

Title: View from the Outside
Author: Richard Chu
Series: VOY
Rating: PG
Codes: K/7

Summary: Through developing a friendship with an alien ambassador, and attempting to help him out of his personal and social situation, Seven learns the value of her relationship with Ensign Kim.

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.

THIS IS A DRAFT; DO NOT ARCHIVE. PERMISSION NOT GRANTED TO ANYONE YET.

Author's Notes: This is yet another one of those prequels to an existing story, and this is one to "Reason for Living." It is somewhat of a departure because it relies heavily on a totally new character. The story is set within the fifth season of Voyager.

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_chu001@idmail.com.

[This is a poem I wrote that compliments the story's theme, which will be incorporated in a latter part of the story]

"View from the Outside"

The stars that glitter in the pale black night,
Are points of call in our futures bright.

Human and alien, together in unity,
Forge profound links to establish Community.

Our hearts together, our minds combined,
To explore the galaxy for the superb and sublime.

As We boldly traverse the depths of space,
We meet new peoples of different species and race.

The point of our journey is to never let go,
For tomorrow me may come again to say hello.
-----Zephram Cochrane.

Please email feedback to: richard_chu001@idmail.com.

"Is that wise?" Chakotay asked, bewildered by Janeway's decision to bring Seven of Nine on an ambassadorial mission with Neelix.

"I don't foresee a problem," Janeway replied before sipping her morning coffee from behind her Ready Room desk. "The Doctor has made a lot of headway in teaching Seven the basics of ambassadorial protocol." She motioned Chakotay over to her desk from which she leaned over to whisper, "Besides, she's been practising her smile."

Chakotay chuckled, showing his dimples. "Trying to impress the Elogian Ambassador?"

"It couldn't hurt," she mused. "In fact, they revere all women."

"I'd bet they'd teach the Kazon a few lessons."

She rolled her eyes. "You couldn't teach a Kazon to say hello without thrusting a phaser down their throat, let alone give women their due credit."

"No wonder the Borg didn't assimilate them."

"Ironic isn't it?" she said. "In any case, Neelix will be with her, so he'll take care of everything."

"You're sure it's a good idea making Seven an 'Ambassador-for-a-day'?"

"Well, if I was negotiating with the Hirogen, perhaps not, but I think the Elogians are a patient and understanding people. Seven could learn a lot from them, if the Elogian Ambassador is any indication."

Before Chakotay managed to continue the conversation, Janeway's comm badge chirped. "Yes?"

"Captain, Ambassador Ologin is hailing," Ensign Kim reported.

"Patch it through in here."

Her computer screen cleared itself of ship reports to momentarily reveal the Federation insignia, before an image appeared of a butterscotch skinned, smooth faced alien with flattened nose and imbedded ears, and deep emerald eyes with dark giraffe-like spots on his head. "It is an honour to speak to you again, Captain," he stated regally.

"The honour is all mine, Ambassador."

"Your modesty is another quality I hold with great esteem."

"It's nothing, I assure you," Janeway said, smiling, noticing her face flush slightly.

The Ambassador smiled back, appearing genuinely content to have produced the external response. With that he got down to business. "As requested, we have a shipment of high grade dilithium crystals ready for transport, as well as the largest assortment of edible vegetation for your hydroponics bay."

"Thank you so much." She was impressed with their generosity. "I will send Neelix down in a shuttle to transport the very generous amount of supplies."

"I hope you will be accompanying him."

"I'm afraid I can't," she said with genuine disappointment. "But, I will be sending a fellow crewmember with Neelix. Her name is Seven of Nine."

"Unique name."

"Unique individual."

"Well, I look forward to meeting both of them." He looked reverently at her and said, "I hope we will be able to speak again."

"It would be my pleasure," she said, bowing her head slightly before the Ambassador ended the communication.

Chakotay still standing, listening to the whole conversation, said, "I think he likes you."

She gazed at him teasingly. "You may want to take lessons from him."

Ambassador Malboran Ologin leaned back in his soft, tan-leathered chair, impressed and enchanted with Kathryn Janeway. The fact that she was Captain of a starship travelling across the galaxy proved to him her strong will, determination, and strength of character. She would have to be tough to fight off anyone who would dare threaten her ship and crew. Yet, listening to her speak over the comm channel, he felt her inner warmth, generosity of spirit, and kindness of heart. He was mesmerized by the fact that she was willing to exhibit to him those gracious, intrinsic values of her personality. It had been so long since any woman, Elogian or alien, had been so considerate.

But alas, he was not going to have the opportunity to meet her face to face. While they had shared conversations over the past couple days over the communications channel, he knew those conversations would be different had they shared each other's personal presence. Body language would speak volumes. He had a feeling though, that she knew of his feelings. While he was out of practice, he still could sense a friendly distance from her. Had they actually met, he was sure he'd know for certain.

He broke his daydream for companionship with a heavy sigh, and got up to head for the Elogian interstellar trade spaceport. He briefly glanced at his

appearance on a large mirror, and straightened his sleek, forest green suit. Looking at the top of his head, he frowned, seeing one of his head spots out of place. Staring at the mal-aligned piece of thin, silk-like fabric in the mirror, which somehow overlapped with another, he moved it to produce a quarter-centimetre space with the other pieces, forming a giraffe-skin pattern. After looking at his head from a variety of angles and being satisfied with his appearance, he walked out of his green-shaded office, down a whitewashed hallway, to a local transporter. "Kolotin Spaceport; Gate 312," he requested, and he beamed away.

The Spaceport was the largest structure in Kolotin, the Elogian capital city. Two kilometres in diameter and three kilometres in height, the giant cone-shaped, girder and concrete structure was the primary interstellar commercial destination for over three dozen different species. From a distance, it looked like the core of an advanced insect hive piercing the purple sky, with shuttles of different designs and sizes flying in and out, up and around to the hundreds of shuttle pads and docking bays in the structure. Giant elevators carrying shuttles moved up and down, inside and out of the structure in an intricate internal transportation system. Neelix and Seven were on the peak of the structure, a dozen other shuttle pads surrounding theirs'.

Malboran, conscious while in mid-transport, and seeing a formidable Federation shuttlecraft sitting on the landing pad, could feel a brisk wind nab at him. He hated Gate 312 or any of the gates in the 300s, as they were the highest pads, notorious for their high winds. As his body fully rematerialized, he looked down and felt his body as if making sure no parts were missing. It still bewildered him how his body could be pieced together so perfectly with the high winds pelting the open-air transporter pad, despite having knowledge of the advanced containment fields. He thought one of these days a part of him would fly off and splatter his violet blood on some unsuspecting shuttle window.

Feeling something move on his head, mumbled a curse as he realized that his headpieces were no longer arranged properly. He noticed two individuals standing beside their shuttle, and thrust aside his vanity as he walked into the wind to greet them.

"Welcome to the Elogian Homeworld," he shouted against the howling wind.

"Thank you," Neelix shouted back, his hair sticking straight up as it blew against the wind. "Nice weather you have here."

Malboran smiled at the humour-filled tone. "It's not so bad when you get under a kilometre in the air," he commented back. "But, I must apologize for the shuttle arrangements."

Neelix could see Seven was about to make a curt remark, and quickly cut her off. "It's quite alright." Seven glared at him, strands of blond hair flying loose into golden flames.

"I assure you that this will not affect the goods you require. We will be sending your shuttle down to level 142 where the crystals and the plants are securely stored. Each shuttle pad is its own elevator."

"Excellent," Neelix beamed.

"But, for us humanoids, I suggest the transporter. It's much faster." And with that, the three of them entered the transporter pad and beamed down to ground zero.

They rematerialized, each looking distinctively unkept in contrast to the whitewashed, tidy and serene atmosphere of the corridor leading to Malboran's office, their ears still ringing from the howling wind. Seven's hair had thick strands fall loose, while Neelix's looked like tall dried wildgrass sprouting out of a desert patch. Looking at their unkept appearance, Malboran suggested, "I have a guest restroom over to your right. If you like, you can get tidied up." He seemed to focus on Seven more so than Neelix, even though Neelix probably needed it more than her.

They both nodded and walked over to the only door on the right side of the hallway. He watched them walk over, and then heard them mumble animatedly about something. Neelix was motioning his hand to let Seven go in first, yet she seemed to hesitate. In the end, they both entered together, only to bump shoulders.

Assuming they'd be a short while, he rushed to his office to tidy his own appearance. Looking at his mirror, he grumbled at the fact that his headpieces were clumped together in front on his forehead, a patch of vitality on a pale, bald head. Begrudgingly, he went again to rearrange the odd-shaped spots, making sure that they covered his entire head, each distanced half a centimetre from each other. Neelix and Seven walked in just as he finished his last touch-up, their appearance back to normal, except for Neelix's frizzy hair.

Acting unconcerned, Malboran moved over to his desk and picked up a hand-held triangular object and passed it to Neelix. "This is the manifest list for the supplies we will be transporting to your shuttle," he said with a smile.

Taking a quick glance over, Neelix replied. "It looks about right. If you don't mind, I'd like to see if I can assist the transfer crew."

Malboran was notably disappointed that they apparently did not want to stay very long. While it was his job to simply assist travellers and traders in procuring what they needed or desired, it was always in the hope of developing meaningful interpersonal ties. After all, he was an Ambassador, not a salesman. "Well, if that's what you wish, I'll take you back to the Spaceport."

"Oh, no, you needn't go through all the trouble," Neelix said. "I'm just very eager to see the variety of edible plants you're generously giving to us."

Malboran's spirit rose. "Oh, in that case, if you'd like, I can show you to our vegetation production facilities."

"Really? That would be wonderful! But, again, you needn't go through all the trouble. Just tell me what to tell the transporter, and I'll be on my way. I'm sure you're a very busy man."

"Indeed I am," Malboran said wearily. "But, schedules can be delayed..." He went out and said it, "Not friendship."

"Of course," Neelix said as they all got up and headed for the transporter.

Neelix and Malboran's laugh echoed in an enormous bunker-like structure, encompassing hectares of lush, vegetable and fruit laden land, brightly lit with tubed lighting elements stretching across the entire roof, buzzing their heat and light to the floor. Seven sat in the back seat, efficiently reading an Elogian PADD. "So you're telling me," Malboran said between chuckles, "that the Talaxian monk actually said 'pubic ministry' instead of 'public ministry' to a crowd of 400,000?"

"Hee-hee, yes! The next day, the media had a field day: 'Talaxian proclaims pubic ministry,'" Neelix said before cracking up.

