

Title: Finding the Balance Within
Author: Richard Chu
Series: VOY
Part: 1/1**
Rating: PG
Codes: K&7, P&T

Summary: Seven of Nine's questioning of the meaning and purpose of her life forces Harry and B'elanna to evaluate their respective relationship with her. Harry must discover whether he can truly love Seven; B'elanna is forced to confront her prejudice against Seven. Through Harry's compassion, Seven learns to cope with the fundamental uncertainties of human life.

Disclaimer: Star Trek: Voyager and all the Star Trek properties are copyright to Paramount. The author is using the context for non-profit creative purposes. Copyright infringement is not intended. The author reserves the right to maintain ownership of the story and elements not copyrighted to Paramount.

May be archived exclusively in ASC Archive and Summer's K/7 web site:
<<<http://members.aol.com/summer73/k7home.htm>>>

Archiving or (re)posting of the story to web pages or newsgroups requires the expressed permission of the author. Certain restrictions do apply (mostly to make my life a bit easier).

Dedication: I just want to dedicate this first story I've posted--second fanfic story I've written--to J.A. Toner, author of "Satisfaction" and "Quid Pro Quo." Without her wonderful stories I would never have thought about restarting my creative writing urge. She's been most helpful in answering some of my basic questions about writing in the past few months, and was kind enough to read my first story, which I forced upon her in my initial fury of writing, for which I profusely apologize for. To her I owe a huge, and everlasting Thank-you!

Appreciation: which until now has been anonymous since I was a lurker at the time--to Macedon for his very concise and insightful essay which he posted to ASC(EM). He put textbooks (which I have read only parts of) worth of valuable notes into a great essay, which I used to write and revise this story. I probably still have made 'newbie' errors in my writing, but, hey, it's my first big story :-)

Gratitude: to Summer for putting up with my worries about posting this story, and for taking the time and space to archive it.

Thanks: to Lesa for being my beta-reader.

Author's Notes: As the code states, this story is a revised version of my first draft. And for those who have been waiting, the FINISHED, revised version! :-)

Addendum: I wanted to clarify that I've had a very hard time trying to place this story in the Trek timeline. The best I can do is place it between the fourth season episodes "Vis-a-Vis" and "One." This is my first fanfic I've 'really' written and posted, so that will explain the many

references to established events--i.e. not so much character development as character supplement to what is established in the show. I wanted to give the main characters in my story some depth, while at the same time, expanding on the K/7 pairing. This was originally a script idea I had thought of a long while ago, but I recently read that someone had already pitched a very similar idea last year--which turned into "The Raven."

Having said all this, I accept all constructive criticisms, grammatical to stylistic. I will accept the good, the bad, and the ugly--however, doesn't mean I will accept open flames. One of the major things I want to find out is the stylistic things that might have bothered any reader. And if certain scenes 'didn't work', being too long, too short, whatever you thought was the problem. Those who have received feedback from me on their stories know how picky I can be. Be as 'ruthless' to me! I can't learn if I don't know what I'm doing wrong! To lurkers--Lurk no more! I'd love to hear from you. In any case, whoever you are, if you liked or disliked the story, please give at least one (big/detailed) reason. I hope I did all the posting details right. If not, tell me.

Please email feedback to: Richard_chu@canada.com.

It had taken Seven quite a long time to grasp the ability to harness the emptiness of her mind. To her, it was a difficult paradox to understand that one could utilize the quiet of a mind that lacked a collective authoritative voice. It was an under-utilization of a vital resource, leaving room only for inefficiency, irrelevancy, and uselessness.

Tuvok, however, had reminded her several times that the ability to evoke the benefits of a calm mind was the first step required to attain control over the emotions that could erupt from the emptiness that accompanied human individuality. What most would consider an irony coming from a Vulcan, Tuvok expressed as a logical fact, that rationalizing emotion was not the most effective way of controlling it. Seven had to learn to accept her human sensibilities in order to control them, which was why Tuvok had convinced her to undergo a variety of Vulcan meditations meant to develop emotional control.

Eyes closed, arms raised in prayer-like position, hands clasped together with index fingers pointing upwards, and cross-legged on the floor, Seven and Tuvok sat solemnly, opposite each other between Tuvok's mediation lamp.

Like every evening session, The atmosphere was calm and dark, with only the slight flicker of the lamp providing any dominant visual stimulation.

The lamp's flame wagging in the air served as the sole stimuli to evoke the internal fire that was being prepared to be harnessed.

After an indeterminate amount of time, Tuvok began the meditation. "Maintaining your internal calm, slowly begin to gaze at the flame."

Following the motions of previous meditations, she slowly opened her biological eye. After allowing Seven a moment to complete his instruction, he continued, "Stay fixed on the flame. Do not analyze. Observe. See the flow of the flame, how it sways with the currents of the air, the brilliant hues of colour as you look from the centre to the periphery of the flame.

See its slow, fluctuating symmetry."

She continued to follow Tuvok's instruction to the letter, noting, as best she humanly could, the various components of the flame. Tuvok continued only after seeing Seven's attentive compliance. "Now that you have seen the real flame, close your eye and recreate the image in the emptiness of your mind."

"It is done."

"Control the flame. Let it be the metaphor of your emotions. Your emotions fuel it. Let the predominant emotion keep the flame alive."

Seven's flame flickered abruptly before returning to its tranquil state. Undeterred by her momentary flash, Seven responded, "I have it."

"Let one emotion be the fuel. Let another be the suppressant."

"I have it," Seven repeated. "It is flowing... breathing... perfect."

Tuvok let Seven continue her momentary control before continuing, "Now, slowly and steadily magnify the emotions, while maintaining your control. Do not let the emotions overwhelm you."

The calm orange-dominant flame began to turn an efficient, rich blue, with the flame maintaining its size. Seven reported confidently, "It is done."

"Keep the flame constant. Do not become blinded by irrelevant emotions. Maintain control by maintaining perspective."

"Of course."

But her statement seemed to backfire. The flame, while maintaining its blue hue, began to grow, and flicker more vigorously. Tuvok noticed Seven's problem as her breath became shortened. "What is happening?"

"The flame is growing...becoming uncontrollable...brighter...larger..." Seven reported.

"Regain equilibrium. Let the suppressant emerge. Focus on control..."

"I...I cannot..." she stuttered, the flame encompassing the corners of her singed mind. "It's going to..." Seven cut herself off, breaking the meditation.

Tuvok lowered his arms, sighing in Vulcan displeasure. "What went wrong?"

"I lost control," she said in frustration.

It had not been the first time. In fact, every single meditation for the past two months ended with Seven losing control. The frustrating part for Seven was that every meditation was exactly the same. Tuvok had told her, however, that while the ritual may be the same, it was the internal difference that mattered, and that even if she was unsuccessful in previous attempts, it was not necessarily for the same reason. "What did you lose control over?"

"It was...fear. Fear was the flame, and confidence was the suppressant."

"It is most impressive that you have been able to distinguish between the two," Tuvok commented. "However, fear is one of the more primordial emotions."

"So then I should be able to control it."

"On the contrary; fear, when mixed with other emotions, becomes increasingly difficult to harness."

"But I did not mix emotions."

Tuvok raised a brow, "Didn't you?"

Seven tilted her head in confusion. "Explain."

"Fear and confidence are essentially two different emotional responses. The former is fundamental, instinctive, while the latter, is necessarily cultured and developed. Like all emotions, fear and confidence have many different contexts, which produce respectively different types. Each of these types of fear requires a relevant type of confidence to cope with or eliminate the particular fear. I surmise that tonight, you supplemented an inappropriate type of confidence to control a specific fear, which led to your loss of control."

Understanding Tuvok's explanation, Seven asked the next logical question, "How do I gain this comprehensive understanding of my emotions?"

"From experience and training."

"Then let me try again."

"No," Tuvok ordered. "You must rest and reflect, as you have done every night since we began this exercise. You must learn to intuit your experiences and live with these new moments. Only then can you attain the balance between intellect and emotion."

"Very well," Seven replied as Tuvok reached for the lamp. As Tuvok blew out the lamp, the room darkened further, with only the stars to illuminate the room. She looked at her surroundings and realized she was reliving the turmoil present within her during the meditation. As she looked around to regain her bearings, she noticed each object in the room carrying its own distinct shadow, each having a corner eclipsed. She closed her implanted eye and observed with imperfect vision. The uncertainty of what an object was, the invisible qualities that she could not ascertain, led her to feel a certain kind of fear. But she could not deduce what kind of fear it was.

She opened her ocular implant and her fear dissipated. Before leaving his quarters, Seven turned to Tuvok and remarked, "Thank you, Tuvok. Good night."

"Good night, Seven."

She walked out of his quarters and headed for the turbolift. As she walked, Seven thought about the fear that she could not control. She scoffed off her confusion momentarily as she emphasized the thought, 'I fear nothing.' But throwing aside fear was not the answer. The events of the evening had brought her to question herself, 'Why did the fear become uncontrollable? What do I have most to fear?'

"Vorik, have you finished transferring navigational control from the jelpacks to the backup isolinear circuitry?" Torres asked.

"Yes, lieutenant."

"Good," Torres uttered tiredly. The entire engineering crew had been working for two days straight transferring all the systems to the backup circuitry to perform an upgrade of the bio-neural jelpacks. While they still had a long way to go, they were nearing the end of this first, slow part of the task, and Torres allowed herself to loosen up a bit. It was either that or blow up at someone, but she knew better than that. There were still at least three major steps before they would be finished. She could blow up later. Out of curiosity, Torres asked, "Computer, time?"

"Current time is 0016 hours."

She had been at it for over 14 hours. It was really getting time to quit for the day. She had yet another full day's work ahead, well, actually three, but she didn't want to think that far ahead yet. 'Just go step by step,' she reminded herself. It was the most efficient way. 'Besides,' she thought, 'it keeps that Borg out of my Engineering.'

Since it was a routine job for the Engineering crew, Torres had stated that Seven's assistance was not required. B'elanna was actually quite surprised when Chakotay had agreed to her request to keep Seven out of the way, but it wasn't unconditional. She could feel the pressure Chakotay was putting on her, the moment she tried to disassociate herself from Seven. Maybe it was her lame excuse that 'the guys couldn't keep their eyes off Seven' that gave her away, but B'elanna felt a cold sternness in Chakotay's eyes from her refusal to assign Seven. It was a look that she found hauntingly familiar, prompting her to realize that she was being put under the gun.

Getting back to the job, Torres ordered, "Vorik, just finish securing all the systems we've transferred today, and leave the rest. We'll do the rest tomorrow morning."

"You mean, this morning."

Annoyed at Vorik's Vulcan logic, "Yes, later this morning." Saying it made her all the more tired. Not wasting any time she started moving towards the door, "Well, good 'morning' Vorik."

"Sleep well Lieutenant."

As soon as she entered her Cargo Bay, Seven walked towards the computer console near her alcove to perform preliminary tasks to prepare for the work she planned to do later in the day. As she started, a part of her rationalized that all the preliminary research was a slow process. While the computer could display information quickly, she could only access a limited amount of information at a time. She had modified the console to display five different screens of information at a time, all of which was easily processed by her ocular implant. But it was still a detached

process. The computer outputted information. She inputted it. It was reciprocal, not unified. This inefficiency left a large portion of her mind open to 'inefficiencies.'

Despite her realization of this fact, her emotions nevertheless emerged.

She felt envious. While pushing the buttons and memorizing the information on the screens, a part of her wanted to be the console. It had something that she did not: perfection. The console had instantaneous access to the computer core, to the heart of the ship, the centre of function. Every console aboard the ship had the singular purpose to serve the core, being the conduits of information. There was no confusion and no uncertainty. It worked or it didn't. It was all or nothing, and Seven desired to have that perfection once again.

This lack of perfection made her feel confused. Ever since she realized she had lost her link to the Collective, Seven had begun to carry doubts about herself. Without the ability to access perfect information, she could not attain any perfect outcome. Errors would appear, inadequate head accD 0 Srs w'6 0

"Ensign Kim is in his quarters."

She regained some control when she suddenly became frustrated. Why is he not responding? Maintaining the string of rationality left in her, she demanded, "Computer, what is Ensign Kim doing?"

The Computer beeped negatively, "Access denied. That information requires level 5 security clearance to bypass privacy protocols."

She was about to use her Borg experience to plow through Voyager's primitive security protocols, when she decided it was more efficient to simply go to the Ensign's quarters. Her anger and frustration, being the strongest support for her frame of mind, allowed her to put up an exterior of cool calm. After walking out of the Cargo Bay, into the corridor, and stepping into a Turbolift, Seven demanded, "Deck six."

Once the lift reached its destination, she walked out and down the corridor, heading towards Ensign Kim's quarters. As she got closer to his quarters, she began to hear a strange string of sounds. It wasn't like any mechanical noise she had heard before. It wasn't the noise she could hear coming from the power conduits, or the sounds of the environmental systems. It had an irregular rhythm, and the tones fluctuated in accordance to the rhythm. In front of Ensign Kim's quarters she could get a clearer depth of the sounds. It had a deep, rich hollow aspect to it that sounded almost organically based. Despite the oddity, it was nonetheless strangely compelling.

Her anger and confusion dissipated as the tones and rhythms eased her mind.

She was getting used to hearing the sounds until the sounds ended unharmoniously. After it had stopped for a moment, she took the opportunity to chime the door. There was a pause. She was about to ring again, when she heard a frustrated, "Come in."

She walked in and found herself in a room that was only half lit. She turned to her left to find the lighted area focused on the Ensign who was out of uniform. He was holding a long black instrument that had shiny metallic elements scattered throughout. He was reading a large PADD mounted on a stand. He didn't look too happy, frustrated more like it.

And, he wasn't showing signs of embarrassment, a characteristic she had come to expect from him. He was certainly concentrating. But, after looking up to acknowledge whoever had entered his quarters, he diverted his concentration to the person who had walked in, "Hi, Seven."

"Good evening, Ensign."

Thinking that whatever had brought Seven to his quarters would probably take up some time to work on, Harry decided to stop practicing. Walking towards Seven, he ordered, "Computer, full lights."

As the room brightened, Seven got a better look at the instrument Harry was holding. Maintaining her focus on the instrument she asked, "Ensign, what is this?"

"Oh, it's a clarinet. It's a musical instrument."

"And it's purpose?"

Casually, Harry answered, "For me, it's enjoyment. I get some satisfaction from playing a catchy tune. It's a form of entertainment for myself."

"If you get satisfaction from it, why did you look frustrated when I first came in?"

Smirking at the irony, "Like anything, before you can enjoy it, you have to get used to it."

"Explain."

"Well, it takes practice to tap your imagination, and to be able to express it well. You need to first know how to read music, then you have to learn how to play an instrument. It's that process of getting to understand the music, get the feelings expressed in the music, and learning to express them properly with a musical instrument that can be frustrating at times, because we don't always have enough experience in performing the music..."

Harry was trailing off for some reason and Seven was noticing this. She had known, since the first time she met him, that Harry's eyes said a lot about his disposition. When his pupils dilated, clearly he was feeling attraction towards her body. When he squinted he was either concentrating or under pressure. Here, his eyes were moving quickly, undirected at any one object, but moving from one object to another. Not to mention the fact that he wasn't looking at her while he gave his last answer. Vocalizing her observations, Seven stated, "Ensign, you seem...unfocused."

Squinting, Harry asked, "What do you mean?"

"You seem to be trying to divert my attention."

Slightly amazed she was able to detect that, and annoyed that he was failing to change the subject, he resorted to ignorance, "I don't know what you're talking about."

In a condescending disposition Seven stated, "Ensign. I have become increasingly accustomed to your behaviour. I am sure that you are indeed trying to keep something from me."

In a stern voice Harry replied, "Well, I guess I am. But, I'd rather not talk about it." In explicitly trying to change the subject, Harry asked, "So, what brings 'you' here?"

"I felt the need for...company."

"Feeling a bit lonely down in Cargo Bay Two?"

Quietly, yet frankly, Seven replied, "Yes."

He was taken back a bit by the blunt answer. Empathizing with her, he let his guard down a little. There was no point in getting Seven frustrated if she was already. It just wasn't the right thing to do. Trying to break the static atmosphere, he moved towards the replicator to get something to drink. Out of courtesy he asked Seven, "Want anything to drink?"

"No...thank you."

He nodded in acknowledgement and smiled slightly in instinctive reaction to a courteous response. He turned back to the replicator, "Computer, cup of Green Tea."

A string of acknowledging beeps, with a hum and a visible amalgamation of energy and light, produced a small teacup filled with a steaming, light green liquid. Carefully holding the cup in the palm of his hand, he moved towards the sofa and sat down, "So, what's up?"

"Up?"

"Yeah, how are things going? What brings you to my quarters?"

"I was contemplating my existence."

"Hmm, what about?"

"It is difficult to explain."

Assuming this was one of the first times Seven had opened up to anyone, Harry said in a caring voice, "Take your time. You don't have to feel compelled to say anything you feel uncomfortable saying."

"Comfort is irrele..."

Seven cut herself off. Her internal struggle was resurfacing again, and she was trying to get rid of it, but she didn't know how. She closed her eyes in concentration. Harry, noticing this, asked, "Seven, are you alright?"

She paused, unable to give an answer. Something inside her was trying to convince herself that she was alright but every fibre in her being said otherwise. She leaned on the back of a chair and uttered in anguish, "No."

Getting concerned, "Want to go to Sickbay? You feeling okay?"

The word 'feeling' made her burst out in deep frustration, "No! But...I don't know what I'm feeling!" Putting her fist over her chest, "There is something right here that is...uncomfortable. I want it to stop...but I don't know how!"

Harry was taken aback by the sudden outburst, as it was very uncharacteristic from what he was accustomed to experiencing. He had heard of rumours about Seven's threats to the Captain when she first came on board, but he took that to be a result of her rapid transition from Borg to human. 'Maybe that's what's happening to Seven now...another transition,' Harry thought. Feeling a bit out of his league, and worried he might make things worse, he suggested, "Maybe you should talk to the Captain about this."

"I don't want to talk to the Captain; I want to talk to you."

For a moment, he felt flattered that she trusted him enough already to come to him about this, but he quickly felt, and felt very strongly, that he wasn't really qualified to talk about it. He thought about directing her to Tuvok, but quickly realized that Tuvok was the last person to talk about personal matters. To Tuvok, they were just unnecessarily emotional and

illogical. Not trying to push Seven away, he did his best trying to help, "Well, uh, what are you thinking about that might be causing these...feelings to emerge?"

"I was contemplating my existence."

"Okay...but what part of your existence were you thinking about?"

"My humanity. My life as a Borg, and how those two things are incompatible."

Her face was showing signs of strain again. Trying to keep her talking, rather than feeling, Harry stumbled out the question, "Why are they incompatible?"

"Because humanity is imperfect. It is filled with irrelevancies that have no bearing for a Borg."

"But you are...at least half-human."

Seven glared at Harry for stating such a designation, "I am not HALF of anything! I am whole; I am one; I...I am..." Seven mumbled the rest, and broke down to a whine.

Harry stared at Seven's face. It was definitely one filled with emotion. She was confused. She was scared, sad, angry...in anguish. And to add to that, she probably didn't even know what she was feeling. Noticing that she was leaning ever more on the chair he insisted, "Seven, I think this is one of those times where you should sit."

Too weak to argue over a trivial matter, she allowed him to put her arm over his shoulder and guide her to the sofa. She was visibly tired, or maybe strained, so he asked, "When was the last time you regenerated?"

"24 hours ago."

Getting worried about what to do, he asked, "Is it good enough if you just sleep?"

"I do not know. I've never 'slept' outside my alcove."

Harry felt inclined to call the Doctor, except that he felt the Doc wasn't entirely qualified. Seven was clearly going through a psychological problem, and given the Doctor's track record, he didn't want to put Seven in another potentially devastating situation. He slowly got up to get his tricorder. Scanning her implants, he stated, "Well, it looks like your implants are stable. I'm not detecting anything out of the ordinary, at least that I can tell. Maybe you just need to have your human body rest."

"I've never needed rest before."

"Well, you've never been through such a deep identity crisis."

"Is that your diagnosis of my condition?"

With an unequivocal look on his face, Harry answered, "Yes, Seven, that's what I think you're going through."

"If there are no physical signs of a problem, what evidence do you have to suggest this diagnosis?"

"Well, I'm not a Doctor, so I don't know if I'm detecting anything or not."
Looking aimlessly in contemplation, and then looking into Seven's eyes, Harry added, "But anyway, let's just say, it's part of what I was trying to hide earlier."

She nodded slightly in understanding. Harry closed the tricorder and decided to sit beside Seven. He stared at the floor, in a moment of thought, before he looked into Seven's tired face, "You know Seven, everyone goes through some sort of identity crisis along the way. It's, I guess, kinda like a Klingon rite of ascension."

"What is that?"

"It's a ritual Klingon children go through to prove to themselves that they are adults. It usually involves a lot of roaring and being poked with pain sticks. Personally, I'm glad I'm not a Klingon. Anyway, it's a time when they usually chose to become a Klingon warrior and live to fight for personal honour and glory to the Empire."

"And it's relevance?"

"Well, there are times in a human's life where we have to prove to ourselves who and what we are and what we want to be. The only similarity to the Klingon version is that it can be just as painful to go through psychologically, and emotionally."

Harry's words reverberated in Seven's mind, calming the emotional turmoil inside her. "I am...surprised that you provided such an accurate diagnosis of my condition."

Teasing, Harry said, "Is that a compliment I hear from the all-knowing Seven of Nine?"

Being momentarily calm, Seven smiled slightly at Harry's attempt at humour. But she quickly returned to her deep thoughts, "That is the problem, Ensign. I am no longer all-knowing. I am no longer perfect."

All Harry did was pat Seven's shoulder as a gesture to comfort her. He didn't know what else to say. Seven turned to Harry, trying to understand his action, and looked into his face. He smiled sympathetically, and that seemed enough of an answer for her. Harry got up, and in reaction, Seven asked worriedly, "Where are you going?"

"Oh, I'm just going to get a blanket for you."

"I don't need a blanket. This room's temperature is sufficient."

Shrugging his shoulders compassionately, "Okay. I'll just be at my desk if you need anything."

