blonde, and realized that tonight she wasn't going to win this battle.

Is this the way it was going to be? Janeway thought with alarm. That she was going to have to tolerate, for the first time in her life, someone placing a priority on her. With all her previous lovers in truth she had ruled the roost.

Lover! Her mind caught and stumbled on the word.

Swallowing the rather innocuous food supplement, Janeway realized, as the ex Borg gave her a satisfied almost smug look, that she had more than met her match in Seven.

Chapter Eighteen

Poised, straight-backed, Seven of Nine, sat in the far corner of Voyager's Mess hall, situated on Deck 2, Section 13. She was the only occupant. She lifted her morning glass of nutritional supplements and drank from it. Placing the glass down on the table, the doors hissed open and Commander Tuvok entered.

"Seven," the Vulcan said, acknowledging her.

"Commander," she replied.

Tuvok headed for the galley counter and lifted one of the two flasks that were on permanent display. He poured water into a tall glass situated beside the flasks.

When Voyager was stranded in the Delta Quadrant, a decision was made by the captain to remove the replicators and utilize her personal dining room for a kitchen area. A supply of food stocks with vegetables from the Airponics bay along with food obtained from trading and scouting missions was sourced on an ongoing basis. The aim was to allow Neelix to cook 'real' food to supplement the crews' diet. The intention - to significantly save on the ship's power reserves by restricting replicator usage.

However, given her recent experience of Neelix's culinary skills, Seven wondered, with a touch of humor, if the crew deeply regretted the captain's decision.

"May I?" Tuvok said, indicating to the empty seat across from her.

"Of course," she replied.

Sitting, the Vulcan carefully placed his glass on the table.

Seven eyed Tuvok's glass. She had only ever seen the dark-skinned Vulcan consume one other beverage - hot spicy Vulcan tea. She wondered if he restricted himself or if his palate, like hers, until recently, could stand very little aboard Voyager.

"How are you, Seven?"

"I am well, Commander," Seven said, warmth showing in her eyes but not in her tone. "And you?"

"I am also well," Tuvok responded. He slowly surveyed the Mess hall. "Have you been seated here long?"

"Precisely four minutes," she said, then added, "I prefer to have my nutritional supplement after many of the crew has eaten."

"I understand." Tuvok inclined his head. "Sometimes, I also enjoy this time in the morning for quiet contemplation."

Sitting in silence, Seven allowed her thoughts to return to Voyager and its captain.

It was during her first few weeks aboard Voyager, that she understood acutely the need to identify as 'human'. As part of the Collective, she had belonged to something greater than herself. Individuality seemed small, insignificant and unnecessary. But as an individual, she quickly became aware that she had no real understanding of what it was like to have independent thought, and was forced to deal with not only her own but also other opinions, attitudes and subsequently their emotions.

Emotions, she thought. Such a small word but, as she was to learn, it carried significant connotations.

After being severed, unwillingly from the Borg, she found it extremely difficult to adapt, and was a reluctant crewmember. As a Borg drone, hierarchy and figure head roles such as 'captaincy' were irrelevant and inefficient. But aboard Voyager, as they traversed through many hostile sectors, she became aware that hierarchy had a purpose, and Captain Janeway worked hard at not only making her understand this, but bringing her into the so called 'fold' of the Voyager collective.

In the beginning, she had thought that, here, in the Delta Quadrant, many of Janeway's Starfleet ideals were misplaced. But through time, she found that no matter how misplaced she believed they were, aboard Voyager, they worked. Slowly, she nurtured a growing respect for the redhead. She could not be sure of the exact moment when Janeway began to catch her attention - her own evolving emotions she discovered were flighty and complex sensations that she found

difficult to analyze - but she believed that it was shortly after the trouble with Arturis where she recognized that Janeway was an individual of great substance.

"I realize we share an affinity for silences," Tuvok said, interrupting Seven's thoughts, "but in this instance, I feel compelled to engage in conversation."

Seven focused on the Vulcan. He looked at her intriguingly. Aware that Tuvok was reaching out to her, she explained, "I was thinking."

The Vulcan inclined his head. "You seemed deep in thought."

Seven looked at the commander. Since her arrival aboard Voyager, she had found solace in Tuvok's friendship. Although hesitant to discuss his own private affairs, he never shied away from her curious mind. She was indebted to him. He had made her transition, in many ways, much more tolerable.

The blonde eyed the Vulcan for a moment. "I have been experiencing changes."

"That is not surprising given your condition." Tuvok frowned. "Offspring can be disturbingly illogical, yet profoundly fulfilling. You should anticipate paradox." He raised his brow. "I must also point out that, as illogical as it seems, being a parent can have infinite rewards, far more than would seem possible. My children occupy a significant portion of my thoughts - now, more than ever."

Seven eyed the Vulcan. She accessed her memory. Of course, he was a parent. She made mental task to put together some questions for Tuvok. A warm feeling filled her belly. He would prove a valuable resource for her inquisitive mind regarding this matter.

"I am not referring just to my pregnancy," she responded. "Before the mating ritual, Diplomat Omahr informed me that Captain Janeway is an extremely complex woman with deep emotions that were not yet...fully formed." She looked puzzled. "You understand love, correct?"

The Vulcan raised his brow. "Correct."

"I am in love with Captain Janeway."

Tuvok raised his brow.

"My stomach flutters and my skin flushes when I'm near her. My midsection fluctuates and feels...heavy when we are apart. My throat swells and my tear ducts over-work when I am," she quirked an eyebrow, "upset with her." She paused. "And my chest constricts and often fills with...emotions when I am near her."

Seven did not mention that increasingly her longing for Kathryn was almost incomprehensible. Her human body, which as a drone she had no awareness of, had been a great source of frustration for her. To her dismay, when her body armor was removed, her indomitable strength

was replaced with unnecessary aesthetics such as head and body hair, along with unusual biological requirements such as the need to ingest food as a source of energy. But worst of all was the feel of her skin - it prickled constantly, which she found extremely irritating.

As a Borg drone certain sensory requirements, such as taste touch, and smell were irrelevant, the combination of her body armor and implants removed the need. After her surgery, to remove the majority of her implants, she felt weightless, as if nothing of her physically remained, and it was un-nerving. She experienced sensory overload; the 'feel' of things such as her unitard, as it encapsulated her body, was almost unbearable, the slight changes in air as it moved around her, and the sensory perception of touch was overwhelming. However, it wasn't until the mating ritual that she truly and, with absolute relish, appreciated her human body fully.

"I see," Tuvok replied.

"Recently, I have been having...mood swings that I am having difficulty dealing with. I find that I am...emotional. Last night, I demanded that the Captain be punctual - she didn't tell him her compensation demand when she was not. "And, increasingly, I dislike her spending any of her off duty time with anyone other than me," she frowned, "in particular, Commander Chakotay."

She looked at the Vulcan, she did not add that she detected something sly and furtive about the ex Maquis manner. She was aware that many of the crew found him 'attractive', but she disliked his insolent and suggestive manner. Often, he would stand uncomfortably close to her, ogling her breasts.

"Is this a pattern I should come to expect?" she asked.

"Perhaps," Tuvok said, frowning in response. "Not long ago, you would have considered love irrelevant."

"Correct," Seven replied. "Parental love, romantic love," she looked at the Vulcan and her voice gentled, "affection between friends, I would have considered them all inefficient and un-resourceful." She raised her ocular implant. "As part of the Collective, I considered romantic love no more than a series of biochemical responses that trigger an emotional cascade impairing normal functions," Her voice sharpened. "The Borg has referenced this condition in over six thousand assimilated species. They consider love a flawed condition, a weakness."

Tuvok raised his brow. "And you?"

Her voice gentled again. "I have come to accept that love is not a flaw, but a strength."

"You are learning to recognize your emotions for Captain Janeway."

Happiness registered in Seven's eyes "You are correct."

"Emotions can be a powerful tool."

"Yes."

"Your emotions may be new, and heightened with your pregnancy." Warmth crossed his eyes. "However, prior to your pregnancy, I have been aware of your growing feelings for the Captain for some time." He drank from his glass. "Captain Janeway has many demands. It may prove prudent if you learn to control your emotions."

Seven frowned. "Clarify."

Tuvok folded his hands together on his lap. "Love is a dangerous emotion, Seven. As you are experiencing, it produces many other emotions, jealousy, shame, rage, grief." He frowned. "Captain Janeway's command aboard Voyager is difficult. Often, she is seen as the only arbitrary and leading force aboard this vessel. It is a heavy responsibility, and one that she has shouldered alone." He looked at the blonde. "It is important that she is able to meet the demands of a Starfleet Captain who's highest goal is to return her crew home."

Seven frowned. "Explain."

Tuvok breathed in deeply. "The Captain is an unusual human. She exhibits many characteristics that are unique and rare. She is selfless in that she does for others what she will not do for herself. She is purposeful and single minded, and many of her methods are unorthodox."

Seven raised her brow. "Agreed."

"I have known Captain Janeway for a number of years. We have served on three starships together. She was present at my daughter's Kolinahr." He folded his hands neatly in his lap. "I have become attuned to her emotional needs. I have the greatest respect for her and consider her a friend." He looked at Seven. "I hold the same esteem for you."

Surprise then warmth filled Seven's eyes, "And I you, Commander."

The Vulcan inclined his head. "However, it is clear that there are emotions building inside you that are like a gathering storm. You must learn to control them, otherwise they may consume you," he lifted his chin, "and the Captain."

Seven couldn't quite grasp what she was hearing. Was he implying that she was yet another burden to the Captain? Tuvok had been a rock, a shelter in the storm. He had proven himself to be a friend and confidant. If she understood him correctly, he was telling her that she needed to continue to hide her feelings from Kathryn as Diplomat Omahr had suggested. It appeared that the Gaelian understood immediately that Seven's feelings for the Captain were much more than friendship and she made it very clear that Kathryn was not ready to deal with those types of emotions...yet.

Seven couldn't help but reflect on her meeting with the Gaelian.

"I am aware that you prefer not to indulge in what humans refer to as small-talk," Diplomat Omahr said as she worked on the holographic matrix with Seven in Holodeck Two.

"Correct," Seven replied, keying in algorithms to her console.

The Gaelian stopped keying in commands to her console. "I also understand that you appreciate the direct approach, Seven?"

"Again, you are correct."

"You are upset with me."

Seven stopped keying in commands. She raised her ocular implant, but did not look up. "I do not know you, Diplomat Omahr. Why would I be upset with you?"

"You dislike me for what has happened to your Captain."

Seven's back stiffened. She looked at the Gaelian.

"I believe she challenged your Borg Queen for you?"

Seven studied the tall, elegant, dark, beautiful woman. "Captain Janeway refuses to leave any crewmember behind."

"Seven, from what I understand, your Captain went on an almost impossible mission to rescue you."

Feelings of pride filled Seven. They were quickly swept away. "The Captain does not differentiate between any member of her crew. If it is within her means, as I said, she will not leave a crewmember behind."

"I see," The Gaelian replied. She pondered for a moment. "I hear she spends much of her personal time with you."

Unsure why the Diplomat was engaging in this type of conversation, but after her 'dressing down' by Janeway regarding her interaction with the Gaelian, she decided to adhere to social etiquette and respond.

"Before Voyager, the Borg Collective was all that I had known." She hesitated. "They raised me, provided me with a sense of order. However, since being severed from the Collective, I have adapted to being an individual. In those years I have explored the positive and negative sides of human individuality." She inclined her head. "I am aware that I am a logical, matter-of-fact, blunt individual who has difficulties expressing human emotion." She breathed in deeply.

"Individualism has confused me." She didn't add that it had, until recently, made her feel angry, isolated, inadequate and profoundly helpless.

Deep emotion registered in the Gaelian's eyes.

Surprised by her need to be so open, Seven looked at the Gaelian for a long moment.

"Emotions such as being self aware, guilt and feelings of discontent have been with me since I left the Borg." Her eyes widened. "Humans are complex creatures, who avoid truths and do not like their vulnerabilities being exposed." She looked down at the console. "There are times I miss the hive mind, the complete sharing experience in an unbounded flow of information," she raised her ocular implant and added almost to herself, "unhindered by omnipotence, omniscience or morality."

Diplomat Omahr moved away from her console and closer to the ex Borg.

"As such, Captain Janeway regards me as an unformed individual," Seven continued. She looked at the Gaelian. "And I acknowledge that to a certain degree she is correct. I was a Borg drone for eighteen years with only faint, indistinct memories of what it was like to feel emotion." She breathed in deeply. "Emotion," she added, a touch bittersweet, "is considered by the Captain as the ultimate goal of being human." Pain crossed her face. "To Captain Janeway I am nothing more than an experiment." She looked at her console. Her fingers reflexively keyed in some commands. "She wants nothing more than for me to re-connect with my humanity."

Diplomat Omahr frowned deeply. "I am aware that there are some areas of your personality which are still unformed. And sometimes due to your bluntness you can often be seen as arrogant. But I assure you Seven, from what I understand, many of your fellow crewmembers see the intelligent, warm, witty individual that you truly are," she raised her brow. "Those who are observant enough also see your vulnerability despite your background as a Borg drone which, I might add, has created much of your curtness." She smiled. "I find your curtness refreshing."

"You do?"

"Yes." Diplomat Omahr said. "Seven, I do not believe that Captain Janeway sees you as an experiment." She moved even closer to the ex Borg. "Your Captain believes very much in duty. The needs of this crew compel her to rigidly compartmentalize her life into personal and public zones. Although she exerts strong emotional control and gives off a sense of security and self-confidence." She eyed the blonde intently for a moment. "It is important that you understand this, Seven, she is deeply dissatisfied, and she doesn't know herself anywhere near as well as she thinks."

Uneasy that the Captain was being discussed so freely, Seven responded, "Diplomat Omahr, I-"

"There is no doubt that she is an exceptional leader," The Gaelian interrupted quickly. She raised a hand in a placating gesture. "However, although she gives the impression that she is happy to be alone, in reality, she hates it. She is restless and unsettled." The Diplomat's eyes carried deep

sincerity. "She believes she has failed greatly, and it may be so."

Surprised, Seven raised her brow.

"Seven," Diplomat Omahr said gently, "Captain Janeway is filled with regret so deep it causes her great pain and, as such, she is very protective of her emotions. Her crew tries to get close to her, but often she is inaccessible, aloof even. She does not trust easily, and if she lets someone in, she often regrets it. She lives," she frowned, "in constant fear of tragedy." She hesitated. "However, she trusts you. You," she added quietly, "bring her happiness."

"I do?" Seven replied, almost involuntarily.

"Haven't you wondered why your Captain cannot respond physically to her?" Her eyes moved to her counterpart on the bed.

Seven looked at the hologram, naked, wantonly spread eagled and, without doubt, very desirable. "I agree that it is puzzling." She quirked her ocular implant then looked at the Gaelian for a moment. "However, it would appear that the Captain prefers the real Diplomat Omahr."

"Oh she prefers the real thing all right," the Gaelian replied. Slowly, she sized Seven up. "And it's not only me."

Seven frowned. "Diplomat Omahr, Captain Janeway responds physically each time she is in your presence." Surprising feelings of agitation filled her. "You are the only one she responds to in that way."

"On the contrary, Seven, each time she is around you, she responds physically to you in that way also."

Shocked, the blonde raised her brow. "I have seen no evidence of that."

"Trust me, it's true."

Unexpectedly, Seven flushed.

Slowly, looking at the blonde, Diplomat Omahr grinned. "Let's just say that Tuvok and I, with the help of Voyager's crew manifest, have been running a little experiment of our own." She winked. "Believe me when I tell you this, Seven, she responds to you. However, your Captain will do anything to protect you. So much so, she has insisted that this information be withheld from you."

Astounded, Seven breathed in deeply. Her shoulders tensing, she looked at the Gaelian.

"It is imperative that you persuade your Captain to participate in the mating ritual...with you."

Seven blinked. She studied the Diplomat with keen interest. With me! Perplexed, she replied,

"Captain Janeway is not an individual that one can persuade...easily."

"I assure you, Seven, you will."

"Clarify?"

"You must offer yourself to her."

"Diplomat Omahr," Seven said, "I believe, given your psi-empathic abilities, that your observations of Captain Janeway are correct," she lifted her brow, "and very enlightening. However," she said, glancing at the matrix of the Diplomat on the holographic bed, "the Captain does not wish to mate with me. She wishes to mate with you. That is clearly why she has withheld the information and that is why she is adamant that we create a compatible hologram of you."

The Gaelian eyed Seven for a long moment. "Although the individuals of Voyager's crew puzzle you," she said gently, "it is Captain Janeway that fascinates you." She smiled. "So fascinates you, you have singled her out."

Seven eyed the Gaelian.

"When you are in her presence, you are exhilarated, and desperately want to be noticed. That she allows a mere drone to be part of her inner collective surprises you. No, astonishes you. You wonder why." She looked at her intently. "Your newly evolving emotions confuse you, and make it difficult for you to grasp that an individual can feel so much for another." She smiled. "You have been attracted to her for some time."

Color rose higher in Seven's face. This direct assessment was unnerving. Her stomach fluttered. She couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. She lowered her eyes.

At first, with Captain Janeway, her only interest had been analytical observation. But, by her second year aboard Voyager, she began to notice small things such as the shine of her red hair, her slate-grey eyes, her overt gesticulation; the way she played with her combadge when she was uncomfortable, the way she rubbed her brow when she was deep in thought, the way she placed her hands on her hips when giving an order, the way her thumb often played across her elegant fingers, catching on her fore and middle finger repeatedly, when she was about to convey important information.

The shift in her interest had happened during a game of velocity. Turning to face Janeway, after a particularly exhilarating game, she noticed, as she bent to pick up her towel, the way her hair fell across her face in the most intriguing way. She also noticed, for the first time, the outline of her breasts; her hardened nipples, the swell of her hips...swaying as she moved toward her.

Standing in front of her, breasts heaving from exertion, beads of sweat sliding down her cleavage, Janeway flicked her towel in her direction and told her their time was up - but for Seven it was just beginning.

Standing erect, feeling as if she had just been caressed from the touch of the towel, Seven protested in the only way she knew how - she insisted on another game. Janeway's smell was so intoxicating; it filled her with a longing she had never known.

Frowning, the captain refused, and told her, admonishingly, to try to be a good sport.

Seven knew, as she watched Janeway exit the holodeck, that her offer had been misconstrued. She just wanted to be near her.

After their game, she immediately carried out research and discovered that these intriguing emotions were defined as infatuation. Yet another strange phenomenon that humans indulged in. Inexplicable feelings of discomfiture filled her - her growing human emotions baffled her. She did not see the physiological requirement in being attracted to another female. It would not assist in procreation, which was the purpose of attraction after all, was it not?

The question then was why did she feel this way? Aboard Voyager, there was no need to be adaptive, mixed sexes meant that there was no requirement for alternate mating strategies. However, to her frustration, she discovered that no research could undo what had been done - she had noticed Janeway in a certain way, and now she could not un-notice her or, as she endeavored to do, ignore her own physiological responses.

"Seven," Diplomat Omahr said gently, "Captain Janeway believes that you are not only young but innocent." The Gaelian raised her brow. "She underestimates you." Her eyes twinkled. "Even though emotions are new to you, ironically, you are much further along in your realization of your feelings than she is." She smiled. "When you offer yourself to her, do not share your feelings...she isn't ready. During the mating ritual, the mind and the emotional connection is very powerful. We Gaelians believe that it allows a window into the soul." She touched Seven's arm. "When an individual is not ready, emotionally, it can be too overwhelming and sometimes dangerous."

Taken aback, Seven placed her hands behind her back and stared at the Gaelian.

"You find this unsettling?"

"Unsettling?" Seven blinked. "Perhaps."

"I'm sorry to have ambushed you this way," Diplomat Omahr said. She reached out and placed her hand on Seven's arm. "However, it is imperative that you use everything within your means to convince your Captain to mate with you." She paused. "Her life depends on it." Looking into her eyes, she added, "I will teach you what you need to do to hide your feelings during the mating ritual."

"Seven?"

Seven focused on the Vulcan. "Diplomat Omahr actively encouraged our joining?" she said with a clear note of hurt in her tone.

Tuvok raised his brow. "It was a necessary step and the most logical course of action."

"Indeed." Seven pushed out of her chair. "I have astrometric scans to complete."

"Seven," Tuvok said, looking up at her. "When I was a young man, I experienced an emotional attraction to a woman." He paused. "It nearly destroyed me."

Intrigued that Tuvok would share this with her, Seven slowly retook her seat. "Your wife?"

Tuvok lifted his chin. "No, her name was Jara, a Terrelian female." He bent his head. "I would have violated every tenet of Vulcan philosophy simply to be near her."

Completely surprised and captivated by this revelation, Seven stared at the Vulcan.

"I lost all sense of who I was. The emotional attraction I felt for her became a kind of insanity." He looked at Seven intently. "As a Vulcan, my natural emotions are erratic, volatile. If I do not control them, they will control me."

"You are drawing similarities to my growing emotional attachment to Captain Janeway. You believe I will not be able to control my feelings for her?"

"No." Tuvok looked at the blonde for a long moment. "I am referring to Captain Janeway, Seven. I believe the intensity of her need for you is beginning to overwhelm her."

Eyes wide, Seven gazed at the Vulcan.

"If my opinion was to be solicited?" Tuvok continued, his dark eyes focusing on her.

"It is," Seven responded quickly. She breathed in deeply, relieved that she could be open, at last, about discussing Janeway's deep and complex emotions.

"I believe that Captain Janeway's feelings for you are not just driven by the events that took place upon Sgurr Mohr."

"They are not?" Seven responded, feeling a well of excitement build inside her. She felt the color on her cheeks increase. She wanted to sigh. These fluctuations in her body temperature were increasingly occurring at the most inconvenient of times.