They gave each other a few moments to let their laughter calm down on its own. Malboran sighed contently before directing his voice to the back seat, "Didn't you think that was funny, Seven?"

Matter-of-factly, she replied, "I fail to see how a Freudian slip is considered humorous."

Neelix gave a shake of his head. "Don't mind her, Malboran. She still has yet to understand the subtle nuances of Talaxian humour."

He gave Neelix a curious glance, but agreed to not continue that conversational thread. Looking up and around, Neelix said, "I must say, this is one impressive marvel of Elogian engineering."

"I do not mean to sound arrogant, but you are correct. Three hundred years ago, our ancestors foresaw the inevitable land shortage of the entire planet and began building structures like these."

"Land shortage?" Seven finally spoke up and asked.

"Yes, given the population growth projections of the time, the Planetary Council believed that within a hundred years, the planet would not be able to sustain the population with our inefficient distribution of land-based resources. So, they engaged in the most ambitious social and infrastructural reformation in Elogian history. It was vital that every centimetre of land be used in the most efficient way possible. Buildings would not stand any lower than 100 storeys, transportation would be multi-leveled, whether it be on the surface or underground, and all industrial production would no longer have the luxury of inefficient warehouses stretching three storeys high."

"You mean this greenhouse is more than one storey?" Neelix asked as he noticed a blue light blinking on the front console of the cart.

"Absolutely. It goes three levels underground, and four levels above." Malboran said as he noticed the light, but ignored it. "And above that are residential and commercial units reaching up 90 more storeys."

"Astonishing!" Neelix exclaimed.

Seven became increasingly curious. "How are you able to maintain soil fertility?"

"The natural way. Each level contains all the necessarily layers of earth, insects, biodegradable material--everything to provide the appropriate level of production. We don't use any chemical or technological treatments to artificially maintain soil fertility."

"Would that not put extraordinary strain on the structure itself?" Neelix asked. The light stopped blinking.

"Indeed it does," he replied. "But our Engineers did nothing short of a miracle. The entire building is built bubbled-layer atop layer. It's just that the building is so large, you cannot tell. These 'greenhouses' as you call them, have lasted for over two hundred years."

"Without any degradation to its structural integrity?" Seven asked.

"There is of course degradation, but so low that our Engineers believe the buildings will last another 500 years before they need to be rebuilt. But the building life will last much longer with the installation of structural integrity fields we acquired from an allied species of ours."

"Impressive."

"You wouldn't be the only one who has said this," Malboran beamed.

"Could we see the other levels?" Neelix asked.

"I can show you, but they aren't that different to this one. We can, however, go to what we've designated the Galactic Garden. It has the widest assortment of flowers, shrubs, trees, grasses, all of which mix into the most soothing scent you will ever find this side of the galaxy."

"Sounds fascinating!"

Malboran smiled, happy to please his guests, and turned towards one of the edges of the warehouse. They retained a content solitude as the lukewarm air, fresh with the scent of vegetative life, swept across them. Neelix looked around, seeing the very neat rows of green, red, and yellow, cared for by a multitude of women. At least, he presumed they were women. There wasn't much difference of these Elogians to Malboran, except that they had hair instead of spots.

He was about to ask about the lack of men in the fields when he realized the cart was slowing. Looking ahead, just before a large, arched gate to a very bright chamber, he saw two carts blocking their way, with a pair of tall, foreboding uniformed Elogian women clearly waiting for them. Malboran appeared frustrated by their presence. His attitude lost its official flare as he said to Neelix and Seven, "You two please stay quiet. I'll take care of this."

He stopped just before touching the two women and gave a casual smile. "Tressa, Ranan, what a pleasant surprise!"

The two women gave quick glances to Neelix and Seven, and maintained a forced composure. "Ambassador Ologin," a tall, built, aqua-blue eyed, crue-cut brunette said with slight mockery. "The Service has been trying to contact you for the past hour."

"Really? There's nothing on my Locator to suggest any incoming messages," he said, glancing over to the PADD Seven was reading.

"Interesting," Tressa said suspiciously. "We should get that checked."

"Oh, you needn't bother," he said, his tone slightly condescending. "So, what is so important that the Service dragged the two of you out here."

"You obviously haven't been listening," Tressa said indignantly, shaking her head in disgust. "We're hear to get you back to your office and back to work."

Malboran opened his arms to display Neelix and Seven, "I am at work."

She seemed to ignore his statement. "The Mandalans have been waiting for 75 minutes just to get their shuttle cleared for landing," she said. She gave the slightest indication of a smile to Neelix before continuing. "While the starship Voyager is a formidable and intriguing ship, she is not a major planetary trading partner."

Malboran gave a huff. "You needn't worry about the Mandalans, I arranged everything with Partia before I left."

"She was given other tasks to complete."

"She what?" he asked rhetorically, angry at the apparent insubordination. "No one can do that; She's my assistant!"

Tressa turned wide-eyed in anger. "What did you just say?"

His body froze, his face draining to a pale shade, not only by the menacing attitude of Tressa, but by the shock over his own words. He stifled out, "I...What I meant...to say was...she should have told me she wasn't going to reschedule." His head tilted down slightly, ashamed. Afraid.

"I see," she said, her anger contented by his change in attitude. She turned to her partner, giving her a look that resulted in her retreat to her conveyance. "Well, now that we have this misunderstanding all brought out into the open, why don't we all head back to your office...Ambassador."

He nodded in acquiescence. Turning the wheel as far as it could go, he accelerated, heading back from whence they came, the two women following in their own vehicles. Turning to Malboran, Neelix asked finally, "What was that all about?"

He gave a heavy sigh. "It's a long story. A very long story."

Seven walked out of the transporter to Malboran's office to find the hallway filled with Elogian women. Malboran and Neelix walked one behind the other, getting disapproving looks from them all. It seemed strange that so many people were standing in the hallway, performing no apparent tasks, as the corridor lacked any productive furniture or appliance. As soon as she walked behind Neelix, however, the looks changed when they were directed to her. They eyed her with, what she assumed to be, amused curiosity. Their frowns turned to polite smiles as they looked at her face, and glancing quickly to

her chest. Looking back at them, Seven gave them her own distinctive curious look at them, bewildered by their odd behaviour. She felt a sense of security entering Malboran's office, closing the door behind her.

She walked over to his desk, and stood at attention, observing him. He was clearly distraught ever since his encounter with Tressa, whom she deduced to be a part of an Elogian security force. The attitude of the women in the corridor did nothing to improve his state of mind. She watched as he slumped into his chair, the air of Ambassadorial authority drained from him. Taking a deep breath, he leaned over his desk and pushed a button. "Partia, are you there?"

A melodic, yet stern voice came from the intercom imbedded in his desk. "Yes, Malboran. What is it?"

"You may now grant clearance to the Mandalan freighter."

"Good," she said curtly and cut off the comm link.

He huffed wryly and leaned back on his chair, the spots on his head shifting out of place.

"We came all the way back here just for you to say that?" Neelix asked astonished. "Why didn't you just do that back at the greenhouse?"

He smiled and pointed to the PADD Seven was holding. "Remember? I said it wasn't working."

She looked at the PADD, analyzing it and discovering that it was not malfunctioning. "Why did you lie to the woman, Tressa?" Neelix asked.

"It's a very long story," he said wearily. "And, as you now know, I have a lot of work to do."

Neelix gave a compassionate smile and decided to take leave of him. Malboran smiled, and bowed to him, giving him the directions for the Spaceport. Neelix was about to leave when he noticed Seven standing still. "Are you coming?" he asked.

Giving a moment of contemplation, she directed to Malboran, "No. I wish to stay and observe the Ambassador."

Both of them gave her a bewildered look. Neelix eased over to Seven, gently directing her to the door. "Seven, Malboran is a very busy man, and it would be best if we leave him to his work."

Seven resisted. "I wish to stay. Captain Janeway did state that my presence here was for the purpose of improving my ambassadorial skills. Observing a 'busy' Ambassador would serve my assigned purpose."

Neelix couldn't rebut her statement. Flabbergasted, he asked Malboran, "If that's okay with you?"

His look was still in surprise, a rush of pleasant amusement emerging. "It's okay with me," he said, smiling.

"Yes. Species 3913."

"By that low number, I'd say we've known each other for a long time."

"52 years, five months, 21 days. In that time your species has managed to totally resist assimilation."

His eyes squinted in contemplation. "And do you know why?"

She gave a blank look. "How could the Borg know if they had not assimilated any of your species."

"Exactly!" he said, snapping his fingers. "They don't know because they don't interact. They observe, and if they find something they want, they just take it, no questions asked."

"It is efficient."

"It is a weakness," he said. "By competing for information through conflict, they lose the trust necessary for cooperation."

"Trust is irrelevant."

"What does your humanity have to say about that?"

His question caught her off guard. Speaking of the Borg, she put all her efforts in explaining her ingrained understanding of them, with Borg concentration and focus. Yet, it had not entered her mind that a different perspective lay dormant within her.

She realized that she was speaking as a Borg, with information and history being the source of their strength. By assimilating individuals, the Borg squeezed out every gram of experience and added it to the Collective consciousness. Yet, there was strength in knowing one's own experiences. Rationality, intelligence, was supported by emotions that had slowly emerged since her liberation. Her pride buffered her confidence. And with confidence, she functioned efficiently. Negative emotion, too, was a source of strength. Sorrow amplified memory. Fear exacted erudition. Sympathy exalted compassion.

With her own experiences, trust was not inefficient, nor irrelevant. It lay at the source of strength for humanoid existence outside the Borg. She realized this from her own life. Only with the trust from Janeway soon after being removed from the Collective could she leave the brig, and begin to experience human individuality. Only with the trust Lieutenant Torres had in Janeway's judgement would she let her clean up the ship of Borg components. Without trust, any social, political, or military organization could exist without the implicit understanding of superior and subordinate, mentor and disciple, parent and child. She looked up to Malboran and said, "Trust is not irrelevant. It is necessary."

"Yes, and the only way to gain trust is through interaction," he said softly. "We, along with hundreds of other species, have managed to resist the Borg because we've managed to share our thoughts cooperatively, trading secrets with each other, helping entire civilizations resist assimilation."

"It appears to be more efficient."

"Not efficient. Effective." He grinned. "Another rule about diplomacy is that diction and interpretation are your best sources of strength. Our allies don't always agree with us, and we can go on for a very long time disagreeing, or just being plain stubborn. Obviously that's not very efficient, but in the end, when the need arises at a particular point, our collective goals are achieved."

