

Title: Reason for Living  
Author: Richard Chu  
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Summary: Her grief of her loss of an individual of equal uniqueness, and his confusion and doubt over his choices in love, are obstacles that fall between Harry and Seven's first kiss.

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Author's Notes: This is a sequel of sorts to my first story "Finding the Balance Within," although it's not necessary to read it to understand this shorter story. There are mainly references to my first story that may confuse you, although the significance of these scenes is obvious. This story is mainly a interlude between the 'big guns' "Finding the Balance Within" and my next story "Tears of Love and War."

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](mailto:Richard_chu@canada.com).

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A uniformed, yet apparently unkept Tom Paris met up with a briskly walking Ensign Kim. "Hey, Harry, what's the rush?"

Harry eyed Tom's appearance, about to comment, but simply answered his question. "I'm on my way to see Seven. No one has seen her all day."

"Really? I thought she was with B'Elanna in Engineering coordinating my shuttle mission with the Shakarians," he said, puffing a plume of dust from his uniform.

"Well, B'Elanna's been around Seven long enough to deal out a few Borgish tricks of her own," Harry managed to cough out. "Did you have any trouble eluding the Brakolli raiders?" he asked..

"No, we managed to stay outside their sensor range. The plasma storms in the area make for good hiding spots." Tom gave a smirk. "Just like home."

Harry gazed at Tom's dirty uniform and suggested, "Why don't you take a shower. The Shakarian caves have done wonders to your uniform."

"Good idea. See you later."

Harry patted Tom on the shoulder and left for the Cargo Bay. Arriving, his demeanour turned serious as he found Seven crouched in the far corner of her makeshift quarters, her head face down on top of her knees. All around her were overturned cargo barrels, spilled open containers, PADDs strewn around her body. As he approached, he saw her hair hanging loose down the sides of her face, covering arms clutching her legs together.

By the look of things, Seven had experienced an 'emotional release' but because of what, he did not know. She had been distant towards him these past couple months, but he had no idea as to why. There were times he thought about asking her about it, but an appropriate time never seemed to come up. After noticing an unscheduled absence from her shift in Astrometrics, he decided to go to her and see what was wrong. "Seven?"

"I prefer to be alone, Ensign Kim."

He approached her and crouched down in front of her. "You've been alone all day. I got worried."

"Your concern is unwarranted."

He moved closer, placing his hand atop her head, caressing. "Is it?"

She immediately recoiled, lifting her head to shake off his hand, revealing a tear-laden face, her usually clear blue eyes dampened and bloodshot. "I wish to be alone."

He tried to smile. "You should know by now that when someone says they want to be alone, they mean the exact opposite."

"I am not playing a manipulative human game of deception. I want to be alone."

"That may be what you want," Harry returned, "But that's not what you need."

She glared fiercely into his eyes. "How do you know what I need?"

"Call it a hunch," he said, sitting down cross-legged a third of a metre in front of her. The more Seven recoiled, the more he knew something was wrong. Her confident charge was gone, replaced by a weak defensive veneer that was easily cracked.

This was apparent as she appeared uncomfortable with his close proximity and quickly got up to walk away from him. "Please leave. I am going to

regenerate."

"Go right ahead and regenerate," he said scornfully as he stood up. "I'm not going anywhere, Seven. Not until you tell me what's been bothering you."

"It is none of your concern," she uttered, her face heavy with emotion as she approached her alcove.

"Seven, you *are* my concern. You're my friend, and I care a great deal about you. Now, I've let you have your time 'alone.' I've kept my distance these past few months, but it's really beginning to worry me. We've barely spoken a dozen words outside of work. That may be you with everyone else, but...it's not us."

Seven stared right through her alcove. "There is nothing you can do. I must deal with this alone." She walked up to her alcove to prepare for regeneration. "Please, Ensign. Leave," she whispered.

"Okay, fine," he said softly. She wasn't going to tell him. That much was obvious, but he still felt for her. "Let me help you get setup."

She nodded in agreement, and entered her alcove. Harry walked across to the side control panel to initiate the regeneration cycle. Before he keyed in the initiation sequence, he gazed at Seven's face. Her face had crusted from the tears, ageing her face artificially. Letting her regain some peace, he entered the initiation sequence, and saw her close her saddened eyes. "Sweet dreams, Seven."

