

Summary: Following Janeway's rescue of Seven in "Voyager Conspiracy", both women realize what they really need.

Content Disclaimers: Following the end of "Voyager Conspiracy." (Season 5)

ALL I NEED

by Lara Zielinsky

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Voyager's Sickbay...

"All right, Seven. You can sit up now." The Doctor, his balding pate shining just the tiniest bit under the bright lights of Sickbay, stepped back from his patient on the only occupied biobed in the medical bay at the moment. The blonde Astrometrics officer shifted her gaze from where she had been studying the lone, non-medical occupant of the Chief Medical Officer's office who was issuing a log entry on the ship's latest adventure. Seven knew, a little ashamed, that she had played a huge role in creating the mess that the captain had just finished cleaning up.

The Doctor had been siphoning off the terabytes of data Seven of Nine had subjected herself to through her cortical implant, a stark crescent-shaped reminder around her left eye of her 18 years of membership in the Borg Collective. The information overload had overwhelmed her analytical processes and created chaos in her usually logical thoughts.

She slowly rolled to her side and sat up, gingerly moving one leg then the other off the biobed. Rubbing at her left temple, she eased away the vaguest remains of a headache.

"Thank you, Doctor." Seven acknowledged her actions of the past two days with self-disgust. Trying to ingest *Voyager's* logs of the entire last five years, most of which she had not personally be present to experience, had been ultimately... unwise. Seven had misinterpreted the data and began seeing conspiracies around every corner of the lost Starfleet vessel.

No longer believing the crew to simply be trying its best to cross 60,000 light years of Delta Quadrant that stood between its varied crew and home--Earth, a small blue and white orb Seven herself had ties to but had never seen in person--she had become paranoid and delusional.

The loss of her logic and the final fact that she had grown to distrust the one person she felt the deepest connection with in this lonely existence wounded Seven deeply. She wondered what that person would have to say about it.

"Doctor?" Seven and The Doctor turned to observe the person emerging from the CMO's office.

Seven remained still, and quiet, identifying nervousness skittering through her bioprocessors as she took in the compact form of *Voyager's* captain from the top of her auburn head to her shined ebony boots.

The Doctor answered the captain's vaguely spoken question. "Yes, Captain. Seven's overload has been corrected." Seven arched an eyebrow at him. "Seven, you came very close to burning out several neural pathways. You are considerably more Human than Borg now. You should be more careful."

"Thank you for your concern, Doctor, but I will be fine," the young blonde abruptly

interjected. She instead turned to gauge the captain's reaction to all this, aware suddenly that Janeway was looking from the Doctor to Seven with what the blonde identified as alarm putting a flush to her cheeks and washing the clear blue eyes more gray.

"Is she fit to return to duty, Doctor?"

"Yes. Though I would recommend she stop using Borg data nodes during regeneration for a few weeks."

"The Doctor says you're fit to return to Astrometrics. But I am willing to give you a few rotations off if you think you need it." Janeway's voice rolled over Seven's ears, sending a shiver of reaction down the woman's very straight spine, making her sit even more upright.

Keeping her gaze on Captain Janeway's face, Seven had to half turn as the smaller woman walked to the biobed and leaned on it, resting her forearms on the surface when she turned her face up to meet Seven's gaze. "I... am sorry that you were required to fetch me."

"No apologies necessary, Seven. I wouldn't leave... any member of my crew stranded and confused." Janeway leaned back slightly and Seven was aware of disappointment caused by the captain's command-like tone and response.

She remembered the feeling when she knew someone had beamed aboard the Delta Flyer with her, as she hurtled it and herself toward a deadly rendezvous with the alien catapult. She also remembered knowing, before she turned around, before even hearing the other person take more than one breath, that it had been this woman, Kathryn Janeway, who had come to talk her out of her mission.

The Doctor stepped back, retreating to his office when Seven stepped down, bringing her gaze only a few inches lower. She was still almost 12 centimeters taller than the captain, but the older woman, in her cranberry red shouldered uniform instantly made Seven feel smaller somehow.

"The Doctor thinks you should stop using the data nodes for a while. What will you do?" the Captain said.

Instantly a desire to please Janeway rose up and Seven replied automatically. "I will dismantle the enhanced alcove."

Janeway leaned back against the biobed and crossed her arms loosely over her chest before brushing her right hand over Seven's arm. The action left a tingling sensation in its wake, Seven realized, wondering if her blue gray biosuit's systems were malfunctioning. She only vaguely caught the captain's next words. "Would you like some help?"

"I can do it myself, Captain," she objected tersely.

"I was offering my assistance, Seven. Do you want it or not?" The captain's lips quirked and Seven realized she had objected purely on the basis that Janeway had offered. They were back to their mutual antagonism it seemed. The exercise that had seemed necessary before, Seven suddenly determined it was petty and unnecessary on her part.

The captain, who no doubt had dozens of other things clamoring for her attention, was clearly offering to be of assistance to Seven in something the young woman knew she needed to do. Being contrary seemed suddenly to be self-defeating. "I..." She blinked as a vivid memory of this woman on her knees before her on the shuttle's deck rose up in her mind. The low lights of the various readouts cast highlights in tousled hair and earnest blue eyes. Suddenly she didn't have the strength to say no. "I will... appreciate the help."

Janeway stood then, straightening her uniform with an automatic gesture, and offered her elbow to the young Borg. "Let's go then."

Seven tucked her hand into the crook of Janeway's arm. As the captain led her through the medical bay's doors, Seven glanced back over her shoulder and caught sight of The Doctor's surprised expression just before the automatic doors slid shut.

She turned back and studied the auburn head that came just to her own shoulder. Blue eyes raised up briefly to hers and then looked ahead where they were walking toward Cargo Bay 2. "I'm sure we'll have the alcove dismantled in no time."

"Yes, Captain. You will be all I need."

Janeway paused and looked up at her with surprise and then a smile quirked once again at the corners of her mouth. "All right," she responded quietly. Janeway's voice instantly warmed every cold, afraid corner of Seven's uncertain heart, the part of her that had been wounded enough to accept the illogical conclusion that someone would want to use her, to experiment on her, healed just a little at the thought of this captain's -- this woman's -- protection.

After the third crewmember glanced oddly at the pair walking through the Deck 6 corridor, Janeway began to feel self-conscious about what she was doing. She moved her elbow and with a twinge of regret felt Seven's hand fall away.

It had seemed simple enough. Escort Seven to Cargo bay 2 and begin earning back the young woman's trust by helping her dismantle the alcove. Something fragile had broken between her and Seven of Nine. Kathryn acknowledged how hurt she felt when she realized the former Borg was willing to commit suicide in the face of that lost trust. She broke the silence with an attempt at conversation.

"Seven?"

"Yes, Captain?" Janeway noticed the woman tucked her hands together behind her back. The formal stance like a beacon signaled Seven's discomfort. For being the cause of that Kathryn felt the sharp bite of shame.

"Are you going to be all right? You still look upset."

Seven raised her right eyebrow at her in query as they stepped from a turbolift onto the deck containing the cargo bay. She looked like she was considering what to say and finally, Janeway let out a breath as the blonde spoke quietly, with an earnestness Kathryn had come to associate with Seven's attempts at understanding herself. "I... find that I am... dismayed at how easily I believed that... friends... could be... enemies." She reached over and activated the doors to the cargo bay.

Janeway followed Seven inside and up onto the dais where the Borg alcoves stood.

"Paranoia does that," she said. "I'm terribly sorry I didn't see it happening sooner or I would have tried to help." She followed Seven's cue and helped the woman remove several panels to get at the wiring behind. "Not one of my best moments as captain."

"You are an excellent captain." Seven's voice was abrupt, with a note of finality so strong it gave Janeway pause and she looked up, trapped for a microsecond in the steady gaze of surreal blue eyes.