"Unlike any other crewmember she has allowed you to see her softer side. Unlike any other crewmember she has encouraged you to spend your off duty time with her. Unlike any other

crewmember she has permitted a higher level of intimacy with philosophical discussions and participation in velocity matches. And...unlike any other crewmember she has offered to take you to Bloomington, Indiana." He eyed the blonde. "Her home town." He raised his brow, and his eyes relayed the significance of this gesture. "For some time, the Captain has encouraged you to solicit her for advice."

Slightly dazed by such revelations, feelings of elation gathered within Seven as she stared at the Vulcan.

"As such, I would have to conclude that Captain Janeway feels differently about you than she does for the rest of her crew."

Seven's breathing grew shallow.

"I believe that the Captain has, for some time, been emotionally attached to you." Tuvok looked at her for a long moment. "I believe that Captain Janeway is in love with you, Seven."

Seven's heart thudded hard against her chest and her stomach fluttered at his words. During the mating ritual, she would have agreed with him. The experience had been so intense and extraordinary that it, not only confirmed her feelings for Kathryn, but led her to believe that redhead felt the same. However, her clear rejection, after the ritual, forced Seven to reconsider, and the anger she experienced when Janeway refused to have any meaningful dialogue with her was crushing.

Nonetheless, she had made a commitment, to the Captain, that there would be no residual after affects and, as such, she was forced to accept that if Janeway did not want any further personal contact with her then she would have no choice but to accept it. Even so, the pain of abandonment and loneliness were overwhelming.

Seven wasn't quite sure why Tuvok was sharing this with her, but she was deeply grateful.

Kathryn was in love with her!

"However, Seven, it has been my long held belief that the Captain will have difficulty coming to terms with such a profound emotional attachment, particularly with a crewmember," Tuvok said. He sipped from his glass. "Whether she is capable, at this juncture, of accepting her deep emotional need for you is not fully known. Nonetheless, one element is known, her command must remain unfettered."

Seven's sense of elation quickly dissipated. "I am...confused."

"Starfleet protocol does not prohibit interpersonal relationships between commanding officers and their crew whilst serving aboard operational vessels, but they are...discouraged."

Bureaucracy! The blonde raised her brow in disdain. Inefficient!

Tuvok eyed her. "I understand that certain Starfleet protocol seems inefficient, particularly here, in the Delta Quadrant, Seven. However, in order to truly understand Captain Janeway, you must first understand her belief system. She strongly believes in Starfleet protocol and Federation laws. They are her guiding force.

Although she found many of Starfleet's protocols irrelevant. Seven was, as was every other member of this crew, fully cognizant of their strict adherence and application aboard Voyager. "I understand," she replied. Eager to pursue the other matter, she added quickly, "You mentioned that Kathryn is in love with me," heat filled her very core, "and that she may have difficulty coming to terms with such a deep emotional attachment. Elaborate."

Tuvok raised an eyebrow. "In the past, the Captain has suffered deeply when it comes to emotional relationships."

"In what way?" Seven asked. She watched Tuvok hesitate and thought for a moment that he would not discuss this matter with her.

"Suffice to say, she suffered a deep loss."

Seven frowned. She had gone through Janeway's personnel file, but they contained only her career history and standard personal information. She used her eidetic memory to flush out any detail that might help her uncover something, anything, in terms of gossip and rumor, but she did not fraternize with the crew enough to use it as an efficient source. She wondered if she should have accessed Janeway's personal logs as part of her research.

"I have no reference regarding a loss in her personal life."

"You will find this type of information is not held in ship personnel records."

"I would like to know more about this...her...loss."

Tuvok exhaled. "This is not a matter for me to discuss. I advise that you take up such discourse with the Captain."

"Commander, Kathryn is not always reasonable. What if she does not wish to discuss it?"

"As I have stated it is not for me to discuss."

"I have been a member of this crew for two-point-seven years. In all that time I have never made a personal request," Seven said, eyeing the Vulcan. "I am making one now, will you share this information with me?"

Tuvok raised his brow, but said nothing.

Seven tried a different tack. "Has Kathryn ever discussed this matter with anyone aboard Voyager?"

"I cannot answer that question, Seven."

Seven looked at the Vulcan. "During our time on Sgurr Mohr, she spoke of you. She shared that through the years, you had, in her words, 'kept her together', particularly during the early years in the Delta Quadrant, supporting her until she found her voice and steady focus. I too want to support her, Commander."

Tuvok eyed Seven for a long moment then inclined his head. "The captain has never, to my knowledge, discussed this matter with any individual aboard Voyager."

"Not even with you?"

"Correct."

"Then I must assume that the matter is too uncomfortable an issue for her to discuss?"

Tuvok inclined his head. "A reasonable assumption."

"I must understand how to assist her." Seven raised her ocular implant then quoted the Vulcan philosopher Surek. "Learn reason above all. Learn clear thought. Learn to discern that which seems to be, and that what you wish it to be, from what truly is. Learn the truth of reality, the reality of truth C'Thia. What is - is. This will set you free."

Warmth and a deep emotion that Seven had never seen before flitted across Tuvok's eyes.

"I wish to assist Kathryn," she said her tone suddenly filling with vulnerability. "However, her emotional intricacies and the strategies she uses to conceal them are...complex."

Seven placed a hand on her growing stomach and stroked it. Carrying this child was, apart from being with Kathryn, the most pleasurable experience of her life. Becoming a mother filled her with new and overwhelming emotions. Although she had collected gigaquads of data on being a parent, the written word did not - in any way - convey the emotional and physical resonance that she was experiencing daily.

If Seven ever chose to describe it colloquially, she would say that she was 'loving every moment of it'.

"Your ability to manipulate a situation is developing well."

Seven looked at the Vulcan for a long moment. "Do you blame me, Tuvok? I have tasted life with her."

The Vulcan quirked an eyebrow. "You have never addressed me by my first name or, to my knowledge, used such a...quixotic analogy."

Seven inclined her head.

Tuvok raised his brow. "And now that you have tasted life. What about your pursuit of perfection?"

"I have come to realize that if I truly wanted to pursue perfection, then I would have returned to the Borg." Seven raised her ocular implant. "I have learned, through Kathryn, that imperfection is as equally beautiful." She watched intrigue flit across the Vulcan's face. "Kathryn has a towering strength. However, it does not stop her from falling from the highest height, or feeling the greatest pain. It is her very ability to be so small, yet so great, to be so weak, yet so strong, that makes her so unique, so individual."

"Ri vath kau eh ri vath rok nam-tor na'etek hi etek kau-tor" Tuvok said in Vulcan.

"There is no other wisdom and no other hope for us than that we grow wise," Seven said.

Tuvok inclined his head. "Your insight of Captain Janeway is notable, Seven."

"Thank you."

They sat in silence as Tuvok looked at her intently. "The captain's father, Admiral Janeway," he said eventually, "and her then fiancé, Justin Tighe, died in an accident fifteen years ago."

Seven's eyes widened. "I was unaware of this," she responded quietly. She suddenly felt unnerved that Kathryn had been engaged more than once. She understood that this human ritual conveyed a willingness to commit for life to a monogamous relationship. She was still coming to terms with the first engagement - and now there was a second!

"As I said this is not a matter for ship records."

"What occurred?"

"They drowned under the polar ice cap on Tau Ceti Prime in the Alpha Quadrant. Their deaths, as you can imagine, were devastating for the Captain."

"Explain," Seven responded. Her face paled at the thought of how Kathryn would have suffered. She knew how personally her Captain took the loss of a crewmember.

"The captain, the Admiral, and Mister Tighe were testing a prototype ship when it crashed. She was thrown clear of the wreckage, and tried to save her father and fiancé, with no success. This caused her tremendous grief." He eyed the blonde. "As I am sure you can appreciate, the experience was harrowing. I believe that it was only the support of her mother and sister that brought her through the ordeal."

"I see," Seven said slightly stunned.

"After she was rescued, she took an extended leave of absence." His eyes shone in sympathy. "As one can appreciate, she suffered from severe depression. Her recovery was slow."

Seven understood that this type of disclosure was very uncharacteristic for the Vulcan. In sharing Kathryn's personal history, he was showing great trust in her. She found it very reassuring.

"The captain, on her return to Starfleet, switched from the science division and took a post graduate training in command." Tuvok looked at Seven steadily. "I believe she did this to honor her father and her fiancé."

Concern shone from Seven's eyes.

"As you have pointed out," Tuvok continued, "the Captain has both weaknesses and strengths. She is as human as many of the crew aboard Voyager. As such, the guilt of their deaths has never left her, and she pays very little attention to her own needs." He paused. "It is important that you understand that, as a direct result of their deaths, she often struggles to control her...bleakness."

At a loss, Seven looked at the Vulcan.

"As I rely heavily on the tenets of Vulcan philosophy, the captain also relies heavily on her Starfleet training to keep command of the ship."

Tuvok paused and eyed the ex Borg.

"Although, her captaincy is extremely important to her, honoring her father's beliefs in Starfleet and the Federation is just as important. That is how she controls her guilt, her bleakness," he said. He reached for his glass. "If you wish to support the Captain, I suggest you control some of the demands that may be placed, by you, on her. This will ensure that she fulfills her commitments to the crew of Voyager." He looked at her. "I believe the doctor has formulated a serum that will naturally inhibit some of the affects of your pregnancy. I suggest you confer with him regarding this matter."

"That is correct." Seven suddenly realized that this encounter, this morning, was not by chance. Tuvok had sought her out. She raised her brow. "You believe that I may place too many demands on Kathryn and that her command of Voyager will suffer?"

Tuvok exhaled. "As I have alluded to, it is important that the Captain's desire for you does not consume her, as I believe it might. She must have control. Your instincts are still developing, and are far more pronounced and erratic given your current condition. As such, they are far more basic than the Captain's. You respond to things quickly, instinctively. You are still developing the skill to control your emotions such as disapproval, anger," he looked at her, "lust."

"I..." Seven bit back a surprising retort that, last night, Kathryn's lust did consume her. She breathed in deeply. A wave of jealousy washed over her at the idea of her being physical with anyone. Justin, Mark. Who else! She frowned, this was an emotion she was becoming familiar with and disliking intensely. "What of her relationship with Mark Johnson?"

"You are referring to Captain Janeway's fiancé before Voyager was lost in the Delta Quadrant?"

"Yes."

As if understanding that, as he was still alive, he took priority over the other one, Tuvok said gently, "I believe, even though the Captain was in a committed relationship with Mister Johnson, she has never been as emotionally involved with him as she is with you."

Seven's eyes widened at this unexpected disclosure.

"However, as discussed, even though her feelings for you are genuine and deeply felt, it is prudent that you continue to maintain your current course of action and allow the Captain to come to terms with her emotional need for you."

The blonde raised her brow. Until now, it had not been the case of her letting Kathryn come to terms with her feelings but, more overcoming her own anger at Janeway's clear rejection of her and their child. Since the mating ritual, she had refused to connect with the redhead emotionally, and it seems it would be necessary to continue.

Tuvok linked his fingers together. "In my experience, Captain Janeway is far more accommodating when she believes that she has resolved certain inner turmoil in her own time and in her own inimitable way."

Seven breathed in deeply. "I cannot give her back what has been taken from her," she said, her eyes troubled. "But she is not alone. As she often tells me, this is a collective aboard Voyager. She has the unity she needs here with the crew," she hesitated, "with me and soon with our child. I will not allow my emotions to affect her command." She looked at Tuvok. "Will you teach me how to control them?"

Tuvok inclined his head. "It will not be easy, but I suggest we begin as soon as your duty shift ends."

"Agreed."

"Seven and Mister Tuvok," Neelix said, entering the Mess hall with some vegetables from airponics. "What a wonderful surprise," The little Talaxian added, grinning. "I forgot the Captain was visiting the station this morning." He tutted. "I put her usual pot of coffee in her Ready Room." He placed the bundle he was carrying on the galley counter. "Will she be returning any time soon?" he asked. "If she is then I must remember to replace it." He turned to look at them when there was no reply. "Seven?"

The blonde blinked at the realization that she would now, given their co-habituating status, be expected to know the whereabouts of the Captain. The idea that some of the crew would so naturally look to her for this sort of information, when it could be easily accessed, filled her with deep warmth.

"The Captain has cleared her schedule, Neelix," she replied. "She anticipates that she may be required at the station for the day and possibly early evening." She looked at the Vulcan and added quietly, "When we left our quarters this morning, Kathryn was disgruntled. She seemed unhappy that you had assigned a security detail."

Tuvok inclined his head. "Although we have been on orbiting the Zarkonian space station for several days, and Captain Janeway has been to the station on more than one occasion, in my experience, it is always wise never to allow her to go unescorted."

"Agreed," Seven replied.

The Vulcan raised his brow. "Seven, you should be aware that disgruntled is a term you should get to know intimately. It is an emotion that the Captain experiences whenever she is assigned a security detail."

Amused, Seven raised her ocular implant. "I will, Commander."

"Can I get you both anything?" Neelix asked, heading straight for them.

"No thank you," Seven responded.

"Surely something to eat is in order?"

"I have consumed my nutritional supplements."

Neelix eyed Seven's glass and his eyes narrowed. "Piffle. That substance is no substitute for the real thing." He looked quickly at the galley. "Let me make you Porakan eggs. It may not have as many enzymes, but it'll taste better."

Seven visibly swallowed. It had been a great relief to her when she decided to stop ingesting Neelix's food. "No," she replied a little too sharply.

"C'mon Seven," Neelix said. He slapped his hands on his stomach and rubbed it. "The little one loves my food."

"That may be so, Mister Neelix," Tuvok said, looking up at the Talaxian. "However, Seven does not seem to share the same appreciation for your food as the child."

Neelix huffed, "But Mister Vulcan," he said, placing his hand on Tuvok's shoulder, "I-

"Neelix," Ensign Harren called out as he entered the Mess hall with Ensign Baxter. "What's on the menu today?"

"Ah! Ensign Harren and Baxter," Neelix said, "Porakan eggs are on their way." He placed a hand on Tuvok's shoulder. "Porakan eggs are the most flavorful eggs in this sector," he said to the

Vulcan. "Scrambled with a little dill weed a touch of rengazo...a galatic favorite. Now these eggs were not easy to prepare. After we picked them up, I had to sterilize them in a cryostatic chamber for three days. Then each and every one had to be parboiled-

"Mister Neelix," Tuvok said, removing the Talaxian's hand from his shoulder, "I would prefer not to hear the life history of Ensign's Harren's breakfast."

"Neelix," Ensign Harren called out. "We're starving."

"Sure you won't reconsider, Seven? Mister Tuvok?"

Tuvok frowned. "I have never been more certain, Mister Neelix."

"Last chance," the little Talaxian said. He clicked his tongue when he didn't get a response. "Oh well." He turned around. "A delicious breakfast coming right up Ensigns," he said, moving quickly to the galley.

Seven raised her ocular implant to Tuvok. "Thank you."

Tuvok inclined his head. "I, like you, struggle with the culinary surprises that Mister Neelix offers."

Seven's head drew back sharply. Her eyes narrowed, and her ears keened. She focused on the two ensigns who were taking a seat near the entrance. They were talking about her.

In the beginning, Seven had found it an unnecessary waste of time 'being charming' as the doctor recommended in social lesson three 'getting to know you'. But, soon she became aware that she would have to quote the colloquial phrase, 'tread lightly' around the crew of Voyager. If requests were made in a forthright manner, such as 'assist me', 'comply', 'you will fail,' the crew reacted negatively. This baffled her, but as time progressed, she discovered that as a whole, the crew was very precious about their opinions, which only served to highlight their fragile egos and insecurities - all of which she still found, to some degree, unexplainable and puzzling.

"Don't you think that Seven looks less like a Risa show girl without the headdress now that she's got rid of the cat suit?"

Ensign Baxter laughed.

Seven felt color stain her cheeks. Although she had adapted to being aboard Voyager, she learned quickly that an important human trait was required in order to manage those egos and insecurities - empathy. It was difficult, and so unnecessary, but it appeared an essential component in order for the crew to function cohesively. In the beginning, she had absolutely no understanding of why she needed to indulge these weak minded, feeble bodied individuals in such a way, but nonetheless she did. Through persistence, she learned that by breathing in deeply, she could bite back an immediate and instinctive retort, substituting it instead with words such as 'understood', 'perhaps', 'explain', etcetera.

Seven found that if she made crewmembers comfortable around her by being civil and pleasant - they would be receptive - by being receptive, they would be more productive. Efficiency, after all, was what it was all about, was it not?

"It's a pity," Ensign Harren continued. "I loved her in that suit." He sniggered. "You could've served coffee on that ass."

"It was never her ass, I was interested in", Ensign Baxter responded. Sniggering, he cupped his hands and motioned them around his chest. "I'm not interested in her much either, other than to get her between my sheets. But, hey, once I come, a pillow looks just as attractive to me."

"Isn't sex without love an empty experience?"

Ensign Baxter laughed. "Yeah. But, you know what they say, as an empty experience, it's one of the best!"

Seven's eyes narrowed. As her role aboard Voyager progressed, she had stopped counting the many accusations that were hurled at her by some crewmembers. Some were direct but most were under their breaths. The mindless drone, wouldn't feel it, would she? Altercations at the beginning were plentiful, but she had quickly grown tired of them and instead chose to ignore discourteous comments. It seemed that in order to become an individual one had to consider hanging oneself off an emotional precipice which she was not prepared to do and, as such, she was forced to endure the backlash - as she was doing right now.

One of the drawbacks regarding her current emotional state, Seven realized, early in her pregnancy, was her desire to desist such comments. Prior to her pregnancy, aware that many of the crew was suspicious of her, she had tolerated the disparaging and often crass comments. However, her desire to terminate both ensign's life signs - right now - was strong.

Color heightening, Seven eyed the two ensigns who were completely oblivious to her enhanced hearing. She watched their shoulders shake with laughter.

"She's my kind of gal," Ensign Harren said.

"Sh..what?"

"Pussy on a pedestal."

"Whoop-de fucking-do," Ensign Baxter said. "You really are into that freak of nature."

Suddenly aware that he was being observed, Ensign Harren covered his mouth and added, "I wonder if Seven has put those cat suits through the replicator, I would like one of them as my new pillow," he winked, "if you know what I'm saying."

Seven raised her ocular implant when both ensigns laughed. Is this hostile environment what

Marika will experience also?"

"Seven," Tuvok said. "Are you all right?"

Seven eyed the two ensigns as they slapped each other's shoulders. Ensign Baxter snorted then sucked in air for another bout of laughter. She breathed in deeply and deliberately tuned them out. "Yes," she responded, looking at Tuvok.

The Vulcan glanced over his shoulder at the chortling ensigns. "Ever since I entered the Academy," he said turning his gaze back to her. "I have had to endure the egocentric nature of humanity."

Seven looked at the Vulcan in surprise. She raised her brow, pleased that the Commander had clearly identified that she was being discussed in a negative manner.

"They believe that we should all share their sense of humor." Tuvok frowned. "However, it is curious," he added, "I have never understood the human compulsion for laughter, particularly when it mimics that of an animal that is often despised in their culture."

"Seven frowned. "Which animal?"

"Hyenas."

Seven's lips quirked imperceptibly. "Species 5618, Human." She raised her brow. "Physiology inefficient, below average cranial capacity."

"In this case," Tuvok responded, glancing back at the two chuckling ensigns, "I am forced to agree."

"Perhaps," Seven said, "there is something to be said for assimilation after all."

Chapter Nineteen

"Captain Janeway," Elder Duhr said, warmly as the doors slid open.

Her dark glossy hair dazzling, her tight and rather risqué stunningly white, high collared uniform impeccable, her beautiful face warm and open, the Gaelian welcomed Janeway into her palatial suite.

Janeway nodded to her security detail, and they posted themselves outside of the Gaelian's abode.

"It is unfortunate that we must meet under these circumstances, Elder Duhr said, her voice sultry enough to launch a thousand starships, "but it is very good to see you."

Taking Janeway's arm, she led her into to the living area.

"It is good to see you also, Elder Duhr," Janeway replied. A deep sense of gratitude that the Gaelian had tracked Voyager down filled her. "I was delighted to receive your comm. I can't tell you how relieved I am that you are here."

"Captain, it is I who should thank you," Elder Duhr said, as she escorted Janeway to a long counter. "Can I offer you some refreshments?"

"I'm happy to sample anything your recommend."

"It will be my pleasure," the Gaelian said looking intently at Janeway. She pointed to a raised section of the floor. "Please take a seat."

Janeway nodded then made her way over to the mezzanine floor, which was lavishly furnished with rugs and cushions. Sitting on a chaise longue, she was quickly reminded as she watched the tall, dark, stunning woman study the variety of different colored liquids on the counter of how beautiful a species the Gaelians were.

The captain eyed the backless chaise longue opposite her, the word decadent sprung to mind. She leaned back and looked around the luxurious penthouse suite, brimming with chic décor, low lights and fabric upholstered walls. It was spacious, sumptuous and completely self indulgent.

Just wonderful.

She looked at the table between the chaise longues' and caught her bottom lip - it was filled with sumptuous food, that she had no doubt, would taste delicious. Crossing her legs, she briefly wondered what the bath tub would be like. Enormous, she was sure.

Not for the first time, Janeway appreciated that Gaelians truly knew how to reward themselves. Even when they were 'out of town', so to speak, it seemed that the important aesthetics of life always prevailed.

This place would rack up a few top credits back in the Alpha Quadrant, Janeway thought. She frowned lightly, she couldn't remember the last time she had indulged in such a luxurious pad. With Mark, she realized, celebrating their engagement. Justin, she thought, would have loved this place.

Surprised, Janeway caught that thought and held it. Before leaving the ship, this morning, she had picked up a few things from her Ready Room. Opening her desk drawer, she caught site of the holo-imager which held a selection of images of Hobbes. She did something that surprised her - she erased them. After she deleted the images, the holo-imager beeped and asked if she would like to remove another file. Her finger hovering over the delete command, she hesitated and decided to check it first. Her eyes widened when an image of her and her beloved Justin appeared.

