When Voyager picks up an unexpected passenger, Janeway reluctantly plays ship's counselor — and finds a challenge unlike any other.

Past Imperfect
A novel by Fletcher DeLancey
PAST IMPERFECT

PAST IMPERFECT SERIES – BOOK I

FLETCHER DELANCEY
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AUTHOR’S NOTE

This is the first book in the Past Imperfect series.

For more in the series,
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OTHER BOOKS BY FLETCHER DELANCEY

Past Imperfect Series
- Past Imperfect
- Present Tension
- Future Perfect
- No Return
- Forward Motion

Chronicles of Alsea
- The Caphenon
- Without A Front: The Producer’s Challenge
- Without A Front: The Warrior’s Challenge
- Catalyst
- Vellmar the Blade (novella)
- Outcaste

To learn about the world of Alsea, immerse yourself in the Chronicles of Alsea site: alseaworld.com.
For my mother, who always said I should write a novel.

I’m fairly certain this isn’t what she had in mind.
IN A SECTOR of the galaxy where few ships ever traveled, a pinhole opened in the fabric of space. Increasing its diameter exponentially, it soon became a gaping black opening, blotting out the stars behind it. With a blinding flash of light, the hole discharged a sleek black ship, then shrank in size until it was once again a pinhole. A moment later it winked out altogether. The ship moved on, traveling at the equivalent of warp nine, a mere crawl in comparison to its earlier galaxy-spanning speed. It had one more interspace jump to make before emerging in its home sector, and the gate was close by. The ship’s occupants, members of a species known to others in their area as the Sumak, were very pleased with their mission. They’d collected a fine assortment of specimens, and would be well received by their government. They looked forward eagerly to their homecoming.

It was an event they would never experience. The ion storm that had been moving through the sector was undetectable to their sensors until they emerged from the gate. They saw it as soon as they cleared the portal, but by then it was already too late. At warp nine it took them exactly four seconds to slam into the storm. Their ship was well-built and powerful enough to make them invulnerable to nearly every other race in the sector, but that did not matter now. The storm shorted out critical systems, including navigational arrays and power dampeners. Without the
dampeners, the main power source immediately overloaded most of the systems, causing catastrophic failure in every section. A series of doors and airlocks opened simultaneously in the belly of the ship, causing an explosive decompression that warped the hull and sent wreckage spinning silently into the depths of space. Crippled, the ship began to tumble as more silent explosions vented equipment, hull sections and crew.

The Sumak could have launched escape pods in two minutes. Their ship was destroyed in less than one. It continued to tumble gently, a graceful dance through space. A few of its systems were still operational, but life support was not one of them. The bodies that floated through what remained of its corridors were beyond any help that might come in response to the ship’s automatic distress beacon, which faithfully but uselessly beamed its message into space. Even if any Sumak had been left alive, they would have known the futility of waiting for rescue. Still one interspace jump from the home sector, the ship’s distress call would dissipate long before it ever reached homeworld.

With only a few systems left intact, the drain on the ship’s power source was now down to a trickle. It could power the remaining systems almost indefinitely, and so the beacon continued to broadcast its message. And in one of the few less-damaged rooms near the center of the ship, a bank of large stasis tubes hummed quietly. Its occupants were oblivious to the chaos that had just ripped the ship apart. They could afford to await rescue for as long as they needed to—even if it took centuries.
Kathryn Janeway, captain of the Federation starship Voyager, was enjoying a rare moment of tranquil contentment. Slouched in her bridge chair with a PADD in her hand, she was scrolling through the latest report on ship’s operations. Voyager had been traveling through a quiet sector of space for several weeks now, and the crew had not only completed all normal maintenance, but were now actively improving systems and performance. The knowledge that her ship was in absolute top condition gave Janeway a feeling of well-being so strong that it radiated off her. Her first officer, Chakotay, was at close range in his chair and leaned over for a quiet comment.

“You know, you don’t often look that happy while going through departmental reports. Usually you treat them like they were dipped in the waste reclamation sump before landing on your desk.” He was a large, broad-shouldered man with dark hair and a distinctive tribal tattoo on his forehead, which crinkled when he smiled. It was crinkled now.

Janeway looked up from her report. “Well, it’s not often that departmental reports contain so much good news,” she said. “Engine efficiency is now five point three percent higher than maximum, and B’Elanna says here she thinks she can get it to six percent. All of the phaser banks have been cleaned and recalibrated, and the power supply has been realigned. Tuvok calculates that weapons output is now at one hundred percent and
is requesting a test to confirm. Seven of Nine says she’s extended long range sensors another two percent, which means that they are now at twelve point eight percent greater than Starfleet specifications. And best of all, Neelix reports that we are now completely out of leola root and requests that we locate another source in order to lay in a new supply.”

Chakotay, who hated leola root as much as the rest of the crew, smiled broadly at the last comment. “Shall I tell Seven to make that her top priority?”

Janeway pretended to seriously consider this suggestion. “No, I think Seven’s time would be put to better use cataloguing every space particle larger than nine microns between here and the Alpha Quadrant. After all, we wouldn’t want to hit anything.”

“Ah, but if she did that she wouldn’t have time to come to the party tonight, and you know how much she would miss that.”

Janeway gave her first officer a mock glare, and they both laughed.

Seven detested parties as much as the rest of the crew disliked leola root. Both the Doctor and Janeway had tried their best to help her learn the fine art of socializing, and Seven had made excellent progress, but she still considered parties to be a great waste of otherwise useful time. Janeway sometimes thought that if she could ever teach Seven to relax, her job as mentor would be complete. She didn’t expect that to happen before the next twenty years or so.

“So, who are you going to come as?” asked Janeway. Early in their travels, Voyager had taken aboard a Delta Quadrant native who offered to earn his way by working in the mess hall. Despite his universally unpopular cooking, Neelix thought of himself as the ship’s morale officer, and was always finding a new reason for a party. Janeway actively encouraged his efforts, having seen the advantages Neelix’s self-assigned role could offer. Tonight was a celebration of heroes, and the crew were supposed to come dressed as a person they admired greatly and who had influenced their lives or careers in some way.

“Not telling,” said Chakotay. “You’ll just have to guess when you see me. What about you?”

“I’m not telling either, but I’ll give you a hint. It’s not Leonardo.” It was well known that Leonardo da Vinci was one of Janeway’s heroes, but she thought it would be far too easy to use him.

Janeway opened her mouth to retort, but was interrupted by Ensign Harry Kim, manning the ops board. “Captain, we’ve just received a distress beacon. It’s automated.”

All levity vanished as both Janeway and Chakotay sat up straight in their chairs. “Distance?” Janeway’s voice was crisp.

“Point zero eight light years; two hours at current speed.”

“Any ships in the area?” This question was not meant to determine whether another ship might get there earlier. Voyager had been attacked enough times and in enough ways by now that Janeway was wary of anything that might remotely be a trap.

“None within sensor range.”

“All right. Continue monitoring for any energy signals or emissions that could indicate engine activity. Mr. Paris, increase speed to warp eight and alter heading to the coordinates Mr. Kim is sending.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Tom Paris.

“Janeway to sickbay.”

“Yes, Captain,” came the Doctor’s voice.

“Doctor, we have received a distress beacon and will be at the source in less than one hour.”

“Understood. I’ll be ready for any casualties.”

The atmosphere on the bridge was tense for the next forty-five minutes, as the crew waited to see what would unfold. Sometimes a distress beacon led to nothing at all; just a transmitter floating in space. Sometimes it was a trap. And sometimes it meant caring for casualties and helping with repairs as Voyager’s crew carried out one of their principal mission objectives, to offer aid when needed. But the best times were when a beacon led to discoveries, either sociological or technological. Janeway always hoped for the last option, since exploration was her first and strongest love.

When the source of the beacon came within visual range, Harry Kim put it up on the main viewer. It was immediately obvious that caring for casualties and making repairs were not on the agenda today. The ship they saw tumbling slowly through space was little more than an aggregation of metal alloys, held together by the thinnest thread of structural integrity. It
looked as though it had been chewed up and spit out by something very large.

“Captain, energy dissipation readings show that whatever happened here, happened a long time ago,” said Harry. “That ship has been dead in space for nearly four hundred years.”

The bridge crew watched the ship in silence. Nobody who traveled through space could be unaffected by the sight of such destruction. Voyager, for all of her sophisticated systems and well-trained crew, was not immune to the dangers of the universe, and all who lived aboard her knew the risks. It was always sobering to see another ship that had run those same risks and not survived.

Harry’s console beeped, and Janeway turned to see him quickly punching in commands. “Mr. Kim?” she prompted.

Harry finished his double-checking and looked up in slack-jawed astonishment. “I’m reading a life sign on board that ship. It’s faint, but it’s there. And Captain—it’s Human.”

The senior staff had convened in the conference room to discuss the situation. Rumors that a Human life sign had been detected had already spread to every corner of the ship, and the conference room was buzzing with it. Janeway actually had to raise her voice to call the meeting to order.

“All right, people, we have a lot to do here,” she said. The room immediately quieted and all heads turned toward her expectantly. “Seven, do you recognize that ship? Can you tell us anything about it?”

Seven of Nine had spent most of her life as a Borg, having been assimilated at the age of six. Until Janeway had severed her from the Collective less than two years ago, the tall blond had known nothing of individual will. Since then, she often gave the impression that acquisition of individuality was highly overrated, and her time with the Borg was to be preferred. Certainly her experiences in the Collective had given her a vast depth of knowledge, which Janeway often used to Voyager’s advantage.

Tilting her optical implant toward the captain, Seven answered in her normal dispassionate voice. “No, Captain. The Borg have no memory of this species, although they have been through this sector. Judging by the
technology aboard the ship, this was an advanced species and one the Borg would certainly have assimilated had they known about it. Somehow they avoided detection."

“Well, that alone makes them worthy of our respect,” said Janeway. Seven raised her eyebrow, but made no further comment. Janeway shifted her attention to the ship’s half-Klingon engineer. “B’Elanna, what are your thoughts regarding the stability of that ship? Can we get an away team on board?”

“I think so, yes,” answered B’Elanna Torres. “There’s no life support or gravity, and scans show that whatever equipment generated it has been destroyed, so the team will have to suit up. The biggest issue is going to be stabilizing the ship. We’ll have to use the tractor beam to stop the tumble, and that hulk is in such bad shape that we have very little margin of error. Any more force than necessary and the whole thing is going to fly apart.”

“But you can stop it.” It was a statement, not a question.

“Yes, Captain.”

“All right. Doctor, you’ve examined the sensor readings. Do you have any theories?”

The Doctor cleared his throat, unnecessarily since he was a hologram, and spoke. “The life signs are faint but stable. Too stable, in fact, given the condition of the ship. I think we’re looking at a long-term stasis situation.”

“Which complicates things,” interjected B’Elanna. “Since we can’t create an atmosphere over there, we’re going to have to remove the stasis equipment, transfer it to a portable power source, and bring it over here before we can thaw whoever is in there.”

Janeway nodded. “Is there anything else we need to be thinking about before moving on this?”

“Well, I, for one, would like to examine that stasis system,” said the Doctor. “Starfleet stasis technology is nowhere near the level of development that this must be. Unless that equipment was installed after the ship was destroyed, which I highly doubt, then it has remained stable for nearly four hundred years. If any of the technology is compatible or convertible, this could be an important discovery.”

“Agreed.” Voyager had encountered long term stasis technology before,
but it had never been adaptable to their systems. “Tuvok, do you foresee any threat to Voyager if we attempt this rescue?”

“Not at this time, Captain,” answered the Vulcan security chief. “Mr. Kim’s sensors continue to show no evidence of any other ships in the area. If the distress beacon has indeed been broadcasting for four hundred years, it is likely that any attention it attracted would have arrived here long before now. In my estimate, the greatest danger is likely to come from the ship itself, given its fragile condition. I would recommend that several security personnel accompany the away team to watch for hazards while the others work.”

“I agree. Choose your personnel and have them ready. B’Elanna, you and Seven are in charge of stabilizing the ship. As soon as that’s done, I want you both on the away team. Doctor, you’re on the team as well. Before you go, have a stasis tube ready in sickbay just in case anything goes wrong and we have to do a direct transport. B’Elanna, take as many of the engineering crew as you think you may need to remove the stasis equipment, but don’t bring them on until you know it’s necessary. Seven and Harry, I want you to examine any parts of the ship’s computer that may still be functioning. I’d like to know more about the race that built that ship and how it was destroyed. And I’d especially like to know how the hell a Human got on board.” Janeway rose from her chair, ending the meeting. “Let’s go, people.”

B’Elanna and Seven of Nine had run several sets of calculations before settling on the appropriate angles and power settings they’d need to stabilize the ship. Normally Tuvok would operate the tractor beam, but given the delicate situation, he had turned his tactical board over to B’Elanna. Seven of Nine stood at the science station, monitoring readouts and ready to step in should anything unexpected occur during the operation. Forty-five minutes after the staff meeting, B’Elanna announced that they were ready to begin.

“Tom, move us parallel to the ship and match its course and speed,” said Janeway. Tom’s fingers danced over the control pad, and Voyager gracefully slipped into position.

“Course and speed matched,” said Tom.
“Engaging tractor beam,” said B’Elanna. Everyone watched the viewscreen as Voyager’s blue tractor beam lanced out and touched the derelict ship, each impact of the beam lasting only a fraction of a second. The ship’s tumble gradually slowed, and after a dozen more impacts, it stopped altogether.

“The ship is stabilized,” announced B’Elanna with satisfaction.

“Excellent work,” said Janeway. She spoke to the comm system as B’Elanna and Seven headed for the turbolift. “Janeway to Kim. The ship is stabilized, and B’Elanna and Seven are on their way down.”

“Understood,” came Harry’s reply. “We’re all suited up and ready to go as soon as they get here.”

Janeway had to force herself not to drum her fingers on her armrests as she waited the interminable ten minutes for B’Elanna and Seven to get to the transporter room and suit up. The call came none too soon for her.

“Transporter Room Three to the captain. The away team is ready for transport.”

“Do it,” said Janeway. She looked at Chakotay. “Time to see what’s over there.”
Eight transporter beams appeared in an open section of the derelict ship, the safest place that the transporter operator could locate. When they dissipated, B’Elanna, the Doctor, Harry and Seven immediately began scanning the area. B’Elanna finished first and spoke through the comm system in her suit. “The life sign is twelve meters above us and two hundred meters to the left. We may have a bit of a crawl to get there.”

Seven snapped her tricorder shut. “I’m detecting an energy reading from what may be a computer terminal on this deck. I suggest we access that terminal first before attempting to locate the bridge.”

“I’ve got it,” said Harry, looking at his tricorder. “It’s not far, but getting anywhere at all on this heap of metal is going to be a challenge.”

The away team gazed at their surroundings in some awe. The inside of the ship was in no better shape than the outside. If there had been rooms and corridors, they were now unrecognizable. All that the away team could see in any direction was chaos, with beams, pipes and wiring piled in heaps and crossing every space. The area where they’d been deposited was one of the few places where they could stand upright, and even here they had to watch out for the loose debris, which floated everywhere. There were also a few bodies to be seen, hovering between what was left of the deck and the ceiling. The aliens had been short, with long, bulbous arms and legs. Their arms ended not in hands, but in modified pincers. One alien
was turned toward them, its face tight with hundreds of vertical wrinkles creasing the gray skin.

“Not very attractive, were they?” said B’Elanna.

The Doctor gave her a dismissive look and moved over to examine the nearest alien. He passed his tricorder down the body, looked at the readings, and said, “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. They had an extremely interesting physiology—I wouldn’t mind examining one in more detail.”

“Later, Doctor,” said B’Elanna. “We need to find the live body before worrying about the dead ones.” Activating her comm system, she contacted the ship. “Torres to Voyager.”

“Go ahead, B’Elanna,” Janeway’s voice answered.

“Captain, we’ve located the life sign and a possible computer terminal, but they’re in opposite directions. We’ll have to split the team, and travel through this ship is going to be arduous. It may take a while before we have anything to report.”

“Understood. Contact us when you have anything. In the meantime, we’re maintaining transporter locks on you just in case.”

“Yes, Captain.” She looked around at the team. “Everybody got that?” The other members of the team nodded. “Good. Okay, looks like this is where we wave goodbye. Let’s check in with each other every fifteen minutes.” She didn’t bother to assign the four security personnel, knowing that they would already have their orders from Tuvok. Indeed, as she and the Doctor moved away, two security members immediately flanked them, one in front and one at the rear, while the other two moved off with Harry and Seven. Although Tuvok’s unflappable calm sometimes drove B’Elanna crazy, she had to admit that he was the best security chief she could ever imagine working with. She never had to think about security—it just happened.

An hour later, all she was thinking about was how hot and frustrated she felt. Harry and Seven had reached their goal in short order, managed to power up the computer terminal, and were now reporting progress in translating the language. Meanwhile, she was still clambering around in an atmospheric suit that was designed to compensate for any type of outside environment, but wasn’t as efficient at regulating its interior environment. She was sweating from the effort of crawling over, under and around debris in her bulky suit and gravity boots, and
their progress had been maddeningly slow. It didn’t help that the Doctor, unencumbered by any suit, was moving lightly and still looking as fresh as if he’d just come off a round of golf in the holodeck. He vanished around a pile of beams and B’Elanna clumped after him, muttering a string of Klingon curses. Rounding the beams, she nearly crashed into the Doctor’s back. With a particularly colorful curse, she stepped out from behind him and found why he’d stopped. Her frustration vanished immediately.

They were standing in the largest open space they’d seen since leaving the beam-in point. The room had been heavily damaged, but the destruction was less here than elsewhere on the ship. Two walls still stood, both lined with stasis tubes that seemed to be intact. The first tube on the opposite wall had blinking lights above it, but the rest were all dark. The other two walls of the room were strung out in pieces, with some parts still attached to the room’s framework while others floated, moored by cables and wiring to the still-intact sections. The tubes that had been on these destroyed walls were all damaged, and B’Elanna could glimpse mummified remains still strapped inside. The Doctor was already kneeling beside the closest one, running his medical tricorder over the occupant. He straightened and touched his comm badge.

“Doctor to Voyager.”

“Janeway here. Go ahead, Doctor.”

“Captain, we’ve reached the source of the life sign. There appear to be forty or more intact stasis tubes, and many more that are broken. I’ve just examined the remains of one occupant. It was an adult male Cardassian.”

Shocked, B’Elanna moved over to another broken tube and looked inside. She didn’t need a medical tricorder to see the distinctive facial and ear structure. “Captain, I’ve just located a Vulcan.”

“And here is a Bolian,” added the Doctor, leaning over a third tube.

There was a momentary pause, and then Janeway’s voice came through. “Doctor, your first priority is to locate whoever’s alive in there and get that tube out. Once we’ve stabilized that individual, we can…catalogue the remaining occupants.”

“Understood. Doctor out.” He and B’Elanna exchanged a look, then began making their way through the debris toward the one operational tube. B’Elanna tried not to focus on the remains visible through the smashed tubes, but it was hard not to be affected by her first sight of
Alpha quadrant species since Voyager’s stranding five years earlier. She wondered what Seven and Harry were learning from the ship’s computer.

Reaching the active tube, the Doctor began scanning. He shook his head. “I can’t get any decent readings through the material of the tube,” he said. “The biosign is there and it’s not changing, but I can’t get details on brain activity, heart rate or anything else. Unless we can translate the readout, I won’t know anything at all until we open this tube.”

By now B’Elanna had arrived and was inspecting the equipment. “This is pretty advanced technology. I think we can match the power signature, though, so we can get a portable power source on this.” She walked in front of the next two tubes, looking closely at the wiring, and returned. “Well, I know why there’s only one life sign here.”

“Why?”

“These were designed so that power goes into the first tube on the system, reaches a certain level, and then goes on to the next one. Each tube has a bypass circuit, so if its life support fails, the power that would have gone into it diverts directly to the next tube. The advantage of the system is that if there are any problems with the power source, the tubes will lose power one by one rather than all at once. Kind of hard for the person on the end, but it’s a good way to minimize loss. My guess is that the power source on this ship has been gradually failing, and these tubes have been shutting down one by one. The other bank must have been compromised in some way that caused it to fail earlier; otherwise we’d have someone alive in the first tube on that system as well.”

The Doctor looked concerned. “If that’s true, then this tube has a limited amount of time left. Do you have any idea how long before it fails as well?”

“Not yet. It could be years. Let’s see how Seven and Harry are doing—maybe they’ve got a translation by now.” B’Elanna activated her comm link. “Torres to Kim.”

“Kim here.”

“Harry, we’ve reached the life sign, but we can’t do much with the stasis tube until we can translate the computer system operating it. Are you making any progress?”

“Yes, we’ve accessed the main computer and Seven is downloading data now. I’ll program a tricorder with the translation code and have it beamed over. And B’Elanna—you aren’t going to like what we’ve learned about these aliens.”
B’Elanna looked back at the jumble of broken stasis tubes and their mummified occupants. “No,” she said, “I don’t imagine I will.”

The senior staff was assembled once again in the conference room. It had been six hours since B’Elanna had contacted the ship and asked for two engineering staff to beam over with a power converter. One hour ago the team had returned, having successfully removed the stasis tube from the alien ship’s system and downloaded what they could of the database. The tube had been beamed directly to sickbay, where the Doctor was busy preparing to end the tube’s cycle. By now it was well into beta shift, but the other members of the team took only a brief break before returning to share what they’d learned. Janeway didn’t waste any time.

“Harry, Seven, what can you tell us about these aliens?”

Seven spoke first. “They were called the Sumak, Captain. Their homeworld is located approximately twenty thousand light years from here. Their propulsion technology was highly advanced, equivalent to a form of slipstream drive that used marked points of entry and exit. It enabled them to travel all over the galaxy. But they were not explorers so much as...collectors. The stasis tubes contained the results of a collection expedition to the Alpha Quadrant.”

“Collectors? You mean, like the Hirogen?”

“No. They did not hunt. The purpose of collecting other species was for research.”

Harry spoke up. “For lack of a better term, they were scientists, Captain. Their mission was to collect members of sentient lifeforms and return them to their homeworld for governmental research.”

“What kind of research?” asked Chakotay.

“Well, they were apparently a xenophobic species. But instead of just closing off their world and avoiding contact with other races, they took it one step further. They actively collected members of other races in order to test them for intelligence, physical strength, pain tolerance, susceptibility to disease, and several other factors. The purpose was to discover which species had the potential to be a threat to the Sumak.”

“What I don’t get,” said B’Elanna, “is why they bothered to put their collection”—she said the word distastefully—“in stasis tubes. With their
propulsion system it was apparently a matter of weeks to get from the
Alpha quadrant back to their homeworld. Why not just lock everyone up
for a few days and then offload them?”

Seven answered. “Their testing procedures were very rigorous and
defined. They did not want members of the ‘collection’ to interact with
one another, or to engage in any behaviors that might modify their normal
response to the tests.”

Janeway’s jaw was set and her eyes were hard. “How did they go about
capturing their prisoners?” she asked. She refused to call them a
“collection.”

“Since they were xenophobes, they went to some trouble to avoid
detection,” said Harry. “They apparently had a type of cloaking technol-
ogy, and targeted only those individuals who were alone, with no
witnesses nearby. I’m sure that nobody ever knew what happened to these
people.”

“Area 51,” said Tom suddenly. Everyone looked
at him.

“Care to explain that one, Tom?” asked Chakotay.

“It was a government conspiracy theory in the mid-twentieth century,”
Tom said. “For a few decades, people reported seeing alien ships all over
North America. Some people even said they’d been captured by aliens,
had medical experiments performed on them, and were then released.
None of them were ever taken seriously by the scientific community, and
the government’s official policy was that no alien ships had ever visited
Earth. But there was one rumor that many people did take seriously. The
story was that an alien ship had crash-landed at a military facility in the
North American desert, and the government had hidden the ship and then
denied that anything happened. The military facility was called Area 51.
So the name became synonymous with a perceived governmental
conspiracy to hide the presence of aliens visiting Earth.”

“It would appear that the ‘rumor’ of Area 51 may have been based in
truth,” said Tuvok.

“Do we know what destroyed this ship?” asked Janeway, glancing at
the hulk outside the conference room viewports.

“There are no records in the database indicating what happened,” said
Seven. “Therefore, whatever occurred most likely demolished the ship
instantaneously. Almost all of the ship’s systems were destroyed by a
power surge, yet the core power source was not compromised. There are
no weapons markings on the ship. I believe it encountered some sort of natural phenomenon which affected its ability to regulate the flow of power through its systems.”

“Perhaps an ion storm,” said Tuvok.

Seven nodded. “That is my guess as well.”

“Can we recover any of the ship’s technology?” Janeway didn’t have much hope, but it was something that always had to be ruled out.

B’Elanna shook her head. “No. There’s nothing intact over there bigger than a spanner, with the exception of the stasis tube room. That seemed to have some protection due to its location in the ship and the fact that the bulkheads were fortified.”

“Why fortify a room holding a bunch of people in stasis?” asked Tom.

Harry answered him. “They seemed to be very concerned with security. Apparently, in addition to being xenophobes, they were also paranoids. They didn’t want any of their prisoners getting out of that room.”

Janeway was looking grim. “How many prisoners were there?”

B’Elanna checked a tricorder. “According to the Doctor, there were eighty-four individuals representing nearly all of the Alpha quadrant races: Andorian, Bajoran, Betazoid, Bolian, Breen, Cardassian, Human, Klingon, Nausicaan, Romulan, Trill, and Vulcan.” She looked up. “About the only species they seem to have missed is the Ferengi.”

“They probably bargained their way out of capture,” said Tom. But his joke fell flat; Janeway gave him an unamused glare and then moved on.

“That brings us to a rather difficult question,” she said. “How do we honor the dead?”

The room went silent for a moment. The staff had been so busy gathering data and dealing with the immediate tasks that this thought hadn’t occurred to them.

“Destroy the ship,” said Tuvok. All heads swiveled toward him. Some faces registered astonishment and dismay; B’Elanna’s expression was approving.

“Why?” asked Janeway.

“It is the only logical choice. There are representatives of twelve Alpha quadrant species, all with different traditions for honoring their dead. Some of those traditions involve activities which we are incapable of performing here on Voyager. In addition, the logistics of removing the remains of eighty-three individuals from an unstable environment would
be both difficult and dangerous. It would not be acceptable were any of Voyager’s crew to suffer injuries or fatalities in the course of removing bodies that have been dead for nearly four hundred years. The ship is unstable enough that a single photon torpedo aimed at its power source should vaporize it. Since several of the races on board use immolation as a method of honoring their dead, we would be respecting at least some of their beliefs while reducing the risks to our own crew.”

Janeway looked around the table. “Does anyone have any other suggestions?”

No one spoke, and she returned her gaze to Tuvok. “I’ll take your suggestion under advisement. This isn’t a decision that I want to make quickly.”

“I under—”

“Sickbay to the Captain,” came the Doctor’s voice over the comm system.

“Go ahead, Doctor.”

“Captain, I’ve begun the process of powering down the stasis tube. If all goes well, we should be able to see our new arrival in just a few minutes.”

“I’m on my way.” Janeway stood up. “Good work, everyone. Get some rest. We’ll reconvene tomorrow at 0900 hours.” She turned and left the room. As the other staff members pushed back their chairs, B’Elanna elbowed Tom in the ribs hard enough to make him yelp.

“What was that for?”

She glared. “For having a pathetic sense of humor. Sometimes you’re still a pig.”
Janeway strode through the sickbay doors with her command mask firmly in place, but a set of decidedly mixed feelings behind it. Assuming that the doctor’s procedure went well—and she had no reason to believe it wouldn’t—she was about to meet someone from almost four hundred years in her past. The explorer in her was itching with gleeful anticipation at what could be learned from such a person. On the other hand, she also had the unenviable duty of informing this individual of his or her situation, and she was not looking forward to that at all.

“Report, Doctor.”

The Doctor turned around from his position in front of the silver stasis tube, which towered over his head. “The shutdown procedure is operating smoothly, and I’ve erected a medical force field around the tube. The patient’s vital signs are still masked by the material of the tube, but according to the readout, everything is normal. As soon as the tube has powered down completely, we’ll be able to open it.”

“Will the patient be conscious once the tube is powered down?”

“Your guess is as good as mine, Captain,” said the Doctor cheerfully. Janeway’s voice was cool. “I’m not here to guess, Doctor. I’m here to observe your medical expertise at work.”

The Doctor’s smile vanished and he busied himself with a rack of medications. “I’ve made preparations for every contingency I can think of.
My hope is that once we open the tube, we’ll find the occupant in a normal sleep cycle. But without being able to scan through the tube, I really can’t say what will happen.”

Janeway nodded and crossed her arms over her chest, watching the gleaming tube. She didn’t have long to wait. Within five minutes, the stasis tube emitted a sudden hiss as the inside atmosphere was vented. As the hiss died away a mechanical click could be heard, and the front half of the tube slowly slid around, vanishing into the rear half and exposing the interior. The Doctor held a medical tricorder in front of the tube, recording vital signs. Janeway moved to the other side, taking care not to contact the force field, and looked in.

