

Title: Feelings from the Frontier
Author: Richard Chu
Series: VOY
Part: 0/4
Rating: PG
Codes: K/7

SUMMARY: After Seven returns to the Borg following the away team's successful retrieval of a transwarp conduit, Harry plays a role in discovering why she left, and learns to appreciate the impact Seven has had on his life. In the end, they come to understand each other and further their relationship.

Author's Notes: Set during "Dark Frontier." NOTE: Includes dialogue from the episode. Basically an episode addition, consisting of scenes on Voyager while Seven was on the Borg Uni-complex, and Janeway was in the Delta Flyer looking for her.

Author's Notes 2: Can be considered a sequel to "Reason for Living." It doesn't necessarily fit well yet, but that's because the story that does isn't finished yet-i.e. "View from the Outside."

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.

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 reason.

Please email feedback to: Richard_chu@canada.com

"What's taking them so long?" Harry asked Tuvok as they stood at the transporter co-ordinates on the Borg Sphere, having completed their role in the mission to steal a transwarp conduit.

"I don't know," Tuvok responded with Vulcan concern.

Suddenly their comm badges activated. "Chakotay to away team. The Sphere has detected Voyager. They've altered course to intercept, and they're charging weapons. We've got to get you out of there now!"

"Maybe we should go find them," Harry suggested. "I know the layout of the Sphere."

"No," he warned. "We cannot risk losing you in your search."

"But, they..." Harry cut himself off as Janeway came around a corner. Harry looked to find Seven but she was nowhere to be found. Before he could ask the obvious question, Janeway stood behind Tuvok and commanded over her comm badge, "Bridge, we're in position. Three to beam up."

"Three?" Chakotay asked.

"Energize!" Janeway ordered, deferring an answer until the remaining members of the away team were safely aboard.

The quick march from the transporter room to the bridge was silenced by the Borg threat they now faced without the assistance of their resident Borg. As soon as the turbolift doors opened on the Bridge, Chakotay asked the question that plagued Harry's mind. "Where's Seven?"

"She had a change of heart," Janeway answered, her voice holding in the confusion and sorrow for the one she liberated from the Collective. "Report."

"The Sphere's changing course. They're retreating."

"They're bringing their remaining transwarp coils online," B'Elanna reported.

"Pursuit course. Target their propulsion system," Janeway ordered.

Before Tuvok could fire a shot, the Sphere disappeared from the viewscreen in a green flash. Paris punched in a few commands to ascertain the direction of the Sphere, but couldn't get the information in time. Resigned he said, "They're gone, Captain."

Alone, Harry kept himself busy in Astrometrics while the rest of the crew was celebrating their successful away mission. They had managed to take what they wanted from the Borg, and that seemed like the best news the crew had heard in a long time. For the first time, they had managed to outwit the Borg, and it pleased them.

He shook his head slightly as he thought about the crew's reaction to their 'feat'. They were acting like young children just learning about the moralsof right and wrong, taking profuse pleasure in the thing they had stolen, snickering to themselves knowing that what they were doing was wrong. But it didn't matter. They took something from the bad guys. They won't care. There were more transwarp coilswhere they came from.

But this success came at a price, a price no one else seemed bothered to pay. They had lost their resident Borg. This bothered Harry more than the disregard of basic ethics because it struck deep down into the moral fibre of every crewmember who implicitly accepted the arrival of the transwarp coil. Their lack of any second thought to the fact that Seven was no longer with them made them no better than Ferengi mercenaries willing to pay any price for what they wanted. It seemed like they'd rather have an inanimate piece of technology than the presence of a beautiful, intelligent, spirited, quirky, liberated drone.

His train of thought was broken by a warning beep from the computer after he mindlessly keyed in a useless sequence to the console. It was good enough to be a preverbal splash of cold water to his mind as he realized what he was thinking. The whole moral dilemma he created was just a front to the confusion, sadness, and emptiness caused by Seven's return to the Collective.

And that's what it was. Her return. Yet, he simply did not understand why Seven would want to go back after all this time, and after all she had experienced since she came aboard. She had learned so much, and was only beginning to understand the nuances of humanity. She only begun to understand his feelings for her, and they were just beginning to explore their possibilities together. There was so much more he wanted to show her, give her, but now all of that was gone. Their future together dissolving on a transwarp trail as she flew back thousands of light years back to her old home.

He tried to focus on some work, but the gnawing feeling in his stomach wouldn't let him try to suppress the swell of emotion flooding him. He pushed on the console buttons hard and harder trying to focus himself, acting on the irrational thought that the harder he pushed, the louder the button sounds would be. But he just wanted something to divert his mind, and the sound he was creating with each touch on the console was his attempt at doing so. It didn't matter that he was running a level 5 diagnostic of the sensor array over and over and over again.

But she was not something easily ignored, and like a slap in the face, her image flashed in his mind. Her body facing away from him ready to exit a room, her head turned towards him, her face beaming a warm smile. Such a beautiful smile. That first smile while they were on the fake Starfleet ship, the Dauntless, was his first glimpse into her humanity, and such a wonderful glimpse. Up to that point it was such a rare thing to have Seven respond in any emotional capacity, and her smile was proof that she wasn't the cold, calculating Borg she was brought up to be. She was capable of being more, and it was comforting at the time that she was willing to share one of her first human moments with him.

Now, with her gone, it was a bittersweet memory. It may have been her first, but it was his last look at the human Seven of Nine. Why leave now? He suddenly asked himself. She seemed like she was only beginning to fit in with the rest of the crew,

understanding the significance of the many 'human idiosyncratic activities' of the crew. She was only beginning to enjoy life. Why stop now? "Why?" he said out loud as the Astrometrics doors opened.