Janeway couldn't recall when she had put the image on the holo-imager. When she checked, the

entry date was old. She guessed, at some point, she had added images of Hobbes, and filed the other.

She looked at the image - both of them, young and ready to conquer the quadrant. Her knees weakening, she found her chair. Sitting, she stared at the image for a long time. Tears sparkled then fell from her eyes. They met while she was serving on the Al-Batani. Staring at the image, she smiled. Boy was he handsome.

It wasn't until Admiral Paris intervened and told the completely blindsided redhead that the young man had feelings for her, that she stopped being oblivious. He was her first love and she fell hard for him.

Janeway hadn't seen an image of him in some years. Her grief was so overwhelming that she couldn't bear it. The healing process had been slow and if she was honest, she had never fully recovered surviving the crash. It had left not just an indelible mark, but a deep, dark chasm on the twisting path of her life. The loss haunted her, and some nights when she was brave enough to allow reflection, it tortured her. It was her driving force for pushing so doggedly to return to the Alpha Quadrant, to reunite crewmembers aboard Voyager with their families - she, more than anyone, understood fully how such a loss could tear one apart.

"I recommend the Arahantez," Elder Duhr said approaching her. She held out a long stemmed glass of green liquid.

Snapped out of her memories, Janeway was relieved to see the glint of silver behind the Gaelian's ear.

"It is one of my favorite pleasures whenever I visit this sector."

A bit early, but when in the Delta Quadrant! Janeway thought, accepting the glass. "You have travelled to this sector?" she asked inquisitively.

"Oh yes, Captain. As an exobiologist, I travel extensively." She looked at Janeway. "Fortunately I am in the concluding stages of my life, so it allows me quite a bit of latitude."

The redhead smiled. What an enlightened species. To so gracefully accept the latter stages of life without any qualms must be wonderful.

"Captain," Elder Duhr said, holding out a hand to the table. "Please eat."

"Thank you, Janeway said. Unable to resist, she picked up a small appetizer, and popped it into her mouth, it tasted delicious.

"I want to tell you how grateful the Council of Authority is for your communiqué," Elder Duhr said. "And since you trusted me, it is only right that I take you into my confidence, and tell you that we have had our suspicions for quite some time that Sgurrin has not been conforming to our behavioral codes." She sighed. "But, given her position, it has been extremely difficult to prove."

Taking the backless chaise longue opposite Janeway, Elder Duhr looked at the redhead, and leaning on one elbow said, "Please, taste your wine."

Janeway tasted the green substance; it was deliciously refreshing but also a little heady.

"We have several judiciary agents who have travelled with Diplomat Sgurrin and I."

"She is here?" Janeway asked in surprise.

"Oh yes, Captain." The Elder replied then drank from her glass. "Fortunately you have made many stopovers before arriving here. As such, it has not taken as long as we anticipated." She looked at Janeway. "It is important that you understand that your authentication is vital."

Janeway inclined her head. "I understand."

"Given Sgurrin's high profile status, it was deemed appropriate by the Council of Authority that the judiciary agents from both sides pursue this infraction off our planet to ensure the fulfillment of justice."

"I'm surprised you would go to such lengths."

Elder Duhr crossed her long legs. "We have long suspected Sgurrin. If she has committed such a heinous crime, then it is our duty to present an effective case." She sipped from her glass. "I have taken this opportunity to meet with you informally to brief you. But make no mistake about it Captain," she said her green eyes focusing on Janeway, "we have arranged with the Zarkonian's for an assembly area. The intention is to record your authentication. Diplomat Sgurrin and her judiciary agents will also be in attendance. After we take your authentication, we will gather the facts and then hold the assembly."

"You will hold a trial here?"

Elder Duhr nodded. "Yes, we will hold a trial here."

The Elder's tongue seemed to wrap around the word 'trial', Janeway noticed.

"What will happen to Diplomat Sgurrin?"

Uncrossing her long legs and straightening, Elder Duhr lifted a finger and smoothed it over an eyebrow. "It is a matter of social order, Captain. Our society, like any other, must control disruptive elements. As we are psi-empathic, crime is rare.

Janeway didn't like to ask, why, with their empathic abilities, they would need a trial. She concluded that societies needed the rigor of formality. And, there was also the fact, that psi-empathic or not, emotions could also be suppressed and memories tampered with as Tom Paris experienced when he was wrongly convicted of murder during an away mission to the Banean

homeworld to repair a damaged collimator.

"But we have, on the rare occasions, executed citizens for these type of crimes."

Executed! Janeway gulped down the wine in her mouth.

The redhead was shocked at the unexpected curve ball. She looked at the Gaelian. "Isn't it rather contradictory that a society as highly evolved as yours would resort to such a crude practice?" She frowned. "There must be a better alternative to execution. You must have some sort of penal reform?"

"No we do not support institutions such as penal reform."

Janeway frowned.

"I understand your reservations, Captain," Elder Duhr said. "Our society is old. Infraction is rare on our planet. And this is not a matter of being disciplined for inappropriate behavior by the family. Diplomat Sgurrin may have taken a life. An execution may be undesirable, though when found guilty, it is necessary and warranted."

Janeway blinked.

"Nevertheless, it is important that you understand that a decision to proceed will only be made after great deliberation." She looked at Janeway. "If you have no objection Captain, a Gaelian Arbitrator will also be in attendance tomorrow. She is assigned to determine all authentications of events."

Quite a party, Janeway thought. "Yes of course"

"I am curious, Elder Duhr," Janeway asked. "As your species is psi-empathic, why do you require a trial."

Elder laughed. It was a light, delightful sound. "Good question, Captain," she responded. "As I said, infraction is rare for this very reason. However, there are technologies that can erase the act from the perpetrators memory and, as such, leave them as innocent as the day they were born." She looked at Janeway. "That is why we require authentications. We need to build an events case. That is why your authentication is so vital, Captain."

There was silence for a moment.

"You are worried that your Federation definition of what constitutes right or wrong might not translate in Gaelian law."

Execution just seemed so radical a move, but Janeway wasn't about to argue how the Gaelians should hold their own court proceedings. The fact that they were here and seeking out her testimony clearly indicated that they intended to carry out the trial judicially. She inclined her

head. "Your psi-empathic abilities make it difficult for me to argue otherwise."

Elder Duhr smiled. "We do not expect you to remain here at Zarkonian specifically for the trial. However, if you could, it would be very much appreciated."

"Of course I will make myself available to you and your judiciary teams," Janeway said. "Voyager will remain in orbit for as long as you need my services."

"Thank you, Captain," Elder Duhr replied with great sincerity. She smiled. "You must be excited at the thought of becoming a parent?"

Janeway looked at the Gaelian in surprise. "You know?"

The Elder smiled. "It is part of the gossip of the outpost and I am, after all, psi-empathic."

Janeway smiled. "It was unexpected."

Elder Duhr laughed, lightly. "I think that might be an understatement, Captain."

Reminded again of the Diplomat's abilities, Janeway grinned. "All right, it was very unexpected, but," she added with deep warmth, "not unwelcome."

"Although Seven is not Gaelian, she is experiencing, through the baby, unexpected changes, I would imagine?" the Elder asked, her eyes showing deep curiosity.

Janeway nodded then sipped from her glass. Astonishingly, the substance seemed to change flavor from being refreshing to wildly indulgent. The redhead was impressed, sipping some more, she wondered how soon she would be able to obtain a few bottles.

"A Gaelian norm is for parents to be quartered together and spend much of their time there. They are intimately attuned to one another and the baby. This allows their empathic interdependency to grow." Elder Duhr smiled warmly. "The reason our society encourages this is because our children can be more susceptible to social isolation if their psi-empathic abilities are not fully nurtured."

Janeway listened intently. This presented a welcome and unexpected opportunity for her to fully understand what may happen to them. "You have raised a good point, Elder Duhr, Seven and I will have to address how best to nurture our baby's psi-empathic abilities."

"I envy you, Captain." Elder Duhr said. "We Gaelians love this time. It only comes every fifty of your years and although a bonded pair is close, during this time, the connection becomes intense." She smiled. "How is Seven, your bond partner?"

Bond partner! Knowing the Gaelian definition meant life partner, Janeway raised her brow. "As you say, she is changing."

Elder Duhr nodded. "I am aware that she is younger than you. The young ones are always the hungriest," she said with a note of mischievousness. "Is this her first time?"

First time? Janeway raised her brow questioningly.

"Having intimacy."

Janeway blinked. Color filled her cheeks. "Yes."

"Is this her first child... Your first child?"

"Yes," Janeway said, her color deepening.

Elder Duhr laughed then quirked an eyebrow at Janeway. "Then my friend, she will be even keener than normal. Often with a newly bonded couple, it is difficult to separate them. They spend much of their time making love."

Janeway swallowed. "Elder Duhr with Seven's pregnancy-"

Nodding, Elder Duhr interrupted, "She will be demanding, jealous and very possessive. She will soon be absorbed with only thoughts of you and the child. It will not be an easy time for you to uphold your duties and be a devoted bond partner." She leaned forward. "I am sure that our datafiles haven't told you this, but pregnant Gaelians' are a force to be reckoned with. Our species reproduce so infrequently that Gaelian first parents are spoiled terribly." She laughed. "Seven will expect to be indulged completely."

Explicit images filled Janeway's mind of their time together, last night. Her eyes sparkled at just how lustfully demanding Seven had been. Although she had responded as fervently, she wondered how long her stamina would last. Even though she knew that Seven held back emotionally, something had shifted between them - their lovemaking had been incredible. Her biggest concern now was how she could be there for Seven to adequately fulfill her growing needs, as well as continue her demanding role as captain.

Janeway raised her brow, it was clear that she could be nothing other than frank with this woman. "The new...demands will take a little getting used to, Elder Duhr."

The Elder nodded. "I have prepared a special remedy for you. I have sent it to your doctor. I understand the demands that will be put on you so I'm here to help you as much as I can."

Surprised, Janeway smiled. "Thank you."

"Captain," the Elder said, "after the mating ritual, although the Alpha Gaelian returns to female form, during the pregnancy the demands from her partner is great." She studied Janeway. "Of course, I don't expect you will be experiencing anywhere near the same intensity that a Gaelian bonded pair experience." She smiled. "However, you may still experience some physical changes?"

"Some," Janeway said then nodded. "In my groin to be specific."

The Elder pursed her mouth. "That is good, that means that not only will your intimacy be intense, but that your orgasms will be increasingly long and sustained as your bond partner's."

Janeway tried not to choke on her wine.

"It also means that your energy levels will increase." She tapped her glass with an elegant finger. "I have also sent data to your doctor with minerals that will boost your growing energy requirements," she said. "With a mild sexual suppressant for Seven for a short time until you adapt and an energy booster for you, one would imagine that your needs will be met sufficiently." She looked at Janeway. "It wouldn't do if your partner's needs weren't being met, now would it?" Her brow rose inquisitively. "Are you pleasing Seven?"

Janeway cleared her throat. "In our culture, Elder Duhr such matters are considered private."

The Elder's brow furrowed. "As you wish. Should you require any advice then let me know. As I have stated, she will be very demanding." She paused for a moment. "She will be in her scion of pregnancy?"

Janeway inclined her head. "We refer to it as the second trimester."

"She will now want to mate more often."

Janeway resisted rolling her eyes. I know!

She breathed in deeply.

"Captain, you should be happy," the Elder said then laughed. "Even in Gaelian terms your bond partner is a very beautiful woman." She smiled. "Pleasing her is not a duty, surely?"

This woman is as persistent as a Ferengi chasing latinum.

Janeway closed her eyes briefly. "No it isn't. But in my own history, Elder Duhr, I have no frame of reference for this. I have never," she hesitated, "mated with a woman."

The Gaelian raised her brow. "I see. And you find this difficult, why?"

"Oh I assure you, it is not difficult. Not difficult at all!

"Good."

"But there are complications," Janeway said, then bit her bottom lip lightly. "She's a member of my crew. She's very young with no experience of relationships coupled with the fact that I have no experience with women."

"All the things you clearly dread, Captain," the Elder said dryly.

Janeway eyed the Gaelian for a moment. "Not dread, just consider new territory." She frowned. "It worries me that I have put Seven in this situation."

"Why?"

Janeway ran her fingers down the stem of her glass. "Although Seven's decision to mate was voluntary, in reality she did it out of necessity."

Elder Duhr inclined her head. "Let me tell you Captain, for Gaelians, one must be compatible at a fundamental level. Gaelians cannot mate with someone they are not attracted to, or have a deep connection with. It is against our natural laws."

Janeway studied the Gaelian. "In that case, why did Diplomat Sgurrin hold the belief that she would bond with Diplomat Omahr?"

"That was arrogance on her part, Captain." Elder Duhr sighed. "It was the ignorance of her youth supported by an erroneous belief that the power of her position would be enough of an incentive. And that is why Omahr is dead," Elder Duhr added then breathed in deeply. "Sgurrin did not allow for what Omahr might actually want."

Janeway nodded. They sat in silence for a moment.

"As well as the sexual side we consider the emotional side to be as equally important," Elder Duhr stated. "Have you discussed emotions?"

For the second time, during this personal and frank conversation, Janeway had to resist squirming in her seat.

"I...we...I..." She swallowed. "It isn't that simple."

The Gaelian frowned. "Isn't it?" She stared at Janeway.

Janeway felt color rise in her cheeks. How could she explain to this Gaelian, although they were having wonderful intimacy and there was a strong connection, she had no right to make claims on Seven emotionally. Although a deep understanding had passed between them last night, Janeway had no intention of staking a claim for Seven's heart, when she didn't know where her own stood. The baby was what was important right now.

"Understood," Janeway replied diplomatically to the Gaelian. Wanting to change the subject, she added, "I have also noticed a lump between my shoulder blades and markings," she said, lifting the sleeve of her uniform to show the Elder.

Janeway watched Elder Duhr's eyes widen as she studied the markings. Surprise registered on

her face. "Captain Janeway," she said after a long moment. "These markings are usual only to Gaelians, and even then, it is a rare occurrence. It is almost unheard of," she whispered. She looked at Janeway intently. "I myself, as an exobiologist, have never seen the markings, in the flesh, so to speak. That is how rare it is."

Dropping her sleeve, Janeway swallowed. "What does it mean?"

The Elder took a long drink from her glass before answering. "Since our species is one gender, fertility can be difficult and, as you know, it only occurs every fifty of your years. The markings you carry are known as Fertile markings. It means that you are very productive, Captain, and capable of impregnating Seven again - within a few of your years."

"Again!" Janeway exclaimed. "Am I missing something here?" she said to the Gaelian, aghast. "I was under the impression that one needed the...necessary equipment for conception to happen."

"It appears that you may have a stronger, more unique connection with Seven than originally thought," Elder Duhr replied dryly. "The lump as you referred to, on your back is also a marking. Every six of your months, another will appear. These lumps will run the full length of your spine. When the last one appears, you will transform."

Transform! Oh hell's teeth!

"Even though, I will not be on Sgurr Mohr?"

"That is why the Serling markings are so prized, the joining is not influenced by our planet."

Janeway shook her head. "I can assure you, Elder Duhr, there will be no further transformation for this Captain." Her chin setting, she added, "I have a ship and crew to get home."

"Captain, you do not seem to understand, this is exceptional," Elder Duhr replied. She looked slightly dazed. "I am not sure why it has happened," she raised her brow, "particularly as you are...human."

The Gaelian shook her head and seemed to be at a loss for words. After a moment, she looked at her chronometer on the wall. "I must ask for your forgiveness, Captain. I didn't quite realize the time. I have a comm that I must make." She stood. "Please, will you excuse me?"

"Of course," Janeway replied.

Sitting, waiting for the Gaelian to return, Janeway couldn't quite take in what she had been told. She would transform again. The hell I will! she thought. Aware that the doctor, for all his boastings, was indeed an exceptional physician, she decided to task him as soon as she returned to Voyager with preventing any future changes to her physiology. A comical image of a brood of her children running along the decks of her ship filled her mind. Dear God!

"Captain, my apologies again," the Gaelian said returning a few minutes later.

"Not at all, Elder Duhr."

"Would you like to continue our discussion?"

Janeway shook her head. "Right now, I am more interested in how developed you think our child's psi-empathic abilities will be?"

Sitting, Elder Duhr looked at Janeway for a long moment then shrugged. "It is difficult to say. From what you have told me, it would appear that your bond partner is clearly experiencing a similar path as a Gaelian pregnancy." She raised her brow. "But it is difficult to conclude the level your child's psi-empathic abilities."

Janeway nodded. "Understood. However, given she will have abilities, my concern is how we nurture those abilities aboard Voyager or when we return home to the Alpha Quadrant."

"You are concerned because she will be emotionally advanced amongst a fragile and sexually immature species?"

Janeway frowned. "I wouldn't quite put it like that."

Elder Duhr blinked. "I apologize if that sounded a little harsh, but from what I have read from Voyager's datafiles, and observed, sex, it seems, is often given in exchange for comfort and security." She inhaled. "Convenience rather than desire." She quirked an eyebrow then appraised Janeway. "Humans are a painfully self conscious and awkward breed."

Janeway's frown deepened. Did she just insult me?

"From a Gaelian's perspective, your species lacks much of the self awareness that is required for higher impulse formation and emotional stability. Your child is unique, Captain, and she requires it."

Janeway's head drew back. That was definitely an insult!

"I am aware that as an evolved humanoid species, Gaelians have a greater prescience regarding their emotional and...sexual feelings," Janeway said her tone precise. "And I can understand certain frustrations that your people may experience when dealing with other species, but don't you think your comments are a little severe?"

The Gaelian's eyes widened.

Not waiting for a response, the redhead leaned forward and added, "I can assure you, Elder Duhr, that our child's emotional and developmental stability will be uppermost in both my and Seven's minds'. And, although I agree there may be certain things," she said, her tone making it clear that she wouldn't tolerate any further derisory comments, "that we are not equipped to deal with. When the time is right, I assure you we will be."

Clearly aware that she had offended Janeway, the Gaelian cleared her throat. "Yes. I'm sure you will, Captain. Forgive me. I have five children of my own, and I understand how demanding they can be, and the difficulties of being parent."

Janeway nodded then smiled. "There's no need to apologize, Elder Duhr. I am sure there is much you can teach me."

"I am old Gaelian, Captain," she said, looking not a day over thirty. "With age, comes stubbornness." She laughed. "Sometimes, I forget that I was young myself and more than capable," She looked at Janeway tenderly. "I am sure that you and your bond partner will provide well for your child."

Elder Duhr stood. "Captain, I have arranged for us to lunch with the judicial team, but I have some business that can't be put off as I had hoped." She sighed. "By business, I mean an indulgence of mine." Her eyes glittered with amusement. "One of few remaining, I'm sorry to say."

Janeway stood and placed her empty glass down on the table.

"A Zarkonian trader heard that I was here. He is aware that as well as an exobiologist, I am also a keen collector of artefacts." She smiled at Janeway. "As he's leaving the station this morning, I have arranged to meet with him. That was the comm I had to make. I hope you don't mind?"

Janeway smiled. "No, not at all."

"Do you know the restaurant Zokranitz?"

"Yes, Janeway replied. She had eaten there on arrival. Although a newly opened establishment, the food was barely palatable. She wondered how the Gaelians would cope. Sick bags, she thought amusedly.

"Good. Would you care to join us, in say, in two hours?"

Janeway nodded. "I'd be delighted.

"Although, we are preparing for 'trial'," Elder Duhr said linking her arm through the redhead's and leading her to the door. "We are civilized, are we not?"

"Indeed," Janeway responded, standing at the exit doors.

"Of course, you could join me in my overview of the artefacts?"

Looking forward to the chance to stretch her legs and stroll a little before lunch, Janeway's eyes widened. "I appreciate the offer, Elder Duhr, but-

The Elder pressed a panel close to the doors. "No need to explain, Captain," she said warmly. "I understand you'll appreciate the time to explore."

Janeway smiled. "Indeed." She stepped over the threshold and waited until the doors closed behind her.

"Right Ensigns," She said, looking at the two young men as they snapped to attention. "Let's go." Walking briskly with them following, she added mischievously, over her shoulder, "Time to see just how well your Commanding Officer is keeping you people on your toes."

Chapter Twenty

Seven lay on the biobed in Sickbay waiting for the doctor to administer the medical compound that would inhibit an escalation in her sexual needs. The doctor had manipulated a gene known as the regus-14 which would regulate the attractant chemicals which, she had just discovered, in order to attract Janeway to mate with her - often or more correctly very often - was being produced in abundance, in her newly formed sex-pheromone glands.

"Seven, I'm glad your satisfied that the compound in no way will affect the baby's growth. It will just, as you know, prevent the Captain from turning into a heavily salivating Mikonian dog whenever you are around. Although," he said almost gleefully as he raised himself on his heels, "that would be a sight worth seeing, indeed!"

Seven didn't respond.

"Seven," The EMH said, lifting his brow. "I expected more of a fight with you regarding this matter."

She looked at the EMH. "I am concerned about the demands that this trimester will place on the Captain."

Preparing the compound the doctor looked at Seven. "How very considerate of you."

"We need time to adapt," Seven responded then frowned. "We need to take this more...slowly."

"I see," the doctor replied.

Not wanting to engage in conversation, but indulge in her thoughts about Kathryn, she focused on the lights above her.

Shortly after she discovered her 'attraction' to Janeway, she began to observe human mating behavior aboard Voyager. She viewed the crew from an anthropological dimension, observing their interaction from all areas - psychological, biological, physiological, social, and cultural. She even attended a well publicized evening event at Sadrines where many of the crew spent their leisure time.

Although Voyager's crew was mixed sex with a limited group of Alpha and almost non-existent Delta Quadrant species, that evening, it was, for Seven, similar to being in bowl of primordial hormonal soup, with all manner of sexual undertow - bodies pressing into each other, particularly hers. 'I want you,' were the words she heard as the evening progressed. At first they whispered in her ear softly, but as she ignored them and attempted to continue with her observations, they tugged at her and sharp elbows tried to convey their sincerity. 'You know that I could be with someone...like you.'