"Sometimes I wonder, though," she managed to counter as she accepted a spanner to utilize in several disconnections. She had to change her angle to get at a particular spot and the device slipped from her hand as she lost her balance over her calves.

Seven's Borg-enhanced reflexes were just a hair quicker than hers that were honed by weekly Velocity matches. Their fingers met beneath the falling equipment.

"I have it," Seven said as her mesh-covered left hand closed around the spanner and her right hand closed over Janeway's wrist, steadying her.

Kathryn's cheeks heated in a confusion of emotion she hadn't felt in forever it seemed.

"Sorry."

"No harm done."

She watched as Seven disconnected the last wires and rolled onto her rear, leaning back against another alcove, wrapping her right arm around her upraised right knee. The Borg's musculature flexed under smooth skin as she rapidly separated the various devices from the node relays.

The blonde's cheek twitched as she removed the components, set them into a small equipment locker and set the catch. Janeway questioned the young woman's quiet, deliberate air. "Are you very upset your experiment didn't work?"

Seven looked up from the box and pursed her lips briefly. "There is much about... the ship that I do not understand because I have not... experienced the same... history as everyone else," she admitted.

"Is that why you wanted to accumulate all the logs? So you would know our history? You could ask people you know."

"The Doctor says that close relationships are built on shared experiences. Without the commonality of history I will never be able to fully share with the crew."

Janeway felt the full understanding of Seven's experiment hit her like a force 7 stun-blast full in the chest. "You have several close relationships among the crew," she protested. "What about Tom and B'Elanna?"

"I do not. I... do not... fit in."

Janeway felt her throat catch as Seven tried to voice her insecurities. This wasn't the Borg first severed from the Collective, missing the emotionless existence among that race of bioconstructs. "I... Are you that lonely, Seven?" Even as she asked the question, evidence flitted across her memory of passed off comments, actions by this woman and others, time and again through their adventures supported Janeway's conclusion.

Seven rolled back in an unconscious mimic of Janeway's earlier movement as she wrapped both arms around both bent knees. "I... see Lieutenants Paris and Torres, or Ensign Kim... Thom Argyle and Jennifer Delaney... and I walk up to them... and conversation stops."

Dear God, Kathryn thought, continuing to listen.

Though her movements were precise as Seven moved her hands over her own thighs, Janeway recognized it for the temporizing it was. The young woman, former Borg or not, was terribly upset, and nervous. "I cannot share with them... the way I seem to be able to share things with you."

"You could, Seven." Janeway reached across the space separating their knees and lightly squeezed Seven's right hand. "They'll get to know you and you'll get to know them. It just takes time."

"You do not often spend time with anyone aboard ship socially. How do *you* get to know people? Why do they smile when they see you?"

Janeway's answer was quick, evidencing a belief characterizing herself since her earliest days in command. "They smile because of some idiotic fear that to dislike me would be detrimental to their positions on the ship."

Seven however canted her head to one side, the blue eyes softening in confusion. "Fear? I hear nothing but respect from most of the ship. Except some of the Maquis, which," Seven reasoned as Janeway chuckled, "can only be expected." She paused and the captain sensed they were about to shift gears in the conversation yet again. "Do you like most of the crew?"

"Yes, I do. I don't know very many personally, but that's to be expected. There are 141 people aboard *Voyager*. I suspect though that I will learn more about each of them during the journey home. We will be together a very long time after all."

That response gave Seven trouble, Janeway could see, as the smooth face dropped and the full lips pursed thoughtfully. "Do you believe *Voyager* will return to her home, Captain?"

"I have to, Seven."

"Do you really believe though? All the time?"

Janeway frowned. "I don't know what you mean."

Seven leaned back and rested her head against the alcove wall. Her blue eyes settled once more on Janeway's face. "You have given in to doubt before. I wonder... Do you still have doubts?"

"Well we've seen the catapult technology work. 3,000 light years isn't anything to sneeze at."

Seven did not balk at the idiom, but moved on to another issue. "But we did not keep it with us."

"You're working on the slipstream technology. Other areas are working on different methods of boosting our speed. I have no reason to doubt we will eventually return to Earth."

Seven nodded. There was a long pause pregnant with possible responses by the inexperienced young woman. Janeway was surprised at the sure, mature tone that finally accompanied the blonde's next words.

"But you still doubt occasionally," she said in a very sage-sounding voice. Janeway pursed her lips in dismay, but then finally nodded. "It's nice to know," Seven concluded.

"So you're going to be all right?" Kathryn brushed her hair off her cheek where it had fallen during their conversation. Given a little distance she might actually figure out everything that they had talked about, but Janeway could not deny the pleasure she felt at seeing a measure of self-assurance return to Seven of Nine's features. *If it helps her*, Kathryn thought, remembering the devastation she found in a dimly lit face as she looked up from the floor of a shuttlecraft.

"Yes, I believe I will," Seven said. "Thank you for coming to get me."

"You're welcome." She stood, gesturing for the blonde to step into her alcove. She moved over to the control console. "Consider yourself back on duty after a full regeneration cycle, all right?"

"Yes." Stepping onto the platform, Seven set her feet and straightened her shoulders, relaxing into the alcove's electromagnetic field that kept her upright and connected to the regenerative process while she did a fair facsimile of appearing to sleep standing up.

The Borg's eyes closed and Janeway set the program to run. "Sweet dreams... Annika," she murmured, visually tracing the calm lines on the slender face, before walking from the cargo bay.

The captain felt exhausted herself but also a little less afraid for Seven's safety now that she was back aboard *Voyager* and seemed to have worked through most of her confusions. She decided to head for her quarters to shower and change into a clean uniform before returning to the bridge.

As she crossed the threshold of her door, her combadge chirped. She tapped the gold surface. "Janeway here."

"Chakotay here, Captain. Are you planning to return to your duty shift?"

"I was... after a shower, Commander. Why? Something come up?" Immediately she felt her exhaustion flow away replaced by an adrenaline rush keying her up for action.

"I'd like to talk."

"All right, the ready room, twenty minutes."

"Thank you. Chakotay out."

Janeway sighed. She realized she still had some issues to work out with her first officer. It was especially important since they had agreed to keep this incident out of the official logs.

She removed and tossed her uniform jacket onto her bed and clad only in the form fitting pants and a sleeveless tunic, she entered the ensuite and used a cloth to scrub her face, hands and neck, easing some of the tension in her shoulders. After this shift, she realized, she will have been on her feet for almost twenty hours straight.

Forcing herself to walk past the bed, she managed to ignore the almost siren-like call it whispered to her mind and went out to the corridor, and down to the bridge access turbolift.

Emerging on *Voyager's* bridge, she looked around to note which officers were monitoring the various stations. Tom had things well in hand at the helm. It was late Beta shift so Harry at Ops was replaced by Ensign Carey, a petite woman with mouse-brown hair and at present a very serious expression on her face. Chakotay moved down in the command well, drawing her attention to him finally. As she visually passed Security she gave Lt. Ayala, Tuvok's beta shift security officer, a quick smile.

"Ayala you have the bridge. I'll be in my ready room." She crossed the bridge and Chakotay fell into step beside her as they both mounted the pair of steps leading to the ready room door.

When they were alone, Chakotay spoke without preamble. "Seven all settled?"

Janeway nodded. "You can schedule her back into rotations as soon as her current regeneration cycle is complete. The doctor corrected her problem." She gestured. "Can I offer you anything? Coffee?"

"Yes, thanks." He settled at the desk and watched her work at the replicator.

As she returned with the cups in hand, sitting down opposite him, he took one. "Well, Seven was malfunctioning. We don't have that excuse."

"I heard the captain and first officer came to blows."

"Oh really? Who won?" He smiled a little knowing the scuttlebutt on shipboard was the only thing that made this journey even the tiniest bit amusing sometimes.

"The captain. Made the first officer walk the plank."

"What's next? Did you poison the coffee?"