Seven laid back down. Harry went around to the back of the desk about to write something on his computer terminal when he noticed Seven just lying there with her eyes still open, "Seven, is there anything else wrong?"

"I don't know how to go to sleep. When I regenerate in my alcove I usually am given a sedative to induce unconsciousness."

In a different situation he would have chuckled at the 'cultural differences,' but he instead blinked his eyes in understanding, "Well, just close your eyes, breathe deeply, and clear your mind." He was about to say 'just relax' but said, "Don't think or analyze. Just calm yourself down and focus on your breathing. Slowly breathe in and out..."

It became apparent that by the time he had finished 'directing her to sleep,' she had already fallen unconscious. He gazed at her for a few moments, thinking about everything about Seven: her beauty, intelligence...and her vulnerability. It was her vulnerability that was foremost on his mind at that point. He sat down and quietly sent out a message. He ended by giving the voice command, "Computer, encode as time-lapsed message. Send at 0700 hours."

The Computer beeped loudly, ending the wake up alarm by stating, "Current time is 0650 hours."

A sad whine from under a pillow was the first sign of life from B'Elanna.

'It's not fair; it's not fair' she thought. Of course fairness had nothing to do with it, but she felt the need to find some excuse for her current predicament. It's not that she didn't feel she could handle the responsibility for every single chip, conduit, and panel of the ship, but that there simply wasn't enough hours in the day to get everything done.

Something always got in the way, forcing her to adjust her schedule or catch up on old work. As she turned face up in her bed, an idea popped into her head, 'Why don't we change to a longer day? A Vulcan day, or maybe a Klingon day. They're only four or five hours more.' That idea got her mind jumping, and soon enough she was already getting ready for the morning shift. She was about to take a shower when the computer beeped and said, "Incoming time-lapsed message."

Sighing in slight frustration, she asked the computer, "From who?"

"Lieutenant Tom Paris."

She let out a mischievous smirk, and accessed the message. "Good morning B'elanna," Tom began cheerfully, "Well, I hope you had a good night's sleep because today I have something special for you. I know you've been busy with the circuitry upgrade, but I took it upon myself to force you to take a break sometime today. Oh, like maybe at 1330 hours for three hours...at least." The message ended with Tom saying, "I assure you it will be warm, and very relaxing. And if you feel compelled to ignore this request, I may be forced to pull rank."

She relished in her temptation for a long moment, but quickly was reminded of her duty, by her uniform folded on a chair. She battled in her mind whether to accept or deny Tom's 'order.' Her will still being groggy from waking, she gave in and decided to go to the holodeck at the designated time. It was a reasonable indulgence, she convinced herself. She smiled contently as she got ready for work, anticipating her imminent 'break.' It was at least the best order anyone had given her in the past couple days.

"Lieutenant Paris. Incoming time-lapsed message."

"From who?" He groaned.

"Ensign Kim."

Tom sighed, "Lets here it."

"Hi Tom. Sorry for waking you, but I have a problem on my hands...well in my quarters actually. Seven's here. And I don't think she's well. I thought about going to the Doctor, but she's having a personal crisis, of the sort that the Doctor has been less than successful in treating. I need you to come here to check on her. I've already done some scans, but I didn't find anything wrong. I really need your help with this one."

"He never fails to get caught in tough situations," Tom remarked out loud.

'He's too good for his own good,' he thought as he got out of bed. But, then again, that was what made Harry such a good friend. He was hopeful.

He may be naive sometimes, but he was still good to be around. After all, it was his exceptional nature that saved his life.

Changing into his uniform he moved to thinking about what might be wrong with Seven. She seemed ever Borg-like: strong, determined...efficient.

But then again, he wasn't one to spend that much time with her. B'elanna was of course the reason. Seven was just not a good topic of discussion with her. B'elanna always hardened when anyone brought up her name.

Since he could never bring it up, he didn't really know why. Maybe she thought Seven remained a threat to her authority, or maybe she reminded her of the demise of the Maquis. The Borg slaughtered and assimilated thousands of Federation citizens and Starfleet officers, just as brutally as the Cardassians eliminated the Maquis. Putting on his communicator he shrugged off the dark thoughts. It was a morbid way to start a day thinking about such things, but it was becoming a strange morning. He got his tricorder and headed for the door.

Torres walked into the Mess Hall yawning. Before she reached a table, Neelix came up to her, with coffee in his hands. She looked up to greet him, but noticed that he was looking less than his normally cheerful self, "Morning Neelix. Something wrong?"

"Good Morning B'elanna. Oh, it's nothing important."

"You sure? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Well, in a manner of speaking. I just had a rather disturbing nightmare last night."

Feeling concerned she asked, "About what?"

"Well, I'd rather not burden you with it."

"It's no burden at all," B'elanna said compassionately, "Have a seat."

Neelix hesitated for a moment, but eventually gave in. He sat down, staring at the centre of the table, searching for a comfortable place to start. Trying to break the silence he uttered, "Well, here's a cup of coffee for you."

"Thanks." B'elanna paused a moment, then finally asked, "So, what's made you so serious this morning?"

"I just had another nightmare about those nanoprobes swimming inside my body..."

Torres' face hardened when she heard the word 'nanoprobe.' But, hiding her hostility, she focused her attention on Neelix, "What happened with the nanoprobes?"

"I dreamt that there was this battle waging inside me. And I was losing the war." He shuddered as he continued, "I saw myself as a zombie, Borg implants all over my body, controlling my mind...my body. I roamed the ship intent on finding people to assimilate."

Imagining his dream B'elanna shuddered herself, "That sounds horrible!"

"What made it worse was that Kes came around the corner of the corridor and my body was intent on assimilating her! She was walking up to me, smiling, ready to hug me. I tried to tell her to run, but I couldn't get the words out. My mind cried out to stop, but...but I couldn't. I was yelling at myself to stop, begging myself to stop, but it was...futile. That's when I woke up."

Torres couldn't help but feel horror, anger, and sorrow after hearing about Neelix's dream. She focused her attention on the fact that it was indeed Seven's fault. She felt that as a singular truth. She convinced herself that blaming Seven was a way to help with Neelix. His life was still very fragile, perhaps more fragile than most really knew about. Finding something to say, B'elanna consoled, "Neelix, it was only a dream."

"But it feels so real..."

"I'm sure it does," she replied. She paused, not knowing what else to say. After staring into her coffee cup she advised, "Maybe you should take a break for a while."

He thought about it for a moment. But after forcing himself to regaining composure, he said, "No. That's okay. I think the best thing is to keep myself busy. The last thing I need is time to think about it more."

"If you need to talk, you know where to find me."

Softly patting B'elanna's hand, Neelix replied, "Thanks."

He held her hand for a moment before he got up to return to his morning duties. B'elanna watched him get up and walk over to his kitchen. She continued to watch him as he served breakfast to Lt. Carey. After knowing what Neelix was thinking about, B'elanna could tell that his smile to Carey was pasted on. But it was a convincing smile. Carey laughed out loud after Neelix said something to him. With a smile on his face, Carey left

for a table, leaving a clear line of sight between B'elanna and Neelix. Neelix saw B'elanna's gaze, and gave a muted smile. She smiled back and turned to stare into her coffee.

But, staring into the coffee reminded her of her frustration. Seven of Nine. She had changed Neelix for the worst. It was all her fault. Sure, she brought him back to life, but Neelix was different. He was suffering under his cheery exterior. He was afraid of himself. B'elanna was definitely angry at Seven, but she couldn't really find a strong reason for her feelings. Sure, she found excuses for her feelings, but they weren't the deep-rooted reason. She had done nothing wrong to her, and she had done a lot for the ship since she'd come onboard. The only reason she could think of was that Seven was Borg. That fact alone seemed reason enough, 'Look what she's done to Neelix.'

She forced herself to stop thinking about it. She gulped down the last bit of coffee in her cup and headed for the Mess Hall doors. On her way out she turned to Neelix and gave him a last compassionate smile.

Kim paced impatiently in his quarters. 'Where is he?' Harry worried in his mind. 'Maybe he didn't get the message. He is one to ignore messages from time to time. Damn, maybe I interrupted him and B'elanna...' Trying to brush aside his worry he asked, "Computer, time?"

"0715 hours."

Somehow, asking for the time didn't make things any better. 'This is just great. I'm on duty in 45 minutes. Tom's late, and I have a Borg sleeping in my quarters,' he thought in frustration. His thoughts were diverted when he heard the sound of the door chime. 'Finally!' he thought, but Harry paused a moment. After being worried and frustrated, he was now feeling paranoid, 'It might 'not' be Tom.' He paced around for a few moments, worrying blindly. After regaining a portion of rationality, he asked the computer quietly, "Computer, who's at the door?"

"Lieutenant Tom Paris."

He sighed a breath of relief. He rushed to open the door. As they opened, Harry saw Tom about to chime the door again, "Harry, what took you so long?"

Trying to gain some composure, Harry replied, "I wanted to open the door personally instead of...yell through the door."

As Tom entered the quarters he quirked, "If I didn't know you better, I'd think you were being a bit paranoid."

Harry rebuffed, "Of course not."

"Now I'm sure of it," Tom replied with a smirk. "You know it's not even 0800. Don't you think it's too early for being so jittery?"

Letting his guard down, Harry answered, "I've been up all night."

Tom nodded in understanding. He looked around the quarters, finding Seven

lying on the sofa sleeping quietly. He paused. Harry asked, "What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing. I've just never seen a Borg sleep."

Frustrated, Harry urged, "Look, can we get down to business?"

"Right," Tom replied as he got out his tricorder. He was punching a few buttons and the tricorder beeped in response. He took out the medical scanner and was about to scan Seven when Harry grabbed Tom's wrist and demanded, "What are you doing?"

Frustrated, Tom replied, "I'm scanning her. Well, at least I was about to. God, you 'are' jittery this morning." Trying to ease Harry, he added, "Relax. I'm not going to bother a single cell of her body."

Flustered, Harry sputtered, "Yes...good, of course."

Tom got an idea and relayed it to Harry, "I know, why don't you do the scanning, I'll do the analyzing."

"You don't have to do that."

"Yes I do! You're so paranoid right now, you'll be breathing down my neck more than the Doc does, and I don't need any more of that in one day."

He handed the scanner to Harry, who hesitated before he saw Tom's insistent face. Tom set up the tricorder and then motioned Harry to start scanning.

While waiting for the data to come in, Tom took a glance at Harry. Harry was moving the scanner up and down Seven's body, but his eyes stayed fixed on Seven's face. He could tell that Harry was looking, remembering every minute detail of Seven's face: the lines on her naturally reddened lips, the contours of her cheeks and nose, every eyelash and every hair in her eyebrows. It was something Tom himself did every time he was close with B'elanna. Thinking for a moment, 'I'm surprised he's kept his distance for so long. But, then again, it's not like Seven feels the same way for him, if she feels anything at all anyway.' His train of thought was broken by the announcing beeps from the tricorder. He looked down into the tricorder, analyzing the data. Harry noticed the beeps and got up to question Tom, "Well?"

"Well, there doesn't appear to be anything vitally wrong. Her implants are stable, nanoprobes are dormant, and her body is perfectly healthy."

Cutting him off, Harry stated, "That's exactly what I found."

"You didn't let me finish." Tom showed the tricorder face to Harry, "There are elevated levels of activity in her hippocampus."

"What could that mean?"

"It could mean anything. You'd have to ask the Doc."

Frustrated, Harry stated, "Absolutely not." He paced a bit before asking, "Don't you at least have a guess?"

Teasing him, Tom replied, "She could be dreaming about assimilating on Risa for all I know."

"Very funny."

Trying to ease Harry's concern, Paris said, "Well, I'm not that far off. She could be dreaming. She is asleep after all." Curious, Tom asked, "So, what brought her to you last night, anyway?"

"She said she wanted company."

"Oh really!"

Noticing the look B'elanna always had when she talked about Harry and Seven's 'relationship,' Harry contextualized, "No, not like that! She wanted someone to talk to."

Controlling his inclination to tease him, Tom asked, "What about?"

In a serious tone, Harry replied, "She wanted to talk about her existence." He added, with a more concerned voice, "She broke down last night. I thought she was about to cry."

Tom looked serious for a moment, "Cry? Seven?" He suggested, "Harry, maybe it would be a good idea to let the Doctor examine Seven."

Harry stated unequivocally, "No."

Trying to convince him, Tom said, "Look, she's going to have to go to him anyway for her weekly examination. He's going to find out. For her sake, it might as well be sooner rather than later."

Justifying his position, Harry stated, "Well, I don't think the Doc is the best person to deal with this particular problem. You saw the data. There's nothing medically wrong with her."

"Why not go to the Captain? Or Tuvok?"

"Seven said she didn't want to talk to her. As for Tuvok, I doubt suppressing emotion is the best course of action. What she needs is a councillor."

Tom replied mildly condescendingly, "And you think you're it?"

Frustrated, Harry rebuffed, "What, you think I can't handle it?"

Apologetically, Tom said, "No, I didn't mean that exactly." Pausing for a moment, he added, "I know you care about Seven, and I have no doubt you are trying to find the best course of action for her, but you have to try to look at this situation a bit more objectively. You're letting your feelings get in the way. You might be harming her in the process."

Harry stepped back for a moment, 'Am I getting too involved? Am I using this situation as a way to get to Seven?' Such a dark impulse flustered him. He looked to Tom, "You might be right."

Trying to give him a solid direction, Tom stated, "This may sound strange,

but maybe you should go and talk with Neelix about it. He is 'morale officer' after all."

"Neelix..." Harry said, thinking out loud. "That's probably a good idea. Except, I don't have the time." Harry looked up with shock, "The time! Computer, what time is it?"

"0755 hours."

"Damn, I'm on duty in 5 minutes," Harry stated as he rushed around his quarters preparing a set of PADDs filled with various reports, and getting into his uniform. Noticing Tom standing there he asked, "Well, what are you waiting for? Don't you have to get to the helm?"

Calmly, Tom replied, "Actually, I swapped shifts with Ensign Brooks. I have the morning and afternoon off."

"Still, we have a briefing this morning," Harry countered as he took off his sleeping robe.

"I know."

As Harry put on the inner undershirt of his uniform, he asked, "Shouldn't you start going?"

"I will."

"What are you waiting for?" he continued, jumping into his uniform.

"I just want to take in this moment."

"What are you talking about?"

Tom pointed to the direction of Harry's sofa. Harry turned while zipping up his uniform pants and saw Seven awake, staring at him. Quietly he asked Tom, "How long has she been awake?"

"As soon as you asked the time," Tom replied, trying to hold in a laugh.

Harry shook his head in embarrassment. He turned to Seven and said weakly, "'Morning Seven."

"Good morning, Ensign."

Deciding it was a good time to leave, Tom headed towards the door. Turning to Harry, he said, "See you on the bridge in a couple minutes."

"Yes...right."

After Tom left, Harry gained a bit more composure, getting everything ready. He didn't say anything for a few moments. Feeling the unbearable silence, he asked, "So, Seven, how are you feeling this morning?"

"Yes."

"Good."

He was about to get another PADD from the table in front of Seven, when he noticed that she was yawning. He asked, "Still tired?"

"I do not know. I've never felt tired."

"You just yawned."

"It was an autonomic biological reaction," Seven responded matter-of-factly.

Harry added, "Which usually is a sign that one is still tired."

"If you say so."

Grabbing the PADD in front of Seven he asked her, "I'm curious. If you don't know you are tired, then how do you know when you have to regenerate?"

"It is a reasoned action. When all necessary tasks have been completed, and appropriate biological needs are required, it is simply efficient to use the time to regenerate. Once an efficient period has lapsed, I return to other duties. Feeling tired is irrelevant."

Remembering that feeling was something that prompted her to come to him he stated, "Well, you know, feelings aren't irrelevant. If I'm not mistaken, it was your feelings that led you here last night."

Frustrated at that reality, she replied, "Yes, of course."

Reminding himself that he was on duty he stated, "Well, if you want, you can stay in my quarters for as long as you like. I have to go to a briefing." Thinking about the repercussions of someone seeing her walking out of his quarters, Harry suggested to Seven, "When you decide to leave. Could you check to see if the corridor is empty, before you step out?"

"Why?"

In a rush, and deciding not to hide the truth, "You probably know about the rumours that go around about you and me, and I just don't want to escalate the gossip."

Despite thinking that the request was a trivial one, she replied, "All right."

Relieved, Harry said, "Thanks." After doing a mental checklist to see if he had forgotten anything, he glanced at Seven before he left, "If you want, you can replicate something to eat."

"Thank you, Ensign."

"Later, Seven."

Tom walked into the observation lounge just before the briefing was about to begin. The Captain acknowledged his entrance, "You're just in time, Lieutenant."

"Morning everyone," Tom replied as he quickly found his seat. He took a glance at B'elanna and noticed a bright smile on her face. 'Good, she's coming this afternoon,' he thought to himself.

After waiting a minute or so, Janeway asked, "Has anyone seen Harry this morning?"

"I have, Captain," Tom answered quickly. He added, "I think he'll be a bit late this morning."

Giving that official concerned look, she asked, "Do you know why?"

Trying to find a plausible excuse he answered, "He told me he was up all night working on something."

She nodded in acceptance of Tom's explanation. Picking up a PADD she began the briefing, "Well, we might as well start. B'elanna, how are the upgrades coming?"

Handing the Captain a PADD, B'elanna replied, "It's pretty much going according to plan."

"Pretty much?" Janeway asked sternly as she glanced at B'elanna's progress report.

"Yes, well, we still have yet to transfer all the systems to the isolinear backup system. To be honest, it's quite tedious work, to say the least."

Janeway questioned further, "How much longer do you think you will need?"

"I hope to be able to start phase two sometime today. It's only a two or three hour setback."

Nodding in acceptance, Janeway turned to the computer screen, "Which leads us to you, Doctor."

The Doctor answered in his usually arrogant manner, "Yes, well, while my job is just as tedious and, arguably more complex, I have been able to finish the modified bio-neural fibre replacements on schedule."

Clearly annoyed by his attitude, Janeway replied in a less than genuine tone, "Thank you, Doctor." She continued to ask, "Are there any possible side-effects of installing the new fibres?"

"None. I asked Seven to double check my work, and she found them to be perfect," The Doctor stated proudly.

Wondering himself where Seven was, Chakotay asked, "Where is Seven, anyway? I thought I told her she should be here."

Janeway glanced at B'elanna and then answered Chakotay's question, "I decided that she didn't need to attend."

Chakotay was visibly frustrated by Janeway's answer, knowing full well why Seven wasn't there. He was about to discuss his frustration, when Kim rushed through the door.

"Sorry for being late, Captain," Harry spewed out quickly, catching his breath.

Authoritatively, Janeway responded, "Glad you could join us, Ensign. Just don't make it a habit of being late."

"Believe me, it was out of my control," Harry replied as he took his seat.

Chakotay, finding that moment to be appropriate, stated, "Speaking of being out of control, I think 'some' of us need to control our personal feelings about Seven of Nine." Chakotay was staring at B'elanna while he said this, but Harry stared up at Chakotay. Chakotay continued, "Seven has been with us for eight months already. It's a foregone conclusion that she is staying with us, and I think it is our responsibility to make her feel like part of the team."

Janeway, trying to minimize the attention on B'elanna, said to everyone, "Chakotay's right. We've become a community from the moment we accepted our fate in the Delta Quadrant. And now we have a new member, who needs to be included."

Justifying her isolation of Seven from B'elanna, Janeway added softly, "I know that some of us have our own personal problems with Seven, whether it's because she was a Borg, or because of her unique way of doing things. And I have tried to balance all of our different opinions for the good of our community, but at some point, we are all going to have to accept her. She is one of us, and I hope we can all learn to accept that."

B'elanna stared at the table, looking guilty, uttered, "I know...I haven't been one to accept Seven as...whole-heartedly as some of you have." She paused, unwilling to be more specific, even among her associates and friends. She just added, "But I will...try to be less antagonistic to her in the future."

Janeway said softly to B'elanna, "That's all we ask..." She turned to the rest of the group, "...of anyone."

There was a long pause as the senior staff sat reflecting about what had just transpired. Harry was thinking about it as well, but while he felt for B'elanna, Chakotay's words echoed in his head for vastly opposite reasons. Trying to focus his mind, and everyone else's, he decided to get everyone back to the briefing, "Well, uh, now that we have that straightened out...Tuvok, I have the Ops report you asked for."

"Thank you Ensign."

Turning to Chakotay, Harry continued, "...And, Commander, here are the results of the power consumption diagnostic on the Astrometrics lab."

"Thanks Harry."

Trying to reduce the long silence, Harry added, "A new project I had thought about pursuing is an upgrade of the EPS power conduits on deck 12. They've been left untouched and still have Borg modifications to them, but I was thinking maybe I could try to find a way to use what's there as a blueprint to enhance the rest of the conduits throughout the ship."

"That's a good idea," Chakotay commented. "I'll leave that project in your capable hands."

Harry was about to add something, but after glancing at a still-stunned B'elanna, decided to keep his mouth shut.

Looking at her PADD and noticing everything on the agenda was complete, Janeway stated, "Well, if there's nothing else, dismissed."

While everyone got up to leave, Tom headed towards B'elanna and try to console her in some way. B'elanna was visibly shaken by the dressing down from Chakotay, and they both left to find some privacy. Janeway noticed Tom and B'elanna leaving, and moved towards Chakotay. "You know, you were a bit harsh with B'elanna."

Unshaken by his sternness, he replied, "Perhaps. But, I know B'elanna. It takes a lot to change her mind."

"But in front of the senior staff?"

"I know; it not comfortable to be reprimanded in public, especially over a personal issue. But, it's nothing compared to what we went through in the Maquis. Remember Suder? I had to prove to him that I was in control, every time he went too far. If I waivered in any way, he would've killed me without a second thought. B'elanna can be that way about some things. She's just as stubborn." Remembering the fate of his compatriots, he added, "All Maquis were. That's why they're all dead now."

Seeing the matter was resolved in Chakotay's mind, Janeway decided to let it go. She patted Chakotay on the shoulder and headed towards the bridge.

Waiting for the Captain to finish talking with Chakotay, Harry approached him, "Commander?"

"Yes, Harry."

"I just wanted to make sure that you were okay with my assigning of Seven to my project."