"Apparently," Seven said, slightly defiant.

He notice her tone and failed to hide his amusement. "Seven, the point is, if you want to observe, you're going to have to interact. As Captain Janeway so colloquially said to me, 'It's the name of the game.'"

"I understand." She paused to think of what else to say, but her mind went blank. For a moment that seemed like an eternity, she stood, her eyes aimlessly gazed out the window, looking for something to comment on.

Malboran saw the confusion in her face, and suggested, "Why don't I show you my desk?"

She was relieved to be given something to 'observe' and walked behind the desk, beside Malboran's chair. He busily tapped in a few sequences to vary the information on the screens. Feeling her presence beside him, he turned around, to look up at her face, only to find Seven's breasts blocking the view. Like the women in the hallway, he eyed them with curiosity, but quickly turned back around to refocus his mind. Awkwardly pointing to a screen on the top, right corner of the desk, he said, "This...uh...screen is showing the arrival list of ships landing or preparing to land at the Spaceport. Basically, it shows arrival time, place of origin, cargo manifests or requests." He keyed in a sequence as he said, "If I needed to, I could access a detailed report of any particular ship, cross-referencing to previous trades, political and economic links to other allied planets, or detailed information of the ship's crew. Anything."

Impressed, she asked, "Is this another...monument to your great Elogian reformation?" She clearly was trying to choose her words carefully.

"Yes, indeed it is. This building was constructed about 150 years ago, about the same time the Spaceport was being built. Because The Service would be the vital 'Elogian touch' to the Spaceport's purpose, they made an explicit attempt to link the two structures to the same computer networking system."

"Are other systems linked to yours?"

"Yes, but they are more or less independent from ours. The greenhouse mainframe is connected to the global network, but it can easily be severed. One thing the Planetary Council was concerned about was a total shutdown of the planet's computer system. So, they decentralized it."

"That is similar to the Borg."

"Yes, it is," he said, turning to glimpse her face.

Just then, Neelix returned, and found Malboran in mid-movement, his face not yet peering over Seven's chest. "Am I interrupting something?" he asked.

Malboran spun around surprised. "Neelix! You're back so soon."

There was a dubious look on Neelix's face, but he let it pass. "Well, chalk it up to Elogian efficiency. By the time I got there, they were almost done."

"Our workers can be very motivated." With a tone of sadness, he asked, "I take it, you're here to retrieve Seven from my company?"

"Yes, we must be on our way." Neelix sensed his shift in attitude, and impulsively asked, "Why don't you join us?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Come back with us to Voyager. I can prepare a meal fit for an Ambassador!"

Malboran was very hesitant. Despite all the encouragement Neelix could muster, Malboran wouldn't accept his offer. "At least ask your superior, what was she, 'Her Excellency'?"

"Alright, alright," he acquiesced. He typed a priority message to her Excellency's office, and quickly got a reply. "Negative."

Neelix remained unrelenting. "Tell them it will only be for a few hours."

He typed in the request again, but only to receive a negative response. "Why not?" Neelix asked.

"I can't ask that," Malboran replied. "You don't question Her Excellency's judgement."

"Well, we'll see about that," Neelix said defiantly. "Neelix to Janeway."

"Janeway here; what is it Neelix?" came from the comm badge.

"I'd like to invite Ambassador Ologin to a special banquet in his honour, but the Elogian authorities are creating a bit of a snag down here. Perhaps if you made a formal request?"

Malboran stood from his chair, alarmed. "No, Neelix, you needn't do that!"

"I'll see what I can do, Janeway out."

Malboran was becoming figgity and concerned. "You really didn't have to go to all the trouble. I have lots of work to do. The Mandalan shipment is quite a complex one."

"All the more reason for you to get some much needed R&R."

"R&R?"

"Rest and Relaxation," Seven explained.

Just then Neelix's comm badge chirped to life. "Neelix, permission has been granted."

Neelix smiled triumphantly, opening the door to Malboran's office. "After you, Ambassador."

For the first time in a very long time, Malboran began to feel excessively self-conscious. Not only was he constantly checking on the position of his spots, he was breathing deeply, as if building up a reservoir in case he was to pass out. His mind was unfocused, constantly changing subjects, barely touching a thought before moving on to something else. It was an unending cycle of responsibilities he kept trying to put in his mind, to alleviate the worry of meeting Captain Janeway.

He was unpreple to ndaght bffi guaro nHow sougldhe ktantdin hfrontof hier?

H

"

P

"Of course. But it would not have been possible without your...empowered support."

Janeway smiled at his compliment and turned to introduce her senior staff. He looked at each of them as she announced them, and bowed slightly in recognition. "It's a pleasure to meet you all." Turning back to Janeway, he said, "I must say, if this shuttle bay is any indication, you have quite an impressive ship."

"She's held together pretty well these past five years," she said with an ounce of pride. "After doing some reading on your world, I must admit, it is quite amazing itself."

"Perhaps," he said modestly. "But seeing a ship of this calibre, from the other side of the galaxy no doubt, is a very special moment."

"You are more than welcome to tour the ship whenever you like."

"Thank you, Captain."

Janeway turned to Neelix and said, "Why don't you show the Ambassador to his quarters."

"I'd like nothing better to do Captain, but I think I should get started on that special banquet for Mr. Ologin."

"Of course," she replied. "Seven, why don't you do the honours."

She nodded in agreement. "If you will come with me, Ambassador."

"Lead the way," he said jovially.

As he left the shuttlebay with Seven, his initial apprehension subsided, replaced with a sudden jolt of joyful contentment. All the way to his quarters he had a growing smile on his face, as if each step brought a greater happiness to him. Whether he felt he deserved such joy or not, he knew that his presence on the ship was a developing dream come true.

Arriving in his quarters, he invited Seven in. She hesitated, explaining that protocol stated it inadvisable to enter an Ambassador's quarters as soon as he arrived aboard ship. But, after a bit of logical manipulation and diplomatic interpretation, she entered. "Would you like a drink?" Malboran asked.

"I do not require any liquid sustenance."

He smiled. "Isn't there a Starfleet protocol somewhere that says it's bad form to not accept a drink from an Ambassador?"

She was about to respond, but an internal realization stopped her before she uttered a syllable. "Yes."

"So then, what would you like to drink?"

"I do not know," she said, staring blankly at Malboran.

"I take it people don't often offer you a drink."

"Quite the contrary. Certain crewmembers do offer 'a drink,' but I regularly decline their offer."

"I, on the other hand, rarely decline a drink. For one thing, it's bad manners, for an Ambassador at least, but most of all, it gives me the opportunity to try out some alien concoctions," he said gleefully, rubbing his hands together in anticipation, eyeing the replicator. "I've been doing some research of the information Captain Janeway shared with us, and I am very interested in trying out...Saurian brandy." He ordered a glass and examined its unique, almost florescent green colour. He waved the glass gently, swirling the brandy so as to smell its unique aroma under his flattened nose. After lifting the glass up to his eye level to get a second glance, he gulped the beverage in one long, constant swig.

PART 5 BEGINS

His eyes closed, Malboran slowly removed the glass from his lips, his throat still swallowing the last remnants of the brandy in his mouth. He remained motionless, his breath halted, relishing in the after effects of this quick intake. Soon enough, the alcoholic effect took over, his throat unable to handle the intense burning. He slowly wheezed, the small vibrations of his vocal chords massaging the intensity away. He turned to Seven, a broad smile on his face. His voice was a hoarse whisper. "W-o-w!"

Seven raised her eyebrow curiously. Malboran continued, "Now that's good. Very, very, good!"

Her curiosity remained unabated. "What is 'good' about it?"

He shook his head exaggeratedly. "Tsk, tsk, Seven. You just can't explain the effect a good alcoholic drink can have."

"By the flushness of your face, and the growing disequilibrium of your balance centres, it appears the only 'good' is that you are intoxicated."

"There's nothing necessarily wrong with that," he said before snickering. "In fact, Ambassadors have been known to do their best work after a few drinks."

"I find that difficult to believe."

He tried to look serious for a moment as he wobbled over to the couch. "You haven't been doing your homework, Seven," he said, plopping himself down. "The Politeks. One of our oldest trade partners. When a conflict broke out between them and the Woracians, we stepped in to mediate. And do you know how we managed to do it?"

She looked unimpressed. "You intoxicated them."

He considered her interpretation for a moment before saying, "Something like that. We just so happen to have the Politeks' favourite beverage at the negotiations, and the Woracians' as well. Of course, the more frustrated they got, the more they drank, and soon enough, they had had enough, and they signed a treaty before the day was out."

"It sounds incredible."

He laughed. "Next time you come back down to the planet, I'll show you. We have the whole thing on record!" He laughed again, repeating the drunken images in his mind. He glanced over at Seven, thinking she would be laughing with him, but saw the opposite. "Oh, Seven, you definitely have to get a sense of humour!"

"I was simply trying to understand how the Politeks and the Woracians maintained the treaty given the obviously irregular circumstances of their agreement."

"It's simple," he said. "When they came to their senses afterwards and saw the record, they laughed themselves back to the bargaining table. They saw how ridiculous they looked, and realized they weren't all that different, and settled their differences. To this day, they are the strongest partners in the Elogian Alliance."

"Clearly a 'sense of humour' is an...effective attribute to possess."

He smiled to her. "Ambassadors know how to have fun!"

The Ambassadorial banquet was not about to commence for another several hours due to the lack of preparation on Neelix's part. Malboran didn't mind in the slightest, and took the opportunity to tour the ship with Seven and the Captain. Neelix had suggested that Malboran contact the Elogian Ambassadorial Service to inform them of the delay, but he insisted it was not necessary. He assured Janeway, Neelix and Seven that he had made all the necessary arrangements.

Confident in his assurance, they toured the ship, arriving first in Engineering. He was able to get an in depth view of the warp core as the new dilithium crystals were being installed by B'Elanna Torres. He was impressed by the delicate nature of the warp drive system, as the Elogian FTL drives were less efficient, due mainly to the fact that interstellar travel was not an important preoccupation. He explained to Seven and Janeway that the land shortage suffered two hundred years ago was due to the fact that most Elogians desired to remain on the planet.