She eyed him and smirked. "No more than I usually do." Janeway's lack of cooking was a point of amusement for the first officer and he took his pokes where he could, knowing at least she would smile from time to time.

He raised the cup in a salute to her and smiled. His tattoo crinkled attractively on his forehead giving him an appearance of being several years younger. The captain immediately was put in mind of Seven's observations about friends, and smiles.

She resolved to find time for Seven and offer the young woman more opportunities to make friends among the crew. Perhaps she could start by providing a good example by socializing with the young woman herself. It certainly isn't like they couldn't hold conversations that lasted hours. Perhaps she would engage the young woman more often in the mess hall than in the quiet solitude of Astrometrics.

"Neelix is throwing a party to celebrate the 3,000 light year jump provided by the catapult."

"Good idea," she said. "I'll collect Seven and bring her down."

Chakotay seemed a little surprised. "All right."

Their coffee break finished, Janeway showed Chakotay out and went to take a complete shower back in her quarters.

Captain's Quarters...

The hot water jets coursed over her head as she leaned into the spray. Janeway realized that she was anxious to bring Seven into *Voyager's* social circles. She decided to skip the uniform entirely. Instead, she pulled out a pair of light color loose pants and a cambric white shirt. Fixing her communicator over her left breast she left her cabin and returned to the cargo bay.

Cargo Bay 2...

"Regeneration terminated. Cycle incomplete." Seven let the computer's voice sink slowly into her consciousness. Then her newly awakened senses detected someone else present. She opened her eyes to find the captain leaning on the alcove control console, blue eyes intently studying her. "Captain Janeway. May I be of assistance?"

The captain who was oddly no longer in her uniform, nodded primly. "I thought that you might enjoy attending Neelix's party." Seven detected pleasure lacing the words, and too, a tone of query, as if Janeway was uncertain of the response she would receive.

Seven considered that. She discovered pleasure at the thought that the captain would think to bring her to such an event. There were always a lot of human interactions to observe, even if she wasn't participating as much as she would like. She stepped out of the alcove. "Yes." She took in the captain's attire. "Should I change, Captain?"

Blue eyes sparkled with luminous gray edges as they scanned her form and a smile briefly quirked the compact woman's lips. "Whatever makes you comfortable, Seven. Rule number one. Be yourself."

"I don't know any other way to be," Seven countered quietly. "Should I?"

Janeway shook her head and genuinely let herself smile. The expression crinkled the skin at the corner of the captain's eyes. "So, will you come with me?"

Seven found herself ducking her head to the side and felt a flush of embarrassment. "Yes, please."

Janeway gestured toward the cargo bay doors. "Let's go."

Voyager's Mess Hall...

The doors to the mess hall admitted the pair to the party a short walk later. Those crewmembers nearest the entrance glanced over as Janeway stepped across the threshold. A few nodded, several smiled, and even two raised their drinks in a sort of salute. Janeway recognized one of the xenobiologists and Samantha Wildman, immediately scanning further for the Wildman child and Neelix.

She moved further inside and turned to look at Seven who stepped quickly to her side, the larger woman's form close enough that Janeway's back was quite warm. The Borg's hands were crossed behind her back once again and her eyes flitted nervously back and forth through the gathering, which was already quite noisy with several cells of conversation, and people eating as well as drinking.

The captain smiled briefly when Seven's gaze included her for a brief instant and then turned at the sound of approaching footsteps. Her gaze settled briefly on Neelix, the ship's Talaxian cook, and Naomi Wildman, the ship's only child. Janeway thought for a moment it was typical of her own

childhood to have haunted the kitchen, eating constantly in between vigorous outdoor activity and smothered her smile.

Naomi, the Katarian-Human daughter of Ensign Wildman and her husband who had been left behind in the Alpha quadrant, broke from Neelix's side with a great deal of energy. She ran up to Seven and the captain eyes only for the blonde at Kathryn's side. "Hi, Seven!"

Janeway watched Seven's face and knew the instant the younger woman relaxed. Her gaze stopped flitting around and settled on the girl's upturned face and the line of her shoulders softened considerably. Then she brushed Naomi's shoulder as she returned the greeting. "Hello, Naomi Wildman."

Neelix greeted Janeway. "You're just in time to present the toast." She shifted her gaze from the young woman and child reluctantly. Naomi led Seven over to where a tray of synthehol-filled glasses rested. The blonde Borg retrieved two and Janeway accepted one graciously.

She looked at Neelix, who smiled and stepped back, giving her access to space at the very center of the gathering. Tapping the side of her glass with a fingernail, she felt the tinkling sound vibrate slightly into her body and quirked a brief smile as faces turned her way and conversation dwindled gradually until there was only the sound of her breathing. She scanned the faces nearest her, bestowing warm smiles on each of her crew: Chakotay, B'Elanna Torres and Tom Paris. Tuvok lifted his brow and raised his glass slightly. Harry Kim put a tentative arm around Megan Delaney's shoulders as she leaned into the gesture gingerly.

She raised her glass and thought quickly. "For one night, let's forget how far we are from home. And rejoice in how far we've come... together."

"Hear, hear!" Chakotay responded, raising his glass.

She let her gaze drift through more faces as she lifted the glass to her lips and saw everyone else do the same. Finally her gaze rested on Seven's face and she watched the blonde sip cautiously and smile in return.

The mingling returned. Conversations started up again. Several crewmembers changed direction and moved in the social flow, past the captain, extending greetings and well wishes. Through the throng, she felt rather than saw Chakotay come to stand off her right shoulder as she sought Seven's whereabouts on the other side of the crush of people before her.

"Looks like Seven isn't much the worse for her ordeal."

Janeway nodded. "I had a talk with her." Now she could see Naomi was once again leading Seven around, this time taking the former Borg over to a table where a 3-D chessboard was arranged.

She frowned. Not another adult had yet engaged Seven in conversation. She started away from the first officer only to stop when his hand landed on her shoulder. "Leaving already?"

"I'm going to see if I can draw Seven out just a bit."

"She's have some time with Naomi. I understand she was rather curt with the girl earlier. You might just leave her alone for now."

Janeway's blue eyes took on a smoky cast and she looked up at him. "Chakotay, do you know why Seven wanted to download *Voyager's* logs for the entire last five years directly to her cortical implant?"

"The Borg desire for 'more input'," he quipped. "Come on, Kathryn. Seven is the classic overachiever. She probably thought it would help--"

"Her loneliness," Janeway interrupted giving him a sharp look. "She was able to believe in the conspiracies her mind cooked up because she still believes that she is an outsider here."

Janeway had lowered her voice. "Do you know what finally drove her onto the shuttle?"

Here she felt a large dollop of the regret still echoing from when she had first heard Seven's "final" analysis aboard the Delta Flyer.

Chakotay shook his head.

"She had concluded that I was planning a quick return to the Alpha quadrant so we could turn over our 'Borg specimen' for dissection."

"That's absurd," he countered.

"She didn't... perhaps doesn't even now... trust us enough to believe otherwise, Chakotay," Janeway concluded, looking over to where Seven was pensively considering her moves in the board game.

"You said the Doctor corrected her malfunction."

"He did, but... Chakotay... just believe me. This isn't about malfunctioning implants. It's about feeling and being treated like an outsider." She patted his arm and ducked her head briefly before striding away.

"Captain?" B'Elanna Torres stepped away from Tom Paris's side and intercepted the compact intent woman. "Is something wrong?"

Kathryn realized her concerns for Seven were visible in her features and immediately neutralized her expression, dropping the cool command mask in place. B'Elanna immediately backed up. "Nothing's wrong with the ship, Lieutenant. I thought I'd find a snack."

The half-Klingon chief engineer raised a hand and pointed back the way the captain had come. "Neelix put the food over there." She suddenly pressed her drink into Tom's hand, kissed his cheek and pulled Janeway to the side. "So, tell me. What's up?"