Giving full approval, Chakotay remarked, "Of course. It will certainly keep the both of you busy while B'elanna finishes with the circuitry upgrades."

Trying to be reassuring, Harry added, "Even with the new project, I'll still be able to help B'elanna out."

"I'm sure you will. But, I don't think that will be necessary," Chakotay replied. 'Had better not,' he thought to himself.

Seven had decided to stay in Ensign Kim's quarters. While she knew she had assignments to complete, she felt very...inefficient. Somehow, she did not feel it necessary to immediately allocate her time to various tasks. She just sat on the sofa, looking around Kim's quarters.

Noticing Harry's clarinet sitting on a stand on a shelf, she got up to take a closer examination of it. Picking it up, noticing the various fingerholes and silver keys, she wondered, 'How can such a primitive object produce...enjoyment?' She decided to experiment and blow on the mouthpiece, but was unsure as to how. There was a large, rectangular hole on the mouthpiece that made it impossible for her to do any3059 ai7th the instrument. She looked on the shelf for some3059 athat could cover the hole, but didn't find any3059 aremotely appropriate. Seeing the futility in her experiment, she put the clarinet back on its stand.

Looking over the shelf, she found a set of pictures. 'He's smiling,' she noted to herself as she looked at all the pictures. 'He is happy.' Seven tried to remember a time that she saw Harry in such a state, but couldn't recall any. Trying to t059k of reasons why, she picked up and analyzed a picture of Harry i7th another woman. They iere sitting on a beach, i7th Harry's arm wrapped around the woman's shoulder. Harry ias wearing a pair of loose beige shorts, i7th a t059, see-through dark blue shirt. The woman had long, curly, dark hair, flowing in the static breeze of the photo. She ias only wearing a deep orange swimsuit. Chronicling the image, however, iasn't producing any conclusive reasons why Harry ias so happy. She hypothesized that they iere engaged in some courtship ritual, but didn't understand why that alone was reason enough for either of them happy. If copulation was the ultimate result, courtship seemed like a total waste of time.

Before finis059 aher thoughts, Harry entered his quarters. He was clearly looking for Seven, and when he saw her w7th the picture, he gave a worried look. Acknowledging Harry's entrance, Seven greeted,

"Good Morning, Ensign."

Walking over to her, eyes fixed on the picture Harry replied, "Morning."

Notic59 ahis eyes focused on the picture, Seven asked, "Who is this woman?"

"Her name is Libby. She is...was my fiancée," he replied as he gently taking the picture from Seven's hands.

"Was?"

"Yeah..." Harry trailed off.

Confused she asked, "Did you lose your feelings for her?"

"No..."

"Did she lose her feelings for you?"

"No..."

"Then I do not understand..."

Stating a sad fact, Harry said, "Seven, we're 60,000 light years apart. I really doubt we'll ever get married."

Accepting his statement, she returned to questioning Harry about the picture. "Where is this?"

"Risa."

Seven recalled, "The fourth planet in the Risian system in sector 016. The 'planet of pure pleasure.'"

"That's the one."

"Why did you go there?"

Frustrated by all the questions, Harry asked back, "Why are you so interested in that picture?"

In a slightly sad tone, Seven replied, "I wanted to know why you were happy there."

"Why?"

"Because I wanted to understand the human concept of happiness." Sighing, Harry said, "That's a really big question."

"How is that?"

"Well, everyone has different reasons to be happy. Sometimes it's from having some satisfaction in accomplishing something, or helping someone out when they're in trouble, or being comfortable with someone."

"So you were comfortable with Libby."

Quietly Harry replied, "Very much."

"She was...your friend?"

"She was my 'best' friend."

Noticing a facial expression that she had not seen on Harry, Seven commented, "You are sad."

Staring into the picture he replied softly, "Yeah, I guess so."

"I do not understand. You said you were happy with Libby, yet you feel sad."

Still gazing into the picture, he replied, "Like I said, it's complicated."

With sadness came a new facial expression that Seven discovered. She noticed how his eyes were becoming slightly swollen, showing the first signs of the formation of tears. The only thing stopping the full formation of tear droplets was the quick blinks of Harry's eyelids. Her concentration on Harry's face was disrupted when Harry noticed Seven staring at him. "What's the matter?"

"Your sadness provoked a physical response."

"What do you mean?"

As if expressing emotion herself, Seven replied in a soft tone, "Your eyes were in the process of producing tears."

Clearing his throat, and trying to establish a higher level of 'masculinity,' Harry replied, "Well, it's nothing important. Just a...result of a strong emotion that...comes with losing someone you care about."

Harry had noticed that Seven was not as abrasive as she normally was. Her arrogance, perhaps a certain degree of her confidence was non-apparent.

She seemed uncharacteristically soft, as if she was actually absorbing what Harry was telling her. Testing his thought, Harry asked, "Have you felt sadness over the loss of someone you had an...association with?"

She looked up into Harry's face, "Yes. I had thought about my human parents."

"What had brought you to think about them?"

"I was contemplating the purpose of my existence, wondering if being nurtured by my human parents would have provided a greater sense of...direction in my life now."

Harry encouraged, "I don't understand. You have a lot to offer us. You are a very talented individual."

In a worried, yet strong tone, "Talent is irrelevant if one lacks focus and direction."

Becoming confused, Harry asked, "I'm not sure I know what you mean."

Seven replied assertively, "As a Borg drone within the Collective, each is directed to better the Collective by improving on its own perfection.

Every task is focused on that single goal. It is the defining quality and purpose of being Borg." Her voice weakening, "But I am no longer Borg...I am no longer perfect. Thus, I no longer have a purpose for my existe..."

Seven suddenly started to hyperventilate. Her whole body, following suit, began to go into convulsions.

"Seven!" Harry yelled as he caught Seven's body before it hit the floor.

"Kim to Sickbay! Medical Emergency. Two to beam directly to Sickbay!"

Harry glanced down at Seven's face, showing nothing but shock and fear.

Softly he comforted, "Everything's going to be all right...just hang on..." His reassuring voice dissipated as the transporter beam encompassed them.

B'elanna was quiet in the turbolift. Tom just stood beside her, waiting for B'elanna to come to him than force the issue out of her. She had already been through enough personal confrontations for one day. But,

finding the silence more of a hindrance to B'elanna opening up, Tom asked, "So are we still on for this afternoon?"

"Sure," B'elanna answered unemotionally.

Trying to cheer her up, he asked, "Anything in particular you think you might want, to... elevate the experience?"

She turned to Tom with a confused look. "What are you talking about?"

Teasing her he replied, "Oh, I don't know, a half dozen of Orion slave girls...I wouldn't mind that. Or maybe, some unjoined Trill males from the Obesian baths to massage your neglected body?"

The turbolift stopped and Tom and B'elanna walked out. Not falling for Tom's advances, she answered bluntly, "Just the calm of an ocean breeze and the warmth of a tranquil star, thank you very much."

Not wanting the events in the briefing room to potentially ruin the holodeck simulation, Tom decided to weed B'elanna's self-pity out, "You know, I scheduled the time for you. I just want to make it as good for you as possible, especially given the circumstances."

Sighing, she replied, "Yes, I know. I'm sorry. I..." her voice wavered, "...I just don't feel like talking right now."

"Better now than later," Tom insisted.

Speaking as if completing a thought in her mind, she said, "It's just that I never expected Chakotay to be like that to me."

"What do you mean?"

"I've seen Chakotay be so adamant to other people. He only did that when I felt there was no other way to go. He never forced anyone to do anything. He usually didn't have to..." B'elanna paused as if gaining a painful realization.

"What's the matter?"

"...He only did that when he felt someone had betrayed his trust."

In an understanding tone Tom stated, "I really doubt he's felt that you betrayed him. It's about you and Seven, not Chakotay."

"You don't understand..."

Tom cut her off, "Yes I do! I know because I betrayed his trust, long ago. What was so pathetic was that it was over latinum. I betrayed his trust because I was greedy. But you, you haven't done anything wrong. You're just finding it hard to accept Seven for one reason or another..."

B'elanna countered in sad frustration, "That's just it. I can't find a reason to hate Seven. Deep inside me is this revulsion against her. But I can't find a reason. She's done nothing to me. She was just a Borg.

Don't you see, I did betray his trust?over nothing. Nothing at all..."

"You're over-reacting."

"What!" B'elanna stated indignantly.

"Listen to yourself. You're talking as if Chakotay won't ever trust you with the warp core anymore. Okay, so he pushed you to confront your prejudice against Seven. That doesn't mean he's going to throw you in the brig. You of all people should know that he's a caring man. He won't force you to do something you aren't already capable of doing. That's what makes him such a good commander, and you know that."

'He's right' B'elanna thought to herself. 'All I'm doing is blaming Seven...again.'

Trying to lighten the mood, Tom said, "Anyway, just think about you and me."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, what did it take? A near death experience to finally force yourself to tell me you loved me?"

Smiling a little, she replied, "Well, I guess I can be a 'little' stubborn."

"I have to admit, I thought it was the biggest compliment that your proclamation of love would've been your last words."

Returning to her normal self, she replied, "Well, don't read too much into that, flyboy."

"My point is, you now have too much time, and you've become too accustomed to leaving the issue of Seven on the backburner. Chakotay's given you a time limit now."

Sighing, she answered, "You're probably right."

By now they had walked to Engineering, when suddenly B'elanna remembered, "Damn! Speaking of the time, I wanted to bring up the possibility of extending the normal workday."

"What?" Tom said in unpleasant surprise.

"I was thinking of, instead of changing the shift rotations we could instead extend the length of the day."

"You must be joking."

B'elanna answered, "I'm serious! I have so much to do, there's just not enough time in the day to get things done. I mean, all we'd have to add is a few more hours, which would give us just a couple more hours to our duty shifts, and whatever extra for off-duty."

"You think you could hold that suggestion for a while?" Tom suggested.

"Why?"

Tom answered emphatically, "Because I don't want to spend ANY extra time with the Doc thanks to an extended duty shift!"

"Think of it as extra time to remove your own prejudices," B'elanna said ironically as she entered Engineering, leaving Tom speechless out in the corridor.

Janeway walked into Sickbay, a concerned look on her face. Immediately she looked to the clamshell biobed and saw Seven laying unconscious, with the Doctor analyzing on one side, Harry staring worriedly on the other.

Reaching the foot of the biobed Janeway asked the Doctor, "How is she?"

"She's fine. She appears to have had an anxiety attack."

"What? Are you sure?"

Matter-of-factly the Doctor replied, "Absolutely." Turning to a monitor he continued, "As you can see here, certain memory engrams have surfaced which has caused pressure to build up in the memory centers of her brain. In time the pressure builds to the point that the chemical imbalance results in a full body shut down. It's relatively common that these attacks happen in the morning after the body has gone through the regular shocks associated with regaining consciousness."

"Why didn't you detect this before?"

The Doc hypothesized, "Anxiety attacks are commonly the result of some prolonged trama. But it is possible that a concentrated circumstance can spawn an attack relatively quickly."

"Does this have anything to do with her experiences with the Borg?"

Trying to limit his psychological analysis, he answered, "I have no way of knowing. Memory engrams aren't like data files that have a date stamp.

Only Seven can tell us what they were about."

"So, what caused her to collapse?" Janeway asked as an open question. She turned to Harry for his explanation.

Harry was noticeably nervous, "Well, she was...talking...and then she collapsed."

"Talking about what?"

Harry was trying to inform the Captain, but ended up with a cryptic response, "She was contemplating her existence."

"What about?"

"She wanted to know what it meant to be happy."

"Happy..." Janeway repeated. "It's certainly understandable. Since coming on board, it's not like she's actually had a 'fun' time with us. The exploration of humanity...it's no easy task."

Janeway noticed the Doctor nodding slightly, looking as if in deep contemplation. Turning to Harry again, she asked, "Where was she when she collapsed?"

Getting very nervous, and blushing he replied, "She was...in my quarters."

Her eyes widened slightly at the answer. She tried to contextualize his answer, "Weren't you supposed to be working on the power conduits on deck 12?"

"Yes, and I was going to get Seven..." Harry cut himself off.

"Ensign?"

Feeling as if his head was on fire, he asked, "Captain, do you mind if we talk about this...in private?" He stared at the Doctor while saying this.

Getting the hint, and rolling his eyes, the Doctor stated, "Computer, de-activate EMH."

Janeway waited for him to disappear before turning to Harry with a compassionately eager look on her face. Harry took in a deep breath and spit out, "Seven came to my quarters last night. She was distraught and wanted someone to talk to. I can only guess that since I'm the only one who really tries to talk with her, she came to me instead of anyone else. It's not that surprising really, I mean, I do try to just talk to her..."

Janeway cut him off, "Harry. Calm down."

Seeing the Captain's reassuring face, he took in a deep breath and did just that. "Right. Well, she came to talk about her life, trying to reconcile, what I gather to be, two sides of herself. She had said, she was human on the one hand, yet Borg on the other, and couldn't find the balance between the two. Anyway, she looked tired, so I suggested that she get some sleep, and so she slept in my quarters."

Janeway interjected, "Seven...slept?"

"Yeah..."

"In your quarters?"

"That's right," Harry answered. Getting back on topic, he continued, "Well, I went to her after the briefing this morning, and she was...looking at my pictures with Libby..."

Janeway noticed Harry getting distraught himself after mentioning a loved one from his 'distant' past. She felt she had enough pieces of the puzzle and let Harry keep the other details to himself, "And noticing that you were happy in those pictures, she wanted to know why."

"Yes...exactly."

"Did she understand?"

"I don't know. We didn't get that far. She was telling me about her purpose as a Borg and then she started to collapse."

Reassuring Harry again, Janeway said, "You did the right thing."

He smiled in gratitude to his Captain's comment, but quickly returned to a serious tone, "I still wonder..."

"Well, think about it. It's better this happened earlier than later, and with...a friend, than in a different, more contentious atmosphere."

"You're probably right."

In mock-indignance, "Probably!?! Are you forgetting who you're talking to?"

Harry looked up in shock, but noticed Janeway hiding in a smile. He smiled back, "Of course. You're 'absolutely' right...Captain."

Gratified that Harry had loosened up, she thought it an appropriate time to fetch the Doctor, "Computer, active EMH."

"Finished with your little classified chit-chat?" The Doctor asked indignantly after rematerializing.

Sighing Janeway replied, "Yes we have. Can you please tell us Seven's prognosis?"

"She's fit for duty if that's what you mean. All I suggest is that she refrain from any stressful situations."

"Thank you, Doctor. Please, wake her."

After an injection from a hypospray, Seven's eyes flickered open. Janeway leaned over her and asked softly, "How are you?"

"Tired."

Janeway was both perplexed and amused at Seven's emotional response. She looked up at Harry for some explanation, and found his amused smile aimed at Seven all the answer she needed. Deciding to keep her presence brief Janeway asked, "Do you feel up to working with Harry on the power conduits?"

"Yes."

"Harry, I trust you can fill Seven in?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Good. Inform me of any change in Seven's condition."

"I will."

Janeway turned to leave, but not before noticing Harry holding Seven's hand.

Engineering was a buzz of activity as three shifts were working simultaneously both busy with regular operations and also with the circuitry upgrade. Every console was manned with a crewman or Ensign, taking orders from junior officers who took orders from the chief engineer.

The extra crewmen were working on or analyzing opened access panels, and climbing in and out of the Jefferies tubes. Only the inactive warp drive, with its static shimmering blue hues, was in a calm state.

While analysing a schematic on a PADD B'elanna barked out, "Carey, make sure the secondary warp plasma manifold is secured. Parsons, keep the primary flow regulators offline until Carey's finished with the plasma manifold. Vorik, check that the impulse drive controllers are online. I told the Captain that she could have impulse back in 30 minutes. And while you're at it, double check that the inertial dampers are operating at 95% of peak efficiency with the backup isolar system."

"Aye, sir" could be heard echoing in the background as B'elanna's orders were heard and followed. She turned to her own computer console and began her own tasks she had delegated to herself. She thought about the scheduling of the upgrade and decided that she was running on time.

Checking that Carey and Parsons had finished their task, she tapped on her comm badge, "Alpha shift, start the installation of the new biopacks for decks 1-3. Beta shift, install on decks 4-6, and Delta shift, start on deck 7 and work towards deck 9."

She was busily punching buttons and calling up diagnostic displays when she suddenly felt an uncomfortable feeling behind her. The rustle of three work crews increasingly dissipated until what was left was the low hum of the warp core. As if instinctively, B'elanna turned around to see the entire Engineering staff standing up to her work station. She stared at the crew before asking, "What's going on here?"

Carey took the initiative and explained, "Lieutenant. We believe that it is in the interest of the Engineering crew that you be relieved of duty..."

"What!?!"

"...for approximately three hours," Carey reassured. "We know that you've been working exceptionally hard, and we've tried our best to keep as much of the burden off your shoulders, but we think that at this time, half way through the upgrade, you deserve a break."

Narrowing her eyes in suspicion B'elanna asked, "Wait a minute. Did Tom put you up to this?"

The crew turned to each other and murmured to each other as to how to respond to her question. Carey stated, "Well, he certainly did give us the idea..."

"Let me guess, he woke all of you up this morning, giving a very official sounding order that you were to relieve me of duty, and he stated explicitly that it was a command level decision."

Smiling, Carey replied, "Something like that."

B'elanna rolled her eyes "Well, it's not going to work. We still have to monitor the installation of the replacement bio-neural jel-packs, and until

that is done, I can't leave."

"But!..."

"But nothing!" B'elanna stated. "Do you know what you're doing? It's mutiny!"

"Well, I wouldn't put it that way."

Trying to convince Carey back to work, "Lieutenant. I know what you're trying to do, and it's very considerate. But half way through the upgrade is 'not' the time to take a break."

Most of the Engineering crew agreed and slowly dissipated back to their stations. Giving in, Carey said, "Yes, I know. It was actually all Tom's idea. I knew it wouldn't work. Even I was opposed to it. Now is not the time. But he was right too. You do need a break."

"How do you know that?"

"You tense up when you are overly stressed."

"I do not tense up."

"You're tense right now. Look, your posture straightens up, your eye brows furl around your eyes and your left hand turns into a fist."

B'elanna looked down to her left hand and noticed the fist. She looked up at Carey with surprise, "I had no idea you were so observant."

Deflecting the compliment, Carey replied, "Well it was Vorik actually who told me about this."

"Vorik. Of course."

Vorik was standing beside Carey, appearing resolute in getting B'elanna to leave Engineering. "I must concur with Lt. Carey that there is a legitimate logic to Lt. Paris' suggestion-

"I'm sure there is Vorik, but I don't care about Vulcan logic right now. We have work to do and that's that." Trying to use logic against him, B'elanna told Vorik, "If you don't obey my command, I will be forced to relieve 'you' of duty."

"But Lieutenant Paris outranks even you."

"Damn it, Vorik! Just get back to work. We're wasting time just arguing about this!"

Whether noting B'elanna's emotional command, or seeing the logic in her statement, he nodded and returned to his station. She sighed a breath of relief at finally getting rid of Vorik. She started to regain her train of thought when her communicator beeped, "Paris to Engineering."

She tapped her communicator and replied, "This is Engineering."

"B'elanna, you're late."

"All thanks to you!" she replied in frustration.

"What, the Engineering crew not being very cooperative today?"

"As if you didn't know."

"Yeah, I thought it wouldn't work. But this will..."

She was about to asked what he meant when she realized that she was being beamed away. "Now wait just a damn minu..." Her voice was cut off as she dematerialized out of Engineering.

Harry strolled down the corridor with Seven, his mind racing to think of ways to keep Seven from getting stressed. In the process he was uncharacteristically quiet as they walked to deck 12, which only made Seven curious, "Ensign, you look apprehensive."

"I guess I am a little."

"Why is that?"

Thinking that giving her all the information would be less provocative, Harry answered, "I was just thinking of ways to keep you from getting stressed. The Doctor did say that you should be kept from incidents that might provoke another anxiety attack."

"And you believe that not engaging in conversation is an effective means to that end?"

"Not exactly. I just don't know what to say."

There was another pause as they waited for a turbolift. For Seven, despite the proximity to the Ensign, she felt uncomfortable with the silence, even if she knew it was because of Harry's internal confusion. So she took the initiative and tried to spark a conversation, "I notice that you give a lot of thought before you engage in any action with me."

"What do you mean?"

"Most crewmembers are very efficient with their duties when they work with me. They say very little, and when they do engage in discourse it is only about a task at hand. Yet, you take time to engage in conversation, and make efforts to work more cohesively."

"Is that a good thing or a bad thing?" Harry asked sarcastically as they entered a turbolift.

Seven paused before answering, "I am not certain. There are times when working alone in Astrometrics can be very unpleasant. Despite my duties, I...feel alone."

"Deck 12" Harry commanded the computer. Noticing the conversation potentially being a stressful tangent, Harry diverted, "Well, in a way I guess that's why I pop in from time to time..." Noting his blatant lie, he

transposed, "Actually, I just...wanted to see you."

"You mean you still feel attracted to my body?"

"Well...yes. But, it's always been more than that." Pausing to find words to explain himself, he said, "When someone is attracted to someone, it's usually only a catalyst for someone to do something more."

Genuinely curious, Seven asked him to explain.

"Well, procreati

conduits were modified with Borg micro-inducers."

Continuing the analysis, Harry added, "Which reduced the phase variance within the conduit, resulting in increased power distribution efficiency."

Yes."

"Exactly how many micro-inducers would we need to enhance the entire power grid?"

"This section alone contains 50,000. To augment the entire network, we would need to replicate over 65 million."

Shocked at the sheer amount of work, Harry commented, "I guess this is a long term project."

Undeterred Seven replied, "My estimate suggests the project can be completed in 15 days."

"That's it? How's that possible? We're talking about installing millions of micro-inducers to every conduit on every deck."

"I can use the same method I used in installing them in the first place, by modifying nanoprobes so that they will be able to be carried along the plasma through all the conduits in the ship."

"Wait a minute. You want to inject nanoprobes into the ship's power systems?"

"Yes."

"Bad idea. There's no guarantee that the nanoprobes won't assimilate the rest of the ship."

Confidently, Seven replied, "I assure you, I would take every necessary precaution."