Leaving Torres to her work, they went to Astrometrics where Seven boldly boasted about its efficient and 'state of the art' equipment. Malboran seemed exceptionally impressed by the sensitivity of the instruments and the range of the sensors. He tested the equipment himself, looking up the Woracian homeworld and to his surprise, he found it, in intricate detail, from its planetary composition to the Woracian population. The Elogians had such sensitive equipment, but it was not nearly as miniaturized as the Borgified systems. They had enormous honey-combed sensor arrays in geostationary orbit around the Elogian moon, that dwarfed Voyager itself, for such detailed scans.

Their next stop was the holodeck, but what impressed him there was the vast array of programs available. "How many worlds are programmed into the holodeck?" Malboran asked.

"Around 150," Janeway answered. "While I haven't tried all of them, we have a wide array of programming that can take us to any place, any time."

"Very impressive. We too have 'holodecks,' but our programming is very limited by comparison."

"Interesting," Seven said curiously. "Given the long history of your planet and your interstellar alliance, I would have assumed you would have at least as much programming as Voyager's collection."

Janeway added, "Especially since what we have here is only a small portion of what is available in the Interstellar Federation Library back on Earth."

"Elogians don't like looking back, or going to other planets," Malboran said bluntly. It was a standard Elogian Ambassadorial response to such a question, one he was practised in giving. Usually, he hoped that the tone of his voice, and the ambiguity of the answer would signal to the curious listeners that he didn't want to talk about it. But this time was different. He wanted to talk about it, if only because he had gained a trust in Seven, and a respect for Janeway.

His hope came true when Seven asked, "By my experience, you have shown an interest in 'looking' back. You went to great lengths to tell us about the history of your planet, as well as showing us some of the Elogian industrial facilities. I find this to be in odds to your statement..."

"Seven," Janeway warned. "Clearly he doesn't want to talk about it," she said, commenting on Malboran's tone.

"It's quite alright, Captain. But to answer the question brewing in your mind, Seven, you're right. I do have an interest. But I'm different."

Voyager was not a ship designed for diplomacy, at least not the Voyager that had spent five years in the Delta Quadrant. All standardized equipment and protocols from the plasma conduits to the structure of rooms had been tweaked, reformed, or transformed in one way or another to make it more of a ship of survival than a showcase of the Federation's greatness. The Captain's personal dining room was no exception when it had turned into the crew's Mess Hall by an overly eager Mr. Neelix.

But, when it came for a real diplomatic dinner, Neelix had to improvise again, and for him it was of the worse form. He had to try to revert his Mess Hall to a room fit for an Ambassador. And the first part was to vacate the premises. It pained him to announce to everyone that they had to leave. It was heartbreaking for him to turn away his regular customers, but he knew it was his fault. When he asked Malboran about coming to Voyager, he didn't think his spur of the moment decision would result in a momentary shock to his entire system of feeding the crew.

But all was not a loss for him, thanks to one Mr. Thomas Eugene Paris. While Tom was not his best critic, Neelix didn't hold it against him. Their differences in culinary tastes was simply a result of different cultures, different quadrants of the galaxy. It was only natural that one's Leola Root stew was another's Pepperoni Pizza.

Neelix had tried Tom's pizza, but thought it a rather unpleasant experience. The combination of melted cheese and the rather bland pepperoni, topped on a soggy, circular piece of flattened bread ironically called a 'crust,' was not appealing to his Talaxian sensibilities.

But what Tom lacked in taste, he made up in food management. Neelix feared that the dinner would result in a total shutdown of his services to the crew. Tom, however, came up with an ingenious plan, which he had called 'take-out.' Apparently, in the mid to late 20th century, a form of food distribution had developed where people could order prepared food, and take it with them as opposed to eating it on the spot in the eating establishment. Tom had called it an improvement on the sandwich, and a precursor to the portable food replicator. Neelix agreed with him, and in short order, a 'take-out window' was created just behind the kitchen. He had to bore a hole to make up the 'window' but he had acquired help from some of his most enthusiastic patrons. It wasn't until the window was complete that he remembered he should have asked Janeway for permission, but seeing she didn't mind too much when he had procured her dining room, he thought this window wouldn't be a problem.

All the time spent taking care of the crew's welfare had eaten into the time required to prepare the dinner itself. One of the first problems was the arrangement of the tables and chairs. While he had to accept that he couldn't do anything about the chairs, he had to do something about the tables. He knew that he had to have one long table, and providing that was simple: just push together enough tables to provide enough seating. The problem was, the tables were too narrow. They didn't give enough room between people across from the table. It was a slight detail, but after reading up on the protocols associated with Federation official gatherings, he came to accept it as a diplomatic norm to respect the personal space of anyone sitting and eating at the table. He tried pushing two tables together to widen the setup, but that left too much room. With his helping hands, he managed to solve the problem by procuring and laying out a wider piece of duranium over the length of the tables.

While arranging the tables and chairs, as well as the table settings, was a relatively simple affair, choosing the dishes for his guest became a challenge. Once he started to think about it, he realized that the Elogians had itself a vast interstellar alliance of dozens upon dozens of planets. In addition, they traded with hundreds of other species in the quadrant. This would have given Malboran a rather large sampling of cuisines. How could he make the dinner unique?

The Mess Hall gleamed officialdom as the senior officers wore their rarely used dress uniforms, two pairs of security officers gallantly standing at attention on either side of both sets of oak doors that led to the room, a soft Vulcan ballad covering the usual hum of the ship's engines. Over in front of Neelix's kitchen, which was draped with white linen to cover the goings on inside, four crewmembers stood as servers. The room was lit a little brighter than normal to lighten the shade of grey that covered the walls to try to match the white table cloth, as well as accentuate the shine of the crystal glasses and the silver cutlery, as well as the gold trim on the dishes.

The dinner was in its final stages of completion as the officers stood around a talkative Malboran, an apéritif in their hands. "I once had the misfortune

of having to make a trade deal with a species whose means of communication was through physical contact. The first time we met he grabbed and squeezed my—"

"Dinner is served!" Neelix announced as he emerged from the kitchen.

"Ah, good," Malboran commented as he walked towards Neelix, leaving the senior staff hanging. "I'm quite interested in tasting what you've prepared."

"Well, the faster you sit down at the table, the quicker I can present the food to you," Neelix replied eagerly. They continued to chat a bit on their own as the crew drifted to their seats, Janeway nearest to the head of the table, her back to the windows, Chakotay across from her, then Tuvok across from the Doctor, Torres across from Paris, Seven across from Kim, and Neelix at the end of the table, closest to the kitchen.

"What did that species grab?" Tom whispered to B'elanna, offering her a seat.

"Wouldn't you like to know."

With everyone standing in front of their seats, Janeway called to Malboran, "Ambassador, if you would be so kind..."

Turning to her and noticing everyone waiting, he quickly walked at the head of the table, "Oh, of course, Captain. My apologies." Standing in position, he made sure to smile at everyone at the table, before sitting down. Soon after, everyone followed.

Janeway, sitting in the first position nearest Malboran, without haste, took her glass of wine, and stood up to make a toast. Everyone took and raised their glasses. "I offer my deepest and most sincere appreciation and gratitude for the generosity and kindness you have shown to us since we first contacted you four days ago. Having had the opportunity to be in communication with you prior to our arrival to the Elogian Homeworld, I do not hesitate to say that you are truly a man of honour, distinction, breadth, and spirit, and I know that I speak for the rest of my crew when I say it has been a privilege to know you."

In unison, the crew nodded their agreement, and sipped from their glasses. As soon as Janeway had finished, Malboran stood and raised his glass to toast. "I too offer my appreciation and gratitude to you, Captain Janeway, and to your valiant crew." Looking over to Seven and Neelix, he said, "Having had the opportunity to speak with you, and meet and share some of the monuments of our society with Seven and Neelix, I must say that the diversity of your crew, as well as the mere fact that you have travelled so far in your travels, are a tribute to the Federation's enlightenment, through your nobility of spirit, compassion, courage, and endurance. This ship houses a people that I, personally and on behalf of the Elogian Alliance, am honoured to have come to know. You are truly friends."

Everyone nodded and smiled in appreciation as they sipped from their glass. Sitting down, Malboran noted, "And also for the record, your taste in beverages is exceptional."

"It's Saurian brandy," Janeway said.

"Yes, I know." His response garnered a look of amazement. To answer Janeway's implicit question, he explained, "As soon as I entered my quarters, I took the opportunity to taste some of the delicacies I had read about in our initial information trade. I was most curious about Saurian brandy, and your replicator was good enough to give me a sample.

"He enjoyed it immensely," Seven noted.

"You were there?" Janeway asked, a note of concern in her voice.

"Yes, she was," Malboran answered as it to cover for her. "I had insisted she come in because I still had some things to discuss with her." He tried to hide a growing smile, "But the Brandy distracted me a little."

Harry tried to hide his suspicion, gulping down the rest of the brandy in his glass. Adding to Malboran's statement, Seven said, "He had explained to me how alcoholic beverages were effective in attaining results."

Harry choked, from the burning in his throat, or the jealousy burning in his mind, he didn't know. "Are you alright, Ensign? Malboran asked.

"Yes," he managed to cough out. "I'm fine...Just...didn't expect the...strength of the brandy."

"Yes, it does have quite a kick doesn't it?"

"Yes, indeed," Harry managed to reply.

"It is apparently not the only one with 'quite a kick,'" Seven stated.

Harry looked wide-eyed at Seven, his cough growing uncontrollably. It was here the Doctor grew concerned and asked, "Are you sure you're alright, Ensign?" He began to engage in medical badgering, "You aren't allergic to Saurian brandy, are you?"

"No, no...I'm just...It's...nothing..."

"Maybe some food will help," Malboran suggested.

"Yes, that's a good idea," Neelix interjected. "Waiters?" he asked, sharply clapping his hands twice. Janeway frowned at Neelix's actions, but decided to tolerate it for the moment as the 'enslaved' crewmembers came out of the kitchen, food in hand. Neelix stood up and approached Malboran, as the servers placed a bowl in front of him, and to the rest of the crew members. "For an appetizer I thought something light would be appropriate."

"Indeed it is," Malboran complimented. "What may I ask is it?"

"Chicken soup," Paris blurted out before Neelix could open his mouth. The whole table looked at Tom, surprised by his outburst.

"Well, yes, it is, Mr. Paris."

"Isn't that a bit...simplistic for an Ambassadorial dinner?" Tom asked.