Janeway was bemused that she could not convince Torres everything was fine. Perhaps the Klingon would make an interesting friend for Seven. "Come with me," she said. "And talk with Seven."

The normally swarthy dark Klingon's skin paled and her ridges somehow became more pronounced. "Uh, no, Captain. Thanks."

"Why not?"

"She'll start in on one of two topics, Captain: inefficiencies in Engineering, or me and Tom. And I'm really not--"

"Come on, Lieutenant." Janeway propelled B'Elanna before her over to the table where Seven and Naomi were playing their game.

"Wha--? She's busy with the kid. Let's--"

Seven's keen hearing picked up on their approach. Her hand froze in mid-air over a piece as she turned her head to take in both women. She could see the captain set somewhat behind Lt. Torres. Then she noticed a shift in the muscles of Janeway's shoulders. If the woman removed her hand, judging from the resistance in B'Elanna's body the Chief Engineer would fall on her butt in a very abrupt, inelegant way. "Captain? Lt. Torres?"

"Good evening, Seven." Janeway came around B'Elanna and after giving the engineer a stern reproving look she let off the pressure in her hand. To Torres's credit she kept her balance.

"Hey, Seven. So what're you doing here?"

"I am playing chess with Naomi Wildman," Seven replied in an utterly factual tone.

"Who's winning?" Janeway asked lightly leaning with one hand on the table and splitting her gaze somewhat evenly between Seven and the Wildman child.

Naomi looked bemused then reached for a piece, and triumphantly proclaimed, "I am. Seven,

I win... again."

Janeway caught the dismay on Seven's face as the young woman studied the layout, her ocular implant ticking over the various pieces and no doubt remembering every move of the present game. "You play quite a good game then, Naomi." Janeway praised the child. "Maybe I could steal Seven away for a few minutes? Give her... a few pointers?"

"Okay." Naomi looked over her shoulder and saw her mother approaching from another angle. "Looks like I have to go anyway." She hopped up from her chair and hugged Seven. "Thanks for the games, Seven. Good night, Captain. Lieutenant Torres."

Janeway smiled brightly at the energetic child and put a hand on Seven's shoulder as the girl walked off to meet her mother. "Come on, Seven. Time to mingle."

"Well, Captain, if you don't--"

Smiling, Janeway reached out appearing casual, but gripped Torres's shoulder. "Let's all go join Tom and Harry for a few minutes. Shall we?"

B'Elanna eyed Janeway with an expression probably not too different from a challenging one she would offer a charging Klingon Targ, but then she shrugged. Seven stood and nodded. Her voice was quiet and tentative when she accepted. "Yes."

Janeway brought the trio over to where Harry and Tom were quietly chatting, the fair-haired helmsman relating something grandiosely to the dark-haired Ops officer. "Oh, hey, B'Elanna," he interrupted himself as they approached. "I was beginning to wonder. Something up, Captain?"

"No, Tom." She smiled at this young man who was one of her crew's more rogue-like. What was she saying? He was her favorite rogue. "Just thought I'd bring over a friend to chat." She indicated Seven of Nine.

Harry smiled at Seven. "I'm glad to see you're all right, Seven," he offered.

"I am functioning at acceptable levels, thank you, Ensign Kim." Janeway winced slightly but let the conversation continue without interruption.

"I'm glad to see the Flyer's back in one piece," Tom interjected.

In her concise, helpful way, Seven apparently determined that Paris had wanted to change the subject. So she offered her opinion. "The Delta Flyer's controls are several degrees off, Mr. Paris." Janeway started to lift a hand to the young woman's arm to forestall her words, but the rest of Seven's offer tumbled out before she could. "I will help you go over the systems in the morning."

Tom blinked but recovered nicely. "Uh... All right, Seven. Thanks... for telling me."

"You are welcome."

"Anyone want another drink?" Janeway downed hers in a quick swallow and held the empty glass up.

"I will fetch you another."

"No, Seven, thanks. I'll get it myself. Can I refill yours, B'Elanna?" The captain gave Torres a firm look. The engineer looked down at her empty glass and after a moment, shrugged and handed it over. "I'll be right back. The four of you enjoy yourselves."

Kathryn lingered over the wine refills, occasionally glancing up to observe the quartet of three young officers and one Borg. Tom leaned forward and whispered something to B'Elanna who shrugged. He stepped back, their hands unobtrusively linked between them. Harry glanced toward the wine table, but did not appear to see the captain, and shrugged.

"Come on, Harry. Tom. Turn on the charm, fellows," she murmured. She had picked up the glasses and moved quietly off to the side when Tuvok approached.

"Captain."

"Tuvok."

The dark-skinned security chief topped off his wineglass and moved next to her. "Are you enjoying yourself, Captain?"

Janeway looked up to her long-time friend and comrade and shrugged. "About as much as you, I suspect," she quipped, knowing full well the Vulcan had little taste for parties, but mingled out of a sense of duty. A duty emulated by her. Crew morale was a tricky thing, she thought, thinking of how many times she had put positive spins on essentially insignificant events to promote good spirits among her stranded crew.

"I see." Tuvok shifted his stance somewhat and then resumed sipping at his synthehol. He nodded toward Seven. "I understand that Seven will be returning to duty in the morning. Should she not be regenerating?"

"Yes, but the doctor cleared her." Janeway studied Seven, who stood patiently just outside B'Elanna's left shoulder, listening avidly if the tilt of her blonde head was any indication. "I just thought she might enjoy the party."

At that moment, Seven's gaze began to drift and her eyes caught Kathryn's across the room. There was a clear disturbance in the young woman's eyes, and Janeway excused herself. "I'll see you later, Tuvok."

"Yes, Captain," he answered as she moved out of earshot.

The party appeared to be wrapping up when most of the guests departed around 0100 hours. Janeway, at Seven's side, turned to her. "Ready to leave, Seven?"

"Yes." She immediately followed the smaller woman to the doors and out into the corridors of *Voyager*. It had been a very odd evening, she decided, categorizing and assimilating all of her experiences and trying to file them away for future reference. Most of them centered on the captain, who had repeatedly drawn her into conversations on everything from the ship's cuisine to the latest developments in the adaptation of the alien slipstream technology. Owing to the captain's conversations, Seven found herself relaxing once again after Naomi's early departure had left her a bit at loose ends.

"So, Seven. How do you feel?"

The young woman glanced down to find Janeway looking up and reflected the warm smile offered her by the older woman. She searched her memory and came up with a response from her lessons with the doctor regarding dating. "I had a good time," she said from rote.

The captain's face took on a soft cast. "I'm glad," she responded, her voice softer than usual, though she did not appear tired.

"We were discussing the slipstream project," Seven re-initiated what she hoped would be a train of conversation she felt comfortable with. "Would you like to go to Astrometrics and examine my progress?"

"Don't you need to regenerate?"

Seven found the idea of regenerating unwelcome at the moment. She would rather spend time discussing the slipstream project with the captain, who frequently had insights of technological brilliance on the project when even Seven was in a quandary. But she did not know how to explain this and decided her lack of focus was indeed due to a lack of proper regeneration. "Perhaps you are correct."

"Come on, then, I'll tuck you in."

"Tuck me in?"

Janeway smiled gently. "Set the cycle on your alcove," she elaborated as they entered the

turbolift. "Deck 6," she told the computer.

After leaving Seven quietly sleeping in her alcove, Kathryn walked in silence back to her quarters on Deck 2. The corridors were ghostly quiet and the lights dim for the night cycle. The occasional crewmembers she encountered were coming from the mess hall as she herself had done.

A few noted her passage, but most simply went about their own business. She noted the expressions on several faces and remembered Seven's words earlier countering her opinion that most of the *Voyager* crew feared her. She took another look and noticed a few shy smiles. Maybe the young woman was right.