"That was going to be my question," the Chief Engineer stated as she walked in.

"B'Elanna!" he said as he turned in surprise.

She gave him a curious look. "Catch you at a bad time?"

"No, not really," he said in a forced calm as he turned around back to the console and started to scan some nearby system...any nearby system.

"So then maybe you can explain to me why you were running level 5 diagnostics on the main sensor array."

"I was trying to find the cause of a dip in the array's resolution."

"47 times? Come on, Harry. Not even a first year cadet would run a diagnostic that many times."

Harry seemed unfazed by the teasing insult. She put her hand on his shoulder and turned him around to face her. "What's wrong?"

He gave an ironic laugh. "Everyone acts as if nothing's different. We take a piece of technology and ignore the price we paid for it. Just like old times, huh?" he said sarcastically.

She gave a squinted look. "This is about Seven, isn't it," she rhetorically asked. He gave back an affirming look. "Look, Harry, I know you cared about her, and I'm sure she cared for you in her own...unique way, but you can't expect her to abandon her home."

"Voyager is her home."

"Voyager is where you'd 'like' her to accept as her home. But you can't change what she is."

"How many times do we have to have this conversation?" he asked furiously. "She's human. She belongs with us."

B'Elanna stayed calm. "Harry, she was human for the first six of her 30 years. I'd hardly call that a strong foundation in humanity."

"It's enough to know that she was human. And where it matters, she knew what she was and wanted to become."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Well let me ask you, how did you know Tom wasn't the womanizer everyone thought he was, even though everything you heard and saw of him just oozed that reputation?"

She gave his question some thought before answering. "I guess, after we had spent some time alone together, when he didn't have the need to prove to everyone his manhood."

"Well, it's the same with Seven. I've spent enough time with her alone to know what kind of individual she is. And in her heart, she's a human woman."

"Then why did she leave?"

He gave a resigned sigh. "I don't know. But I'm sure ~~a~~ hell going to find out."

It was 0230 when Harry neared Cargo Bay two. He knew by then, the crew assigned to salvage duty of the Borg debris would have left for the night. While it was finally time to get rid of all the useless junk from their salvage of the destroyed Borg probe, he had hoped that one piece of Borg equipment still remained. When the doors opened, he found Seven's alcoves still in one piece, and still activated. This one practical hurdle resolved, he now turned to the ethical dilemma of what he was about to do.

If he didn't have a reason to come, he probably wouldn't have. The idea of just standing in front of an empty alcove would've been too painful. The flood of memories would only overwhelm him. But now, he had come to retrieve something of a personal nature. He had come to find Seven's data node containing her personal logs.

While it was a blatant invasion of Seven's privacy, he had to find out why she had left. While she was still aboard, she had given him and the rest of the crew every indication that she wanted to stay. If her logs said otherwise, it would at least give him a reason for her apparent reversal of opinion. He had only read her logs once before, when she first escaped from the ship and found her parents' ship The Raven. He justified to himself that because he had to read her logs to find out why she left then, her logs would tell him why she left again. The possibility of knowing why she left seemed strong enough to suppress his moral objections. The irony was that he was more willing to accept the possibility of confronting her about his actions than not having seen her again.

Walking in to Seven's alcove, he found the data node attached behind a Borg panel. He removed it and headed for his quarters. >From there he hooked it up to his computer console and used the Borg translation program he developed when he first accessed her logs:

*****BEGIN LOG QUEUE, STARDATE 52444.6*****

Personal Log. Seven of Nine. Stardate 52444.6. Today I will be assisting Lieutenant Torres in masking Voyager's warp signature,

as well as creating detailed schematics of the crippled Borg sphere for the purpose of recreation on the holodeck. In addition, Captain Janeway has asked me to read through my human parents' logs in the hopes of obtaining relevant research to assist in our mission to board the Sphere and take a transwarp conduit. It will be a busy day. End log.

Personal Log. Seven of Nine. Stardate 52457.4. I have completed my tasks with Lieutenant Torres and Commander Chakotay regarding the warp engines and the holoprogram. It was, however, not without personal difficulty. After reading 23 PADDs containing the Hansen's field notes, I have had difficulty sustaining focus on my duties. Brief flashes of memory emerge into my consciousness. There are times when I can hear the voices of my parents in my mind. This has resulted in an erosion of my efficiency in carrying out the various tasks. I cannot focus my mind when it is saturated with feelings of sadness due to loss, as well as a growing resentment against my parents for their arrogance that led to my assimilation. To control these emotional outbursts, I have put to use the meditative techniques I learned from Commander Tuvok, and they are helping me cope. Nevertheless, reading the logs has resulted in the discovery of various technologies that can be used on our mission to the Borg Sphere. As the information contained in the Hansen logs is vital for the success of the mission, I must put aside my personal disruptions. End Log.

Personal Log. Seven of Nine. Stardate 52478.1. I have been assigned on the Away Mission to the Borg Sphere, along with Captain Janeway, Commander Tuvok, and Ensign Kim. For six hours the crew has been simulating the mission, practising for the actual incursion onto the Sphere. In that time we have managed to improve our efficiency, reducing the time required to achieve success to two minutes, 12 seconds. It is, however, still unacceptable as we are limited to a maximum of two minutes following the disabling of the Sphere's sensor grid. To give the away team more time I have been assigned to continue researching the Hansen's logs to extract information regarding their ability to remain within a Borg vessel undetected. This is increasingly difficult due to my increasing inability to control my emotions. I have had a disturbing 'daydream' involving Naomi Wildman assimilating into a drone. She had asked questions that I remember Annika Hansen asking her father prior to the Raven crashing and her assimilation into the Borg. It is an unsettling nightmare extrapolating my fear that the mission on the Borg Sphere will end in failure. I must make sure that the mission does not end so. End Log.