"I'm not saying you wouldn't. But we still don't know a whole lot about Borg nanoprobes. I mean, they re-activated in you, whether you wanted them to or not. One freak accident could lead to the nanoprobes replicating and attaching themselves all over the ship. It's too risky."

Spitting back Harry's earlier remark, "But don't the benefits outweigh the risks?"

"Not in this case."

"I don't underst..."

Harry cut her off, "Seven, before, I was talking about the risks and benefits to myself. Here you're talking about the benefits and risks to the ship and crew. The considerations are very different. We're talking about something that has broader consequences. At least, we'd have to talk to the Captain about this."

"Obviously."

Noting Seven's confident tone, Harry said, "Fine. Let's go see the Captain."

B'elanna.

"Yes, you do make so many selfless sacrifices for me," she huffed.

"Still want just a warm breeze and a calm sun?"

"Maybe later," B'elanna said quickly before giving Tom an aggressive forshadowing kiss.

With Torres gone, some of the Engineering crew decided to take a look at B'elanna's upgrade schedule. "You must be kidding!" Carey remarked.

Vorik, taking a glance, responded, "It is not unachievable."

"No it's not, but be realistic. I don't want to spend the next 12 hours crawling through Jefferies tubes. That's not my idea of a fun, good working day."

"There are conduits that run through several main corridors."

"Oh, I know. But come on, I'm not the only one who hates 'tube-work.'"

Vorik stated, "Like it or not, we must complete a large portion of our 'tube-work' before Lt. Torres returns."

"Okay, fine." Carey responded. "You can help Beta shift install the jel-packs in Jefferies Tube 35-Gamma on deck 4."

"And you?"

"I 'am' second in command here. I'll finish up B'elanna's work, which includes watching you do your work." Carey answered shrewdly.

Vorik raised his eyebrow in Vulcan fashion, realizing he had been duped.

Carey smiled as Vorik left, and turned back to B'elanna's console. He watched, with jovial ease, a diagnostic display showing the continual swapping of the jel-packs throughout the ship. Every few seconds a light would blink indicating a complete swap.

He noted with impressed amazement, that regardless of the cramped tubes the crew was undoubtedly in, they seemed to be working exceptionally quickly with the swap-out. Carey did a few preliminary calculations and realized that they could be finished a couple hours ahead, even with B'elanna's compressed schedule.

Taking on his Chief Engineer's role, Carey decided to follow suit to quicken the upgrade process. Thinking about how well the engineering crew was working, he felt compelled to follow their lead. For some reason, even though he was not Chief Engineer, he felt proud to be a part of a crew who were the miracle workers of Starfleet. They had managed to survive for four years totally on their own. It was an amazing achievement. And it was all thanks to, ironically enough, an ex-Maquis.

Feeling grateful for B'elanna's addition to the Voyager crew, he thought how important it was to make her burden just that little bit lighter. He

never questioned outright why he felt so attached to B'elanna as a friend, but he was nonetheless curious at how such a transformation of thought could've occurred. After all, they actually got into a fight four years ago, when the Captain was deciding on who to be Chief Engineer. Sure, he had consciously made amends with her after she was chosen, but that didn't make him change his mind at the time. Like most of the Starfleet crew, he still had felt resentment over the fact that some of the Maquis were given junior officer posts.

Carey suddenly thought, 'Neelix.' It was all thanks to him. Neelix didn't know of the conflict between the Maquis and Starfleet, nor did it matter to him. All he cared about was making people enjoy themselves, and make them realize the good fortune they received. Carey suddenly realized that eating leola root stew was something Neelix had used to prove himself right.

Whatever the political division between Starfleet and Maquis, Neelix had shown that they at least shared a common palette. They all hated leola root. That commonality sparked a sense of camaraderie that would leola ro318 0.15 Tw ()

Taking on an artificial air of authority, Carey ordered, "Thank you, Ensign. Carry out my instructions."

"Aye, sir."

Returning to his friendly self, Carey added, "And after we're finished, we can play another game of Vulcan Calto. I was close last time."

Carey received a skeptical silence.

B'elanna and Tom lay on the calm beach, with nothing but uninhibiting swim wear to cover their bodies. B'elanna laid a metre closer to the ocean waves, the gusts caused by the unchanging tides, tickling her sun-warmed toes. She felt totally at peace, with a sun to warm her entire body, and the constantly moving air to keep her from overheating. It was a perfect program, and her unconscious, Mona Lisa-esque smile told Tom just as much.

It was ages since he had seen her so content. She rarely was that way in public-always being energetically sarcastic, teasingly aggressive, or genuinely frustrated. But here, she was a sleeping goddess, with only the regular pulses of heat, wind, and the blending aromas of her perfect paradise to stimulate her soul.

After an hour of only the holographic stimuli of the environment, Tom decided to bring her slowly back to a more conscious state. Dusting away sand to uncover a small PADD, he pushed a few onscreen buttons. Ever so slowly, the ocean tide began to rise. As the minutes passed, the waves moved slowly towards B'elanna's toes. In response to the greater rush of air hitting her feet, she instinctively curled her toes upward, preparing to avoid an incoming wave. Her body seemed intent on staying serene, avoiding the emerging impulse that was approaching her feet. But, her heightened Klingon senses slowly reactivated, her heart pulsing energy throughout her body, slowly retrieving her from her tranquil state. With a single droplet of nipping water, her tranquillity was displaced, as the impulse caused by the cold ocean swell returned her to consciousness.

She slowly opened her eyes, noticing an eager face staring back at her.

She smiled groggily, spreading her arms out to stretch. Keeping her attention on Tom's intent face, B'elanna commented, "You 'do' know how to make a woman happy."

"Oh, it's all in the timing," Tom replied smoothly. "The more time I spend with you, the more I understand what makes you tick."

"And do you like what you see?"

Moving closer to her lips, Tom breathed, "Well, I have to admit, you are the only one I'd be willing to spend a lifetime getting to know."

"Well, its not like you have much choice," B'elanna sarcastically whispered out before kissing him.

Releasing Tom's lips, but embracing him in her arms, she asked softly, "So, what else do you have planned for this little get-a-way of ours?"

"Well, that's hard to say," Tom answered coyly. "There are so many things that can happen. Those Klingons might come back."

B'elanna smiled at the reference to the Klingons, "I have to admit, that was a very interesting 'appetizer'."

"Well, I'm still thinking about that one," Tom remarked, rubbing his lower back. "You gave me one heck of a wallop. I probably should've added a few more Klingons."

"I guess you don't know how far I will go...yet."

"No, I don't. But you can't say I don't try to find out." At that moment Tom snapped his fingers and suddenly a clearing materialized in the tropical forest. At the centre was a large canopy of palm leaves, housing an unfinished dance floor and a Caribbean music ensemble.

B'elanna turned around in surprise. "You don't expect me to dance, do you?"

"Totally up to you," Tom answered. "You can lay here and enjoy the music, while I go dance with the Orion slave girl over there, or we can share the fact that neither of us can dance to this music.."

"Playing on my jealousy 'and' my honor. Well, you've got the whole Klingon bit down pat, don't you?" B'elanna teased.

Tom smiled. B'elanna laid back down and seriously gave it some thought before answering. "Okay, let's dance..."

But as she got up, the red alert klaxon sounded. "...then again, maybe not."

"All hands to emergency stations," Janeway announced through the comm.

They started for the holodeck door until B'elanna remarked, "We should change first."

Looking down to remind himself of his tight attire, Tom gave an agreeing look.

"Computer state the nature of the emergency," Seven ordered.

"Primary warp plasma manifold has ruptured. Collateral damage to secondary plasma injection system. Primary injection systems are offline."

"This sounds serious," Harry commented. "We have to get to Engineering."

"Agreed," Seven replied, quickening her pace to a turbolift.

It seemed like an eternity for Harry, waiting in the turbolift. In the middle of a crisis, Harry was stuck in transit totally helpless. Noting the Stoic attitude Seven displayed didn't seem to help him much either.

Finally reaching Engineering, he felt some relief finding B'elanna already

at her station, focused on resolving the problem. Harry did nothing to break her stride, but B'elanna nonetheless flinched at his approach. He didn't realize that it was actually Seven with whom B'elanna was noticing.

Harry moved to a console adjoining B'elanna's and brought himself up to speed. Trying to get himself into the loop, Harry stated, "We need to shutdown the plasma flow to the manifold."

"But we can't access the injection system. It's locked in cycle. The commands won't get through." Feverishly punching buttons, Torres reported, "I'm trying to re-route the commands through the auxiliary command processors."

Seven accessed another console beside Harry and reported, "The circuitry conduits near the injection system have been damaged. You must first repair it before attempting to send commands."

Coldly, B'elanna responded, "Well, if you looked a little harder, you'd notice that we don't have time to fix the conduits. The manifold will create a cascade failure before we even reach them. Not to mention the radiation that is seeping into that section."

"We have no choice."

"Yes we do!" B'elanna blurted out. "We can bypass the damaged area and access the system indirectly through the anti-matter injectors. Shut down the source of energy, and the problem is solved."

"You do not have the time," Seven responded, holding in her frustration. "The plasma is already eroding the breach. Residual plasma will destroy the manifold before the energy is dissipated."

"What I don't have is time to argue!" B'elanna clamoured.

Reciprocating B'elanna's anger, Seven responded, "And I do not have time to correct your inefficient and irresponsible course of action!"

Standing between the two, Harry felt the need to defuse the situation.

"Seven, maybe it would be a good idea if you left."

Turning to Harry she replied, "That is exactly what I had in mind. But I require your assistance, Ensign."

avctlyj -441.75 -12 TD -0.0444 Tc 0.0873 Tw (correct ur assistance43the energ86.5 0 T

you want my help, I'm going to need a bit more detail than that."

Seven was about to respond when the computer alerted, "Warning. Plasma leak in progress. Total plasma manifold breach in four minutes, 32 seconds."

Feeling the urgency of the warning, Harry urged, "We'd better hurry."

On the bridge, Janeway sat in her command chair, getting a handle on the situation. "Tuvok..."

"Manifold integrity is down to 57%. If it drops below 25%, the manifold will explode."

"Divert power to the structural integrity fields surrounding the manifold."

"Power transfer complete," Tuvok reported. "Integrity still falling."

Janeway was not out of ideas yet. "Engage the plasma venting system. If we reduce the flow pressure, maybe we can give B'elanna more time."

"Aye, Captain."

Tuvok was silent for a few seconds, waiting for the effects of his command. "Integrity is holding...for now. I estimate we have an additional 3 minutes before the manifold breaches completely."

Janeway gave a muted sigh of relief. "Bridge to Torres, report."

"Torres here, Captain. I'm still trying to shutdown the anti-matter injectors manually. But I have to access and shutdown four inter-connecting systems to gain access. I need more time."

"You've got seven minutes, B'elanna."

"That should be enough, Captain."

Harry was at a distinct disadvantage trying to keep up with Seven's calculations in the Cargo Bay. All he could do was try to put everything he saw on the five screens to memory and hope that all of it would combine to make some sense to him. But after staring for two minutes, he was getting more lost than anything. There was simply too much data flashing by. What added to the difficulty was that Seven was working completely in Borg.

Harry knew that if he spoke, he would lose his train of thought, so he kept quiet and continued to try and piece together Seven's plan.

"Micro-inducers," "replication," were the first words he mentally translated. 'She's going to do something with the plasma conduits,' Harry deduced to himself. But that didn't make any sense when he deciphered: "Neural link;" "gel-pack;" "bio-electric field." Put together, none of it made any sense.

While keeping some of his attention on the screens in front of him, Harry also made attempts to juggle the things in his mind. He deduced that, since conglomerating all the information produced a dead-end, there must be a certain pattern to the words. The first two words referred to the plasma conduits. The last three referred to something about the jel-packs. 'What is the connection?' Harry wondered.

"Nanoprobes," flashed on the screen for a split second, and suddenly everything came together. Seven had used nanoprobes to distribute the micro-inducers in the plasma conduits. Once there, they replicated each other, allowing them to spread throughout the EPS conduit. Harry suddenly realized that Seven was going to use nanoprobes to repair the jel-packs.

That realisation seemed enough for Harry to divert his concentration to the woman working the console. "Seven you can't do this."

"There is no alternative," Seven asserted.

"I've already told you. It's too risky."

Seven momentarily stopped and faced Harry with disappointing eyes. "More 'risky' seem () Tj 0 -11.25 TD -050.st be

Harry nodded, a muted concerned smile on his face, and went deeper into the Cargo Bay to get the equipment she needed. His second-guessing thoughts were disrupted by the computer, "Warning. Plasma leak in progress. Total plasma manifold breach in two minutes, 45 seconds."

He quickly opened the storage container, found the equipment, and rushed back to Seven. "Thank you," Seven returned, taking the cable in hand.

The briefing room was filled with humid tension. But only Carey, Tom, and B'elanna were feeling it. Chakotay and Tuvok just sat in their seats, waiting for the Captain to arrive. Then again, they all knew what they came to talk about. Harry sat beside Tom, a blank look on his face.

The swish of the door seemed like a break from the tense silence, but it proved to be an precursive gust to the storm. "What the hell happened down there!" Janeway demanded angrily.

Everyone was taken aback by the abrupt question from the Captain and said nothing. "B'elanna?" Janeway prodded for an answer.

Torres stood up to hand Janeway the PADD detailing the problems that led to the accident. "There was some miscommunication in the sequence of the upgrade in stages two and three, which led to the unpredictable consequence of a plasma manifold breach."

"According to your report, instead of completing the entire swap-out, you started to test on parts of the system instead of the whole system all at once," Janeway read of the PADD.

"Yes, Captain," B'elanna admitted feebly. "By not taking into account the extensive nature of the tests, the parts of the system that were tested overloaded, and key systems were damaged as a result. The sequence of the test allowed for the plasma injection system to malfunction, which led to the manifold breach."

Carey jumped in, "Actually, Captain, what B'elanna has put in her report is not complete."

B'elanna felt betrayed. "Carey!"

"Captain, I take full responsibility for the accident that occurred," Carey confessed as he stood up. "It was my weak judgement that led to the potential for the breach to occur. I had not examined carefully enough Lieutenant Torres' post-installation tests, and thus did not anticipate the jel-packs being tested as rigourously as B'elanna had wanted. I had no idea that the injection system would be involved. If I did, I would never had tried."

B'elanna tried to push Carey back to his seat. "Captain, as Chief Engineer, it is 'my' responsibility. My lack of judgement in leaving Engineering during the upgrade was inexcusable..."

Janeway was about to agree before Tom interjected, "Actually, Captain. It's my fault."

Janeway's anger gave way to frustrated bewilderment as she sat down to re-focus herself, "You, Tom?"

"I had planned a holodeck session for B'elanna last night. I felt that she needed a break from the upgrade, so I took the initiative and arranged the whole thing. If anything, it's ultimately my fault."

"I see," Janeway responded coldly.

The atmosphere thickened as Janeway just sat in her seat eyeing all three of the culprits. She didn't know what to say. Her authority called for strict action, yet her compassion called for understanding. Realizing her counsel sitting opposite Tom, B'elanna, Carey, and Harry, she ordered, "I'd like nothing better than to put you all in the brig for what you've caused.

It was irresponsible, and down right reckless! But I need all of you right now. Carey, Paris, you two go to Engineering and help fix up this mess. Torres, Kim, get down to the Cargo Bay and see what the hell happened there. Dismissed!"

They all nodded, disgrace spelled on every one of their faces. Instead of going through the bridge, they all went to the briefing room turbolift, to avoid the eagerly curious looks of the crew.

Once in the turbolift they quickly started to argue. B'elanna was first.

"Carey, we agreed that this was going to be my responsibility!"

"Lieutenant, I'm not going to sit by and watch your career go down in flames because of something 'I' did."

"What you did was simply try to get a head start on the upgrade," B'elanna asserted. "There's nothing wrong there."

"But without taking more care in knowing what the hell was in those simulations and tests in the first place."

"Well, I shouldn't have fiddled with it anyway. It was too early to run those particular tests."

Tom decided to interrupt the Engineering debate. "Okay, you two, enough of the sharing of blame. It's sickening. Not to mention, it's none of your concern. You stick to fixing problems. Leave taking blame to the expert."

"You?" B'elanna turned to the quiet Ensign, "Harry, you going to let your best friend take all the blame?"

Harry barely looked up acknowledging the utterance of his name. "I don't think Mr. Kim is caring too much. He looks like he's got bigger problems," Carey responded to Harry's heavy face.

"I've read each of the reports submitted by Lieutenant's Paris, Torres, and Carey. They all are very biased in their accounts."

"Biased in what way?" Janeway questioned.

"They are all explicitly trying to absorb the blame for the incident, when clearly, all are to blame."

Janeway leaned back in her chair wearily. "They were covering each other."

"In so many words, yes."

She stared at the table, thinking. Chakotay asked, "So what are you going

to do?"

"What I have to do, which is reprimand every one of them." She gave an uncertain look. "But how can I stop from this happening again?"

"It's not like sending them to their rooms is going to solve the problem," Chakotay remarked.

"No, I suppose confining them to quarters wouldn't?"

"You expect this to happen again?" Tuvok asked, concerned.

"Expect? No. Worry? Yes. Frankly, I'm surprised it hasn't happened sooner."

Janeway noticed Tuvok's serious look and replied, "Well, think about it. I've tried to create a community here, and look where it got us."

"I think what you've tried to accomplish here is not at fault," Chakotay stated.

"However, a lack of restraint remains a significant concern," Tuvok interjected.

"You can't just legislate into people's private lives."

"Perhaps not. But for every circumstance there is necessity, and placing paramount importance in maintaining the efficiency of the crew should be our priority."

"At the expense of our community?" Chakotay asked with disbelief.

"As a matter of fact, yes. Without the crew, we do not have a community from which to build."

Chakotay fell silent to Tuvok's logical reply. "You're right," Janeway noted to Tuvok.. "But so are you, Chakotay. The question remains, what can I do to put the crew in line, yet not stifle our 'community spirit'?"

After exiting first from the turbolift, B'elanna and Harry walked to Cargo Bay two. B'elanna still hadn't heard a word from Harry, so she tried to bring him out of his silence. "So, what can I expect in the Cargo Bay?"

He responded coldly, "Your worst nightmare."

B'elanna was unprepared for such an answer. Clearly something was weighing heavily in his mind, if not his heart, but she hadn't expected him to be so blunt. Given their relationship, they usually teased each other towards the truth. This time was no different as B'elanna tried to weed it out of him. "Isn't it your nightmare too?"

Harry took her comment as an intentional tease. "B'elanna!" he warned through gritted teeth.

B'elanna was forced to silence at his subtly aggressive response. It was a

side of Harry she had never seen before. Ordinarily, Harry would go on the defensive with any mentioning of his budding relationships with some female crewmembers. But this time, he was assertive, focused, almost aggressively offensive. Given her uncertainty over Harry's state of mind, she decided to wait and see where his friend's character would go.

B'elanna didn't have to wait long. Entering the Cargo Bay Harry's attitude hardened further. If her view of Harry's face was accurate, he looked as if he was betrayed.

They walked over to the panel that was ground zero for the nanoprobe infection. They both avoided eyeing Seven. Analyzing her tricorder, B'elanna remarked, "These jel-packs have been completely assimilated."

Harry didn't respond to B'elanna's comment. He didn't have to. B'elanna continued, "I'm also detecting a bio-electric field emanating from all the assimilated jel-packs, from here to the primary plasma manifold interface.

And, there appears to be implants sprouting around the infected circuitry."

Harry still ignored B'elanna's report. She looked at him, and noticed he was analyzing the link between the circuitry synaptic pathways and Seven.

"Harry," B'elanna called softly. He still didn't answer, even though she was right beside him. "Harry!"

"What!" Harry barked back at her.

"Have you been listening to anything I've said?"

Harry snapped, "I heard every word, lieutenant."

B'elanna felt even more lost. He rarely, if ever, intentionally called her by her rank. "Okay, Starfleet, what the hell is this all about?"

As if stating the obvious, Harry replied, "We're here to 'find out what the hell happened.'"

"No, I mean with you," B'elanna clarified. "Ever since the accident you've been a total nut case. I've never seen you like this."

"Oh, show a little anger and I'm a 'nut case.' What does that make you?" Harry insinuated.

Had it been anyone else, she would have reciprocated the anger. But Harry was one of her close friends. And it was not like him. "That makes me a Klingon, Harry," B'elanna revealed, surprised herself by accepting her identity. She tried to lighten the mood. "For a human to be a Klingon-that's being a nut case."

B'elanna noticed a small movement in Harry's face. "Is that a smile I see?"

"Of course not."

"Harry, when are you going to learn that you can't hide anything from me?" B'elanna asked genuinely.

"Not yet," Harry admitted, futilely trying to stay angry. He gave up giving a cynical smile. "What is it with you?" he asked, trying to understand how she could get under his skin.

"Harry. Let me tell you something." She moved closer to him. "You're a good man. Too good. And it shows. It's only natural that us 'flawed' people try and use your good nature to 'our' advantage."

Harry's face hardened again, accepting B'elanna's explanation. He felt he had been taken advantage of. He felt that way about the Borg standing two metres away. Noticing Harry's change of face, B'elanna remarked, "But it's nothing worth getting angry about."

Harry turned to her and reassured her, "I know. But it's not you I'm thinking about."

"It's Seven isn't it."

Harry blinked in the affirmative. "So, what happened?" B'elanna asked as she put away her tricorder, thinking Harry was the best source of information.

"I helped her."

"What did you do?"

"I got the optical cable and helped her modify it to be used as a bio-neural link."

"And?"

"And what?"

"What else?" B'elanna asked, looking for the cause of Harry's problem.

"And then I found out she was going to use the nanoprobe without modifying them. I tried to stop her, but I couldn't."

"What do you mean, you 'couldn't'?"

"I grabbed her arm," Harry recalled.

"That's it?" B'elanna asked. "You just 'grabbed' her arm?"

"What, you expected me to use a phaser on her?"

"That would've been a 'bit' more effective, wouldn't you say?"

Harry stared at her in disbelief. "I couldn't do that!"

"No, Harry, you 'wouldn't'," B'elanna corrected.

Harry was shocked at the accusation, but more disturbed at knowing that she was right. But that didn't stop him from retaliating. "Who the hell are you to be so judgemental? I didn't see you stop yourself from being blinded by your disgust towards Seven back in Engineering. If you had listened to her, maybe we wouldn't be in this mess!"