He sighed and walked over to where he first found her to do a little bit of cleanup. While he could never put the large barrels back, he could at least collect all the containers and organize the PADDs for her. Picking up each of the PADDs he noticed an unusual consistency in their content.

They were all about the 29th century drone she named One. A PADD contained the basic information about his anatomy, a breakdown schematic of his biological and technological components. On another PADD were lists and detailed outlines on possible ways to take control of his technological components: his nanoprobes, the imbedded holo-emitter, his shield emitters.

Another PADD had images of One's development, from his infant stage to the end of his maturation cycle. Harry had his suspicions about the flood of interest Seven apparently had with One, but he thought against jumping to conclusions. He decided to go to the Doc and ask him about it.

Sickbay was relatively quiet, Tom being off-shift, and no long-term patients occupied any of the bio-beds. The Doc noticed Harry's entrance and approached him from his office. "Can I help you, Ensign?"

"Evening, Doc. I was wondering if you could tell me a little something about the other Borg drone we had on board a few months ago, One."

The Doctor's face hardened as the memory washed up into the present. "What exactly did you need to know?"

"Actually, what I wanted to know was how he died."

He gave a solemn look and turned to walk towards the clamshell biobed. Like a war veteran, he stood rigidly beside the biobed, his arms straightened

along the sides of his holographic body, his eyes staring into the middle of the biobed. Harry didn't know what to do until he saw the Doc's saddened face. He simply copied the Doctor's stance, paying his respects to an individual he barely knew.

"He killed himself," the Doctor finally said.

That answer took Harry by surprise as he was not privy to most of the medical reports. "How?"

"He had internal bleeding, brain haemorrhage, skull fractures. I had to operate, but he refused."

"Why?"

"He felt his presence threatened the lives of the crew and the safety of the ship. He felt that since the Borg knew of his presence, they would constantly look for him, and kill everyone on board to get to him."

By the tone of the Doc's voice, Harry began to share and understand his respect for One. As a Borg, he was unique. He was willing to sacrifice his life for the safety of the ship, an attribute Seven had not yet developed at the time. One was an ironic martyr: the Borg who sacrificed himself for humanity. "How did Seven take it?"

"How do you think she took it?" The Doctor said incredulously. "She saw her prodigy die in front of her, despite her pleas for him to live." He turned away from the biobed, unable to keep the image of a dying Borg in his mind.

"She stood above him, begging him to live. She said he was hurting her, and he had the gall to say that she would adapt."

Harry leaned on the biobed, his hands imprinting on the mattress. "She hasn't has she."

"Obviously not. I hear she skipped her entire duty shift today."

"Yeah. She wouldn't respond to anyone over the comm either. The only time she responded was when Janeway said she was going to meet her, and she firmly said no. There was something in Seven's voice that kept the Captain away."

"Has anyone seen her today?"

"I have. I just came from her Cargo Bay. I found her crouched in a corner of the room, with PADDs around her. They were all about One."

"So that's why you asked."

"Yeah."

The Doctor walked around, picking up various medical instruments, obviously trying to keep busy. "So how is she?"

"By the look of things, she seems depressed."

"I guess it was only a matter of time."

"What do you mean?"

The Doctor paused before speaking. "Borg resilience. While I'm no psychological expert, I know enough to diagnose various stages of depression.

First there's the self-help fix, then an inflated bubble of contentment.

But soon enough, it all comes crashing down again, and you're back to square one. The Borg are no different. Just more stubborn."

"She still thinks it's her fault," Harry hypothesized as he thought about the contents of the PADDs in the Cargo Bay.

"That's a probable conclusion. I'm sure as a Borg, she's not accustomed to grieving for someone, so, it's probably still all pent up inside her."

"I tried to talk to her, but she just kept insisting she wanted to be alone."

The Doc smirked sadly. "There's that Borg resistance rearing its head again."

Harry crossed his arms. "There has to be a way to help her past this."

"Ordinarily, if this was just a matter of friendship, just being with her would lure her out of her self-created cocoon. But this is more than friendship. She's lost the one thing she helped bring into the world."

"You speak of One as if he was her child."

"Biologically, he wasn't. But technologically, and socially he was. They shared a close bond, individual Borg with individual Borg. He may not have been her child in the strictest sense, but she was his mother...And she lost him." The Doc seemed deeply concerned about the whole incident, but uncomfortable. "Is there anything else I can do for you?" he asked, trying to change the subject.

"No, Doc. Thanks," Harry replied as he walked to leave Sickbay. "I'll see you later."