*****END OF LOG QUEUE*****

Harry leaned back in his chair and sighed. There was nothing in her log that gave any reason for her desire to return to the Borg. In fact, everything suggested that she wanted to stay. She explicitly said she did not want the mission to end in failure. While on the one hand, he knew that statement could be her basic desire for perfection—failure being the opposite of perfection...it could also mean that she wanted to make sure no

member on the away team would succumb to assimilation.

He paused a moment as he recycled his last thought in his mind. He read the last log again. "I have had a disturbing 'daydream' involving Naomi Wildman assimilating into a drone," she had said. She ended the log by saying, "It is an unsettling nightmare extrapolating my fear that the mission on the Borg Sphere will end in failure. I must make sure that the mission does not end so."

He sat up in his chair, a realization emerging. "Could it be?" he said aloud. He got up out of his chair and started pacing his quarters contemplating the possibility of his interpretation of Seven's actions aboard the Sphere. The more he thought about it, the stronger the possibility in his mind. In an instant he darted out of his quarters, heading straight for the Captain.

It hadn't surprised Harry that the Captain was in her Ready Room. It was understandable that, like him, she was too distraught to sleep. The loss of Seven to the Borg was not something either of them took lightly. After chiming her door, he entered to see a tired, yet surprised Captain Janeway. "Harry, what are you still doing up?"

Approaching her position near the windows he smiled and said, "Probably doing the same thing you are. Wondering why Seven isn't with us."

She returned a sad smile and walked over to her personal replicator. "Would you like something to drink? Coffee perhaps?"

"Actually, I wouldn't mind a cup of tea."

"Jasmine?"

"That'd be fine."

She ordered his cup of Jasmine tea, and ordered herself a coffee. Handing the tea to Harry, she asked, "So what brings you here?"

He nodded his thanks for the beverage and sat down on the sofa under the observation windows after her offer to sit. "I've been wondering why Seven would consciously decide to leave Voyager to return to the Borg, and an answer came to me just before I got here."

"And what did you come up with?" she asked as he took a sip of the tea.

"Well, it occurred to me that she had come to learn the basics about individuality, and she began to see the value of it. How important it is to keep it, not only for herself, but also for everyone else on the ship. After what she'd been through in the

past two years, she's probably learned that the most one could do with one's individuality is sacrifice it to save anothers."

"It's an interesting thought," she commented. "What makes you think she sacrificed herself for us?"

Harry was growing uncomfortable because her question was leading to his access of Seven's logs. "Well, I guess, everything we've gone through. I mean, when she linked herself to the ship's systems a year ago, and I was willing to sacrifice myself to save her, she later asked me why I was willing to make such a sacrifice for her. Then just a few months ago when I was hit while deflecting the Shakarian weapon platforms from her shuttle, Tuvok told me she had risked the entire mission by going back into the sensor grid to save me. I just think these things show that she was becoming more aware of the conscious decision of self-sacrifice."

Janeway failed to hide her smile. "You know, all these acts of self-sacrifice seemed to be aimed at you."

"I know," he said, blushing slightly. "But the point is now, she's obviously expanded her reason for sacrificing herself."

"Well, you were on the away mission this time, too," she teased.

"I think that's just incidental. This time, the whole crew was at stake. After all, the Sphere did retreat after we had beamed off."

Her look turned to serious contemplation. "Yes, I know. It was as if..."

"As if what?"

"As if they had gotten what they wanted and left."

"Like us."

"Yes. And that troubles me."

"I guess I never thought of it that way."

She turned her attention back to Harry. "What made you take the direction you did?"

He cleared his throat a bit. "Like I said, just her experience with self-sacrifice."

"I can see how you extrapolated your theory, but you seem pretty sure that you're right. How can you know for sure?"

He looked down away from her face, his actions catching up with him. "I read her personal logs."

"I see," she said somberly.

"I knew it was the wrong thing to do," he explained, "But I just had to find out. We had been through so much together, I just didn't understand why she'd just get up and leave everything. She gave me no indication that she was uncomfortable with being with me, I mean, with being on Voyager," he corrected quickly. "I just had to know why."

She sat quietly, gazing at the passionate Ensign. To Harry's surprise, she didn't get angry. "I know the two of you have become close. I actually can't think of two people better suited for each other. The two of you can share a lot together."

"Thank you, Captain," he said humbly.

"And, I don't blame you for what you did." Harry looked up at her in surprise. "Because, I was thinking of doing the same thing."

"You were?"

She smiled at his tone. "Yes, I was. I couldn't think of a reason for why she left. And my only thought was that maybe the Borg somehow lured her back when she beamed onto the Sphere."

"You may well be right."

"So could you."

He chuckled. "I guess we haven't gotten very far, then."

"Oh, I don't know. What's the saying? 'When one has eliminated every possible explanation, the one remaining, no matter how improbable, must be the truth.'"

"And which explanation would that be?"

"Maybe it's a little bit of both."

"Computer, isolate the sensor readings for time index 114.6. Identify source," Janeway asked, examining sensor logs from her desk in the Ready Room.

"Random subspace energy fluctuations," the Computer replied.

"Isolate the sensor readings for time index 166.2. Source?"

"Random subspace energy fluctuations."