Harry's accusation stung, by the fact that he was right about her. They both stood beside each other, regretting their words. B'elanna decidedly broke the silence. "Harry?"

"Yeah?"

"Remember the time in the Ocampa underground?"

"How can I forget?"

"When I saw you for the second time?" B'elanna clarified.

"You mean, after they had sedated you?"

"Yeah. You were so 'with it,' you know? And you sounded so genuine when you warned me that they'd sedate me again if I didn't calm down."

"Well, I was," Harry responded calmly. "I didn't want all those alien drugs in your system. Who knows what they'd do to us."

Turning to face Harry, B'elanna asked, "What happened to 'that' Harry Kim? Why the change all of a sudden? You've been through life, death, hell, you're even a duplicate of yourself. Why, after 'this' accident, you've lost your charm?"

Harry broke B'elanna's gaze, ashamed to even answer her question. "I...I don't know. It's just that...I can't let myself be used anymore. Not after what happened."

B'elanna was still genuinely confused. It wasn't like him to be so disjointed when he spoke, but he seemed to be jumping over important details. "Harry, how have you been 'used'?"

"I can't talk about it...Not yet." Harry emphasized, "Not here." He shook his head in frustration and darted for the Cargo bay doors.

B'elanna watched Harry rush out. She turned around and saw herself facing Seven, who was staring back at her. B'elanna gave a cold look, and took out her tricorder to get her mind focused on examining the damage instead of thinking about Harry.

But she couldn't stay focused. She couldn't understand how Harry could suddenly change. Just this morning he was his usual, calm, composed, diligent self. Now, he was an angry recluse. He didn't even care about Tom when they were in the turbolift. Ultimately, though, she knew it had something to do with the drone standing a metre away from her.

Seven, having paid attention to the conversation between B'elanna and Harry, finally remarked, "Lieutenant. You appear to be angry."

"I see spending time with Tuvok has been a big help," B'elanna replied sarcastically. "You state the obvious even better than he does."

"Lieutenant, I do not wish to argue with you."

"Well, I'll do one better; I don't want to 'talk' to you."

Seven responded with an annoyed look at B'elanna's incessantly aggressive attitude, but she maintained her persistence. "How do you expect to understand Ensign Kim's loss of his? 'charm'?"

"Through him."

"He explanation does not seem to be forthcoming."

Trying to get some work done, scanning the synaptic pathways, B'elanna said, "When he's ready...he'll tell me."

"Why wait?"

B'elanna slammed her tricorder shut. "Because, it's his problem! I'm not going to try and help him if he doesn't want my help."

"How can you help if you do not even have all available information?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I was there, Lieutenant," Seven replied. "Yet you have not asked me for a chronology of events."

"Well, I don't want to hear your 'chronology,'" B'elanna spit back.

"Then it is your loss."

B'elanna took Seven's statement as a challenge. And she quickly realized it was a no-win scenario. If she ignored Seven's information, Seven would be right; B'elanna would lose some potentially important information. But, if she accepted Seven's information, Seven would have won the challenge.

Focusing on Harry, B'elanna retorted, "It wouldn't be my loss. It would be Harry's." Pausing momentarily, swallowing her pride, B'elanna finally asked, "So what happened?"

"As soon as I returned to the Cargo Bay, I began to analyze ways of repairing the damaged circuitry system near the plasma manifold. I deduced that the most efficient means was through the use of my nanoprobes, which would be injected into the bio-neural circuitry. Ensign Kim's role was minimal as he simply retrieved a type-3 optical cable and a repair kit."

Seven continued in a confused tone, "While observing my actions, he asked if I intended to use the cable as a means to modify the nanoprobes. He became upset when I explained to him that I had no intention of modifying the nanoprobes, and he feebly attempted to stop me."

"And after that, you injected the nanoprobes into the jel-packs," B'elanna concluded.

"Yes. I then connected the optical cable to the synaptic pathway, connected myself to my alcove, and inserted the cable into the implant below my right ear."

B'elanna remained confused. "How did you 'use' Harry?"

"As I said, I did not."

"I was speaking rhetorically, Seven," B'elanna replied, slightly annoyed.
"But, I still don't understand what Harry could be talking about...Unless you're hiding something."

"I assure you, lieutenant, I am not. However, I do share your concern."

"What's that supposed to mean?" B'elanna asked suspiciously.

Seven admitted, "Recent events have led to a realization that I have gained a certain...affinity for Ensign Kim."

B'elanna couldn't believe what she heard. "You don't know what you're talking about! You're a Borg!...You don't 'care' for people. You're a mindless drone!"

"I may be Borg, but I am no longer a drone," Seven asserted. "Unlike you, I have learned to harness parts of my humanity, and use it towards more 'efficient' ends."

"Oh, please! You don't even say 'thank-you'!"

"That acknowledgement, I have learned, is not blindly given, but granted to appropriate parties."

"Are you saying I don't deserve a 'please' or 'thank-you'?" B'elanna asked.

"You must have been seeing Commander Tuvok" Seven said in a sarcastic tone.
"You are reiterating the obvious."

B'elanna exploded, "Why you...you..." She couldn't find a word harsh enough to describe her rage. She growled in anger and threw her tricorder at Seven. But instead of hitting Seven in the face, the tricorder bounced off a green Borg shield that frizzled into existence, startling both B'elanna and Seven.

"Have you gotten a report from Harry?" Janeway asked Chakotay in her Ready Room.

"Actually, no I haven't. I thought he might have given it to you."

Janeway gave a concerned look. "Notice anything...different about Harry?"

"He didn't seem very focused at the debriefing. If anything he looked as if he had something more pressing on his mind."

"Have you talked with him about it?"

Chakotay smiled as he answered, "He's not usually 'that' forthcoming to me."

"And I don't even have a report to read between the lines," Janeway replied, concerned.

Moments later Janeway's door chimed. "Come in."

It was Harry who walked in, at least his body. His mind was lost in personal uncertainty, his eyes glazed over with confusion, his voice hollow.

"You wanted to see me, Captain?"

Chakotay decided to give them some privacy. "Excuse me, Captain."

Janeway nodded permission for the Commander to leave. Sitting in her chair, she put a PADD on her desk, and folded her hands in her lap. "So, how are you feeling?"

"I'm...fine, Captain."

"Are you sure there's nothing you need to talk about?"

"Not really, ma'am," Harry answered.

"Then would you mind explaining why I haven't received a report from you regarding the accident in Engineering?"

Harry had been locked into a corner. "I...I...I've been busy."

"We've all been busy, Ensign. What have you been up to that has pulled you away from your duties?"

Ordinarily, Harry would have stopped his diversionary tactics and get to the point, but ironically, his loss of self-confidence, made him bury the truth deeper within himself. He didn't want to deal with it, and he definitely didn't want to talk to the Captain, or anyone else, about it.

"It's a personal matter, ma'am. I'd rather not talk about it."

"I see," Janeway uttered. "If you don't want to talk about it, then there's nothing I can do for you."

"I appreciate your understanding, Captain."

"Actually, Harry, I don't understand." Janeway stood up and approached the Ensign. "And I want to help you, but equally important, right now I need you. I need to know that you can still be trusted with fulfilling your responsibilities, even with your...personal matter. Can I still trust you?"

Harry felt the sting of Janeway's deep and concerned gaze into his eyes.

He wanted to assert himself, but his fear from his uncertainty encroached upon his confidence. "I hope so."

Janeway maintained her strong gaze. "That's not much of an answer, Ensign."

Harry gave it another effort, but to no avail. "I'll try."

Janeway blinked in disappointment. She gave a muted sigh as she turned back towards her chair. Wisking around, Janeway commanded, "Ensign. I'm relieving you of duty."

"That's not necessary!"

"Oh, I think it is. You've lost something, and I'm giving you time to find it again."

"What about the repairs, and the infestation to the jel-packs?" Harry countered.

"You're welcome to help B'elanna and the rest of the Engineering team, but I mean it when I say you're off-duty. You are not to take on any responsibilities until you are fit to be returned to duty, understood?"

He sighed. "Aye, Captain."

"Dismissed."

Harry turned to leave, but before reaching the doors leading to the bridge, Janeway wanted his personal attention. "Harry, I won't imagine I know what's on your mind. But, I want you to know, you haven't done anything wrong."

"Thank you, Captain. But, I don't think it has anything to do with doing anything wrong, as it has to do with knowing what is the right thing to do."

Harry left the Captain with a confused look on her face.

B'elanna rushed into Engineering. Finding Tom working on her control panel, she approached him. "Tom, we have a problem."

Happy to see B'elanna, he teased, "Tell me something I don't already know."

"I'm serious. I was down in the Cargo Bay, and Seven has re-developed her Borg shields. It might have something to do with the increased bio-electric field forming around her, or her tapping into the ship's main power systems..."

"What a minute. How do you find out about the shields?"

B'elanna diverted the question as smoothly as she could. "That's not important. What's important is we find out how to disable it. I was thinking of..."

Tom cut her off, slyly focusing on his question. "The only way you could've found out about the shields was if you hit it with something..."

"If you think I'd be dumb enough to bump into it, you're way off," B'elanna responded defensively.

Eyeing B'elanna's body for a sign of contact with a force field, he noticed something missing. "Where's your tricorder?"

"How did you know I had a tricorder?"

"Well, you're wearing a tricorder holster, which happens to be empty. Wait

a minute..." Tom put two and two together, and gave a laugh. "You threw your tricorder at her!"

B'elanna stood unamused, which only made Tom realize he was right. "You know what Harry will say when he finds out?"

"I don't think Harry will care too much," B'elanna said bluntly. "He's got this 'thing' on his mind."

Tom responded assertively, "Oh, I think he'll care. Harry hasn't changed his mind all that much."

"What are you talking about? He's so 'out of it.'"

"Oh, everything is perfectly normal," Tom assured. "I've seen it dozens of times. He simply has to make a choice."

B'elanna was getting fed up with cryptic answers. "What are you talking about?"

"He just has to decide whether to still kill two birds with one stone."

B'elanna huffed in frustration at Tom's vague answer, pushing Tom away from her console, and getting to work.

Seven reflected on her statement, "I have gained a certain affinity for Ensign Kim." While the thought had been developing in her mind for several weeks, for some reason, hearing the words spoken made the statement more substantial, real, and true. From a fleeting feeling percolating in her mind, came a pillar from which she could use as a guide to attain a new level of understanding. Yet, unlike her previous experiences with emotions, she was not apprehensive, but confidently curious. She wanted to know where her feelings would take her.

But her curiosity was muted, in part, by confusion over the rapid transformation of Ensign Kim. Recalling his explanation of 'being used,' Seven couldn't understand how that alone would cause him to be so uncharacteristically solemn. The Ensign and Seven had 'used' each other in the same fashion ever since they started working together on the Astrometrics Lab, and even when he got angry, or when she ignored his suggestions, he never 'lost his charm.' In addition, to her it seemed highly improbable that the injection of the nanoprobes alone would cause

obligatory expressions, such as 'please' and 'thank-you' were more than perfunctory. Even if Seven had not yet experienced the full potential range of human interactions, she knew that expressions embodied the ability to convey significant sentiments, from the subtle to the obvious.

Realizing that she was following the chronology of events, her confusion was compounded by doubt, surfacing from the recollection of the sudden appearance of her Borg shields. In her calculations, Seven had not anticipated the re-emergence of her shields. She grew increasingly uncertain as it occurred to her that if her shields returned, other aspects of her Borg makeup could re-emerge and threaten her ability to control the nanoprobes. Without her, the nanoprobes would easily continue to assimilate the bio-neural circuitry and spread to other systems on the ship.

What concerned her the most was the understanding that if that occurred, she would have failed in her task. Her imperfections would force failure into her own personal chronology of events. That error would be a blemish she could never erase, and worse, never forget. Her imperfection would be concrete. Her doubt would have a permanent place in her character. And that frightened her.

She tried to refocus on something else, attempting to return to her more confident state, by immersing herself in her thoughts concerning Ensign Kim, but she couldn't. Her uncertainty quickly mutated into fear, burning away her remaining confidence.

Immobilized in her alcove, she could not run away and have the change of environment douse her trepidation. Recalling the transformation of Ensign Kim, she could not even call on him to assist her. She was isolated.

Without warning, her mind became flooded with a fuzz of vocalizations.

Seven winced at the intensity of the sounds echoing in her mind, but the momentary prick of pain dissipated as soon as it came. In an instant, her own individual thoughts and emotions became sedated with an accustomed collection of communication. She heard the voices-the others. The Collective.

A puddle of rationality questioned how the Collective could reach her. But she didn't care. The familiar sounds were all she needed. She felt the comfort of her old home. She welcomed the others into her mind. She let the voices rebuild her confidence. She let the weight of humanity drift away. She became drugged on the illusion of drone perfection.

A pillar falling, Harry collapsed onto his bed, facing the ceiling. The force of his fall gave his body a much need change of pace, blood rushing up his body, a wave of life splashing up into his mind. It gave him a moment of clarity, recognizing for an instant, that his problem was about himself alone. But as the wave receded, so did his confidence, and his confusion returned.

Harry laid there, hoping that his problems would emerge and escape. His mind became a kaleidoscope of drifting fragments of thoughts, riddled with disassociated feelings, uneven in intensities. Passion rolled into focus, crushed by heavy disappointment, fractured into seedlings of uncertainty,

and blooming into unyielding fear. He saw a lock of dark curls, a flash of an anomaly, the pale skin of an enemy, the mucus of a monster, the darkness of death.

Letting it all come out to the surface made him worse. He pushed himself up and walked to a corner of the room, where most of his personal belongings sat. He decided to pick up his clarinet, and play something soothing to himself. "Computer, replicate a number five clarinet reed."

Picking up the reed from the replicator, and wetting it in his mouth, he walked over to the PADD sitting on a music stand and started to flip through, looking for a piece he wanted to play. He started slowly at first, sight-reading each piece in his mind, judging whether the melody was something he desired. The first one on screen was a Jazz piece that was quick paced and lively, and was a piece that he always found a challenge to play. But he decided to skip it; He didn't feel like challenging himself, and, because it was the first song Libby had heard Harry play in the symphony orchestra. He quickly skimmed over another one, and skipped it because it was too mellow a piece. He skimmed over another one, passing it over because it was too upbeat. Another and another he scanned and skipped, growing increasingly frustrated, finally hitting the PADD off the stand, and breaking the softened reed in his mouth.

Throwing the broken reed pieces back into the replicator, he turned to stare out into the stars, hoping this one final act would provide him the peace he so much yearned to return.

He had always loved star-gazing. It was the one thing that had always provided him a general reassurance. Whether in space or on Earth, the stars always twinkled. It was just the intensity and the sheer volume of stars that changed when within an atmosphere. Just feeling the immense space between him and the stars made his problems feel small, the twinkle teasing his curiosity, easing his confusion.

As a child, the first time he star-gazed, he thought that if he flew to a star, his problems would eventually go away. They would get bored of him and just leave. At that moment in his quarters, he repeated that thought, as irrational as it was. But he quickly knew that particular thought wouldn't work, irrational or not. He had travelled over 75,000 light years away from home, and his problems only grew worse. And getting closer to home only served to aggravate his present problem. Noting, however, that Voyager was only travelling at impulse, made him feel a bit better. They weren't going anywhere fast, which gave him more time to think. And that small fact seemed to soothe his bubbling emotions.

More composed, Harry felt that staring out a window wasn't as effective as gazing at a sky full of stars, so he decided to go to the holodeck.

Turning towards the door, his eyes caught a glimpse of the pictures on his shelf. The pictures of his parents, of him with Libby on Risa, of his graduation, made him realize why he couldn't focus and think in his quarters. They had become tainted. Impure. Everything in his quarters

"B'elanna, progress report," Janeway commanded.

In the Briefing Room, B'elanna got up to use the wall monitor to illustrate the work of her Engineering crew. Pointing to a diagram of the plasma manifold and the surrounding circuitry, B'elanna reported, "We have repaired the breach in the manifold, and the interconnecting conduits around it. But, as of yet we have not been able to do anything about the infected jel-packs."

"Why not?" Chakotay asked.

"We're still trying to figure that out. Two problems exist. First off, the nanoprobes are enveloped in a bio-electric field, which seems to also be containing them from spreading to other systems. Second, all infected systems have developed shields to protect them from external interference."

"Borg shields? Where did they come from?" Janeway asked, concerned.

"I believe I have an answer to that question," the Doctor interjected. "I have been able to run some preliminary scans on Seven, and have discovered that she is some sort of controlling rod for the nanoprobes."

"Meaning, she is what is keeping the nanoprobes in check," Paris explained.

"Yes. But, it's more than just control. The nanoprobes have become an extension of Seven. She has, in effect, become a part of the circuitry system."

"How did you come to this conclusion, Doctor," Tuvok asked.

"From my experience with Borg technology, the bio-electric field, which B'elanna detected, is created by the nanoprobes. Seven emits the field because she has nanoprobes integrated into her biological systems. The field emitted by the circuitry system has the same bio-electric signature as Seven's, which I can only conclude is the result of Seven taking control. If it was the other way around, the field in the jel-packs would be different, since they feed off the bio-neural fibres in the jel-packs."

"How does that explain the shields?" Paris asked.

"Seven's Borg abilities are dependent on the layers of technology imbedded in her body. Since we removed a significant portion of her Borg implants, she lost many of those abilities. But now, she has essentially regained the volume of nanoprobes, equalling the number necessary for implants, required for most Borg functions. So, it's possible she has regained the ability of Borg shields."

"What about these implants outside the circuitry system?" Janeway asked, looking at a report on a PADD.

B'elanna answered, "They appear to be sensory devices."

"Which I think are possibly used as scouts," the Doctor added.

Janeway gave a serious look. "What are you getting at, Doctor?"

"I took a sample of an infected jel-pack, and I noticed that they have been unaltered."

Janeway concluded, "Meaning, it's possible that the nanoprobes are prepared to expand their...sphere of influence."

"I'm afraid so."

Janeway sighed in frustration. "Recommendations?"

"Clearly we cannot simply remove Seven from the circuitry system," Tuvok noted. "And, leaving her connected is also not an acceptable solution."

"Which means we need a third alternative," Janeway stated.

"Could we destroy the nanoprobes in some way?" Paris asked.

"Have you been paying attention, Mr. Paris?" the Doctor asked indignantly. "They are protected behind a Borg forcefield."

"Can't you modify some nanoprobes to combat it?" Paris asked further, holding in his frustration at the Doc's attack.

"I'm touched by your strong faith in my abilities, but it would take too long to replicate enough nanoprobes to combat them all."

Tuvok turned to the Doctor. "What suggests we are constrained by a limited period of time?"

"Well, Seven of Nine, of course." Everyone turned to the Doctor, not understanding him. Noting their blank looks, he added, "Seven's body can control only so many nanoprobes. The sheer number of nanoprobes she is controlling now is a hundred times that of a single drone."

"So, she's over-extending herself," Chakotay clarified.

"Yes. So, it's only a matter of time before Seven loses control."

Paris commented, "Disconnect her, and the ship gets assimilated. Keep her there and the ship still gets assimilated. Not very good prospects."

"No, Mr. Paris," Tuvok added. "They are not."

It was already late in the evening when Harry chimed Janeway's door. He had concerns about disturbing her, worse yet, wake her if she had already gone to bed. But, he wanted to return to duty and have an important part of his life back.

Janeway's doors opened to an awakened Captain. "Harry!" she said surprised.

"I'm sorry to bother you so late, Captain. But I needed to talk to you."

Adjusting her pink silk sleepwear, she answered, "Come in."

After turning on the lights, she asked, "So, what's on your mind?"

"I want to be returned to duty."

"Already? But, it's only been a few hours."

"Lets just say I'm a quick study."

Impressed, Janeway responded, "You found what you were looking for?"

"I found what I had to do."

"And what was that?"

Harry answered confidently, "I have to make a choice."

"And have you?"

"No, not yet."

Janeway returned to her serious self. "It doesn't sound like you've finished searching."

"Perhaps not, Captain. But I passed the first hurdle, which was the hardest part. And, I'm sure you know, some decisions need time."

"How does returning to duty give you more time?"

Harry was candid. "It doesn't, exactly. But it gives me a direction. Thinking in my quarters, alone, just wasn't working well. I want to do what I'm good at, which is my job. I need to still know for myself that I can do it, and only after I know for myself, can I make a confident choice."

"Dismissed."

Seven relished in the sounds of the hundreds of voices. Ever since they emerged, she continued to feel the euphoria of her regained peace of mind.

Everything else had no meaning. Time. Humanity. Voyager. What mattered was that she was regaining her perfection, and establishing her lost control. She became intent on shedding herself from her human confusion and doubt.

From her implant eye, she was able to interface directly to the ship's systems. She ordered her nanoprobes to establish a link to the main core, and instantly, her minions followed her command. She relished in her perfection. No doubt. No confusion. No inefficiency. Only action.

Her minions quickly completed their task. Accessing the data, Seven felt triumphant, attaining her desired perfection. She had access to the ship's computer. She didn't care about the data itself. That was not the point.

What was important was that she became one with the core. She had gained a new purpose. She had become more than just human.

But from the cacophony of voices, a single voice grew in intensity, calling her name. At first she thought it was simply the Collective calling to her, but the other voices remained constant in intensity. This voice was from outside the Collective. Outside her mind. It was registering through her auditory sensors. It was coming from her Cargo Bay.

"SEVEN OF NINE!" Harry yelled, his call echoing in the room.

Seven focused her eyes and stared down at the Ensign, who was accompanied by the Doctor. "What do you want?" Seven questioned, her voice reverberating with a familiar Borg-collective sound.

Harry froze, startled by the cold, collective chorus. "What's wrong with your voice?" he managed to ask.

"That question is irrelevant. I speak for the Borg. State the nature of your presence."

"What Borg are you talking about?"

"I am in contact with the Collective. I speak for the Borg. Your presence here is not required."

Harry was about to ask another question to try to understand what Seven was talking about when B'elanna called over the comm. "Harry, what's going on up there? The nanoprobes are still spreading!"