In his quarters, Harry laid back on his sofa thinking about Seven. While a part of him knew that there was little he could do, the desire to find a way to help her out of her situation occupied his thoughts. There had to be something he could do. Nothing so grandiose as to solve her problem, but something to nudge her in the right direction.

His comm badge chirped. "Yes?"

"Harry, it's B'Elanna. I want you to look at something. Go to your computer console and check the power distribution levels."

Sitting down at his desk, he activated his computer. "What am I looking for?"

"The output levels on deck eight seem to be fluctuating a bit."

"They look like they're spiking every 0.023 seconds."

"Have any ideas what could be causing it?"

"Irregularities in the plasma flow regulators?"

"No, they all check out."

"Then something has to be drawing up the power."

"That's the only thing I could come up with, but everything checks out."

"Maybe a problem with the internal sensors?"

"Nope. Now you see why I called you."

Harry hummed in agreement as he traced the various conduit outlines on the computer screen, puzzled by the power irregularity. "Why don't we run a segmental diagnostic of deck eight to localize the power drain."

"Sounds good to me. Commencing."

While waiting for the diagnostic to finish, Harry asked, "So, got the inside scoop on Tom's new program he's working on?"

B'Elanna gave an obvious chuckle. "Yes, I do, but the condition for knowing was to keep it from you."

"Come on, B'Elanna. Just a little hint."

"Sorry, Harry. You know where my loyalties lie."

"Just a hint," Harry begged.

"A hint would give it all away. I know how you are with human history."

"Aha! Human-it's a human program." Thinking out loud, he said, "It's got to be a 20th century program, human history; he's already written a program about B-movies, a hotrod, Sandrines?"

"Well, since you don't need my help, maybe we can get back to the task at hand," B'Elanna suggested as the computer began to beep. Harry could hear over the comm line B'Elanna asking, "Computer, identify location of power surge."

"Power surge is localized in section 297-forward-gamma."

"What's in there?" Harry asked.

"The Cargo Bays," B'Elanna said. "But, there's nothing in the Cargo Bays that would cause this spike in power. None of the transporters are online."

"Except Seven's alcove. Computer, run a level-four diagnostic of the Borg alcoves in Cargo Bay Two."

"Diagnostic complete. No anomalous readings detected."

"Something's not right," Harry said, concerned. "B'Elanna, meet me down in the Cargo Bay."

"I'm on my way."

Harry entered the Cargo Bay to a busily working B'Elanna. "What's wrong?" he asked as he jogged to the alcove.

"There's an overload in the power distribution circuits. And I can't shut down the regeneration process."  
Looking at a side console he noted, "The power output is 30% above normal."

"And if we don't deactivate it, Seven is going to fry herself to death."

Harry began to panic. "Can't we just shut off power to the whole deck?"

"I've tried half a dozen things already, but the computer won't respond to my commands."

"Kim to the Doctor, medical emergency in Cargo Bay two!"

"What's the emergency?"

"Seven's trying to kill herself!"

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Janeway rushed into a busy Sickbay. "How is she?"

"Biologically, she's okay, only minor burns around her implants," the Doctor responded. "But those implants are another story. I've had to inject three doses of replicated nanoprobes to help her body repair all of her implants. They're all heavily damaged due to a power overload."

"Overload?"

"The output of her alcove was 30% above the nominal rate," B'Elanna explained.

Harry interjected. "Apparently, Seven adjusted the output settings in order to burn out her cybernetic implants."

"The Borg equivalent of slicing her wrists," the Doctor commented morbidly.

"But why?" Janeway asked.

The Doctor gave a directed look to Harry. "Harry?" Janeway prodded.

"I think she was still dealing with the loss of One. She didn't know how to deal with the loss she felt, and I guess..she thought suicide was the only way."

"Oh, my.."

Harry inhale

Janeway softly put her hands on Harry's shoulders. "It wasn't your fault. If anything, it's mine as Captain. But sharing blame isn't going to help us out of this situation." She gazed authoritatively into his eyes. "We have to move forward."

"Yes, Captain." Harry straightened up a bit and took in a deep breath. "What should we do?"

Janeway crossed her arms and looked at an unconscious Seven. "Now that we know what's going on, we have to maintain a constant watch on her." She turned her face towards Harry. "I take it you can take this assignment."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good," she said, returning a smile. "When she's able, try to keep her focused on the task at hand. She may resist. She may want to just wallow in self-pity and be alone, but you have to keep her occupied." Turning to B'Elanna, she ordered, "Keep Seven in the loop. Ask for suggestions, recommendations, anything."