When she ignored their pleas, they were soon followed by flavored suggestions then demands, 'You should think yourself lucky, Borg!' Eventually her constant refusals produced a clawing and completely oppressive atmosphere. She concluded when she hastily exited the holodeck, that many of the crew were in fact just a consignment of homogenous entities addicted to food and alcohol and whose personality defaults were highlighted in the extreme when they overly indulged in both.

She recognized, however, that had Janeway been in attendance, her attitude would have been different. Seven acknowledged her attraction to the Captain was growing. Continuing her research, she focused on humans and realized that the male and female of the species smelled differently. Intrigued, she observed that human females tended to oxidize more. She did not approve of this. It fooled her olfactory senses as often females used too much spray. However, she discovered that some oxidizing was preferable to no scent. A recent incident with an ensign, in a Jeffries tubes, where they were carrying out strenuous replacement of conduit piping, forced her to give the young man a sharp reprimand when her olfactory senses were assaulted - so much so - that she immediately terminated the task and informed the red faced ensign that given his overwhelming ripe odor, he was relieved of duty.

"Seven did you know that during pregnancy, a human female's uterus can expand up to five hundred times its normal size?"

The blonde sighed. "Doctor," she said, reining in her sudden annoyance. "I am fully cognizant of the way human female physiology adapts during pregnancy." Her eyes narrowed. "You have assisted me with collating the data."

"Hmm...so I have," the doctor replied, sounding slightly miffed. He keyed data into the tricorder.

Seven raised her brow when the doctor busied himself filling up the hypospray. Her thoughts returned to Janeway.

As her research continued, she discovered that she preferred the smell of women. Their scents were...delicate. However, it was the smell of Captain Janeway that surprised her - it seemed to arouse her, particularly during their velocity matches.

Whenever she could, during a velocity match, Seven found that she increasingly pushed Janeway hard. Of course, the captain was of the understanding that it was her need to compete that was the driving force. But in truth, she had long ago understood that the redhead held a tactical

advantage - years of experience - along with her instinctual awareness of where the disk was at any one time, and her ability to alternate her thinking quickly. This was something that she realized she could not defeat - yet. So, she indulged in what gave her gratification, she pushed the older woman as hard as she could, challenging her, making her work, making her...sweat.

In the beginning, it astounded Seven that such a small, physically fragile, rather insignificant bipedal human could affect and preoccupy her thoughts so much, but as her new and evolving emotions for Janeway grew, she began to look forward to her interaction, and any form of praise or encouragement, which she found irrelevant in the beginning, she began to look forward to from the redhead. She even looked forward to and anticipated the small electric touches of reassurance whenever they were in close proximity - her shoulder, her lower back. Eventually, just Janeway's nearness filled her with warmth; hearing her husky voice - up close, studying her face - the small lines around the corners of her eyes - all only seemed to accentuate her beauty, experience and age.

Seven began to see Janeway as a beautiful individual among a great many tedious and dull individuals.

However, it was not until the encounter with the Gaelians, and specifically Diplomat Omahr's claim on the Captain, that an array of wildly different emotions were brought to the fore. For the first time, she felt the full force of her emotions; jealousy, which was and is still a most unpleasant experience. Seven's musings were abruptly interrupted by images of Janeway - naked. Her mind was suddenly filled with flashes of their time together last night. Her mouth suddenly filled with the taste of her, and her nostrils flared at the memory of her smell. She swallowed and recalled how much she enjoyed tasting her...everywhere. Her desire for the captain flared. "Doctor," she said, her voice tight, "can you administer the serum now?"

"Of course, Seven," the doctor replied, approaching her. Holding the hypospray to her neck, he administered it.

Immediately, Seven felt the strong sexual urge, dissipate. She breathed in deeply. Acceptable!

She looked at the EMH gratefully. She was aware that in the beginning the doctor had romantic feelings for her. As much as she considered him her friend, she had never reciprocated those feelings. She wondered if he had the same feelings for her as she had for Kathryn. If so, she realized, they would be extremely difficult to deal with.

She recalled the doctor telling her once, in way of explanation, when she had a particularly difficult incident with Ensign Nicolleti, that it was her beauty that had infuriated the Ensign. He explained that the woman was possessive of a young ensign she was dating and he had, apparently, expressed an attraction for her.

The Doctor told her that it was the human female inclination to dislike other beautiful woman, particularly a very beautiful woman such as her. He finished by telling her that given her beauty naturally a very insecure Ensign Nicoletti would dislike her.

Seven had found the news disturbing. It was when she first realized that the doctor had romantic feelings for her. "Doctor you have provided valuable guidance in developing my social skills," she said. "However, as you are aware, I have never reciprocated any of your...romantic feelings." She blinked. "I apologize."

Surprised, the EMH looked at her.

"I hope this open acknowledgement will assist in ceasing your attraction to me?"

The EMH cleared his throat. "It doesn't quite work like that, Seven."

The blonde raised her brow, yet another human mannerism. It surprised her that the doctor sought to emulate humans only. She wondered with his exposure to so many different species in the Delta and Alpha Quadrant that he would have found humans rather minor to emulate, but there it was. She quirked her ocular implant. In fact, in her pursuit to help the doctor have the same senses as the majority of the crew, she had enhanced his program with smell and touch receptors, and in the process utilized her own sense of smell more often.

The doctor offered in way of explanation, "You are a woman, Seven?"

Seven frowned. "Is that an observation or a diagnosis?"

The EMH raised his brow. "I mean you are a very beautiful and extremely intelligent woman."

"Thank you...Doctor," Seven responded hesitantly, then inclined her head. Unsure if she should have initiated such a conversation, she decided to change the subject. "Why, during our social lessons, did you not mention same sex coupling?"

The doctor breathed in deeply. "It wasn't my intention to omit it. It is after all very natural. However, I realize now, that I may have...skewed the facts a little." His mouth tightened. "I suppose, since we're being frank, that I had hoped that with my exceptional programming, and our close relationship, an attraction would manifest."

Aware that rejection was, from her experience, very painful, she tried to convey her sincerity, "Again, I apologize that I was unable to...reciprocate."

The doctor looked at her. "Thank you, Seven, but apologies are unnecessary. One cannot control whom one lo...cares about, wouldn't you agree?" He smiled wistfully. "However, it is very thoughtful of you."

Seven eyed the EMH. Strong emotions of sympathy filled her. Not wishing to continue with this line of dialogue, she asked curiously, "Doctor, are you aware that Captain Janeway was engaged twice?" Sitting up, she added, "Are you also aware that the Captain lost one of those individuals and her father in a...tragedy?"

The doctor eyed the blonde. "Yes, Seven. As her physician I am aware of any severe trauma that

has affected the Captain's or any of Voyager's crews' personal life."

Knowing that with a little persuasion she could get information out of the EMH, Seven's eyes alighted. "Then, Doctor, I think it is time we talk-"

The Sickbay doors opened and Tom Paris stormed through with Voyager's chief engineer quickly following.

"Reporting for duty," Tom said to the doctor.

"Tom, we're not finished," B'Elanna said, ignoring the doctor's and Seven's presence, she added, "What were you doing with that Delaney sister?"

"What seems to be the problem," the doctor said. Raising his brow, he whispered to Seven, "Like they two only have one problem."

"Meghan is the problem Doc," Tom replied. Keying in his log-on commands to the console, he said to B'Elanna, "Her name is Meghan."

B'Elanna threw up her arms. "I prefer bitch myself."

"The problem is Doc," Tom said, never taking his eyes off B'Elanna, "that only one of us is happy in this relationship...and it ain't her!"

Seven glanced at the doctor's shocked face. Her eyes filing with keen interest, she focused on the brawling couple.

Tom grabbed the sides of the console. "How can you be so obtuse, B'Elanna!"

"Obtuse!" B'Elanna exclaimed. "Duh, if you stand close enough to that Delaney sister, you can hear the Ortagian ocean!"

Tom breathed in deeply then faced the half-Klingon. "There's nothing going on, B'Elanna."

"You had your arms around her!" she hissed. "You were nuzzling her neck!"

He raised his brow. "It meant nothing."

"Why don't I try sucking on some crewman's dick, and see how much of nothing that means, Tom!"

Tom threw up his arms. "What will it take to convince you?"

"Oh, lets see!" B'Elanna said stomping toward him. "Admitting you're an asshole would be a start!"

Tom looked at the EMH, when B'Elanna was toe to toe with him. "Doc, you might want to leave that biobed next to Seven's empty. I think I'll be occupying it soon!" He eyed B'Elanna. "What is it that makes you want to smack her every time you see her?"

"Because she's a lazy, good for nothing, man stealing, cu-"

"B'Elanna," the doctor interrupted. "Being lazy is hard work," he said, making his way to her quickly. "Just ask Tom." He placed a hand gently on her shoulder and led her to the exit. "As much as I hate to break up this tête-à-tête, some of us actually do have patients to attend to."

Standing at the doors, B'Elanna's eyes narrowed. "Thanks, Tom."

"For what?" He threw up his hands. "For flirting! For being human! For screwing up occasionally!"

Seven watched a hurt expression cross B'Elanna's face. "For making me understand that the sole purpose of your life is to simply serve as a warning to others!" She eyed the helmsman. "This is over."

"Oh, B'Elanna," Tom replied weakly.

The doctor raised his brow. "Your dismissed, Lieutenant." He gently pushed B'Elanna over the threshold. "That's Starfleet for get out."

Feelings of deep sadness filled Seven as she watched the doors close behind B'Elanna.

"Tom," the doctor said with a strong note of aggravation in his tone, as he made his way to his office, "a word."

"Tuvok to Seven of Nine."

Seven hit her combadge. "Commander?"

"Seven, we have an emergency. We have been informed that Captain Janeway is in grave danger. We are transporting to her last coordinates. Meet me in Transporter Room Two."

Her heart suddenly pounding, Seven responded, "On my way, Commander."

Chapter Twenty-one

Shivering, curled up and freezing, Janeway lay in a corner of the dank, dark room. Nose broken, eyes so bruised they could barely open, she dry retched. Spitting up nothing, but blood, saliva dripped from her open mouth and pooled on the dirt infested floor. The redhead knew her body was failing. The beating had started as soon as she was dragged into this dungeon. Her last memory was of being ambushed, as she left the hotel, and her security detail being killed instantly.

Janeway was beaten so bad she could barely move. She had no concept of time. She knew she hadn't been here, in this, foul smelling room that stank of death for long. But, regardless, given her physical state, she wouldn't survive another extreme beating.

A light blazed through the room. Janeway folded in on herself, she tried to quickly cover her eyes, but her movements were painfully slow. Tears slid down her face as her swollen eyes tried to adjust. She opened her mouth to protest, but nothing other than a whisper came out. As part of their torture, her captors took great delight in hanging her up, beating her. Her vocal chords had all but ceased.

Turning her face toward the dank wall, she sought to find some comfort from the stark light. It was the first time her captors had used the bright overhead light. They seemed to prefer to work in the shadows. Talking in their own language, shuffling around her, they hit her naked body, repeatedly, strategically; drawing out their vicious intent for as long as they could without leaving her dead.

The rage that she had felt for them had quickly turned to terror. Their disgusting smells, their animal noises, their shuffling and brutality made her realize that it was the worst kind of captors - mindless thugs. Not interested in her physically, or in negotiating with her. Their only interest, it seemed, was the sport of savagely beating her.

"Ah. Here you are."

Surprised, by the feminine voice, Janeway turned her head from the wall. A tall watery figure stood above her.

"Captain Janeway," the voice said, soothingly.

A hand reached out and stroked her cheek.

Janeway pulled back. Her mouth moved, but nothing came out.

"Bring her."

Janeway's chains rattled. She felt the restraints around her arms and legs roughly being pulled. In great pain, her voice croaked when her captors dragged her up and shouldering her, hung her from the chains.

"I'm sorry, Captain," The voice said.

Somehow, hanging low from the rafters, her brain jumbled, Janeway knew the voice was lying.

"What do you want?" she croaked, barely audibly, through swollen lips.

The watery shadow filled her vision. "Something that is yours," the voice responded.

Janeway flinched when a fingernail trailed down her badly beaten, deeply cut, bleeding chest.

"Steady," the voice said, drawing a fingernail along Janeway's left breast. "They shouldn't have cut you so deeply."

Janeway moaned. Her gag reflex had long gone. Her empty stomach heaved in response. "What do you want?" she eventually uttered, wishing that she could make out the voice.

"What does anyone want?" the voice responded lazily. "Always it's something that one cannot have." The voice hardened. "I want your child!"

Trembling, Janeway flailed against her chains. The terror that filled her surprised her. She didn't think she had anything left. But her sudden fear was so acrid, it filled her nostrils. She thrashed, but nothing happened. The absolute realization that she was incredibly fragile, vulnerable and open to any act her captors decided upon almost broke her completely.

Janeway's head lolled. Trying to straighten it, her eyes too swollen and battered to see, she uttered blindly, "Who are you?"

"Don't you know?"

Janeway tried to force open her swollen eyes, tried to focus. The voice was light and the figure tall. She was so badly beaten that she wasn't sure she would recognize her own mother right now.

"I'm Elder Duhr, Captain," the voice said, sweetly.

Suddenly the mechanics in Janeway's brain began to work, and her mind filled with the familiar tones of the person that she had so recently believed in. Unexpected pain shot through her. Surprising tears dropped from her swollen eyes and streaked down her bloody, beaten face.

No!

"Do you know that my people see your species as nothing more than primitive animals?" Elder Duhr said, trailing a finger lightly around Janeway's abdomen. "We see our kind as special and separate from creation. It will be our downfall, of course, that we are presumptuous enough to believe that we sit top of the hierarchy." She leaned closer and whispered, "We are so perfectly formed that we now choose to ignore that we have evolved from a lowly species...such as you."

Breathing in deeply, the Gaelian smelled Janeway. She then brushed a hand not so lightly, this time, over Janeway's broken cheek. "I have never liked the way you humans' smell."

The redhead groaned.

"In our growing arrogance we have forgotten where we came from." The Elder dropped her

hand. "You see, Captain, even the most progressive of our species now see nature's beauty and abundance as divinely ordained for the benefits of its highest creation - Gaelians. Oh, but how wrong they are. Even though we are an evolved species, we are complacent. Gone is the exuberance that drove us to become a space faring nation. Now we hide, in fear that we will be contaminated. We are an insulated, frightened."

The Gaelian moved away from Janeway.

"We have forgotten what it means to be part of nature," her voice rose. "We believe that we are closer to divinity, but we are not divine. In order to survive we need to grow, but only through an extraordinary mix. Your child will be our salvation."

Marika! Janeway reeled against her chains. Where are you Voyager? she thought desperately. Seven...?

Today, Janeway had just lived through the most excruciating time of her life, but the pain of betrayal that sliced her open and spilled out her guts was indescribable. Flailing wildly, she knew in her very bones that she wanted her child to see the Indiana sky. To see the creek that ran alongside her family home; to eat her mother's food. She wanted her child to experience not just what it meant to be loved. She wanted that love shared - she wanted her child to connect with her blood with the meaning of her life that flowed in her veins. She thrashed again. "You will not harm her or Seven!" she uttered her swollen lips and tongue causing the words to slur.

"Oh don't worry, Captain. I have no intention of harming the child or your precious bond partner." Elder Duhr said, soothingly. "As an exobiologist, I have been fascinated by the Borg. As a scientist, I have made contact with many species who have encountered them, and to meet my very own Borg, Seven of Nine, has been an experience. To the Borg the origin of a species is incidental, it is perfection they seek. Their bodies are merely a physical framework that they can bolt technology onto. For the Gaelian, our physical frame and associated desires have become all that matters."

"Urggghhh...nihilistic."

"I understand your concerns, Captain. But, you see, I admire the Borg. They see life for what it truly is. They understand that all species compete. That only a few will fit into that tiny little spot that will allow them to survive. All the rest; the thousands, millions, billions will die. The war of nature destroys the weaklings only the best that have adapted will reproduce, passing on their successful characteristics to succeeding generations. Your very own species, like mine, place great value in life. However, ironically, life, itself, is abundant, Captain, it is the ability to survive that is unique." Her voice hardened. "Sertile markings," She sneered. "Unacceptable!"

Janeway fought weakly against her shackles.

"I understand your species, Captain. I have studied your datafiles extensively. You seek greatness and ultimately perfection through enlightenment. And while all that is admirable, the Borg may not tell you how to attain enlightenment, but they will map out how to reach for

perfection."

Disbelief spread through Janeway.

"On my planet, the time has come to forge and design our future. Right now we are vulnerable. But with your child, half Gaelian, half Borg, we will create a new more complex, exciting evolutionary development to our species." She breathed in deeply. "What I will tell you is that what is about to happen is written. Our society is disordered, skewed. The time has come to put that right. There is a sacred text that foretells your ship's coming to Sgurr Mohr, the subsequent birth of your child and the changes she will bring. Your child will not only carry inherit characteristics of a Gaelian, with her psi-empathic abilities, she will be Borg, one of the most progressive and efficient species in the Delta Quadrant, and we intend to nurture that Captain."

Janeway's mouth filled with bile.

"It is your misfortune that it has come to this, Captain Janeway." Elder Duhr clicked her tongue. "However, believe me, with those markings," she said, her tone deepening almost menacingly, "it is absolutely necessary."

The repulsive smell that immediately followed the figures that entered the room, told Janeway that her captors had returned. Suspended, and the pain incredible, she tried to stay focused, tried to override the screaming agony of tortured flesh and bone as they talked. But she couldn't.

"Finish." Was all Janeway could decipher before Elder Duhr left her in the unbearable hands of her captors.

The pain excruciating, the savage beating relentless, her body covered with deep gashes and bloodied, a window for the first time opened up in Janeway's mind.

Moving slowly towards the blue window, the redhead watched it grow. Intrigued, she moved closer. A familiar piece of sky came into view. Frowning, she headed through it and, landing on her feet, looked down at the old oak porch. Lifting her head, she looked around. She knew this place for sure. The house, the surrounding trees and farmland were memories tugging at her.

Bloomington, Indiana...Home!

Janeway breathed in sharply. Joy filled her when she heard the twittering conversations of the early morning birds.

She closed her eyes briefly when a light breeze carried the magical smells of home cooking.

Trembling, a surge of homesickness filled her. She breathed in deeply.

A shape formed in the corner of her vision.

No! It can't be?

"Daddy?" she said hesitantly to the figure sitting in the shade of her family home.

Dressed casually, the man turned his head.

"Daddy?"

Janeway moved forward. Stumbling, she looked down - her feet were shackled.

"Daddy!"

Tears streaming, she stared at her father. He was here - in the flesh - she tried to take in his familiar rugged face; his wavy hair, his dimpled cheeks. "Daddy, is it really you?" she asked in the most desperate tone that had ever come out of her mouth.

"Yes, Katie."

Staring at the man she had loved all of her life, her heart palpitating, Janeway couldn't help but re-live the very last time she had seen him.

The broken ship's fuselage projected from the waterbed, nose up, she grappled to stand on the ice. She could see clearly into the cabin - to her amazement her father and Justin, both bloodied and dazed were moving slightly - they were alive!

Desperately, she threw herself into action. Quickly, she made her way to the section of the cabin that had risen to the surface and immediately began working on the flickering console. Her hands trembling, she tried to transport her father and Justin, but the scanners refused to lock on to them in the ship's cockpit.

"Dammit!" she screamed. She glanced over her shoulder and to her horror the ship's fuselage was sinking into the pitch black, freezing water, and there was only enough power to transport one person - not two.

"Oh, God...Please...No!"

Heart hammering, head pounding, Janeway desperately worked the console.

"There must be a way!"

Glancing over her shoulder, she saw the ship slowly sink. How could she choose one over the

other?

"Hurry! Hurry!"

Flash visions of her life with Justin - knowing she had sacrificed her father to allow him to live - flooded her mind. How could she be happy with him after paying that price? Life without her darling Justin, knowing she had sacrificed him to save her father, was equally intolerable. How could fate have presented her with this bitter dilemma?

"You can do this, Katie. C'mon save them!"

The terror of a decision she might be forced to make, made Janeway's fingers fly over the console in a desperate attempt to reconfigure the annular confinement beam to hold the two most important people in her life.

But the spatial matrix couldn't hold them - the damage was too much.

"No! Please. No...NO!"

The most incredible fear grasped at her. Heart thudding, adrenaline pounding, unable to feel the cold, mind racing, she inputted every remote algorithm and command into the console in an attempt to gain enough power to engage the beam to transport them.

Crying, she desperately pounded her fists on the console when it didn't work.

Glancing over her shoulder, the ship still there, she gasped with relief. Gathering her fracturing resolve, she took a deep breath.

"You're accustomed to pressure, to emergencies, to disaster! This is what you've had been trained for Goddamit!" she shouted as she worked desperately. "All you need to is to keep your head and generate enough energy to make one transport...Keep your head, Katie...Keep it! Keep it...Keep it!"

Five more seconds was all she needed to transfer the molecular patterns of her father and Justin to a storage buffer and rematerialize them. Desperately, she rerouted the phaser couplings. Little by little, the beam gained power.

"Please...please...please..." she whispered.

Quickly, she glanced over her shoulder - the ship was still there. She glanced aft at the emergency medical kit, it was there. Immense relief filled her, she would be able to stabilize their injuries and keep them warm. They were being tracked by Starfleet scanners. It wouldn't be too long before help arrived.

For the first time, a glimmer of hope filled Janeway as the beam gained power. Tears streaming down her face, she closed her eyes briefly, the thought of losing Justin, the man she loved and

adored, and her Daddy, who meant absolutely everything to her, was too much - it was not going to happen...Not on her watch!

Gritting her teeth, Janeway vowed, she was going to bring them home. Concentrating, she worked the console and watched the confinement beam power up inch by inch. Nearly there, she watched the console with deep intensity.