A nude woman stood in the tube. She was quite tall, easily over 180 centimeters, and painfully thin. Dark brown hair liberally laced with silver framed a narrow face that was marred by sunken cheeks, hollow eyes and a ghastly pallor. Her arms, legs, torso and head were all restrained by heavy straps, and a series of wires connected various points of her skin to the tube casing.

Her eyes were wide open.

Janeway was startled, not having expected the tube’s occupant to be conscious. The woman fixed her eyes on the Doctor as he moved the tricorder down her body, and Janeway saw them cloud with confusion, then sharpen with fear. She stepped into the woman’s line of vision and spoke.

“We mean you no harm. You’re safe here. You’re in our sickbay, and this is our doctor. Right now he’s simply making sure that you’re all right. He won’t hurt you.”

The eyes shifted to Janeway, holding her in an intense stare. They were an unusual color of green, sparking with a keen intelligence. They swept down Janeway’s uniform, and when they returned to her own eyes the fearful expression in them had changed to wariness. Still the woman did not speak.

“My name is Captain Kathryn Janeway, and you’re aboard my...ship.” She had started to say starship, but decided to be more cautious. “We found you on another ship that was damaged, and brought you here. We only want to help you. No one here will harm you.”

The woman stared for a few seconds longer, then opened her mouth. A
wheeze was all that came out. She stopped, cleared her throat, and tried again. “Then let me go,” she said in a rasping voice.

“We will, as soon as it’s safe for you.” Janeway turned to the Doctor. “Is it?”

The Doctor snapped his tricorder shut. “Her vital signs are all normal, considering the situation, and she’s not carrying any biological threats. Computer, release medical force field.” A brief buzz, a flash of grainy blue, and the sickbay was quiet.

Funny, thought Janeway. I never notice the sound of a force field until it’s gone.

“I believe that these wires are simply attached by molecular adhesion,” continued the Doctor. He pulled carefully on one of the wires and it popped off the woman’s skin, leaving no mark. “Good. Help me disconnect these and we can get her out of there. Pull the wires close to her skin.”

Janeway worked on one side of the woman’s body while the Doctor worked on the other. Within half a minute they had all of the wires disconnected. The Doctor pushed a button on the side of the tube, and all of the restraints simultaneously retracted. The woman raised her arms to grip the sides of the tube, stepped out, and immediately toppled forward. Both Janeway and the Doctor caught her. With a nod to Janeway, the Doctor effortlessly picked the woman up and deposited her on the nearest biobed, where she attempted to sit up without success. Lying back, she stared at the ceiling. “Who are you?” she asked.

Thinking that the woman had not processed her words initially, Janeway repeated herself. “I’m Captain Kathryn Janeway, and—”

The woman waved a hand, interrupting her. “No. Who are you with? You’re military.”

This was harder to explain. “We belong to the Federation, a peaceful governmental organization. Although there are military aspects to our organization, we’re also explorers and diplomats.” She moved closer to the bed so that the woman could see her more easily. “What is your name?”

The woman turned her head and met Janeway’s eyes, her expression still deeply wary. After several seconds of silence, she said, “You’re in uniform, I’m naked, and you’ve done something to me so I can barely move. I have no idea how I got here or why, and I never heard of this ‘Federation.’ I’m not giving you anything.”
The unexpected response took Janeway off guard, and she decided that it was time to regroup.

“Doctor, will you please get some clothing for our guest? And I don’t mean a sickbay gown.” The Doctor opened his mouth as if to protest—he was, after all, in the middle of a medical exam—but thought better of it when he met Janeway’s even stare. As he walked away, Janeway looked down at their new guest once more.

“All right, I can see that the oblique approach isn’t going to work. So here’s the direct approach. When I said you were on my ship, I meant that you were on my starship. The organization I work for is called Starfleet, and our mission includes space exploration, defense, diplomacy, and providing aid. It was that last mission goal that brought you here. We received a distress call from an unknown source which turned out to be a derelict ship, and when we boarded the ship to investigate, we found you, in this stasis tube.” She indicated the tube, standing open and silent near the bed. “It’s a device designed to suspend your metabolism for a period of time. We brought it here, opened it up, and here you are. The reason that you can barely move is because you’ve been in stasis for a while, not because we’ve done anything to you.”

The woman’s expression changed to one of dismissal and disbelief. “You don’t honestly expect me to believe that story.”

Janeway’s response was interrupted by the Doctor’s reappearance with a small pile of folded clothing and a pair of boots. Accepting the clothes, she asked, “Is there any way to speed our guest’s recovery from stasis so she can walk?”

The Doctor turned to look at his patient. “I believe so. There’s nothing physically wrong with her other than a lack of nutrients and a severe electrolyte imbalance. She can probably recover some strength almost immediately, though full recovery will take considerably longer.” He reached over to the medicine rack, loaded several vials into a hypospray, and lifted it to the woman’s neck. She flinched and caught his wrist with her hand, moving faster than either of them thought possible. Holding his wrist, she stared at him but said nothing. She must have known that in her weakened state she could not stop the Doctor, but her message was very clear: You are doing this against my will.

Janeway sighed. This was not at all what she’d hoped for. She touched the woman’s arm gently, but the green eyes never moved from the...
Doctor’s face. Leaning over, she spoke in a calm, low voice. “You said we’d done something to you so that you couldn’t move. Please believe me when I say we have not. We can, however, give you something so that you can move. It is a completely painless injection.”

The woman neither acknowledged Janeway’s words nor moved a centimeter. Janeway looked at the Doctor. “Give the injection to me, Doctor.” She turned her head slightly to expose her throat.

The Doctor frowned for a moment, then nodded in sudden understanding. Moving carefully, he reached across the biobed towards Janeway’s neck. The woman dropped her hand and followed the path of the instrument with her eyes, staring as the hypospray injected its contents with a hiss. Janeway straightened her neck and looked down at their patient, who was now watching her. Without breaking eye contact, she said, “Get another injection.”

The Doctor had the hypospray loaded in seconds, and slowly moved toward the woman’s throat. Still she looked at Janeway, and only flinched when she felt the tip of the hypospray touch her skin. A moment later her eyes widened as the hypospray hissed. Janeway breathed a sigh of relief. She had made the first connection.

“Thank you for trusting me,” she said quietly. “You should feel better soon.”

In fact, the deathly white pallor of the woman’s face was already brightening to a faint pink, and within a few minutes she was able to push herself into a sitting position. Janeway handed her the clothes and said, “We’ll be right over there while you get dressed. Doctor?”

The Doctor did not look pleased at being dragged away from his patient a second time, but he accompanied Janeway to the other side of sickbay without a single sarcastic remark. When they stopped, Janeway watched their patient’s progress out of the corner of her eye as she addressed him. “The stasis wasn’t complete, was it?”

“No. Apparently, the Sumak’s stasis system was not meant to last four hundred years. Her metabolism was still active, though at a very reduced rate. With no nutrients coming into her system, her body gradually converted its own tissues into an energy and fluid source instead.” The Doctor was warming to his subject now—there was nothing he loved so much as pontificating about his medical knowledge. “A good analogy would be hibernation, in which an endothermic organism survives a long
period of cold by reducing its metabolism and living off its own body fat. Because the metabolism is so slow and the energy is being converted directly from the body, there are no waste products. Her current condition is that of a person who has been starved for several weeks. In addition, her muscles have atrophied to a considerable degree. We will have to take some care restarting her digestive system, and she’ll require physical therapy to regain muscle strength. Beyond that, however, I don’t see any complications from her long stasis. I will say that it’s a good thing we got there when we did.”

Janeway noted that their patient had managed to put on the clothes and was in the process of pulling on her boots, albeit with some difficulty. “I agree. Then if you foresee no complications, do you have any objection to releasing her from sickbay?”

“Captain, I don’t think that’s wise! She should be monitored for several hours after her release from stasis.”

“Then give me a portable biotransmitter and I’ll get it on her somehow. You can monitor her from your office.” Noting the Doctor’s stubborn expression, Janeway reminded herself that he was the one person on board Voyager who could refuse her orders if he thought it was in the best interests of his patient. Deliberately dropping her tone to one that was more conversational than demanding, she said, “Doctor, you may have noticed that our new guest is not exactly overjoyed to be here. I think you may cause more harm than good if you try to keep her in sickbay and treat her without her cooperation. The only way we’re going to get her cooperation is if she believes what I’m telling her, and I have a feeling that the only way she’ll believe that is if I put the proof in front of her. For that, I need her out of sickbay.”

With a theatrical sigh, the Doctor said, “All right. But I want her back here as soon as possible.” He stalked over to a storage compartment and returned with a small metal disc. “How are you going to convince her to wear this?”

“I’ll think of something.” Janeway took the biotransmitter and walked back to their patient. The woman was now fully dressed and sitting on the biobed, her long legs dangling over the edge. She was still pale, but looked far healthier than she had a few minutes earlier. Her eyes met Janeway’s, and while they remained guarded, the deeply wary expression was gone.

“Do you feel better?” asked Janeway.
For several seconds the woman appeared to be deciding whether or not to respond at all. Finally she said, “Yes. Thank you.”

Janeway nodded. “You’re welcome. Can you walk?”

The woman slowly slid off the biobed, tested her balance, and took a couple of tentative steps. Her face brightened for just a moment before the guarded expression returned. “Apparently I can.”

“Good. I’d like to take you for a walk and show you something. You might have an easier time believing my story if you see it with your own eyes.” She held up the biotransmitter. “But I can’t take you out of sickbay unless you wear this. It attaches to your neck by molecular adhesion; you won’t feel a thing. All it does is monitor your vital signs and transmit the data back to sickbay.”

Their guest eyed the transmitter. “I won’t wear—”

Janeway interrupted her. “You won’t wear it; yes, I thought as much.” Dropping her hand, she stepped closer to the woman, inside her personal space. “Consider this. A few minutes ago you were unable to move. You would still be unable to move if you hadn’t trusted me and allowed the Doctor to give you that injection.” She gestured to the sickbay doors. “Outside those doors are the answers to all of your questions. But you won’t know those answers unless you trust me a second time. Now you can sit in here and call me a liar, or you can come with me and see for yourself that I’m telling you the truth. If you want to come with me—” she held up the transmitter between them—“then you have to let me put this on you. I won’t force you. It’s your choice.”

Silence stretched between them as their gazes locked. At last the woman nodded. “Fine. If my choice is to stay here or go, then I choose to go.”

Janeway didn’t allow her relief to show. “All right,” she said softly. “I’m going to attach the biotransmitter now. It goes onto your neck, where the Doctor injected you.” She reached up as the woman moved her head to one side, and the small metal disc went silently into place. Stepping back, she offered a friendly smile. “Let’s go for a walk.”

Running her fingers over the biotransmitter, the woman moved to Janeway’s side. When the sickbay doors opened she showed no hesitation, walking through into the corridor as if she knew precisely where she was going. Her attitude was countered by the way she swiveled her head from side to side and up and down; she was taking in every centimeter of
the corridor with intense interest. She stared at the crewmembers passing
them, and when Ensign Golwat walked by, the woman’s head nearly
twisted off her neck. She was still staring after the ensign when they
arrived at the turbolift. Janeway pressed the call button and spoke casu-
ally. “That was Ensign Golwat. She’s Bolian.”

The woman’s expression was rapidly changing to one of bewilderment.
“Bolian?”

The turbolift arrived and they stepped in. “Deck one,” said Janeway.
“Bolians are from a planet in the same quadrant as Earth. They all have
that blue skin tone.”

When the turbolift doors opened she walked out without another
word, leading her guest to the back entrance of the conference room. It
was the best place she could think of for her purpose. She entered the
room first, then stood aside to let her guest through. The woman took
two steps in and stopped, her gaze fixed on the view through the confer-
ence room viewports.

There, looming large as it hung motionless in space, was the
Sumak ship.

“That’s where we found you,” said Janeway quietly.

The woman looked at her in shocked disbelief, then back at the ship.
She walked slowly to one of the viewports, carefully extended her hand,
and touched it quickly with one finger. When nothing happened, she
rested her hand on the viewport and stared out. Janeway moved to her
side and gazed out as well, keeping her guest in her peripheral vision.
After a silence that stretched into minutes, the woman’s shoulders
slumped and she dropped her hand, turning to face Janeway. All of the
fight seemed to have gone out of her. She looked smaller, and very
vulnerable.

“Well, either you have the most advanced video projection equipment
I’ve ever seen, or you’re telling me the truth,” she said. “And I think
you’re telling the truth.” She paused, swallowing hard. “I don’t know
where I am or what’s going on, but it looks like I owe you an apology. I’m
sorry that I all but called you a liar. Perhaps we can start over fresh.” She
held out her hand. “My name is Lynne Hamilton.”

Janeway took her hand and smiled. “Captain Kathryn Janeway. I’m very
pleased to meet you at last, Ms. Hamilton.”

Hamilton nodded. “Thank you. I want you to know that…well, I don’t
normally behave that way. It’s just that this is a little disconcerting,” she said, showing a gift for understatement. She turned back to the view of the Sumak ship and stared at it for several seconds before speaking again. “How did I get here?”

Janeway had already answered this question once, but she knew her guest must be feeling disoriented. Patiently she explained again how they’d found the Sumak ship, removed her tube and ended her stasis. Hamilton didn’t move a muscle during the explanation or for several minutes afterwards, her attention directed solely on the ship hanging in space beside them. Janeway waited, giving her the time she needed. When Hamilton finally spoke, the interruption to the silence in the room was startling.

“The last thing I remember was going on a dayhike from base camp at Denali.”

Janeway said nothing. Slowly, Hamilton turned her head and searched the captain’s eyes. “Do you know where that is?” she asked, her tone hesitant.

“Yes, the tallest mountain in North America.”

An expression of relief crossed Hamilton’s face. “Well, at least there’s something familiar. My friends and I were planning to start our ascent the next day. I wanted to take a walk, without crampons and climbing gear before we got serious. I remember sitting on a boulder about two miles from camp, just reveling in the silence and the beauty, and the fact that I couldn’t see another human being in my field of vision.” She shrugged. “And that’s it. The next thing I remember was waking up and seeing that doctor and you. Your uniforms, all the consoles and computer readouts—and of course, being naked as a jaybird—it scared the hell out of me.”

“You hid it quite well,” said Janeway. She didn’t know what she’d expected from a person freshly emerged from a 400-year stasis, but this calm manner certainly wasn’t it.

“That’s good to know.” And then, impossibly, one side of the woman’s mouth curved up in a half-smile. It was brief, but the change it wrought over her face was startling. She suddenly looked younger, and Janeway wondered exactly how old she was. It was difficult to tell with the effects of her long stasis, but judging by the amount of silver in her hair and the lines around her eyes, Janeway guessed she was in her early to mid-forties.
The smile died away, and Hamilton turned back to the viewport. “So how did I end up on that ship?”

Janeway hesitated. “Ms. Hamilton, are you aware of certain…stories about people claiming to have been kidnapped by aliens?”

“Yes, of course, they’re always in the supermarket tabloids. Nobody ever takes them seriously.”

“Perhaps they should have. It’s what happened to you.” Carefully, she explained what Seven and Harry had discovered about the Sumak. The look of horror on Hamilton’s face was something she didn’t think she would forget for a while.

“You mean I was a lab rat?”

Although Humans had stopped using live animals in medical experiments long before Janeway had been born—medical technology had rendered the practice unnecessary—she knew about it and understood the reference. “That was their intent, yes. But they never got to that point because they never made it back to their home planet. Something catastrophic destroyed their ship; we can only guess what it might have been. But because you were protected inside a stasis tube, you survived.”

“My god.” The room was quiet as both women gazed at the shattered ship. After a long pause, Hamilton said slowly, “Captain Janeway, these aliens…they didn’t come all that way just to pick me up, did they? There must have been others.”

“Yes. There were eighty-three others, taken from several different planets.”

“And where are they?”

There was no easy way to say it. “You were the only survivor.”

Hamilton leaned her forehead against the viewport and closed her eyes, what little color there was in her face draining away. “Eighty-three dead. Everyone except me. Why am I the only one who made it?”

“Your stasis tube was the closest to the power source. It was the only one that didn’t lose power.”

“I guess that makes me the lucky one,” said Hamilton, not moving from her position. “Funny, I don’t feel very lucky. God, this is hard to take in.”

Janeway was silent. It was hard for her to take in, too—there had been members of her own race among the dead, as well as representatives of races she knew and admired. Even the races she disliked had at least been
familiar. It seemed a cruel twist of fate that her first contact with species from her own quadrant involved so much death and so little hope—but there was life, too, in the form of this woman from the past.

“I can imagine some of how you must feel,” she said. “It’s been difficult for us as well. Many of us recognize our own species on that ship. But we’re all grateful that you’re here, and that we could pull some life from all that wreckage. We will mourn the dead, but we’ll go on—and so will you.”

Hamilton lifted her head and opened her eyes, meeting Janeway’s gaze in the reflection from the viewport. “Thank you. That does help a little.”

Janeway smiled at her, seeing an answering smile in her guest’s reflection. The sudden gasp startled her. Shifting to look at Hamilton directly, she watched as the woman raised a shaking hand and touched her own face while staring at the viewport. When she turned toward Janeway, her eyes were wide and frightened.

“I just realized that I’ve been seeing my own reflection,” she said. “But it’s not me—I mean, this doesn’t look anything like me. My face is so thin; I look like a skeleton. What’s happened to me?” Her voice rose at the end, a crack appearing in her preternatural calm.

Janeway put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “You lost a lot of weight while in stasis, that’s all. You’ll be all right.” Under her hand, she could feel her guest trembling slightly.

“I think I need to sit down,” said Hamilton, moving toward a chair. “May I?”

“Of course,” said Janeway, sitting next to her and feeling like an incon siderate clod. “I’m sorry, I should have realized...are you feeling all right physically?”

“I’m a little weak in the knees, but otherwise everything seems to be working.” She looked around the room. “Is there somewhere I could get a glass of water?”

Janeway touched her comm badge. “Janeway to sickbay.”

“Captain! How is our patient doing?”

“Ms. Hamilton is doing fine, Doctor,” said Janeway. She knew the casual reference to their patient’s name would leave the Doctor beside himself with curiosity, and smiled inwardly at the thought. “But she’s asked for a glass of water. Would that harm her in any way?”

To his credit, the Doctor did not ask any questions. “Not at all. In fact,
she’ll need to take in fluids before we can restart her digestive system. A glass of water would be good for her. Tell her to drink it very slowly."

“Thank you, Doctor. Janeway out.” Janeway went to the replicator, ordered a glass of water and a cup of coffee, and brought the drinks back to the conference table. Handing the glass to Hamilton, she raised her coffee cup. “I could use something myself. It’s getting a bit late.” She closed her eyes as the first sip of the hot brew hit her taste buds. When she opened them again, it was to find Hamilton eyeing her drink with disbelief.

“Did I just see you pull these out of thin air?”

Whoops. Janeway decided on the short explanation. “It’s called a replicator. We have the technology to convert energy to matter. Go ahead, it’s the real thing.”

Hamilton sipped her drink, paused, then took a larger gulp. She considered the glass in front of her for several seconds, finally setting it down with a click. When she turned, Janeway was struck by the change in her guest’s demeanor. Her face had tightened, her jaw was set, and the bewildered look in her eyes had given way to something far more determined.

“Captain Janeway,” she said, “there’s a piece missing to this puzzle. You’ve told me how I got here, and I can accept that. What I can’t accept is how you got here. This ship, your technology, your ability to travel in space—not to mention the fact that suddenly there’s life on other planets—this is all completely impossible, unless I’ve somehow jumped to an alternate reality. But I think it’s more likely that I’m in my own reality, just a different time.” She paused, then continued more slowly. “You said that the tube you found me in was designed to suspend my metabolism. But I’ve lost a lot of weight, so either my metabolism wasn’t suspended after all, or it was in an incomplete suspension for a long time. Tell me—exactly how long was I in there?”

Well, there it is. Janeway had been trying to think of a gentle way to reveal her guest’s true temporal displacement, and Hamilton had taken it right out of her hands. Meeting the direct gaze head on, she said, “We don’t know exactly when you were captured. But in Earth Standard Time, you are now in the year 2376.”

Hamilton was visibly rocked by this news. She shook her head and spoke almost to herself. “Jesus. I knew it had to be a long time, but my
god, almost four hundred years...” She rose from her chair and moved to
the viewport, her back to Janeway. “I was climbing Denali as a celebration
of the new millennium. It was July 2001. So I’ve been on that ship for
three hundred and seventy-five years. Except in my mind, it’s only been
three days since I said goodbye to Cole—my boyfriend—and got on an
airplane to Alaska. I planned to be home in two weeks. Two weeks!” She
let out a sound that might have been a laugh. “Give or take a few
centuries. And now I have to wrap my head around the fact that he’s
dead, and has been for a long time. Everyone I’ve ever loved...hell, even
the people I didn’t like—they’ve all been dead for almost four centuries.”

Janeway stood up and joined her at the viewport. “I realize that this is
difficult for you. If you’d like to talk about it, I’m here to listen.”

There was no response at first. Then Hamilton turned and gave her a
quick smile that didn’t go anywhere near her eyes.

“I appreciate your offer; thank you. But there’s not much to talk about,
is there? I’ve lost everyone I ever cared about, and there’s not a thing I can
do about it. End of story. At this point, I need answers more than counsel-
ing. I need to know more about the time I’m in now, and who you all are,
and how you got here. And where is here, anyway?” She gestured toward
the viewport.

Janeway hesitated, but the intelligent green eyes watching her did not
miss a thing.

“Obviously you don’t have good news about that, either.”

Janeway sighed. “I’m afraid not.” In as few words as possible, she
outlined Voyager’s situation: how they had been pulled from Federation
space by a powerful entity and then stranded seventy-five thousand light
years from home, and how they had been making their way back for
nearly five years so far. When she finished, her guest looked like she
didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “So you’re telling me that not only
am I displaced in time, but in space as well?”

“Well—yes. But Voyager has made excellent progress so far, and we’ve
already cut our journey in half. I truly believe that we’ll make it home, and
sooner rather than later.”

A short laugh escaped. “So it’s not all bad news then, eh? I guess I’m
along for the ride.” An expression of alarm crossed her face as she asked,
“I am along for the ride, right? You’re not going to put me off
somewhere?”
“Of course not!” Janeway was shocked that she could even think it. “You’re one of us now. You were the moment we detected your life sign.”

Hamilton looked at her oddly. “Thank you. Don’t misunderstand, I’m grateful to you and your crew for rescuing me. It’s just that...” She stopped.

“It’s just that what?” Janeway prompted, when she showed no signs of finishing her sentence.

“I guess there’s a lot I need to know,” Hamilton said at last. “Probably more than you’ll ever have time to tell me. It looks like I have four hundred years to catch up on, so where do I start?”

Janeway knew that wasn’t what she’d meant to say, but at least this question had an easy answer. “You can start with the ship’s database. It has complete historical records. You can also read about this ship and its mission, as well as Starfleet and the Federation—that’s a planetary consortium that Earth now belongs to. You’ll be current in no time.” She smiled encouragingly, but she was troubled. Hamilton’s apparent dismissal of her loss and her emotional compartmentalization were character traits that Janeway recognized quite well, since she shared them. And she knew from experience that somewhere, somehow, this was going to cause problems for the woman unless someone could get through to her and help her to process her displacement. For the thousandth time she wished for a ship’s counselor, because she was fairly certain this was going to fall on her shoulders.

“There’s a computer interface in sickbay,” she continued. “The Doctor wants to keep you under observation for a while, so we’ll get you started there. I’ll show you how to use the computer, and the Doctor can answer any questions you may have after I leave.” Janeway indicated the door. “Shall we?”

Hamilton looked doubtful for a moment, then nodded. “All right.” As they walked toward the door, she confided, “I was kind of hoping that once I left that place, I wouldn’t have to go back. I hate hospitals.”

Janeway laughed. “You’ll fit in just fine with us, Ms. Hamilton. I can see that already.”

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**Past Imperfect**  

At 2300 hours Janeway stepped into her quarters for the first time
since she’d left them that morning. It had been a long and draining day. She’d shown Hamilton how to use the computer—really, the woman had grasped the concepts and the information storage system amazingly quickly—and left her to her research. Then she’d had to hear an update from the Doctor on his plans for physical therapy and restarting their guest’s digestive system. When she was finally able to leave, all she wanted to do was go home and go to bed. But her day wasn’t done yet. She had another staff meeting at 0900, and by then she needed to have a decision made on how to deal with the bodies still littering the alien ship outside her viewport.

Walking straight to the replicator, Janeway ordered a whiskey and soda. Settling in her favorite chair, she asked the computer to play a slow jazz selection. As she sipped her drink and listened to the soothing music, she could feel some of the tension easing from between her shoulders. Sinking even deeper into the chair, she reviewed her options, weighed the benefits and risks, and considered the issue of her crew’s morale. By the time her glass was empty, she’d made her decision. Tuvok was right; the risk to the crew was too high to attempt removal of the bodies. In addition, bringing eighty-three corpses on to Voyager and then disposing of them in the appropriate ways would seriously impact her crew’s morale. Better to honor the dead in one spectacular explosion, something that was conclusive, and be done with it.

As she took her glass to the replicator and prepared for bed, another thought occurred to her. Hamilton needed the closure, too. She’d have the Doctor bring her to the memorial service.
The next day the ship was abuzz with the news. Captain Janeway had distributed a shipwide memo informing the crew of the eighty-three dead prisoners and the upcoming destruction of the ship. She set aside one hour for crewmembers to either attend the memorial in the mess hall, watch it on viewscreens throughout the ship, or simply process the tragedy in their own way. The memorial was scheduled for 1500 hours.

At 1455, Janeway stood in her dress uniform, watching the gathering crowd. Seven of Nine entered the room and took up a position near a viewport, her hands behind her back. It hadn't been too long ago that Seven espoused the Borg philosophy regarding death: dead was dead, and the event was unworthy of any special attention. She'd come a long way since then. Janeway caught her eye across the room and gave her an approving smile; Seven nodded her head in response.

Then the Doctor came in with Hamilton. She had put her hair back in a French braid and was dressed in black, standing out vividly in the sea of colored uniforms. They came through the crowd directly to Janeway.

“Captain Janeway, thank you for doing this,” said Hamilton. “And thank you for inviting me to attend.” Her attire contrasted with her still-pale face, and the silver streaks in her braid created an arresting effect.

“You’re very welcome,” said Janeway. “I suspected you might need this more than any of us.”
Tuvok arrived and nodded to Janeway, indicating that all was ready. She stepped to the front of the crowd and the room fell silent. Scanning the faces of her crew, she began to speak.

“We are here to honor the lives of eighty-three individuals who died on the Sumak ship. They were residents of the Alpha quadrant, taken from their homes without their consent or knowledge. They were Andorian, Bajoran, Betazoid, Bolian, Breen, Cardassian, Human, Klingon, Nausicaan, Romulan, Trill, and Vulcan.” She paused.

“It is not possible for us to honor the memories of each individual on that ship. We will never know their names. We will never know how they lived, who they loved, what was important to them, what gave them joy. We will never know what they accomplished, or what they could have accomplished had they lived out their lives. But we do know one thing: that their deaths are recognized and honored.

“Although we cannot treat all of their physical remains as their belief systems would warrant, we can still respect those beliefs. Accordingly, a representative of each race will share with us their ways of honoring their dead. Those races not represented on this ship will have someone else to speak for them. Commander Chakotay will begin.”

Janeway stepped back into the crowd, and Commander Chakotay came forward to talk about Andorian beliefs. When he finished, Tal Celes walked up. Her voice was shaky at first, but grew stronger as she told of her people’s relationship with the Prophets. Ensign Harry Kim spoke for the Betazoids, and Ensign Golwat represented her race. By the time Tuvok stepped up, Janeway was marveling at the amazing diversity of ideas and concepts represented here, and also at some of the startling similarities. She had never had occasion to learn about the death and afterlife beliefs of several of these races, and was moved by what she heard.

When Tuvok finished, Janeway returned to the front. Surveying the sea of sober faces, she paused when her gaze reached Hamilton. Their new passenger stood straight and tall, but the glint on her cheeks betrayed the course of tears. Good, Janeway thought. It can’t be healthy for her to be as controlled as she seemed. She looked at Tuvok, who nodded and said something quietly into his comm badge. Then Janeway spoke.

“The ship before us has been a tomb for three hundred and seventy-five years. But we cannot leave it as we have found it. It is not known by
others to be a sacred resting place, and we cannot guarantee that those aboard it will be left in peace once we are gone.