Janeway gave a perturbed look. "Computer, run a transspectral analysis on all subspace fluctuations," she ordered as her door chimed.

"Yes?"

Tuvok entered, a slightly amused look on his face. He announced,

"A member of the crew has requested an appointment with the Captain. I informed her that you were...occupied, but she was insistent."

Janeway didn't bother to look up, still examining the sensor logs. "Whatever it is I'm sure Commander Chakotay can handle-" she stopped as she looked up momentarily to find Naomi Wildman peaking from behind Tuvok's legs. She paused to consider whether to give Naomi her attention while she was busy, but acquiesced. "Request granted. Send her in," she said, hiding in her slight annoyance.

Tuvok nodded and moved away to reveal Naomi's position before he returned to the bridge. The little girl tried to hide her apprehension at speaking to the Captain, finally standing at attention after her Vulcan front was gone. Walking up she handed Janeway a PADD and stated, "Permission to submit a proposal for your review."

"Proposal?"

"It's a rescue operation for Seven of Nine."

She gave an impressed look, scanning over Naomi's work. "Oh, you created this plan all by yourself?"

"Yes ma'am," the girl said proudly. She explained her proposal. "You see, if we change our long-range sensors to Seven's cortical implant frequency, maybe we can find her."

Janeway tried to soften the reality of the situation. "The Delta Quadrant is a very big place. And Seven could be thousands of light years from here."

Naomi was undeterred. "What if we boosted our sensor range with power from the main deflector?"

Janeway gave a soft chuckle. "You've been spending too much time in Engineering." She finally had to say, "I'm afraid it's not that simple. But thank you crewman. Your initiative is duly noted."

Naomi turned to leave, disappointed, but she had to ask, "Captain, you're not going to give up are you?"

Janeway heard the sadness in the little girl's voice. It said that Naomi had lost one of her closest friends. Janeway put down her cup of coffee and got up to walk over to the other side of her desk to encourage Naomi. "There are three things to remember about being a Starfleet Captain. Keep your shirt tucked in; go down with the ship...And never abandon a member of your crew."

Before she could say more, completing beeps from her computer console diverted attention. "Trans-spectral analysis complete," it announced.

Janeway turned the console around and was amazed to see the data

on the screen. "Take a look at this Naomi. What do you see?"

"Sensor logs," she said matter-of-factly.

Janeway seemed to gloss over Naomi's answer, explaining, "These aren't random energy fluctuations. They're Borg comm signals. And they were all directed at Cargo Bay two."

"You mean the Borg were talking with Seven of Nine?"

"It sure looks that way; Come on," she said, as they left her Ready Room together, the answer to Seven's return partially explained with some scientific fact.

Once on the bridge, Janeway asked Naomi, "Can you go back to your quarters? We have a lot of work to do."

"Are we going to find Seven of Nine?"

Janeway smiled reassuringly. "Yes we are."

The little girl smiled brightly and joyfully turned and walked into the turbolift. Janeway turned to see a confused first officer. "Is there something you know that we don't, Captain?"

She walked to her chair and sat down. "Only a working hypothesis. I want you to go through the Hansen logs and look for anything relating to trans-spectral frequencies. I don't think Seven stayed on the Sphere totally out of her own free will."

A few hours later, Chakotay was reporting his findings to Janeway in her Ready Room. "I've reviewed the Hansen field reports. Their research had stumbled upon an entity they described as 'the Borg Queen.' They managed to find and tag a drone that was working and communicating with her. He examined the drone's cranial transceiver logs, and as it turns out, his hunch was right. The drone had been receiving direct commands from this Borg Queen. I analyzed the comm signals." He pointed to a diagram on a PADD he handed to Janeway. "Look at the trans-spectral frequencies."

"They match the ones that were sent to Seven," she deduced.

"What did the Hansens learn about this Queen?"

"I'm afraid they never got a chance to find out."

"One thing is certain," Janeway stated, "She contacted Seven of Nine. And the next day, Seven rejoined the Borg. Obviously, she exerts some influence."

"You think Seven was instructed to leave Voyager?" Chakotay asked.

"Instructed? Coerced... She insisted she join the away team."

She was adamant that if she didn't board that Sphere our mission would fail. Sounds to me she was being threatened. My instincts told me she was holding something back, but I...I didn't pursue it. I let her go."

"If you hadn't we might all be drones by now."

She turned away, gazing out into the stars outside her window, speaking to the Borg threat that tainted the void of space. "What's running through that collective mind of yours...You've got thousands of species to choose from, billions of individuals, why Seven of Nine? You should have assimilated us while you had the chance."

Chakotay was concerned by Janeway's words. "Captain?"

She turned to him and ordered, "I want you to keep analyzing the Hansens database. Compile a list of every technology they created to track the Borg. Assemble a team of Engineers to assist you."

He knew where this was going and warned, "If you're planning a rescue mission, that research will only take us so far."

"Oh?"

"I've studied their log entries long enough to realize that as brilliant as the Hansens were, they made a fatal mistake-They became over-confident."

She looked straight into his eyes and said, "We won't make the same mistake." And with that she left her Ready Room.

Captain's log. Stardate 523.7. With the knowledge that Seven of Nine did not choose to leave Voyager and return to the Collective out of her own will, I have decided to mount a rescue mission. This will be a long-range tactical rescue. It could take days, even weeks before we find our missing crewman. Lieutenant Torres is equipping the Delta Flyer with the transwarp coil. It will allow us to cover more territory. An away team will take it into transwarp space, where Tuvok believes we can track the Sphere that abducted Seven & Nine. Thanks to the Hansens, we'll be well prepared for an encounter with the Borg. Their multi-adaptive shielding will make the Flyer virtually invisible to Borg sensors, and narrow beam transporters will allow us to penetrate the Sphere."