"Yes, Captain," B'Elanna replied.

Janeway turned to the Doctor. "How long until she regains consciousness?"

"The sedative I gave her should wear off in a couple hours. The nanoprobes should finish their repairs well before that."

"Good. Keep me informed."

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0303 hours, Harry noted to himself as he roamed the corridors. He'd have to be back at Sickbay by 0500 to meet an awoken Seven of Nine. There didn't seem to be much purpose to go back to his quarters to sleep since he'd likely just toss and turn for those two hours. He couldn't just pop up on the bridge or Engineering, so that didn't leave much except for the Mess Hall.

He wasn't expecting anyone in the Mess Hall, and sure enough, it was empty.

He wasn't looking for anything in particular, but the dark starlit room gave him what he needed. A moment of serenity in a sea of uncertainty. He walked up to the corner window, leaned on the side wall and just stared out into space.

The irony of space travel for Harry was that while the notion of being stuck inside a ship for long periods of time exaggerated his natural level of claustrophobia, staring out into space and focusing on the various bodies of light, produced one of the most clear states of mind for him. While this was a ritual born from his youth on Terra Firma, performing it in the depths of outer space seemed like the most natural thing for him to do. The twinkling lights around Earth were now replaced with distinct stellar bodies. What used to be just stars turned out to be distant galaxies passing by, quasars, red giants, white dwarfs. He could see the vibrant colours of bright yellow, white, blue, and red, all defining the objects that passed by his field of vision.

Tonight, he was looking out for a supernova, or just a nova. Like a child looking at the Terran sky for falling stars, he was looking for a reason to



hope. Whether he found a nova or not, his wish was clear. But he still felt unsure, his only recourse at that moment was to cling to a childhood tale of wishing upon a star.

He felt so lost. He couldn't imagine his life without Seven, yet, now, he couldn't think of a way to help her out of the depression that struck her.

He wanted to touch her, embrace her in his arms, yet he didn't want to smother her. He needed her, but unsure if she needed him. He had already failed to keep her from danger-from the fear and sadness within herself.

What good was he to her then?

Just 'being there' for her was obviously not enough. She needed more than simple company, he thought. She needed someone who knew what he was doing, someone she could turn to for definitive answers. She needed an equal. But if he couldn't even explain to her the value of dating, how could he help her through the loss of 'her child'?

feared the germs that he thought were deposited on the clarinet reed. While the fear he faced now paled in comparison, fear nonetheless begets fear, having the tendency to compound on itself like an infection.

As he neared Sickbay, he tried harder and harder to squeeze the anxiety down deep into his psyche, but the courage he sought was weakened. He couldn't get past the fact that Seven had tried to kill herself. He couldn't help but feel that somehow it was his fault. No matter how many times he recycled Janeway's assurance to the contrary, his uncertainty bypassed his confidence-building attempts. He was trying so hard he hadn't realized that he had walked in to Sickbay and right up to Seven's biobed.

He managed to get out of his detached state after hearing Seven recognize his presence. Her face was paler than usual, as were her lips, but somehow he was expecting that. "Hi Seven," he managed to whimper out.

"You do not look well," Seven observed.

"I'm as good as can be expected, given the circumstances. How about you?"

"As good as can be expected."

They shared momentary glances, only to deliberately break them. They didn't communicate with each other for an elongated period. They looked like a monument to shared shame, each staring at opposite directions, faces downcast, bodies rigid, eyes glossy with pent up emotion.

"Trying to set a record?" The Doc asked jovially, trying to break the tension between the two.

"Excuse me?" Harry asked.

"Well, the two of you have been avoiding each other's gaze for so long that I thought you were trying to break the record of most distant gaze at short range."

"That's not particularly funny, Doc."

"Perhaps not, but at least it broke the tension in this corner of my Sickbay."

Harry smiled. "Thanks, Doc." Fiddling with the sleeve of his uniform, he asked, "So, is it safe to take her out of here?"

The Doctor nodded in the affirmative. "She shouldn't have any problems with the internal repairs of the nanoprobes. Though, it would be a good idea that she get something to eat."

"I'll see what I can do," Harry said as cheerfully as he could. He offered his hand to a still weary Seven of Nine and asked, "Care to join me for breakfast?"