"Yes, I thought about that," Neelix said, "But, I thought of the old Talaxian expression, 'The simple things in life are the best things in life.' I'm

sure that since Malboran has tasted a wide variety of Delta Quadrant cuisines, I thought it be best that we give him some of the Alpha Quadrant's common delicacies. They may be simple and basic for you, but they're new and different for the Ambassador."

"Quite right," Malboran agreed. Taking a spoonful, he commented, "And very different it is, Mr. Neelix. Thank you." Neelix returned to his seat, a cheerful, if not slightly defiant look on his face as he passed Tom.

"Chicken soup is quite a staple on Earth," Janeway said before tipping a spoonful in her mouth. "In both European and North American cultures, it serves as a home-made cure for the common cold, to a meal to have after an outing in the cold of Winter."

The Doctor injected, "This is despite little substantive scientific evidence to suggest it's medicinal qualities."

"Are you saying it's properties are nothing but old wives tales?" Janeway asked, quite prepared for the Doctor's comment.

"You may draw your own conclusions, Captain. I'm simply stating a medical point of view."

Tom said, "I don't know about the rest of you, but I know that after I had a bowl of my mother's chicken soup, I felt much better."

"A psychological response," the Doctor commented. "Hardly the basis for any sound medical evidence."

"Well, I beg to differ, Doc," Paris replied. "There's nothing like a good, positive, strong state of mind to get the ol' immune system churning out its magic."

"It's hardly magic, Mr. Paris. As my 'nurse' you of all people should know that."

"As your 'medical assistant' I think I'm qualified to provide the crew with a relatively sound second opinion."

"'Relatively' being the important word—"

Malboran sipped a final spoonful of soup as he listened to Tom and the Doctor bicker endlessly. Leaning over to Janeway he whispered with amusement, "Are the two of them always like that?"

She smiled. "Most of the time."

"And they never tire of each other's company?"

"Apparently not. They've been known to argue for hours. B'elanna thinks it's Tom's way of keeping sane in the Doctor's presence."

"A male, holographic Doctor," he said in awe. "Amazing."

"I thought your planet had developed a highly sophisticated holographic system."

"Oh, we have male holograms," Malboran explained. "Just that none of them are programmed to be Doctors."

"What are they programmed for, then?"

Malboran paused as if unprepared for the question. He seemed uncomfortable as his face turned a darker shade of brown by the question. It was as if he was blushing. Quickly taking a sip of the brandy, he answered, "Well, let's just say they are used for more...primitive purposes."

Janeway's mouth opened to mouth an 'Ah.' "I see...You don't--"

"No, I don't," he said firmly. "Others do, but I choose not to. To borrow a Borg phrase, it seems quite futile...I mean, a hologram, Captain," he emphasized.

Janeway responded, whimsically, "Some people may consider it good practice."

He grinned. "Romancing a real person is practice. Dating a hologram...that's a fantasy."

She smiled back and patted his hand with hers. "I couldn't agree with you more."

Dinner had continued much like the appetizer. Neelix served an Alpha Quadrant dish, Tom immediately recognized it and expressed his amazement that Neelix would serve such a thing, then the Doctor began a medical dissertation on the dish, and Tom immediately went on the offensive to defend his staple diet. First it was pizza, then burritos, nachos, then strawberry cheesecake. By the end of it, all of the human officers were stuffed, following the human custom of finishing everything on one's plate. The Doctor, being his over-bearing self gloated with an arrogant smile, 'I told you so,' written all over his face. Only Malboran, Seven and Tuvok managed to complete dinner satisfactorily. Janeway apologized to Malboran for deciding to immediately go to her quarters to 'digest,' so Seven was given the responsibility of escorting him back to his quarters.

They were the first to leave, as some of the crew decided to stay and 'finish off the leftovers.' As they walked towards a turbolift, Malboran noted, "Mr. Paris seems to have had an enjoyable evening tonight."

"It is common knowledge among the crew that tonight's menu consisted of Ensign Paris' favoured dishes," Seven replied.

"Yes, it appeared that way. He was quite knowledgeable about each," he complimented. "I think Mr. Neelix did an excellent job tonight."

"His choices seemed appropriate given the circumstances."

"You don't sound too enthusiastic about it," he said as they arrived at a turbolift.

"I found tonight's dinner to be appropriate for diplomatic purposes as it served to showcase human cuisine."

"But?"

"However, I concur with the Doctor's assessment that the entrees were nutritionally unsound. There were excessive levels of saturated fats, an over-abundance of proteins, and insufficient nutritional supplements. It was nothing more than 'junk food.'"

He looked up to gaze at Seven, scrutinizing her. After a while he broke his look, his body relaxing as he turned to stare out the star-filled windows. "Seven, do you know if Captain Janeway is...involved to anyone?"

"Involved? Elaborate."

"As in seeing someone."

"In what way?"

"In a...romantic way."

She raised her eyebrow. "Not that I am aware of. Why do you ask?"

"Just...curious."

Seven's own curiosity peaked by Malboran's inquiry. She recalled the instance when he first came on board and simply gazed at the Captain. Behind all the diplomatic rituals, his reactions to Janeway showed characteristics of courtship initiation: the pupil dilation, the flushed face, the momentary pause as he gazed at her. The fact that now he explicitly asked her about Janeway's relationship status proved one thing. "Are you romantically interested in Captain Janeway?"

He shot a look at her, but was not overly surprised at her question. "It would be hard not to be."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because she's such a strong woman, yet she doesn't discard her warmth. She is cautious, yet open; authoritative, yet compassionate. Such a blend of qualities in a single individual is incredibly striking."

"Intriguing observation," she said. "I have come to the same conclusion, however, I fail to see how that provokes a romantic interest."

"I guess it's all a matter of one's state of mind," he said, giving her statement some thought. "You may not have the same response as I do because of a great many things. The fact that you're her subordinate on Voyager may emphasize her authoritative qualities over her more humane attributes, or you simply have no romantic interest in a homosexual relationship. I suppose it helps that I'm more or less an equal with the Captain, in terms of professional position, but also, I am interested in heterosexual relationships."

"I see," she responded.

Seeing he had answered her question, he asked, "Do you have any romantic interests, Seven?"

"To the extent you share, no."

"Really? I thought--" he cut himself off, unwilling to continue his train of thought. Seven's interest was peaked, however, and he had to admit, "I thought you had already been involved with someone."

"How did you come to such a conclusion?"

He cleared his throat. "Well, by the size of...uh...your breasts."

She looked down at 'them' and looked back at Malboran, confusion on her face. "I do not understand."

He shook his head in regret. "It was an erroneous cultural assumption, Seven. I apologize. It's just that Elogians usually do not exhibit such...notable physical features unless a significant biological event is occurring. For Elogian females, the swelling of mammary glands usually coincide with pregnancy."

She paused in thought. "That would explain why the Elogians in your office were staring at me when we returned from the vegetation production facilities."

"Most likely. Although, added to that is the fact that when Elogian women are pregnant, they usually refrain from public exposure."

"Why?"

He sighed. "It's a cultural convention. As you may have noticed, most Elogians are physically similar on the surface, both the men and the women. The only distinctive features are the spots on mens' heads and the hair on womens'. For a pregnant woman to roam the streets in her obvious condition is to give the message that they are different."

"But they are different," Seven replied bluntly.

"Everyone knows that, but the general idea is for society to be constructive, it must emphasize not our differences, but our similarities. True equality is thus supposedly achieved."

"Such a philosophy risks social stagnation."

"Interesting statement coming from a liberated Borg drone. Since when did the Borg care about 'society'?"

"The Borg Collective is a distinct society, consisting of a wide range of diversity" Seven said matter-of-factly. "The purpose of assimilation is to enhance the Collective by incorporating all the relevant aspects of an alien civilization for the purpose of Borg perfection."

"It's exactly that kind of domination the Elogian Reformers tried to avoid. The purpose of emphasizing similarities is to establish a basic level of common interest. From there cooperation can exist. This ideal is the foundation of the Elogian Alliance."

"Yet the risk of social stagnation exists. It will be inevitable that you will be required to rely on your allies as your society begins to lose the innovative ability inherent in diverse cultures. In the end, there will be no common interest among partners."

"Perhaps," he said, looking grimly at a resolute Seven of Nine.

PART 7 BEGINS

At 0745 Seven entered Janeway's Ready Room after being summoned from her Cargo Bay. She found the Captain sitting at her desk, reading a PADD. Janeway looked up and greeted her, "Good morning, Seven."

"Good morning. Have you 'fully digested,' Captain?" Seven joked.

She chuckled. "Yes, I have. Speaking of which, how was your evening with the Ambassador?"

"Intriguing. We discussed many topics of interest."

"Oh? Such as?"

"We conversed over the contents of last night's dinner, to philosophical issues regarding the Elogian Alliance to...personal matters."

"Personal matters?" Janeway asked, her interest peaked as she leaned forward paying full attention to Seven.

"Yes, we discussed issues pertaining to personal relationships."

Janeway gave an impressed look. "It seems you and the Ambassador have been getting along quite well."

"We have," Seven said. "He is an impressive individual. I chose well in using him as a model for improving my ambassadorial skills. Through my observations and our interactions, I have gained valuable diplomatic experience."

"And nothing more?" Janeway asked. "You seem to be getting along much better than as teacher and student. You've managed to form a personal bond with him."

Seven remained her Stoic self. "Malboran himself stated that inter-personal relationships are key in developing strong diplomatic bonds. By relating to the other party, one allows for the creation of an atmosphere of shared experiences and points of view, thus providing an avenue from which to discuss one's differences under the banner of cooperation."

Janeway couldn't help herself from finding humour in Seven's rhetorical response, indicative of a diplomat. "I take it that the both of you have developed an 'avenue to discuss your cultural differences'?"

Seven became reflective as she responded. "Yes, we have. I would not have thought it possible prior to meeting him. Before, any statement that conflicted with my own conceptions would have produced a negative response. And yet, Malboran made me curious about his statement, rather than make me react to it."

"He bore his diplomatic responsibilities well."

"Yes, but I believe it is more than mere responsibility. There is a genuine quality within him. I feel I am able to discuss experiences that I ordinarily would not discuss with anyone."

Janeway smiled. "You mean you trust him."

Seven paused in a moment of reflection before she said, "Yes, I do. As improbable as it seems, I feel I 'trust' him equally as much as I trust you, and yet I have only known him for less than 24 hours."

"He's a very amicable man."

Thinking about a topic of discussion she had with Malboran, Seven asked, "What is your impression of the Ambassador, Captain?"