The crew sat attentively in the Briefing Room, listening to Janeway explain her plan. "Mr. Paris. You'll man the helm. Commander Tuvok; Tactical. Doctor, there's no telling what condition Seven will be in when we find her. You'll come along."

"Yes, Captain," the Doc replied.

"I'll be leading the away team," she continued. "The rest of you

will remain on Voyager and maintain position at the threshold of our transwarp conduit. We may need tactical support when we return. You'll be taking your orders from Commander Chakotay. We'll be searching for one individual among thousands of drones. But she's one of us. And I'm not about to let her go." Pausing to look at each member of her staff, she said,

"Let's get started."

Everyone quickly left to prepare for the mission, with the last one to leave being Ensign Kim. He was about to leave, when he turned to her. "Captain--"

"I know you want to be on the shuttle with us," she interrupted. "But I need you here on Voyager."

Harry was disappointed, but gave an understanding smile. "Then I'll wish you luck."

"Thanks," she smiled back. As the doors to the bridge opened, she gained his attention one last time. "Harry. I'll bring her home."

He turned a confident smile, and left for his station.

"Shuttle has cleared Voyager," Harry reported from his bridge station.

"Go to yellow alert," Chakotay ordered.

"The Flyer has initiated their warp drive. Transwarp coil appears to be functioning within acceptable tolerances," B'Elanna stated over the comm from Engineering.

"Open a channel to the shuttle," Chakotay ordered.

"We're at critical velocity," Paris noted over the open comm line.

"Engage, Mr. Paris," Janeway ordered.

"Transwarp in four...three...two..." Paris' voice cut out with a static fuzz.

"They've entered the transwarp conduit," Harry stated. "We've lost contact."

After ordering the helm officer to take Voyager closer to the threshold of the transwarp conduit, he sat down in the Captain's chair. "Now, we wait."

B'Elanna entered Seven's Cargo Bay to find Harry crouched down, sitting on top of a square container in front of Seven's alcove.

"I had a bad feeling that you'd be in here," she said as she walked up to him.

"Was that before or after you asked the computer?" he said wistfully.

"Before, obviously. Who needs a computer when I have a woman's intuition," she said teasingly.

He didn't seem effected by B'Elanna's friendly taunts. His face was focused on the green electrode tube on the top of Seven's alcove as he was engulfed in his own thoughts. "You know, Seven's been quite an influence on me."

"Has she?" she replied with a tone of doubt.

"If it wasn't for her, I'd probably not be the perfect Ensign everyone things I am."

"What do you mean?"

"Well," he laughed embarrassingly as he said, "Before she came on board, the only other crew person that I thought of emulating...was you."

"Me?" she asked in surprise.

"Yeah, strange, huh? I thought that since you were so innovative and you managed to be so creative outside the restraints of Starfleet protocol that I could try to think outside the standardized Starfleet box. Just like you. I thought I could learn about the reality of...well, of everything, engineering physics, design, anything, by ignoring, or transcending Starfleet regulations."

B'Elanna was astounded. "I...I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything. Your actions said plenty. It wasn't surprising that the Captain chose you as Chief Engineer over Carey. That appointment only solidified my faith in you."

She kept the surprising thought in her mind until she realized that it was a 'past' thing. "How did Seven change that?"

"Well, she's like the opposite of you, yet the results were equally impressive. She sticks to protocol, albeit ~~Bog~~ protocol, but protocol nonetheless, and it gets the job done. Knowing that, I guess I changed my thinking back to my old ways, back to the tried and true Starfleet protocols."

"I see," she said, a disappointing tone evident.

Harry heard it and quickly added, "It's not like I think any less of you or anything. You're still a great Engineer, and I respect you because of your abilities. And I care for you almost like a sister I never had."

She smiled at his tender honesty. "I care about you too, Starfleet. I have ever since the first time I saw you."

He smiled back before continuing. "I guess a big part of it too was the fact that I was attracted to her from the moment I laid eyes on her."

"Good enough of an excuse to ignore me," she teased.

He turned to her and laughed. "Hey, you're not such a bad looking woman yourself. If I didn't think of you as a sister--"

B'Elanna quickly interjected, "I would have kicked your butt for trying."

His laugh grew. "Ooh, should I be scared or excited?" he tanted.

"Scared, Harry. Very scared," she said slyly.

They laughed together at the odd conversation, until Harry continued. "Eh, seeing such perfection both in work, and in body, I guess I wanted to show myself off a bit."

"A bit? You made yourself more green than Saurian Brandy."

"If that's what it took..."

"Obviously, it wasn't enough," she said, quickly regretting her words. Harry's demeanour suddenly lost its joviality.

"I guess it wasn't..."

"Harry, I didn't mean--"

"No," he stated, "You did. And you're right. I just wasn't enough. She easily decided to go back because I wasn't a strong enough hook to keep the Borg Queen from taking her."

"Harry," she said, crouching down to see the right profile of his face, "I don't think there would be anything strong enough to combat the lure of her old Collective. It's like a drug. If you take enough of it, and then stop, when you take it up again, it will only be a stronger, easier addiction."

"Maybe...But still..."

"Starfleet," she said affectionately, "Sitting here and worrying about what could have been won't make things any better."

"And what does your intuition say about why I'm here."

"It tells me that you're wasting time worrying about whether the Captain will find Seven or not."

"Wasting in the sense that they will, or they won't find her?" he asked, in a pensive whisper.