She was resigned but accepted his offer by taking his hand.

Seven relied heavily on Harry to help her walk in the corridors. The corridors were busier as they left Sickbay, enough to create the uncomfortable feeling that rumours would start flying by midday. Crewmembers

who passed them smiled and nodded to them, but only to feebly camouflage curious stares. Noting these reactions, Harry took a quick detour to the nearest turbolift. Once secured inside, Harry ordered, "Deck six."

Seven gave a curious look. "The Mess Hall is on deck two."

"I know. But I think a private breakfast is in order. Unless, you would rather go to the Mess Hall."

"No, a private breakfast is more acceptable."

Harry couldn't help but smile at her response. "Good."

Once in his quarters, he eased Seven into a chair, and went to the replicator. It wasn't until he activated the tactile interface that he realized he had barely enough credits to get a glass of water. But before turning to explain this embarrassing story, he did a double take on the console reading two months worth of rations allocated. He keyed in a diagnostic to check the validity of the numbers, producing a typed message: HARRY, CONSIDER THIS COMPENSATION FOR KEEPING TOM'S PROGRAM FROM YOU.

B'ELANNA.

He mouthed a thank-you to B'Elanna and promised to repay her later. An overjoyed smile leaking from his face, he asked Seven, "So what would you like for breakfast?"

"Food supplement 215."

"I'm afraid I'm not familiar with that one."

"You are not. It is a creation of my own containing all the relevant nutrients required."

"It doesn't sound that appetizing."

"That is irrelevant. It serves my needs."

His eyes widened in surprise. "Are you telling me you've never had a traditional human breakfast?"

"Traditional human dishes are inefficient."

"But they are so good!"

"That is?"

Harry interrupted, "... 'not' irrelevant. Look, food serves more than a nutritional purpose. It functions as a means of providing comfort."

"Comfort?"

"Yes! You can get an immeasurable amount of satisfaction from eating your favourite dish."

"I do not have a 'favourite dish.'"

"A condition I intend to rectify," he said eagerly, rubbing his hands

together. "Now, what could possibly be delicious to you," he thought out loud. "What's your favourite colour?"

"How does that have any bearing in determining my favourite dish?"

"Well, sometimes appearance plays an important part. For example, a person who has blue as a favourite colour can also enjoy foods that have blue in them, like Romulan ale, Bolian grain noodles, or blueberry pie."

"I see," Seven commented. "My favourite colour is red."

"Ah?" he said, disappointed.

"What is the matter?"

"Oh nothing. Just that there is a vast array of dishes that are red. Like about...ten thousand."

Harry avoided becoming overwhelmed by the vast selection of delicacies he could expose to Seven as it was a perfect activity to keep Seven preoccupied. Being daring, he started with exotic Klingon dishes, such as fresh gagh, to the variety of elegantly prepared Japanese sushi creations. While she did not find any one of them especially her favourite, she did express a leaning towards human food. Preparation, he noted, was an important factor. That, and the food being sufficiently 'dead' upon reaching her mouth. That let a variety of 'red' dishes, anything from red beet soup, to a host of Mediterranean tomato-based seafood dishes. He noticed after a tasting of the twenty-third dish, she gave little consideration to the increasing amounts of food she was consuming. Her enjoyment seemed to transcend her Borg preoccupation with efficient consumption, yet in the end, she had still did not establish which entree she liked the most.

Having exhausted most of the likely candidate dishes, what remained was dessert. Seven gave no indication she was getting full, so he decided to continue experimenting. Instead of going for the exotic, Harry tried a tried and true delicacy. His own mouth watering at the sight of the breadcrumb crust supporting a firm, white creamy substance, topped with strawberries, coated in a sweet red sauce and whipped cream. A craving gaze focused on the dessert as he presented it in front of Seven. "What is this designated?" Seven asked.

"The designation doesn't do it any justice. Just try it."

Seven looked at him curiously, but did as he suggested. Slicing a small morsel, and dabbing the breaded substance with the strawberry sauce and whipping cream, she efficiently placed it on the top of her tongue, and slipped it off the dessert utensil with firm lips. Her facial expression transformed from serious evaluation to wide-eyed elation. Harry had found her favourite.

She was about to take a second bite when suddenly her expression hardened to angry disbelief. She dropped the fork and stumbled out of her chair. "No," she uttered in anguish. "I cannot do this."