“Therefore, we have one last gift to give these honored dead: a final gesture of respect.” She nodded at Ensign Farley, who stepped forward to play a quiet dirge on his flute. When the last notes faded, Janeway glanced at Tuvok, then faced the viewports. Tuvok spoke again into his comm badge, and a photon torpedo ripped through space toward the ship. A second later the derelict ship erupted in a silent explosion.

At the same moment, an agonized scream tore through the quiet crowd. Janeway whirled around in time to see Lynne Hamilton drop to the floor, her hands to her head. She curled into a fetal position, sobbing, “No! Make it stop! Oh god, make it stop!” And then she could say no more as her screams became those of pure animal pain.

Janeway slapped her comm badge on Hamilton’s writhing body and shouted to be heard over the screams. “Computer, medical emergency! Lock onto my comm signal and transport one to sickbay!”

The Doctor was already dissolving as he transferred his program. Moments later the screams were cut off as Hamilton was taken by the transporter beam. The ensuing silence was shocking by comparison, and every person in the room was wide-eyed and shaken. Janeway’s own heart felt like it was going to pound right out of her chest.

*So much for crew morale.* There was nothing she could say or do to mitigate the impact that Hamilton’s sudden breakdown had created; all she could do was end the service.

“Thank you all for attending,” she said. “Those of you on duty may return to your stations.” There was a long pause, and then a quiet buzz filled the room as some people left for their stations and others took seats at the mess hall tables, leaning close in intent conversation. Janeway looked at her first officer. “You have the bridge, Chakotay. I’ll be in sickbay.”

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For the second time in two days, Janeway strode through the doors to sickbay without knowing what she would find there. Whatever had happened to Lynne Hamilton was tied to the destruction of the ship.
somehow, that much was obvious. She hoped the Doctor would have some answers quickly.

When she glimpsed the still form on the biobed, she thought for just a moment that Hamilton was dead. But the readouts indicated otherwise, and she stepped up to the bed with a feeling of relief.

“What happened?”

The Doctor glanced up from the scan he was running. “One moment please, Captain.” He finished the scan, looked at the readout, and frowned. “I don’t know yet. When she arrived in sickbay I sedated her immediately and have been running scans ever since. So far, they don’t show anything except that her blood pressure has dropped and her heart rate and adrenaline levels are way up. None of those findings are surprising, given what we saw in the mess hall. I’m about to do a deep brain scan next.”

Janeway stood by, hating the fact that she was helpless to do anything. She watched as the Doctor carefully positioned the brain scanner, checked the settings, and activated it. Lights glowed on the scanner as it began feeding information to the Doctor’s computer terminal.

“Hmm,” said the Doctor as he watched the readings. “This is interesting.”

“What?” said Janeway, trying hard to curb her irritation at the Doctor’s lack of explanation.

“What?” said Janeway, trying hard to curb her irritation at the Doctor’s lack of explanation.

“The pain center in her brain has been stimulated somehow. Since there is nothing wrong with her physically, I can only assume that the stimulation is direct.” His fingers flew over the control panel and the hum of the scanner paused for a moment before continuing. “I’ve programmed the scanner to focus on that specific region of her brain, and increased the resolution. Let’s see what it shows us.”

Janeway walked around the panel to see for herself. A visual image of Hamilton’s brain on a cellular level was scrolling by, and she knew she didn’t have the training to recognize anything out of the ordinary. Still, watching this was better than watching the Doctor.

The image continued to scroll past, moving back and forth as the Doctor scanned each layer of cells and refocused the scanner to the next layer. Then something so abnormal appeared on the screen that Janeway needed no training to know they’d found the problem.

“What the hell is that?” she said.
The Doctor was staring at the screen in surprise. “I don’t know,” he said. “Some sort of microbot, I’d guess. It’s clamped on to the nerve bundle leading to the pain center. Obviously it’s stimulating the nerves somehow, but I’ll have to get it out of there to find out how it works and why it’s there.”

He began pulling instruments and equipment out of supply cabinets. “I’m sorry, Captain, but I’ll have to ask you to move out of the area. I’m going to need to erect a medical force field to guard against contaminants. This is going to be very delicate microsurgery.”

Janeway moved several steps away. “How long will it take?”

“Three hours at least. I can’t be more specific than that.” He activated the force field and bent over Ms. Hamilton.

“Contact me as soon as you’re finished,” said Janeway, and the Doctor nodded without even looking up. Janeway turned and left. She still felt helpless, but at least now they knew something. All she had to do was wait. And she was so very good at that.

\[ \text{Janeway was in her quarters, trying unsuccessfully to read a book, when the call came in four hours later. “Sickbay to Captain Janeway.”} \]

Janeway dropped her book and hit her comm badge. “Go ahead, Doctor.”

“Captain, I’ve removed the microbot, and Ms. Hamilton should make a full recovery. If you’ll come to sickbay, I think I can explain what happened.”

“I’ll be right there.” Janeway was out the door in seconds, and in sickbay less than three minutes later. She was surprised to see her chief engineer there with the Doctor. B’Elanna looked up at her entrance and waved her over.

“Take a look at this, Captain.” She indicated a viewscreen, and Janeway walked up to see a magnified image of the microbot. It had been disassembled, and she recognized some of the components that were exposed.

“It’s a receiver of some sort, isn’t it?” she said, staring intently at the screen.

“Yes,” said the Doctor. “And more. When I removed it from Ms. Hamilton’s brain, I asked B’Elanna to help me determine how it worked.”

“It’s actually quite a simple little machine once you get the thing
apart,” said B’Elanna. “But the microcircuitry is amazingly advanced. As long as it receives a programmed signal, it stays inactive. But if the signal stops, the microbot responds by generating an electrical charge that is delivered directly to the nerve leading to the pain center.”

The Doctor picked up the thread. “The charge causes the victim to feel excruciating pain. And since the pain is not caused by any actual physical trauma, the body can’t engage any of its pain-blocking defenses. For instance, if you cut your hand, you initially feel a sharp pain caused by nerve impulses from the injured area to your brain. Those nerve impulses go into the thalamus, which directs them onward to the pain center. As the impulses are redirected, the brain stimulates production of a neuropeptide that inhibits pain signals. Soon the acute pain dulls down to something that still hurts, but not nearly as much as the initial injury.” He indicated the viewscreen. “This little gem bypasses that defense by delivering the equivalent of a nerve impulse directly to the pain center. There’s no way for the brain to suppress it. Ms. Hamilton was experiencing more pain than is normally possible for a Human to feel.”

Janeway was horrified. “But why would…” She stopped. “Harry said the Sumak tested their victims for pain tolerance. Is this how they did it?”

“I don’t think so,” said B’Elanna. “I mean, that may have been a secondary purpose, but I don’t think that’s what it was designed to do. If you’re testing for pain tolerance, you’d want to be able to produce different levels of pain. This microbot can only produce one level: excruciating.”

“Then what was it designed for?”

“We’ll probably never know for sure, but I can make a guess. Captain, you didn’t see the destruction inside that ship—it was even worse than the outside. There wasn’t a single bulkhead left standing, except in the room where the stasis tubes were. Those bulkheads were reinforced, and I found other signs that indicated the Sumak were paranoid about possible escape. I think this device is one more safeguard against a prisoner getting away somehow. There must have been a transmitter on board the ship that kept these devices inactive, but if a prisoner ever escaped, they wouldn’t get far before going beyond the range of the signal. Then they’d be incapacitated and easy to recapture.”

Something didn’t add up here. “But a prisoner couldn’t go anywhere on the ship that would be out of range of the transmitter,” said Janeway.
“And with nothing in space to interfere with the signal, it would also travel a good distance outside the ship as well. How would that prevent escape?”

“I don’t think it was designed to prevent escape on the ship itself,” said B’Elanna. “They had plenty of other methods to deal with that. I think it was designed to prevent escape once the prisoners were on their homeworld. With buildings and landforms to get in the way, a prisoner could be out of range of the signal in a short distance.”

“Not only that,” said the Doctor thoughtfully, “but it’s likely the signal would not suddenly end, but would gradually degrade instead. I suspect that the microbot is not intended to deliver the kind of constant charge that Ms. Hamilton received. It’s intended to deliver short charges as the suppressing signal fades in and out. That’s all that would be needed to incapacitate a humanoid.”

Janeway groaned inwardly. “So when we destroyed the ship, we also destroyed the transmitter and cut off the signal altogether.” She walked around to Hamilton’s biobed and gazed at the still face, her anger swiftly rising. The Sumak had caused this woman so much harm, and they were still doing it long after their own deaths. What bastards.

“I’m sure that the Sumak had some redeeming qualities,” she said. “But I’m damned if I can imagine what they could possibly have been. And I won’t feel easy until this sector is five light years behind us.” She activated her comm badge. “Janeway to bridge.”

“Yes, Captain.” It was Chakotay’s voice.

“Chakotay, we’re done here. Resume original heading, warp six. Get us the hell out of this space.”

“Course set. We’re on our way.”

“Janeway out.” She could feel the hum of the warp engine and didn’t need a viewport to know that the few remaining molecules of the Sumak ship were falling quickly behind them—but not quickly enough to erase her sorrow and guilt. In the course of helping this woman, they had inadvertently caused her unthinkable pain. And it had been her decision that had set it in motion.

*Her introduction to our time has been nothing but traumatic. I hope I can turn this around.* Turning to leave, she said, “Doctor, you’ve done excellent work here. Thank you. And B’Elanna, thank you for your help and your input. As soon as I get your reports I’ll add them to the mission log and then
close the file. After that, I hope I never hear the name ‘Sumak’ again.’” She nodded shortly and walked out of sickbay.

B’Elanna and the Doctor looked at each other, startled by Janeway’s attitude. The Doctor spoke first.

“I wonder if the Captain needs a checkup?”

B’Elanna shook her head. “No, I don’t think there’s anything wrong with her. She’s just pissed off that we couldn’t catch this before it happened. I wouldn’t mention anything to her if I were you. She’d probably tear your holographic head off.”

The Doctor moved off to prepare his report, leaving B’Elanna staring at the sleeping form of Lynne Hamilton. She had a speculative look on her face. Then she shrugged her shoulders and headed back to engineering.
Alpha shift was nearly over the next day before Janeway got the call that Ms. Hamilton was regaining consciousness. She wasted no time turning the bridge over to Chakotay. When she arrived in sickbay she could hear Hamilton’s voice, speaking to the Doctor in slow and tired tones.

“And how do you feel now?” the Doctor asked.

“Like I just fell two thousand feet down an ice slope and came to a stop against a granite wall. Every muscle in my body hurts.”

Janeway arrived at the biobed as the Doctor responded, “That’s to be expected. Your muscles hurt because they were severely contracted. I can give you something to help with that.” He moved to a medication rack and began loading a hypospray.

Hamilton looked up. “Captain Janeway. What happened?”

Janeway had been dreading this moment. It pained her to have to tell Hamilton of another Sumak cruelty committed against her, and she still felt a simmering rage toward the aliens. She pushed her anger deep down and explained their theory as gently as she could. As she talked, the Doctor returned and injected Hamilton, who was so focused on what she was hearing that she didn’t even move her head. When Janeway finished, Hamilton let her head roll back on the pillow and stared at the ceiling. “You say this thing was the size of a cell?”
“Yes.”

“Then how can you be sure that there aren’t any other little...gifts left inside me?”

“We can’t,” said the Doctor. Janeway shot him a glare that would have sent most organic lifeforms into cardiac arrest, and he scrambled to modify his statement. “I mean that we’ve scanned you thoroughly for any other implants and found nothing, but it is possible that since we don’t know exactly where to look, an implant of that size could escape notice until we focused in on its exact location. However, I am reasonably certain that there was only the one.”

Janeway thought the Doctor’s bedside manner could still use a great deal of improvement. Leaning over Hamilton, she said in a reassuring tone, “The Sumak ship has been destroyed, and we’re already nearly a light year away from its location. If you had any other signal-controlled implants, they would have activated by now. Also, you never arrived at the Sumak homeworld and were therefore never involved in an experiment, so I can’t imagine that the Sumak had the time or any reason to implant anything else in you. You’re safe now.”

“But just to make sure of that,” said the Doctor as he wheeled the brain scanner into place, “I’d like to run another scan on you now that you’re awake. Don’t worry, this won’t hurt.”

Hamilton closed her eyes. “Doctor, I don’t know what your capabilities are, but I really don’t think it’s possible for you to do anything to me that could hurt as much as that implant.”

Janeway’s heart ached to see her new passenger lying there so quietly, accepting the Doctor’s ministrations with the air of one who had nothing to lose and really didn’t care. It was such a contrast to the stubborn resistance and quick intelligence she’d seen in their first meeting. As she watched the progress of the scan, a protective instinct rose up in her. She wanted to put her arm around this woman and tell her that everything would be all right, that she’d make sure of it. But her father had always said don’t make promises that life won’t let you keep, and she had lived by that advice. Unfortunately, life hardly ever allowed her to make guarantees.

The Doctor turned off the scanner and pushed it away. “The scan shows nothing. You’re going to be fine.” He leaned over her. “Can you sit up?”

“Let’s find out,” she said. Ignoring his outstretched hand, she pulled
herself into a sitting position. Only a wince betrayed her discomfort. “I feel like I have no abdominal muscles at all.”

“You don’t, really,” said the Doctor. “That’s something that we’ll have to work on with your physical therapy.”

“What do you mean?” Obviously this was the first she’d heard of it.

Janeway stepped in to prevent the Doctor from digging another hole. “Ms. Hamilton, you were in stasis for a very long time. Much longer than the system was designed for. You already know that your metabolism wasn’t entirely shut down; it was just dramatically slowed. And that means that your body still needed nutrients. Since there was nothing coming into your body to satisfy that need, it simply used what it had. You burned up all of your extra fat and a lot of your muscle tissue to survive, and it’s going to take you a little while to rebuild.”

Hamilton took a moment to absorb this. Without a word, she pulled her sleeve up and flexed one bicep while feeling the muscle with her other hand. Then she checked the rest of her body, wincing several times as she flexed various muscles, but never letting out a sound. When she looked up again, she had the calm, quiet air of complete despair.

“Well, that’s it. There isn’t anything left they could possibly do to me. They took me away from everyone I loved, booby trapped my brain, and now they’ve even taken my body. Damn, I thought I was just weak from the stasis.” She slumped back on the biobed and stared up at the ceiling.

“Your physical condition is only temporary,” said the Doctor. “With a little therapy we’ll have you up and around in no time.” He was doing his best to sound encouraging, but the silence from his patient testified to his ineffectiveness.

Janeway put a gentle hand on their patient’s shoulder and watched as Hamilton slowly turned her head. The encouraging words died on her lips as she looked into eyes that were full of a quiet defeat.

“You don’t know me,” said Hamilton. “None of you do. You have no idea what I used to be.” She returned her gaze to the ceiling, continuing after a pause. “I’ve worked all my life to stay on top of the heap. I’ve always had to prove myself by being better, stronger, faster. And I was. But now I’m slow and weak and behind the times.” Her mouth twisted in a bitter smile. “Hell, I don’t even know who I am anymore. Why should you?”

Janeway felt her new passenger slipping away from them and wished
once more that she had a ship’s counselor. She’d take a nice, clean fire-fight over the slippery uncertainties of emotions any day. But there was no counselor on board, and if she left things up to the Doctor this woman would probably be catatonic by the end of the shift.

Squeezing the warm shoulder beneath her hand, she said, “What the Sumak did to you happened a long time ago. They’re all dead, but you are alive.” Hamilton met her eyes and Janeway looked at her intently, trying to find the fire she knew was there. “You’re right,” she continued. “There’s nothing they can possibly do to you now—because you’ve outlived them. You survived. Your brain is fine, and you’ll get your body back with a little work. The Doctor has an excellent plan for your physical therapy, and you’ll be surprised at how quickly you recover. And you will recover—because that will be your victory over them.”

Though Hamilton said nothing, her gaze sharpened a little, just enough for Janeway to hope that she was getting through. “How long will you need to keep her for observation?” she asked the Doctor.

“At least forty-eight hours. Even without the microsurgery, I’d still want to keep her here until we finish rehydrating her and get more nutrients into her system.”

Janeway nodded. “All right. I want daily updates, and contact me when you’re ready to discharge her.”

“Oh, of course.” The Doctor smiled at Hamilton and walked into his office.

When she turned back to the biobed, Janeway wasn’t surprised to see Hamilton watching her.

“I’m in here for two more days?” She didn’t sound happy at the news.

“You need the rest,” said Janeway, holding up a hand to forestall the objection she could see forming on the woman’s lips. “And you’ll have full access to the ship’s database,” she added in a gentler tone. “You can catch up on things just as easily here as anywhere else on board. I’ll check in on you to see how you’re doing.”

Hamilton tightened her jaw and perused the ceiling once again. “Fine,” she said. Under her breath she added, “It’s not like I have anyplace else to go.”

Janeway was already moving away and almost didn’t hear the quiet comment. She paused, then returned to the biobed and leaned over until Hamilton had no choice but to meet her gaze. “You will,” she said.
“Voyager is your home now. You’re one of us.” She could see the doubt in her eyes; could almost hear the woman thinking, No, I’m not.

“Yes,” she said, “you are.” Green eyes widened in surprise and Janeway knew she’d hit the mark. “And I look forward to showing you around when you’re feeling better,” she added. She stayed where she was, not releasing the eye contact until Hamilton finally nodded. When the woman didn’t seem inclined to say anything more, Janeway wished her a good evening and turned to go. She’d taken several steps when she heard the voice behind her.

“Captain Janeway.” Hamilton was propped up on her elbows.

“Yes?”

“I…I appreciate what you said. Thank you.”

Janeway smiled at her newest passenger. “You’re welcome. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Despite receiving regular updates from the Doctor, Janeway made a point of visiting sickbay twice each day for the next two days. Hamilton slept through the first day and half of the second, and the Doctor assured Janeway that their patient was fine; sleep was just what her body needed right now. On her fourth visit, Janeway arrived to find Hamilton sitting at the computer console, going through what appeared to be historical records.

“How are you feeling?” asked Janeway as she came to a stop behind her chair.

Hamilton jumped a little, then turned with a sheepish look on her face. “Well, I was feeling quite a bit better until you scared the tar out of me.”

“My apologies. I didn’t mean to.”

Hamilton ran a hand over her face and shook her hair out of her eyes. “No, I know you didn’t. I was just…a little absorbed, I guess.” She gestured at the computer. “I didn’t expect to be reading about World War III.”

Janeway took a moment to scan the text on the screen. “I’m afraid that won’t be the last war you read about,” she said reluctantly. “But you’ll
find a lot of positive history, too. Inventions, advances, treaties, new understandings of science and humanity...we've done some good things.”

“That’s obvious from what I’ve seen of this ship so far,” said Hamilton. “And of you.” One side of her mouth curved up in a tired smile. “I’ll be glad when I get to the good stuff, though. This isn’t exactly the type of light reading recommended for hospital stays.” She rubbed her face again. “The part I can’t quite get over is that to you, this is all history. To me, it’s the future. It’s so strange reading about things that haven’t happened yet in past tense. I feel...adrift.”

“Maybe it would help if you used a different perspective,” said Janeway.

“Such as?” Hamilton looked skeptical.

“Well, current theory in temporal mechanics holds that time isn’t linear at all, but is happening at all times, all around us. That it’s like a river, with past, present and future all intermixed and moving together. And that if we can learn to distinguish between them, we can step from one time to another at will.” She didn’t mention her certain knowledge that by the twenty-ninth century, humanity would be able to do just that. “Travel through normal space requires two things. One is propulsion; the other is the means to determine the difference between Point A and Point B. We’ve come up with several possibilities for propulsion in time travel, but so far we can’t differentiate between different points in time. However, we’ve had experiences with several races that are able to travel through time, so we know it’s possible.

“Time is happening simultaneously, Ms. Hamilton. The past and the future are all around us, just waiting for us to learn to distinguish them. So thinking of the last four hundred years as the past is simply a matter of your chosen perspective—you could just as easily think of them as the future or the present. At the moment, we Humans continue to think of time as linear because it’s too difficult for us to comprehend the other possibilities. But I think someday that will change.”

There was a momentary silence as Hamilton simply stared at Janeway.

“Holy shit,” she said at last. “I think I need to be smoking a joint to understand what you just said. Do you people often walk around discussing these kinds of concepts?”

“Not all of us, no, and not all the time,” said Janeway. “What’s a joint?”
“Oh, no. Are you going to tell me that no one uses marijuana anymore?”

“I guess not, since I never heard of it. What is it?”

Hamilton’s cheeks looked slightly pink, a noticeable color change given the still-pale skin tone of her face. “Um…it’s a plant. You dry the leaves and buds and smoke it. The tissues contain a drug called THC, and what that stands for I really don’t remember, but it does some pretty fun things to your brain if it’s used properly.”

“I take it you know how to use it properly,” said Janeway, crossing her arms over her chest. Secretly she was delighted that Hamilton was opening up this much.

The color in Hamilton’s face increased. “Well…yes, I do. I mean I did. But it’s been a while.” She tilted her head to one side, meeting Janeway’s gaze curiously. “So what’s the current governmental stance on recreational drugs?”

“Depends on which government and what kind of drug you’re talking about,” said Janeway. “Narcotics are almost unheard of on Earth these days, but believe me, if you want to rearrange the synapses in your brain, there are any number of planets you can go to for highly refined, extremely powerful drugs.” She allowed a smile to break the surface. “However, I think anyone involved in the recreational drug business would be mortified at the idea of smoking a plant. It would be considered disgustingly low-tech.”

The short pause following her statement was broken by something she hadn’t expected: a low chuckle. Hamilton looked up with bright eyes, still chuckling.

“Thanks,” she said. “I’ll have to keep in mind that my past drug experiences, which would once have been considered slightly racy and a little outside acceptable society, are now nothing more than a primitive embarrassment. How humbling.”

Janeway’s response was interrupted by the Doctor, who appeared from his office with PADD in hand. “Ah, Captain. I was just about to contact you.” He beamed at his patient. “Ms. Hamilton is ready for release. She’s recovering nicely and needs nothing more than continued rest, which she can do quite well in her own quarters. I see no further reason to keep her under observation. I would, however, like to see her first thing tomorrow for the start of her physical therapy.”
Janeway nodded. “Excellent. Thank you, Doctor. Ms. Hamilton, would you like to see your new quarters?”

Standing up quickly, Hamilton said, “God, yes. You have no idea how much I’d like that. Just get me out of here. No offense, Doctor,” she added after a pause.

“None taken,” said the Doctor with a slightly injured air.

As Janeway walked out with her new passenger in tow, she heard the Doctor talking to himself just before the doors slid shut.

“Oh, why does everyone always want to leave sickbay?”

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Janeway had assigned Hamilton quarters on deck six and was now showing her around her new home. Her guest was observing everything quietly, but her interest had obviously been piqued by the tour.

“And this is the replicator,” said Janeway as they came to a stop in front of the unit. “The technology is complicated, but operating it is easy. Simply ask it for what you want, and be specific.”

Hamilton looked doubtfully at the unit. “What do you mean, ‘be specific’?”

Janeway spoke. “Computer, water.”

The replicator produced the default for that command, a glass of room-temperature water. Janeway handed it to Hamilton and turned to the unit again. “Computer, water, cold.”

Another glass appeared, and Janeway handed that one to Hamilton as well. “That’s what I mean. You can program it for your preferences, but right now it’s using a default menu.”

“Got it,” said Hamilton. Setting both glasses on a nearby table, she stepped up to the unit. “Computer, gin and tonic, on the rocks. Icy cold.”

“Please restate your request,” said the computer. Hamilton turned to Janeway with a bewildered air.

Janeway was just as confused as the computer. “What does ‘on the rocks’ mean?”

“Oh. Right. I need to watch my idioms. It’s a slang term for ‘with ice,’ but it was so common in my time that I never even thought of it as slang.” She turned back to the unit. “Computer, gin and tonic, cold, with ice.” In a moment, the replicator produced the drink. With a smile that actually
touched both sides of her mouth, Hamilton lifted the glass. Her smile died when she saw the expression on Janeway’s face. “No?”

“No. God only knows what that would do to your digestive system right now. Do you want to go back to sickbay so soon?”

Sighing, Hamilton looked at the drink. “Can I just tell you what a laugh a minute it’s been to wake up here? Now what am I supposed to do with it? There isn’t even a sink.”

Janeway took the glass out of Hamilton’s hand and put it back in the replicator. “Computer, recycle.”

With its characteristic hum, the computer recycled the components of the drink and the glass, storing the energy. Hamilton looked impressed. “Now that is every working woman’s dream.”

Amused, Janeway continued her tour, taking her guest through the bedroom and into the ensuite, where she showed her how to operate the sink and sonic shower. Hamilton looked decidedly askance at the shower. “Let me get this straight. There’s no water, just sound waves?”

“That’s right. Some of the crew quarters have both sonic and hydro units, but not these. Our water reclamation system couldn’t clean and recycle enough water to provide a sufficient amount for all crew quarters, so we have sonic-only units in all but the officer’s quarters. They’re extremely efficient, and you don’t even have to dry off.” Janeway didn’t mention her own famous distaste for sonic showers; Hamilton looked doubtful enough as it was.

“Well, however it works, I’ll be trying it out soon. I feel like I haven’t had a shower in a few hundred years.” Her voice was so dry that Janeway wasn’t sure whether she was making a joke or not; a quick glance at her straight face didn’t help. She decided to let that one go. Moving back into the living room, she indicated the standard furnishings.

“Within certain size limitations, you can order anything you want to use for decorations from your own replicator. You can also use it to replicate clothing for yourself, and anything else you might need. Keep in mind that everything you order costs a certain amount in replicator rations. I’ve had a move-in deposit put into your account, which should cover the necessities. Anything larger than your replicator can handle will have to be ordered from ship’s stores.” She showed her guest how to access her account and check the database of options from the replicator, then
moved to the computer terminal to demonstrate how to activate it and access the ship’s databases from the unit.

“That should be everything you need to get along,” she said. “The computer will keep you busy for as long as you have questions for it. You can ask for a schematic of the ship to familiarize yourself with the layout, and that should help you feel more at home. Oh, and one more thing. This is yours.” She pulled a comm badge out of her pocket and held it out.

Hamilton took it and looked at it curiously. “All of our comm badges are programmed to the individual. Among other things, they allow the computer to route communications. If you ever want to reach me, just activate the badge by tapping it once, and ask for me. If someone calls you, tap the badge and you’ll open the channel. The badges also allow the computer to track our locations.” To demonstrate, she said, “Computer, locate Captain Janeway.”

“Captain Janeway is in Lynne Hamilton’s quarters.”

She looked at Hamilton’s wide eyes and added, “Sometimes these badges are the difference between life and death. Don’t ever take yours off unless you’re in the shower or in bed, and even then you should keep it within arm’s reach.”

“How do I put it on?”

“It will adhere to any material, and comes off when you pull it. Just press it to your shirt.”

Hamilton looked at Janeway’s own badge, then pressed hers to the same spot on her chest. The comm badge stayed put.

It seemed to Janeway that the sight of Hamilton in her own quarters, wearing her comm badge, felt somehow right. She was aware of the lower decks gossip characterizing her as a captain who liked to pick up strays, but providing aid to those in need was a Starfleet ideal that they were all bound to uphold. The fact that she enjoyed helping others was a secondary motivation.

She held out her hand. “Welcome to Voyager, Ms. Hamilton,” she said. Hamilton shook her hand warmly. “Thank you, Captain Janeway. And please, call me Lynne. Everyone’s so polite around here; I’m starting to feel like I don’t have a first name.”

Janeway nearly snorted at hearing her crew described as ‘polite,’ but kept a straight face. “All right,” she said, “I will if you’ll call me Captain.”

“Done,” said Lynne. “Captain, I recognize that you must have a lot of
demands on your time, and I’m grateful for the amount you’ve spent with me. You’ve made this a little bit easier for me, and I truly appreciate it.”

Janeway was warmed by her earnest gratitude. “You’re very welcome,” she said. “Call me anytime you need me. I’ll check back with you tomorrow to see how you’re doing.”

Lynne nodded, and Janeway started back to the bridge. As she rode in the turbolift, she thought with relief that her newest passenger was adjusting very well, considering what she’d been through.

Her sense of well-being would have abruptly evaporated if she could have seen the lonely figure slumped in her quarters, sobbing amidst the tasteful but sterile Starfleet standard décor.
Toward the end of Alpha shift the next day, B’Elanna had called the bridge to inform them that the dilithium crystals they’d recently installed had developed fractures and would have to be immediately replaced. They’d taken the warp engines off line, and Janeway used the opportunity to roll up her sleeves and pitch in with the repairs. Every now and again she liked to brush up on her engineering skills, knowing that the occasional practice kept her sharp. She also knew that her presence in engineering tended to galvanize the staff, and that wasn’t necessarily a bad side effect. B’Elanna seemed fairly immune to this effect, however. It was a common characteristic for chief engineers, who knew perfectly well that all captains were at their mercy. Without the chief engineer, the engines wouldn’t run, and a captain with no engines was like a crystal goblet with no wine: decorative, but not very functional.