She put her hand on his shoulder. "That I couldn't tell you," she said softly. She could feel his breathing growing uneven and short, his body beginning a slow trembling.

"I guess there's a limit to a woman's intuition, huh?" he said, trying, but failing, to make a joke, a tear swelling from the side of his right eye, finding its way down his cheek.

Seeing the tear caught B'Elanna off guard. Being so physically close to it, the impact of it hit her like a splash of warm water. The tear looked so big, so full of emotion, she couldn't help but follow it trail down the side of his face. "You love her...very much, don't you?" she asked softly, comforting him by caressing his back.

"It's so stupid, isn't it?" he said angrily, the sadness still apparent as he swiftly stood up and walked up to the alcove. Turning to a still crouched B'Elanna, he said, "I mean, here I am, the last officer in the chain of command, falling for a woman who's so out of my league, there's a betting pool with astronomical odds just to see what stupid move I make next."

"Harry, it's not as bad as you think--"

"Of course it is. Here we are, one Borg-perfected woman, and one Starfleet officer with the shortest career record on file. Both of us stuck on one of the smallest ships Starfleet manufactures, and 'best' of all, we're stuck with each other on a journey that could last a lifetime. That just screams a living nightmare for the rest of my life."

"Not when the two of you finally get your acts together and 'be' together."

He didn't hide a sarcastic laugh. "I can't believe it; now I'm getting advice on love from a Klingon!"

She tried a more forceful, but sincere tone. "Harry, she's good for you."

"Since when did you become a Seven supporter?"

"I haven't," she said frankly. "No matter what happens between the two of you, I'm sure Seven and I are going to bug the hell out of each other this entire trip. But I am a supporter of one Harry Kim, and this supporter...this sister says, that a Borg perfected woman is exactly what a Starfleet perfected man needs."

His anger subsided with her reassurance. But it only weakened his will as he slumped down to the floor of Seven's alcove. "I wish she could see that."

"She will," B'Elanna reassured. "Take my word for it. As a woman, I can tell you we're a stubborn bunch. We're never wrong. And even when we are, unless our lives are at stake, we as hell won't admit to it."

"Great, I have to wait until Seven's life is at stake. And when's the next time that happens where I'm not stuck thousands of light years away to help her 'see the light'?"

"Now is a great time. After all, 'distance makes the heart grow fonder.'"

"If she comes back," Harry said discouragingly.

Personal Log. Ensign Kim. Stardate 52580.1. I've given some thought to what B'Elanna said to me yesterday in Seven's Cargo Bay. While I still find it odd to be getting love advice from a Klingon, her words were quite convincing and encouraging. Perhaps the benefit of having a sister would be a greater insight into a woman's psyche, (or a messed up childhood), but B'Elanna did tell me something important. I can't rush sharing my affections to Seven of Nine. While the two of us have shared several moments together, it hasn't necessarily come to the point that either of us are ready for a more intimate relationship. For all I know I could still just be lusting after her, my carnal desires masquerading as feelings of love. As the one who has a conscious, and more or less, comprehensive knowledge of emotion, I shouldn't be the one to initiate the next step. She has to. If I truly love her, I'll be willing to wait. And for now, I'm willing to wait. End log.

Acting-Captain's Log. Commander Chakotay. Stardate 52589.3. After three days waiting at the threshold to the transwarp conduit the Delta Flyer entered, we have yet to discover any indication of their return. While Kathryn did say it could take weeks to find Seven of Nine, I can't help but feel concerned after just 72 hours of waiting. I have encouraged B'Elanna to find ways of tracking the shuttle by developing ways of sending probes into the conduit. While success from her efforts is unlikely due to the multitude of unknowns, at least it gives the crew something to do other than stand at their posts waiting for the tiniest sign. End log.

On the bridge, B'Elanna stood at the aft central console just behind the Captain's chair. "Is the probe ready?" Chakotay asked.

"It's loaded and ready for launch," she said. "It's been reconfigured to detect transwarp fractures of the transwarp conduit and stay within its threshold. That should be enough to keep the conduit open enough for us to scan through it."

"Good work. Launch when ready."

"Firing," Harry reported.

The torpedo shot out in an orange flash only to produce a green splash before disappearing into the conduit. "The probe is

transmitting," B'Elanna said with satisfaction.

"Can you detect any ships?" Chakotay asked.

"I'm scanning the probe's entire sensor range. So far nothing. But the resolution is limited by the subspace distortions."

"I'm going to try emitting anti-neutrinos. Maybe that'll clear things up," Harry suggested.

"Do it," Chakotay ordered.

After a few moments B'Elanna reported, "Sensor sensitivity up by 35%." Turning to Harry she smiled. "Good work."

He smiled back, only to look back on his console after it beeped for his attention. "I'm detecting a transkinetic wave approaching. It could be a sign of a ship."

"The Delta Flyer?" Chakotay asked.

"It's possible."

B'Elanna console suddenly started beeping. "I'm picking up transwarp signatures. There's a conduit approaching. 30,000 kilometres off our port-bow."

"Battle stations," Chakotay ordered. "How long until they arrive?"

"Approximately 20 seconds," she replied.

"Helm," Chakotay commanded, "Back us off to 40,000 kilometres. I don't want them accidentally run us over."

Following the completion of his order, Harry reported, "Something's emerging. By the size and displacement, it looks like the shuttle."

>From the viewscreen they saw a tiny green dot grow larger until it spit out the Delta Flyer in a green flash. "They're through," B'Elanna said.

Immediately, Chakotay called the shuttle. "Voyager to Delta Flyer. Report."