"I haven't been able to do anything yet! I just got her attention after yelling at her, and all Seven is doing is just spouting about being in a Collective and being in contact with the Borg. Are you detecting any subspace communication with the ship?"

B'elanna paused. "No. Nothing. But even if she is, you have to get her under control!"

"I'm trying! Kim out." Harry turned to Seven, looking for answers.
"Seven of Nine, where is this Collective communicating from?"

"The origin of the Collective is irrelevant. I am in contact with the Collective."

"If you don't know where it's coming from, how do you know it's the Collective?"

"I hear their voices."

"Voices?" Harry asked, thinking aloud.

"The voices of the Collective."

Harry turned to the Doc and asked, "Do you have any idea what she's talking about?"

"I'm guessing it has something to do with the sensory implants, since we aren't receiving any subspace signals."

"So she's hearing the voices of the crew, and thinking they are the voices of the Borg Collective?"

"Apparently."

Testing his hypothesis, Harry asked, "Seven, what are the voices saying?"

For a moment, she searched for an answer to his question. Probing her mind, she listened to the voices, and quickly came up empty. The voices she heard were echoing like the Collective, but their speech was disjointed, uneven, and weak. It was the Collective, yet also, it was not.

Noting she could not answer his question immediately, she attempted to discard the question. "It is beyond your limited human comprehension."

"Try me."

Seven was being challenged. She would have easily said no, but his persistence forced her to confront the issue immediately. She had to know what the voices were saying. Not for the Ensign, but for her. Realizing her need for answers, gave her another realization. Her attempt at evasion had failed. She had failed. Even with the inclining of the Collective in her mind.

She couldn't answer. Seven would have if she could. But she did not have an answer. The voices in her mind were telling her nothing. They were the Collective, yet they said nothing. She had returned to her home, but it was empty. Her quick definition of the Collective-the voices-was no longer applicable.

Harry noticed Seven's lack of a response to a simple question, and assumed his hypothesis correct. "Seven, what you are hearing are the voices of the crew. The sensory implants that are located near the infected jel-packs are feeding auditory information into your brain. The voices you hear...are of us."

Despite Seven's doubt, she could not accept the explanation of the Ensign standing before her. He tried to make her listen, but she would not.

Seven simply buried herself deeper into the voices, desperately looking for a shred of direction from the Collective she was hearing. "Kev, hand me that phase capacitor, will you? Come on, haven't you heard Jono talk about his date with Meagan? I think it's kind of childish to start setting up curfews. One day I'm going to throw Neelix's spice rack out an airlock.

No one can deny he looks better out of uniform. I thought the plasma cloud we passed was beautiful. Be careful with that!"

"Something's happening," the Doctor reported, analyzing the data from his beeping tricorder. "Her heart rate is increasing rapidly."

"Is she losing control already?" Harry asked.

"Possibly. I have to do a more detailed analysis from Sickbay."

"Fine, go. I'll stay to monitor her from here."

Harry turned to scan Seven as the Doctor nodded and briskly left the Cargo Bay. Harry became increasingly concerned when he noted an increase in concentration of nanoprobes in Seven's system. He tapped his comm badge.

"B'elanna, any changes with the nanoprobes?"

"Actually, yes. Their rate of progression has slowed by 10%. What did you do?"

Harry gave an ironic chuckle. "I don't know exactly. But apparently, the concentration of nanoprobes in Seven's bloodstream has increased by 10%."

"What could that mean?"

"That's what I'm going to find out."

"That is acceptable," Tuvok said in the Captain's Ready Room, Chakotay beside him.

Chakotay insisted, "I think it's unnecessary, Captain."

Despite the level of seriousness in the room, Janeway couldn't help but develop a grin in front of her counsel. "It's a shame we don't have a debate competition during off hours. The two of you alone would provide an intriguing match." Chakotay gave an amused smile, while Tuvok raised his brow in Vulcan fashion. "And while I sympathize with you, Chakotay, I really don't see an alternative."

"I need not remind you that this protocol is standard procedure on all Galaxy class starships," Tuvok noted.

Chakotay turned to him. "I'm surprised, Tuvok, you'd make the blunder of comparing Voyager to a Galaxy class ship?"

"I emphasize the purpose of the procedure, which is to limit the interference civilian activity produces in Starfleet vessels that accommodate civilian activity. 'Intense' social relations, such as

'covering for each other,' is just one such interference we must curb.

Such activities have been known to occur on large vessels, and since we are alone in the Delta Quadrant, we too suffer the same problems, as the crew must also double as community."

"But I think the existing protocols are enough, and extend as far as we can ethically go."

"Obviously they are inadequate..."

Chakotay interrupted, "But only this time. Sure, the Captain was worried this might happen, and so it did. That doesn't mean we change the rules suddenly to accommodate this specific incident. Rules are meant as a guide, not exclusively as a restriction. Yes, we are given certain limitations in what we can do, but we are able to bend the rules if it is reasonable to do so. Reasonable, Tuvok, not purely logical."

Tuvok made an amazing admission. "I'm afraid I do not know where you are going with this, Commander."

"We all make mistakes, Tuvok. And whether we are Human, Vulcan, Klingon, or Talaxian, we can learn from our mistakes. Even you have, Tuvok."

"Indeed," Tuvok responded, recalling the incident on Sikaris.

Chakotay concluded, "I'm convinced the crew will learn from this."

Janeway stood in front of them, amazed at what had just transpired.

Chakotay had beaten Tuvok. Letting the moment linger in her mind, after the fascinated shock subsided, Janeway imprinted a new-found appreciation for her first officer. In addition to his physical and personal charm, she noted a stronger charismatic quality to the man that even she, herself, had underestimated. And that only added to her affection for the man. "You two never cease to surprise me. You've given me even more to think about, but to keep the both of 'you' surprised, I'll make my announcement to the crew later on today at 2130 hours."

The more Seven thought about it, the more the euphoria wore off. The examination of each voice in her mind eroded her new-found purpose of existence. She was incrementally becoming smaller, weaker, more human, her fear of uselessness and doubt slowly returning. The fact that it was happening a second time-the first time following her triumph over species 8472-made her feel even lower, the withdrawal being more intense and debilitating.

Her mind was fragmenting at an increasing rate. One part of her wanted to continue searching the voices, looking for a thread of direction. Another wanted to erase all knowledge gained about the voices and return to the euphoric state. Both desires were multiplied by the various intensity of desire inherent in each. A part of her wanted to become Borg, to attain perfection. Another part wanted to return to her human state, to maintain the relative peace of human existence. While being human was a challenge, at the very least, it was a broad direction. She wouldn't be at a cross-roads.

Suddenly her mental fragments solidified partially at hearing a familiar voice. Ensign Harry Kim. She looked down in the Cargo Bay and noticed the Ensign standing in front, his back to her, working at a console. He was there, yet his voice was in her mind as well. She would have analyzed the situation to find a plausible answer, but she was more concerned with what the voice in her mind was saying. "Personal log. Stardate 51186.2.

Working with Seven of Nine is starting to get a little awkward. Tom's right, anything more than friendship is a bad idea. But I can't stop thinking about her. Personal log. Stardate 51729.6. I thought I'd gotten over Seven, but fate seemed to continually tease me with new and unexpected twists. First she actually comes to my quarters about a personal matter, next thing, she's sleeping in my quarters, looking at my pictures, and asking what it means to be happy. How the hell can I answer that question to her of all people, the woman of my dreams?"

Listening to the familiar voice in her head, she realized something else.

She had lost her happiness. The contentment she felt when she first heard the voices was gone. And no matter how hard she tried, she could never get it back. She shivered at that reality, her eyes welling up with tears.

Harry was close enough to hear something strange behind him, and turned to see Seven in her languishing state. He took out his tricorder to do some scans, but he was more focused on the individual than the data of her.

"Seven, something wrong?"

"I've lost my happiness," Seven whimpered.

Harry paused, absorbing her words. It was suddenly so obvious to him that he too had lost his happiness. He couldn't remember a time on the ship where he felt totally at peace, or in a state of contentment. And worst of all, he knew he couldn't. He knew no one on the ship could feel too comfortable. It was against their primary mission, which was to get home.

They were lost, and they were striving to be found. It was up to them, because no one else at home could help them. If they stopped striving to move forward, no one else would know about them.

He stared back at Seven, realizing that the two of them, ever since stepping aboard the USS Voyager, had their lives forever changed. Harry's life was now about getting home, and getting everyone else home. And he thought the same must be true of Seven of Nine. Just that her journey would be a longer one. And for one reason or another, he felt the need to help her.

Harry stepped up to her alcove, and put his tricorder away. "Seven, we all have times in our lives when we lose something most valuable to us. For me it was my parents, Libby, all my friends, and some of my favourite places on Earth. But, that's what hope is for." Harry anticipated Seven was about to ask a question, and continued, "Hope gives us a purpose in our lives. It's something we strive for, work towards. It gives us a direction."

Seven thought about Harry's words. Instantly she thought them profound.

Hope seemed to be the answer to all her problems. With hope, she could develop a purpose. With hope, she could develop direction. With hope, she could eliminate her confusion and doubt. With hope, she could be perfect.

"I want hope," Seven stated.

Harry smiled slightly at Seven's child-like demand. "It's great that you

do, but that's something you have to get yourself. I can only give you a general guideline."

"Very well. Assist me."

"Well, you have to know what you want."

"I want perfection."

Harry grimaced slightly. "That's a bit too big of a desire. It's good to have a big goal, and hope is a part of that, but you need smaller steps to get to where you want to go. Hope is a desire for a certain outcome. For example, I want to go back to Earth. It's a goal that I want to accomplish, but I also need to keep in mind some smaller things, like keeping the ship in order, having enough food, energy reserves, and all that. For hope to stay alive, you need to know that what you want is possible. And in keeping in mind what you need to do, you create a direction in your life. So, for you, what do you want to get out of your life?"

"I...I do not know." Seven felt discouraged after hearing herself say it. Hope was worthless. It didn't give her any answers, but demanded answers to the fundamental questions in her mind.

Still trying to help her, Harry said, "Well, it doesn't have to be a big thing. Anything small will do. Like, I wanted to have a clarinet to play a couple months after being stranded in the Delta Quadrant. You could say, I was hoping to get one, so I could play my music. So, I starved on Neelix's initial culinary experiments for a week, and saved up enough replicator rations for my clarinet."

"I can simply 'hope' to complete a task?"

"Yeah, sure," Harry encouraged.

"I hope to play your clarinet."

"You want to play 'my' clarinet? Why?"

"You stated it gave you pleasure. I wish to experience that pleasure."

Harry looked surprised, but accommodating. "Okay, I guess it's as good of a place to start as any." He was about to add something, when he noticed Seven closing her eyes, her hand clutching her chest. He knew something was wrong, and quickly scanned her with his tricorder. "Kim to the Doctor, I'm getting some really strange readings from Seven's bio-scan."

"I see them as well. The problem is getting worse. She can't take much more of the stress to her circulatory system."

"Can't you give her something?"

"I'm afraid not. I can't give her poly-adrenaline since her system is already flooded with natural adrenaline. And I can't give her a sedative since that would only weaken the bio-electric field containing the nanoprobes."

Harry heard the tricorder beep a warning, and looked up at Seven's face. Her skin was rippling. Small, roaming bumps were coalescing into a single ball until metallic claws burst out, and extended across her right cheek, causing Seven to cry out in pain.

Harry tapped his comm badge and stated with shocked concern, "Kim to

to like them."

"Would it matter? Just let the virus roam and reproduce," Paris said.

"And let it roam, reproduce, and 'feed' off the ship's system?" the Doctor rebuttled arrogantly. "No, we have to control what it is able to do before unleashing it.

Harry butt in. "So you're saying that it is possible for you to modify 8472 DNA to create a nanoprobe anti-virus to destroy the nanoprobes."

The Doctor stated hesitantly, "Yes, it's possible."

"Then lets do it."

"Harry..." Janeway warned.

"Captain, it's the best solution. If the Doc can control the life span of the virus, and the cell's functions, we don't have to worry about the cells eating up the ship..."

"There's more to it than that..."

Harry remained resolved, "We can't let Seven just...fade away."

"I don't want that to happen either, but there are consequences that we must be aware of."

"I know that, Captain. But the risk is worth it."

Janeway hardened as she realized her authority was being stepped upon.

"Ensign, I believe I should be the judge of that."

Harry closed his eyes, aware of what he had done. "I'm sorry, Captain."

Janeway gave a compassionate look. "We all care about Seven's well-being, and with that in mind, the Doctor will continue his research on the project. If what the Doctor tells me is true, we still have a while before Seven's condition forces us to make the ultimate choice. But we still have to find a way to extend that period of time."

"Of course, Captain," Harry responded.

The Doctor added, "We need to find a way to decrease the stress her body is going through now. I've already told the Ensign that I cannot provide any prescriptions that would help."

Harry suddenly beamed, "I have an idea."

Seven turned her eyes to the bay doors, noticing Harry arriving, clarinet in hand. She felt an urge of satisfaction emerging within her, thinking that she would finally be able to experience a new type of pleasure that would give her comfort. Trying to prepare herself, she analyzed the clarinet, looking for the reason she could not play it the first time she tried. Staring at the mouthpiece, she noticed a light brown object.

Zooming in with her implant eye, she scanned it, categorizing it as a

small slice of wood. Judging from the composition of the fibres, it was of the Terran variety, commonly described as 'bamboo.' Used in conjunction with a clarinet, or most wind instruments, it provided the vibration that produced the sounds associated with music.

She was about to ask Harry a question about playing the clarinet when she noticed he stopped two metres in front of her. At that distance, it would be impossible for her to retrieve the clarinet. "Ensign, you must be closer to hand me the instrument."

"I'm not going to give it to you."

Seven felt slightly frustrated at his uncooperative act. "How am I to experience the pleasure associated with music if I cannot touch the instrument?"

"First you have to appreciate the music as an outsider. You need to feel the music first in order to know the music. Otherwise what you play will be useless."

Seven felt dubious about the Ensign's explanation, feeling it was merely an evasion tactic, but decided to go along with him.

"Computer, load instrumental-suite entitled "The Inner Light," arrangement Kim-zero-zero-one," Harry ordered. "Overlay basic program with orchestral ensemble twenty-five."

Waiting for the computer to acknowledge, Harry moved closer to Seven's alcove and wrapped his lips around the mouthpiece of his clarinet. After a few affirming beeps of the computer, it paused before tapping out the slow tempo of the chosen piece of music.

For a reason yet unknown to Seven, Harry closed his eyes as the tempo was given. She assumed that he was concentrating on the tempo beats of the computer, but Harry wasn't showing any signs of concentration. His face was motionless, his skin, a rich vanilla, his hands positioned peacefully over his clarinet. He stood as a representation of tranquillity and composure, two qualities Seven was yearning for.

Desiring Harry's apparent calm, Seven tried to mimic Harry's disposition, closing her eyes and clearing her mind as she always did during her meditations with Tuvok. Since the Cargo Bay had a naturally darkened lighting scheme, she encountered only the blackness of her closed eyes, without a flicker of visual stimuli.

But another sense gained attention. From the silence rose the swelling symphonic sound of violins, supported moments later by a deep harmony of cellos. A single horn emerged, introducing a passionate melody, sending waves of music floating throughout the Cargo Bay. The slow speed of the beats became regimented by the crisp flow of an ascending scale by a single harp, which repeated itself, slowing as the music fell silent in anticipation.

Allowing the smooth introductory sounds before him to echo in the Cargo Bay, Harry began to play the melody. His fingers fluttered over the keys, the mellow sound from his clarinet reverberating with the same softness of the violins, evoking the deep heart of the cellos, mimicking the poignant

pulses of the bass horn. Over and over the mellow melody repeated, growing gradually in intensity. As if cresting, the music slowed, awaiting the feather-soft resonance of a harp.

For Seven, the music's repetition gave her a soothing stability that she had lost ever since she lost the Collective. None of the voices mattered to her since the music provided sounds to anchor her mind. Part of her wondered how the music could be so reassuring without consisting of voices telling her. But, for the most part, she didn't care. The music was enough. It brought to mind a well of euphoric emotions that defied explanation. She just listened, feeling confident that the music would give her what she needed.

With a transitionary scale played by the harp, the song grew louder as the symphony played the symphonic melody as a waltz. The ribbon of sound grew larger, waving majestically, as Harry continued his solo performance, maintaining the initial melody as the orchestra waltzed with him. As the dance slowly arrived at its end, the instruments diminished one by one, first the harp, then the horn, cello, and finally the violin. With a final moment of silence, Harry played his solo one final time before the orchestra rose awake for a final wave of harmony to end the evocative musical suite.

Harry paused before removing his lips from the clarinet mouthpiece, eyes glazed with excess fluid. Opening her eyes, Seven noticed that Harry's statuesque appearance crumbled away. His breath momentarily became uneven, his hands allowed to tremble free, from its previous talent, his head lowered, weakened by an outpour that was slowly overwhelming him.

His raw emotions, however, were forced back into suppression by a curious Doc over the comm. "Ensign Kim, what happened? Seven's heart rate has decreased by 40%."

Bypassing the question, Harry asked, "Is she out of danger?"

"Yes. The flow of nanoprobes is returning to normal."

Harry was relieved to hear it, and decided to get a look first hand.

"Good. Kim out."

Clarinet in hand, he walked in front of Seven. "How are you feeling?"

Seven's face was pale, with implants protruding around the implant around her left eye. But her expression tried to defy the invasion her body was experiencing. "I am...tired."

"It's probably from the strain you are under right now."

"No," Seven tried to clarify. "I am...calm. I have no apprehension. No fear. No sadness. Just...calm."

"Maybe it was the music."

"Yes..." Seven replied. "It was the music. It was..." she paused to find the word, "appropriate."

Harry smiled at her response, feeling she actually meant 'beautiful.' "I'm

glad you liked it. It's one of my favourite pieces of music."

"Where did you acquire it?"

"Well, actually, I didn't find it. A Captain by the name of Jean-Luc Picard found it by accident after finding an ancient probe."

"Jean-Luc Picard...Locutus?"

Harry remembered, "Oh, right...yes. That's him. But he found it after he was rescued from the Borg." Harry got to the point. "Anyway, the piece was first introduced to me by professor Chattaway, the conductor for the Julliard Symphony Orchestra. He had first heard of it from a Starfleet Journal on Stellar-Archeology."

"Why is it your favourite?"

"It's probably because it is one of the most soothing pieces of music I know. The story goes that the song was written as a commemoration of the birth of a child. So, I guess, in a way, it was a bit like a lullaby."

"Lullaby?"

"Yeah," Harry replied. "A song that's used to soothe babies to sleep."

"Which would explain why I am tired," Seven deduced.

Harry smiled. "Yeah, I guess so. But, that's not the only reason why I love this piece..." He paused a moment to well up enough stability to tell her the story. "It was the song I played to Libby the night I proposed to her."

Seven noted the emotional significance of his statement, seeing his head slightly tilted down, staring at the floor. Recalling the emotions she experienced while listening to the song, she tried to understand the impact of the song for Harry. It was a commemoration song for a baby...a lullaby...a song played before a proposition... "It is a love song for you, Ensign."

"Yeah...it is...or was," Harry said sadly.

"Was?"

"What good is a love song if the one you love isn't with you?"

Seven suddenly felt confused, "Then why did you play it to me?"

Harry looked up at Seven, and realized what he'd done. One of the songs that meant so much to him for one sole reason suddenly became mixed with the uncertainty and disbelief that accompanied transition. His most sacred memory of his love was forced into the open to defend itself.

He had played it to Seven of Nine. He told her his story. He told her it was a love song. "I don't believe what I just did," Harry commented to himself, turning and walking away from Seven.

"Ensign?" Seven called, wishing him to come back, confused at his sudden change of attitude.

He didn't respond to her. He was finally forced to contend with a rush of bombarding emotions. On one side, his deep feelings for Libby; the time they spent together; the cherished moments of closeness; the reciprocal understanding of each partner's feelings, logic, understanding...purpose.

Their moments together meant so much, even when they didn't say anything to each other. Walking along a riverside in the park; hiking up a mountain, gazing down at the Academy grounds, staring up at the countless stars all night. They shared those moments. Whatever they did, that was most important. Together they bolstered each other's confidence, self-worth, and courage, diving off the cliffs of heaven in the holodeck, or spiralling down towards the Earth in orbital parachuting.

She fulfilled every wish and dream he had in his heart, and he tried to do the same for her. As a child he was always envious of Betazoids and Vulcans because they were telepathic. The few Betazoid students in grade school teased him about his 'deficiency,' even though they had yet to develop the skill since they hadn't reached puberty. Harry wanted to know what it was like to hear the thoughts of other people. When he started dating Libby, his childish desire seemed to incredibly come true. The more time they spent together, the more they understood each other, sometimes finishing each other's sentences when they were casually debating with each other, helping each other around the apartment when they started to live together, caring for the other when one was frustrated, saddened, disappointed, or sick. They were a single unit: Libby and Harry.

But 60,000 light years now separated them. Their link strained by space and time. The only closeness available were the friendships with the crew. Nothing more. And friendship could never take the place of an intimacy based on a triad of mind, body, and soul.

Then came Seven of Nine, sparking a growing impropriety. How did Harry not see where he was going? How did he let himself be diverted?

It was body. Seven inherited physical perfection, two parts human genetics, one part Borg enhancement. She was unavoidable. What her mind called irrelevant, her body called for attention. And Harry gave it to her. Her body called, "Know me," and Harry rushed forward, trying to get a glimpse at the mind within the body. He implied humanity. He implied humour. What Harry considered conversation, Seven deduced as mere copulation. But by the end of his initial attempts, her body was all there was.

But his body too called out to him. While he reacted against the invitation, a part of him called to accept. His instinct called to take advantage of the opportunity, and it used his rationality to maintain the desire to fulfil that essential task. His initial dreams and thoughts were his body's call, urging him to make his move.

His body, however, soon tired of waiting. As much as he could rationalize forging a union of two bodies, a deep and rooted rationality dominated. He wanted to know her first. He wanted to see if they were more than biologically compatible. He wanted to know if there was more to share than the touch of the other's body. He wanted to touch her mind, glimpse her soul.

But this rationality conflicted with the established union of his past.

Harry couldn't reconcile both. Not yet; it was still too soon. He needed more time. And he certainly couldn't do it in the lair of temptation.