The downside to the day’s events was that they were now down to a single set of spare dilithium crystals. Janeway shook her head when B’Elanna gave her the news. She’d known their good fortune couldn’t last. It wasn’t that she was naturally a pessimist; it was just that life in the Delta Quadrant tended to reward optimism with more crises. Well, they’d just have to keep their eyes peeled for any source of dilithium as they traveled.

She found time during the repairs to make a quick call to the Doctor,
who informed her that their new passenger had been in for her first physical therapy session and her first solid food. “She’s going to have to be watched, Captain,” said the Doctor in a disapproving voice. “She tried to overdo her physical therapy, and it was only the fact that I was expecting such behavior that saved her from hurting herself. She reminds me of a certain captain we all know.” Janeway hid her smile and thanked the Doctor, ignoring his pointed comment. Then she was swamped by work and didn’t leave engineering until late that evening, at which point it was really too late to drop by Lynne’s quarters. Retiring to her own quarters, she called up a glass of merlot, sank into her favorite chair, and tapped her comm badge.

“Janeway to Hamilton.”

There was no answer. Janeway felt a little alarmed. “Captain Janeway to Lynne Hamilton,” she repeated.

“Hi, Captain, this is Lynne. I’m sorry, I just stepped out of the shower and forgot where I’d put my badge. Wow, that shower is something else.”

Janeway relaxed and smiled. Hearing Lynne’s voice gave her a warm feeling that she didn’t stop to analyze. It was just nice to know that she was okay. Of course, if she wasn’t okay, the Doctor would have informed her instantly, but Janeway didn’t feel the need to examine that either. “I just wanted to hear how you were doing,” she said. “Did everything go all right today?”

“Yes, thank you for asking. The Doctor gave me some truly vile food to try—I think he called it a ‘nutritional supplement’—and then let me work out a bit. I’ve been spending the last few hours doing historical research.” There was a pause. “Or, according to your theory, non-linear temporal research. You’re right, humanity has done some amazing things. Other things are somewhat…less impressive, and some are downright shocking.”

“How so?”

“Well, for one thing, who would have ever thought Britney Spears would be remembered as one of the top music icons of the twenty-first century? Now, I was only around for a few months of that century, but that was enough to know that she certainly didn’t deserve to be in the history books. I’m sure that every music critic from my time is rolling in his or her respective grave right now.”

“I’m sorry, I’m not familiar with that phrase.”

“Oh, right; sorry. It means that they would be completely appalled.”

Janeway laughed. Lynne surprised her, and for a woman who made her living by being able to predict the thoughts and behaviors of others, this
was refreshing. She certainly hadn’t expected Lynne to be spending her time analyzing the relative merits of music that had survived into the twenty-fourth century. “Well, at least we still have Mahler and Tchaikovsky,” she said.

Lynne sounded excited. “You do? Really? How can I find that?”

“Are you a classical music lover?”

“Yes, I am, and a little bit of familiarity would mean a lot right now.”

Janeway chastised herself for not thinking of this angle earlier. After all, music was one of the few things that could connect Lynne’s time with the present. “The music files are in the ship’s database. Simply ask your computer to play a selection by name. Your quarters have a built-in audio system.”

“Excellent! I can’t wait to try it. Thank you, Captain. Was there anything else?”

Janeway had just begun to settle into the conversation and was surprised at its sudden ending. “No,” she said. “I’m glad to hear you’re doing well. If you have any other questions, don’t hesitate to call me. Enjoy your music and have a good night.”

“Thank you, I will.”

“Janeway out.” Janeway took off her comm badge, stared at it for a moment and then set it on the coffee table. Lynne sounded as if she was doing quite well, and Janeway was glad to hear it. But she also felt as if she’d been rejected in some subtle way. Nobody on Voyager ever made her feel that way, but then, everyone else on Voyager treated her like the captain. Lynne apparently did not fully understand the distinction, and that was part of her appeal. On the other hand, being dismissed was something Janeway was not used to and did not particularly appreciate.

Deciding that some relaxation was in order, Janeway called up a music selection. She told herself it was only a coincidence that she felt like listening to classical.

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Nearly a week passed before Janeway saw Lynne again. Voyager had encountered a planet inhabited by warp-capable beings, who were both friendly and inclined to trade. Several days of drawn-out negotiations and barter had resulted in the ship’s holds being filled with supplies, and B’Elanna was pleased with her procurement of some much-needed equip-
ment that could be modified to fit the ship’s systems. By the time the transactions were complete, Janeway was very tired from the endless days of diplomatic entertainment and negotiations. She had checked in with the Doctor on Lynne’s status every day, and had managed several short comm link conversations with her new passenger, but there hadn’t been time for any real contact. When Voyager finally broke orbit, she was in her ready room, wrapping up her log entry and thinking that she really should stop by to see Lynne before collapsing in her own quarters. She was just logging off her computer when her door chimed.

“Come,” she called, reconciling herself to yet another demand on her time. But her weariness was forgotten when Lynne Hamilton walked into the room.

“Lynne! Please, have a seat. What can I do for you?”

“Hello, Captain,” said Lynne, taking the seat across the desk. “The Doctor says you’ve been busy these last several days, and I really didn’t want to disturb you, but…” She cut herself off and looked more closely at Janeway. “Wow, you look exhausted.”

“Thank you very much for noticing,” said Janeway, who was amused by the less than diplomatic observation. “Most people wouldn’t find it necessary to tell me.”

Lynne had the grace to blush. “I’m sorry, that was tactless, wasn’t it? It’s just that you and the Doctor are practically the only people I know on this ship, and…well, how you’re feeling matters to me.”

Disarmed by this frank explanation, Janeway sat back in her chair. Mentally she made a note that it was well past time to introduce Lynne to more of the crew. “Thank you,” she said, this time without a trace of irony. “That’s kind of you. Now, you must have had some reason for coming here other than checking up on my health.” She smiled, letting her visitor know that she wasn’t offended.

Lynne responded with that half-smile that seemed to be characteristic of her. “Yes, I did. I came to ask you for a job.”

This was completely unexpected. “A job?”

“Well, this is an inauspicious beginning.”

Caught, Janeway immediately altered her body language, straightening up and giving Lynne her full attention. “My apologies; I don’t often get job applicants. Tell me what you had in mind.”

Now it was Lynne’s turn to lean back in her chair, and Janeway, always
tuned to the subtleties of physical cues, noted that her guest had neatly
turned the moment to her advantage. Then she listened with growing
concern and understanding as Lynne explained.

“Captain, I need something to do. I’ve worked my whole life, and
being productive and valuable in some way has always been important to
me. For the last several years I’ve taught outdoor education, and I often
thought that if I ever won the lottery, I’d keep teaching anyway—my work
was very rewarding and I couldn’t imagine not doing it.” She looked down
at her hands, clasped together on her lap. When she looked up again her
face was completely serious. “And now I find myself in a situation where
my past experience and training mean absolutely nothing. At first I
thought I didn’t have anything to offer you or this ship, and that was pure
hell. The idea of just hanging around as a passenger, not doing anything of
value, probably for the rest of my life—it’s unthinkable. It’s like a slow
death. But as I’ve been going through your historical records over the past
week, I realized that I do have something to offer after all.”

“And that is?”

“An accurate knowledge of history. Do you remember when I said that
Britney Spears was certainly not the music icon of the twenty-first
century?”

“Yes.” Janeway could easily recall the indignation in Lynne’s voice.

“Well, after I read up on history from 2001 forward, I decided to go
from 2001 backwards. And I found that Britney Spears was just the tip of
the iceberg. Captain, your history records are inaccurate. I mean, you’ve
got the right winners of the various wars and all of the indisputable, big
facts right, but the smaller things have been distorted. I’m a history buff
in my spare time, and I can help you set the record straight.”

Janeway sat back again, considering both the offer and the less obvious
plea for help. Lynne’s idea made sense, and truly, she would be a precious
resource for researchers of Earth history and sociological archeology. The
only problem was, she didn’t have any of those on Voyager. But she’d have
to think of a way to take advantage of this woman’s skills somehow—her
statement that idleness was like a slow death struck a sympathetic chord
in the captain. She understood that, although Lynne’s physical recovery
was proceeding nicely, her mental recovery would stall or regress if a way
couldn’t be found to keep that active mind busy.
“I don’t doubt our records are somewhat...imperfect,” she said. “And you certainly do have something to offer. A great deal, actually—you’re unique in your understanding of twentieth century history. How we can best put that understanding to use is something I’d like to think about for a while. Give me a little time, and I’ll contact you when I’ve made a decision.”

A look of mixed relief and gratitude crossed Lynne’s face. “Thank you. I really appreciate this. And I know you’re busy, so I won’t take any more of your time. Have a good evening.” She rose from her seat and paused, raising one eyebrow. “And Captain—take it easy tonight. You could use some rest.” She nodded a farewell and moved away.

Janeway was so startled by the novel experience of a passenger giving her an order, even a well-meaning one, that she sat unmoving for a moment. She didn’t know how to respond. If Lynne had been a crewmember, Janeway would have put her in her place immediately—but then, if Lynne were a crewmember she’d never have dared such familiarity. Even Chakotay, the one crewmember who could occasionally speak in such familiar terms, did so very rarely—and never in quite the casual way that Lynne just had.

Lynne had almost made it to the door when Janeway came out of her shock. “Lynne,” she said, standing up. Lynne stopped and looked back at her inquiringly. The expression on her face caused Janeway’s half-formed reprimand to die on her lips. The woman obviously had no idea she’d done anything out of line and was not expecting any sort of reminder of the captain’s status, no matter how gently Janeway had intended to deliver it. Janeway found that she simply couldn’t bring herself to say the words that would cause that face to fall. Instead, she said the next thing that came to mind.

“Did you find Mahler and Tchaikovsky?”

Lynne’s face lit up and she gave Janeway a rare full smile. “Even better. I found Dvorak. His New World Symphony is one of my favorites, and I can’t tell you what it meant to hear that music again. It’s like a lifeline to my past—something familiar to hang on to. Thank you for mentioning it to me.”

Janeway felt inordinately pleased that she’d been able to help, and even more so that she’d caused one of those full smiles. “You’re more
than welcome. I’m a fan of classical music myself, though I don’t think I’ve heard that particular symphony.”

“Oh, you should give it a try. It’s wonderful.” For a moment her gaze was distant. “I have a lot of memories associated with that piece. That’s always been the power of music for me—its ability to evoke memories and feelings.”

“Fortunately, some things don’t change with time.”

“Thank god for that,” Lynne agreed. With a nod, she turned and left.

When the ready room door closed behind her, Janeway stared at it for a few moments before shaking her head and returning to her desk. That conversation hadn’t gone at all like she might have expected. What would she do the next time Lynne assumed such familiarity?

Not having a ready answer, she dismissed the question for now. Besides, she had a bigger problem to consider at the moment.

She tapped her comm badge. “Chakotay, please report to my ready room.”

It was time to have a chat about personnel and job assignments.

At Chakotay’s suggestion, the archeology department had been informed of Lynne’s offer. This was an underutilized part of Voyager’s science team, since the ship rarely had the leisure or opportunity to gather information on past cultures; if they gathered anything, it was usually intelligence or supplies. Two members of the department, Crewmen Johnson and Slater, had jumped at the chance to work with “a living history book,” as Mr. Johnson had put it. Earth history wasn’t their specialty, but they both felt that the opportunity was too important not to take advantage of it. Lynne was introduced to them the next day, and the first weekly departmental report after that event communicated a palpable excitement at their progress.

“Ms. Hamilton is proving to be a unique and exceptionally valuable resource. On her first day, she stated that all historians are biased in some way, and that she would be no different. She cautioned us to remember that anything she said would be colored by her own beliefs and experiences, but that she would do her best to present all sides of the issues and be as fair as possible. She has been true to her word. Our discussions
Past Imperfect

have been fascinating, and we do not exaggerate when we say that this research is priceless to a modern understanding of twentieth-century Earth history.”

Janeway put down the PADD and allowed herself a moment of quiet triumph. Lynne was not only being useful; she had quickly made herself the star of the archeology department. The two scientists were thrilled to have a project they could dig into, and the whole affair had been resolved nicely to the benefit of both parties. If only all of her problems could be solved so beautifully.

She spent the next several hours reading departmental reports, and was deep into the engineering report when a beep from her console alerted her to an incoming message. She was surprised to see that it was from Lynne.


Dear Captain,

I am unsure of the protocols involved in contacting or interacting with you, so please forgive me if this is inappropriate—but I wondered if you would like to share a lunch with me. Perhaps in the mess hall tomorrow?

Sincerely, Lynne Hamilton

Janeway smiled. The note was charming, and no one else on board Voyager would have dreamed of writing it. It had been several days since she’d last spoken with the woman, and it was certainly time that she brought herself up to speed on her progress. But not in the mess hall. She keyed the computer for a reply.


Lynne,

I would indeed enjoy sharing a meal with you, but may I suggest dinner in my quarters instead? Perhaps you could meet me there at 1800 hours tomorrow. I hope you like peanut butter.

Captain Janeway

The last sentence was an inside joke that anyone else in the crew would understand. She knew she’d have to explain it to Lynne, but that would be an excellent conversation opener. Especially if her replicator gave her any trouble.
Janeway put the finishing touches on a Caesar salad while letting a bottle of wine breathe on the table. She patted her replicator and whispered, “Well done, my friend,” as an encouragement for future good behavior. Replicators might be simple constructions of circuitry and power supply, but every good captain knew that machines were more than the sum of their parts. It usually paid off to be properly appreciative when they came through.

She had changed out of her uniform into simple pants and a light sweater. At first she’d considered keeping her uniform on, but then decided that might make the evening a little too formal. She wanted Lynne to feel comfortable.

Her door chime sounded a few minutes before 1800, just as she’d placed the dinner rolls on the table. “Come,” she called, and walked toward the door as it swished open. Lynne stepped through and stopped. She held a small covered container in one hand.

“Hello, Lynne,” said Janeway. “Thank you for coming this evening.”

“Oh, it was my pleasure. Thank you for inviting me. I brought a contribution to our dinner—you can’t imagine how happy I was to find it in the replicator programs.”

Janeway took the proffered container and peeked inside. She didn’t
recognize the contents, but she could smell the subtle and wonderful scent of coffee. “What is it?”

“It’s an Italian dessert called tiramisu. My replicator didn’t quite get it right, but I tweaked it a bit and it finally came out the way it’s supposed to. Have you ever had it?”

“No, I don’t believe so.”

“Well, I’ve heard rumors about you and coffee, so I think you’ll like it.”

Janeway grinned. “I can’t wait to try it.” She took the container to the table and picked up the bottle of wine. “Can I interest you in a glass?”

Lynne joined her. “The Doctor gave me a clean bill of health yesterday, so yes, I’d love one.”

Janeway poured a glass and presented it to her guest. Raising her own glass, she said, “To your clean bill of health—and your first week on duty. By all accounts you’ve been a great success.”

Lynne gave her a grateful look as they clinked glasses. “Thank you. And thank you for arranging it; you’ve saved my life in more ways than one.” They sipped their wine, and Janeway noted that Lynne held hers in her mouth before swallowing. “Mmm, that’s excellent,” she said. “Really unusual flavor.” She looked around the room with interest. “So, do I get the twenty-five cent tour?”

Janeway couldn’t interpret that one. “I have no idea what you just said.”

“I’m sorry; it’s an idiom from my time. I never realized how many of them were in my vocabulary until I arrived here.” She thought for a moment. “It was the custom in my time for a hostess to tour a new guest around her home, showing the main rooms and any pieces of art, pictures, knickknacks, whatever. I guess the purpose was to provide an ice breaker—I mean, to help get the conversation started. The guest could comment on the rooms or décor, and those things often helped the conversation over the initial awkward stage that always seems to happen when two people meet outside their normal environment and don’t really know what to say.”

Janeway was interested. “That makes sense. What was the origin of the idiom?”

“Shit, I knew you were going to ask that. It might have originated in the mid- to late-1800s, when money was worth a lot more and twenty-five
cents would get you a shave and a haircut—or probably a tour of a museum or great house. I really never thought about it until now.”

“Well, you certainly are full of interesting information,” said Janeway, as she gestured for her guest to take a seat on the sofa. She took the chair opposite.

“Johnson and Slater think so,” said Lynne, sitting down. “I talk on and on for hours, and they practically hang on my every word. My friends and family would laugh if they could see it.”

“Why is that?”

“Well, first of all they know—I mean, they knew how much I love to talk. Secondly, I’ve always loved teaching, especially to interested students. So here I am in a job where one, I get to talk all day, and two, I’m teaching some of the most interested students that ever existed. They’d tell me that I always manage to land on my feet, and here I’ve pulled it off again.”

Janeway ticked the idioms off on her fingers. “‘Land on my feet,’ meaning…”

“Um…meaning succeeding even when it might seem unlikely.”

“And ‘pulling it off’?”

“Pretty much the same thing, actually. God, you people really force me to examine my vocabulary. I swear it’s that more than anything else that makes me realize how far I am from home.”

“You must miss it,” said Janeway, watching her closely.

Lynne’s animated face went still, along with the sparkle in her eyes. The change was dramatic, and Janeway was sorry that she’d been the cause of it.

“Yes,” said Lynne shortly. “And if you don’t mind, I really don’t want to discuss it.”

There was an awkward pause, and Janeway picked up the sculpture that stood on her coffee table. “Then shall we start the twenty-five cent tour here?”

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For the next half hour they walked around Janeway’s living quarters, while she pointed out artifacts from her travels and related stories about them. Lynne expressed sincere interest and asked questions about almost
everything, which usually spawned more stories. Janeway’s storytelling continued as they sat down to dinner, and Lynne turned out to be a good listener. She made observations and comments that demonstrated her keen intelligence and sometimes stopped Janeway in her tracks, as she was compelled to think about something from an angle she hadn’t considered before. As the evening wore on, she found that she was enjoying herself tremendously. Lynne seemed to take pleasure in her company and came alive as they conversed, often challenging Janeway’s statements—but never in an arrogant manner; more in the manner of one who sees things differently and wants to examine all the viewpoints. Janeway found Lynne’s point of view to be unique, refreshing, and often remarkably relevant to current events, as she frequently came up with examples from her own time that perfectly illustrated what Janeway was saying. Their conversation grew more animated and intense as they finished dinner and moved back to the couch, and at one point Janeway suddenly realized what was so different about their interaction: Lynne was treating her simply as a friend; not as a captain, teacher or mentor. Here was the other side of that familiarity that had so surprised her the week before, and she was deeply grateful that she hadn’t squelched Lynne’s initial attempt at a connection. She had enough sense to understand that a friendship like this, one that was outside all of her normal boundaries, could be priceless.

As the evening wore on, she found herself growing more and more relaxed, laughing at Lynne’s recounting of her days in the archeology lab and her trials and tribulations of learning how to use the ship’s equipment. Lynne somehow made nearly every story funny, even though many of them poked fun at herself. They both had a good laugh when Janeway explained her tendency to produce spectacularly awful dinners, the pinnacle being when she’d burned a pot roast—something that was theoretically impossible with a replicator—and had been forced to serve peanut butter sandwiches instead. Lynne assured her that the meal had been excellent and that her reputation was obviously undeserved. Then they sampled the tiramisu, and Janeway thought she’d died and gone to heaven. Dessert and coffee all in the same forkful was her idea of perfection.

When Lynne finally remarked on the lateness of the hour, Janeway was astonished to see how much time had passed. She often lost track of time while working, but rarely while socializing. It felt wonderful. She escorted
her guest to the door, where Lynne turned and held out her hand. “Thank you, Captain,” she said. “I enjoyed your company very much.”

Janeway took the hand in both of her own. “You’re very welcome, and I enjoyed your company as well. Perhaps we can do this again?” She felt a little shy, but she was making the request as a friend, not as a captain, and the normal self-confidence that came with her rank was conspicuously absent.

“I’d like that. Would you like to come to my quarters next week at the same time?”

“I’ll be there,” said Janeway.

Lynne’s smile seemed warmer than usual. “Until the next time, then,” she said, withdrawing her hand and stepping through the doorway. The door swished shut, and Janeway stood in her quarters alone.

Wondering why the room suddenly felt so empty, and why her fingers were tingling.
Over the course of the next several days, Janeway was distracted more than once by thoughts of Lynne. At a staff meeting one morning, she realized that Neelix had been talking for five minutes and she had no idea what he’d been saying. This wasn’t actually that unusual; she was often guilty of not paying scrupulous attention to everything the Talaxian said. But a few minutes later, when Chakotay asked her a question and she realized that she hadn’t been listening to him either, she knew she’d better get control of herself. She told herself that her wandering mind was caused by the novelty of having a new friend who was not a member of the crew, who saw the woman behind the captain and needed nothing from her—not orders, not approval, not counseling, not mentoring. After all, she hadn’t had that luxury in five years, so wasn’t a little distraction entirely understandable?

She found herself hoping to see Lynne again, and didn’t want to wait until their next dinner date. But she normally did not spend much time in the area of the archeology labs on deck seven, where Lynne passed her days. Janeway’s interests ran more in the life and physical sciences, so while it was not unusual for her to make an appearance in the main science lab on deck eight, it would certainly cause comment were she to stroll into archeology. She could think of no plausible excuse to visit the area and didn’t want to be obvious in her desire to see Lynne again.
Deciding on an alternative strategy, she began taking more meals in the mess hall than was her wont. Many crew members dropped by her table to chat, but Lynne was not among them. She even tried eating at different times, with the same unsatisfying results. If she didn’t know better, she’d think the woman wasn’t even on board. The thought occurred to her to check the computer for Lynne’s whereabouts, just to make sure. She laughed at herself for being an idiot, but it didn’t stop her from checking anyway.

“Lynne Hamilton is in the archeology lab,” the computer informed her. Later that evening, when she asked again, she learned that Lynne was in her quarters. She frowned. It was the dinner hour for the alpha shift, and while many crew members chose to eat in their quarters rather than the mess hall, she had to wonder. Her thoughts flashed back to that awkward moment during their dinner together, when Lynne had closed up and refused to discuss her feelings of missing home. Janeway had let it alone then, but now she wondered if she shouldn’t push the subject a bit further. For the next two days she checked on Lynne’s whereabouts and found that she was spending her time in the archeology lab, the weight room, or her quarters. Janeway had introduced Lynne to a number of the crew earlier in the week, but she didn’t seem to be doing much socializing. Once again Janeway wished for a ship’s counselor, who would know what was normal in this situation. Certainly Lynne needed time to work through her feelings of grief, loss and anger, but how much time? How long should she be left alone?

As long as it takes, she concluded. She’d keep an eye on things, but would not intervene unless it became necessary. What she’d seen of Lynne so far convinced her that she was dealing with a strongly independent woman who would not welcome anyone’s efforts to help her.

When the evening of their dinner finally arrived, Janeway spent more time than she thought possible deciding what to wear. After realizing that she’d been standing in front of her closet for several minutes without making any progress, she chided herself for a fool and selected a simple dress she’d always liked for its grace and comfort. Bottle of wine in hand, she set off through the corridors to Lynne’s quarters. Crew members greeted her in passing, most of them glancing at the bottle. She realized that it was rather unusual for her to be carrying wine through these corridors; the only other person with whom she regularly had dinner was
Chakotay, and he was right next door to her. Well, her crew would just have to get used to the fact that their captain had a friend.

Arriving at Lynne’s quarters, she activated the chime and felt a little tingle of excitement when she heard Lynne’s voice through the comm, inviting her in. Janeway stepped through the door and stopped in her tracks.

Lynne was wearing a pair of camel-colored pants and a dark green blouse left open at the neck. A sparkling green pendant nestled in the hollow of her throat, glittering on its chain as she moved. Three weeks under the Doctor’s care had filled out the hollows in her cheeks, softening the planes of her narrow face. Her hair was up in its usual French braid, which Janeway had come to love for the way it set off those silver streaks. It occurred to her that Lynne was a beautiful woman, and she wondered why she hadn’t noticed it before.

“Captain, it’s good to see you!” said Lynne happily, her eyes alight.

“Thank you for inviting me,” said Janeway, presenting the bottle of wine. She couldn’t take her eyes off her friend. If the last several days without seeing her had been hard, for some reason seeing her now was even harder. She felt awkward, bereft of the usual smooth manners that had served her so well for years of diplomatic engagements, and relaxation seemed an unachievable goal.

Lynne took the bottle to the table and opened it, allowing it to breathe. She looked at the label. “Never heard of this grape,” she remarked.

“It’s from a planet in the Alpha quadrant called Bajor,” said Janeway, walking over to join her. “Earth still makes some of the best wine around, but other planets produce some wonderful blends as well, and Bajoran wine is known as extremely high quality.”

“Do you mean to say that you’ve carried this bottle all the way from the Alpha quadrant?” Wide eyes showed Lynne’s surprise.

“Well, no.” Janeway wished she did have something that special to offer. “Our replicators are programmed with the patterns for a number of Alpha quadrant wines. It’s not the same thing at all, and if we ever get back home, I’ll show you what Bajoran wine really tastes like.”

“You mean when we get home,” said Lynne, regarding her with a raised eyebrow and a slight curve to her lips.

“Of course,” said Janeway, relaxing a little. With that single comment and the accompanying look, Lynne had implied that she understood
Janeway’s situation perfectly. While in uniform, she could never make anything but positive assertions about their return home, but here she was not in the role of captain and was allowed to have doubts. A certain tightness in her chest eased just a bit.

Lynne put the bottle down again and picked up a glass full of clear liquid. “Can I get you anything to drink before dinner?” she asked. “I didn’t know you were bringing wine, so I’ve already started in on a gin and tonic. It’ll probably clash with the wine later, but I really don’t care.”

Yes, hard liquor sounded like an excellent idea—a fast route to complete relaxation. “I’ll take a whiskey and soda,” said Janeway.

Lynne made the request to the replicator and brought Janeway’s drink to her. She raised her own glass. “What’s the normal toast around here?”

“To the journey,” said Janeway, raising her glass as well.

“To the journey,” echoed Lynne. They touched their glasses together and drank.

Lynne led the way to an armchair and couch sitting at right angles beneath the viewport, and motioned Janeway toward the chair. Sitting on the couch and tucking one leg beneath her, she held up her glass. “Do the history files still contain a record as to the origin of this custom?”

“You mean, toasting and clinking glasses?”

Lynne nodded.

“They might,” said Janeway, “but if they do, I’ve never read it. I suppose you know.”

“Of course,” said Lynne, the smile touching both sides of her mouth this time. “I can’t tell you when it originated, but it was hundreds of years before I was born. In that time, poison in the drink was a common tool of political assassins, so it was customary for the host to drink from his guest’s glass before drinking from his own. That way he proved to his guest that the drink wasn’t poisoned. But if the guest trusted the host and felt that such proof was not necessary, he would clink his glass to the host’s. The toast probably evolved in conjunction with that signal.”

“Mr. Johnson and Mr. Slater must be getting all the history they could ever desire,” said Janeway. “Including the esoteric.”

“Oh, they’re getting their money’s worth,” said Lynne, amusement crinkling her eyes.

Janeway looked around the room, which bore no resemblance whatso-
ever to the standard Starfleet quarters she’d originally brought Lynne to. “So,” she said. “Do I get the twenty-five cent tour?”

At that, Lynne threw her head back and laughed. Janeway was both startled and pleased, having never heard her friend laugh until now. She must be adapting, she thought. It seemed to be a confirmation of her decision to let Lynne deal with the situation in her own way.

“You can absolutely have the twenty-five cent tour,” said Lynne, rising from her chair. “In fact, I’ll give you the fifty-cent tour and only charge you twenty-five.”

Janeway listened in fascination as Lynne explained the meaning behind her various pieces of art. Paintings, drawings, and other renditions of various mountains featured largely in the décor, and Lynne had climbed most of them. She had a story to tell about each one—some of humorous events, others of wildlife encounters or close calls with danger, and some simply of a moment of clarity while viewing the world from the summit. One prominent picture featured Denali, majestic but icily forbidding with its mantle of glaciers and snow.

“You’ve already heard the only story I have to tell about Denali,” said Lynne. “I hung this picture here because I have unfinished business with this mountain. Someday, when we get back, I’m going to finish what I started.”

Besides the mountains, the walls also featured framed pictures of fishes, birds, and other animals. A few plants graced the room, placed so that they complemented the furniture and the art. Janeway felt comfortable in these surroundings; the room had an aura of serenity. No wonder Lynne spent so much time in her quarters—they were quite inviting.

“My décor doesn’t have the history that yours does,” said Lynne as they finished the tour. “Obviously, this all came from the replicator. But I must say I had a hell of a good time creating it all. I’ve always had to save up my money before buying a single piece—a chair, or a framed print—but here I could just look through the pattern listings and call up what I wanted. It was an incredible luxury. I loved being outside in my old life, and usually tried to bring as much of the outside world inside my rooms as I could. I like fishes, birds and herps in particular, and always had prints and sculptures of them. It was...comforting to be able to recreate some of this.”
Janeway had looked at Lynne sharply when she’d said *in my old life*, but her friend’s expression hadn’t changed. “What’s a herp?” she asked.