"We've got Seven, but there's a Borg vessel right behind us," Janeway said over the comm.

"B'Elanna, target the threshold perimeter. Photon torpedoes, full spread."

"Commander?"

He turned to her and explained, "It should destabilize the matter stream and implode the conduit for at least a light year."

Nodding in understanding she keyed in the commands. "Torpedoes locked."

"Fire!"

Through the viewscreen they could see the Delta Flyer escaping the threshold of the conduit, half a dozen torpedoes heading towards the threshold perimeter. They exploded in a giant flash of green strands of energy, the implosive impact travelling farther and farther away in a straight line, until the final explosion looked like a tiny blink of light.

"Voyager, report," Janeway ordered from the shuttle.

"We collapsed the conduit. No sign of Borg activity," Chakotay said.

Relieved, Janeway said, "Prepare us for docking. We're coming home."

Before they all could share in the joy of their return, B'Elanna's console began to give warning beeps again.

"Commander, I'm picking up Borg signatures. Lots of them!"

"Source?" Chakotay asked.

"The conduit!"

"I thought you collapsed it?"

"So did I!"

"Standby weapons," he ordered. Over the comm to the shuttle he said, "Captain. Raise shields. We've got company."

"Here they come!" B'Elanna announced.

They all looked at the viewscreen again, their fears surfacing from beneath their trained composure. Despite their belief of success against the Borg, again, they were to be humbled by the approaching enemy ship. They stared into the projection of space to see a green-strand flash of light. But instead of a ship, what emerged was a plume of Borg debris spewing out of the damaged conduit, the remnants of a giant sphere spiralling uncontrollably as it emerged from transwarp space. The entire bridge crew took a sigh of relief, as they realized their fears were proven wrong. Finally, Voyager was triumphant on its own, the threat firmly neutralized.

Harry observed a small orange dot on his monitor. Touching it with his finger, the monitor activated to show all the vital information on the Delta Flyer the sensors could detect. The shuttle itself was moderately damaged, its hull integrity

weakened from a combination of energy disrupters and photon torpedo bombardments, shield generators weakened, weapon systems disabled. Residual energy signatures suggested that the shuttle had been under the influence of some sort of tractor beam.

'Must've been on hell of a ride,' he thought.

His eyes focused on the life sign signatures sensors were able to detect. Four lifeforms: one Vulcan male, one Human male, and two Human females. He grinned at the thought, 'See B'Elanna? Even the computer thinks Seven's human.'

After confirming that the other members of the shuttle crew was safe and uninjured, he focused his attention on the young, female life sign. To his satisfaction, it was strong and vital. The computer detected a slight shift in her bioelectric frequency, but that was to be expected from a body augmented with cybernetic implants. Knowing where she just came back from, Harry cross-referenced her old life signs with the new data. There was a slight inconsistency; the new life sign showed a higher bioelectric frequency. It wasn't enough to make her life sign indistinguishable from her old life sign pattern, but enough to make him worry.

Changing views on his monitor, he watched as the Flyer entered final approach to the shuttle bay. He looked for the timer on the screen that would indicate how long until they completed docking, but he couldn't find it. He then remembered that the timer would only be there if the shuttle was on autopilot, and Tom was never one to enjoy that particular feature. But timing was important because he wanted to meet Seven as soon as they landed.

He did need permission to leave his post, however. With Tuvok on the bridge, Harry would have had to follow protocol to the letter and announce his intentions to the commanding officer from his station. Thankfully, Tuvok wasn't there, so he logged off and approached Chakotay who was sitting in the Captain's chair.

"Commander," he called quietly, leaning over the railing.

"Permission to assist the Delta Flyer crew with disembarking."

Chakotay turned to him and gave a curious look. "Disembarking? Is this a new protocol that I'm not aware of?"

"I wanted to make sure everyone came back alright."

"You can do that from your station."

"I mean, in person, sir."

"I'd like nothing better than to see them right now too, Harry. But I don't have the luxury of leaving my post."

Harry gave a disappointing look as he leaned off the railing.

"Yes, sir."

He was half way to his station when he heard loudly, "Permission granted."

He turned to Chakotay. "Sir?"

"You can go," Chakotay said, his face trying to hide a smile.

Harry had no qualms about the joy he felt and smiled appreciatively. "Thank you, sir."

Timing was on his side for as soon as he entered the shuttle bay, the hatch to the Delta Flyer opened, and out stepped Janeway. "Captain!" Harry exclaimed between breaths as he jogged over.

"Did we catch you practising the Starfleet marathon, or are you just eager to see us?" Janeway teased, noting Harry's heavy breathing.

"The latter. I was hoping I'd get here just as you were docking, but I didn't have a perfect estimate of how long it would take for you to land."

"Tom was trying out a new landing procedure," Janeway explained. "So, he didn't use the autopilot."

"Since when has he ever?"

"Never!" Tom stated as he exited the shuttle. "Landing is the most important part about flying a shuttle. It showcases the best in a pilot. It's one's...signature. And those things you just shouldn't copy and standardize."

"Sure, Tom. Whatever you say."

"Hey, I got everyone back here in one piece, didn't I?"

"That you did," Janeway said. Turning to Harry, she asked, "So, how's the ship?"

"She's in good shape. Had better be since we didn't do much except wait for you to come back."

"Thanks to everyone's work, we did come back." He put her hand on his shoulder and said, "And I kept my promise."

Harry smiled a thankful smile and turned to see Seven emerge. She caught his gaze, and approached. "Ensign, why are you here?"

"I wanted to be the first to come down and welcome you back."

"I see. And what does this involve?"

"Oh nothing much. I just wanted to...see you."