He marched out of the Cargo Bay. "Ensign!" Seven called again, but she heard only the sound of the Bay doors closing behind Harry.

B'elanna was walking towards the Cargo Bay when she noticed Harry rushing in the opposite direction. She called to him as he approached but he avoided eye contact and brushed right past. She paused to think whether to go after him, but decided to keep her heading as she had a job to do.

In the Cargo Bay she accessed a panel infected by nanoprobes and scanned it. "Torres to the Doctor, I'm scanning the jelpacks now."

"Good, I need to know the frequencies of the bio-electric field."

"Frequencies? There's more than one?"

The Doctor was a little uncertain. "Well, I'm pretty sure there should be more than one, or at least a fluctuating range. I already have the frequency of Seven's original field, from her regular check-ups, but that frequency is probably different now."

"The frequency now is 2.948 isohertz."

"This looks serious. Her regular bio-electric frequency is 0.922. I wonder why it's increasing."

"Well, the jel-packs operate at 4.5 isohertz."

"So, she's losing," the Doctor commented grimly.
wof 4.5 is16ertz."

ah'e'scircuithe ere-6h02125beTD 056438375 0munt5v \$1r70.05 The je10 Tj9 -407u25an8625 TD -28464 Tcsopos

"Unknown."

B'elanna stared into an implant-scarred face, twitching with nanoprobes, and apparently straining. "Now why would it be lower here?"

Seven flashed open her eyes, catching B'elanna off guard. Seven's eyes were bloodshot, dark bags under her eyes, contrasting a pale face. She opened her mouth, apparently trying to speak, but only able to rasp out the word, "Ensign..."

B'elanna gave a startled expression of confusion, at a loss as to what Seven was trying to say. She couldn't tell if Seven was trying to answer her question, or trying to say something completely different. "What Ensign?" she asked, trying to figure out what Seven was saying. Seven was able to utter, "...Kim."

"Ensign Kim," B'elanna fitted together. "You're referring to Harry?"

Seven nodded.

"What about him?"

"...Help..."

"You want to help Harry, or do you want Harry's help?"

Seven just nodded in response, which only confused B'elanna even more. She stomped her foot on the alcove floor before stepping off and pacing in frustration. What did Seven mean, or want? How could she help Seven, or how could Harry help her now? It didn't make any sense.

Taking a deep breath, B'elanna tried to focus her mind. She recalled asking the computer why the field frequency was lower near the alcoves, when they should be higher, since they were the focal point of the infestation. Then Seven 'awoke' and started to refer to Harry.

She suddenly gave out a laugh at a possible causal link percolating in her mind. "No way; what ever got you thinking that B'elanna Torres?" she said to herself. But no matter how much she tried to find a different answer, that outrageous one in her mind seemed to become more realistic. Feeling as if Seven was driving the point home in her head, B'elanna turned to confront her. "Let me get this straight. The field is lower here because you feel that both you and Harry can help each other?"

Seven gave a relieved nod.

"But that would mean that you're fighting the nanoprobes in your system."

Seven nodded again.

"Meaning you want to remain human?"

"...Yes..."

"Because of Harry?"

Seven nodded.

"You actually have feelings for him?" B'elanna asked with disbelief.

"Yes."

Without thinking, B'elanna said, "But you're Borg."

That statement made Seven shudder. B'elanna thought she was going through a medical emergency and called for the Doctor as she flipped open her tricorder. But stepping closer, she saw Seven's face and realized the real cause.

"Lieutenant?" the Doctor responded to the emergency call.

"Nothing, Doctor. False alarm. Torres out." What B'elanna saw were tears. Seven was crying.

At that moment, B'elanna saw Seven in a totally different light. She felt guilt at misunderstanding Seven. She realized that Seven was Borg in name, but human at heart. She saw Seven's history, her childhood humanity as becoming her dominant virtue, as opposed to a deeply buried attribute. All this time, B'elanna was seeing her as a representative of an enemy race, but all along, she was a victim of Borg purgatory.

B'elanna gave an inward sardonic laugh as she realized that her prejudiced hatred against Seven was related to herself. What she hated so long about herself, was simply being transferred to Seven. In a fundamental way, Seven was very much like B'elanna, struggling to find and create a balance between two opposing components of her psyche. Why B'elanna didn't realize the parallel long before she blamed on her Klingon impulsiveness, but this time, instead of cursing a part of herself, she simply accepted it as a consequence of a lifelong evolution of her nature.

She thought about Chakotay's personal reprimand and thought Tom's evaluation of it as true. Chakotay would only push anyone under his command when he knew they would be ready to perform. And somehow, Chakotay knew B'elanna was finally ready. Now, she had finally accepted herself wholly, and it was thanks to Seven of Nine's existence on board.

"...Help...me..." Seven uttered.

"I will," B'elanna replied with compassionate conviction. "I will."

"Computer, recreate Terran environment, Kim-010," Harry ordered the computer as he rushed into the holodeck. Instantly, Harry was immersed in the darkness of nightfall, the familiar stars of the North American sky attempting to comfort an anguished Ensign. He began to walk, letting the rustle of the grass beneath him accent the cricket sounds around him. The stars seemed exceptionally bright in a moonless sky, which only made Harry feel better, as he gazed at the rounded mountains in the distance. He could see the glow of a city just beyond one of the hills, but it was far enough that it didn't diminish the brilliance of the stars.

Finding a particular spot, and laying down to stare at the sky above him,

Harry let his thoughts of Seven mature in his mind. Watching a falling star streak across the sky, he let his compassion for Seven root itself in his conscious mind. He cared about Seven. At least for now, as he lay in the soft, sweet-smelling grass, that was something he could not deny. But it was something that he had an increasingly difficult time trying to keep in check. Up until now, he had never allowed his care for Seven explode into an urge to fulfill his lust, or even encroach upon his established love for Libby.

But what had he done? He had let his emotions flow unchecked, his compassion finally free to express itself in one of his most sacred songs.

For the first time in years he cursed fate. He cursed the fact that he was pulled so far away from his perfect life with his family and Libby. He cursed the fact that he chose to remain on Voyager than stay in a different dimension where he was with Libby. He cursed the fact that the Borg representative was a perfect human female. He cursed the fact he was infatuated with her from the start. He cursed the fact he was forced to choose between the perfection of his past, and possible future, and the perfection in his present, with a potential future.

Without warning, the holodeck doors opened and Neelix came strolling in.

"Hello? Is anyone here?"

Harry composed himself as he got up to respond. "Yeah, I am, Neelix.

What's up?"

"Oh nothing really. I didn't mean to barge in like this, but the doors weren't locked, and the program didn't seem to harmful."

"Harmful?"

Neelix responded coyly, "Yeah, like Tom's Klingon calisthenics program, or his 'Lover's paradise' program."

"I don't think I've heard of 'Lover's Paradise' before."

"Well, let me tell you, that is one program you don't want to be walking into while running...and occupied."

Getting the picture, Harry asked, "Don't you think you should just 'knock' before you enter?"

"You're right. It's just that I've never needed to lock my door. I mean, you can come in to my quarters whenever you like, you know that. So this whole knocking business with respect to the holodeck just seems excessive."

"I think you're taking this 'my house is your house' mentality a bit too far."

"I guess my old paranoid instincts are falling away the longer I stay on Voyager."

Noticing the small talk coming to a close, Harry asked, "So what brings you here?"

"Actually, I just came in to work on my latest holonovel."

"Holonovel?" Harry asked dully.

"Yes. It's my second instalment. This time, the 'daring trader' finds his

"But, even if I have these feelings for her, I can't just abandon what I have already."

"You mean Libby."

"Yeah. I'm engaged to her; I can't just abandon her," Harry replied, staring back up at the stars.

"You're sure she hasn't moved on with her life?"

"I could read between the lines."

"What do you mean?"

"My parents' letter. They only told me so much about her in their letter. I guess they were thinking Libby would send her own. But, anyway, clearly she was still hanging on, especially having heard that I was still alive."

"Are you really sure about that?"

Harry paused before answering. "No, I'm not sure." He could never be sure; not until he got home. Only then, seeing her face to face, would he be able to know for sure if Libby stayed by him. And until then, he couldn't abandon her, even if she would've gone on with her life without him. He had asked her to marry him. Whether he liked it or not, those words 'will you marry me' linked him to her, and only her decision to leave would break that matrimonial link.

"And you're willing to sacrifice your life for her happiness?"

"Wouldn't you?"

Neelix hesitated, unsure at how he could relate to Harry's situation.

"I'm not sure."

"Well, let me put it to you this way. You know that Kes is still alive somewhere, just existing on a higher plane of existence. If you knew that there was a possibility of her coming back, would you jump at the chance to reunite with her?"

"In a heartbeat."

"Well, there you go. We're in the same boat. Just that, I have someone who threatens the possibility of any reunification with my fiancée."

"That being the case, how can you possibly abandon Seven?"

"Who said anything about abandoning Seven?"

"How else can you control your apparent deep feelings for Seven, except to avoid her? To limit your contact with her? You have to distance yourself from her, but in doing so, you dampen her development, reducing her potential as a human being, throwing away a chance for her to learn to accept and cherish friendship."

Neelix continued, "What you're doing now is putting the cart before the horse. Worrying about falling in love, even before she develops a friendly

relationship with you."

"But the potential is there."

"And there's the potential that the crew will be food poisoned by tonight's dinner entree, but that doesn't mean most of the crew won't eat it."

"That's because we don't have a choice."

"And you don't have one here either. How can you put your personal concerns over the benefit of another individual, particularly someone who needs as much help as Seven of Nine?"

"I'm sure someone else will come along."

Disappointed, yet encouraging, Neelix responded, "You'd postpone her development just to satisfy your own personal problem? That doesn't sound like the Harry Kim I know."

"It's not that simple."

"Yes it is," Neelix reinforced. "You're talking about choosing between your existing, yet very distant, relationship with Libby, and a potential relationship with Seven. You want to protect someone you know still cares for you."

"Well, yeah..."

"But the repercussions of that choice seem awfully devastating to me. Risking Seven's development, to keep a relationship that you have absolutely no way of knowing still exists? That's a pretty high price."

Harry couldn't combat Neelix's compelling and passionate reasoning. Deep down, he knew he couldn't do what it took to save his distant relationship with Libby. In so many ways it was out of his hands. And the truth that, for the most part, Seven depended on him for interpersonal aspects of humanity, solicited a profound guilt within him. Even if he got back with Libby, how could he live with himself knowing that the return to his life was based on the sacrifice, however small he rationalized it might be, of Seven's emerging humanity. She may never learn the profound comfort that came with a close friendship.

Thinking in more philosophical terms, Harry could see that his part in Seven's life was a clear example of humanity's greatest goal of living to improve the individual and all of humanity. Since he was four years old, he grew up knowing that the most noble of humans put the needs of others ahead of their individual selves. Harry had lived fervently to uphold humanity's highest ethic, and he knew now, that if he were to act on his desire to stay with Libby, he would be compromising his ideals. And that, he knew he couldn't live with. Seven needed Harry's friendship, and Harry was beginning to realize that, at least at this level, he needed hers.

He thought about Libby, and became confident that she could move on with her life. There were countless nights when Harry had to postpone a date because of something coming up at the Academy. If it wasn't a pop exam, it was an added lesson at the Zero-G Training Centre at Utopia Planitia, or manoeuvres in the Saturn flight range. At every instance, Libby would

understand. Thinking about it, it made him realize that while Libby loved Harry, it was Harry who needed Libby. Given time, Libby could move on, because she had the strength and will to do it. He finally accepted that he was using Libby as an anchor, but that anchor was keeping him from moving on in 'his' life.

"You know, you're right," Harry admitted.

"I'm relieved you think so. I'd hate to see someone as talented as Seven, lose out because she didn't have someone to help her." Neelix added, "It's very important for her right now to have a guide to help her."

Harry was curious at the tone of Neelix's voice. "You relate to her?"

"To an extent. It's been a while since Seven 'reanimated' me, but I can guarantee you that without Commander Chakotay's help, I wouldn't be standing here today, helping you."

"We definitely owe Chakotay a debt of gratitude."

"And I'm confident Seven will owe the same to you."

Janeway mulled over the contents of the PADD in her hands for the third 'last time.' It contained the announcement that she hoped would create a new balance within the ship between the community of the shipmates and the crew of the ship. For four years, Voyager had teetered between rigid adherence to protocol and orders, and blatant disregard for those things in the name of moral or ethical superiority. The words in her PADD tried to create a golden mean between those two extremes, holding the hope that a greater convergence could happen in oD 0 Tc 0.15dy () Tjuran w

Tj -435.75 -10273 -0.0556 T12 TD -0.0698 Tc 0.0268 Tw (he was usiSFor o hn,) of Neweo hayratcisi

shown that love. Some nights alone in her quarters she wished Chakotay was with her, Captaincy be damned. She yearned for the warmth of another human being.

She stared at the chronometer on her computer screen and felt the weight of command sag in her stomach as 2130 approached. She took the PADD and stood up, preparing to make her announcement. Pushing a comm button and hearing the characteristic Captain's whistle, she began. "To all hands, this is Captain Janeway. As you know, a series of events in the past few days has forced me to re-evaluate ship's protocol regarding appropriate fraternization conduct during duty hours. The inappropriate actions of certain crewmembers resulted in serious damage to key systems, which could have resulted in serious injury, fatalities, or even the destruction of the ship. Such a circumstance must never be permitted to occur again, and thus I am forced to take the following action. Under article 21 of the Captaincy Authority Code, I hereby make the following amendments to Starfleet protocol 931 regarding appropriate conduct during duty hours.

Under the old amendment, responsibility for actions of crewmembers rested solely on the senior officer. The new amendment shall distribute that responsibility to all crewmembers, regardless of rank and position. Any and all reprimands will be shared accordingly."

"I know that many, if not all of you, will see this as excessive, if not outright unfair. However, you must all realize that the point of this new protocol is, to maintain crew discipline, while at the same time, retaining the communal aspect of the crew. We must all be conscious of our actions, and the ramifications those actions pose, not only to our friends, but to the entire ship. What happened in Engineering resulted in serious damage to the plasma injection system, which could have seriously crippled if not destroyed the ship. And the only way that such a disaster was avoided was through the sacrifice of Seven of Nine's humanity."

"As this case demonstrated, the actions of one crewmember, or a number of crewmembers, resulted in a series of events that had profound ramifications which weren't even conceived of at the time. It is my hope that this new protocol will remind each of you of the link you have with every member of the crew, and make you take into consideration the possible detrimental ramifications of your actions before you act."

Concluding with a compassionate note, Janeway said, "We are more than a crew, yet we are not exactly a community. As such, we have to make due with what we have, which is a Starfleet command structure, but with the understanding that we share a relationship with each other that transcends our rank. I hope you all see this as a first step in a new direction, where we understand and accept the responsibility of keeping this crew coherent, and at the same time, creating a community atmosphere where we are more than friends, but like a family. Janeway out."

"Doctor, how are you coming with the virus?" B'elanna demanded over the comm.

"I have at least three hours of work to do. I've found the combination of genes responsible for cell function, but I still have to discover which gene deals with 'assimilation.'"

"Doctor, you don't have three hours. Seven's field frequency has rising to 3.2 isohertz. The surrounding jel-packs are at 3.8. Unless we can remove Seven from the system, she will be totally assimilated in an hour."

"I'll do my best. In the meantime, you should try to keep Seven occupied."

"Occupied? How?"

"Keep her thinking about her desire to stay human. At this point, that's only thing that's keeping her from acquiescing to her nanoprobes."

"How do I do that?"

The Doctor was hesitant and abrupt. "I don't know? relate to her. Doctor out."

'How do I relate to an ex-Borg?' B'elanna thought to herself. She turned around to face Seven, and found her mind a blank as to any similarities between them. And any potential for any meaningful conversation seemed unlikely given Seven's physical shape. Seven looked exhausted from the onslaught of the nanoprobes, ever-growing implants slowly spreading over her face and head. Even her hair was falling out, a blond ring forming around Seven's feet.

She decided to borrow something from Harry's character. "Okay, Seven. The Doctor wanted me to relate to you, well I'll do it in Harry Kim style; I'll tell a story. As I'm sure you've noticed, Harry's quite talkative most of the time. Usually it's to hide something personal, like any rendezvous he has with you, or even before you came on board, any relations he had with other women on the ship."

"I don't know how you are with feeling jealous, but I think I should let you in on our resident boy scout," B'elanna said jokingly. "For someone who's got a perfect relationship at home on Earth, he sure knows how to woo the women on this ship. Let me tell you, his charm is quite attractive. The first time I met him, I felt I could trust him. There is this genuine compassion in his face...his eyes..."

B'elanna noticed Seven nod slightly in response before she continued.

"Even though I knew he was Starfleet, for some reason, hearing his voice, looking at his face, I knew I didn't have anything to worry about. Even if he couldn't save me when we were sick, I just...knew he was going to look out for the both of us...even to the very end."

B'elanna was going to continue when she heard static coming out of the comm system in the Cargo Bay. She took out her tricorder and noticed that the system was being isolated and controlled by the nanoprobes infested jelpacks around Seven's alcove. Further analysis revealed that the bio-electric field surrounding those jel-packs was equal to that operating in Seven.

She appeared to be attempting to gain access to the comm system. In the process, B'elanna could hear fragments of Seven's voice sputter through the audio system until one coherent phrase was uttered, "Harry is my friend..."

B'elanna smiled at Seven's remark. For some reason she couldn't uncover, B'elanna seemed genuinely happy for Seven. The dominant reason that rose to mind was the fact that she realized that Harry was someone they both

could relate with. Harry never had his motives hidden, or tried to deceive his friends. He simply couldn't. Whenever Harry tried to hide something, or lie about something you could tell right away. For a human, he was terrible at hiding his emotions, even worse than a Bajoran. While it would probably make things worse for him career-wise, it was definitely a virtue to have in a sincere, compassionate, and outreaching friend.

But B'elanna also realized that there must be something more between Seven and Harry, even if each of them weren't consciously aware or accepting of.

B'elanna just felt that there was a great potential for Seven and Harry to bloom into a full fledged relationship. Superficial attitudes aside, both Seven and Harry had an innate similarity of character. They both were pure of heart. Such a characteristic was obvious in Harry, but was apparent in Seven, as B'elanna stared at her in the Cargo Bay. Seven's humanity was just beginning to bloom before she was assimilated in childhood. While she may see humanity through Borg eyes, her humanity was looking at her Borg exterior through a child's eye: pure, truthful, and simple. And until her immature human mindset developed further, only then could her core being re-surface. And the best way for that to happen was to have Harry help her along the way.

B'elanna was going to continue her story when she heard her tricorder give a warning beep. She noticed nanoprobe concentrations shifting towards Seven again, the bio-electric field rising as a result. "Torres to the Doctor. I think you're time's up. The final onslaught has begun. If you don't give Seven that virus now, you might as well forget it all together."

"Doc, the clock is ticking," Harry said in as calm a tone as he desperately could. After hearing B'elanna call him about Seven's condition, he started to get extremely worried.

"No one is more aware of that than I, Ensign. But if the virus is not created properly there could be very serious side-effects to the circuitry system."

Just then, Janeway rushed in to Sickbay. "Doctor, status report."

"The virus is still incomplete. If I don't isolate the cell function gene, these cells will eat through the entire ship."

Janeway gave a thought before asking, "What is the lifespan of these cells?"

"I've engineered them to live approximately 1.2 hours."

"And it's reproductive cycle?"

"Between 60 to 75 minutes."

"So not all of the cells will reproduce."

"No. I engineered their reproductive cycle such that with each successive generation, 20% of the cells die out."

"Well, that's good enough of a safety margin for me. Get the cells ready

to inject into the jel-packs."

The Doctor gave a disapproving sign, but acknowledged, "Yes, Captain."

B'elanna greeted Harry, the Doctor, and the Captain into the Cargo Bay.

"You'd better hurry up and do whatever it is you're going to do. The frequency of her bio-electric field is only 0.09 isohertz off from the normal circuitry frequency."

"What happens when it matches the old frequency?" Janeway asked.

"Seven's humanity will have become suppressed beneath the Borg implants and it's inherent programming," Harry responded.

"Let's get on with it," Janeway ordered.

The Doctor moved in front of each of the crewmembers in the Cargo Bay, and handed each of them a hypospray. "These contain a concentrated dose of the 8472 virus which you will inject into the circuitry system."

"How do we penetrate the shields protecting the jel-packs?" Harry asked.

"If my research is correct, species 8472 never had a problem with the Borg shields. They seemed able to penetrate any defence, and resist any offence provided by the Borg. This should be no different."

"Is there an open panel anywhere?" Janeway asked.

"Yes, right here," B'elanna answered, moving to the panel where the optical cable connected Seven to the circuitry system.

"That's where it all began," Harry admitted, reminding himself of the regret at his failure to stop Seven.

"And that's where it will end," Janeway responded, trying to keep everyone, especially Harry, focused. "Doctor, why do we each have a hypospray?"

"Once the virus comes into contact with the nanoprobes, they'll start acting like antibodies, swarming to attack the virus cells. That should create breaches in the shields, which will allow you to find another access point and inject more of the virus. Right now, I suggest we concentrate on the access panel, and the cable that is linking Seven to the system."

"Very well," Janeway commented. "Harry, start spraying the virus over the link. Doctor, start with the access panel. B'elanna, you and I will start looking for breaches in the Borg shields."

"I suggest you look at the periphery of the infestation," the Doctor suggested.

"That's near the injection system, Captain," B'elanna noted.

"I'll go. B'elanna, you get to Engineering and monitor the entire system. Things might get a little rough."

"Yes, ma'am," B'elanna responded as she quickly headed out of the Cargo Bay.

Just before Janeway started to leave, she walked over to Harry and encouraged, "Good luck."

"To all of us," Harry returned with a smile.

After the Captain left, the Doctor moved closer to Harry and lamented,

bio-neural circuitry system, I think it's an acceptable side-effect."

"That's easy for you to say; you don't have to fix it afterwards."

The Doctor smiled connivingly. Getting back to work, Harry scanned Seven's body. "It looks like the nanoprobe concentration in Seven is slowly decreasing."

"I suggest you spray the cable link again to increase that rate."