For all that Kathryn Janeway, late at night and alone, might berate herself for unpopular decisions and the hard this one versus that one choices, those aboard *Voyager* for the long trip back to the Alpha quadrant did not seem to be holding to a grudge.

Janeway emerged from the turbolift to find Tuvok just entering his quarters. The dark-skinned Vulcan who served as *Voyager's* security chief had a short towel around his neck and his sleeveless gray uniform top showed signs of perspiration. "Late night workout, Tuvok?"

"Captain?" He paused in his doorway as she approached. "I would have thought you retired already."

She chuckled. "Not for a few more years yet, my friend."

"You left the mess hall quite some time ago."

"So did you," she pointed out remembering how he was a few paces ahead of Seven and herself in the corridor leading to the turbolift.

He raised an eyebrow and dropped his chin in acknowledgment. "Your point is taken, Captain. I will not pry further."

"Were you prying? I hadn't noticed." Janeway smiled and leaned back against the wall and observed him.

"Well, then, good night." Considering the conversation closed, he started into his quarters.

Janeway remembered Tuvok assisting Seven when her homing signal had drawn her to *The Raven*, the ship where she and her parents had been assimilated eighteen years ago. At the time he had informed her that he felt an affinity for the young woman and felt that would allow him to help her. It was, she realized, the same reasoning Janeway had given herself for being the one to transport over to the Delta Flyer and talk to Seven about her most recent trouble. Perhaps between herself and

Tuvok they could determine how best to help Seven.

"Could I ask you a question?" she hurriedly asked before the cabin's doors could close. Tuvok stepped into the sensor, and the doors quickly retreated.

"Concerning?"

She took a deep breath. "Seven of Nine."

His dark eyes were inscrutable and he remained quiet for an agonizingly long moment. "Perhaps you would like to sit down," he suggested by way of answer, then gestured her into his quarters.

A bit astonished, Janeway stepped through. "That sounded like a 'yes'," she quipped, smiled and glanced around her officer's spartan quarters.

She noted his meditation table and the simply structured furnishings. It looked, she thought, rather like the Vulcan equivalent of a mountain cabin. She glanced up at the walls to find not hunting trophies, but instead a single shelf where a lone holographic cube resided. She stood to one side

and the angle shifted so that she saw the light-created figures within.

Looking slender as ever, and considerably younger, Tuvok stood in ceremonial robes adorned with Vulcan pictographs along the edges. Beside him stood a woman Kathryn had never seen before. She was hauntingly beautiful and reed-thin, her features were aquiline smooth, and brows arched elegantly, set in almond-toned skin. Drawing in the viewer, her eyes were a captivating swirl of green.

Tuvok cleared his throat behind her and she turned, blushing a little at having been caught staring. Janeway moved back to the low cushioned bench that served as his couch and apologized. "I didn't know you kept a holo here."

"She is my wife."

Kathryn nodded. "I know. I'm sorry. It's just-- Tuvok, how do you bear it?"

He was quiet for another long moment, then with measured calm, he replied, "Kathryn, I thought you wished to discuss Seven of Nine."

That he used her first name was telling, Janeway realized. It was not that Vulcans had no emotions, just that the expression of emotions, if at all, was muted by extensive mental training. Obviously thoughts of his wife, so distant, caused Tuvok a great deal of internal conflict.

It was yet another reason to get her crew safely home, she realized, knowing again she was accepting blame for something not entirely in her control. Shaking off her sudden trip down memory lane, Kathryn put her hands, fingers laced, across her knees. "Yes. You've spoken with Seven before. What do you think of her?"

"For a young human she is remarkably self-contained and possesses a formidable intelligence." His answer was straightforward though his brow raised in question.

"Would you say that she is adapting to life on *Voyager* well?"

"She transitioned well as a capable member of Astrometrics, providing her colleagues there and on the bridge with skill on several occasions." He paused as Janeway frowned. "Do you disagree with this analysis? Has she done something?"

"What about socially?" Her voice held a touch of earnest now.

"Ah, you are concerned about her recovery from her experiment with the enhanced alcove."

Janeway nodded. "While we were on the shuttle together she told me that she believed we were going to take her back to the Alpha quadrant and let them dissect her."

Her security chief nodded. "A reasonably logical conclusion."

"Tuvok!"

"Kathryn, it is a fact that Starfleet is first and foremost a military organization. Seven's components would likely provide valuable information to deflect future Borg attacks."

"But to dissect her? I can't imagine--"

"You cannot imagine it because you have a great admiration and dedication to Starfleet ideals. Such a perspective, tempered with your heart, makes you the formidable captain that you are. To believe that an organization to which you have given your life would act inhumanely would seriously undermine your ability to serve it."

Janeway stood, disturbed by this revelation of her trusted friend. "So I should tell her she is right to be paranoid?"

Tuvok eyed her curiously. "Why must you tell her anything? This incident has concluded. The Doctor successfully corrected her overload."

"She's... lonely. I don't know what to do. If I tell her that her fears could be well founded, she'll withdraw even further. She was willing to die out there yesterday."

"And it is your ... responsibility to make her less lonely? I believe I am beginning to understand. That why you brought her to Neelix's party and, counter to your own nature, mingled extensively in an effort to see that she conversed with most of the crew?"

"Counter to my own nature?" She rubbed her forehead and then the back of her left shoulder feeling tension knotting her muscles.

"Yes. You are not typically so social." His narrow shoulders shifted in a muted shrug. "Captain, may I suggest that you 'sleep on it'? You may be too tired at the moment to see the issues clearly."

As if on cue, Janeway yawned. She smothered a wry chuckle and nodded her head. "I suppose you're right." She stood and walked to the door. "Good night, Tuvok" she offered, standing on the threshold.

"Have a good night, Captain."

Janeway worked over her conversation with Tuvok as she entered her cabin and readied for bed. First in the ensuite, she removed her pants and shirt, set the communicator aside and tossed the clothing into the recycler. Pressing a button on one of her drawers she opened it and pulled out a long cotton sleeveless top, shrugging into it and smoothing it down over her breasts and hips where it covered her decently to the knees.

rushing her teeth and hair, she studied her face in the mirror over the sink. *The endlessly long days are going to have to stop*, she scolded herself, recognizing the darkened skin under her eyes for the evidence of exhaustion it was. Still the cycle would be the same again tomorrow, she knew. And every day until *Voyager's* triumphant return to the Alpha quadrant.

Whenever that will be.

"Computer, lights off." She moved on bare feet over the deep pile rug toward her bed. The computer obeyed the command as soon as the word 'off' passed her lips and she gratefully slid onto the mattress, burrowing under Starfleet issue blue covers, face down into thick pillows with an exhalation of relief. She wrapped her arms around the pillow and tugged it tightly into her body, forcing her mind blank. Sleep followed quickly.

The corridor ended at the airlock. A set of faces both familiar and strange peered from beyond the glass as Janeway walked forward, pride and relief forming every step. She reached over and activated the massive rollaway door.

"Welcome, Captain," an unfamiliar face said. Next to the Andorian admiral, Janeway recognized and fell into the embrace of Admiral Paris, her mentor.

"Welcome home, Kathryn," he murmured, hugging her tightly.

"Permission for my crew to disembark, sir," she asked.

"Permission granted."

Janeway stood next to Paris as they stepped back to allow the flow of people to move from Voyager onto the space station. She exchanged smiles with her officers as they walked out onto the promenade into the embraces of loved ones.

His wife and youngest daughter, T'Pol, greeted Tuvok, their faces alight with relief. An admiral who gestured him off to a briefing met Chakotay. Harry Kim fell into an embrace with his mother and father, their faces stained with tears and their conversation punctuated with Harry's exuberant shouts of joy. Tom Paris stopped before her and hugged her before looking up past her shoulder to his father. There were tears in both men's eyes as they shook hands then the admiral pulled his son quickly forward for a fierce hug.