"You have now seen me. Thank you for the welcome, Ensign." And with that she walked down the shuttle bay towards the exit.

Tom leaned over to Harry and asked, "She hasn't quite got the whole improv part of the social graces has she?"

Harry smiled, still looking at Seven as she walked out. "No, not quite. But she means well."

For the rest of the day, the away team was stuck inside Sickbay as the Doc performed several post-mission tests. He felt it was necessary that he catalogue as much information as possible since they had travelled for such a long period of time in transwarp space. He reasoned that if he, a hologram, had experienced some disorientation, it was possible that the body could have similar side-effects, if not in the short-term, in the long-run. It was for that reason the Harry couldn't see any of them for the rest of the day.

Later that evening, when the Doc was satisfied that little, if anything, was possibly wrong with them following their travels, Harry decided to visit Seven in her Cargo Bay. While he knew that she, and the rest of the crew was ordered by the Doc to get some rest, somehow, he knew that she wouldn't be regenerating. The Cargo Bay doors opening, his hunch was proven right as he found Seven working at her console. She turned to see who entered, and acknowledged his presence. "Good evening, Ensign. Do you require my assistance?"

"Evening, Seven. No, I didn't come because of work. I just got off duty, and I just wanted to see how you were doing."

"Is this a continuation of your earlier welcoming in the shuttle bay?"

"No, no. That was...that. This is just...this."

She raised her eyebrow. "Obviously." She continued working on her console, and mused, "It appears your method of explanation has not changed in my absence."

He chuckled before saying, "Well, it appears your abrupt social graces hasn't changed much either." He regretted his words as soon as they finished coming out of his mouth. He saw Seven's body stiffen, her hands no longer moving over the console with their usual Borg efficiency. Trying to recover, he said, "Then again, it's not like you had the opportunity to do much practice."

"No, I did not."

"I'm sorry, Seven...I didn't mean to--"

She turned to him and said, "An apology is not necessary. It was my fault; I attempted to assert a humorous statement. I failed." She tilted her head downward slightly, as if ashamed.

He moved closer to her, placing his hands on her shoulders to reassure her. "No, no, Seven, it's not your fault." He raised her face with his hand. "You were funny; I was the one who wasn't. What I said was inappropriate given the circumstances."

"Perhaps. But your statement was correct. I have not improved since my leave of absence."

"That's understandable, you were with the Borg."

"No you do not understand. The Borg wanted me because of my humanity. They believed I was an asset to them because I am the only drone to return to an individual state. They believed I could assist them in assimilating humanity."

"Well then, I guess at this point in time you are perfect."

She gave him a bewildered look. "Explain."

"Well, you didn't understand the parts of humanity that the Borg wanted, and yet you still managed to resist them. You saw the value of humanity enough to peak their interest, but not enough to be of relevance to them. Given the circumstances, I'd say you were perfect."

"An interesting hypothesis."

"Do you have another one?"

"In fact I do, however, I like yours better."

He was surprised by her statement, and was surprised even further when she smiled in amusement to his surprised look. "You know, you may not have the nuances of certain social rituals, but you're getting good at teasing me."

Her breath touched his face as she asked, "And which social ritual would that be a component of?"

Harry smiled, his eyes glancing down at Seven's lips. "It wouldn't happen to start with a 'C', would it?"

Her body inched forward millimetre by millimetre. "It would."

He gazed into her rich blue irises. While it was a foregone conclusion his own eyes were dilated, he felt sure hers were as he gazed. He said in a whisper, "The next letter wouldn't happen to be an 'O'?"

"It is."

He closed his eyes, the memory of Seven's eyes foremost on his mind as his head tilted forward. "The next letter wouldn't happen to be a you--" his attempt to utter the letter 'U' was interrupted by Seven's lips pressing against his.

They pecked gently, once, twice, before he grasped her face in his hands and opened his eyes to look in hers to indicate his passionate intent. He brought her lips to his, tenderly pulling them with his, feeling her lust flesh. He opened his mouth to taste, his tongue pressing gently to be invited. Her lips opened, and to his surprise, he too was greeted with a supple tongue. Their lips open together, their taste buds caressed each

other, sharing their fluidic space.

Their passion grew in waves, each successive embrace employing deeper emotions. Their first kiss was a statement of desire fulfilled. Their second, an act of intent, their third, an active embrace. From this moment on they were sealed as one, their spirit joined in passion, shared in understanding. Their lips now told the other with perfect clarity their compassion, love, hope, and future.

When they ended, Harry found himself smiling uncontrollably. "What is it?" Seven asked.

He leaned his forehead on hers and said, "I've waited so long to do this."

"17 months, 31 days, 15 hours, 10 minutes to be exact."

He couldn't help but laugh softly at her exact count. "I must have broken every record in the galaxy to wait so long."

"Perhaps, but I should inform you that I was willing to further our relationship earlier."

"You were? I didn't know. I mean, I thought you didn't feel ready."

"You never asked."

"No, I guess I didn't." He wrapped his arms around her waist as he said, "While you were gone, I kept thinking you weren't ready, or you didn't want to take it a next step further. I guess it was my fault all along."

"Possibly, but irrelevant. We have now taken that 'next step.'"

"Yeah, we have, haven't we?" he said happily. Chuckling, he asked, "To make up some lost time, maybe I should ask right now if you want to take our relationship to another level."

"I'll let you know."

THE END.

End Part 4/4

Please email feedback to: amb_ricardo@starttrekmail.com.
Story Copyright 1999 Richard Chu.

AMB Ricardo's Online Database
<http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Club/1146/>