"What? Can't do what?" Harry asked frantically.

"I cannot!" she exclaimed, rushing out of his quarters.

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Later that evening, the door to Harry's quarters chimed. "Enter," he said flatly.

In came a less-than-happy Captain Janeway. She simply stared at him, hoping he would explain the events earlier in the morning. But he just sat in his chair, his eyes fixed on a plate of strawberry cheesecake, which now sagged with the moisture of the whipping cream, that now was drooling on top, diluting the deep red strawberry sauce.

Janeway stood patiently, simply waiting. Harry spoke. "I take it Seven's now in a worst state than she was before."

"She's regenerating."

"Efficiently, I hope."

"Under the Doctor's watchful gaze."

"That's good," he strained as he got up to stretch his self-induced aching body. As if ignoring the Captain, he turned and walked towards the cabin windows. Where was a supernova when you needed one? He settled for a flickering quasar before saying, "I tried to help her. God knows I tried."

"By having her indulge in the delicacies of life?"

He turned to her, his face filled with compassion. "I wanted to give her a reason to live." He shook his head. "She needed a .0198 Tc -0.1335k.753dai55sion. "Iws4 chimut he just s

"I know you do, but that might not be the best thing for her right now."

"Well at least, put me on the mission as well."

"I have. They will need a decoy to draw Brakolli fire while they make a run for the Shakarian outpost."

Harry grew suspicious. His part in the mission seemed excessively dangerous.  
"Is this a test?"

"For both of you. You have to stay on top of everything for this mission to succeed. You have the defensive weakness of the Brakolli to work with, which, for any trained shuttle pilot, should be a breeze. If you stay on the ball. Just avoid getting hit, and you should make it."

"I will, Captain. But what about Seven?"

"That's why she's with Tom and Tuvok. If anything goes wrong, they can handle it on their own."

"Good."

Janeway smiled encouragingly. "Get some rest. We have a big day tomorrow."

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Seven walked in to the Delta Flyer and sat in the upper right station to prepare for the mission. Tom and Tuvok glanced at her momentarily, but refocused on their tasks at hand. Irrelevant communication was restricted entirely, a rarity for Tom. But 'the situation' could not be ignored. An important, albeit underlying component of success was a return of a focused, and efficient Seven of Nine.

A soft beep came from Tom's console. "It's time," he said.

"Prepare for departure," Tuvok ordered.

Paris nodded and went through every step of protocol for launch. Tuvok monitored his console, double checking Tom's actions as the shuttle mission's commander. He glanced over to Seven and found her busy on her console, although, by the tired expression on her face, she did not look focused.

"Delta Flyer to Voyager," Paris announced over the comm, "Ready for departure."

"Confirmed," Janeway said. "Good Luck, Tom."

Tom emerged from his exterior calm to smile. "See you on the other side."

The shuttle cleared the bay doors and darted towards an asteroid field. Seven's computer console quickly began sounding alarms as sensors began picking up the Brakolli sensor emissions. "We will enter the sensor grid in 30 seconds," she stated apathetically. Both Tom and Tuvok nodded in acknowledgement. Without further interactions, the cabin returned to its state of sombre quiet as they drifted into an enemy shield grid.

Fearful expectations became reality as Tuvok announced a plethora of weapon

signatures powering up all around them. "Weapon platforms are targeting our engines," Tuvok reported calmly.

"Three minutes to the other side," Paris announced.

A jolt and everyone realized they had been hit. "Shields down to 90%" Seven stated. "Re-enforcing with emergency power."

"Brace for impact!" Paris said as a full spread of torpedoes bombarded the shuttle. A scream of pain came from him as his console exploded, thrusting him out of his seat. Tuvok quickly got down to him to attend to his injuries. "Seven, retrieve the medical kit from the aft compartment," he said firmly.

A smidgen of concern escaped and swept across her face as she left her station. She returned with the kit and opened it. "Severe burns to his face and hands," Tuvok noted from his tricorder. "Hand me a hypospray of Cordrazine."

She complied, and then rushed back to her console as it sounded a more foreboding klaxon. She focused on reason for the warnings, but her expression continued to darken as her entered commands failed to change the outcome volleys of torpedoes were destined to produce. "I am unable to strengthen the shields," she said, slamming her fists onto the console.

"How long until we reach the other side of the sensor grid?"

"One minute, 45 seconds."

"Open a secure channel to Ensign Kim's shuttle. Order him to enter the grid."