There!

Quickly, she initiated the automatic pattern lock, bypassing the diagnostic process in order to save precious milliseconds then manually activated the annular confinement beam.

Smiling, she whirled to meet them. The sight before her was mind-boggling - the ship's fuselage was gone. Her stomach lurched - there was nothing but still water.

The ship, carrying Janeway's most precious cargo, had sunk silently beneath the inky waters of an alien sea.

Janeway focused on the man before her. Slate-grey eyes filled with love and compassion gazed back at her.

Unable to believe that her father was here before her, open armed, Janeway attempted to choke back the tears but she couldn't.

Could it really be you?

Desperate to fall into her his arms, to feel his warmth, she dragged at her heavy shackles, and tried to move forward, but a blow hit her so hard it forcibly lifted her off her feet and threw her to the ground.

On her hands and knees, blood pouring from her, her father moved quickly to her.

Dazedly, she whispered to the man who stood over her, "Daddy...do you forgive me?"

"Always, Katie," he said. His brow furrowing deeply, he squatted.

Broken, she croaked as she lifted her head and gazed into his eyes...her eyes, "Daddy...I'm sorry I let you die!"

"There's no need. I'm always with you," her father responded, his eyes shimmering with tears, he reach out for her. "I love you."

Another blow, a bone cracked, Janeway screamed. Crumbling, she fell on her side. Lying on the old oak floor, she looked up. "Daddy," she said then sobbed in agony, "Please...Help me!"

"Release your mind from the pain, Katie. I'm with you," her father said urgently. Desperately, he crouched beside her.

Janeway screamed as another blow forced her to writhe. "Help me!" she begged.

"Sleepy bee," her father said. Tears falling from his kind, gentle eyes, he quickly sat next to her. "Do you remember that day when you learned to ride, you were so stubborn, Katie," he added. Crying openly, he pressed himself up against an oak beam and reached out for her. "You were determined, that no matter how many times you got thrown from that horse that it wouldn't lick you."

Carefully, Edward Janeway gently laid his daughter's head on his lap. He stroked her blood coated hair. "On our way home you spotted a bee on the dirt road," his voice broke. "Something so small... anyone else would have walked on by, but you picked it up and tried to help it on its way." He shook his head. "You were always rescuing things." His hand stilled. "You couldn't understand why it didn't want to fly away." He half-sobbed. "I told you it was asleep." He swallowed. "Do you remember that, baby?"

Fat tears falling, Edward Janeway looked down at his daughter's, broken and bleeding face.

Her mouth filling with blood, Janeway spat it out, and tried to find her voice. "Yes Daddy," she replied, her voice small. "You told me," she swallowed, "the bee was asleep."

"That's right, darling," he replied, as he stroked her matted hair. "Just a sleepy bee that needed a nap before it found its way home."

Janeway whispered, "I'm... home now... aren't I, Daddy?"

"Yes, sleepy bee. You're almost there."

Closing her bloodshot eyes, she tried to hang on to the familiar, but the shattering pain from more savage blows enveloped her.

Hit...crack...hit...crack...hit...crack!

Pulling, Janeway struggled against her chains.

Then with another resounding blow, her heart stuttered.

Her father wept openly

Struggling, her breath catching, Janeway realized what was about to happen.

Tears falling from her swollen eyes, cowering and twisted, her mouth filled up. The blood poured out over the edge of her lips, as she whispered "Daddy... I think..." she faltered, her

heartbeat faint now, her body began shake, "...this time...I'm licked."

"Your home now, Katie." Her father responded. "You're tired," he added soothingly. "Just like sleepy bee."

Shaking violently, she whispered, "I'm...cold, Daddy."

"Go to sleep now, baby," he said, weeping. Holding her, he whispered, "It's over."

Seven! Janeway thought. The image of the beautiful blonde, laughing openly with a strawberry blonde child in her arms flashed before her, "Forgive me," she whispered.

Eyes rolling back, Captain Kathryn Janeway of the Starship USS Voyager body convulsed one final time then went limp.

Much to her captors disgust another blow wrung out nothing from the redhead's lifeless body.

Chapter Twenty-two

The cybernetic implants in Seven's legs, carried her at a far greater speed than the average human. Unceremoniously, she pushed aside any of Voyager's crew, who stood in her way, as she blazed toward Transporter Room Two. Sprinting at great speed, she was never more grateful than now for her Borg enhanced physiology. Her increased strength, agility, acute hearing and sight, along with her nanoprobe tendrils, were all still very much intact. And - right now - all very necessary.

Coming to a halt at the entrance way of Transporter Room Two, Seven was stunned by what she saw.

"Seven," Tuvok said, approaching her.

"Commander," Seven responded. Her eyes never left the two individuals standing on the transporter dais.

"You will be fully debriefed once we transport down to the Zarkonian space station," Tuvok said. He handed her a phaser. "However, right now, we must leave."

"What news of Kathryn?" Seven said, refusing to budge.

"I have been informed that Captain Janeway has been taken captive," Tuvok replied. He glanced over at the dais. "Diplomat Omahr and Sgurrin are here to assist with her rescue. As I said, once we arrive at our coordinates, you will be fully briefed."

Heart thudding, eyes wide, great fear filling her, Seven eyed the Gaelians.

"Is that understood, Seven?"

Seven acknowledged the Vulcan's request. "Understood, Commander."

Quickly, she moved toward the transport dais, and took a position next to the Gaelians and four elite members of Voyager's security team. Claspings the phaser tightly, she watched Tuvok join them.

Nodding to the Ensign at the console, the Vulcan commanded, "Energize."

They materialized in the command central of the Zarkonian modular space station. With its four saucer-shaped docking modules, the station was more than capable of accommodating five reasonably sized vessels in each. The central command module, housed storage facilities for deuterium, dilithium, ordinance parts and other provisions supplemented by a massive replication facility as well as a network of quarters for crewmembers. It also served as a home base for a large migrant population and as a waypoint for exploratory vessels, such as Voyager, as well as diplomatic missions, layovers for refuel or significant repairs. As a large trading spaceport, it had strong defensive capabilities, and the station and neighboring asteroids were protected by type-four deflector shields as well as two phaser banks.

A large contingent of Zarkonian security officers, all well-armed, stood before them. Two individuals stepped forward.

"I would like to introduce Station Master, Dercon, and Head of Security, Investigator Nuriq," Tuvok said to his team. "They have been briefed with the situation and have offered their full assistance."

Ignoring the individuals, Seven looked at Diplomat Omahr. Face tight she said, "For a dead person, Diplomat, you look very much alive."

"Seven," Diplomat Omahr replied. "I'm sorry for the subterfuge, but it was necessary."

"Where is Kathryn?" Seven asked. Her tone did not reveal her growing fear.

"The Diplomats do not know, Seven," Tuvok said. He placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "They intercepted a message stating that Captain Janeway had been captured." He raised an oblique eyebrow. "No coordinates were provided. However, no warp signatures have been detected since o-six hundred hours. She is here... somewhere." Dropping his hand, he turned to Investigator Nuriq. "In order to locate Captain Janeway, we need to disable the station's deflector shield."

"Agreed," the green, bald headed, heavily muscled woman replied. She nodded at the Station Master, who moved toward a console and entered a few commands.

The Vulcan tapped his combadge. "Tuvok to Chakotay."

"Go ahead, Tuvok," Chakotay responded quickly.

"Deflector shields are down."

"Good. We're scanning the station now," Chakotay replied.

Tuvok watched Seven agitate, as they waited for Chakotay report.

"Captain Janeway is not on the station. We're now checking the asteroids," the ex Maquis replied. "We're running a full spectral scan. The asteroids are dense, it might take a few minutes."

"Acknowledged, Commander" the Vulcan said, eyeing Seven. "Tuvok out."

"Why have they taken her?" Seven asked the Gaelians.

"I can explain," Diplomat Omahr said, holding her hands out in a placating gesture. "But it requires some background information."

Seven inclined her head. "Proceed."

"Diplomat Sgurrin and I belong to an elite force within our species. We have, for some time, been working as undercover operatives within Elder Duhr's sect."

Sect? "For what purpose," Seven asked. A pulse started to throb in her neck.

"Elder Duhr is head of a sect whose sole goal is to create a new breed of Gaelian who will be stronger, smarter and faster than our current species," Diplomat Omahr responded. "They are the self appointed protectors of the future of our people, and they are committed to fulfilling the prophecy at any cost." Eyes narrowing, she added. "A number of our operatives have worked hard to infiltrate this rogue shadow group. Few have succeeded."

"You mentioned a prophecy," Seven stated. "Explain."

"Seven," Diplomat Sgurrin said. She glanced at Diplomat Omahr who nodded. "Although we are an enlightened species, the sect wants to return to what our forbearers believed; that enlightenment will take our species away from their origins. They believe that we have forgotten what it means to be part of nature; to be strong, to conquer. The sect has sacred scrolls which foretell the coming of a savior - one with a mix of Gaelian traits and," she hesitated, "other traits."

Seven noted Diplomat Sgurrin's demeanor was different; stronger. "Such as?" she asked.

"Borg traits."

Shocked, Seven exclaimed, "Borg?"

"The sect believes that your child will take our species back to the original principles of our forbearers. The scrolls prophesize the birth of a child, not belonging to our world, who will affect the destiny of our entire species," She looked at Seven. "Elder Duhr believes that savior is your child."

My child! Seven blinked. "Why the deception?" she asked, her tone precise. "Why did you not bring this artifice to Captain Janeway's attention on Sgurr Mohr?"

"Elder Duhr is extremely clever, Seven," Diplomat Omahr responded quickly. "The sect is amoral, shrouded in secrecy and answerable to no one, but her. Over time, through assigning loyal officers to key positions, a rebellion base has grown strong. Without evidence of a savior child, it has remained covert and inert, that is until recently." She breathed in deeply. "When the news reached our planet, from trusted sources, that a vessel, not native to the Delta Quadrant, was travelling through our sector with a former Borg drone, disconnected from the hive and fully individual. The sect galvanized." Breathing in deeply, she looked at Seven's stomach. "Voyager arrived at our planet, and-

"The rest, as they say, is history," Tuvok interjected. "How did you find out about Seven's pregnancy?"

"When Voyager left orbit, so did we. We have been tracking your ship," Diplomat Omahr responded. "As Elder Duhr provided you with star charts that detailed a safe passage though several sectors, we knew where you were heading."

Seven eyed the Gaelians. She gently glided a hand over her abdomen, before clasping her hands behind her back.

"Keeping our distance, but a watchful eye on Voyager, was not too difficult," Diplomat Omahr added. "By having Sgurrin send a comm implicating that she had committed a crime, and that I was dead. Elder Duhr knew that your Captain would do the honorable thing and use whatever methods she could to notify the Council of Authority of her new findings." She raised her brow. "We intercepted the probe that she sent. It contained exactly the message she'd hoped for." The Diplomat's lips thinned. "And, as planned, we rendezvoused with Voyager at this outpost."

Seven focused on Diplomat Sgurrin. "You are not a spoiled member of an elite family?"

"No," the Gaelian responded.

"You did not lose your partner?" Seven asked Diplomat Omahr.

"Diplomat Sgurrin, stepped closer to Diplomat Omahr. "She is very much alive," she said. She linked hands with the Diplomat. "We are bonded."

Tuvok raised his brow. "You are not as young as we were led to believe."

Diplomat Sgurrin shook her head. "As crime is rare on our planet and you would have access to

datafiles of our history, Elder Duhr needed a plausible story. From reading Voyager's datafiles on Federation history, in particular Earth's, she surmised that a spoiled aristocrat, with the passion of youth, and a preyed upon victim, would not be too implausible a story for the senior officers aboard Voyager to accept."

"Suckered."

Diplomat Sgurrin looked at the Vulcan with a confused expression.

"I am utilizing a colloquial word that Captain Janeway would use when uncovering a ruse."

"I see," the Gaelian responded slowly. She raised her brow and studied the Vulcan.

"There is no doubt that it was a rudimentary strategy," Tuvok said. "However, it appears, it was a very successful one." He looked at the Gaelians. "And the energy beam?"

"Genuine," Diplomat Omahr responded. "We were specifically chosen by our leaders because of our covert work in the past and also because my gestation time was nearing."

"Why wasn't a Gaelian Alpha chosen to mate with me," Seven stated.

"A Gaelian cannot mate with you Seven, the risks are too great," Diplomat Sgurrin responded. She looked at the blonde, and anticipating her next question, answered, "Even with your Borg physiology." She frowned. "Believe me, if it was possible, Elder Duhr would have found a way."

"In order to fulfill the prophecy," Diplomat Omahr explained gently to Seven, "it was planned that my energy beam be directed at a member of Voyager's female crew. One that you were most attracted too. This individual would then transform into a Gaelian Alpha."

Seven's eyes widened.

"Of course, since becoming an individual, we had no way of knowing if you preferred the male species," Diplomat Omahr said. She quirked an eyebrow. "It turned out not to be of concern." She smiled. "When we met you, for the first time, in Voyager's Sickbay, the love emitting from both you and Captain Janeway was quite overwhelming."

"The Doctor provided a serum that would have stopped me becoming pregnant. How did you know I would not utilize the inoculation?"

"We're empathes, Seven," Diplomat Omahr responded softly. "And you are very maternal, a natural parent. We knew you wouldn't use the serum."

Tuvok raised his brow when a tremulous look crossed Seven's face. "However, if I am not mistaken, Diplomat Sgurrin, the child will also be human?" he stated quickly.

"Elder Dhur is a zealot, Commander," Diplomat Sgurrin replied. "She believes that the humans

aboard Voyager are lower animals. As such, she chooses to ignore that the child will also, in part, be human."

Tuvok nodded. He looked at Diplomat Omahr. "I assume you produced another energy beam?"

"Yes, she did," Diplomat Sgurrin responded. "She is pregnant. This will be our third child," she added, squeezing Diplomat Omahr's hand before letting it go. "However," she added as she looked at Seven's anxious face, "that is not of concern at this moment."

"Curious," Tuvok said. "I thought that Gaelian were bioformed?"

"We are Tuvok," Diplomat Omahr responded. "But with the help of a special compound, we can leave the planet for a period of time." she looked at her partner. "But we must return soon."

Frustration welling up inside of her that it was taking so long for Voyager to respond, Seven asked sharply, "Why has Kathryn been captured?"

"A staged assembly was to be held and an effective case presented," Diplomat Omahr responded. "The plan was that Sgurrin, with the authentication of Captain Janeway, would be charged and convicted of murder. During this time, as your Captain would be heavily involved in the assembly proceedings, Elder Duhr intended to win your confidence, Seven." She looked at the blonde. "Then she planned to convince you to return with her to Sgurr Mohr."

Seven tried to ignore the pang of fear that clenched at her heart at the thought of leaving Janeway. "I would never leave Kathryn."

"Seven," Diplomat Omahr said, "even though you are bonded, Elder Duhr is old and very potent. Sgurrin and I were born psi-empathic and our training has enhanced our abilities, we are now fully empathic. Over the years, we have learned to suppress our emotions when we encounter others with empathic abilities. However, with Elder Duhr's exceptional abilities, it was necessary to have synaptic neurons implanted not only to suppress our emotions, but to have very detailed false ones overlaid." The Gaelian looked at Seven intently. "Believe me, Seven, if she wished, you would not be able to resist her."

Seven felt lightheaded. "Why have they taken her?"

"Her capture is a deviation from the plan," Diplomat Sgurrin replied.

"Why?" Seven asked

The Gaelians looked at each other.

"As a sect," Diplomat Omahr said carefully, "the power of ritual is very important. It was planned that on our 'successful' return to Sgurr Mohr, a sacrifice would be made to honor the scrolls and start the invocation of the new genesis. The sacrifice was to be a selected individual from our planet."

Seven felt a sudden wrench in her stomach. The baby has kicked!

"Seven," Diplomat Omahr added cautiously, "we are here, now, because a decision has been made to sacrifice your Captain."

Sacrifice! Seven looked at the Gaelians in horror. The color drained from her face.

"Through the power of ritual, her blood will be drawn in a pattern to incite and reinforce the faith's beliefs, and give power to the prophecy," Diplomat Sgurrin said. "Although, we are now a peaceful and enlightened species, long ago, when we first explored space, we were hungry and we took whatever we could."

"I assume, in those days, sacrifice was an integral part of your beliefs," Tuvok asked.

"Yes," Diplomat Sgurrin replied. "Most species were so overwhelmed, so unprepared, that our fore-bearers took full advantage." A look of shame crossed her face. "We exploited every new encounter, using our strengths...our sexual prowess to enslave and sacrifice them. She looked at Tuvok. "We did not become a closed society willingly. The contraction of the Mhorinian disease, not only wiped out all of our male species, but most of our population. We were forced to retreat, to re-evaluate and, through time, we became a better more enlightened society and a less harmful species." Her face hardened. "We are ashamed of our past. Our people have no wish to return to those times."

Unable to believe what she had just heard, Seven stared at the Gaelians. Bitterness, pain and fury were suddenly more acute emotions. She slapped her combadge, "Seven to Commander Chakotay."

"Go ahead, Seven."

"I require an update."

"We're still working on it. There's nothing on geothermic sensors," Chakotay replied. "Wait, we're picking up life signs."

"Known?"

"They're too erratic."

"Source?"

"Coordinates one seven two mark five."

"Those are the coordinates for Asteroid Xail'Urch," said Investigator Nuriq. "We mined there some time ago. It still has gravity and breathable air."

A wave of relief filled Seven. Gravimetric suits would only weigh them down.

"Commander, we have triangulated the coordinates to an asteroid," Tuvok informed Chakotay.

"Excellent, Tuvok. Let me know when you are ready. Chakotay out."

"The perimeter of the coordinates is the weakest in sector four of the asteroid. We shouldn't have any problems beaming down," Investigator Nuriq said to Tuvok. "The terrain is flat but the caverns are deep."

Tuvok looked at Diplomat Sgurrin. "Your tactical analysis, Diplomat."

"Elder Dhur will have her closest sect members with her. They will not be wearing any inhibitors. Their pheromones will be in full force, we need to inoculate everyone." She held out a batch of capsules, and passed them to Investigator Nuriq to distribute. "Tuvok," she said passing one to the Vulcan. "Seven."

Seven hesitantly took the capsule.

"It will not harm your child," Diplomat Omahr said reassuringly. "And it will help block Elder Duhr from reading your emotions."

"As we know," Diplomat Sgurrin said, "returning Captain Janeway to Voyager, and neutralizing the threat of this sect is our primary objective." She looked at the group. "I must warn you, Elder Duhr has a contingent with her." She grimaced. "The Grolectors, are hellish creatures, but their origins are human, so they are vulnerable to our sexual pheromones. The sect has enslaved them. They are a malevolent species that thrive in committing acts of violence. They are savage, barbaric, amongst the most ferocious of their kind. Their feral fury is legendary and hard to contain."

"How large a contingent?" Tuvok asked.

"Five."

Seven heard a snort from one of the Zarkonian's.

"Believe me," Diplomat Sgurrin said, directing her gaze to all the Zarkonian soldiers, "An encounter with just one of these individuals, if you live, will stay in your mind for a very long time to come."

Impatience, shining from Seven's eyes, she asked, "When can we transport to the coordinates?"

Tuvok looked at Investigator Nuriq.

"Whenever you are ready, Commander," the Investigator responded.

Seven looked at the Station Master. "I suggest you inform your Sickbay to be on standby."

Why?" The four foot, bright orange haired individual responded, his raccoon eyes growing.

"There will be heavy casualties."

"I take it there's no point in holding out for a diplomatic solution?" he asked.

"Tuvok and Seven locked eyes. "No," he replied. He tapped his combadge. "The rescue team is prepared to commence search, Commander. We will soon be ready to transport to the coordinates you provided. The Station Master will take care of the transport from here."

"Understood, Tuvok," Chakotay responded. "And Commander..."

"Yes," the Vulcan replied.

"Turn the asteroid inside out if you have to."

"Understood."

"Battle stations," Seven heard Chakotay say before the comm was cut.

Tuvok addressed them. "In order to minimize the casualties on our side," he said, "we need to agree our tactical approach before we beam down to the asteroid."

Chapter Twenty-three

In order to ensure that they were not discovered, they materialized on the asteroid several hundred meters from the location that Chakotay had provided. As yet, the element of surprise was working to their advantage; they had not encountered any members of the Gaelian force.

Approaching a rock formation, Seven held out her tricorder. "There is an opening approximately three kilometers from here," she said quietly.

They headed toward it.

Investigator Nuriq silently ordered her team to form a defense perimeter around the entry of the rock formation.

"I suggest we proceed with caution," Tuvok responded.

"Agreed," Diplomat Sgurrin replied.

Seven keyed commands into her tricorder. "I am mapping the caverns surrounding here." Her heart rate picked up when they passed through the opening. "There is faint signature."

"Is it the Captain's?" Tuvok asked.

"Too faint for a diagnostic," Seven responded.

"How far down?" Diplomat Sgurrin asked.

"Approximately six kilometers," Seven responded, moving quickly.

They descended down a sloping 45 degree incline, so steep they were forced to quietly scramble down much of the way. The sloping passage led them to a horizontal side passage which they followed. The stillness and silence was pervasive. Other than hand codes, they descended in silence.

Eventually they emerged into a large cavernous chamber, hundreds of feet high. The cavern was illuminated by greenish phosphorescence. The strange luminescence seemed to emanate from the walls of the chamber itself. There were two passages in the far wall of the chamber opposite their entry point that were black expanses of gloomy darkness.

Seven's heart began to thud. Excitement filled her. For the first time since the descent, life signs were strong. "I'm reading strong life signs," she whispered.

"Any of them Captain Janeway's" Tuvok asked quietly.

Seven's heart stuttered. "No," she responded. Quickly, she moved through the entrance.

"Hold your position, Seven," Tuvok whispered.