“Oh, sorry. It’s an abbreviation for... actually, I don’t know what it’s an abbreviation for! Anyway, it’s a reference to reptiles and amphibians.”

“Ah, herpetology,” said Janeway.

“Yes, but that’s the *study* of reptiles and amphibians. I’m not sure there’s even a word for the animals themselves that corresponds to herp. The word herpetology comes from Greek root words meaning a creeping thing. But if you’ve ever studied herps, you know that they move in practically every way except creeping. Sometimes I wonder if the scientists who originally came up with these names actually studied the animals they were naming.”

“The same thing could be said for today’s scientists,” said Janeway. “There’s a star in the Alpha quadrant named Tarak Far, which is a Vulcan term meaning a large, red object. But the star is a brown dwarf. Some of us suspect that the astronomer who named it had his instruments pointed in the wrong direction and just didn’t want to admit it.”

Lynne laughed again. “Some things don’t change, do they?”

“No, they don’t. But fortunately, other things do,” said Janeway. “If they didn’t, we wouldn’t be here now.”

“Well now, that calls for another toast,” said Lynne, raising her glass. “To the scientists who invented and refined warp engines, enabling *Voyager* to be in the right time and place to save my butt.”

“Hear, hear,” said Janeway, and they clinked glasses again. She, too, was grateful that *Voyager* had found Lynne in time, but suspected that her reasons differed somewhat from Lynne’s. Lynne was just glad to have survived. Janeway, on the other hand, was beginning to get the feeling that Lynne’s presence on *Voyager* was going to have a significant impact on her own life. She only wished she knew that the feeling was reciprocated. Her friend had been warm, friendly, and polite, but as far as Janeway knew she was like that with everyone. She had no reason to believe that Lynne treated her differently than anyone else on the crew. It was true that Lynne seemed to enjoy their time together, but after all, Janeway had been the first person Lynne had known on the ship. *The lure of the familiar*, she thought with irony. To her, this was anything but familiar. The way she was feeling right now was strange and very, very different. She had often aesthetically appreciated the form of a female body—B’Elanna’s, for
instance, or Seven of Nine’s, both of whom were beautiful women in their own ways. But this was the first time that her appreciation had gone beyond the aesthetic. She found her eyes drawn to the pendant sparkling in the hollow of Lynne’s throat, and wondered what it would be like to press a gentle kiss there. She shook her head, trying to rid herself of the image. This was inappropriate and wrong.

“Captain, are you all right?”

Caught, Janeway said quickly, “I’m fine. Just a little headache.”

“Is there anything I can do? I’ve got some pretty spectacular drugs left over from the Doctor’s treatments.”

“I’m fine,” Janeway repeated. “It comes with the job.” But her attempt at a joke failed; Lynne’s concerned expression did not change. She went for a diversion. “It’s all right, Lynne, really. But I am feeling a little hungry.”

“Of course,” said Lynne immediately, rising from the couch. “Our dinner is all programmed in; I just need to release the hold on the program.” She led her guest to the table and pulled out a chair for her, then moved to the replicator. Janeway sat down with a sense of relief. She’d have to watch herself far more carefully; Lynne was very observant.

The dinner was excellent and the conversation flowed easily, helped along by the bottle of Bajoran wine. Janeway asked about Lynne’s pendant, and learned that it was the closest thing Lynne could find in the database to a pendant she’d been given by a climbing friend.

“He told me it would keep me safe,” she said, “and even though I’m not much for superstition, I ended up wearing it constantly. I don’t know whether it was the pendant or not, but the fact is I always came home. And the really spooky part is that I wasn’t wearing it at Denali. I broke part of the mounting on a training climb and had to take it in for repairs, and it wasn’t fixed by the time I left for Alaska. I know that could be explained away with the law of probability, but things like that make me wonder whether science can really explain everything, or whether the spiritual doesn’t have more to do with things than we’d like to think.”

“Two years ago I would have been entirely on the side of science,” said Janeway. “But then I had a crash course in spirituality, and ever since then the lines have been far less distinct for me.” She told Lynne about the time when Kes, a friend and crewmate who was no longer with them, had been mortally injured by an energy source within a temple they were visit-
ing. Exhausting every other possibility for a cure, Janeway had agreed to undergo a spiritual journey at the temple in the hopes of saving her friend. In the end, all of the facts and readings and scientific interpretations had come down to one choice: she either had to believe that she could take Kes back into that same energy source without harm—despite all of the evidence showing that the energy would kill them both—or she had to give up and watch Kes die. She chose to believe, stepped into the energy beam, and watched in wonder as Kes woke in her arms and smiled at her.

Lynne was fascinated. “You know, Captain, that just shows that the more advanced our technology and science, and the more we learn, the more we prove that Shakespeare was right.”

“And what was he right about?” Janeway asked, settling back in anticipation of some new and totally unexpected direction of thought. Lynne’s thought processes kept her guessing, and she loved the novelty of it.

Lynne raised her glass and declaimed, “‘There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.’ I always thought Shakespeare wasn’t really limiting that comment to Horatio, but was speaking of us all.”

Janeway nodded. “You’re saying that while scientific knowledge may change over time, the essential truths never do—which is why words written eight hundred years ago can still apply today.”

“Yes, and thank goodness for that,” agreed Lynne. “Otherwise that Shakespeare class I was forced to take in college would be completely wasted here.”

Janeway laughed, shaking her head, and their discussion promptly took off in a new direction. Eventually they moved to the living area with their dessert, and Lynne put on Dvorak’s New World Symphony. Their conversation slowed and eventually stopped as both women focused all of their attention on the music; when the final pianissimo notes died away, Janeway agreed that it was a marvelous piece. This led to more discussion of art and music and the amazing diversity of tastes, which Janeway illustrated by first playing Risan jazz and then Klingon opera. Lynne loved the first and compared the second to a back-alley cat fight, making Janeway snort. Altogether it was one of the most enjoyable evenings she had ever spent. Once again she lost track of time, and felt like an idiot when Lynne said, regretfully, that it was late and she would have to retire soon.
Goddammit, Kathryn, she thought, you know better than that. The guest is always the one to suggest leaving first. She was dismayed at the failure of her diplomatic skills. Captain Janeway, who had negotiated treaties between warring races, had just flunked the basic social test of knowing when to leave.

But Lynne was gracious and gave no indication that she thought the evening had gone on too long; in fact, she thanked Janeway for staying and said warmly that she’d enjoyed her company, wished she could stay up longer, and could they have dinner again next week? Janeway thought it was ironic that her friend had better manners than she did. Lynne was saying all the right things—maybe she should put her on diplomatic detail.

Once again, Lynne held her hand out as they parted. As before, Janeway held it in both of her own, then let it go as she turned to leave. When the door closed behind her, she had only one thought in her mind.

How could she get through the six days until she saw Lynne again?

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Their dinners became a weekly event, usually featuring good food, interesting conversation, and a trading of musical examples. Lynne continued to be alternately horrified and thrilled at the music from her era that had survived, and loved to play samples of both the worst and the best for her guest. She seemed to get an equal enjoyment out of discovering new music, prompting Janeway to act as guide in that particular exploration. They began to trade “Best and Worst” of their centuries, more often than not ending up laughing helplessly over how truly awful the worst could be, regardless of era. Lynne had a fit of laughter when Janeway played Ferengi romance songs, then returned the favor by demonstrating what she called “country twang” music—not to be confused with good country music, she cautioned—which largely seemed to feature trucks, dogs, dusty highways and lonely men. Janeway didn’t believe it when Lynne told her that this music had been wildly popular, but Lynne swore it was true. When Janeway observed that this might have been a contributing factor to the overall social decline that led to the third world war, Lynne said seriously, “No, that was Britney Spears.” Then her deadpan expression gave way to a wry grin, and Janeway couldn’t help but
laugh. The thought occurred to her that she’d laughed more in the last few weeks than in the previous several years combined.

As time went by, she even found herself confiding in Lynne to a degree she would never have dreamed of at the beginning of their friendship. For five long years she had internalized everything and said next to nothing of her true feelings regarding her responsibilities, her private longings and needs, her lingering sense of guilt over Voyager’s stranding, and her driving need to return the crew safely home. Now that ingrained habit gradually dropped away, and she shared her inner thoughts freely. Lynne always listened seriously, never judged her, and often made her feel vastly better simply by acknowledging that she had a right to feel the way she did. Over the weeks she found that the burden of solitary command, which had been her constant companion for years, had magically shrunk to something far lighter and more manageable. At last she had someone to talk to as a friend and equal—she hadn’t realized how desperately she’d needed that until now. And her trust in Lynne was absolute. She’d been careful in the beginning, but no whisper of her initial confidences ever came back to her. On a ship this small, she knew that could only mean Lynne had kept their discussions entirely to herself. After that she gradually became more open, until it was as natural for her now to share a private thought with Lynne as it had been unthinkable before.

She was so happy with this new addition to her life that it never occurred to her to wonder why Lynne did not confide any similar worries, needs or sorrows. To Janeway’s view, Lynne seemed to have adjusted beautifully. She was warm in her friendship and quick with humor, but cool with her other emotions. She welcomed Janeway’s companionship but never seemed to need her, or anyone else for that matter. In the beginning Janeway had felt an intense relief at finding someone who did not require something from her, but as time passed, she eventually found herself in the unwelcome position of feeling a growing attraction for someone who showed no signs of returning her feelings. It was the one thing she couldn’t confide to Lynne, and she certainly was not going to talk to anyone else on the crew about it. And as with all things that cannot be shared, the lack of outlet simply made her feelings all the stronger, until they occupied a considerable portion of her mind.

Janeway found herself actually wishing for some good old-fashioned space battles to distract her, and got more than she bargained for a few
weeks later when they found the *Equinox*. At first she and everyone else aboard *Voyager* had been thrilled to come across another Starfleet ship, but when the truth came out—that Captain Ransom and the remaining crew of *Equinox* were deliberately murdering individuals of an alien species in order to use their energy to power their ship—Janeway’s sense of betrayal grew into a rage that went completely out of bounds. When her battle with Ransom ended, she stood on a shattered bridge, the afterimage of the exploding *Equinox* still imprinted on her retinas and the weight of her recent actions crashing down on her. After making her peace with Chakotay, whom she admitted would have been well within his rights to mutiny against her, it was Lynne she went to for counsel and comfort. And it was Lynne’s quiet understanding, even when Janeway could hardly understand herself, that gave her the strength to pull herself together and go on.

After the *Equinox*, things were blissfully quiet for a while. Janeway needed the time to recover, savoring the peace and swearing that she’d never wish for a battle to break the monotony again. She’d had more than her fill from the last one. But soon the daily bureaucratic grind of running a starship began to weigh on her once again, and personnel and departmental reports became nearly impossible to focus on. It took her twice as long to go through the reports, because her mind kept wandering to thoughts of her most recent conversation with Lynne.

Each week she saved the archeology departmental report for last, hoping to read something about her friend. Usually she was not disappointed. The scientists nearly always included some reference to Lynne’s contributions to their understanding of twentieth century Earth culture, especially her ability to fill in the tiniest details which were usually quite interesting. Once they called her “a priceless treasure,” causing Janeway to glow with pride.

One day almost three months after Lynne’s arrival, Janeway sat in her ready room, going through what she now termed GDRs—an acronym for Goddamned Departmental Reports. *Stars may go nova and ships may be lost*, she thought grumpily, *but GDRs go on forever*. At last she finished the penultimate report with a relieved sigh and reached for her reward. Activating the PADD from archeology, she scanned the report with interest, looking for Lynne’s name. When she found it, her smile of anticipation dropped away.

“We are concerned about Ms. Hamilton’s health. Over the past few weeks she has
appeared more and more fatigued, and several times this week she had to be prompted before answering a question. This has never happened before. We do not know of her medical situation, but have considered that perhaps it may be wearing upon her to discuss what was, to her, a current time as if it were medieval history. We are also aware that, due to the lack of a ship’s counselor, she may not have received proper counseling for the loss of her friends and family. We have not discussed these concerns with Ms. Hamilton, but hope that the proper actions are being taken to ensure these issues are addressed.”

Janeway threw the PADD onto her desk and swore out loud for a good fifteen seconds without repeating herself once. God, how could she have been so blind? Lynne had looked more tired the last two dinners, but Janeway had believed her when she’d explained that she’d just stayed up too late the previous nights.

You are a self-involved p’tagh, she thought. What happened to monitoring her and making sure she was doing all right? She knew damn good and well what had happened. Lynne had always seemed just fine, and Janeway had become so accustomed to being able to rely on her friend that she’d stopped checking to see if her friend needed her.

Well, that ended here. Their next dinner was tomorrow night in her quarters, and Kathryn Janeway was on a mission.
Janeway took special care with her evening arrangements, trying to create an atmosphere that was as comfortable and peaceful as possible. The meal was a repeat of one she and Lynne had tried earlier to great success, and she’d even replicated what had become their favorite dessert, tiramisu. The audio system was programmed to play a selection of Lynne’s most loved classical music, starting with Vivaldi’s Four Seasons. She’d splurged on replicator rations for fresh flowers, remembering Lynne saying that she liked flowers because they brought the outdoors in with them. When the preparations were complete, she surveyed the result with satisfaction. Yes, the setting was good, she decided. But that was the easy part.

As always, Lynne activated her door chime a few minutes before 1800. Janeway picked up the gin and tonic that she had already replicated, called, “Come,” and pressed the glass into Lynne’s hand as soon as she entered. Lynne laughed and raised her glass as Janeway picked up her own drink.

“Here’s to people who know us well,” said Lynne.

“To friendship,” said Janeway. As they clinked glasses and drank, she observed her friend covertly. With a pang of guilt, she saw that there were lines around Lynne’s eyes and mouth that hadn’t been there earlier. She
looked tired and stressed, despite the warm smile she gave Janeway as they walked across the room.

They sat on the couch and settled into their evening with the ease of familiarity, discussing a wide range of topics. But Janeway sipped her drink carefully, limiting her intake of alcohol while she monitored the conversation for the opening she needed. Tonight she had to be sharp.

It was late in the evening and dinner was a distant memory before the opening finally came. Lynne was describing the astrometrics file she’d seen that day, of a gas nebula Voyager had passed through several months before she came on board. “It was so incredibly beautiful,” she said, “the colors and textures—when I left Earth we’d just begun getting photographs of phenomena like those with our first space telescope, but they were nothing compared to this. I wish Cole had been here to see it—he loved astronomy. He would have flipped over that file.”

Normally Janeway would have asked about the idiom—it had become an ongoing joke between them that half the time Lynne spoke in a foreign language—but this time she ignored it and went straight for the heart of the statement.

“Lynne, why is it that you never talk about Cole, or your family, or any of the other people who were special to you? You mention their names and I know who they are, but I don’t know anything else about them.”

Just as it had during their first dinner three months ago, Lynne’s face closed down. “I don’t talk about them because it’s painful,” she said. “Can we change the subject?”

“No, we can’t,” said Janeway, injecting just an edge of command to her tone. Lynne stiffened, and Janeway realized that she’d never used that tone with her before. She gentled her voice and continued, “Look, I know it hurts and I know you don’t want to talk about it. But you can’t go on like this, keeping it bottled up.”

“Captain…” Lynne warned, but Janeway interrupted her, holding up a hand.

“You’re not putting me off again. You did it before and I allowed it, but that was my mistake. Your physical and mental health are at risk if you don’t deal with this. You’re fatigued and distracted already; don’t let this go on.” She paused, giving Lynne the opportunity to respond. When her friend remained silent she added, “I know it’s natural to compartmentalize your feelings when they cause you pain, but you’re just hurting

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yourself more in the process. I can say this with complete authority because I myself am a master of the art."

Crossing her arms over her chest, Lynne said, “You’re a master of most arts. And I still don’t want to talk about it.”

“Well then, what are you going to do? How long will you shut all this inside? Until something gives? It will, sooner or later.”

Lynne said nothing, only watching Janeway warily. It was a behavior Janeway hadn’t observed since Lynne had first come on board, and she hated to see her friend slipping back into that guarded posture. But she’d been thinking about this since yesterday, and it had occurred to her that Lynne might not be opening up about her feelings because of a belief that no one could possibly understand. This had a tinge of self-absorption to it, given the common experience of Voyager’s crew, and Janeway wasn’t averse to bringing that up.

“Look around you,” she said. “This whole ship is full of people who know what it’s like to lose everyone. We may not have lost our loved ones in both space and time, as you have, but there is every possibility that we will never see them again, and we’ve had to deal with that. We could help you, but you’ve been so self-absorbed that you don’t see you’re not the only one on board this ship who has experienced loss.”

Lynne’s head went back at this, a flash of anger crossing her face. Still she said nothing, only watching Janeway stubbornly, willing her to give it up. But she was in a battle of wills with a formidable opponent. Abruptly, Janeway changed tactics. Since making Lynne angry hadn’t worked, she’d try an emotional appeal. Setting her drink on the coffee table, she left her chair and moved to join Lynne on the couch, sitting well within her personal space.

“Lynne, please. You need to talk to someone. Our friendship has come to mean a lot to me, and it’s killing me to see you hurting like this. I want to help.” She saw Lynne’s body language softening, and knew she was on the right track. “I would hope that by now, after all the time we’ve spent together, you’d trust me enough to talk to me. And I mean really talk to me. I don’t want to hear what’s happening in the archeology lab or what you’ve learned from the databases or even your latest Worst Music of the Twentieth Century. I want to hear how you feel. And I wish you’d start by calling me Kathryn, because I don’t want you to talk to me as the captain of this ship. I want you to confide in me because we’re friends.”
Lynne’s eyes went wide with shock, and she stared silently at Janeway for several seconds. When she spoke at last, her voice was small and disbelieving.

“You want me to call you Kathryn?”

“Yes,” said Janeway, a little surprised at this response. “I’m sorry, I should have said that much earlier. I meant to. But I always got caught up in our conversations and forgot about it, and would never remember until we’d said goodnight and I was alone again. I want you to call me Kathryn because when I’m with you, I know you see me as a real person and not just the captain of this ship. It gives me the opportunity to relax and to say things that I could never say as a captain. That opportunity is incredibly precious to me—I can’t tell you how much.” Somehow her approach had changed from tactical strategy to stark honesty, but she had to say this.

“If I never told you what our friendship means to me, then it’s long overdue. You’re unique. I can’t truly be friends with anyone else on *Voyager*; they’re all under my command. And I can’t treat a member of my crew as a full equal, because that’s the antithesis of command. But a good friendship can’t survive without that same equality. I may be on a ship carrying one hundred and forty-seven people, but for five years I’ve been alone—until you came along. And now I have someone I can talk to, finally, and it has made such a difference to me. You’ve lightened my burden just by being here; just by listening. Now I want to do the same for you. Please let me. Please trust me.”

Lynne’s eyes were shining with moisture. “You don’t fight fair,” she said, her voice shaking. “I’m at a low ebb today and you just hit me right where it counts. God, how could anyone resist a request like that?”

Janeway said nothing, giving her the time she needed to get herself under control. A few moments later Lynne continued in a stronger voice.

“You have no idea what it means to hear you say that. You’ve been special to me from the beginning; you’re such an extraordinary woman and I knew from the start that you were someone I wanted to get close to.” She sniffed and impatiently swiped an escaped tear. “You’re the only real friend I have in my whole life right now, and that’s not even the slightest exaggeration. But all this time I’ve been calling you Captain and thinking that you were spending time with me at least partially out of
some sense of duty.” She gave a bitter laugh. “You know, checking up to see how the living history book is faring.”

Now it was Janeway’s turn to be shocked. Lynne, so constantly self-assured and confident, doubting that Janeway wanted to be with her? “That is absolutely not true. I did accept your initial invitation because I wanted to see how you were doing, but after that first night I came to dinner not out of any sense of duty, but because I wanted to be with you. Believe me, if I spent one night a week with every crew member who needed my attention, I’d never have time to do anything else. I look forward to our evenings together. I’m here right now because there’s nowhere else I’d rather be, and no one I’d rather be with.”

“Really?” Lynne choked back a sob, her control slipping once more. “I didn’t think you…I mean…oh god, I’ve felt so alone.”

Janeway pulled her into a hug. “You’re not alone. I’m right here. I have been all along.”

At first her body was stiff, but then Janeway felt arms go around her as Lynne rested her head on her shoulder. That seemed to be as far as she was willing to go, however, and she said nothing more. Janeway suppressed a sigh and tried again.

“Talk to me,” she said softly. “You’re killing yourself trying to hold it all in. Let it go.”

Lynne shook her head. Her next words were muffled, but Janeway heard them well enough for her own heart to ache.

“I can’t. I can’t, Kathryn. It hurts too much.” A sob broke from her then, but she took a deep breath and regained control, her body rigid with the effort.

Janeway moved one hand to the back of Lynne’s head, holding it to her shoulder with a gentle pressure, and rubbed her back with the other. “Yes, you can,” she whispered. “It’s all right. I won’t let go until you do. I want to help you; please let me. It hurts me to see you like this. Talk to me, Lynne, you have to talk to me.” She continued to rub Lynne’s back, whispering in her ear. Another sob broke through, then another. Then the dam crumbled at last, and Lynne wept, clinging to Janeway in a fierce grip and shuddering as the sobs racked her body. Janeway held her and whispered words that made little sense, but she knew that her tone mattered more than anything she could say. The sobs went on and on, until finally they lessened in strength and became gasps, then shuddering intakes of breath,
and at last Lynne raised her head and pulled back from Janeway’s embrace, her face drawn and wet with tears. She wiped her eyes and stared at the captain, studying her with an unreadable expression. Janeway bore the examination without a word, conveying all the affection and compassion that she could in her silence. What she didn’t dare convey was how right it had felt to hold Lynne in her arms, and how she wished she could hold her again, in a different time, with no tears between them.

Lynne reached out and caressed Janeway’s cheek once, very gently, then dropped her hand. “Thank you,” she said.

“You’re welcome,” said Janeway, every cell in her face burning with that innocent caress. But she did not move. Lynne was very vulnerable at this moment, and she knew that her friend needed to reestablish control. Still, she was surprised when Lynne abruptly rose from the couch and excused herself. Then she heard water running in the ensuite, and understood. The water stopped and a few moments later Lynne emerged, her face scrubbed and pink. She went straight to the replicator and paused in front of it. “May I?”

“Of course,” said Janeway, expecting her to refill her drink.

But when Lynne came back to the couch, her hands were wrapped around a steaming mug. She sat cross-legged on the sofa, facing Janeway with her back against the armrest. “Hot cocoa,” she explained. “The best comfort food in the world, and do I ever need it now.” She sipped the drink and exhaled with a sigh of appreciation. “I feel like a shuttle ran me over, backed up, and ran over me again.”

Janeway couldn’t help but laugh at Lynne’s attempt to modernize her idioms, and Lynne’s lips quirked into something that was almost a smile. “I’m serious. This is really embarrassing for me—here we’re avowed best friends for all of five minutes and you’ve already seen me at my absolute worst. I can count the number of times I’ve cried like that, at least in front of someone, on the fingers of one hand.”

Janeway understood this perfectly.

“That wasn’t seeing you at your worst, that was seeing you at your most vulnerable. There’s a difference. You’re one of the strongest people I have ever known, and believe me, I don’t think any less of you because I’ve seen you cry. In fact, I think you were long overdue for it.”

“Well, thank you,” said Lynne, looking unconvinced. She sipped her
cocoa again, then raised an eyebrow. “I don’t suppose you’ll let me out of here until I talk, will you?”

“I have an alpha red encryption code on the door. To release it, you have to talk for at least ten minutes, and I don’t mean about the décor.”

“You may get more than you bargained for.”

Janeway rolled her eyes. “Stop stalling and talk.”

Lynne smiled weakly and leaned back against the sofa arm. She stared into her mug for long minutes, then spoke at last.

“I don’t really know where to start. Sometimes I think about the incredible odds against me surviving the destruction of that ship, and you finding me in time, and I think I should be grateful. How can I feel so bad when I’m alive?” She looked up, seemingly waiting for some sort of censure, but Janeway just nodded.

“You do have a lot to be grateful for,” she said. “But you’ve also lost more than anyone should ever have to lose.”

“So have you. You were right about that. And you never got to say goodbye to your loved ones either, did you?”

“Yes and no,” said Janeway. “Everyone in Starfleet knows that you say goodbye to your friends and family when you ship out. But this was supposed to be a short cruise; none of us said the kind of goodbye that’s meant to last for a year-long deep space expedition. But at least we had some closure, which is more than you did.”

“No,” said Lynne softly. “I didn’t. And that’s been the worst thing of all. It’s bad enough that I’ve lost everyone, but the worst thing is that I never got to say goodbye. Everyone I loved—they must have been in hell for years, without a prayer of closure. Mom and Dad, Cole, my best friend Janet…” She trailed off and took a sip of her hot cocoa. “It must have killed them to never know what happened to me. I’m sure they all hung on, waiting for a miracle, or at least for proof of my death so they could move on. I know for a fact that never knowing is the worst kind of hell, because I’ll never know what happened to them, either.” She looked at Janeway with an expression of pure anguish. “I’ll never know anything. Did Cole find someone else to love, someone who made him happy? Did Janet beat the odds? Her mother died of cervical cancer, and she was so worried about being high risk. And then my parents…oh god, my parents. This must have crushed them. Mom always worried about me when I was climbing, and I always told her I’d be okay. It wasn’t that I thought I was
immortal, just that I somehow knew I’d be fine. And you know, I was right. I’m here, fit and healthy, and she’s been dead for hundreds of years, and I don’t even know how she died.” Her voice had become bitter, and anger flashed in her eyes. “I’ve read the literature on survivor guilt. I know the stages. I know intellectually that anger is just one stage, but what I feel is so far beyond anger. I’m enraged. I hate those aliens for what they did to me, and especially for what they did to everyone I loved. They took everything from me, and invaded my body on top of it. I feel violated. I wish they’d died more painful and more prolonged deaths than they did. I wish I’d been awake to kill them personally, because I am so fucking angry, and there’s nothing I can do with it!”

She slammed her mug onto the coffee table with such force that the glass top cracked, making Janeway wince. The crack channeled the cocoa that had sloshed out of the mug, and both women watched as the brown fluid ran to the edge of the table and slowly dripped onto the floor. Janeway quietly got up, retrieved the napkins from the dining table, tossed them under the spill and sat back down. She hadn’t expected to be replacing furniture, but the emotion that was pouring out of Lynne now was far more important than a tabletop.

Lynne was staring at the crack in the glass, the anger gone from her face as suddenly as it had come. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to break your table.”

“I know you didn’t, and don’t worry about it,” said Janeway. “I can replicate a new one.”

Lynne looked up, her eyes shining with tears. “Can you replicate me a new heart while you’re at it? Because mine’s shattered far worse than that glass, and I don’t know how to fix it. I feel so much anger and hatred, and I’ve been bottling it up because I’m afraid that letting go is going to end up with someone or something getting hurt, and nobody here deserves that. Least of all you. And then, on top of all this rage, there’s an overwhelming, desperate—” She stopped suddenly, unwilling to say it.

“Sorrow,” said Janeway, finishing it for her.

Lynne nodded, the tears falling once more. “I miss them,” she whispered. “I miss them so much. I’m lost without them.” Her face crumpled, and she leaned her head on the back of the couch. “God, it hurts. I don’t know how to describe it. I feel so sorry for the people I loved, sorry for what they went through, sorry I never got to say goodbye, sorry I never
got to see what happened to them, sorry for everything. And then I think, why do I care? They stopped feeling centuries ago. I’m tying myself up in knots for something that doesn’t matter anymore, and somehow that hurts more than anything else.” She closed her eyes and was quiet.

Her heart aching with sympathy, Janeway leaned over and took Lynne’s hand, watching as green eyes opened and met hers.

“It does matter,” she said. “It matters because your feelings are real, regardless of how long your loved ones have been gone. You can’t simply turn off your heart like a burned-out plasma coil—it just doesn’t work that way. If you know about the stages of grief then you know it’s okay to mourn. I’m sure the people you loved would never have wanted you to hurt like this.”

Lynne squeezed her hand. “I know. But I can’t help it.”

“No, but you have to work through it. Trust me, I know that from experience. And you won’t have to work through it alone.”

Lynne didn’t answer; her attention seemed riveted to their clasped hands. “Thank you,” she said at last. “Truly. I don’t know if I can express how much it means to me to have you here right now.” She looked up. “And I really am sorry about your table.”

“I’m here for as long as you need me, and forget the fucking table.”

Lynne’s eyes opened wide. “I’ve never heard you swear before.” She looked so shocked that Janeway laughed.

“Well, let’s just say that I’m getting into the spirit of letting go. It seems to be the theme of the evening. There’s a lot you don’t know about me, Lynne.” She paused. “There’s a lot I don’t know about you, too, but I’d like to learn.”