"He's a charming man," Janeway said with a warm smile. "Very compassionate, sincere...and like you said, 'genuine.'" She gave a slight sigh. "It would be a pleasure to get to know him better."

"Why do you not try?"

"As appealing as the opportunity sounds, I would rather not subject myself to the inevitable repercussions of my actions."

"My experience suggests that it would be simple to develop a relationship with Malboran, given how 'amicable' the two of you are with each other."

"Indeed it would be, Seven. Malboran lacks the cultural baggage that exists between human male-female relationships. But I can't ignore the fact that he would not be able to leave his planet, let alone his responsibilities, no more than I could stay and leave Voyager behind."

Picking up on Janeway's mention of cultural baggage, Seven said, "It is true that the Elogians have a strong desire to maintain a type of gender-based equality, however, they have their own gender-relational peculiarities of their own."

"What do you mean?"

"I have noticed tension between Elogian males and females. The equality between the sexes is unusually rigid. If I compare to human gender equality, the Elogian variety is far less equal. If Malboran is any indication, Elogian males are subject to female authority."

Janeway said rationally, "It's not unusual. Equality can take many different forms depending on the circumstances that developed it. 300 years ago on

Janeway smiled and even flushed slightly. "That's quite a revelation, Seven. Until now, I thought he was simply being very diplomatic towards me, trying simply to be friendly and sociable to me, but obviously I was mistaken."

"It is not surprising. You have not spent as much time with Malboran as I have. You wouldn't be able to notice the fact that Malboran does not hide his emotions as strenuously as humans tend to. He's able to hold in his feelings when necessary, but as soon as it is not, his guard is let down."

"And you've had the fortune of seeing his guard down," Janeway said, leaning back in her chair.

"Yes."

"Well, as a piece of advice," Janeway said putting her fingers together in her lap, "It might be a good idea to keep certain observations private."

Seven looked confused. "I don't understand."

"I don't think Malboran would be happy to discover that you told me that he was infatuated with me. While I find it nothing but flattering, he would undoubtedly feel somewhat embarrassed about it."

"I was simply reporting my findings to you as my superior officer."

"I realize that, but some facts could be left unsaid, for the benefit of the observee. Now, technically this is a breach of protocol, but you needn't tell me *everything* that goes on between you and Malboran, or anyone you develop a firm friendship with. By telling me you betray his trust, and at least in diplomatic circles, such an act is a serious offence."

Seven grew somber as Janeway explained her error in judgement. The realization that she betrayed Malboran's trust struck her. Malboran was a worthy individual to discuss a variety of topics, and she had learned something in every discussion. She had also become accustomed to his presence and it pained her to think that he would no longer be willing to converse with her. While Janeway and other crewmembers served the same purpose, Seven had not developed the same type of open communication with them. She knew it was because Malboran was a diplomat, and it was his job to open dialogue with people, and thus it was not a leap to accept that he could develop an open friendship with her. But that fact only amplified the feeling of guilt she had over her error. Before Seven could think anymore of her guilt, Janeway said, "You can rest assured that I won't tell Malboran about what you've told me, but in the future, it would serve your friendship with him that you avoid telling me certain particulars of your discussions on... 'personal matters.'"

Seven felt a slight wave of relief. "Thank you, Captain."

She left the Ready Room and headed for the turbolift on her way to her duty station in Astrometrics. Harry met up with her and stood beside her in the turbolift. Seven gave him a 'what are you doing here' look, to which Harry responded, "Chakotay asked me to go check a sensor relay in Astrometrics. He said there was a slight misalignment I should fix."

"What is the nature of the misalignment?" Seven asked. "My previous diagnostics did not show any malfunction."

Harry smirked a little. "Don't take it too personally, Seven. Small misalignments can happen when you're not on duty."

The turbolift doors opened and they headed towards Astrometrics. "Very well," she said. "What is the nature of the misalignment?"

"It's a minor problem with the secondary sensor relays. Tuvok was trying to scan a particular region of space between the Elogian homeworld and its third moon, and detected something unexplainable. He ran a level-three diagnostic and found a slight misalignment, and deduced it was the source of the anomaly."

Seven gave Harry a curious look. "What was the nature of the anomaly?"

"Assuming that it was there, it looked like a small distortion in space. But both Tuvok and I discounted that possibility because of the improbability of such a disturbance between a planet and its moon, let alone within a planetary system."

As they entered Astrometrics, Seven replied, "The Borg have encountered such disturbances before."

"I'm sure you have, Seven, but we can speculate about it after we align the secondary sensor relays. Anyway, the lack of resolution from the sensors made it difficult to fully examine the anomaly, assuming it was actually there."

Seven quickly went to her central console to examine the data as Harry went over to open one of the side access panels. She was certain that *her* sensors would not be as imperfect as to project or create a phantom anomaly. Misalignment was one thing. Failure of her systems was quite another.

Harry sensed that Seven was a bit annoyed at the malfunction of the Astrometric sensors, so he tried to keep himself from bringing up 'irrelevant' topics while they were working. But being alone in the same room with Seven made it difficult for him to not try to take advantage of the situation and ask her the many questions plaguing his mind over her comments at last night's dinner. As Harry examined the isolinear chips with his tricorder, he asked Seven, "So, how are you getting along with the ambassador?"

"Malboran and I are 'getting along' just fine," Seven replied matter-of-factly as she continued to examine the data on the anomaly.

Harry turned towards her. "I didn't mean anything by that question, you know," he said defensively.

"I am aware of that," she said curtly.

Harry felt slightly burned by her short answer, despite knowing Seven's current focus. "I was just asking how you and the ambassador are getting along."

Seven turned to Harry with her annoyed and confused look. "And I have already said I am aware of your intent in asking the question."

Seeing Seven's perfect proportions, despite her annoyed look, disoriented his thinking momentarily. She was simply stunningly beautiful. Worth fighting for, dying for, as he had proven when she risked her life by connecting her body to the ship less than a year ago after injecting her nanoprobe into Voyager's jel-packs in order to save the ship. The idea of living with her became more and more of a possibility, and was becoming an almost perfect and wonderful idea in his mind.

Harry quickly regained his composure, hopefully quickly enough that Seven wouldn't notice the dilating effects of the thoughts racing through his mind. "Well...I'm glad we cleared that up," he said as he quickly turned back to the isolinear chips under his console.

They worked in silence for a couple minutes before Harry asked her another question. "Just out of curiosity, what did you mean last night at the ambassadorial dinner, when you said that the Saurian brandy was not the only thing that had quite a kick in the ambassador's quarters?"

Remembering her conversation with the captain about Malboran's privacy, she replied, "Anything that I referred to about the ambassador and myself is strictly a private matter."

His chest contracted and his breath stopped due to the disbelief of what he heard. 'What does she mean it's a "private matter?" How private is it?' Harry tried to shake away the mental jolt, telling himself that it was highly improbable that Seven and the ambassador had gotten close enough to warrant Seven keeping her meetings with the ambassador as a personal secret. Try as he might though, doubt, mixed in with a mild, budding jealousy, fortified itself in Harry's mind forcing him to re-evaluate the possibilities of his relationship to Seven. He didn't pursue the conversation and went back to examining the console.

Just then, the lab doors opened and Malboran entered. "Good morning Seven, Ensign Kim."

"Good morning, ambassador," Seven and Harry said in unison, Harry with a minor tone in his voice.

Malboran grinned at the vocal coincidence. Although, looking at both Harry and Seven, Malboran deduced that he had interrupted some kind of heated exchange. He noticed a flustered look on Harry's face before Harry hid his feelings, and sensed a bit of annoyance in Seven's voice. "I hope I'm not interrupting," he said.

"No," Seven replied.

"Not at all," Harry said right after.

Malboran gave a diplomatic smile. "Good." There was a pause. "Please, don't let my intrusion disturb you from your work."

Both Seven and Harry briefly glanced at each other before turning away to their respective stations. Malboran walked up beside Seven to the center console and looked up at the main Astrometrics screen. Noticing a view of

the Elogian solar system, he asked, "Just out of curiosity, what are you looking for in our system?"

"We aren't looking for anything in particular," Harry replied. "Commander Tuvok was running routine scans when he discovered a mis-alignment with some of our sensor relays."

"I see," Malboran said. Seeing an odd-shaped anomaly between his homeworld and the third moon, he asked as he pointed, "What is that?"

"It's the proof of our sensor mis-alignment," Harry answered.

Seven gave a small, frustrated sigh. "It is not necessarily proof of a mis-alignment, but simply an area of space that our sensors are not able to properly scan."

Malboran noticed Seven's increased frustration, but paid focused attention to the apparent anomaly. "What do your sensors tell you about the anomaly?"

"Assuming that it's there," Harry said, "it's about double the size of Voyager, and has a fluctuating exterior edge. It's dimensions keep changing, but it envelopes a constant volume of space, like a floating globule of oil suspended in water."

"Interesting," Malboran said, nodding his head slightly.

Seven asked, "Is there something of interest to you about the anomaly, ambassador?"

"There may very well be, Seven. We may be looking at 'Eella.'"

Harry stood up and walked to Malboran. "What is Eella?"

He gave a small chuckle. "An Elogian, superstitious legend, not unlike your human legend of the Bermuda Triangle on Earth."

"Bermuda Triangle?" Seven queried, confused.

Harry stated, "The Bermuda Triangle was an area on Earth in the Caribbean that was believed to be a portal to a different dimension, or a place where time was not fixed. Many sailors and pilots believed that it was a cursed place, because of unconfirmed tales of ships and planes being lost within the Bermuda Triangle."

"It is a very irrational and unsubstantiated story based on fear and mere coincidence," Seven commented.

"Perhaps," Malboran said, "But we Elogians have a very similar tale with Eella."

"So it's not the result of a sensor mis-alignment," Harry asked.

"I'm afraid not," Malboran said. "It's very much there, and it's very much a mystery. We discovered Eella about 70 years ago, and since then we haven't been able to gather any concrete evidence or scientific data about it. Any probes we send to it are lost once they penetrate its outer edge."

"Do you know what caused 'Eella' to appear?" Harry asked.

"Unfortunately, no. We don't even know if Eella is entirely safe, but it's seemingly an inert anomaly within our solar system, so we've learned to live around it."

"If it's like Earth's Bermuda Triangle, shouldn't you have put warning buoys around her so ships can avoid her?" Harry asked.