Ignoring him, Seven slowly entered the chamber, several Gaelians came into view. They were in their usual skin tight outfits, but their arms were raised and they appeared to be worshiping. Adulation shone from their eyes as they fixed on Elder Duhr.

Looking for Janeway, Seven scanned the wide cavern anxiously. She couldn't find her. The greenish hue seemed to impair her visual acuity. She heard Tuvok circle around the back of her as did the rest of his detail.

"Intruders." A Gaelian shouted from one of the passage ways.

"We've been detected," Tuvok called out.

Phaser fire ricocheted around in the cavern. Suddenly voices where shouting, people running.

All hell broke loose.

Seven pointed her phaser at a Gaelian who was taking aim at Diplomat Sgurrin, but it failed. She threw it away.

Phaser fire hitting her, Diplomat Sgurrin went down.

Seven sprinted for the Gaelian, who was taking a second shot at Diplomat Sgurrin. Extremely focused and fast, her strikes precise, balance and coordination finely-honed, she let fly a volley of rapid-fire punches, and with an open-handed punch took the Gaelian out. She moved quickly to Diplomat Sgurrin. Kneeling, she observed that she had been shot in the neck.

Dazed, blood pouring from the wound, gasping for air, Diplomat Sgurrin stared up at her. "I'm sorry, Seven," she spluttered.

"It is I who should apologize, Diplomat. "I should have been more cautious."

Breathing heavily, Seven wanted to reassure the Diplomat about her wound, but it seemed severe.

Holding a phaser, another Gaelian circled them. "Stand down, Seven," she said. "I do not wish to harm you."

Slowly Seven stood. There was chaos all around them. Heavily muscled, small, dark haired creatures with elongated teeth came rushing from the passageways into the cavern. Tuvok, his security team and Diplomat Omahr were in a defensive position and firing at the attacking Gaelians.

The Zarkonian soldiers came hurdling through the passage way.

The Grolectors launched themselves at them.

Seven heard screams.

Her hands, locked in a combat position, she eyed the Gaelian pointing the phaser at her. "Where is Captain Janeway?"

"Stand down, Seven." The Gaelian said. She was joined by three of her people.

Understanding that they wouldn't fire at her, Seven eyes narrowed. "Make me!"

Teeth gritting, eyes blazing, she charged in an all-out assault. Three sharp kicks and a punch to the head dropped one of her opponents like an ejected warp core. The three remaining Gaelians took up defensive positions. Knowing her skill and ferocity was enough, she charged them. It took two dead Gaelians, and several ragged breaths, before she realized she'd been hit. A searing pain shot through her head.

Dropping to her knees, Seven swiped a hand over her right temple. Dazedly, she looked at it. It was covered in blood.

She looked across at Sgurrin. Her eyes were closed, but she was still breathing.

As phaser fire mixed with screams echoed around the cavern. Seven's eyes scanned for the Vulcan. Tuvok and one of his security detail, and what was left of the Zarkonians, were pinned down by the Grolectors.

Mutilated bodies were strewn around them. Blood was everywhere.

A figure moved toward Seven. It was Elder Duhr. She pointed at the Gaelian who had fired at Seven.

"Take her."

The dark creature by the Elder's side moved quickly, lithely.

"No," The Gaelian screamed as the creature threw her over its shoulder and disappeared through a passageway.

Seven remained on her knees until her blood curling scream, which seemed to rise above the rest, faded. Slowly she stood. "Where is she?" she asked.

Elder Duhr approached her. Stopping near her, the Gaelian slowly held her hands up. "Seven," she said, "we mean you no harm."

The wound deep, blood poured from it and down the side of Seven's face. Ignoring it, she asked again, "Where is Captain Janeway?"

"You are wounded. Let me assist you."

"Where is she?" Seven said through gritted teeth.

"She is here."

Eyes wide, holding her breath, Seven scanned the area. She couldn't see her. She wiped the blood from her human eye, in the vain hope that it would help. Overwhelming disappointment filled her. "Get her," she said to the tall Gaelian.

"I will soon," Elder Duhr replied. "Seven," she said as she cautiously moved closer, "do you have any idea the power, the magnitude, the ability that your child will have?"

Ignoring the Gaelian, Seven's eyes continued to scan the eerily luminescent cavern. "Where is she?"

Elder Duhr held out her hands. "Your child will not only have inherited Gaelian characteristics, but she will also be Borg. And what a potent mix that is - being Borg with psi-empathic abilities as well as strength, power, superior intelligence, and her extreme beauty. She will be the most extraordinary individual."

Eyes narrowing, Seven looked at the Gaelian. "She will also be human."

Elder Duhr laughed.

Seven felt her skin crawl. It was a new experience.

"Human," The Gaelian replied derisively. "Is it not you who also see humans as weak, erratic...flawed?" Her voice firmed. "Have they not failed you?"

"Humans are complex, passionate individuals," Seven responded. Thinking of Janeway, and the emotional trauma she must have gone through when she lost her father and her fiancée, Justin. She added, "Who can embark on the most profound journeys, not least within themselves."

"Well, well, Seven, the Borg drone has turned," Elder Duhr said. "Hmmm...I must say, I like this side of you. I like that you are compassionate." She smiled. "It shows a sign of maturity." Her smile faded. She shrugged. "Unfortunately there is the small matter of lingering human DNA strands. But I'm sure, in time, we'll sort that out. I prefer to believe that since your Captain transformed, for the mating ritual. At the time, she was more Gaelian than human."

A sense of foreboding filled Seven. "I want to see Kathryn. Now!"

"You will, Seven. But let me give you a little history lesson first, to bring you up-to-date, so to speak," the Gaelian said. "Things are not always as they appear, Seven. How nature appears is not how nature truly is. If you take any hospitable planet, we look upon the land and celebrate it; the insects floating through the air, the birds sporting themselves." Her voice sharpened. "But we are fools! What we do not see, beneath the surface, is a continuous state of war. The young are dying young and the rest of life struggles to survive. The wonder of being alive is to be aware of your nature in all of its glory. These humans, that you admire so much, will never understand your child. With me, she will be worshiped - as she deserves to be - fully." Her eyes widened. "You cannot allow your child to become the small individual that she will be forced to be if you continue with Voyager. You need to let her follow her destiny and become the Gaelian and Borg that she truly is!"

"Enough of this!" Seven yelled. Panic filled her. "Where are you holding Kathryn?"

"Seven!" Elder Duhr spat out, "don't you realize that with Janeway's species, your child will never be equal"

Seven felt ill. She realized that Elder Duhr was using her abilities, and tapping in on her insecurities.

"Your child will add to our uniqueness."

"Add to your uniqueness," Seven repeated. She knew exactly where she had heard that before.

"Yes," the Gaelian responded. "The only place where she can truly fulfill her potential is with us...with me. She will have a wonderful life."

"Kathryn!" Seven shouted. She looked around her and shouted again.

"Janeway, the tormented hero," Elder Duhr sneered. "Wants you, doesn't want you." Her voice "hardened. "Humans are weak, lower animals."She raised her dark, elegant eyebrows. "You need an individual who is strong, who will help you fulfill your destiny."

"Kathryn?" Seven shouted again.

The Grolector, that had taken the Gaelian, returned, and resumed its position next to the Elder.

Elder Duhr sighed. "All right, Seven. We'll have it your way. Your precious Captain is right here," she said. She pointed to a dark edge of the cavern

Seven scanned the area. Her ocular implant zoomed in on a dark shape, but it was difficult to make out what it was. Abject horror overwhelmed the ex Borg when she realized that the shape was a prostrate body on a low altar.

Calling out to Janeway from the top of her lungs, Seven ran to her. Sliding, she fell to her knees. It took her a moment to realize that she had slid in a pool of Kathryn's blood. Hands shaking violently; she reached out for the redhead. Somewhere it registered in her mind that her hands had never shaken. Staring at them, as they reached for Janeway, she found it impossible to believe that she was becoming the soft underbelly of what was once a Borg drone.

"I know you do not understand this now, but your Captain needed to be eliminated," Elder Duhr said, as she approached her. "I understand that it is traumatic." She clicked her tongue. "I'm sorry you had to see her this way."

Hands shaking even more violently, Seven pulled Janeway to her, unable to believe that this smashed and very broken woman was her Captain, the parent of their child, the woman that she needed more than life itself. Trembling, she held the lifeless body in her arms and howled. It was a noise that shocked her - pulled out of her in the way only the tormented know. On her knees, she swayed. Holding Janeway, crying over her, Seven was desperate to feel some life, but there was nothing - only coldness. A deep despairing emptiness filled her. She had taken enough lives to know a shell. Kathryn was no more, and folding her face into the redhead's shoulder, she could not believe it.

She is dead. Dead!

Lifting her head, Seven whispered, "Why?"

"Why!" The Elder exclaimed. "Where's your logic, Seven? You are Borg. She is a mere human!" What kind of match is that!" She looked at the blonde then sighed indulgently. "I really do regret that you have been exposed to this. I wanted to protect you. Given the size of this outpost, I intended for her death to appear as nothing more than a random, but savage crime." She clicked her tongue again. "My failure, I'm afraid. I should have allowed for the unexpected. Originally, I hadn't intended to kill your Captain, you know." She laughed. "There was no need. I sent a serum to your Doctor that would have forced the child to release her need for the human, and I intended to return you to Sgurr Mohr," she eyed Seven seductively. "And with a little work, you will still come willingly." She raised her brow. "But that was before I knew about the Sertile markings." She spread her hands. "Who knew that someone so unimportant would have those markings? It's quite incredible."

Seven shook her head. "Sertile markings?"

"It is said that only a true leader can carry the markings!" Elder Duhr said. She scoffed as she looked down at Janeway's dead body. "Clearly that doesn't apply to her."

Tears now streaming down her face, Seven hugged Janeway tightly then carefully laid her down. She was covered in her blood. Her mind filled with rage. Overwhelming emotions rolled over her. She wanted to kill. Slowly, she stood, and allowed the bloodthirsty need for revenge that screamed throughout her entire body to settle. Coldly, she eyed the Elder then the Grolector at her side. She sent commands to her cortical node. Her exoskeleton hand unsheathed sharp-edged acronine blades that were designed for conduit repairs, but would cut through flesh, bone, and the reinforced outer hull of a Borg sphere, as if slicing through water. Floods of nanoprobe also filled Seven's system, providing her already powerful frame with added strength."

Eyeing the blades, with surprise, Elder Duhr hurriedly stepped back. "I know that you're angry, just now...Seven," she said. She signaled to the creature to take Seven, "but that will chang-

Before the creature had time to react, Seven stepped forward and drove her exoskeleton hand straight through the Grolector's eyes. Without a sound, the creature's body shuddered then went limp. Using her leg, she levered the body, and pulled her blades out. The lifeless torso folded over its knees.

Seven looked at the stunned Gaelian. She was frozen to the spot.

Quickly, Seven scanned for Tuvok. He and the remaining Zarkonians had successfully pinned down the few remaining Gaelians, and all but one Grolector was left, and it was hurtling its way toward Seven right now.

As it crashed into her, Seven didn't budge. Instead, she grabbed the foul smelling creature by the neck. She could tell by the dawning fear in its eyes, that her strength had taken it by surprise. Squeezing its windpipe, she punctured its throat with her blades. To her satisfaction, it tried to

scream. Struggling, its dirty, large canines hacked through its bottom lip as the life was sucked out of it.

Although she had taken a life often as a drone, Seven had never felt the sense of satisfaction that she did now. Blood pouring from its mouth, the creature gurgled as it clawed frantically at her human hand. Serenely, she watched its life expire.

Tossing the lifeless body aside, Seven turned her attention to the Gaelian.

Elder Duhr was hurriedly moving backward. Tripping over, she fell to the ground.

"Did you believe," Seven said moving swiftly toward her, "that I would allow my child to fall into the hands of a megalomaniac?"

Seven stood over the prostrate woman. "Captain Janeway does not like bullies, and like her," she said, grabbing the Gaelian by the throat and hauling her up, "I do not respond well to threats."

She raised the Elder high, until her feet dangled off the ground. "As you admire the Borg so much," She said. "Then, you should experience what it is like to join them, if only for the briefest moment." Seven's blades retracted and her nanoprobes tendrils slithered out. Lowering the Gaelian, she plunged the tendrils into her throat. "Resistance is futile," she said, her tone devoid of inflection.

"Seven?"

The ex Borg felt a light pressure on her shoulder.

Knowing who it was, she offered no acknowledgement. Instead, she watched the Gaelian's skin mottle. She squeezed her throat harder.

"Seven," Tuvok said. "You have struggled for the last three years to regain your humanity."

Seven felt the warmth of Tuvok's hand on her shoulder.

"Your love for Captain Janeway has made that pursuit less arduous, He added. He squeezed her shoulder gently. "Do not lose all that you and the Captain have worked for."

Trying to ignore the Vulcan, Seven focused on the Gaelian. She watched her eyes pop as she slowly choked her. Suddenly, Kathryn filled her mind. 'Conquer this, Seven. Conquer this need to annihilate.' Startled, Seven loosened her grip then let the Elder go. Those were Kathryn's words!

Gasping, Elder Duhr dropped to the ground.

"It is good to see that you did not lose your humanity, Seven," Tuvok stated. He quickly moved to stand over the Gaelian. Pointing his phaser at her, he added, "You have just reaffirmed it."

Chapter Twenty-four

Slowly Janeway opened her eyes. She couldn't quite make out where she was. The noises and the surroundings were familiar, she knew, but she couldn't focus her mind enough. She tried to think.

"Captain?"

Janeway focused. The face was familiar.

"Captain, it's the doctor."

Doctor? Janeway looked at the strange man. Yes, that's right, I'm a...captain, captain of a starship. Now what is his name?

"You're in Sickbay, Captain," the doctor said gently, leaning over her. "You've been in a coma for the last few days. "

Coma? Janeway's mind repeated. She realized that she was lying on a biobed. Then she remembered.

"I'm alive?" she croaked.

"Evidently," the doctor responded. "But it was touch and go."

"How touch and go?"

"Extensive neural path damage, but we have been able to heal you." He looked at her. "You've had quite an ordeal, Captain. Seven, along with a rescue team, found you...dead." He exhaled heavily. "Brace yourself, Captain, you might find the next part hard to believe, but you are quite the little miracle. It appears that Diplomat Omahr brought with her a vile that was given to her

from her," he bracketed the words, "leaders." He raised himself on his heels. "She was told that you may carry the Sertile markings and, if so, would need it." Mouth downturned, he added, "It seems that the Council of Authority anticipated that Elder Duhr might go shall we say, a little, over the top, if you showed the markings."

"How," she paused. Her throat sounding rusty, Janeway cleared it then continued. "How did they know?"

"It seems that the Council of Authority didn't take to well to Elder Duhr bumping her gums about a messianic coming." He sighed. "From my datafiles and experience, it seems that it doesn't matter what species it is, the ones in power like to hold on to it." He looked at Janeway. "Apparently, they wanted Seven and the baby to continue on their way and for that they need you...alive."

Janeway closed her eyes.

"In case you are interested, the vile contained moon microbes from the three moons orbiting Sgurr Mohr, no less," the doctor said. He raised his brow. "And, it appears that an individual with Sertile markings can be brought back to life," his eyes widened, "no matter what the damage." He frowned. "And believe me, Captain, damage is quite the understatement when it came to your injuries."

Janeway opened her eyes slowly.

"As you carry the markings, we injected the microbes into your system. But we couldn't risk you coming back a fully functioning cadaver or zombie as Mister Paris likes to refer to it, so we added some nanoprobes, and it worked!" The doctor swirled his hands in the air. "Tah-dah!" He smiled smugly at her. "You were resurrected."

Tiredness seeped into Janeway's every bone.

He frowned. "Of course, I'm analyzing the microbes to find out exactly what this magic elixir is."

Lying on the biobed, Janeway listened to the doctor prattle on. She knew he was covering up his relief through nervous chatter, but she felt numb, completely removed from herself. She felt as if she were somewhere else.

"Seven has been beside herself. Distraught is too small a word." He frowned deeply. "The events that happened to you have quite literally terrified her."

Janeway felt her body tremble.

The doctor ran his tricorder over her.

"Captain, you should expect a few tremors. It has taken some creative surgery and great imagination to put you back together. You were in a terrible condition."

Terrible condition? Janeway thought. Doctor, I was dead!

She heard the Sickbay doors hiss open, Seven entered.

"Seven," the doctor said, putting his tricorder down, "I thought you were regenerating."

"I was," Seven replied, making her way to Janeway. "I had the computer alert me the moment the Captain's vital signs changed."

The doctor raised his brow in surprise. "I see." He looked at Janeway. "Captain," he leaned in close to her ear. "Seven has been holding a vigil since you arrived in Sickbay. It would be wise if you encourage her to return to her alcove."

Janeway didn't respond.

The doctor looked at the redhead then frowned.

"How is the baby?" he asked, glancing at Seven.

"Our baby is well, doctor," Seven replied, moving closer to Janeway.

Apparently, expecting that chat about the baby would catch Janeway's attention, they waited expectedly.

Silence filled the room.

"You'll be glad to hear that I have prepared a compound to inhibit Seven's...requirements," the doctor said. He added gently, "It appears that Marika has sensed that things aren't quite... routine with you, so she has attuned to meet your current state." He raised his brow. "When you recover, you can resume your normal physical requirements."

How resourceful, Janeway thought. A wave of deep tiredness filled her.

Slowly, Seven approached Janeway and gently reached out to touch her.

The redhead flinched.

She watched Seven's fingers curl up.

She felt shaky.

"Her heart is accelerating to 200 beats per minute," the doctor said, pushing Seven aside. "Her Adrenaline levels are rising."

Shaking violently, Janeway struggled to breath.

Seven looked stunned.

The doctor grabbed for a hypospray "She's convulsing. Fifty milligrams cordrazine and-"

Janeway blacked out.

"Captain."

Janeway opened her eyes slowly.

"Captain."

The redhead focused on the doctor, he was patting her hand.

"Doctor?" she said, feeling as if her vocal chords had been hauled out of a Risa sandstorm.

"Captain," the doctor replied, placing her hand by her side, "welcome back."

"What happened?"

"Your neuroelectrical readings went off the scale," he replied, running a tricorder over her. "There was a sudden disruption in your hippocampus." He closed the tricorder. "In short, we had to sedate you." He looked at her. "You suffered severe neural trauma, Captain. You have been sedated for over a week now." He raised his brow. "The good news is that your synaptic pathways aren't degrading, and a complete encephalographic profile shows that your entire neural structure has stabilized."

For the next five minutes, the doctor prodded and probed her. Thankfully, this time round, his chat was limited to how she was feeling.

A sudden feeling of déjà vu hit Janeway when the Sickbay doors hissed open and Seven entered

"Kathryn," Seven said moving quickly to her side, deep concern shining from her blue eyes. "How is she, doctor?"

"I see no reason why the Captain can't rest in her quarters from now on. That is," he said, looking down at Janeway, "If you promise to wear a neurocortical monitor." He looked at Seven. "Just in case she has another...episode."

"Is that probable?" Seven asked.

"With these," he said wagging his fingers, "It's highly unlikely. But it is always good to err on the cautious side."

"Understood," Seven said. "Kathryn, I-"

The Sickbay doors hissed open and Neelix entered.

"Captain," the little Talaxian said, bright and breezy, "good to see you're awake."

Expressionless, Janeway watched him approach.

"I've brought a little refreshment."

The doctor raised his brow. "He's been bringing these revitalizing remedies every day. Even though you were sedated!" He looked pointedly at the Talaxian, "Sometimes, one can take their duties too far." He frowned. "Unfortunately, I can't prescribe anything for overzealousness, but I assure you Mister Neelix, I am working on it!"

Ignoring the doctor, Neelix, holding a tray, with a small glass containing a black substance smiled down at Janeway. "Enthraxic citrus peel, orange juice with just a hint of papalla seed extract, it's a wonderful pick-me-up."

"Neelix," the doctor said. "I do not believe the Captain requires your concoctions right now. Or ever," he mumbled.

"Ensign Golwat tried some yesterday, and she thought it was delicious. In fact, she had a second glass, and she never has seconds."

"Ensign Golwat is Bolian," the doctor responded. "Her tongue has a cartilaginous lining that would protect her against even the most corrosive acid!"

As her two senior officers argued over the finer points of Bolian physiology, Janeway looked over at Seven. The blonde was staring at her. Unable to make eye contact, she closed her eyes.

Where the hell was a disruption in your hippocampus when you really needed it?

In her quarters, Janeway stood next to the replicator. She keyed in the command for a glass of whiskey. Hands shaking, she lifted the glass and drank the measure in one gulp. Placing it down, she ordered another.

She was acutely aware that it had been a three weeks since her kidnap. She was, according to the doctor still uncommunicative but that was not unexpected. She was suffering from a severe and

dramatic emotional reaction to an extreme psychological trauma, he had told her. Her withdrawal was to be expected. He also informed her she may be prone to other symptoms such as avoidance of places and people.

On that diagnosis, he was right.

The doors hissed open and Seven entered their quarters. Her duty shift had ended.

The ex Borg frowned when Janeway picked up her glass. She moved closer to her.

Janeway shied away.

"You have consumed alcohol each evening since your recovery."

Seven, Janeway was informed by her EMH was being closely monitored, so she had no need to worry about her. He had devised a medical compound that would temporarily assist in reducing her sexual urges and withdrawal pains. The doctor also informed her that the baby had sensed high dosages of cortisol coming from her and had responded accordingly. It appeared that she was waiting for her second parent to normalize.

Holding her glass, Janeway nodded. She knew that Seven and the crew were deeply worried about her. She had changed, her usual vigor had gone. They had put it down to the horrific experience that she had been through, and that she would recover soon. But the redhead knew that something fundamental in her had shifted. That the real Janeway had been sucked out and the person left behind was nothing but an empty vessel.

Seven stepped closer. Nervously Janeway moved away. She knew that the younger woman didn't fully understand her withdrawal, and for that she despised herself.