Janeway looked away from them and watched Neelix, Seven and B'Elanna Torres

walking more slowly, together down the gangway. Neelix was grabbed first, a cultural team insisting he join them and tell them all about the Delta Quadrant. Starfleet Security grabbed B'Elanna and wrestled her to the floor, all the while the half-Klingon woman cursing a blue streak. Seven continued forward and Janeway felt herself gesturing toward the willowy blonde. As their hands reached toward one another, her left hand appeared with a set of cuffs. Powerless to stop, she closed the restraints over Seven's wrists and looked up into a tear-streaked face.

"Why?" came the voice from a ripped open visage, Borg implants spinning crazily.

Janeway closed her eyes and fought to back away as Seven's mesh-covered hand closed over her wrist. The imprisoned woman's face took on an expression of extreme fear, and Janeway screamed.

Panting heavily Janeway opened her eyes. Her body shivered from a profusion of sweat dampening her skin and now evaporating. She sucked in her surroundings along with several steadying breaths. *Dear God, it was only a nightmare*, she realized as her fingers, claws really, closed painfully around her covers and her eyes focused in the darkness.

"Computer, lights." Nothing happened since her voice was too low to carry to the audio pick-ups. Taking another deep breath, she tried again. "Computer. Lights."

Immediately the lighting came up, filtering the objects in the room through a sudden haze as her eyes watered from the brightness.

"Computer, lower lights to half." She breathed a sigh of relief as the lighting dimmed to a less painful level.

Anxiety filling her voice, Janeway called out, "Computer, locate Seven of Nine."

The computer's calm voice responded without inflection. "Seven of Nine is in Cargo bay 2."

Pulling on her uniform pants, Kathryn Janeway tore through the ship as if the very hounds of hell were after her.

Cargo Bay 2...

"It was 51594.2," she whispered. "0h-600 in the mess hall."

"My mistake," came back equally softly. Seven turned around slowly meeting the earnest blue eyes of Voyager's captain, the auburn-haired woman standing carefully several meters away. Their gazes remained locked as Janeway took a step forward. Seven felt her heart start to race, where she wasn't sure it hadn't entirely stopped beating just a few seconds before. "Seven. Annika. I'm asking you to trust me. I have never lied to you and I'm not lying to you now. Come back to Voyager. Please."

Seven didn't remember flipping the switch that turned off the force shield separating them, but the hiss of electricity died away and Kathryn Janeway stepped forward, immediately coming near and settling on the ground before the confused Borg. Resting a hand on the back of Seven's chair she asked, "Trust me?"

Seven slid her left hand gently into the captain's grip, feeling the woman's warm, strong touch through the metal mesh.

Then the captain smiled, tapped her combadge and spoke. "Janeway to Voyager. Two to beam out." The transporter grabbed their biosignatures and star-like twinkling interceded on her vision, obscuring the captain.

Seven opened her eyes to find swirling pools of cobalt blue looking back. Her senses took in the surroundings. The stark emptiness of the cargo bay filled her peripheral senses. Then she focused again on her immediate space, and realized that Captain Janeway stood only a handful of paces away.

Disoriented, Seven realized that she still stood in her alcove. Her regeneration cycle had been interrupted, though she had not heard the computer. Frowning slightly, she asked, "Captain? Is something wrong?"

"I... wondered if we could talk," the captain said as Seven stepped down, taking in the woman's unusual attire. Janeway glanced at the floor and gestured. "Please, sit down." She settled herself back in somewhat the same position they had occupied during their conversation the previous afternoon. Janeway sat with her back against the alcove.

Seven settled primly across from her, legs together, hands cupped over her knees. "Yes, captain?"

"I... have been thinking... about what you said... earlier."

Seven was confused. "Which conversation, Captain?"

"When you said that you thought our mission was to bring you back to the Alpha quadrant so that Starfleet could dissect you." She plunged forward quickly. "I know you were unduly influenced by the malfunction of your cortical implant, but I can't get the idea out of my head. Please. I need you to believe me when I say I would fight them if they tried."

"Captain?"

"I have served Starfleet my entire life, Seven. I want to believe they would never harm you." Janeway reached out and slid her right hand over Seven's Borg-enhanced left. "But I have to face the possibility that they might want to. I'm sorry I didn't acknowledge your fears before."

"I... understand... why you could not." She dropped her gaze. "I had hoped to spare you having to face that decision."

Janeway dipped her head to capture Seven's gaze once more. "You scared me yesterday. I don't think I've been quite that scared in a long time. Taking the Delta Flyer and planning to... end everything. I can't shake it."

Seven queried her with a look. "You... were scared?"

Janeway lifted Seven's hands and studied them for a long moment, resting in her palms. "I don't want to lose your trust. You are a part of... *Voyager*." She raised her eyes to Seven again who met them quietly, waiting for the captain to say her peace. "Will you trust me?"

Seven moved her lips but no sound emerged. There was devastation in the captain's eyes that struck her painfully, making her heart contract forcibly. She managed finally only "Yes" before her voice fled again.

Janeway's eyes glistened with unshed tears and she dropped her head, taking deep breaths over and over again. Seven could see her back expanding with each breath as the captain's composure utterly shattered with relief. She removed her right hand from the woman's grasp and gently rubbed the woman's shaking shoulder.

Their eyes met and Janeway leaned forward. Seven was surprised. While the captain had frequently entered Seven's personal space when they were working on some problem in Astrometrics, she had never initiated an embrace of any kind. The young woman moved her hands, to brace the woman coming up and over her now.

The believed hug never materialized. Instead, Janeway's cheek briefly nudged hers and then

the captain pulled back, bringing her lips over Seven's.

"Annika." Seven's human designation passed the captain's lips just before they warmly touched Seven's own. "Don't leave me."

Sensation exploded through Seven's receptors and she felt her heart beating so hard she feared it might explode from her chest. Janeway's body was suddenly there, contacting all along her own, fitting into the curves triggering sensations both relaxing and exciting. Her breath passed into the other woman's mouth, and the moist heat and taste of Janeway's lips made Seven's head spin dizzily.

"Cap--" Janeway's mouth opened and her tongue touched the Borg's own. Seven's breath came on a sob under an avalanche of emotions she couldn't begin to comprehend. "Kathryn," came out on a breath and she froze. That had been her voice since she was positive she had felt her throat move, but it hadn't sounded one whit like her, longing and desperation coloring the single word, a name, a benediction.

The kiss ended gradually with Seven cradling Janeway's compact figure easily in her lap as the captain dropped her head to the Borg's shoulder. Wetness from Kathryn's tears soaked through the collar of Seven's gray biometrics suit.

Kathryn slowly lifted her head to find Seven's eyes, edged with gray, studying her. "I can't believe I did that."

Seven, who found her mind slightly fuzzed by contentment, asked gently, "Why?"

The contrast in the woman's voice between now and Kathryn's nightmare threatened to shatter her again. Taking a shallow breath, she said, "Because... I... need you..." She looked up, wanting to gauge how her words were received. "I... wanted you to know."

Seven's lips tingled slightly and she lightly touched them with her right hand. "Message received." Her hands met on Kathryn's left hip as the captain's hands rested on her chest.

Kathryn's responding smile was brilliant, forming slowly as she brushed Seven's cheek. Seven reciprocated, brushing away the tear tracks on the captain's face.

Time passes in silence...

"Are you going to stand up, captain?"

The Borg's voice held a note of discomfort and Kathryn instantly shifted. Seven's question was the first sound that entered the silence following their kiss. Janeway had put her arms around the other woman's shoulders loosely. Her head lay against the blonde's broad shoulder, content to listen to the sound of the younger woman's heartbeat while her fears slowly passed. Seven's embrace held her securely on the younger woman's lap.