"We thought and debated about that for a long time 60 years ago, but decided against it, because most members of the Productivity & Trade Ministry believed that any explicit marking of a 'mysterious' anomaly would dampen trade with other peoples such as yourself."

"That's a risky position to take. Ships could get damaged, or worse, lives could be lost."

"It's always a concern, but we do our best to make newcomers avoid the area. The Space Traffic Controllers tell them that they are entering another ship's flight path, or entering a restricted region of Elogian space when they get near Eella space."

"It appears to be an effective solution," Seven commented, attempting to counter Harry's constant stream of what she considered negative questions.

"So far yes, but there's nothing bad about a healthy dose of caution every now and then to remind us of the dangers that exist close to home," said Malboran.

"Agreed," said Seven. Turning to Harry she said, "So then, there was never anything wrong with the sensor relays to begin with."

Harry gave a sardonic grin. "I guess not Seven." Harry moved closer to Seven and put his hand on her shoulder to get her full attention. "No hard feelings?"

Whether it was the close proximity to Harry, or the touch of his hand on her shoulder, or the warmth in his voice, Seven seemingly melted her usual cool exterior and virtually whispered, "No hard feelings."

Harry returned a warm smile in response. "See you later?"

She nodded in the affirmative.

"Great." With that, Harry walked out of Astrometrics back to his post on the bridge.

Seven was in a momentary daze as she succumb to the warmth she was feeling towards Ensign Kim. Remembering the exchanges in the past hour, she felt uncomfortable knowing she was so aggressive towards Harry about the apparent sensor mis-alignment. She began to think it was foolish of her to become so frustrated at Harry for something he had nothing to do with. Her frustration was multiplied by the fact that Harry himself said that he meant nothing by his comments about the sensor relays.

But her feelings quickly changed as soon as Harry came near to again ask if she had no resentment towards him over the sensor relays. 'Of course, I do

not,' she thought to herself. Remembering his touch reassured her of Harry's warmth and compassion, filling her with a satisfaction of being cared for by a good man.

Her thoughts vanished after hearing Malboran clear his throat. Realizing his presence, she quickly tried to appear as if she was waiting for some kind of report on her console.

Malboran had noticed Seven enter a daydreaming state as soon as Ensign Kim had left, and thought it odd for Seven to do such a thing. From everything he knew and experienced about Seven, she was the last person on this ship he thought who would actually daydream. Noting Seven's return from whatever was going on in her mind, he asked, "So...I hope I wasn't interrupting anything when I came in."

"You did not, ambassador," Seven replied matter-of-factly.

"Good, I hope not," said Malboran. Pursuing the questions in his mind further, he asked, "Because, I sensed I wasn't walking into a normal crewmember-to-crewmember discussion as soon as I entered Astrometrics."

Seven turned to Malboran. "Our conversation prior to your arrival was about ship matters and nothing more."

"Then why did the both of you look and sound like you were arguing?"

"We were not arguing, but simply exchanging a difference of opinion over the existence of the supposed sensor relay mis-alignment."

Malboran had an amused look on his face. "And such an exchange usually becomes as heated as it appeared to be?"

"In most cases, we do not disagree, but when we do, yes, it does become, as you say, 'heated'," Seven replied.

Malboran's look grew to an interested smile. "Interesting."

"In what way is this 'interesting'?"

"If I didn't know any better, it'd seem that you and Harry are in a romantic relationship together."

"What led you to such a conclusion?"

"Well, it has been my experience, and my observation that when two people get together, in time, they come to understand, even accept, the main qualities and deficiencies of the other partner, which eventually leads to the couple occasionally engaging in a heated exchange over a rather small issue."

"But Ensign Kim and I were discussing ship-related business, not any personal matters."

"If I may ask, what were you two talking about?"

"Whether or not there was a mis-alignment of the sensor relays."

Malboran's interest peaked higher. "I see, and was this conversation a necessary one?"

Seven paused before answering. "No."

Malboran nodded his head. "Well, that only proves my point," he said. "A simple examination of the relays would prove whether or not there was a misalignment. The both of you needn't have argued over it. Which tends to suggest to me that you and Ensign Kim have something between yourselves."

Seven could not think of anything to counter Malboran's line of reasoning, except to say, "Ensign Kim and I are not in an romantic relationship."

"But do you want to?" Malboran asked.

Before she could answer, Janeway's voice echoed into the room through the comm, "Bridge to Astrometrics."

"Yes, Captain?" Seven queried.

"Seven, Her Excellency from the Elogian Diplomatic Corps would like to privately speak to ambassador Malboran on a secure channel."

The color of Malboran's skin turned a pale hue as his face lost its pleasant demeanour. "Understood, Seven out," she said. "Ambassador, you may use the main Astrometrics screen if you like."

Malboran gave a sarcastic laugh. "If you don't mind, I'll be happy seeing Her Excellency on a smaller screen. No need to enlarge her head more than it already is."

"Very well," Seven said with a perplexed look on her face. It seemed odd that he'd be so disrespectful to his superior officer, or anyone for that matter. Putting her thoughts aside, she directed Malboran to a side console, and patched in the waiting comm feed.

Her Excellency's upper body appeared on the screen. She appeared to be like any other Elogian female, having no distinctive gender-identifying physical features except for her hair, which was styled in a very elaborate mesh of thick curls. Her hair was a shiny, rich black, arranged in curls that looked like small electron orbits buzzing on top of her head. Her clothing was equally elaborate and sophisticated looking. She wore an elegant dark blue coat with golden swirls outlining its edges, from the neck, shoulders, and down to the waist. Where a breast pocket would normally be was the Elogian Diplomatic Corp emblem, which had a deep purple image of the Spaceport with two rich yellow curved lines exiting it, appearing like ship flight paths.

All the elegance and regal appearance of Her Excellency failed to hide her angry look. "Ambassador Malboran. What in Eella's name are you still doing on the Voyager ship?"

Appearing as calm and respectful as possible, Malboran replied, "I do not understand. You gave me permission to come aboard Voyager to attend a banquet on your behalf."

"Yes I did, Malboran, only because that Captain Janeway was so frustratingly insistent that you attend. If it wasn't because of her, I'd never let you

get off this planet. Why bother having a banquet for you anyway?," Her Excellency said scornfully. "It was such a waste of time to let you go."

Malboran's tone grew weaker. "I understand and appreciate your guidance, your Excellency."

Her Excellency scoffed. "Do you? If you did then why are you *still* on that ship, wasting precious time doing who knows what, when you should be down in your office taking care of more important and pressing matters!"

"Yes, your Excellency. You are right."

"Of course I'm right!" she scolded. "Do you have *any* idea how disruptive your disappearance on Voyager has been? All your appointments have been delayed and given to other ambassadors who have much better things to do than to cover your useless male butt."

"I am very sorry for causing all these difficulties, your Excellency. Please accept my most sincere apologies. I will be leaving Voyager at her Captain's earliest convenience."

"You had better, Malboran. Otherwise..." she threatened.

"Yes, your Excellency. I'll return as soon as I can."

Her Excellency glared at Malboran before disengaging the comm link. Malboran closed his eyes and took a deep breath before turning around to head for the Astrometrics doors. Turning, he stood face to face with Seven, who had a very concerned look on her face. Malboran gave a weak smile. "I take it you heard every word," he said.

She nodded. "Borg auditory implants are exceptionally accurate."

Taking a few steps away from the console, he said, "You know, it is a serious breach of protocol to listen in on a secured, diplomatic message. In some cases, it's grounds to declare war."

Seven ignored what Malboran was saying and went straight to the point. "Why was Her Excellency so abusive towards you, a fellow ambassador of the Elogian homeworld?"

"That's just the way she is," he answered quickly, trying to brush off Seven's question.

"I find that highly unacceptable, and highly unlikely."

"And why is it highly unlikely?"

Seven was astounded by the question. "Why is it highly unlikely? How can you ask such a question? It is obvious that she is intentionally trying to inflict abuse, showing no respect whatsoever to you as an individual. She treats you as if you are not even a person."

Malboran turned away as he used his left hand to rub his temples and sighed. "I thought you of all people would understand."

"In what *possible* sense?"

"In a Borg sense," he said staring at the main Astrometrics screen. "You must have endured the same kind of thing with the Borg Queen, an entity that, despite her less-than-desirable characteristics, gave you what you could not achieve on your own: perfection."

"But that perfection was given to me against my own will, destroying the human harmony that existed between myself and my parents. That perfection destroyed another."

Malboran turned to face Seven. "Precisely." Malboran saw the confusion in Seven's face and explained. "As I'm sure you know, every Borg serves the Collective, meaning they serve the Borg Queen. Whether or not they think they are being abused, whether or not they want more freedom, anything dealing with one's individuality is deemed as irrelevant in the pursuit of Borg perfection, correct?"

"Correct."

"Well, in many ways, I am like a Borg drone, forced to follow the commands of my superiors, forced to work under unpleasant conditions, with my input and my personality deemed as irrelevant to the greater cause of the Elogian people."

"But you are still an individual. You can demand better conditions, you can demand greater respect as a productive element of Elogian society. Your individuality has not been supplanted by a collective consciousness."

Malboran shook his head. "Oh, but I am. My individuality has been supplanted by as strong a force as any Borg collective consciousness. I am imprisoned within the social confines of Elogian culture and tradition."

"But culture and tradition can be changed. My examination of Federation societies shows that for cultures to endure they *must* change according to the needs of the present, or risk disintegration."

"Only if the circumstances are right, and only when a large enough section of society demand change."

"Are you suggesting that only you are the one who wants change, that only you are being oppressed?"

"No, I'm not saying that. In fact a significant portion of the male population feel the same way I do, but..."

Seven cut him off. "Then, if there is a large enough section of society demanding change, what other circumstances are necessary?"

"Well...they need a leader..."

"As you are a man with high political standing as an ambassador, you are well positioned to be the leader of such a group."

Malboran resolutely shook his head against her idea. "Absolutely not, Seven. I am not a leader."

"Nevertheless, you must resist."

Malboran grew angry. "And I'm telling you that resistance is futile! If you think for one moment that what you are asking is a simple matter of exercising one's rights, then you simply do not understand the dynamics of Elogian society."

"What is there to understand?"

"EVERYTHING!" he said, slamming his fist on the centre console. "It is not as simple as injecting someone with some nanoprobes to change their way of thinking. It is an imperfect, tedious, lengthy, painful, even deadly process..." Malboran cut himself off from saying anything more.

Sensing that Malboran was holding a fact in, she asked, "Has this been attempted before?"