“Would you?”

There was an almost painful doubt in Lynne’s face, and Janeway wanted to scoop her into her arms and make it go away. Instead she just smiled and said, “Yes. I would. So keep going. Fill me in on what you’ve been holding back.”

Lynne looked at her in silence for several seconds, then nodded. “I’d like that too. I mean, knowing you better. But if you want me to fill you in, you’re in for a long evening.”

“I don’t have any other plans.” And Janeway settled herself on the couch.

For the next several hours, Lynne talked about the special people in
her life—her parents, her boyfriend, her best friend, even some amusing stories about people she’d worked with. Both she and Janeway laughed and cried over the stories, and Janeway felt that her quarters were gradually becoming populated with the ghosts of Lynne’s past. The detailed stories were giving them form and feature, and sometimes Janeway thought she could almost see them. When at last Lynne stopped speaking, Janeway attempted to verbalize this thought somehow.

“Voyager hasn’t gotten this far without losing some of her crew. We’ve all mourned their deaths, and I think I’ve dropped five years off my life span for each crew member I’ve lost. But I honestly believe that people never really die as long as they’re remembered. When we talk about them, laugh over something they said once or some habit they had, their spirit stays alive in some form. It’s only when we fall silent and never mention their names again that they are truly lost.

“Your parents, and Cole, and Janet, and all your loved ones were dead before. But now they’re here with us, in some form. Right here, right now. You’ve brought some part of them back to life, and I feel that I know them in some small way; that I would recognize them from your stories. And now that there are two of us remembering them, their spirits are that much stronger.”

After a pause, Lynne said, “You keep surprising me. You’re right, there’s a lot I don’t know about you. I mean, that was really quite profound.”

Janeway pretended indignation. “You think I can’t be profound?”

To her delight, Lynne laughed, and she realized that it had been several weeks since she’d last heard it. For a moment she castigated herself again for waiting so long to force the issue. But then she thought of how stubborn Lynne had been even tonight, how hard she’d had to push, and it occurred to her that an earlier approach might simply have failed. Maybe tonight was the night.

“You know, sometimes you really remind me of my friend Casey,” Lynne said.

“You haven’t mentioned her before.”

“I know. She’s a part of my past that I don’t bring up very often, even when I’m not trying to hold everything in. Casey was one of a kind. Like you in many ways—strong, independent, frighteningly brilliant, hard to get to know. It took me a long time to get past the walls she had up. But
once she let me in, it was worth the effort. We could tell each other everything, things we’d never tell anyone else, and know that the other would never be judgmental. We joked that we knew so much dirt on each other that it amounted to the emotional equivalent of a nuclear standoff—if either of us ever shot off the first strike, the other could immediately respond with enough firepower to annihilate. She was one of the most amazing women I’ve ever had the privilege to know.” She paused, looking at Janeway with an almost daring expression, and then dropped a bombshell. “She was also the first woman I ever fell in love with, and the only person—male or female—that I truly loved in an unselfish way. I’ve let other lovers go because I didn’t care enough, but I had to let Casey go because I cared too much.”

Janeway was riveted. This was certainly news—she’d had no idea that Lynne had ever loved another woman. A part of her began weighing the possibilities, but she pushed that part back and closed the door on it. “How could you care too much?” she asked.

“Easy, when you love someone who can’t love you in the same way. I’ve always felt that love is about the person within, not necessarily the body they inhabit, but that wasn’t a very common viewpoint in my day. Casey was pretty typical of most North Americans in that she couldn’t imagine loving another woman in any manner beyond friendship. And I knew that, so I never mentioned my true feelings. But then there were occasions when she would say or do something that made me wonder if perhaps she didn’t feel something else for me, too. Several times I almost said something, but always backed out. I knew that if I was wrong, a conversation like that could destroy our friendship. And what we had was so precious to me that I just couldn’t risk it.

“So I never said a word to her about how I really felt, and then I had to watch when she eventually married a perfectly nice man who loved her very much, but just wasn’t right for her. Casey and I both lived in Colorado at the time, but after she got married, she and her husband moved to California. We stayed best friends, so I heard about every stage of their relationship—falling in love, learning to live together, falling out of love, and the final breakup. It took her about five years to decide to leave. One day she called me and said she was coming back to Colorado and would see me in a few days. She sounded happier and more like her old self than she had for years. I couldn’t wait to see her.”
Lynne paused, her expression pensive. Somehow Janeway knew this story wasn’t going to have a happy ending. After a few moments of silence she said gently, “Did she come back?”

“She tried. She didn’t make it.”

Janeway could see the effort it was costing Lynne to continue, and for a moment she thought her friend might not go any further. Then Lynne rubbed her hand over her face and spoke again.

“She was driving a rented van across the Rockies in the middle of winter, and even though her winter driving skills were fine, the guy who hit her wasn’t as experienced. Unfortunately, he was in a semi.” Seeing Janeway’s look of confusion, she explained, “That’s a freight truck about forty feet—I mean, about twelve meters long, and very heavy depending on the load. He came around a curve too fast, broke loose on the ice, and slid right into Casey in a head-on collision. She never knew what hit her. I got a phone call that night from her husband. He said he was flying into town and would I pick him up at the airport and take him to the morgue? Not the hospital, the morgue. The medical examiner assured us that Casey probably didn’t feel a thing and died instantly, but that was small comfort. I went straight home, opened a bottle of vodka, and didn’t stop drinking for two months.” She gave Janeway a sad smile. “Have you ever noticed that I don’t touch vodka? That’s why. I nearly killed myself with it, and ever since then even the thought of it makes me a little ill.”

As if prompted by her own story, she looked at her nearly empty mug. “I need a refill, and I promise not to splash it all over your table this time. Do you want anything?” Janeway shook her head; her glass was still half full. Lynne mopped up the spill, took the mug and the napkins to the replicator, and was soon back with a second cup of cocoa. She looked up at Janeway as she blew across the top of her steaming drink. “This is definitely a two-cocoa evening.”

Janeway watched her sip the hot drink. “I can see now why not being able to say goodbye is the hardest part for you,” she said. “This isn’t the first time it’s happened.”

“No, it’s not. And Casey’s death was even worse in some ways, because she died never knowing how I felt about her. I kept thinking that maybe things would have been different if I’d had the courage to speak up years earlier. I know, I know,” she said, holding up her hand to forestall Janeway’s comment. “I can’t beat myself up over what might have been,
especially when there was such a vanishingly small chance that Casey could have returned my feelings. But what my head understands and what my heart feels can be two completely different things. My heart wondered if maybe she felt the same, but was too afraid to say anything—who knows? Maybe we had a chance. Maybe if I’d spoken up, she wouldn’t have been on that road that night, and she’d still be alive. I carried a huge load of guilt and self-recrimination, and then spent years trying to make up for it by telling everyone exactly how I felt about them. I never wanted that to happen again.”

She laughed shortly. “Eventually I figured out that too much honesty is just as bad as not enough. People don’t always want to hear exactly what you think or feel. So I came back to a happy medium, but after that I made sure that the people who mattered to me knew how I felt about them. It does give me some small consolation to know that when I vanished off Denali, there were no words of love left unspoken. It makes not having been able to say goodbye just a tiny bit easier. But to this day I regret not taking the risk with Casey. It’s possible that I might have lost her friendship by speaking up, but it’s absolutely certain that I lost a potential soul-mate because I was too afraid.” She paused to sip her cocoa again. “Of course, now it’s completely irrelevant. I’d have lost her anyway.”

Janeway’s mind was whirling. She’d been attracted to Lynne for months now, but tonight she suddenly felt that what she’d been attracted to was merely the shell of the real woman. The Lynne she was seeing this evening showed a depth of emotion, passion and vulnerability that touched Janeway in a way she hadn’t felt for a long time. It was as if a part of her heart, long walled-off and heavily armored, suddenly stood blinking in the bright light of day. She had the feeling that if she just took a little step and reached out, she could grasp something truly special—if Lynne shared her attraction. That was a big if. She had to admire the true irony of the moment; Lynne’s story was a perfect description of her own situation. It was also a warning of the possible consequences of not reaching out. Janeway, who had risked life, limb and ship more times than she could count, was positively terrified of risking her heart—but she was also terrified of losing a chance and regretting it the rest of her life. There was nothing in the world to prevent her from having a relationship with Lynne except the other woman’s feelings. No rules or regulations held her back. Duty didn’t come into the equation.
She was free to pursue her options, as long as she had the courage to do so.

She made a snap decision. Tonight was magical; these hours of conversation had brought them closer than ever before. There was an intimacy and comfort that hadn’t been there earlier, and who knew if it would be this strong at their next dinner, when they’d each had a week to think about things that were said and perhaps retreat behind a wall or two?

“It’s not irrelevant,” she said at last. “Nobody else can cause us the kind of pain we can cause ourselves. I understand exactly why you chose not to risk your friendship with Casey.” She paused, then took the plunge. “I’ve been afraid to speak to you about how I feel for the very same reasons.”

Lynne’s distant expression fell away, and she stared wide-eyed at Janeway. Her mouth opened, but no sound came out. “Did you just say what I think you said?” she managed at last.

_In for a shuttle, in for a ship,_ thought Janeway. “If you think I said that I have strong feelings for you, and that I’d like to take our relationship to the next level if you feel the same way—then yes, I did. Lynne, you know better than anyone where I’m standing right now. I value our friendship more than I can tell you, and I don’t want to lose it. So if you don’t feel the same way, just tell me and I promise it will never come up again. Please don’t let it affect what we have. But if you do share my feelings, and if you’re willing to take a chance with me, I believe we could have a great deal more.” She set her drink on the coffee table with a decisive click, crossed her arms over her chest, and regarded Lynne frankly, hoping that the terror she was feeling didn’t show.

“If I’m willing?” said Lynne faintly. “Jesus Christ on a cracker, you have no idea! I don’t…I didn’t…” she stopped, and then broke into an incredulous laugh. “You are just full of surprises tonight. That’s the last thing I ever expected. I don’t know what to say.”

“A condition that with you is rare and probably short-lived, so I should take advantage of it while it lasts.” Janeway’s heart had leaped at Lynne’s reaction, and she didn’t need words to see the emotions in the other woman’s face. She dropped her arms and leaned forward, very slowly. Lynne’s hand came up and she touched Janeway’s cheek gently, looking at her in wonderment. Janeway paused, turning her face into the caress, then closed the distance between them and touched her lips to the hollow in
Lynne’s throat. She’d wanted to do that for so long. Lynne’s head fell back and Janeway gently kissed her way up her throat and over her jaw, then pulled away to look at her.

Lynne raised her head and when her eyes opened, they were startlingly green. She ran one hand up through Janeway’s hair to the back of her head, pulling her forward with a light pressure. Their lips met in a tentative kiss that gradually grew stronger, more urgent, and when the two women finally separated they were both breathing hard. They regarded each other for a moment, then moved together again as if of one impulse, this time in a kiss so powerful that Janeway could feel her heart pounding against her ribs. Lynne’s hands were on each side of Janeway’s face, holding her as if she didn’t want her to move a centimeter—not that Janeway had the slightest intention of doing any such thing. The hands traveled down her shoulders and back, over to either side of her waist, and then she lost track of them as the kiss demanded all of her attention. She had never been this aroused from a simple kiss before. Five years of celibacy were beating at her self control, and all she wanted was to take Lynne into the bedroom and tear all of her clothes off as soon as possible. It was this thought that caused her to suddenly break the embrace and move back, putting a little distance between herself and this woman that she wanted so badly.

Lynne was surprised at the abrupt end to their embrace. Her face asked the question long before she spoke. “What’s wrong?”

Janeway was horrified at what she’d nearly done. It was one thing to take advantage of this magical evening to speak out about her feelings. It was something entirely different to take advantage of Lynne herself. What was she thinking? Lynne was more vulnerable now than she’d ever been, and this was not the time to be pushing a physical encounter. No matter how much I desperately want it, she thought ruefully.

“We can’t do this tonight,” she said.

“Why not?”

“Because it’s not right. You’re vulnerable, and I don’t want to take advantage of that. I want our first time together to be because we both want it for the right reasons, not because we need it for the wrong ones.” It was hard to say one thing when her whole being was straining toward something else, but she knew it was better in the long run. She was used
to putting off her own needs for the greater good; it came with the territory of being a captain.

She hadn’t counted on the possibility that Lynne might not appreciate her sacrifice, and winced when she saw the anger that suddenly flashed across the face so close to her own.

“Goddammit, Kathryn, you are not doing this to me! How dare you come on to me like a ton of bricks and then tell me it’s not the right thing to do?” Lynne abruptly got up from the couch and walked a few steps away. She stood for a few moments, then turned around and fixed Janeway with a level stare. “You say you value our relationship because I see you as a woman and not the captain. But you’re acting like a captain right now. It’s not your responsibility to decide what’s best for me. Last I checked, it was still my job to decide what I want and what I need, and right now, I want and need you.”

Janeway was startled. Lynne certainly didn’t sound vulnerable. And was she acting like the captain?

Lynne must have seen the surprise and indecision on her face, because she closed the distance between them once more and leaned over, resting her hands on the back of the couch on either side of Janeway’s shoulders. Trapped, Janeway looked up into her face. The anger was gone. In a much softer voice, Lynne said, “Okay, you’ve told me what you think is right. Now tell me what you want.”

Janeway’s first impulse was to protect her by saying she wanted them to wait. But as she looked into those green eyes, the thought came to her that Lynne wasn’t asking for protection. She was asking for the truth. Janeway knew she couldn’t start a relationship like this with a lie, no matter how well-intentioned.

“What I want,” she said at last, her voice low and husky, “is to feel your skin against mine. I want to tear your clothes off and make love to you all night. I want physical contact, because I’ve been without it for five years and it’s all catching up to me right now. And that’s what scares me, Lynne—I want you so badly that I’m afraid of hurting you.”

They stared at each other for a long, heavy moment, as Janeway waited for the consequences of her admission. She’d taken the step; now it was out of her hands.

“Earlier tonight,” said Lynne, “you told me that you trust me implicitly. I trust you implicitly as well. I trust you not to hurt me. And if two
people enter a relationship on the basis of that kind of faith, don’t you think it’s the right time?” She leaned in and brushed their lips together, then moved her mouth to Janeway’s ear and spoke in a whisper that sent a shiver down the captain’s spine. “We’ll just take it very, very slow.”

Then she treated Janeway to a demonstration.

Still trapped between Lynne’s arms, Janeway could only close her eyes as she felt lips touch her ear, tug gently on the lobe, and then make an agonizingly slow progression of soft kisses down her neck and across the underside of her jaw. She let her head fall back and was rewarded with a continuation of gentle kisses down her throat to the collar of her shirt. The couch shifted as Lynne transferred her weight to one hand and hooked a single finger into the collar, pulling it aside to expose more skin for exploration. Her soft kisses began alternating with tiny nips as she moved from one side to the other and then down, tugging the collar this way and that, until Janeway was ready to tear her own shirt over her head. At last Lynne let go of the collar and drew her finger down the front of the shirt, between aching breasts, over a quivering stomach, and then…the touch was gone.

Janeway opened her eyes in time to see Lynne lower her head. When their lips met the kiss was still maddeningly light, with Lynne resisting any efforts to deepen it. Her free hand roamed over Janeway’s upper body, occasionally cupping a breast, but never applying any pressure or going closer to her nipples.

By now Janeway’s entire being was focused on where that hand was not going, and the skin it wasn’t touching. She could not remember any lover treating her so gently, nor would she have imagined that such gentleness could be so tortuous—or so arousing. If Lynne had wanted to test her self-control, she was certainly going about it the right way.

Gradually the caresses became more purposeful, rubbing harder, squeezing, and finally—finally!—stroking a nipple. Jolted out of the kiss, Janeway opened her eyes to find Lynne looking at her with a hooded gaze.

“Kathryn, don’t you think there’s entirely too much fabric between you and me?” she asked.

Janeway had never agreed with anything so fervently in her life. She began pulling her shirt from her waistband, but a pair of hands stopped her.

“Let me,” whispered Lynne. She knelt on the floor in front of the
couch and finished pulling the shirt out, then began to push it up, centimeter by agonizing centimeter, kissing and nuzzling Janeway’s skin as it was revealed. When she reached the bra she paused long enough to hook her thumbs under it, lifting shirt and bra together. Immediately the soft kisses and nips focused on a breast, circling around, moving ever closer to the nipple, and then—just when Janeway’s whole body tensed in anticipation—they transferred to the other breast, beginning the same slow torture.

Janeway’s head fell back against the couch and she let out a groan of frustration. She could feel Lynne smile against her, but the lips followed the same pattern, stopping just before they reached the nipple and moving to the other breast. Lynne repeated this torture once more, and then, without warning, closed warm lips over the nipple which had been left so cruelly moments before. Janeway arched her back and cried out, unable to stop herself. After such a long and agonizing prologue, the sensations were so intense that she thought her brain might short out. Lynne was focused now, slowly sucking, rolling and gently biting first one nipple and then the other, until Janeway was very near orgasm, and rational thought was rapidly slipping away. Before she lost it altogether, she managed to gasp out, “Lynne...Lynne! Wait...”

“What?” asked Lynne, looking up at her.

Janeway held her lover’s head between her trembling hands. “Let’s take this somewhere more comfortable.”

Without a word Lynne stood and extended her hands. Janeway allowed herself to be pulled up and immediately fell against her lover, her legs trembling so badly that they could barely support her. Lynne took advantage of the moment to pull her into a deep, intense kiss, then wrapped her arm around Janeway’s waist and walked her into the bedroom. They paused at the side of the bed for another long kiss, and then Lynne gently pushed her down until she was sitting on the edge of the bed. Kneeling once more, she removed Janeway’s boots, socks and pants, leaving her underwear. The shirt had fallen back down during their walk into the bedroom, but Lynne made no move toward it. Instead, she guided Janeway’s legs onto the bed and then sat down next to her. Moments later, having removed her own shoes and socks, she relaxed alongside Janeway and propped her head up on one elbow, regarding her new lover’s
face with an expression of intense desire and something else that Janeway
couldn’t identify. At last she spoke.

“Shall I go on, or would you like to stop here until you think I’m ready?”

Janeway said something that could have peeled paint off the wall, and
Lynne laughed delightedly. Her laughter was cut short, however, when
Janeway suddenly pulled her supporting arm out while simultaneously
pushing on her other shoulder, using the momentum of Lynne’s fall to
lever her own body up. Before Lynne could blink, she was on her back
with Janeway’s body covering her own.

“Wow,” she said. “You’ll have to teach me that move.”

“Oh, I plan to teach you any number of moves,” growled Janeway. She
covered Lynne’s mouth in a bruising kiss, letting off just a touch of her
frustration. Lynne had made her point more than adequately, and she was
ready to return the favor.

Reaching toward the top button of Lynne’s shirt, she used her lover’s
own technique against her, taking long minutes to undo each button and
thoroughly explore the exposed skin before moving to the next. She
passed right between Lynne’s breasts without touching them, but noticed
to her delight that there was no bra. When at last the final button was
undone, she sat up, slowly spread the shirt and stared with undisguised
admiration. Lynne’s breasts were full and firm, tipped with coral, and her
chest and abdomen showed the unmistakable signs of months in the
weight room, rebuilding her body after her long stasis. Janeway thought
she had never seen anything so stunning. She looked up into her lover’s
face and smiled. “You are so beautiful.”

Lynne returned the smile, then sat up and pulled her into a heated
kiss. Slipping her hands inside the shirt, Janeway treated herself to the
feel of Lynne’s skin and the fine muscles of her back. She broke off the
kiss and looked at the dark braid that had so fascinated her. “I’ve been
thinking about this for some time,” she said as she pulled the band off the
end and began raking her fingers through the thick hair, releasing it into a
mass of brown and silver.

Lynne put her head back and made a sound of utter contentment. “You
have no idea how good that feels,” she said. “You could do that all night
and I’d be perfectly happy.”

“Do you want me to?” asked Janeway, half teasing and half serious.
“Yes. Tomorrow night.” Lynne raised her head, and the expression on her face left no doubt as to what she wanted this night.

Accepting the invitation, Janeway pushed Lynne’s shirt off her shoulders and halfway down her arms, trapping them in a gentle bond. Lowering her head, she fastened her lips over a nipple and began to suck it, first gently, and then—spurred on by Lynne’s soft cries—hard enough to turn it red. Shifting to the other, she gave it the same attention, and then began alternating back and forth, occasionally interrupting long enough to gently bite the underside of a breast. She’d gone a lifetime without knowing how lovely a woman’s breast truly was, but tonight she was planning to make up for it.

Reluctantly she paused, knowing that Lynne could not sit up in that position for much longer. Pulling the shirt the rest of the way off, she freed Lynne’s arms and guided her down, then removed her pants and underwear as well. At last her lover lay fully nude before her. She delighted in the long legs and defined muscles, and as her eyes roved she noticed a glint from the juncture of those legs. Lynne was extremely aroused, if the amount of moisture there was any indication, and Janeway suddenly felt a resurgence of her own arousal. Pulling her shirt and bra over her head, she lowered her body on top of Lynne’s, reveling in the extraordinary feel of their breasts pressing together, and their lips met in a kiss that seemed to dwarf those they’d shared earlier. Lynne’s hips began to move under her, and Janeway matched the rhythm, marveling that she could be so incredibly aroused and still have her underwear on. When the rhythm increased in tempo, Janeway rolled off and smiled at Lynne’s sound of protest.

“We’re not there yet,” she cautioned.

Lynne released her breath in a gusty sigh. “You’re going to kill me.”

“You should never start what you can’t finish.”

“Oh, I could finish this if you’d let—” Her voice failed when Janeway took a nipple in her mouth once more, simultaneously sliding her hand down Lynne’s abdomen to her groin. She was amazed at the intense heat she felt there. Leaving the nipple, she once more began a slow progress of touches and nibbles down Lynne’s chest and abdomen, skipped over her hand, and continued down one thigh. Pulling her hand away and shifting position, she came back up the other thigh, then dipped down the inner side, dangerously close to the thatch of dark brown hair. Lynne moved her
legs apart, but she needn’t have bothered; Janeway had other ideas. Lying beside her lover once more, she propped her head on her elbow so that she could watch Lynne’s face, then slid her other hand down the abdomen once more, and finally, delicately, parted the slick folds. Dipping one finger into the abundant moisture, she lubricated the clitoris and began to rub her finger over it, so gently that she was barely touching it at all.

Lynne’s reaction was immediate as her hips began undulating in a rhythm that started slowly but soon picked up speed. Several times she pressed up against Janeway’s hand, but Janeway just pulled back and kept her touch light. After a while she stopped moving her hand at all except to maintain the pressure, and watched in fascination as Lynne immediately picked up the slack, rubbing herself against Janeway’s hand. Her hips moved faster and faster as her cries increased, until at last her body jerked uncontrollably in orgasm. Awed at what she’d done so easily, Janeway resumed her gentle stroking, driving her partner through it. When the shuddering stopped, she left her hand where it was as she covered her lover’s neck and face with kisses.

Lynne lay still for long moments, then turned her head and opened her eyes to find Janeway smiling down at her.

“That was torture,” she said in a rasping voice.

“I know,” Janeway responded. “I’m about to make it up to you.”

She sat up and scooted backwards, trailing kisses down Lynne’s body—and pausing for a return visit to her breasts—until she had positioned herself between those long legs. The scent of Lynne’s arousal was clean and delicate, and although she had never before been in this situation, she didn’t hesitate to run her tongue up the cleft and around the hard little bundle at its top. Lynne’s body jerked, and Janeway settled in for long enjoyable minutes of teasing and suckling. Lynne’s flavor was mild and she found it enticing.

As she continued her ministrations, Lynne’s hips began slowly moving once more. The build-up didn’t take long, however, and the tempo increased dramatically when Janeway at last penetrated her partner with one finger, then two. The sensation of warm, slick walls pressing on her fingers, as well as Lynne’s loud cry, sent her own arousal soaring. She curled her fingers up and pulled them nearly out, then straightened them and pushed them back in, setting up a rhythm. Between the penetration and the loving attention she lavished with her mouth, it seemed to take
no time at all before Lynne’s body again convulsed in orgasm. Her fingers were squeezed by the inner muscles, and she was fascinated by the strength hidden there. When the last twitch died away and Lynne lay still once more, Janeway gently pulled her fingers out, finding it more difficult than she expected, and crawled back up to lie next to her panting lover. Lynne rolled half over and threw one leg over Janeway’s body, nestling her head just below her shoulder. Without opening her eyes, she said, “I forgive you. You made it up quite well.”

Janeway laughed and stroked her lover’s hair, feeling that she’d never been so happy—except for the fact that her own need was now so strong that she was sure she could bite through solid duranium. And it didn’t look like she was going to get her release any time soon, because Lynne was draped over her like a rag doll and gave every appearance of going to sleep. Well, she thought ruefully and with not a little pride, it’s my own fault. I wiped her out.

“I’m not asleep,” murmured Lynne, causing Janeway to wonder if she had suddenly become telepathic. “I’m just floating. Give me a few minutes...” But still she did not move, and her breathing became slow and even. Janeway resigned herself to continued frustration and prepared to settle down while Lynne slept.

But she underestimated her partner. Lynne’s eyes opened and she suddenly rolled all the way onto Janeway, raising herself on her arms to look down in her lover’s startled face.

“That was amazing,” she said. “It’s been a long, long time since I had an orgasm like that. Centuries, in fact. However, I seem to recall that I was going along quite nicely before you so rudely interrupted me. It may take me a while to remember where I was.” She flashed a sensual smile at Janeway, whose heart skipped a beat at the sight. And then it skipped a number of beats as Lynne demonstrated that she did, in fact, remember exactly where she’d left off. Returning immediately to Janeway’s breasts, she soon had her lover incoherent with arousal. After long minutes of the most delightful sensations, Lynne kissed her way down to Janeway’s waist and began a whole new torture, gently lifting the edge of her underpants and grazing her finger or tongue beneath it, then dropping the fabric and lifting it again somewhere else. In this manner she caressed the sensitive skin all around the underwear, which Janeway was now sure must be soaked. She thought she’d never been so turned on in her life, and was
beyond relieved when she felt her underwear being gently tugged off. Lynne paused for a moment, then came back up to kiss her jaw and whisper, “You are absolutely stunning.”

Janeway turned her head to meet Lynne’s eyes, and saw a depth of emotion there reached right through her arousal to wrap itself around her heart. She touched her lover’s cheek, and was gratified when Lynne turned her face into the caress for just a moment before taking her hand and gently kissing the wrist. Then her hand was released and Lynne was again moving down the bed. Janeway waited, tense with expectation, hoping against hope that at last she’d get what she’d been waiting for.

When she felt the warm tongue slide between her folds, a groan of release and sheer joy escaped her. Soon her body was trembling as Lynne found her sweet spot and focused her attentions on it. The orgasm built and swept over her so suddenly that she was startled and a little disappointed, but Lynne barely slowed down. Instead, she added something new to the mix: two fingers pressed just past Janeway’s opening and no farther. Janeway was immediately back at the brink of orgasm, her entire being focused on those fingers and how much she wanted them all the way inside. She arched her hips, attempting to drive them in, but Lynne compensated and kept them at the same point. Janeway’s arousal was now off the scale. It was as if she had arrived at a level of sensation that was higher than her normal orgasm, and every second was almost like an orgasm in itself. She’d never felt anything like it. She had no idea how long she could stand it, and her need for release was overwhelming. An agonized groan escaped and she gasped, “Lynne—please!”

Immediately Lynne pushed all the way in, her long fingers causing an exquisite sensation of fullness. She began a gentle thrusting, her mouth and tongue never slowing, and Janeway’s arousal impossibly built even higher. Still there was no release, and it was almost too much. She wanted it to stop, she didn’t want it to ever stop, she didn’t know how much more she could take. All rational thought was long gone, and all that existed in her whole world were the sensations that were setting her body on fire.

Lynne shifted position slightly and paused just long enough to dip a finger of her other hand into the lubrication, using it to anoint Janeway’s lower opening. Slowly and carefully, she slid a single finger inside and began an alternating rhythm, pulling one finger out while the other two
pushed in. Filled in every way and overwhelmed with the incredible sensations, Janeway lasted only a few seconds longer before her orgasm finally took her, shook her so hard that her entire upper body came up off the bed, and mercifully released her at last. She fell back and thought she might never move again. Through a fog she felt gentle fingers extracting themselves from her body, soft kisses on her inner thighs, and then Lynne was beside her, kissing her throat, her jaw, and finally her lips. Janeway was so exhausted that she could barely return the kiss. She heard Lynne whisper, “I’ll be right back,” and a few moments later heard the sound of water running in the ensuite.