Harry nodded and sprayed over the ball of nanoprobes on the cable. The effect was predictable, but spectacular nonetheless. The ball started to compress and shrivel, despite the increased flow of nanoprobes coming from Seven. "Nanoprobe concentration down 5% from 218% of normal concentration."

"I'd like that to fall to roughly 165% before I think it's safe to disconnect her."

"Understood." But as Harry and the Doctor were preparing to further infect their assigned target areas, they lost balance as the ship suddenly tilted. "Kim to Torres, what the hell is happening?"

"We've lost control of the ship's stabilizers. The nanoprobes seem to be migrating."

"Was that supposed to happen?" Harry asked.

"No," the Doctor answered.

"Damn! B'elanna, is there any sign what is causing the migration?"

She paused before answering. "My best guess is that they're operating on their own. It's frequency is much higher than the standard frequency of the circuitry system."

At that moment two conflicting thoughts occupied his mind for a split second. Now seemed like the perfect opportunity to remove Seven from the circuitry system, as the majority of the nanoprobes were focused away from her. But helping Seven at that moment would mean letting B'elanna deal with the nanoprobes on her own, risking the safety of the ship. But he fortunately had a second hand to help him take both choices. "Doctor, I think now is the best time to remove Seven from the circuitry system."

"But concentration is still above 165%."

"We're going to have to get her out before we divert attention of the nanoprobes swarming the rest of the system."

"And how do you expect to do that?"

"Use me."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Once you remove Seven from the circuitry system, I'll take her place and attract the nanoprobes back to the Cargo Bay."

"That is out of the question! You would be assimilated instantly. Instead of dealing with just Seven, I'll have two drones on my hands! There is absolutely no way I can guarantee your safety."

"All you have to do is connect a neural processor to my neck, and create a bio-neural field around me that has the same frequency as Seven's. That will attract the nanoprobes, but they won't assimilate my body, but attack the neural processor."

"That neural processor wouldn't last 5 minutes under such an attack."

"That's where the virus comes in. You inject the virus in to my body."

"Ha!" the Doctor exclaimed in utter disbelief. "You have really lost it now, Mr. Kim. Have you forgotten what that did to you the last time?"

"It 'didn't' kill me the last time." Harry was growing impatient. "Look, we don't have a lot of time. Either you help me now, or I'll do this myself."

"We must inform the Captain."

"There isn't time!" Harry exclaimed, losing all patience. His plan needed to be implemented immediately, or else the nanoprobe threat would only increase. He grabbed a neural processor from an empty alcove, connected a optical cable from the processor to the empty alcove, plugged the processor on to the base of his skull, and used his tricorder to command the processor to emanate a bio-neural field of 0.922 isohertz. Moments later a Borg shield rose around him, indicating to him that the nanoprobes had discovered him and were starting to converge on him.

Activating the neural processor he suddenly felt a jolt of information flood his mind, all of it from Seven. But instead of cold, calculating data, he felt a deep primordial emotion even he had never felt: pure uncertainty and terror. Having those emotions flood his mind forced him to remember the worst experiences in his life: being alone on the dark side of Luna; working alone on an empty Nebula-class starship during the night shift at McKinley Station; his nightmare of staring into a star-less sky.

He would have been lost in the deluge of dark emotions, had the regular warning beeps of the tricorder not continued to get louder. Struggling hard to regain his concentration, he remembered the need to inject the contents of the hypospray near the neural processor. Focusing on the tricorder screen momentarily, he saw the concentration of nanoprobes increasing in the optical cable. From the tricorder he read the words, "Processor integrity: 25%."

Using the remaining energy not used to suppress the emotions coming from Seven, Harry raised his arm to inject the virus beside the neural processor. Staring at a helpless Doctor, Harry pushed the tricorder to his neck. He screamed in pain as the 8472 cells immediately started to consume him. The pain multiplied when the neural processor frizzled, letting the nanoprobes unrestricted access to Harry's body. But instead of being a target of assimilation, Harry's body became a battlefield, the teeth of the virus and the stings of the nanoprobes eating away at his consciousness.

Before succumbing to the pain he managed to utter, "Seven..."

Janeway impatiently waited in the Jefferies tube for her cue to inject the virus into the jel-packs. According to B'elanna, Janeway should inject the virus as soon as the field frequency dropped below 1.5 isohertz. Her tricorder still read 2.3.

As she was forced to wait, she let herself think about the whole situation with Seven. On the one hand, Janeway believe that despite Seven's defiance against humanity, Seven was consciously participating in the courageous human act of self-sacrifice. According to Harry, Seven had insisted upon her plan, regardless of the risks to her. But on the other hand, Janeway had a nagging scepticism brew within her. Perhaps Seven's actions weren't so much self-sacrifice as 'human-sacrifice.' Perhaps in a moment of frustration, she wanted to return to her Borg state of clarity, regaining the stability of her Borg technology and all that it entailed. After all, her nanoprobes were assimilating her back. Perhaps she couldn't handle the lack of enjoyment in being human. Perhaps she couldn't comprehend what it took to enjoy being human.

Her thoughts were interrupted by B'elanna reporting on the comm. "Captain, the Doctor's plan appears to be working. Nanoprobes are migrating towards the infection area, although the rate of migration is much faster than anticipated."

"Doctor to the Captain."

"Janeway here."

"A 'complication' has occurred in the Cargo Bay. Ensign Kim has connected himself to the circuitry system."

"What?" Janeway and Torres yelled together over the three-way comm.

"Ensign Kim is using his body to attract the nanoprobes away from Seven of Nine and the rest of the ship."

"Get him the hell out of there!" B'elanna ordered in vain.

"I'm afraid I can't. With the nanoprobes concentrating around him, the shields around him are getting stronger. However, I can start the process of removing Seven of Nine."

"What the hell is he thinking?" B'elanna asked in frustration.

"He's saving Seven and the ship," Janeway noted in an admirable tone.

"Doctor, how soon can you start the removal process?"

"Immediately."

"Get all the help you need."

"Yes, Captain. Doctor out."

"He's out of his mind!" B'elanna said.

"B'elanna, stay focused. Questioning Harry's state of mind isn't going to help us get him out."

"Yes, Ma'am."

There was a silence while Janeway and Torres took a moment to focus on their respective tasks. As she worked, Janeway commented on the open comm. "Harry's strong. He'll survive."

"Of course he will," B'elanna replied confidently. "But what I'm concerned about is how he will be after."

"What do you mean?"

"The more I know him, the more I worry about him."

"He's a very responsible young man."

"He's too responsible. I mean, he treats Seven so well, and he gets nothing in return. One of these days I worry that he's going to face the biggest let-down of his life. It's like Seven is someone he just has to help, no matter the cost."

"That's his virtuous nature."

"It's not natural!"

Janeway laughed quietly. "Maybe not, but I don't mind a bit of 'supernatural' ability in my officers once and a while."

"Doctor to Lt. Paris. Report to the Cargo Bay immediately."

"On my way."

Paris rushed in, emergency medical kit in hand, but stopped suddenly after seeing the pair of bodies standing limp in two alcoves. "Harry!"

"Is stable for now," the Doctor added. "Who we need to have utmost concern for is Seven of Nine."

Making sure, Tom took out his tricorder and scanned Harry. "You call that 'stable'? He's got nanoprobe and virus cells swarming in his upper body!"

"The effects of which I can treat. But I won't be able to until I stabilize Seven's condition."

"We can't just leave him there!"

"We don't have a choice! Harry's the only thing saving Seven and preventing the nanoprobe from spreading throughout the ship." The Doctor gave a more compassionate tone. "Mr. Paris. I need your help if I'm going to save them both."

Tom turned to face the Doctor, absorbing the truth in the Doctor's words.

"Alright. What do I have to do?"

Preparing for his task, the Doctor ordered, " You can start by disconnecting the optical cable from Seven's neck implant. Use the synaptic decoupler."

"Done," Paris said after completing his task within seconds.

"Now, we have to quickly begin surgery on removing the accumulated implants. Help me get her out of the alcove."

Placing Seven's arms over their shoulders, Tom and the Doc carried Seven out and laid her onto the Cargo Bay floor. Passing Tom a laser scalpel, the Doctor ordered, "Start removing Seven's outer clothing. We have to quickly remove as many implants as possible in order to be able to transport her to Sickbay."

"You want me to cut away her clothes," Paris said flatly.

"It's good your hearing is fine. That's what I said," the Doctor replied as he started work on a cranial implant.

"Uh, how much?"

The Doctor stopped what he was doing to stare at a wors Ba

to toinis what Ine Ba to havedDone in order to(tomyrjobt. Rri

"Her body armour."

"Yes. But this is a bit more complicated." Analyzing Seven with his tricorder, the Doctor said, "This exoskeleton is deeply integrated with the implants within her body. I can't perform any surgery without risking some unknown side effects to other implants in her body. They're all interconnected."

"Then what can you do?"

"I don't know."

Seven's mind awoke to a plethora of sensations that she thought were impossible to experience as a humanoid. She felt as if she was floating in the air, but with no breeze touching her skin. She tried to open her eyes, but her eyelids would not move. Nevertheless, she saw flashes of her environment, the wall of the Cargo Bay, then the ceiling of the Cargo Bay, then the sensor cluster in Sickbay, and now a matrix wall of the holodeck. She tried to move her arms, but they too would not follow her command. Her entire body lay limp, despite her mind registering all the sensations she was feeling.

She tried to establish a foundation from which to begin an analysis on her situation, but could not acquire any necessary data required. She needed to know what the time was in order to determine the duration of her unusual status. Accessing the latest available, reliable data, Seven recalled 1720 hours, the time she felt Ensign Kim merge with her thoughts. From that moment on, she could not recall any relevant data. And starting from that point, she began to feel strange. She made the assumption that 1720 hours was the time of origin of her condition. But now she was faced with trying to discover how much time had passed since then.

Time seemed to gain a certain regularity as she began to feel as if her body was floating on top of a vast ocean. She felt the waves moving up and down below her, creating its own soothing regularity. But that regularity dispersed as she felt the liquid become thick, sticking to her like a gel. She began to panic as she felt her body slowly become engulfed in the gelatinous ocean. She continued to sink lower and lower, the liquid becoming an ever-darkening green. After being feeling suspended in the air, she felt suspended in the liquid, and was surprised to know she was not in any danger. She was still alive; her breathing was not impaired, and she continued to feel the sensations around her.

But the sensations started to become uncomfortable. Every external part of her body began to sting. She felt as if she was being eaten alive by countless microscopic organisms. She felt her entire body try to fight the organisms, but her body was failing. Slowly she began to realize that she was losing some of the sensations she felt before. She no longer could tell if she was floating in the liquid. The information was slowly disappearing. But her information was being replaced by a colder sensation of the liquid touching her skin.

Before long she could feel the cool liquid all over her body, and she could feel her appendages sway slowly in it. As if unconsciously, her body moved towards the fetal position trying to preserve its body's heat.

But her tranquillity was short lived as she began to feel the stings within her body. The wave was returning, but instead of a wave of the swaying liquid, it was a wave of pain. One after the other her body experienced spasms as her organs felt as if they were being consumed by the organisms.

After a while, however, she noticed that the level of pain began to decrease with each coming wave, until it too stopped. Her body returned to its fetal position, and she fell asleep, exhausted by her strange ordeal. The last thing she remembered was feeling her body pressing down on a bulkhead, a large blanket being wrapped around her, and being carried away.

"Doctor, report," Janeway demanded as she walked up to the surgical bay.

"They're fine, Captain. The plan worked perfectly. I've successfully removed all the dangerous implants, and repaired the damaged ones. Ensign Kim is still in recovery."

Paris, walking in to the surgical bay, asked, "I'm curious, what made you think that the nanoprobes would start to migrate to the holodeck?"

"It was Lt. Torres' idea. Apparently the holodecks are comprised of several dedicated bio-neural jel-packs. That's what makes our holodecks one of the best, or so I'm told. Since the holodeck systems were not in the direct route between the Cargo Bay and the Injection system, they were still safe from infection. All I did was access the jel-packs and entice the nanoprobes by re-creating Seven's bio-electric signature."

"Since I was going to recreate the fluidic space of species 8472 in the holodeck, it made sense to lure the nanoprobes to the holodeck. That way, when I was purging Seven of her excess Borg implants, I would be destroying the circuitry nanoprobes as well."

"And by having all the nanoprobes migrate to the holodeck, Harry ceased to be a target, and you were able to remove him from the system," Janeway concluded.

"Yes. And with the reliability of the holodeck safeties, I could control when the virus was actually destroying the nanoprobes or when they were inert, thus preventing any serious damage to Seven's biological components." the Doctor replied.

"Ingenious."

The Doctor smiled proudly. "Thank you, Captain."

"Can I speak with Seven?"

"Yes, Captain, but please make it brief. She still needs time to recover."

Janeway nodded in agreement, and moved closer to Seven. The Doctor and Lt. Paris went over to Harry and check up on him. "How are you feeling?"

Seven opened her eyes wearily. "Weak."

"That's to be expected. You've gone from being human to Borg, and back to

human in only a few days."

"It was a remarkable experience, Captain. For a moment, I felt as if I was back in the Collective. I experienced such strong contentment that I did not want it to stop."

"But it did."

"Yes," Seven said sadly. "It was the closest thing to happiness I had ever experienced. For a time I cared about nothing by maintaining that feeling. I felt one with the ship. I regained my ability to access knowledge instantaneously. I could hear the entire crew all at once. I was everywhere."

"But it wasn't the Collective."

"No. It was not. The more I tried to justify it, the less beneficial it became. I lost everything, my individuality, and my Collective."

"Well, you're here now," Janeway said, reassuring Seven.

Seven gave an assured look, but quickly fell concerned. "Where is Ensign Kim?"

"Over there." Janeway pointed to a bio-bed. "He's still recovering."

Seven's concerned look remained. "What is his condition?"

"He'll be fine. He suffered some physical injury while connected to the circuitry system, but otherwise, he should be fine."

"He was willing to be assimilated to save my individuality."

"Yes, he was."

"Why?"

Janeway smiled. "That's his human nature. He was willing to give his life to save another...to save you."

"But, why?"

Janeway paused a moment, unsure how to answer the question. "Because he cares about you."

"Why?"

Janeway sighed, "You'll have to ask him."

Seven awoke to a darkened Sickbay, the Doctor apparently deactivated. A burning question was foremost on her mind, and it seemed appropriate that she ask while no one else was around. She moved up slowly to test her body's strength, and discovered she was feeling no pain as a result of her movement. Moving her hand over the controls, she opened the clamshell diagnostic panel, and motioned to stand up.

Using her optical implant, she slowly walked over to Harry's bio-bed.

Unsure as to the best way to wake him, she just shook his shoulder until he woke. "Ensign Kim?" Seven whispered.

"Seven?" Harry whispered wearily.

"Yes. I wanted to speak to you."

"You could've waited," Harry joked.

Seven ignored Harry's comment, and directly said, "Captain Janeway informs me that you risked your life in order to save me."

Surprised at her abruptness, Harry replied groggily, "Yeah, I guess I did."

Seven fell silent before saying, "As a Borg, a drone would sacrifice itself in order to preserve the Collective."

"I guess I did the same thing, doing what I thought I had to do to save a fellow crewmember."

"Many drones sacrificed themselves in order to protect me during the war with species 8472. I felt no emotion for their actions, yet, now, I feel...gratitude for your act of sacrifice."

"It was something I felt I had to do," Harry said, trying to downplay his action.

"I do not understand why you felt the need to put yourself in a potentially fatal situation in order to save me."

"That's what friends are for."

"But what good is your friendship if you cease to exist to share in that friendship?"

"That's a good question, but an irrelevant one. I'm still here."

"But I need to understand..."

"What you 'need' is to relax and accept. I did what I did because I care about you. I couldn't bare to see you suffer so much and I couldn't live without you still around. Don't ask me to explain how or why right now. I assure you, it's still beyond your understanding. Just accept it."

"...Very well."

There was an awkward silence as they both looked into each other's eyes. Harry decided to make conversation. "So, how have you been the last couple days?"

"The Doctor informs me that my human cells are returning to their normal state. However, I am scheduled to undergo a rehabilitation regime with the Doctor for approximately two weeks."

"Well, at least you're back." Harry stopped himself after noticing that he said that with more emotion than he was intending.

"I am 'glad' you are back as well."

Harry moved his arm to give Seven a reassuring pat on the shoulder, but felt something else instead. "Uh, Seven, do you have an implant on your shoulder?"

"No."

"Then what is this I'm feeling?"

"Your hand is touching my breast."

Harry pulled away in shock. "You're not dressed?"

"The blanket that was covering me on the biobed fell off as I stood up."

Stuttering, Harry said, "Well, why don't you get back before someone turns on the lights."

"I fail to see the need to..."

"For me, Seven. Do it for me," Harry said desperately. Harry was still embarrassed by the panic in his voice, but at least he could hide his blushing face in the darkness.

A single flame illuminated Tuvok's quarters. "Control the flame. Let it be the metaphor of your emotions. Your emotions fuel it. Let the predominant emotion keep the flame alive."

Seven knelt opposite Tuvok, the flame in her mind emerging into her consciousness. "I have it."

"Let one emotion be the fuel. Let another be the suppressant."

"I have it," Seven repeated. "It is flowing... breathing... perfect."

"Now, slowly and steadily magnify the emotions, while maintaining your control. Do not let the emotions overwhelm you."

The calm orange-dominant flame began to turn an efficient, rich blue, with the flame maintaining its size. Seven reported confidently, "It is done."

"Keep the flame constant. Do not become blinded by irrelevant emotions. Maintain control by maintaining perspective."

"I have it," Seven reported with pleasant surprise. "I have it."

"Now, control the size of the flame. Let the suppressant diminish the fuel..."

Seven's flame followed her commands. "The flame has become smaller."

The flame returned its original size, maintaining its rich blue hue.

Confident of her control, she let the flame grow larger, encompassing as much of her mind as she could. She maintained her control, her mind resistant to the heat of the flame.

Tuvok looked for any hint of problems, but found none. His eyebrow raised in satisfaction. "Now, return the flame to its original state, and then let it fade away."

Seven followed his commands, and opened her eyes, a small smile on her face. She was successful. "I did it."

"Yes, you did," Tuvok said, hiding the pleasant surprise he was experiencing himself. "What, may I ask, did you do differently?"

"I used fear as the fuel...hope as the suppressant."

"Hope?"

"Yes. Ensign Kim had taught me this one important state of mind. He said it would give me a direction, and it would be useful in attaining any goal I wanted to accomplish."

"In his limited way, he is correct. But what made you decide to use hope instead of confidence?"

"It was my understanding that hope could provide a more general form of confidence, that could overcome any fear. I was correct."

Tuvok gave an approving look. "I am most gratified that you have finally achieved a higher level of emotional control. Such achievement dictates that your training is complete. It is now up to you to gain the experience of the specific emotional states that accompany various aspects of human life."

Seven gave a concerned look. "Does that mean that you will not be providing me this experience?"

Tuvok motioned to blow out the lamp. "I believe you already have someone to give you the experience you need."

Seven and Harry entered the holodeck, a star field simulation running.

"Why are we here?" Seven asked.

"I want to show you something."

Seven looked up and evaluated the sky encompassing them. "I am not familiar with this star field configuration."

"That's because it's not one you've encountered yet."

"How did you attain the astrometric data?"

"I didn't. This is a recreation of the Terran Sector."

Seven recoiled. Harry held on to her arm. "Don't worry, I'm not going to show you Earth or anything like that. I just wanted to show you the stars."

"They are unremarkable," Seven responded, tugging to leave.

Amused, Harry tried to calm her down. "Seven, these stars aren't going to hurt you. I wanted to show you them, because I wanted to share something."

Seven looked into Harry's eyes and melted under his reassuring and genuine look.

"You know what I do when I feel sad, or alone?" Kim asked Seven. After staring upwards for a moment, she turned to hear the answer. "I look at the stars."

"How does looking at stars make you feel better?"

"It puts things in perspective. Whenever I felt saddened by an event, or stressed while at the Academy, I went to an open space outside the city and stared into the sky. Outside the city, the stars are much more brighter, and seeing those familiar stars made me feel so much smaller."

"How does feeling smaller make you feel better?"

"Well, it makes me realize that there are so many other problems and discoveries in the galaxy. Somehow, knowing the mysterious nature of the cosmos, I feel better about my problem, since in the grand scheme of things, it's relatively small.

physHar11.2ar edF ayentdo? 366 133 TD 0 Tc 0.15 Tw

"But what you perceive to be stars are merely the emitted radiation from light-years away."

"That's not the point, Seven. It's not the material nature of the stars, but the meta-physical properties that exist. The potential for life in a particular star system, the new materials that can be found..."

"But that is not certain that you will find anything."

"It's not just probabilities, Seven. It's possibilities."

"I fail to see the distinction."

"Well, it's a matter of perspective. Probabilities have a more negative connotation, while possibilities appear more optimistic. I mean, look at what you went through the past few days. The probabilities of your survival as human were 9

nw511.2l09 Twt n essei 232.56 0 TD 0 T527 68c 0.2328 18w ("It'

"Ensign?"

"Never mind. Tell you what, let's commemorate the occasion. Computer, scan all elements in the holodeck and save as holo-image 'Seven-001'"

"Acknowledged," the computer responded after completing the task.

Harry got a PADD, accessed the image he just created, and gave the PADD to Seven. "Here you go; a memento."

"Memento?"

"Well, usually to celebrate special events, we remember it by recording it, thus creating a memento. I thought it would be appropriate to give you this picture as something to commemorate the occasion."

"What occasion are you referring to?"

"Aside from my first successful attempt at getting something through to you," Harry joked, "The recovery and growth of your humanity...and to our friendship."

"That is acceptable."

"Good." After calling for two glasses, Harry passed one of the glasses of champagne to Seven, and toasted, "To our friendship...and our future."

Seven took a glass and looked into the image. In it, Harry stood staring at the stars, a small, content smile on his face. And there was Seven, standing beside Harry, gazing at his face, his eyes, behind the backdrop of stars hugging the Terran system.

Looking up at Harry again, noticing a soft smile on his face, she replied, "To our future."

= ^ =

And the Adventure Continues...

Please send feedback to: rcchu@unixg.ubc.ca