He gave a deep sigh before answering. "Yes."

"Why did you not mention this to be before?"

Malboran gave a sarcastic laugh. "Because Elogians don't like looking back."

"How can your society learn from its mistakes if it does not look at its history and its past?"

"It's because, as a society, officially we don't learn from our mistakes, because, according to our official history, we have not made any mistakes. Everything in our history has been progress and nothing less."

Seven was silenced by such a peculiar self-understanding of Elogian society. After a moment of silence, Malboran said, "So, now you see why it is almost impossible to change the way things are. If people don't see there's anything wrong, they won't even listen to me, or anyone who says otherwise."

Seven's keen enthusiasm to change Malboran's social situation was muted by the facts Malboran stated, but her determination remained the same. "Nevertheless, you must resist," she said.

Malboran smiled. "How ironic I hear that from you, a former member of the Borg collective. No one on the homeworld would believe their ears if I told them about you."

"I will take your word for it," said Seven.

Feeling the conversation had reached an impasse, Malboran said, "I appreciate your concern for my well-being, Seven. I really do. But there's nothing I can do to change the situation. Our society is so impervious to change that any attempt would be quite futile."

"Perhaps," said Seven. "But that makes your society no different than the Borg Collective."

Giving Seven's comment some thought, he replied, "You may be right. But I'm not the one to change society from within. That's just not the type of person I am."

Seven said nothing. After a moment of silence between them, Malboran said, "Well, I suppose I should start collecting my things and ask the Captain

Walking through the bridge, saying farewell for he thought was the last time, Malboran entered the Ready Room to find Seven and Janeway waiting for him. Thinking nothing of Seven's presence, Malboran said, smiling, "Captain, before I leave, I'd just like to express my deepest appreciation to you and your crew for all your hospitality and warmth during my stay on your impressive ship. I have memories that will last a lifetime."

Sitting in her chair, Janeway smiled in return. "Thank you ambassador. My senior staff and I have enjoyed your company."

"The pleasure is all mine, Captain."

"It's a shame you couldn't stay longer."

Malboran's smile dwindled slightly. "Yes, unfortunately my ambassadorial duties await me back home."

Standing from her chair, Janeway replied, "I understand. But before you leave, I was wondering if you could answer one last question for me."

"It'd be my pleasure."

She picked up a padd and scanned through some information before speaking. "I was looking through the Elogian database you sent us during our first communication, and I couldn't help but notice something interesting about your society."

"And what would that be?"

"Well, Seven was telling me that your society tries to ensure that both the males and females try to look similar to each other to emphasize the similarities between genders."

"Yes, that's true. This is to encourage equality between the sexes."

"And how far does this similarity extend?"

"I'm not sure I understand what you mean."

"Well, is the goal of this practice to make everyone the same?"

Malboran gave a laugh. "Of course not. Men have their roles to play, as do women theirs. Each gender has propensities to specific tasks, and we encourage each person to maximize their Elogian potential."

"I see. Although, it's interesting to note that the women on your planet seem to be capable of a lot more than men."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, just looking at the gender breakdown, women seem to fill almost all of the social, cultural and political positions in your society. The Elogian men seem to be capable only of hard labour or education."

Malboran's smile diminished to a polite grin. "Yes, it appears that way."

"This is quite facintating considering that at the time of the Elogian Reformation, men and women seemed to be evenly position throughout society."

"Things change."

Janeway paused and gazed into Malboran's eyes. "Indeed they do. In fact, I'm sitting with one such example of change."

Malboran gave a confused look. "What do you mean?"

"Here stands a man who is not a labourer or an academic. Looking through your history, this is quite an achievement."

"There is nothing special about me, I assure you, Captain," Malboran said with genuine modesty.

"Quite the contrary," Seven said compassionately. "I see a man who has endured abuse by his superiors, discrimination by his peers, the distain by his society. I see a man who, despite the challenges and obstacles he faces, manages to overcome them each day, reaching out to the galaxy for help."

Malboran turned to Seven, on the one hand angered by her statement of his situation in front of Janeway, and on the other hand, bewildered by her statement that he was calling for help. "I'm afraid I have no idea what you're talking about."

Janeway walked up to him and put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "It's alright, ambassador. I already know what's happening to you."

Malboran glared at Seven. Janeway responded, "You can't blame Seven. If anything it was my fault."

Malboran turned to Janeway to hear her explanation. "As you may know, I freed Seven from the Collective, at first because strategy required it. But soon, I realized I had an opportunity to help her regain the humanity that had been taken by the Borg. And in the past little while, her humanity has continued to bloom. And in your case, her humanity demanded that she try to help you out of your present situation."

Trying to stay composed, Malboran said, "Thank you, Captain, and Seven, for your...humanity. But I can assure that I do not need any help from you."

"That's not what Seven thinks," Janeway replied.

He smirked. "Let me guess. Seven told you, to the effect that, I am a man who is suffering the abused of his female superiors, the distain of his female peers, and the overall oppression of Elogian females. In essence, an unhappy man stuck in an intolerable situation."

"Yes," Seven said bluntly, "And it is a situation I cannot allow to continue."

Raising his voice, Malboran said, "And what do you suggest I do about it?"

Trying to cool him down, Janeway said calmly, "Well, Starfleet protocols prohibit me from suggesting anything to you that could effect any aspect of an alien society."

"That's reassuring to know."

"But what do YOU think we are suggesting you do?"

Noticing the play of words, Malboran said, "I think you are suggesting I try and do something about my situation."

"Very perceptive, Ambassador," Seven said.

Malboran couldn't help but smile at Seven's sarcastic, yet serious comment, lightening the mood of the situation. "Captain, Seven, I really appreciate what you're trying to do, but really there is nothing I can do about it." Giving a sigh, and feeling more free to talk about it, Malboran continued, "I am a social anomaly to everyone on the planet. Rarely do men take up active posts in society. They're usually relegated to academic circles, outside the mainstream society."

"But surely people have complained about this situation," Janeway said.

"Of course. Men complain about it all the time." He gave a sarcastic laugh, "But there's the crux of it. Men are the academics. It's 'their job' to complain. So, no one listens."

"I just don't understand it..."

"No one ever does. It's the great Elogian mystery: Why would a society revert to sexual inequality after all they managed to accomplish."

"What do you mean?"

"Something that isn't emphasized in the information of our planet is the fact that the Elogian Reformation took place at the precise time of sexual equality. Our society managed to change by the widespread acknowledgement of each other's equality. The only way it was successful was by taking into account all of the considerations people had. Given the creation of a new social and infrastructural organization it was imperative to take as many variables into account, because the results would be wide-ranging."

"Obviously something was missing."

"For a hundred years the academics have wondered what it is. How could the gender equilibrium be destroyed?"

"Has anyone come up with a reason?"

"There have been many. But a specialized examination doesn't give a comprehensive understanding. The way I see it, you cannot simply quantify equality. When the movement for greater feminine equality began 400 years ago, they focused entirely on the noticeable inequalities. And there was a lot of transformation in just a century. But when equality was established, no one saw it. People were so obsessed with the quantitative differences, they failed to take into account the underlying improvement of the quality of life between the sexes." He paused, weary. He sighed. "Such a shame that hindsight comes so late..."

"Earth went through a similar social transformation at roughly the same time. And it was a hard 200 years of change. But we realized that you couldn't just legislate equality. It's a change in thinking, in a genuine acceptance and acknowledgement of the strengths of each other."

"Yes, but you had the fortune of having the time to realize that fact. Elogians are a very result-oriented people. It is a strength, but also a weakness. We believed that enforcing equality would change the underlying distrust between genders. Instead, it only exaggerated them."

Janeway gazed admirably at him. "It's never too late to start a new direction. All it takes is someone to start."

He looked back curiously until he realized what she was getting at. "Captain, I couldn't change 300 years of Elogian history. What is one 'Man' in a whole society?"

"A spark," Janeway answered. "If you want to change the thinking of people, you're going to have to share your thoughts."

"But—"

"Malboran, I know this is a radical idea. You're contemplating the transformation of your society. But like your ancestors in the Reformation, they grabbed the opportunity, because their survival was at stake. Now, it's your ideals that are at stake. The ideals of true equality. Of true cooperation within your society."

Her argument was very persuasive to Malboran, although, he wasn't sure if it was because of his infatuation with her, or her reasoning. They probably went hand in hand, but what she was proposing was incredible. She was encouraging him to start a revolution! While he had started countless trade negotiations with dozens of races, none of them were as far-reaching and provocative as this. Joking, he asked, "Isn't it against Starfleet protocol for you to be trying to influence an alien society?"

She smiled. "You know better than I that diplomacy is a messy business."

"Indeed it is," he said, smiling back.

He turned toward Seven and saw the determination in her eyes. Her face alone told him that it would be impossible to convince her that what they were suggesting was virtual suicide. As a single man, alone in his quest for equality, he would be scorned as a social deviant, a man who rejected the generosity of his female superiors. He would at best be exiled to the dark side of the furthest Elogian moon, but it was more likely he'd be tried and convicted of treason against his people in his attempt to transform his demented society.

Nevertheless, his unwillingness to continue his challenge of Seven's desire for him to change his society for the benefit of himself and his fellow men was also fuelled by his desire to see her desire become reality. Deep down, there was nothing he wanted more than to be free from worry, free from fear, free from the undercurrent of discrimination that permeated every level and segment of society. He wanted peace.

Of course, the irony of the situation didn't escape Malboran. He was born into a female-dominated society, and yet here he was with two women from the other side of the galaxy calling on his manhood to eliminate the injustice created by the women on his planet. From an Elogian woman's point of view, both Janeway and Seven should probably be tried and convicted of treason against womenkind in the galaxy.

Nevertheless, for Malboran, the situation was crystal clear. Seven and Janeway were in the right, seeing Elogian society for what it was: a prejudiced, discriminatory, sexist society, one that was not only the "mystery" of the Elogian Alliance, but a mockery of the ideals his world propagated to gain riches and resources for surrounding civilizations.

Three days ago, he would never have had the courage to even think such thoughts, but now such a revelation was so obvious in his mind. The next step was just as obvious. Turning back to Janeway, Malboran took in a breath and asked, "Captain, after considering Seven's and your arguments over the issue of my well-being, I hereby formally request asylum aboard the USS Voyager."

To Be Continued...

By: Richard Chu

Please send feedback to: Richard_chu@canada.com

Copyright, © 1999-2002