Since her recovery, Seven had shown nothing but patience. Janeway knew, in her fragile state, that she should have been grateful for that, but she wasn't. The deadness that was inside her stopped her from caring about anything even the most important things.

Moving away from the replicator, and taking a seat in the farthest corner of the room, she forced herself to drink slowly from her glass. The liquid helped her, and for that she was grateful. Her nights were made not made for reflection, or for savoring. Hers were made for torture.

Seven, moving around their quarters, was talking to her about her day.

Listening, Janeway nursed her glass. Seven had been briefed to act as normally as possible, to ensure that everything was as it should be.

Watching Seven key commands into the replicator, Janeway's hand involuntarily reached for her left breast, as she had done many times over the last few weeks. She sighed with relief, it was there. The deep cuts, the breaks and the bruises were all gone. The doctor's medical skill, the microbes and the nanoprobe that were keeping her alive ensured this.

"Kathryn the food is almost ready," Seven said. She looked at Janeway tenderly. "Would you like to shower and change?"

It was a routine that Janeway liked to do when she clocked off duty. Only she had never returned to duty.

Voyager was still orbiting the Zarkonian outpost. It was clear that her senior crew sensed that she might have a meltdown if they left orbit and faced a red alert.

When Diplomat Omahr and Sgurrin's reinforcements had arrived, a week ago, they quickly took Elder Duhr and her few remaining sect members with them and returned to Sgurr Mohr.

Other than a brief conversation with the Diplomats, Janeway had wanted nothing to do with them. She didn't want to hear that they couldn't tell her anything for fear that Elder Duhr would empathically know. She didn't want to hear that nothing could be done, by the Council of Authority, until the Elder made her move. She didn't want to hear that the only element of truth was that they were bond partners. Everything, it seemed, was a fabrication. She had been completely and utterly suckered.

Her usual diplomacy taciturn, she listened as they fully briefed her and explained that their judicial system would prevail and that and that the Elder and her merry band would be brought to justice. She listened to their apologies about not being able to save her from such an atrocious act of violence.

Throughout the meeting, her only response had been to nod or provide cursory responses. When the meeting came to an end, she wished them a safe journey and had them escorted to Transporter Room Two. The quicker she could get them off Voyager, the better.

Their parting gift had been a copy of the sacred scrolls. Diplomat Omahr had informed her that they had wrestled with whether or not to pass them on. But, in the end, they decided that Marika may want to know her history, and that her coming had been foretold on a faraway planet. It was a decision that they would leave in Janeway's and Seven's hands.

Janeway had passed the scrolls on to Seven and, ignoring the disturbed look in her eyes, told her that whatever decision she made, she would go along with it.

"Kathryn?"

Janeway nodded. She knew that Seven probably more than anything found her silence difficult. But she had crawled into the dark recesses of her mind. Lived her life and every decision she had made with each blow. Stripped of her captaincy, she was forced to face the vulnerable, small, helpless fragile human that she truly was, for the second time in her life. The first was on Tau Ceti Prime.

All these years later, she still couldn't forgive herself for not saving them. Survivor's guilt was

the designated term. Two words that brought a team of professionals clambering at her mother's door to help alleviate her pain and grief - but they couldn't.

The redhead trembled. She thought of the visit from her father, she didn't know what to make of it. Was he real?" She had no answer. Glass in hand, she headed for her bedroom. She had never felt so small.

Stripping, Janeway couldn't look at herself. In the darkness, she swallowed the remainder of her whiskey and stepped into the shower. The water rained down on her. A brief moment of peace filled her. Her mind emptied, allowing her to just live in the moment.

Janeway didn't know how long she was in the shower, but reluctantly, she stepped out and slowly dressed in pants and a thick top to keep her warm. Since her recovery, she seemed to be so cold all the time.

Slowly, she entered the living space.

Seven was at the dining table, waiting in her usual erect form. Their evening meal was under stasis dishes. Janeway looked at the chronometer, she had been in the shower for over an hour.

"Kathryn," Seven said as if she had been gone just five minutes. "Join me. I have replicated a dish that I think you might like."

Moving toward the dining table, Janeway pulled out a chair. She desperately wanted another whiskey but knew that Seven might become frightened at her excessive drinking. And, right now, she could only cope with one frightened person - herself.

Sitting, she tried to smile when Seven removed the stasis lid and placed the meal in front of her. Usually, given such a delicious plate of food, Janeway would have wolfed into it. But, right now, the delicate smell only made her want to vomit. "Thank you, Seven," she said, her voice a little rusty from underuse.

"You're welcome, Kathryn." Warmth filled Seven's eyes. "I thought it best that we eat at the dining table tonight."

This activity of sitting at the dining table, together, was new. At the beginning of Janeway's recovery, Seven replicated nutritional supplements for her to consume at her leisure. But, when it was clear that she wasn't eating, and as the weight began falling off her, the blonde insisted on being around, each evening, until her supplement was consumed. Most nights, it was a painfully slow experience for them both.

Picking up her fork, Janeway swallowed.

Relief evident in Seven's face, she poured some iced water into short stemmed glasses.

Janeway pushed her fork through the food and lifting it to her mouth, forced it in. Stomach

churning, she chewed slowly then swallowed.

Seven discretely watched her.

Janeway's stomach turned. Her eyes widened in surprise. Most nights she managed to consume the supplements. Retching, she covered her mouth. She pushed out of the chair. The chair falling over, she quickly made her way to the bedroom and into the bathroom, where she retched violently.

Slumped on the bathroom floor, barely conscious, Janeway felt a wet cloth on her face then being lifted. Gently she was laid on her bed. Seven slipped in beside her. Since, her return, Seven had taken role reversal and slept on the couch. Janeway knew she should object. The sofa was more than comfortable, but under normal circumstances she would never have allowed that to happen, but it wasn't normal circumstances, was it? Nothing was normal.

Lying close beside her, but not touching her, Seven's breath whispered over her forehead, then a hand closed around her own.

Janeway flinched, her body tensed, but Seven's hand gently lifted hers and placed it on her swollen stomach.

Closing her eyes, for a second Janeway felt something, something that meant something to her - a connection - before the familiar emptiness filled her. She tried to fight the tiredness that enveloped her. She wanted to tell the woman beside her that she was wasting her time. That what she had brought back was not what was taken. She might be alive, but she was dead inside.

Chapter Twenty-five

Opening her eyes, Seven instructed the computer to locate the Captain.

"Captain Janeway is in her quarters."

Stepping down from the dais, she made her way to the workstation, and followed her routine.

She would run a quick diagnostic, check that all Astrometrics functions were fully operational, before exiting Cargobay Two and making her way to her quarters.

The cargobay doors slide open and the doctor entered.

"Seven," the EMH said, approaching her. "I have your medication." He placed a hypospray on her workstation. "The usual instructions apply."

Slowly, picking up the hypospray, Seven stared at it. "It has been over two weeks, Doctor." She tried to mask her pain. "There has been no response."

The doctor moved closer to Seven. "I understand, but as we've discussed, the trauma that the

Captain has experienced is beyond anything she could have ever imagined." He placed a hand on Seven's arm. "We just need to keep trying to reach her."

"What if we cannot?" Seven asked, her eyes brimming. "What if she never recovers?"

"She will, Seven. This is Captain Janeway we're talking about."

"Doctor," Seven said. "I am finding this difficult." She raised her brow. "Each night I try to enforce a routine. As instructed, I talk to her about my day. Update her on the growth of our child. Ask about her day and so it follows." She frowned. "But inside, she pressed a hand to her stomach. "I want her. I ache for her." She looked at the doctor. "But I cannot reach her."

"Have you ever thought of telling her?"

Seven wiped the falling tears from her face. "You know I cannot."

"I know that Diplomat Omahr advised you not to reveal your true feelings during the mating ritual, but that was then, Seven."

"I cannot."

"Try, Seven."

"Doctor, I do not understand what Kathryn is going through. Allowing her to empathically connect to me may damage her further."

"Seven, believe me, you understand the Captain more than anyone." His eyes softened. "And, I don't believe you will damage her."

"I cannot help her. I am not fully human. I do not understand humanity," Seven said, then shook her head in frustration. "I doubt I ever will."

"Do you recall when Voyager stole the transwarp coil from that damaged Borg sphere?"

Confused, Seven looked at the EMH. "Of course."

"And the Borg Queen gave you an ultimatum - rejoin the Collective or watch Voyager be assimilated?"

Seven inclined her head. "Yes."

"The Captain was at a total loss as to why you had chosen to rejoin the Collective," he said. "Some among the senior crew thought that you were keeping to your word and betraying her."

Chakotay! Seven thought.

"But the Captain refused to accept that was the reason. But, you were gone, Seven." The doctor made a dismissive gesture. "As far as the crew was concerned, you had chosen to return to the Borg. A request was made that, since your alcove consumed large amounts of energy, it be removed." He held up a hand. "But the Captain wouldn't allow it. She was so determined to get you back, she did the unimaginable; she pursued you into the heart of the Collective, into their Unicomplex - with trillions of life forms - all of them Borg!"

Eyes wide, Seven listened intently.

"I recall the way she addressed the crew on the Bridge just before the mission." He looked at her. "Do you want to hear what she said?"

Seven inclined her head.

"This will be a long range tactical rescue. It could take days, even weeks, before we find our missing crewman. Lieutenant Torres is equipping the Delta Flyer with the transwarp coil. It'll allow us to cover more territory. An away team will take it into transwarp space where Tuvok believes we can track the sphere that abducted Seven of Nine. Thanks to the Hansens, we'll be well prepared for an encounter with the Borg. Their multi-adaptive shielding will make the Flyer virtually invisible to Borg sensors, and narrow beam transporters will allow us to penetrate the Sphere. Mister Paris, you'll man the helm. Commander Tuvok, tactical. Doctor, there's no telling what condition Seven will be in when we find her. You'll come along. I'll be leading the away team. The rest of you will remain on Voyager and maintain position at the threshold of our transwarp conduit. We may need tactical support when we return. You'll be taking your orders from Commander Chakotay. We'll be searching for one individual among thousands of drones, but she's one of us and I'm not about to let her go."

Seven raised her ocular implant.

"Not one member of Captain Janeway's crew thought that mission possible," the doctor said. "They thought she was risking lives. But the loyalty to her is so strong, that no one questioned her." He swallowed. "Your rescue was in all likelihood a death sentence, not only for her, but for her crew, and they knew it." He looked at Seven intently. "But they knew that when it came to you, she you would risk everything. Everyone aboard Voyager knows how the Captain feels about you, Seven," he half smiled. "Except the Captain."

Unsure what to feel, Seven stared at the doctor.

The EMH raised his brow. "The indomitable Captain Janeway, no matter what the risk, she will always bring her Borg back." He looked at her for a long moment. "You, she will always bring you back." He sighed. "Tell her how you feel."

"That I love her?" Seven breathed in deeply. "That I have always loved her?"

"Yes."

They stood in silence.

"Doctor," Seven said eventually, more tears brimming, "I am afraid."

The doctor slowly shook his head. He sighed, and his shoulders sagged a little. He looked at her and said with a note of resignation, "One thing I have come to realize, as I transcend my program, is that often we can't help those closest to us." His eyes suddenly filled with dark emotion. "Either we don't know what part of ourselves to give, or more likely, the part we have to give is not wanted." He smiled sadly. "Isn't it ironic, that it is those that we live with and know the most that often elude us?"

A wave of sadness filled Seven.

"But we can still love them, can't we?" he asked, sorrow filling his eyes. "We can love them completely, without complete understanding."

Instinctively, Seven understood that the doctor was also lamenting his lost love - her. She reached out and, wrapping her arms around the EMH, sobbed her heart out.

Unable to believe what she had just witnessed, Janeway staggered out of her cubbyhole in Cargobay Two.

Since her recovery, whenever Seven regenerated, Janeway watched her. When required, she gave the computer a string of high level commands that would identify her location as being in her quarters. Then she would command a site to site transport to Cargobay Two. She knew that she was under discrete surveillance with Tuvok, but that hadn't stopped her. Right now, even though she couldn't allow Seven to get close to her, somehow, during her regeneration, she needed to be with her - to watch over her.

Breathing heavily, Janeway ran her hands through her hair, then pinched the bridge of her nose. When she had watched the doctor comfort Seven, as she sobbed, something inside of her had fractured then broke, and she knew that this entire sorry episode had not only affected her life, but the life of everyone around her, and in particular Seven.

As she watched Seven slowly regain her composure, and lean heavily on the doctor, as they exited Cargobay Two, Janeway realized that there was no fool like an old fool. She had been so determined to prove to herself that she had no designs on Seven. So determined to play down her attraction to her, she had pushed her own feelings deep inside. She had a ship to run, after all!

There was no generous unveiling act for Janeway. Unlike Archimedes streaming down the street in all his naked glory, her epiphany was like a clap of thunder over head. Her heart pounded.

I am in love with Seven!

Janeway's eyes widened.

She is in loves me!

Deep in thought, Janeway stood, as still as a statue, for some time. Eventually, squaring her shoulders, she tapped her combadge. "Computer, report me for duty."

"Acknowledged."

Leaving Cargobay Two, Janeway knew that Seven needed her. But, first, she needed to do something for them both. She headed for the turbolift.

Exiting the turbolift, she made her way onto the Bridge.

"Report," she said to a surprised Chakotay.

"Captain," he said quickly exiting her seat, and taking his own.

"Commander," Janeway said taking her command seat. She gave him a tremulous smile.

"Good to have you back," he said. His eyes shone with unmistakable love.

Janeway nodded, "Good to be back."

She studied her command console.

"Everything is ready, Captain," Chakotay said. "The ship is spick and span." He grinned. "And the crew is up for any challenges you throw at them."

Janeway smiled. "Good. Have the senior officers meet at oh-nine hundred tomorrow, Chakotay." She looked at her first officer, her friend. "I think we could all do with a good night's sleep before we set a course for the Alpha Quadrant."

Chakotay nodded. "Aye, Captain."

Leaving the Bridge, Janeway tapped her combadge. "Computer, locate Seven of Nine."

"Seven of Nine is in her quarters."

Greeting a surprised crew with pleasantries Janeway made her way through the corridors. She intended to return to her quarters, but first she needed to stop by Sickbay and let the doctor know that she appreciated all that he had done, particularly for Seven. And to also let him know that, from now on, Seven wouldn't be needing medication.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Janeway entered their quarters. The lights were low. Seven was sitting at the dining table. She looked up. The hopelessness in her eyes was quickly washed away with anger. "Where have you been?"

It was now no longer acceptable for Janeway to hide behind the façade of her command, or the death of her father and Justin. She knew the doctor was right. She would have always refused to let Seven return to the Borg. She would have always brought her back, regardless of the danger, and now she knew why. But, she also knew, only too well, the influence that Starfleet Officers had over first-year, starry-eyed Cadets.

When Janeway had taken Seven from the Borg, she had also taken everything from her. That is - absolutely everything of meaning. In the beginning, Seven had relied on her heavily to fill that void, and the redhead became a mentor and a friend. As such, the younger woman aligned her own goal to that of Janeway's - getting Voyager back to the Alpha Quadrant. Could this be a transient love similar to what many young Cadets experience, as they find their own way?

Janeway had to know.

Seven stood. She was five months pregnant, and it showed. She looked beautiful.

"Seven," Janeway said approaching her slowly. "You said once that as an individual I was small, that I could not understand what it was like to be Borg." She stood in front of the tall, elegant, blonde, and looked at her intently. "And that I would never understand what it was like to be part of a vast consciousness, working together with a harmony of purpose, thought, with no indecision, no doubts, just the security and strength of a unified will."

"That is correct," Seven responded, frowning.

"Did I take all of that away from you, Seven?" Janeway asked. "Have I re-humanized you against your will? Did I de-assimilate you by force?"

Clearly surprised by the unexpected question, Seven placed her hands behind her back then raised her chin. "I have learned to adapt as an individual."

"You told me that although you were no longer Borg, you still needed to understand perfection. Without it your existence would be incomplete."

"I have learned the pursuit of perfection alone is...unfulfilling."

For so long Janeway had refused to analyze her own life, and her own desires. Watching Seven perplexed face, she decided no more.

Unlike the rest of the crew, who she had a frank, open, but authoritative relationship with, Janeway realized that she was often more relaxed, coaxing and effortlessly flirtatious around

Seven. The ex Borg, it seemed, naturally brought out the seductive, dangerous, forbidden side in her and, until now, it had terrified her out of her wits.

Janeway breathed in deeply. "You also told me that a Borg cannot be one, that the silence was unacceptable," she said gently. "You were frightened...I made you frightened."

"Yes," Seven responded slowly, "in the beginning. However, although I have become stronger," she replied, her eyes widened with vulnerability. "I have discovered that I dislike being...alone."

Standing, looking into beautiful, vulnerable, needy, blue eyes, it was impossible for Janeway not to touch Seven. Slowly, she reached out and placed her hand on Seven's shoulder, she felt tension there, and unconsciously kneaded it. Tingling shot up her arm, followed by a shiver down her spine. She blinked, then swallowed. The full weight of what she felt for this woman hit her - hard.

This fiery electricity had always existed between them. There had always been a natural chemistry between them. How could she have been so foolish not recognize her feelings for Seven long ago?

Janeway tilted her head. She had to be sure, she asked softly, "Are you with me, Seven?"

Seven gave Janeway an electrically charged look that made the redhead's universe come to a shuddering halt.

"I have always been with you, Kathryn."

And then Janeway felt it...a small emotion; just a fissure, but enough. Seven was letting her know that she had never returned to this starship because of her growing loyalties to Voyager, to Starfleet, or even to the Federation, but because of her loyalty to Janeway. Each time, she had returned for...her. And that was how it would always be.

Slate-grey eyes locked with clear blue ones. They stared each other.

Gazing into Seven's eyes, Janeway finally accepted that, yes, the younger woman did love her. At that moment, she also accepted that she had, for the longest time, adored everything about Seven. It was as if, from the first moment they met, her heart had chosen Seven so decidedly, she might as well have stated out loud, 'she's the one.'

Janeway needed to connect with Seven. She cleared her throat. "It was a few weeks into the journey home when the reality of the situation settled in for us all aboard Voyager," she said. "At the Academy, we were taught that a captain is expected to maintain a certain distance. And I knew that, here, in the Delta Quadrant, this crew needed me to be larger than life," she frowned. "It wasn't long before they stopped seeing me as a person." She paused. "They had to see me that way. Otherwise, I would be just be like everyone else; unsure, flawed, normal. So I acted strong, remained stoic, and hid the fact that I was all too human." She swallowed. "And somewhere along the way, I forgot that I was..." she half smiled, "human that is."

"Yes, you are all too human, Kathryn Janeway," Seven replied gently. "You are a remarkable, beautiful, significant, incredible, and unique human."

Really?

Janeway felt her insides turn mushy. Right now, all she wanted to do was touch this beautiful woman. She said vulnerably, "I can never give you perfection."

"I have already found it," Seven replied. She reached out and stroked Janeway's cheek, "in you."

Oh God! Janeway's knees weakened. "I love you, Seven."

Seven reached out and gently took hold of Janeway's hands. Their fingers entwined. "I believe I have always known that," she replied softly.

"Seven, I-"

"I have come to understand," Seven interrupted as she looked deeply into Janeway's eyes, "that as a Borg drone I would never have lived a life that matters." Her eyes filling with love, she added, "I want that now. Let yourself be free, Kathryn. Give yourself to me."

The barrier to Seven's emotions fell away.

Overwhelmed, by immense love, Janeway slumped against the blonde. "Can you forgive me?" she said, her voice small.

"Always," Seven replied as she folded her arms around her.

Enclosed in Seven's arms, Janeway, felt for the first time, that she truly understood what 'always' meant.

Epilogue

"I love you," Janeway panted in between hot, deep, kisses, as they pushed through the doors. "Oh God, Seven, you are so beautiful," she whispered catching Seven's bottom lip, "I want you... Oh God I'm so wet for you...!"

Picking Janeway up, stumbling with her, kissing her hard, devouring her hungrily, Seven frantically pressed her against the first hard object that stood in their path. She groaned. "I have wanted to make love to you all day."

Objects clattering to the floor, she hurriedly pressed Janeway down onto the desk. Wrestling with the redhead's dress whites, she tried to free her breasts.

Janeway's breasts were, to Seven's delight, very deceptive. In uniform they were almost un-

noticeable, but out of uniform - particularly naked - they were magnificent - smaller than hers, but just as firm and very sensitive and...touching them, drove her almost insane.

"Ow!" Janeway cried out, as a hard item pressed into her back. "Ooh!"

Kissing her face all over, the ache in her overwhelming, Seven reluctantly removed her cupped hands from their prized possession, and blindly swept them underneath Janeway, pushed the remaining objects off the desk, and unceremoniously on to the floor.

"Those classes don't seem to working too well with Tuvok on controlling your desire, Seven," Janeway said.

Her face buried in Janeway's neck, Seven mumbled a response.

Clutching Seven's arms, Janeway laughed. "Remember, I'm a Starfleet Captain," she murmured, eyeing the blonde, the desire in her eyes sparking.

"Not tonight," Seven replied, breathlessly, "tonight your mine." Panting, hauling at Janeway's uniform pants, she captured her mouth, then pushed them over her thighs.

Moaning, pants hanging around her ankles, Janeway freed a foot then pressed a leg between Seven's thighs.

The blonde groaned.

"Press into it," Janeway murmured.

"Oh Kathryn!" Seven cried out as she followed her orders.

Janeway smiled seductively. "Move against it."

Pressing into Janeway, Seven groaned. She was so excited, she could barely breathe.

Pulling at the straps of Seven's dress, freeing her voluptuous breasts, Janeway whispered, "Are you wet?"

"Yes," Seven gasped, feeling so hot, she wondered if she might expire.

"Oh baby."

Her groin clutching, Seven moaned.

It still caught Janeway by surprise how much Seven adored her talking during their love making, particularly...dirty talk.