The bed shifted under Lynne’s weight as she returned, wrapping herself around Janeway and holding her tightly as her lover recovered from the shattering orgasm. It was a long time before Janeway came back to herself. She opened her eyes and for a few moments simply looked at this woman who had just changed her world. Finally she said, “You were incredible. I’ve never felt anything like that. I wasn’t sure I’d live through it.”

Lynne gently moved a damp strand of hair off Janeway’s forehead. “And you are one of the most amazing women I have ever known.” She seemed unaware that she’d used those exact words to describe Casey, but Janeway caught it and felt the warm confidence of someone who knows she is cherished. She glowed for a few moments before noticing that Lynne’s expression was troubled.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

Lynne hesitated, and Janeway brought her hand up to cup her partner’s cheek. “Surely, after what we’ve just experienced, you can tell me what you’re thinking.”

Green eyes stared into hers with an almost desperate expression. Finally Lynne spoke.

“Kathryn, I’m terrified to say this, but—I could never have done that without having very deep feelings for my partner.”

Janeway regarded her in some confusion. “I don’t understand why that should frighten you.”

“It frightens me because I’ve had feelings for you for weeks now that I thought were misplaced and inappropriate, so I’ve spent a lot of time squelching them. Taking a risk when you have a safety net of friends and family is one thing, but taking a risk when you have absolutely everything
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to lose is something else. I didn’t dare say anything to you, so I got very good at boxing up my emotions.” She pulled away and propped her head on her hand, putting space between them and focusing her gaze somewhere on the sheet. “But now you’ve changed the rules, and I can’t go on the way I was before. I can’t keep this inside. I don’t know exactly what you meant by the next level, but I’m already at the top one.” Nervously, she looked up. “I’m falling in love with you.”

Janeway’s heart ached at the unsure expression on her face and the tension in her body. She understood the courage it had taken for Lynne to speak, and wanted nothing more than to wipe away her doubt and fear. Fortunately, she was pretty sure she could do that in a few short words.

“Then I’m a lucky woman,” she said, smiling. “Because I’m already in love with you.”
If Chakotay was surprised to see the memo from Captain Janeway the next morning, informing him that she was taking a day of unscheduled leave, he wisely said nothing. Although it was unusual for the captain to take personal leave, it was not unusual for her to spend her private time in her quarters, so none of the crew thought it at all strange that Captain Janeway did not set foot outside her quarters all day.

Behind the sealed door, two women were reveling in the discoveries they were making about each other. Some of those were physical, but many others were the result of talking for hours at a level of intimacy that until now had not been possible.

“When did you first feel this way about me?” Lynne asked, in the time-honored tradition of new lovers.

She and Janeway were sitting on the couch, sipping hot drinks. Janeway’s, naturally, was coffee, but Lynne had opted for tea. She was slowly making her way through the replicator’s various tea programs and informing Janeway at every step whether or not a tea had any resemblance to the real thing she was used to. So far, the replicator had failed utterly at Scottish breakfast and oolong, but she felt it did all right with Earl Grey. Janeway thought tea was a terrible waste of caffeine and had no compunctions in telling Lynne so. The battle lines were instantly drawn, and they were having a fine time teasing each other.
Janeway sipped her coffee contentedly and thought about the question. “I felt something for you the moment I met you,” she said at last. “Though it wasn’t love at first. I was intrigued by your strength of will and your obvious intellect, and I enjoyed watching you discover new things. You have such a unique point of view; it’s very refreshing. But I didn’t know I loved you until our second dinner. I’d been thinking about you all week, to the point of distraction, and then when I finally saw you again, it was like I’d never seen you before. I suddenly realized that you were beautiful, and wondered why I’d been so blind.”

“You weren’t blind,” said Lynne. “I was a skinny, starved wreck before then. It wasn’t until that dinner that I reverted to my normal beautiful self.”

“As I was saying,” continued Janeway, reaching out and giving her a playful shove, “I couldn’t get enough of looking at you and listening to your voice. I wanted desperately to touch you. That was the first time in a long while that I lost track of time and had to be kicked out of someone’s quarters.”

“Oh, believe me, I didn’t want to kick you out. You were, and still are, the only person on this ship that I could talk to like that. I looked forward to our dinners like a drowning person looks forward to the lifeline.”

Janeway was impressed. “You have a hell of a poker face. I never had any idea you felt that way about our time together. You were always so warm and polite and such good company, but there was a reserve that I couldn’t get around. You hide your feelings quite well.” Her voice became low and teasing. “Ever thought about going into command?”

Lynne snorted. “I’ve been in command, Kathryn. You try leading a dozen smart-ass teenagers on a mountain climb, when their lack of attention could result in someone getting hurt or killed, and see how far you get without a command persona.” Then her expression grew serious. “The truth is, I looked forward to our time together, but I didn’t feel anything except desperate relief at having a friend. Beyond that, I couldn’t feel anything at all for at least two months after coming here. It was like my emotions had been turned off. I had one good cry my first night in my quarters, and that was the end of it. If I opened my heart even a crack, it was pure misery, so I just kept everything locked up. But then I started to notice you more—how you move, the tone of your voice, the way your whole face lights up when you smile—and before I knew it, I was falling
in love with you. Then for a while I felt guilty about Cole, like I was betraying his memory. That didn’t last long once I reminded myself that he’s far beyond caring and would probably want me to be happy with someone anyway. But I never thought you’d return my feelings, so I locked that up, too.” She gave Janeway a wry glance. “As much as I could, that is. Every time I saw you it got a whole lot harder. Eventually it was almost as hard to be with you as it was to be without you. I thought there must be a special place reserved in hell for people who lose everyone and then fall in love with someone they can’t have.”

Janeway reached for her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze, then simply held it. Lynne looked at her with an unreadable expression. “Kathryn, do you remember what you said about how if I’d just let go of my self-absorption, I’d see I’m not the only one on Voyager who has experienced loss?”

“Yes.”

“That was really hard to hear.”

“I know,” said Janeway. “I’m sorry.”

“Oh, don’t be sorry. I needed to hear it. That didn’t make it any easier. But you were right—I’ve been wallowing in my own pain for months now, and it just never occurred to me that anyone could possibly understand. And now, knowing about your father and Justin, and crewmembers you’ve lost along the way, and then hearing about the Maquis and the Borg and the people who have lost family and friends in those battles—well, I have to say I’m a little ashamed of myself for being so self-involved. Thank you for being so patient with me.”

Janeway squeezed her hand again. Few people in her acquaintance could be so honest with themselves and others, and she respected Lynne’s willingness to take a hard look at herself and speak openly about what she saw. “You’re welcome,” she said. “But you have no reason to be ashamed, and every right to the grief you’ve been feeling. I just didn’t want you to be alone anymore.”

Lynne set her cup of tea on the table and moved closer. “I don’t want you to be alone anymore, either.” She leaned in for a gentle kiss, then turned around and rested her back against Janeway’s chest.

For just a moment Janeway was startled by her concern. She was the captain, the one who worried about everyone else. It was disconcerting to realize that someone was now worrying about her.
She smiled. No, it was gloriously wonderful to realize that someone was now worrying about her. Wrapping her arms around Lynne’s waist, she held her tightly, grateful for the priceless gift the universe had dropped in her lap. They sat like that for a long time, neither one feeling the need to speak further.

It was enough to simply feel.
Naturally, the entire ship knew about the captain’s romance within forty-eight hours, and by the time a week had passed, most of the crew knew that these two were meant for each other. The difference in the captain’s demeanor was a source of amazement to all who worked with her, but nobody complained—a happy Janeway was infinitely more enjoyable to be around than an unhappy Janeway. She laughed more often, was more tolerant of ship and personnel issues, and seemed more relaxed than the crew had ever seen her.

Their new shipmate seemed different, too. Many of the crew only knew Lynne Hamilton by the stories about the 400-year-old woman, but had never actually seen her. Now she was appearing in the mess hall, often with the captain, and could be seen socializing with a number of the crew. She smiled at people in the corridors and made an effort to learn names. Before long, the woman who had been little more than a myth became a well-known member of the ship’s complement, and liked by many. Not all, however. Gossip was whispered in the lower decks about the captain and the new woman, and those of the crew who wanted their captain to be bigger than life resented the intrusion of this unpleasant reality.

It was during this time that Lynne ran afoul of B’Elanna’s famous temper.
B’Elanna had just ended a stressful shift and was, to be honest, a little jealous of Lynne’s relationship with the captain. Not that she’d ever thought about the captain in that way. But it had taken her five years of hard effort to achieve a comfortable and cordial working relationship with Janeway that only occasionally spilled over into her personal life. She treasured those rare moments when she and Janeway spoke as friends, rather than captain and lieutenant, and it irritated her that this woman had waltzed in and passed them all up within mere weeks, finding a closeness with the captain that nobody else could do more than dream of.

On this particular day B’Elanna was sharing a table with Tom and Harry, trying to take the edge off her mood with some Romulan ale. As she described one of the seemingly endless problems that had plagued engineering that day, Lynne walked by the table, tall and cool and looking like she owned the place. B’Elanna watched her go past and was suddenly unable to keep her jealousy from leaking out.

“Well, if it isn’t the fossil,” she said, showing her teeth in something less than a smile. Lynne stopped in her tracks, and B’Elanna felt a savage sense of satisfaction. Then she assumed an artificial tone of concern. “I hope you don’t mind if I call you that.”

Lynne turned on her heel, walked back to the table, and bored into B’Elanna with one of the most piercing stares she’d seen this side of Janeway’s famous Death Glare. “Not at all,” she said. “As long as you don’t mind if I call you Bonehead.”

Tom and Harry immediately put down their forks, preparing to step in and stop B’Elanna from making a mistake they’d all regret. Her blood rising, B’Elanna abandoned all pretense and snapped, “Maybe you’d better go back and read up on Klingons. Then you’d know how dangerous it is to piss one off.”

“I’ve already read about Klingons,” said Lynne. “So you’re supposed to be able to insult me, and I’m supposed to just accept it because you’re Klingon? What a bunch of bullshit. I’ve worked with teenagers scarier than you. If you want to dish it out, you’d better be able to take it.”

B’Elanna was ready to kill. “If you weren’t the captain’s girlfriend, I’d invite you outside right now,” she said in a voice just below a snarl.
“And do what? Beat the shit out of me? How much honor is there in pulverizing someone with no combat skills?”

This stopped B’Elanna for a moment. With the blood singing in her veins, she hadn’t really considered what she would do to this woman. It annoyed her to realize that Lynne was right—she wouldn’t get any satisfaction out of pummeling someone who couldn’t fight.

Lynne took advantage of the momentary silence, pulling a chair over from the next table and sitting down. “Besides,” she said, “I don’t think you really mean it. Captain Janeway speaks very highly of you, both professionally and personally. What she’s told me about you and what I’m seeing right now don’t match. I trust her, so I have to think that this isn’t really you.”

B’Elanna deflated. Lynne had hit her right where it impacted the most by mentioning Captain Janeway’s opinion of her. She’d worked long and hard to earn that good opinion. Did she really want to throw it all away by pounding on Janeway’s girlfriend? She felt her anger ebbing, and realized that Lynne had won this fight without striking a single blow. Looking at her opponent with new respect, she no longer wondered what it was that the captain saw in this woman. Lynne was almost as devious as Janeway.

“Does she really speak that highly of me?” she asked. She felt like an idiot, but she had to know.

“Absolutely. She says you are hands down the most brilliant engineer she’s ever worked with, and that you’ve grown into a fine officer as well. She also considers you a friend.”

“She does?” B’Elanna looked at Tom and Harry. Tom still looked ready for the worst, but Harry was nodding. She could feel a grin spreading over her face, despite her efforts to keep it off. When she looked back at Lynne, though, the other woman’s face was still quite serious.

“Thank you for telling me that,” B’Elanna said. She put her hand out and offered her version of an apology. “You’re right, I didn’t really mean to insult you—I’ve just had a bad day and you walked by at the wrong time. But if you ever call me Bonehead again, I will kill you.”

Lynne shook her hand. “You’re welcome, and I never actually called you Bonehead in the first place. I just asked if you’d mind.”

B’Elanna let out a shout of laughter and smacked her on the shoulder. Turning to Tom and Harry, she jerked her thumb toward Lynne and said, “She’s all right.”
That was the beginning of an unlikely friendship. B’Elanna enjoyed Lynne’s company and found her a good intellectual match, though the woman was absolutely hopeless when it came to anything to do with engineering. She also loved to stir up Lynne’s fiery spirit, and took her first shot at it during their very next meeting by calling her “Fossil,” clapping her on the back and giving her a big smile while doing so. Lynne’s eyes narrowed and she raised her finger, but in the face of B’Elanna’s toothy grin she ended up smiling herself. “All right,” she said. “As long as you mean it in a nice way. But if anyone else calls me that, will you kill them for me?”

B’Elanna laughed and promised she would. So “Fossil” became her affectionate name for Lynne, and no one else dared to use it.

Lynne and B’Elanna could frequently be seen lunching together in the mess hall. Laughter often rang out from their table, and since both women tended to throw their heads back and laugh without reservation, everyone in the area knew when they were having a meal. Through B’Elanna, Lynne came to know Tom, Harry and Chakotay quite well, becoming a part of the senior staff social circle.

There was just one person missing from this circle. Lynne brought it up one day, while she and B’Elanna were sharing dinner in the mess hall after the alpha shift.

“Why don’t I ever see you socializing with Seven of Nine?” asked Lynne, tilting her head in the direction of the woman in question. Seven of Nine sat quietly at a table in the corner, alone as always, drinking her nutritional supplement while apparently reading four PADDs at once.

B’Elanna glanced at the corner table and frowned. “Because Seven is the most irritating and patronizing person on this entire ship. Nobody likes her except the captain, Neelix, Naomi and Harry. And Harry only likes her because he wants to get into her biosuit.”

“Well, I can certainly see Harry’s point,” said Lynne, observing Seven with an appraising expression. B’Elanna smacked her on the arm.

“Watch it. You’re the captain’s woman; no wandering eyes allowed.”

Lynne grinned. “I’d have to be a dead woman to not notice Seven of Nine. She’s stunning. But don’t worry, I happen to think the captain is also stunning, and I have no intention of straying.” She looked back at Seven again, her grin fading. “I just hate to see anyone so alone.”

B’Elanna followed Lynne’s glance. Seven wore her usual impassive
expression, seeming to indicate her extreme disdain for everyone around her. She could feel the hairs on the back of her neck rising from just looking at the woman. Nobody on the ship could piss her off so quickly and thoroughly as Seven could.

“Don’t feel sorry for her,” she advised. “Seven is alone because she wants to be. She makes it obvious that she doesn’t want or need anyone around her, except the captain and Naomi, of course. She’s still Borg.”

“Sometimes it’s people like that who need compassion and friendship the most,” said Lynne.

B’Elanna rolled her eyes. “Now I see what you and Janeway have in common. You’re both suckers for hard cases.” She stood up, holding her dinner tray. “I have to get back to engineering to check on a test I left running. Feel free to go over there and get rejected. All I ask is that you tell me about it tomorrow at lunch.”

Lynne gave her a mock glare, and B’Elanna laughed as she took her tray back to the counter. Lynne and Janeway really were meant to be together. Lynne obviously had no idea what she was getting into, just as Janeway hadn’t when she first took the Borg under her wing. She couldn’t wait to hear the story the next day.

Seven of Nine sensed a presence at her table. Looking up from her PADDs, she identified Lynne Hamilton, their newest passenger and, by all accounts, the lover of Captain Janeway. Seven had been astonished when she’d first heard the gossip—from Harry, naturally—because it had never occurred to her that the captain could love anyone. She was the captain, after all, in command and always leading, never sharing. Seven hadn’t been inclined to believe Harry’s story until she herself had seen the couple walking down a corridor together. There was something in Captain Janeway’s bearing that she hadn’t observed before, something softer. Janeway had given her a smile of genuine delight, introducing Lynne to her in tones that indicated her belief that Seven and Lynne should be great friends. Seven had greeted the woman with a courteous nod of the head, but felt no immediate stirring of friendship. Rather, she felt a sense of dislike. It took her a while to identify the emotion as jealousy. Weeks went by with little contact from Janeway, and their regular Velocity games
—a competitive version of racquetball using phasers and a disc—became sporadic. The worst part was that Seven no longer felt welcome in the captain’s quarters for late night discussions of philosophy. It seemed that whenever Seven was in the mood for such a discussion, the captain was either in Lynne’s quarters or Lynne was in hers. It was all very disconcerting, and Seven had no idea how to deal with the loss of Janeway’s attention or her own disorderly emotions. These days she felt more alone than she ever had before, and now the cause was standing at her table.

“Hello,” said Lynne. “May I sit with you?”

Seven didn’t feel overjoyed at the prospect, but nodded her head nevertheless.

“Thank you.” Lynne sat across from her, holding a steaming mug in her hand, and Seven detected the distinct odor of tea. Tuvok often drank a Vulcan blend, so she was familiar with the general olfactory signature. She found it far less offensive than Janeway’s coffee, but still wondered why anybody would drink such a bitter brew. Oblivious to its bad taste, Lynne sipped it before stating, “I’ve been wanting to talk with you for some time.”

Seven tilted her head. “Why?”

“Why not?”

Unable to think of a response, Seven said nothing at all. She’d often found silence to be a useful weapon when dealing with people she didn’t like, since it usually made others uncomfortable enough to leave her alone.

Lynne, however, just settled back in her chair and gave every indication that she wasn’t going anywhere. “You and I have something in common: we were both brought on board Voyager after having been severed from everything we knew before. I’m interested in hearing about your experiences, and...well, I was hoping that we could get to know each other better.”

Seven hadn’t known what to expect when Lynne sat down, but this was certainly not it. She could not immediately discern an agenda, but she knew that people did not offer her friendship without some ulterior motive. Harry had made friendly overtures, but they were motivated by sexual attraction. The same held true for several other social interactions she’d had on board. In her experience, offers to “get to know her better” were really thinly disguised offers to copulate, and nobody other than the
captain or Naomi had ever seemed to want to pursue a friendship simply because they thought she was worth knowing. She had no idea how to proceed, or even if she wanted to. She had become accustomed to disliking Lynne Hamilton, and the feeling was...familiar. To change it would be less comfortable than to let it remain.

She raised an eyebrow and stared evenly at the woman across the table. “I am not certain that I wish to know you better. My impression of you is not favorable.”

Lynne looked taken aback, but only for a moment. Then she smiled. “Kathryn said you were very direct. It’s refreshing, because it means I can be just as direct, which is so much easier than being polite and tactful.” Leaning forward, she raised her own eyebrow. “Why do you have an unfavorable impression of me? You must have a good reason.”

This was also unexpected—Seven had been fairly certain that her cool statement would cause Lynne to get up and leave the table in anger. But the question demanded an answer, and as always, she was nothing if not truthful.

“You have been the cause of a significant reduction in the amount of time that Captain Janeway spends with me. Since you and the captain became involved, our Velocity games have dropped to forty-two percent of their previous level, and I have seen her only once for a philosophical discussion. I am not satisfied with our current level of interaction. Nor do I foresee a reversion to our former levels of activity as long as you and the captain are lovers.”

Lynne sat back, and Seven was surprised to see a look of sympathy cross her features. “Oh, Seven, I’m sorry. I had no idea that Kathryn wasn’t spending time with you. I’ve been where you are now, and it’s no fun at all.”

“Why would my current location be ‘fun’?” asked Seven in bewilderment.

Lynne’s lips twitched in what might have been a smile, but she said, “That was an idiom. My fault. What I meant was, I’ve experienced the same feelings you’re experiencing now. It’s painful to have your friend stop spending time with you because she’s spending every minute with a new lover instead. If I’d known that was happening here, I’d have done something earlier.” She thought for a moment. “Would you be interested in having dinner with us this week?”
Seven hesitated. As much as she wished to spend time with Captain Janeway, she wasn’t sure she was prepared to share her with someone else during that time. Her discussions with the captain had always been one on one, intense and intellectual and often at a philosophical level of debate that she could never achieve with anyone else on board. If Lynne were there, her presence would doubtless serve to keep the conversation at a much less interesting level. On the other hand, even one-on-two time with the captain was a higher quality than what she’d had over the last few weeks. She quickly decided that she would rather have some time with the captain than none at all, and called upon her socializing lessons for the appropriate response.

“Yes, I would…appreciate that. Thank you for inviting me.”

Lynne looked genuinely pleased. “Good! I’ll check with Kathryn and get back to you with a time.”

It took Seven a moment to translate this statement. Gathering her PADDs and standing up, she said, “I will await further contact from you.”

Lynne stood as well, meeting Seven’s eyes in a level gaze. Seven noted with some surprise that Lynne was her height—something else she was unaccustomed to.

“Thanks for giving me a chance, Seven. I hope that we can be friends. But if you do continue to dislike me, at least do it based on a knowledge of who I am, and not because Kathryn is spending less time with you.”

Seven simply nodded, then turned and left the mess hall. Her distaste for the woman had lessened in intensity to some degree. She appreciated Lynne’s directness; it was similar to the way that she and Captain Janeway conversed. Perhaps a dinner with both of them would be interesting after all.
TWO DAYS after her short conversation with Lynne Hamilton, Seven of Nine waited outside the door to the captain’s quarters. She felt discomfort in her abdominal region and recognized the sensation as a physical response to nervousness. She was still getting used to the concept of the captain in an intimate relationship, and was now about to spend several hours in a social situation where this relationship would be prominent. She was unsure how much of her normal interaction with the captain would be appropriate in this new dynamic, nor how well she would adjust to the different type of interaction that might be required.

She had reviewed her socializing lessons in preparation for the evening, but found much of the content to be inappropriate due to its romantic nature. Extracting the useful segments, modifying others, and cross-referencing the results with Voyager’s databases, she felt reasonably well prepared for the etiquette demands of the evening. But that would be the easy part. Dealing with her own emotions would be much harder.

She activated the chime the second that her internal chronometer indicated 1900 hours, hearing Captain Janeway’s voice through the comm panel almost immediately. “Come in.”

Seven stepped through the door, taking in the room with one sweep of her eyes. Her eidetic memory noted that the captain’s quarters looked exactly the same as they always had. She wasn’t sure why she’d expected
something different, but felt an unaccountable sense of relief at the familiarity. The table was set for three, and Captain Janeway was coming toward her with a welcoming smile.

“Seven! It’s good to see you. Please come in and make yourself comfortable. Can I offer you a drink?”

“Yes, thank you. May I have a glass of water?” She hardly ever wanted a drink, but had learned that this was part of the protocol of a social evening. Water was the least offensive of the various liquid refreshments that Voyager’s crew drank, most of which were vile.

Janeway looked toward Lynne, who was already near the replicator. “Coming right up,” called Lynne. She brought two glasses over to Seven. “Here’s your water,” she said, handing over one glass, “and here’s something I put together for you.” She pressed the second glass into Seven’s free hand. “Kathryn told me you like champagne but that synthehol impairs your cortical implant, so I programmed an old drink recipe into the replicator. It’s carbonated apple cider—same bubbly action as champagne, but no synthehol.”

Seven put the water down and held up the second drink. It had a similar appearance to champagne, but smelled sweeter. Carefully, she took a small sip. The apple flavor was palatable, and the carbonation tickled her mouth. She found the drink quite pleasant.

“It is very good,” she said in a surprised tone.

Janeway looked pleased. “Well then,” she said, “let’s put that drink to use.” She picked up two glasses from the coffee table, handed one to Lynne, and held hers up. “To friendships, both new and old.”

“One is silver, the other gold,” finished Lynne. Both Janeway and Seven looked at her, and she rolled her eyes. “Honestly, didn’t anything make it into the twenty-fourth century? You never heard that?”

“No,” they said simultaneously. Seven felt a sudden rush of warmth at the sound of their joined voices, as if she and Janeway were a team again. The uncomfortable sensations in her stomach eased a little. “Why would you compare friendships to base metals?” she asked.

“It’s an aphorism,” said Lynne. “It refers to the relative value of both types of friendship, and dates back to a time when Earth’s economy was cash-based. Silver was valuable, but gold was more valuable still.”

“So you’re saying that old friendships are more valuable than new,” said Janeway.
“Sometimes and in some ways, yes.”

Janeway turned to Seven. “In her extremely diplomatic manner, Lynne is reminding me that my friendship with you predates my relationship with her, and that my investment in our relationship over a longer period of time gives it a great value.” She paused for a moment, an expression on her face that Seven hadn’t seen since her return from the Borg Queen’s ship. Her voice was soft as she continued. “And while I’m not prepared to assign greater value to one relationship or the other, the truth is that my friendship with you is very important to me, and I have been neglecting it lately. I owe you an apology, Seven.”

“You do not owe me anything,” said Seven, feeling odd at the turn of the conversation. Janeway did not apologize to anyone, so far as she knew.

“Oh, but I do. You may not realize it, but I do and so does Lynne—she gave me quite a lecture after seeing you in the mess hall.” Janeway glanced briefly at Lynne, whose lips quirked as she looked down at her drink. Turning back to Seven, she added, “Friendships bring with them a certain obligation. They require consideration and time and thoughtfulness to survive, and I’ve fallen behind on all three with you. My only defense is that I felt I deserved some time, after five years, to let go of being the captain all the time and just enjoy being Kathryn on my off hours. But Lynne reminded me that I have two relationships with you, one as the captain and one as your friend. The first I could let go after my shift. The second is not so expendable, and I am truly sorry if my lack of time for you hurt you in any way.”

“Captain, I am not damaged,” said Seven. “Though I will admit that my emotions over the last several weeks have been—unsettling. I did not realize that I had any right to expect you to spend a certain amount of time with me; I only knew that it was not forthcoming and that I did not feel happy. Are you telling me that I do, in fact, have this right?”

“To a degree, yes. And you also have the right to come to me if I’m not coming to you. I was wrapped up in my own feelings and didn’t realize what it was doing to you, but if you’d said something to me I would have rectified the situation earlier. I care about you. Your happiness and well-being are important to me, not just as a captain, but as a friend.”

Seven’s feeling of discomfort was now rapidly dissolving into something warm and pleasant. This was not what she’d expected upon her arrival, but she didn’t mind at all. “Thank you, Captain. I also care about
you, and you are important to me as well. I have missed our philosophical discussions.”

Janeway smiled. “Perhaps we can have one tonight. If the mood is right.” She gestured toward the table, and Seven obligingly moved to a chair. Lynne and Janeway took their seats, shaking out their napkins and putting them in their laps. Janeway reached toward the salad bowl, paused, pulled her hand back and fixed Seven with an intent gaze. “Sev-
en,” she said quietly, “since we have both a professional and a personal relationship, I’d like to distinguish between the two. When we are off duty together, I’d like for you to call me Kathryn.”

Seven was stunned. She was aware that no one on the ship other than Chakotay and Lynne had been given this privilege. It was possibly the highest proof of the regard in which Janeway held their friendship, a regard she had not hoped to attain.

“I understand the import of your offer, Kathryn,” she said, pausing only slightly on the name. “I am also very honored by it. However, it may take me some time to become accustomed to using your first name.”

“It’s weird at first, but you’ll be surprised at how quickly it feels natur-
al,” said Lynne, speaking for the first time since their toast.

Seven turned to her. “You are responsible for this.” It was a statement.

Lynne shifted in her chair, though Seven couldn’t see any reason for her discomfort. “No, I think you and Kathryn are. I just got you in the same room together.”

“That is incorrect,” said Seven, observing Janeway’s smile in her peripheral vision. “Kathryn stated that you ‘gave her quite a lecture.’ This implies a greater involvement than you are admitting to. Why would you not wish to acknowledge it?”

“Damn. Your style is going to take some getting used to.” Lynne gave her a wry grin and took a sip of her drink. “I guess I want the focus of this evening to be on you and Kathryn, so I’m trying to figuratively remove myself.”

“Then why be here at all?” asked Seven, genuinely curious.

This time Janeway laughed out loud. “Yes, Lynne, why are you here?” she asked in a teasing voice, reaching toward the salad bowl once more and serving herself.

Lynne gave her a mock glare. “Very funny.” She gestured toward Seven, who took the salad tongs and placed a much smaller portion of
food on her own plate. “I’m here because an unwritten rule dictates that I
meet anyone of importance to Kathryn, and hopefully win their approval.
It’s part of the dating process. I’ve met everyone else; you were the last
one. So now I’m done and you two can just go off and do your own thing
together.”

Seven processed this as Lynne served herself and glanced at Janeway.
Both women began eating simultaneously, prompting Seven to pick up her
fork. She tasted her salad, found it pleasing, and took a larger bite. When
she’d swallowed, she asked the next question on her mind.

“Ms. Hamilton…”

Lynne, still chewing, waved her hand in interruption. Seven waited
politely. “Please,” said Lynne when she could speak. “Call me Lynne.”

Seven raised an eyebrow. “I am already being asked to alter the
captain’s name. Changing two names in one evening may overtax my
cortical implant.”

Janeway snorted and immediately covered her mouth with her napkin.
“Sorry,” she said. “Lynne, did I mention that Seven is developing a rather
dry sense of humor?”