She keyed in the typed message and sent it off. Seconds later she received a response: ON MY WAY. HOLD ON SEVEN. While she knew the message was meant to be reassuring, she didn't gain the desired effect. She was more skeptical and pessimistic as she reasoned it would be impossible for Ensign Kim's shuttle to reach them as they were both traveling at the same velocity. Yet as soon as she had finished the thought, sensors detected a Class-two shuttle off their port bow.

He must have warped in, she reasoned. An extremely unwise maneuver given they were so close to an asteroid belt, she thought. The smallest miscalculation and he would have collided and become one with a spinning, lifeless rock.

Seven was surprised again when she felt the Delta Flyer wobble momentarily as Kim's shuttle engaged a tractor beam onto the shuttle. An odd maneuver, she thought, until she realized that now, the weapon platforms were targeting his shuttle and not theirs. This gave her the opportunity to do immediate makeshift repairs to the shuttle's main systems.

Having stabilized Ensign Paris' condition, Tuvok returned to his console to assist in Seven's repairs. "45 seconds until we reach the other side," he stated.

"Shields are back up to 85%. Damage to the port impulse engine has been partially repaired. We will be able to sustain four-fifths impulse on our

return journey," Seven reported. Return journey, she repeated in her mind. It would be a near impossible feat to return without severe damage, especially with a non-active Ensign Paris.

As she was about to check the status of Ensign Kim's shuttle, the Delta Flyer rocked forward as the tractor beam abruptly disengaged. Looking out the forward window, she saw a glimpse of a Federation shuttle twirling out of control as it passed above. Quickly checking her sensors, she discovered disconcerting information. His shuttle had lost engines, inertial dampeners, shields, main power, and life-support. Ensign Kim was spinning out of control and adrift, an easy target for the automated enemy weapon platforms that they were ordered not to fire upon.

It broke all reasonable sense for Janeway to order them not to fire on the weapon platforms. Even Interstellar Rules of Engagement allowed for the defensive use of arms when under attack. Yet the Captain was resolute, justifying her decision by emphasizing that she did not want to be responsible for changing the balance of power in the war between the Brakolli and the Shakarians. The Shakarians were willing to trade with them, and that was all she was willing to do. She thought it was a large enough impact that they were trading with basic materials such as foodstuffs and materials. To destroy the military capacity of their enemy would have too much of an impact.

Yet now, Ensign Kim lay spinning in space, seconds away from being destroyed. Her breathing became uneven as the thought of losing Ensign Kim burned in her mind. Her lips curved downward with morose anger as the memory of a dying One superimposed with the image of a lifeless body of Ensign Kim. She could not let the image in her mind turn into reality. The despair from losing One was almost more than she could bear. To lose the closest man she ever knew would leave her a body without a soul. She accessed the piloting controls for the Delta Flyer and swiftly turned the shuttle around.

"What are you doing?" Tuvok demanded.

"We are going to retrieve Ensign Kim," she declared.

"That is unwise at this time, Seven."

A part of her agreed with him, but her heart thought otherwise. "Perhaps. But it is necessary."

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She frowned at discovering how close she was to losing the Ensign. Yet, tears of relief flooded her face knowing that despite it all, he was still alive. She managed to thank the medic before he and the nurse left, and crouched down on the floor beside a bruised, yet breathing Ensign Kim. She gazed at his unconscious face, content to see and hear the soft breaths through his nose, , to see his eyes shift as he slept, to admire the vibrant colour of his lips, kept alive with rich human blood coursing through microscopic veins.

Vanity lost to her love, she knelt down to press her lips against his in a first show of affection. She applied a gentle amount of pressure at first, as if fearing she could suck the life out of his weakened body. But, she kissed ever more deeply, pressing his warm lips between hers, feeling his unconscious touch caress her stricken heart. Pain, despair, agony, fear, washed away with each successive touch of lips. Two years of constant and consistent attention by Ensign Kim culminated in a thankful Seven of Nine, transferring a flood of emotion with long, passionate kisses. She became overwhelmed as sorrow and joy rushed to the conscious surface of her soul.

She began to whimper and weep as she confronted the loss of her only protege, One, and the progress she had made with a compassionate Ensign.

Gently lifting his body on to hers, she embraced his chest, his hair wiping away her tears as she rocked with her dearest friend, the noise and bustle around them drowning away with each emotional tear.

And the Adventure Continues...