She whispered. "I want to fuck you."

"Uuuhhh."

"Hard."

"Uuuuhhhh."

Seven grinded into her.

"Then I want to taste your come in my mouth."

"Uuuhhhhhhhhh.....!"

Rubbing frantically against Janeway's thigh, Seven exploded. Crying out, she threw her head back in ecstasy. Her orgasm was prolonged and intense.

Eventually, coming down, she slumped over Janeway.

"Seven?"

"Ummm."

"I cannot get enough of you!" There was urgency in Janeway's touch.

Seven's mouth found her Captain's. She traced her lips with her tongue then boldly sucked her bottom lip into her mouth before kissing her tenderly, lightly.

Quickly, the kiss turned hot and demanding.

Feverishly Janeway sucked Seven's tongue fully into her mouth, and kissed her deeply. Pulling her mouth away, she cried out, "I want you so much, Seven!"

Seven moaned.

Hips moving, thighs opening, their eyes met. Janeway whispered, "Love me."

Seven slid between Janeway's parted thighs.

Janeway groaned and her hips rose up reflexively. "Please..."she whispered.

So taut with desire, she thought she might explode, Janeway cried out when Seven dropped between her thighs and buried her face in her.

"Oh God...!"

Gratefully, her legs wrapped around Seven shoulders. Arching, she reached for her own breasts,

and pulled at her nipples as Seven sucked her into her mouth fully.

Shaking, moaning, Janeway reached out for Seven and pushed her face into her.

Seven's tongue vanished deep inside her.

"Dear, God, Seven!"

Connecting psi-empathically to Seven's whirling emotions, Janeway felt intoxicated. Blood pounding in her ears, she struggled to breathe. She gasped as hot burning desire coursed through her.

Seven raked her hot tongue over Janeway's clit, then pushed deep inside her again. Sucking, she pushed her fingers into her. So wet! Moving deeply inside, she filled her.

"Oh, Seven. Yes!"

Finding the intensity of emotions that were battering against her as Seven devoured her irresistible, Janeway's hips surged up, her hand gripped Seven head hard. "Don't stop!" she cried out. "Don't ever stop!"

Hips moving wildly, Janeway exploded.

Swallowing, Seven lovingly consumed Janeway's wonderful release.

Slumping back, Janeway eyes fluttered open then closed.

Hungrily, Seven stood over Janeway, panting. Eyes flashing, she looked incredible.

Looking up at the blond, languidly, Janeway knew that already, Seven wanted her badly.

Trembling, Seven, slipped her flimsy underwear off. She lifted her dress and, bunching it around her waist, commanded Janeway to go inside her.

The sight was overpowering.

The hunger in Seven's eyes telling her to hurry, Janeway sat upright.

"Touch me," Seven whispered. Spreading her thighs, she hungrily found Janeway's mouth. Her composure long gone, she begged, "Now...Please...!"

The kiss searing, hurriedly, Janeway's fingers wisped over the silky material of Seven's dress. The softness and luxuriousness were a delight to the touch. Touching warm, trembling skin, her fingers made a path until they found her. So wet, she thought as she slipped through soft hair and into her. Always so wet.

Seven almost hissed. Her eyes rolled back. "Kathryn," she breathed, as fingers moved deep inside her.

Upright, one hand thrusting into Seven, the other cupping a soft, firm breast. Lost, in the feel of her, Janeway groaned. "Oh God, Seven. What you do to me."

Her face masked with lust, her eyes feverish, rocking her hips, Seven threw her head back. "Uuuhhh..."

Janeway pushed her to lose control. "I love you, darling. So very, very much."

The explosion of loving emotions from Seven was so astounding, Janeway almost toppled over.

Her heart soaring, unable to speak, Seven grunted. In a state of near blinding lust, she moved her thighs further apart, encouraging Janeway to thrust deeper. Euphoric feeling sweeping through her entire body, love pouring out of her, she felt raw waves of pleasure rise up from her depths and pulse through her. Bucking, her orgasm tore through her.

Slumping forward, she flattened Janeway on the desk.

Janeway laughed, then quirked her brow. "I bet that, right now," she said, running her hands through Seven's loose, shoulder length hair, "you're really glad you found your humanity,"

Seven reply was lost in Janeway's mouth as she kissed her senseless.

Sometime later, the comm system sounded.

Leaning heavily over Janeway, Seven tried to catch her breath. They're love making had been so frenzied they hadn't moved from the desk.

"Whath ...!" Janeway said, a nipple in her mouth.

Trying to focus, Seven felt disorientated. Her third orgasm had been so shattering it left her mind sluggish. She replied slowly, "I do not know, Kathryn."

Janeway pulled her mouth from Seven's breast. "Who would want to disturb us tonight of all nights?"

A haze hanging over her, Seven shook her head.

The comm system sounded again.

"Seven," Janeway said, trying to rein in her desire.

"Yes," Seven replied boneless and prostrate over her.

"Honey?"

"Uh-huh?"

"Someone is outside."

Her eyes unfocused, Seven murmured something.

"Seven...?" Janeway said, laughing.

Seven swallowed. "Yes," she replied.

"Can you get off me, darling?"

"Oh!" Seven responded. "Yes, of course," she replied and moved off her.

Standing, Janeway pulled up her pants, then quickly moved over to the comm. Fixing her clothes, it chirped again.

"Yes!" she said, a little too sharply as she pressed the screen to ensure whoever it was could not see her.

"Captain!" the doctor said, sounding harassed."

"Doctor?" She frowned. "Don't tell me you can't manage one night?"

"What might be one night for you, Captain, is" he said a touch melodramatically, "a lifetime for others."

Janeway smiled as Seven finished arranging herself. She looked so beautiful in her wedding dress, graceful and serene - as if she hadn't been touched. She looked down at herself, and raised her brow in amusement. She was more than a little crumpled.

Janeway's gaze returned to her wife.

Wife! The redhead thought. Who knew I had it in me?

Deep desire filled Janeway as she looked at Seven. No matter how often she made love to her, she was always hungry for more. She had known, that at certain junctures of her life, she had stood at the elbow of love, but it had never nudged her so sharply in the ribs to elicit the potent, shuddering, deep bone hugging need that now ached inside her permanently for Seven.

The comm chirped again.

"Seven, we should have gone planet-side tonight," she said, frowning. "It seems we'll be having a little company tonight."

Seven smiled. "I believe so."

The smile lifted Janeway's heart. Frown clearing, she smiled back. It was hard to believe that it had taken her so long to recognize her feelings for this beautiful, unique woman. What had started out as a frantic, frenzied, lustful mating ritual had ended in soul-searing, sensuous, and passionate love. The reverence that she felt for Seven filled her with awe.

The comm chirped again.

Janeway's jaw firmed. She glanced at the desk, no flimsy underwear to be seen. She frowned. They should definitely have gone planet-side and not Holodeck Two for their wedding night. "This way for the sorrowful city," she said, as she gave her uniform tunic a final tug. "This way for eternal suffering. This way to join the lost people. All hope abandon, ye who enter here!"

Seven raised her brow, "Inferno, Dante Alighieri."

Janeway gave her a quick smile then pressed the console. "Come in Doctor."

"Captain, thank you," the doctor said as the doors slid open. Thank you, thank you."

Marika pulled hard on the EMH's nose.

"Owwwww!"

Astounded, Janeway's jaw dropped. I don't believe it, he's added pain receptors!

The redhead burst out laughing. At six months old their daughter's hand controls meant that she was pulling everything towards her. Right now, holding on to what she found and not letting go was, she had decided, great fun.

"Ouch!" The EMH cried out, as Marika tugged on his nose again, then clung on to it.

Quickly, the doctor entered the room. He was holding Marika as if she was a photon torpedo ready to explode.

Janeway tried to control her laughter when Seven looked at her admonishingly. She eyed Marika who was taking great delight in squeezing the doctor's nose...hard. Her heart filled with joy. The day that Seven gave birth, was the day that she finally put closure to her past. She cried that day - big sloppy tears of release and joy. This child, this magnificent gift, was an amazing wonder to her.

"Seven. Help me!" The doctor cried out, as Marika held on to his nose with a vice grip. "She refuses to let go!"

The blonde, hiding her own smile, moved quickly toward the EMH. "Doctor, she said, grappling

the baby from him, "Let me assist you."

Marika wailed then seeing that she was in her mother's arms, gave Seven a big toothless grin.

"Capthin," the doctor said, holding the bridge of his nose tightly, "I fail to see what you findth amuthing about thish sithuation?" he sniffed. Then he sneezed, then he sneezed several times more.

Sneezing! This guy has got to be kidding me? Janeway thought. Clamping her lips together, she tried to compose herself. Straightening, she cleared her throat. "You're right, Doctor." She pointed to the lavish sofa, and tried to fight off another bout of laughter. "Pleath," she swallowed, "join us."

Holding his nose, the doctor eyed Janeway before making his way to the sofa. He slumped down on it.

Grinning as the EMH slumped on the sofa, Janeway glanced around the room and took in the holoprogram for the first time. She had thought that they should go planet-side as the ship was orbiting Diacordin Prime, which, thankfully, was not only a very hospitable sector in the Delta Quadrant, it also housed some lavish hotels. But, instead, Seven had chosen that their wedding night be spent in the heart of Earth's Italy - a favorite place of the redhead's. It was only now that Janeway realized that she had modified the Leonardo Da Vinci holoprogram. A holoprogram that, over the years, aboard Voyager, had been a place for Janeway to gather her thoughts and, over time, had become a haven for her.

She looked out through the large, open windows. The evening view of 16th century Florence was spectacular. The room, she was pleased to see, hadn't been altered other than the addition of a plush sofa, and a bedroom.

She was charmed that Seven had chosen this place for their special night. There was no doubt it held a unique place in both their hearts. It was in this very simulation, she recalled, that she had tried to teach the blonde about the benefits of relaxation. Back then, Seven had just been liberated from the Collective. And, as it was at the beginning of her learning to be human again, Janeway felt she needed a hobby - sculpting. The redhead's lips quirked - little did she know then, who truly was the teacher.

She looked around the room. The maestro's instruments were there on his desk. Her cheeks colored. Well, some were on the desk but, after their frenzied lovemaking, most were on the floor. She looked at the floor. His paperwork and artwork were strewn everywhere -as they should be. The redhead smiled to herself. She was sure that Seven would have struggled with leaving the 'untidy' elements that were integral to the authenticity of the holoprogram.

Janeway looked up at the prototype glider hanging from the wall. Fortunately, Seven no longer identified the glider with that of a 'big, black, screeching, bird' - a raven to be precise. The prototype had, through its ornithological similarities to the bird, triggered, in Seven, a number of hallucinations of her childhood aboard the USS Raven with her parents, as well as the terrifying

memory of being assimilated.

It was also here, in this simulation, after that incident, that Seven first recognized what the Borg had done to her, and her life. It was here, she had wondered, for the first time, what her life would have been like had she, and her parents, not been assimilated.

Janeway caught her bottom lip, and pondered on the 'what ifs'. What if Seven's parents had never pursued the Borg so zealously into the Delta Quadrant and the family had never been assimilated? What if her father and Justin were still alive and she hadn't changed her career path to follow in their footsteps? She raised her brow. What would they have become? Annika Hansen; human - Kate Tighe; married. She breathed in deeply. Would they have ever met? She frowned. Yes, possibly, somewhere in the Alpha Quadrant, at some point. But not in the way that it mattered.

Janeway's heart clenched. It was with bitter sweet irony that she acknowledged that from great pain can also come great joy.

Contemplatively, she eyed the large fireplace with its candles and burning fire, and recalled that, it was there, they shared their first philosophical discussion. The 'what ifs' lingering, Janeway looked from the fireplace to Seven. The sight took her breath away. Seven was cradling their baby in her arms. Their baby! The wonder of it shook her to the core, and reaffirmed that Seven was the one person in the universe who made her feel truly alive. Without question, her mind, body and soul belonged to this woman.

"Doctor," Seven said, moving gracefully toward the EMH with Marika on her hip, "What is the difficulty?"

"Difficulty!" the doctor exclaimed, wiggling his nose tentatively. "She smells," he added. Sitting bolt upright, he shook his head in disbelief. "She burps!" His eyes widened, and focused on Janeway. "Repeatedly!" He waved his hands. "She vomits!" He looked appalled. "She excretes!" He scrunched his nose as if the smell still lingered. "It may be worth considering removing some of those biological requirements to make her similar to you," he said to Seven. "Yes, I think it is definitely worth taking that into consideration."

Janeway smiled. "Accept it, Doctor. Waste matter is a by-product of being human." She raised her brow. "Let's hope it's something you don't include in your subroutines any time soon."

"Definitely not!"

"Doctor, Marika is behaving very naturally for a child of her age," Seven responded reassuringly. She rubbed her nose against her daughter's, and smiled widely when she babbled in delight. She herself had also found all that the doctor had mentioned difficult to deal with. She looked down at the strawberry blonde haired beauty, who was gurgling up at her, and deep love welled up inside her. She had Kathryn's eyes. "However, she said gently placing one of her knuckles in her daughter's mouth, and watching her suckle, "one adapts."

"If you were finding it difficult, why did you not take her to another member of crew?" Janeway asked, joining the doctor on the sofa.

The EMH cleared his throat. "As her guardian," he said, raising his brow, "it is my duty to ensure that no harm comes to her." He frowned. "If I can't look after her, then how am I going to look after your other children!"

Janeway swallowed. Much to her surprise the doctor hadn't found a solution to ensure that she didn't transform...yet. She avoided looking at Seven, she knew only too well, there would be relish in her eyes. The blonde loved the idea of a bigger family.

Janeway suddenly had a mental image of three children running around her feet. She felt goose bumps pop up all over her skin. No, surely!

"I see," she responded, and resisted the urge to roll her eyes, and say that Tuvok would have been more than capable. After Marika was born, the one request that Seven made was that Tuvok and the Doctor share guardianship of their baby. Fortunately, they both readily accepted. But from the Doctor's perspective - although Marika absolutely adored him, and he her - having a baby in his life was taking more than a little getting used to.

The comm system chirped.

What the hell was going on here? This was their wedding night! Janeway though as she raised her brow. Didn't anyone respect that! She frowned.

"Enter," Seven called out.

B'Elanna, accompanied with a pretty young ensign that she had been seeing recently, entered the room. It seemed that same sex coupling was becoming the rage aboard Voyager these days, Janeway thought, as she eyed the bright-eyed beauty, standing close to the half-Klingon. The old adage 'as the Captain goes, so does the ship' filled her mind.

"Ah Doctor, I thought you'd struggle your first time babysitting," B'Elanna said, making her way to Seven. "We went to your quarters, Seven," she looked at Janeway, "Captain, and it didn't take two seconds to realize that he had gate crashed a very private party." She looked at Seven then winked.

Seven winked back.

Janeway raised her brow. It was clear that her wife had anticipated that the doctor would struggle and had made additional arrangements. That probably explained why they hadn't gone planet-side tonight.

"We're here as backup," B'Elanna said, then grinned. She held out Toby the Targ, her favorite childhood stuffed toy, to Marika. "Wouldn't want their first night of marriage to be a total disaster now would we, Junior?"

Marika gurgled happily and went willingly into B'Elanna's arms. She sloppily bit down on Toby's ear before cuddling him tightly to her chest.

Looking at the way her daughter lovingly held the soft toy, Seven recalled her first introduction to Toby the Targ.

Voyager was orbiting around Norcadia Prime, and she was preparing to take a shuttle trip with Commander Tuvok to study a nearby collapsing micro-nebula.

"Here's the navigational data you asked for," Tom Paris said, handing her a PADD.

"Thank you."

"How long are you planning on being gone?"

"Approximately forty eight hours."

"Just like B'Elanna."

"Clarify."

"She over-packs too."

"I haven't over-packed. I simply wish to be prepared for any contingency."

"And what contingency is this for?" Tom asked reaching for a tool that was about to be packed.

"That is an iso-modulator, enhanced to correct hull ablation in the event we encounter a meteoroid stream."

"Couldn't you just replicate an iso-modulator?"

"I prefer this one."

"Oh, I get it. You like to have your own things with you. B'Elanna's the same way. You know, she'd never admit it, but she still takes a stuffed animal with her whenever she's going to be away for more than a day. Toby the Targ."

"Can Toby the Targ correct hull ablation?"

"No."

"Then your comparison is flawed."

The blonde realized with a deep feeling of pleasure that times had definitely changed. Toby the

Targ might not be able to correct hull ablations, but he held a very special place in her daughter's heart. "Is the rest of the crew still celebrating?" she asked. Since having the baby, B'Elanna had been a great support and a great... friend. It was a friendship she had come to cherish.

B'Elanna nodded and replied, "Yes."

Moving toward the EMH, B'Elanna shooed him, along with the young ensign, toward the doors. "Let's leave these two love birds alone."

"But...But..." the doctor spluttered.

"Don't worry, you can still help."

Looking chagrined, the EMH firmed his chin. "I'm a doctor not a nanny."

"Time to go, Doc." B'Elanna gave the EMH a gentle push through the doors. "That's Starfleet for get out."

Before the doors swished closed on a disgruntled EMH, B'Elanna eyed the desk then Janeway as she stood and made her way to them. She said, with a note of mischief, "Uh, Captain, your flies undone."

Standing at the holodeck's doors, fighting a reflexive urge to check, arms held tightly at her side, jaw clenched, her face turning red, Janeway watched the doors hiss close on a giggling and clearly enchanted ensign. Her face reddened even more when B'Elanna winked at the young woman encouragingly.

Doors closed, Janeway quickly felt for her dress pants, then remembered that zips were archaic.

"Why that...!"

"Kathryn, since our bonding the crew feel you a more approachable. She is being facetious," Seven said with amusement. "And she is...happy." She raised her brow. "I believe that there is much to be said for same sex coupling."

Janeway's jaw relaxed, she shrugged then laughed. "Agreed. I guess that sometimes, I still appear a little uptight to the crew."

Seven placed an arm over Janeway's shoulder. "Correct," she said reassuringly. "It seems that you are no longer considered just a staunch leader."

Janeway's eyes widened and her mouth formed an oh-shape.

Seven inclined her head. "Or the noble sufferer."

Janeway's brow lifted. She gave Seven a stoic look.

Leading Janeway toward their luxurious boudoir, Seven added, "Or the celibate hero."

Lifting her chin, Janeway quirked an eyebrow then smiled whimsically at the blonde.

"Or," Seven said, quirking her ocular implant, "the crazy bitch who is on a self destruct mission."

Stunned, Janeway stopped dead in her tracks, and stared at Seven. "What!"

"I am engaging with the crew more often," Seven said her eyes sparkling with mischief.

"So it seems!"

"Or," Seven said hastily when Janeway's jaw firmed in outrage, "the outrageous flirt."

Seven heard Janeway murmur something under her breath about knowing a few who still thought she had it. Her eyes narrowed. "I believe Commander Chakotay falls into the category of considering you an outrageous flirt."

"Now Seven," Janeway said appeasingly, hearing the jealous undertones. If she was honest, it tickled a little that her beautiful, captivating, logical, wife would continue to allow Chakotay to rankle her. He was, after all, not a patch on her. She sniggered inwardly. Maybe she'd keep that little revelation to herself for a while. "Maybe you should try getting along with Cha-"

Gently placing a finger over Janeway's mouth, Seven leaned in and whispered, "It is better to remain silent and thought the fool than to open one's mouth and remove all doubt."

Huh!

"I have been studying Earth's adages and proverbs."

"Really?" Janeway responded. Sounding not one bit impressed.

"A friend is someone who knows, all about you, and likes you anyway."

Oh no!

"In the case of Commander Chakotay, you cannot make a silk purse out of a sow's ear."

Oh God!

Life begins when once accepts one's fate."

What the...!

"Losing an illusion makes one wiser than finding a truth."

"Seven..."

The blonde wondered if she should continue to tease Janeway, but the deepening scowl told her not. "I am teasing you, Kathryn."

"Yeah?" Janeway said, making her towards the palatial bed. "Well that's cute in all, Seven, but, for now, why don't we just stick to the one kind of teasing that we both enjoy?"

"What is that?"

"Foreplay," Janeway responded seductively. Leaning against the four-poster bed, she fluttered her eyelashes then slowly gave the blonde the once over. "Why don't you slip into something more comfortable?"

"What would you recommend?"

Janeway eyes sparkled. "Me."

A pulse suddenly throbbed in Seven's throat, and a deep need filled her. She went quickly to the redhead. "It is in my nature to comply with the collective," she whispered as she wrapped her arms around her wife.

Contently, Janeway snuggled in Seven's arms.

"Tell me again, about the house we are going to build in Bloomington, Indiana, when Voyager returns to the Alpha Quadrant. Where we can sit outside on the wrap-around porch and listen to the creek as it flows by, and Marika and our other children...our family can play together," She squeezed Janeway, then nibbled her ear.

Other children! Janeway thought. Can it be?

Let the dice roll, Katie, her inner voice said with quite conviction. Doesn't she, more than anyone, deserve to have a family that she can call her own?

"A return is imminent, Kathryn," Seven whispered. "I assure you."

Janeway looked into Seven's beautiful blue eyes and nodded. She smiled inwardly at the blonde's absolute certainty that, after lessons learned from previous slipstream trials, and several recent successful simulations, a return to the Alpha Quadrant was definite. Contemplatively, she raised her brow. It was a rare quality, to be certain of what one wants, and she knew, without doubt, that the woman holding her tightly wanted nothing more than to share her life with her and their...children in a safe environment. For that reason alone, she truly believed that Seven would get them home.

Slowly, Janeway kissed her wife, sweetly then deeply. Pulling her down with her onto the bed,

and into her arms, she whispered. "At the end of my mother's farm track, there's a long overgrown path that leads to some land where we can build a house the traditionalist way..."

The End

If you are interested in reading another J/7 standalone story, that I've written, then hop over to DAX's Perfection website, where she's kindly agreed to host my work.

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