As she lifted her head and released her hold, her fingertips drifted over Seven's smooth cheek and lips, finally cupping the smooth chin a moment before releasing it and standing. She kept her gaze fixed on the curiosity beaming from luminous blue eyes. Offering a hand, she tested her voice. "May I help you up?"

"Is this part of the ritual we will now share?"

The question threw Janeway for a loop. "What?" But Seven did take her hand and stand, their bodies brushing as she rose to her full height.

"While the Doctor's instructions regarding dating strongly suggested a situation might advance to the moment of The Kiss," -- Janeway sensed an emphasis on the phrase had been put there by the doctor's well-meaning lessons. But she had no time to further contemplate *Voyager's*

holographic CMO. Seven's cheeks took on a ruddy cast and she ducked her head to the side, averting her gaze from Kathryn's own and continued on, "The holodeck lessons had not advanced to copulation."

Janeway felt her eyebrows lift and her eyes widen in shock. *Oh dear*, she thought. "We don't have to do anything you don't wish to do, Seven." The taller woman chose that moment to close her hand over Janeway's wrist.

The resulting jolt of warmth short-circuited the older woman's ability to think coherently. *This is all becoming entirely too much*, she thought. *Tuvok was right*. Lack of sleep prevented clear thinking, and right now, the captain desperately wanted to be clear headed once again. "Perhaps I should go."

She turned to leave, taking two steps off the alcove platform. Lightly treading steps followed her down, her heart thudding in time with each one. With a sense of the inevitable, she accepted Seven's long fingers and warm palm as they closed over the shoulder of her nightshirt. The thin cotton transmitted the other woman's touch as easily as if there had been no barrier. Janeway took a deep breath.

"You are... leaving?" Seven asked, her voice wavered slightly though Kathryn wasn't certain if it was because she herself was shaking, or Seven trembled.

Seven's voice went on in a clipped, analytical tone, like she was organizing her thoughts and cordoning off her emotions in order to view them clearly. "I... have... disappointed you. Not responding as you expected." The captain had heard her do it before, but never, ever in regards to Janeway herself.

Immediately she turned in Seven's hands and grasped the younger woman's fingers gently in her own. "No. It isn't you. I... shouldn't have done this... Not now... You've been through a lot the last few days."

"I disappointed you," Seven insisted succinctly. "I do not wish to disappoint you, Kathryn Janeway." Her pronouncement preceded the gentlest of touches on Janeway's cheek, long fingers sliding into the hair around her ears as the Borg initiated another kiss.

The effect on Janeway was something akin to the sensation of being caught in an airlock depressurization cycle. Her lungs expanded, her head swam and her vision clouded. She groped for something to steady her failing balance and found the smooth expanse of biosuit around Seven's waist. Desperately she hung on, as the blonde's exploration of her lips continued. Then Seven's hands moved over her back, down over Kathryn's hips and the realization that Seven was moving forward in this jolted the captain.

She was short of breath and panting when Seven released her. "Annika," she breathed. "We shouldn't."

"Is there a ritual we must observe first? I will do anything you desire," the young woman responded. "Only, do not go. You asked me not to leave. I do not wish for you to depart either."

Janeway was startled. She didn't remember. "When?"

"Just before you kissed me on the alcove platform," Seven answered, reporting it with eidetic accuracy.

The captain took a deep breath and stepped back. "I wanted only to make sure you understood that I would never let Starfleet harm you."

"I believed you on the shuttle. That is why I returned to *Voyager* with you. So you must have had another reason for bringing it up again."

Janeway frowned, and reacting to that, Seven tried to embrace her once again. Neatly she

stepped out of the younger woman's reach and looked up. "I... had a nightmare," she admitted. "I shouldn't have come here though," she added. "It was wrong."

"Why?"

"Because you are not ready for this... and neither am I." Kathryn struggled to regain composure that had been sorely lacking.

"I am not adverse to your attention... Kathryn. I find I am most desirous of it, in fact." Seven saw that Janeway's pulse sped up and her eyes widened again in surprise. "I... have always preferred your company to that of anyone else on *Voyager*. You are intelligent, forthright, dedicated to both your crew and your mission. Why would I not want to spend time with you?"

"But...you..." Kathryn wanted to do a lot of things at this moment and the conflicting intentions bewildered her as she at once wanted to grab Seven and kiss her, or grab Seven and shake her to make her see reason. "You have no experience at this," she managed.

"I am uncertain, yes, because I lack experience for what I wish to do with you. However, I know that you have... experience. I am curious. What are you afraid of?"

Janeway took a deep breath. She couldn't find one whit of composure to grasp and looked at Seven a little lost. "I am not afraid," she offered, unconvincing, even to the young woman who knew very little about human interactions, but had surprisingly honest observations about one human in particular. *God, I can't do this*. The knowledge that Seven could strip her bare emotionally in a glance terrified Janeway. She took another step backward, bumping into the alcove's control console, which blocked her exit.

"Your respiration has increased 32 percent. Your behavior is that of cornered prey. I do not believe you," Seven replied analytically.

"Damn it, Seven, I can't do this!"

"You said that you would not do anything I do not wish."

Moderately familiar with how this young woman's intelligent mind worked, Janeway got a sinking feeling.

"I do not wish... for you to leave." Seven's words were carefully chosen. "Instead I... wish... to engage in intimacy with you."

Janeway felt her body pulsing with each word that Seven uttered, each step the young woman took to close the space between them. Just the words and Kathryn felt utterly seduced. Defensively she protested, "I thought you weren't experienced at this."

"I wish..." Seven had seized on a phrase that seemed to keep Janeway's attention and did not abandon it now that it seemed she would 'get her wish.' "I wish... for you to instruct me." To prevent Janeway's movement away again, she reached for Kathryn's wrist, feeling the small delicate bones.

The invitation filling Seven's voice captured Janeway like a fish on a lure. She was hooked utterly and hopelessly. "I... want that too, Annika," Janeway murmured, leaning into the taller woman's body, reveling in the solid form. "But not here."

"Where should we go?"

Janeway smiled despite the pang of desire swelling in her stomach making logical thought all but impossible. "My quarters," she suggested, "are private." Seven pulled Janeway into her arms and both women were lost for a long moment just enjoying the fit of their bodies together.

"Computer. Site to site transport. Two to the Captain's quarters. Authorization Janeway Pi 1-1-0."

The computer, recognizing her voice, accepted the request and for the second time in 24 hours, she and Seven of Nine disappeared in a shower of energy particles hands entwined.

The transport beam deposited them inside Janeway's living room, where Seven had

occasionally visited for late night conversation. But the young Borg was not interested in conversation now, Janeway realized, as the blonde turned her in her arms and cupped her behind the head, lifting her lips to Seven's own.

"Seven?"

"Yes, Captain?" Seven's voice trilled warm air across Janeway's cheek.

"We're a little overdressed for this, I think." She thrilled to the taste of Seven's mouth as she pulled it down to hers, both covering and awakening her desires with the kiss. She tangled her fingers into Seven's hair, dislodging the clip the younger woman used to secure it up while she worked and absorbed the feel of it as it fell free over her fingers and the collar of Seven's suit.

Seven traced her finger down the front of Janeway's nightshirt, the fabric drawing taut across Kathryn's nipples, eliciting a groan from the aroused woman. Janeway's hands slid from Seven's hair to the back of the biosuit. A moment's fumbling and she found the catch securing it. She trailed her fingers down the woman's spine indulging in the feel of another's skin beneath her touch. It had been a very long five years.

She simply indulged her senses of touch and taste until she encountered a band of warm metal just above Seven's waist and realized it was the woman's abdominal implant, which allowed her to synthesize her energy directly from the ship.

Well, this was going to be an experience, she told herself silently, knowing instinctively that Seven would not right now appreciate hearing that this would be a first time for the captain as well. Her experience having been not only limited to males, but fully Human males at that. She knew Seven's implants significantly enhanced the young woman's musculature, strength and had seen through her projects in Astrometrics the inexhaustible energy the Borg could exhibit.

Stepping back, Janeway gamely engaged that part of herself she restrained so often, the no-holds-barred explorer and adventurer. Seven stood before her, naked to the waist completely devoid of self-consciousness. Still she looked up into Seven's face, wanting Annika to be sure that this was really what she wanted.

Kathryn Janeway was not the love them and leave them sort, and since she had taken the step of revealing her heart, she wanted to be absolutely certain. "Annika, I have to know... before we go any further... are you positive this is what you want?" She accepted Seven grasping her hands and kissing the knuckles. "Once we do this, there won't be any going back. I can't do that to you... or to me."

"In the shuttle, you asked me... to trust you." Seven traced her palms over Janeway's waist, her warm right hand and her mesh-covered left slipping beneath the nightshirt, her touch sending shivers coursing down Janeway's spine.

"I did." Janeway swallowed hard. "Do you?"

Seven nodded. "I do. Perhaps the more appropriate question is: do you trust me?"

Janeway immediately raised her hands to Seven's shoulders. "Of course I do."

"Then trust me to know what I want... is you."

Two pairs of blue eyes fell together. Janeway brushed her lips over Seven's chin as she closed the small distance between them and laid her palm against the younger woman's bared breasts.

She could feel Annika's heart thudding softly beneath her palm and the warmth of the Borg's skin seeped into her hand as she moved it tenderly down across the proud swells of Seven's right breast. Absorbed in the feeling of Seven's nipple hardening beneath her palm, Janeway's gaze trailed up over Seven's throat, watching the pulse speed up there, and then over her lips and up to her eyes.

"I... Please continue."

Janeway smiled and as requested, continued her tender touch. "I definitely think you can call me Kathryn," she offered. "Come with me, Annika."

"You... My designation does not sound so strange when you say it... Kathryn. Why is that?"

"The same reason mine sounds so beautiful on your lips." Janeway drew Seven with her into the bedroom. "The feelings behind it."

Seven looked down at the bed made efficiently with Starfleet-issue blue sheets. "This is where you sleep."

"It's not much," Janeway admitted. "But it's home," she added with a wry chuckle. "Would you like to sit down?"

Lowering herself to the bed carefully, Seven gave an incredible impression of testing the mattress, bouncing slightly and pressing her hands into the ticking. "Will you undress now?" She looked up at Janeway.

The combination of lustful look and the innocence in Seven's eyes drove Janeway's voice into hiding. All she could do was nod and, as if commanded by that penetrating blue gaze, she pulled off her nightshirt, baring herself to the young Borg's eyes for the first time.

"You... are..." Seven could not find a suitable description and reached out. Janeway's uncertainty about the appeal of her own body to this woman whom she considered a paragon of womanhood fled when confronted by that very serious, very adoring gaze. The blonde's hands slid over her hips, defining the line of her stomach and gently exploring the form of her breasts. She answered the insistent tug by joining Seven on the bed and nudging her back with a hand. "I do not know what to say," Seven breathed finally, her hands unable to be still against Janeway's figure.

"Lie back," the captain commanded softly. "I think anticipation is beginning to get the better of both of us."

"Is that the sharp feeling... of need I feel inside?" Seven asked, as Janeway moved with her, lying back on the sheets.

Janeway slid her form over Seven's, indulging them both in the sensations of their bodies' touch. "I hope so, Annika. I dearly hope so." Tangling her fingers in Seven's hair, Kathryn claimed the full lips with hungry kisses. She felt Seven's chest expand when the younger woman involuntarily responded to the desire between them. Janeway slid her fingers over Seven's stomach, intrigued by the changing textures between the oddly warm metal bands and the intervening cooler flesh.

All the while she continued tasting Seven, her mouth, her chin, her cheeks, the delicate lobes of her ears. "You are exquisite, Annika." Then, suddenly, her fingers found a new texture.

Seven's hips moved and Janeway's fingertips slid through a fine patch of hair covering the younger woman's mound. Seven gasped as Janeway's touch skirted a nodule of flesh seeming entirely made up of nerve endings. "Kathryn?" Her voice broke, dying on a groan of pleasure, completely involuntarily.

"Just learning your body, love." Janeway lifted herself up and propped her head gently against her other hand, looking down into Seven's upturned face. She could see that the young woman had a question.

"What?"

"Am I?"

"What?"

"Your love?"

Janeway smiled and tenderly lavished kisses from Seven's mouth down her satin textured skin and explored the reaction of Seven's nipples to her teeth, tongue and breath, until the young woman squirmed helplessly against her, groaning and undulating in pleasure. Seven's skin held a salt-sweet taste Janeway found intoxicating.

Taking a deep breath, she grew bolder, caught in her own rising need to witness the peak of Seven's pleasure. "You are my love," she breathed, stirring the fine golden hairs and firmly settling her arms over the Borg's legs. Coiled energy shifted in the muscles beneath her hands and Janeway thought to request, "All I ask is... please don't kick me out of my own bed."

Seven, who had thrown her left arm over her eyes, brushed her right hand over Janeway's bare shoulder. "I... can make no promises." The captain's deep chuckle strongly suggested that she had just accepted an unspoken challenge.

Kathryn inhaled, intrigued by the scent of the younger woman's arousal. Tentatively she enjoyed her first taste, and groaned in pleasure, pursuing the experience further. As her explorations continued, Seven's control rapidly dwindled, until the room was filled with the utterances of both women, mingled expressions of desperation, enjoyment, desire, and delight.

Seven's synapses stopped processing, and her inputs overloaded. She cried out. Janeway changed positions, bringing herself up and over the Borg, the contact both cooling and heating the blonde instantly. Her stomach contracted as Kathryn penetrated her center with a slender digit. "Kathryn!"

"Annika." Janeway slid her tongue past the blonde's teeth, enjoying the satin warmth.

"Kathryn?" Seven panted into the older woman's mouth, her mesh-covered hand cupped strongly behind Janeway's hand.

"Yes, Annika." Her finger curled up inside and slid against a smooth spot high inside the Borg's center. Seven's response was immediate and gratifying for Janeway.

Her name broke from Annika's throat keening on a cry of surprised fulfillment. Seven's eyes closed, tears squeezing out from beneath them as she let go. Endearingly she bit her lower lip. Janeway nudged the woman's lips apart and tenderly soothed the maligned skin as she withdrew her fingers and contently caressed the blonde's cheek while they kissed. Possessively she threw a thigh over Annika's strong, long legs. Her knee brushed Seven's mound and her own center received pressure when Annika shifted.

"So beautiful," she murmured in the delicate ear next to her lips.

"I... never realized... such pleasure," Seven murmured back, turning her head so that she captured Janeway's mouth. With a strong motion, she flipped them over.

The captain's breath whooshed from her lungs and Seven immediately balanced her weight onto her left elbow, as she endeavored now, to reciprocate. Her eidetic memory and avid attention to her subject's responses guided her inexperienced hands as if she had been born knowing exactly how to engage Kathryn Janeway's most passionate responses, most uncontrolled reactions, and most vocal appreciation.

"Dear God, Annika," the older woman groaned as her pleasure swamped her and sent her arching into Seven, seeking contact along every millimeter of her body. Kathryn shivered, then sighed, as Seven moved up to surround her in a hold both firm and tender. Her eyes closed as her head brushed the Borg's bare shoulder. "I... Thank you... for loving me," she said, somewhat inadequately. "I... need that."

"You shall always have it," Seven responded, shaken herself from witnessing the ultimate

pinnacle of Kathryn's pleasure. "Always."

It would have been an inconsequential utterance from almost anyone else, Janeway thought, but as she looked up, trailing kisses over the firm elegant line of Seven's jaw, she felt the promise.

Always and in all ways. Nuzzling closer, she fell into a contented sleep without nightmares, only dreams of what would come.

THE END