“Dry isn’t even the word for it,” said Lynne. “Desiccated is more
like it.”

The warm feeling in Seven’s stomach had by now expanded into a
feeling of comfort that she could not remember ever experiencing before.
She felt…relaxed. She knew that both Janeway and Lynne were teasing
her, and she also knew that for Humans, gentle teasing was a sign of affection.
Janeway had made it clear that she considered her a friend, but why
Lynne would feel affectionate toward her, she could not fathom. Neverthe-
less, it was a pleasing sensation to know she was liked by everyone in the
room, not to mention a complete novelty.

“Lynne,” she said, returning to her unspoken question. “Are you saying
that my purpose for being here is to meet and approve of you relative to
your relationship with Kathryn?”

“Well, yes, that’s one of your purposes,” said Lynne, looking a little
wary.

“Then I can inform you that I did not approve of you earlier, but I have
altered my opinion. In your presence the captain seems relaxed and happy,
and as her friend I am pleased to see it. I also appreciate your direct
method of communication. It is efficient.”
Janeway waved a fork at Lynne. “That, coming from Seven, is a compliment.”

“I see,” said Lynne doubtfully. “Efficiency is good?”

“Efficiency is a means to perfection,” said Seven firmly. “Adjusting to the general inefficiency of Humans has been one of the most difficult challenges I’ve encountered since my separation from the Collective.”

“I don’t blame you on that one,” said Lynne. “The general inefficiency of Humans is one of the reasons I’ve spent most of my life outdoors. Living outside tends to foster efficiency.”

“How does living outdoors accomplish that?” asked Seven.

“No cars, no cell phones, no computers, nothing that you can’t carry on your back or operate without an electrical outlet. In my experience, people tend to surround themselves with noise and distraction. I like being able to hear myself think.”

“Ah,” said Seven. “In the Collective, I could hear the thoughts of billions.”

There was a short silence as this statement sank in.

“Seven,” said Lynne, “if I may ask—what was it like living with the Borg? You don’t have to answer that if it makes you uncomfortable,” she hastened to add, “but I only know what I’ve read, and that doesn’t tell the real story.”

Seven did not understand why people thought talking about the Borg could possibly make her uncomfortable. It was, after all, a lifestyle with which she was far more familiar than her current situation.

“It does not trouble me to speak of the Borg,” she said. “My initial assimilation was difficult and painful, and my most recent experience with the Queen was frightening, but in general my life with the Borg was extremely rewarding.”

“How so?” asked Lynne. “I mean, from what I’ve read you had no individual will. How could that be rewarding?”

Seven detected none of the usual prejudice that she was accustomed to hearing when asked that question. It seemed that Lynne was simply seeking information, a goal she approved.

“Because I was raised by the Borg, I value goal achievement, progress toward perfection, and unity of intent and action more than anything else. The Borg excelled at all those things. In addition, the lack of individual will was irrelevant—when all are working toward the same
goal, there is no need for individual will. I was in continual contact with billions of minds, all striving for the same things, and all understanding with complete confidence that we held worthwhile places within the system. The Borg are a community of the highest order, and to be a part of that community is to know exactly what you are, what your goals are, and what you should do. Being Human has none of that certainty, none of that mental connection, and only the barest whisper of that community. It has taken me a long time to become accustomed to the silence in my mind, and I am still not accustomed to the lack of certainty, common goals, or community. On Voyager I am disliked by most and feared by many. Here I have experienced emotions for the first time, and while some are positive, many others are not. There are times when my thoughts turn toward my time with the Collective with such intensity that I feel a strong desire to return to it. In many ways, I...miss it.”

Seven was unaware that her voice had grown softer as she spoke, and that her normally impassive face wore an expression of yearning. She was therefore surprised to feel a warm hand cover her own, and turned to see Janeway looking at her with an expression of sorrow and great affection.

“Oh, Seven,” she said, “I knew it was hard for you in the beginning, but I had no idea that you still felt that way.”

“You did not ask,” said Seven.

Janeway looked taken aback, then nodded slowly. “All right. I suppose I deserved that. I admit that my focus has been largely on what I wanted for you, and I’ve overlooked—or maybe didn’t want to acknowledge—the possibility that your adjustment was still difficult. But you must also take responsibility for your side of this relationship. I can’t read your mind. If you don’t tell me what you’re feeling, I can’t help you—and I truly do want to help you.”

“It is difficult for me to speak of my feelings,” said Seven. “Particularly when I know they will disappoint you.”

“Seven.” Janeway’s voice was soft. “You have rarely disappointed me, and your feelings can never do that. Only actions can, and your actions have been above reproach for some time now.” As she spoke she squeezed Seven’s hand, surprising the Borg. She was accustomed to the captain touching her shoulder or elbow, but not this, and wondered if the captain’s new relationship had affected her physical mannerisms. She did
not know what to say, besides a simple “Thank you,” and instead focused on her salad. A moment of quiet descended on the threesome.

Lynne finally broke the silence, speaking in a thoughtful tone of voice.

“Seven, is it possible that one reason it’s hard for you to speak of your feelings is because you’ve never had to before? I mean, if you’ve spent your whole life connected mentally to others, it must be difficult to remember that you must now speak your thoughts aloud in order for them to be understood.”

Seven considered this. “Your question is relevant,” she concluded. “It is true that I am still not accustomed to having to verbalize my thoughts. However, I do not believe that I must speak all of my thoughts aloud in order to be understood. On three occasions this evening I have noted nonverbal communication between the two of you. Obviously you understand one another without having to speak.”

Both Lynne and Janeway looked surprised, then thoughtful as they attempted to recall their communications. Seven saved them the effort.

“When I requested a glass of water, Kathryn asked you to retrieve one from the replicator simply by making visual contact with you. Then, when Kathryn referred to the lecture you gave her after speaking with me in the mess hall, she looked at you again, communicating something that I could not discern. And just now you signaled to Kathryn to proceed with her consumption of food with another visual contact. It is obvious that words are not necessary in some situations or some types of relationships. You have more of a mental connection than you apparently realize.”

Lynne leaned back in her chair, eyeing Seven with respect. “You’re extremely observant,” she said. “I wasn’t even aware of those three instances, but now that you mention them I know exactly what you’re talking about. You’re right, verbal communication is not always necessary. But deep-seated feelings are difficult to communicate non-verbally. I doubt you could have communicated your feelings about missing the Borg without speaking.”

“I have difficulty communicating any feelings at all without speaking,” said Seven. “As yet I do not comprehend how it is done, though I recognize it when I observe it.”

“In many cases, it requires great familiarity,” said Janeway. “The person receiving the communication needs to know the person making it very well. Lynne and I have spent a great deal of time together, and we’ve
learned enough about each other to be able to communicate silently in many instances. Had we spent the same amount of time simply working together, without the personal relationship we’ve developed, we would still have learned enough for some non-verbal communication, but not nearly as much.”

“You are saying that should I engage in the type of relationship you have with Lynne, I too would learn this type of communication?” asked Seven.

“Yes, I believe you would in time.”

“Is that the attraction of copulation for Humans? That it leads to nonverbal communication techniques?”

Lynne, who had been taking a drink from her glass, was suddenly overcome by a fit of coughing. She set the glass down and turned away, covering her mouth with her napkin. When she turned back her face was flushed. “Pardon me,” she said, her voice raspy. “That went down the wrong tube.” She coughed again, but this time Seven thought she could hear a hint of laughter in the sound. “You want to take that one?” she asked, looking at Janeway.

Janeway lowered her eyebrows and glared at Lynne briefly, but when she turned to Seven her expression was neutral. “That isn’t the attraction of copulation, but it is one of the attractions of an intimate relationship. There can be a great deal of comfort in having someone know you well enough to understand you without words.”

“On the other hand, Kathryn,” Lynne said, apparently having recovered from her fit, “you are quite capable of inspiring nonverbal understanding in people you barely know. For instance, I have it on good authority that you can drop an ensign at twenty meters with your Glare O’ Death. You don’t even have to know the poor sap’s name.”

Seven looked from one woman to the other, fully expecting the captain to singe Lynne with some form of that well-known glare. In her experience, Janeway was comfortable teasing others, but was not the type to take teasing well herself. But to her surprise, Janeway just grinned.

“Ahn, now that’s different,” she said. “They teach us that look in command school. It’s more a matter of efficiency than intimacy.”

Seven was finding this conversation to be fascinating in the extreme. Her concerns about Lynne’s presence hampering the quality of conversation with the captain had been entirely unfounded—this evening was
proving to be most enjoyable. If anything, it was even more interesting to have two people explaining Human behavior, particularly when both individuals were equally intelligent, broad-minded and ready to share. In addition, she had rarely seen the captain this relaxed and open. If this was a consequence of her relationship with Lynne, then Seven was entirely in favor of it.

Their evening progressed through a discussion of intimacy versus efficiency in Human relationships, the role of body language in overcoming verbal and social barriers, and the purpose of copulation when not being used for procreation. This last topic was one that Seven had never had answered to her satisfaction, and she was eager to bring it up now, when she had access to two individuals who were motivated to help her understand. Janeway seemed somewhat uncomfortable with the ensuing conversation, but Lynne appeared to have no such issues, answering Seven’s rapidfire questions openly and with careful consideration.

At last their evening drew to an end, and Seven was escorted to the door by her two hosts. She stopped and looked back at the women, observing their ease and comfort with each other, and suddenly understood what she had been trying to define all evening. “I have come to the conclusion that Harry Kim was wrong,” she said.


“He informed me that the two of you were lovers,” said Seven, noting Janeway’s immediate blush and Lynne’s faint smile. “But that is an insufficient designation for you. Tom Paris and B’Elanna Torres are also lovers, but I have not observed them engaging in the same level of mental and emotional intimacy that you have. I do not know of a term that describes your interaction.”

Janeway slipped her hand into Lynne’s and spoke. “You’re right, Seven. The word ‘lovers’ can mean a one-time physical encounter, or a relationship involving a deep level of emotional intimacy, and everything in between. It is rather lacking, but I’m not sure a term exists that exactly describes our relationship.”

“It does,” said Lynne emphatically. “We are more than lovers. We’re partners.”

“Partners,” repeated Seven. “A term denoting a relationship between two equals. Yes, I believe that fits.” She bade her hosts goodnight, grateful
that her social lessons made this part, at least, very simple. She was ten
meters down the hallway when she heard her name being called. Turning,
she saw Janeway standing in the corridor.

“Yes, Kathryn?” she inquired.

The captain smiled. “Velocity tomorrow? Fourteen hundred?”

Seven felt a rare smile break across her own face. “I will be there.”

Janeway nodded and stepped back into her quarters, leaving Seven to
stare at the empty corridor for a moment before turning and making her
way to Cargo Bay Two. As she walked she noted with some surprise—and
no little satisfaction—that her earlier feelings of separation from Janeway
had vanished. The evening had reconnected them, and on a deeper level
than ever before. Their philosophical discussion had been different than
what she was accustomed to—quieter, more relaxed, with none of the
confrontations that had often occurred in the past. Though she had no
objections to their conflicts and sometimes even appreciated them, they
did not leave her with the feeling of warmth that she was currently experi-
cencing. It was a most enjoyable sensation, and one she hoped would be
repeated in the near future.

She had also been left with a great deal to consider regarding dating.
The many ideas, theories and truths that had been discussed this evening,
as well as the example that Janeway and Lynne set by their own behaviors,
made her realize just how far her own “date” had been from realizing the
potential she sought. Perhaps in the future she would reopen her investi-
gations into this concept. And this time, she would have far better refer-
ence sources than the Doctor.
Although the captain’s relationship had been the gossip of the century at first, it soon lost its fascination when nothing exciting happened. Janeway and Lynne did not try to hide their relationship, instead displaying their affection for each other in such a quiet manner that nobody could find anything to point at and talk about. Eventually the captain’s new love became old hat, and was accepted as the norm by nearly all the crew. There were still a few holdouts who thought the whole thing just wasn’t right, that a captain should be above this sort of thing, but they were in the minority. In general, the atmosphere on Voyager grew more mellow as her captain’s happiness became apparent.

And Janeway was outrageously happy. Sometimes she worried about how happy she was, and thought that it was tempting the gods for anyone to feel this good. She was in love, her love was returned, and best of all, her lover was a civilian and not under her direct command. There were no ethics to be compromised, and for the first time in five years she didn’t have to worry about separating the captain from the woman. With Lynne she was just Kathryn, who happened to command the ship they traveled in. She reveled in her newfound freedom to be herself, to let down her guard, and to know she was loved even if she wasn’t perfect. The sense of quiet contentment she felt while in Lynne’s presence was something she had never experienced in her adult life, and she grew accustomed to it so
quickly that soon she could no longer understand how she’d survived so long without it. And on top of everything else, she didn’t have to worry about Lynne’s safety. Her partner’s job held no danger, and since she was not a member of the crew, she did not take part in away missions and so was never in harm’s way—unless harm came directly to the ship. It seemed that their relationship was perfect in every way as far as Janeway’s command was concerned, and she basked in the glow of their joy and increasing intimacy.

Lynne had even turned out to be a worthy Velocity opponent. Janeway had initially taught her the game as a way of channeling her anger and giving her an outlet that didn’t involve breaking furniture. Lynne had launched herself into the game with a physical abandon that made her formidable, regardless of whether she actually scored any points. Her body checks were something to contend with. As the weeks passed, however, her physical power began to give way to a cagey finesse, and as her marksmanship improved she developed into a player nearly as adept as Seven of Nine, and far less predictable.

The only flaw in Janeway’s life, so far as she could see, was the work that seemed to pile up on her desk. Because of it, she wasn’t able to spend nearly as much time with Lynne as she wanted. Two or three nights a week was all she could manage, but those nights were worth the wait. And Lynne never seemed to mind, apparently understanding that Janeway’s duties sometimes had to take priority.

This happy situation continued for a glorious six weeks before it all came crashing down around Janeway’s ears. That was the day Lynne walked into the ready room and sat down for an interview with the captain.

“Lynne! What can I do for you?” asked Janeway in surprise as Lynne entered. Except for that day shortly after her arrival when she’d asked for a job, Lynne had never set foot in the ready room until now. By unspoken agreement, she left Janeway to her work during their duty shift and never contacted her except during the lunch hour. For her to walk in now meant that something big was going on.

“Hello, Kathryn,” said Lynne, taking the chair across the desk. “I have a request to make of you as the captain, so I thought I’d better do it formally, in your office.”

This sounded like trouble. “What is it?”
Lynne did not prevaricate. “I want to be put on away mission duty.”

“What!” Of all the things Lynne could have said, this was the most unexpected. Stunned, Janeway instinctively stalled for time. “Why?”

“Because I need to be under a sky again. I’ve spent my whole life either working outdoors or fidgeting indoors and scheming various ways to get back outside again. I’ve always been most comfortable with dirt under my feet and sky over my head, and on Voyager I have neither. It’s been over four months since I got here, and that’s just too long for me to go without fresh air. I need to get onto a planet. I need to do something besides discuss social politics and historical events that really don’t matter anymore.”

By now Janeway was regaining some of her composure. “Lynne, that’s exactly what the holodecks are for. Starfleet engineers knew that crews would go space happy if they never had a diversion from a ship’s controlled environment, so they enabled us to go anywhere we want to. If you need to get out, we could go to the farm after the shift. Or I could help you write your own program. You can go to the mountains, the beach, put yourself on a rock wall, go skiing—whatever you want.”

Shortly after they had become intimate, Janeway had taken Lynne to the holodeck for a program that she had never shown anyone before. It was a faithful representation of her mother’s house on the farm in Indiana; a place she went to for comfort when her loneliness and homesickness threatened to overwhelm her. This visit, however, was filled with laughter and joy. Lynne had marveled at the technology, and they’d spent a great deal of time exploring the various places on the farm that were conducive to new lovers expressing their desires for each other. She felt a little warm just thinking about it.

But Lynne was unimpressed with this offer. “Thank you, but that’s not good enough. I understand the purpose of holodecks, and god knows the technology is just amazing, but it’s not real. Maybe you can fool yourself, having been brought up with the concept, but I can’t. The smells aren’t right. The air doesn’t feel right. It’s a wonderful getaway, and I can’t tell you how much I enjoyed your farm program, but I can never forget that it’s really just a masterful imitation. I need the real thing.” She took a deep breath. “From what I understand, the only way to get planetside is to go on away missions, so I’m asking you for help. How can I get on that duty?”
“You can’t,” said Janeway flatly. “I don’t mean this unkindly, but your position on this ship doesn’t warrant placement on away missions. You’re a historian, and I can’t see that you could do your job any better on a planet than you could here on the ship. I simply cannot justify putting you on a team unless you could be an active asset. Otherwise, you’re putting yourself and others at unnecessary risk.”

Lynne’s eyes flashed. “I am not a historian.” She waved her hand. “Okay, it’s true that I’m working as a historian, but that’s not my vocation and you know it. I’m trained in outdoor pursuits. Mountaineering, rock climbing, glissading, skiing, spelunking, navigation, wilderness first aid, survival skills—I could contribute a lot to any team that needed to move around on rough terrain. And as for risk, I put myself at risk on a continual basis in my old life. You know as well as I do that danger is an unavoidable part of certain lifestyles, and that there are many ways to minimize it.”

“Yes, there are, such as sending the right person for the job. You certainly have useful skills, but you’d need more than that for away missions. Depending on the mission, we may send engineers, security, botanists, diplomats—knowing how to get through terrain is usually the least of a team’s concerns.” This was not entirely true, and Janeway could think of many occasions when Lynne’s skills would have come in handy. But they all involved more than a little risk, and the idea of sending her lover into known danger made her throat catch. She had to talk Lynne out of this.

“Fine! I have a degree in biology—let me help the xenobiologists collect specimens. Send me with the botanists to help collect plants. Let me take security training—I’ve certainly been getting a lot of practice with a phaser. I could be an asset if you’d just give me a little training.”

“It’s not that easy. Nearly everyone who goes on away missions has received four years of Starfleet training in addition to their particular area of expertise. We can’t just give you a few lessons in one area and expect you to perform to the same standards as everyone else. You’re not a member of the crew.”

“Then make me one! Put me through whatever training you have to; I certainly have the time. Let me learn whatever I need to catch up. I didn’t expect that it would be easy, but I know I can do it. Just give me a chance.”
Now Janeway was really alarmed. Her efforts to deflect Lynne had simply diverted her into an even more problematic desire. If Lynne were to become a member of her crew, everything between them would change, and she had no idea how she could handle it. Desperate to head this off, she went on the offensive, pushing her chair back and standing up with her hands on her desk. Leaning forward, she said, “Lynne, Voyager is not a training ship. We’re all alone out here, much of the time in unfriendly territory. I’m sorry, but I can’t spare the people or the time to spend months training one person to do what others are already trained to do!”

Unintimidated by Janeway’s deliberate physical stance, Lynne immediately stood up as well, put her hands on the desk and met her stare. “I know for a fact that Commander Tuvok has already spent considerable time doing just that, training some of your Maquis crewmembers.”

“That was different. They were already members of a ship’s crew.”

Anger suddenly flashed across Lynne’s face. “Dammit, Kathryn, I know this is not an unreasonable request! I did my research before walking in here, and I wouldn’t have come if anything had indicated that I was out of line. I came in here expecting your support, but instead you’re throwing up every block you can think of! Why are you fighting me so hard on this?”

Janeway held out for a few seconds longer, then slumped into her chair with a sigh. It was a posture of defeat and something she would never have done in front of anyone else on this ship. But Lynne wasn’t anyone else on this ship, and besides, she was defeated. She had run out of excuses and would have to tell the truth. Part of it, anyway.

“Because I can’t date a member of my crew,” she said quietly.

Lynne stared at her in astonishment, all signs of anger gone from her face. With none of her usual grace, she fell back into her chair, and the two women regarded each other over the desk.

“So that’s what this is all about? Why didn’t you just say so in the first place?”

Janeway pinched the bridge of her nose, feeling the unmistakable signs of an incipient headache. “Because I didn’t want you to think that I was trying to influence your decision based on my own personal needs in this relationship.”

“When, in fact, that’s exactly what you were doing.”

“Well, in a word—yes.” Janeway looked down, suddenly ashamed.
Lynne got up from her chair, came around the desk and knelt in front of Janeway, resting her hands on her partner’s thighs.

“Kathryn, it’s okay to have personal needs in a relationship. That’s what makes it a relationship. All I ask is that you be honest with me about those needs.”

Janeway held her hands. “All right. I need for you to not be part of my crew.”

“Would you really just let go of everything we have if I did become a member of the crew?”

“I don’t know. It would kill me to do it. But Starfleet protocols are very clear on the issue of captains dating subordinates. Besides that, how would I handle having to command my lover? How would you handle it? Our lives would become divided into on duty and off, and you know as well as I do that my time isn’t always that easy to separate. And then there’s the issue of what it would do to crew morale to have the captain in a relationship with a crewmember. They’d be watching to see if I showed any favoritism, or if you took advantage of your position. It’s a Pandora’s box, and I honestly don’t know if I could deal with it properly, even assuming that I could conveniently drop my ethical beliefs and break a Starfleet protocol because it inconvenienced me. It would be rather difficult for me to enforce regulations among my crew after that. The captain of a ship has to set the standards.”

They looked at each other for several moments, until Lynne stood up without a word and returned to her chair. Janeway felt chilled as she watched her partner deliberately put distance between them.

But Lynne just pulled her chair closer and leaned her forearms on the desk. “Okay. I’ll stay a civilian. What we have means too much to me to put it at risk. But Kathryn, please help me with this. I really do need to get out and do something.”

Janeway breathed a sigh of relief. Even the issue of her partner going on away missions seemed far less frightening now that she’d eliminated the much greater danger to their relationship. “Thank you,” she said. “And I’ll do what I can.” A thought occurred to her, and she tilted her head curiously. “Tell me, why is it so important to you to go planetside? I understand what you’re saying about holodeck programs being imitations, but I don’t think that’s the whole story. There’s something else, isn’t there?”
Lynne leaned back in her chair and gazed at Janeway with an odd expression, and then, surprisingly, she looked away.

“Lynne?” Janeway had never seen her react this way. Lynne could normally bore holes through solid duranium with the force of her stare, and she never broke eye contact until she’d made her point.

After several more seconds of silence, Lynne finally met her eyes. “I’m worried, Kathryn. You say you love me, but despite all of our time together, you don’t know who I really am. To you I’m a historian with an interesting point of view.”

“That’s not—” Janeway began, but Lynne held up her hand.

“Please, let me finish. I know you see more in me than that. But my life right now is nothing like what it should be, and—with the exception of my relationship with you—nothing like what I want it to be.” She closed her eyes briefly and rubbed the bridge of her nose in an unconscious imitation of her partner. “I’ve always lived my life by the philosophy that I can accomplish anything if I set my mind to it, and that’s seen me into and out of some amazing experiences and some breathtaking places. But here, it feels like I’ve lost my way. Every day I go to the lab and talk about what to you is distant history, and then I go home and read Voyager’s mission logs and think, wow, what astonishing things they’ve done. People used to say that about me. Now it feels like I have nothing to offer you, and...” She paused, then finished in a quieter voice. “I’m afraid you’re going to get bored with me.”

“Oh, Lynne.” Janeway’s heart went out to her lover. “You’re so much more to me than you seem to realize. I’m in love with you, not with what you do. You’re a unique and very special person, and I can’t imagine ever getting bored with you.”

“But that’s just it! You’re in love with someone you don’t really know. I want to show you who I truly am—I want to earn that love.”

“You’ve already earned it!”

Lynne shook her head. “I’m not doing a good job of explaining this. I guess what I’m really saying is that I want more. I want your respect and admiration, too. Do you know how proud I am of you? You’re the captain of a starship, for god’s sake. You’ve had a profound impact on a lot of lives—hell, on entire cultures. You make a mark wherever you go. I can hardly believe that you’ve chosen me to be with, but you have and frankly, I’m starting to feel unworthy. And it’s all tied in to the fact that I’m not doing
what I want to be doing, and you’ve never seen me in my own element.” She looked at Janeway with a pleading expression. “I don’t need to influence whole cultures. I just need to be myself again, to have some pride in what I do, and show you who I really am. And from what I can see, the only way to do that is to go on missions.”

Janeway let her breath out slowly. This was much bigger than she’d realized. Her initial thought when she’d agreed to help Lynne get planetside was that scheduling a little shore leave might do the trick, but it was obvious now that such a temporary fix would accomplish nothing. There was no easy way out of this one—or at least, no easy way that would keep Lynne safe. But she was beginning to realize that protecting Lynne from danger was something like keeping a bird in a cage: it might satisfy her own needs, but it would kill Lynne by centimeters.

“All right. I think I understand what you’re saying, and I’ll try to figure out some way to get you on an away team without compromising your civilian status.” As Lynne’s face lit up, she warned, “But it won’t be easy, and I can’t make any guarantees. It’s not just my decision.”

“But you’ll back me up.”

“Yes, I will.”

“Then that’s all I can hope for. Besides, I find it hard to believe that you don’t get what you want around here.”

Janeway had to smile. “Well, I did get you.” She enjoyed the look on Lynne’s face, then sobered as reality laid a heavy hand on her shoulder. “How ironic. If I keep you on board, you’re going to be miserable, and if I let you go, I’m going to be miserable.”

“Why would my going on away missions make you miserable?”

“You’ve looked at the logs. Surely you must realize that away mission duty is the single most dangerous duty on a starship. You’re asking me to make it possible for you to be put in situations where you might get hurt or even killed. How could I not be unhappy about that?”

There was a moment’s silence. Finally Lynne put her hand over Janeway’s and said softly, “I don’t have a good answer for you. Everyone who has ever loved me has had to live with the knowledge that to be happy, I had to be doing things that weren’t always safe. But Kathryn, you’re the same way. You don’t exactly lead a quiet life. I have to accept the same thing about you, and believe me, it’s not easy. You’re literally all I have, and the idea of losing you is something that I can’t even think.
about without getting panicky. But it’s who you are, and part of why I love
you. What I need for you to realize is that it’s who I am, too.”

Janeway was rocked by this statement. She hadn’t considered it from
her partner’s side of the equation, but it was true that Lynne had to accept
a certain amount of uncertainty about Janeway’s own safety. Lynne was
right—it was unfair of her to expect her lover to accept that risk of loss,
but not be willing to accept it herself. She sighed, knowing that she could
not address this issue without forever altering the perfect happiness she’d
felt over the last month and a half. Then Lynne’s words triggered another
thought, and she smiled at her lover in spite of herself. “So, you came in
here telling me you just wanted to feel the dirt under your feet, and now it
turns out that this is about what makes you who you are. Sounds like you
weren’t being entirely honest with me about your needs.”

Lynne opened her mouth to retort, then snapped it shut again as she
realized that her own words were being used against her. Her lips quirked
in her trademark half-smile. “You know, I hate it when I’m hypocritical.
And I hate it even worse when someone catches me at it.”

Janeway laughed as she got up from her chair and came around the
desk. Lynne rose, and Janeway pulled her into an embrace that was
intended to be a quick hug—she was still on duty after all—but somehow
melted into something else entirely. She suddenly felt as if she could
never let this woman go; that this moment was all there was and when
she allowed it to pass, nothing would ever be the same. When they finally
pulled apart, she tried to hide the tears that were welling up in her eyes,
but Lynne noticed immediately. Reaching up to cup her partner’s cheek,
she said softly, “What’s wrong?”

Janeway wasn’t sure she could explain it. “I must really love you. I’m
about to let you go out and possibly hurt yourself, and me in the process,
all because you asked me to.”

Lynne squeezed her hand. “Did the proverb about loving something
and setting it free make it to the twenty-fourth century?”

“It doesn’t sound familiar. What was it?”

“Supposedly it came from the ancient Chinese. I never did find the
original source. For a while it hit mainstream American consciousness,
and the first part of it got so overused that it became a joke. But the full
proverb is timeless and very true. It said, ‘If you love something, set it
free. If it comes back to you, it’s yours. If it doesn’t, it never was. We do
not possess anything in this world, least of all other people. We only imagine that we do.” She reached for Janeway’s other wrist and held their clasped hands between their bodies. “I will always come back to you if there’s any chance in the world. And I am so grateful to you for loving me enough to let me go.” She leaned in for a kiss, then straightened up again, remembering where she was. But Janeway needed that physical affirmation. She pulled her close, meeting her lips in a kiss that began as a gentle, tender contact and quickly spiraled up to something that threatened to get out of control. It was Lynne who finally broke it off. Leaning her forehead against Janeway’s and breathing hard, she said, “Come to my quarters tonight? We can finish this conversation, and I promise to never let you go—at least, not ‘til morning.”

Janeway swallowed hard and nodded. “I’ll be there.”

Lynne squeezed her hands, dropped them and walked out, leaving Janeway to stare at the closed door, her body tingling with a desire that had no outlet. She made her way to the upper deck and got a cup of coffee from the replicator, wishing that she could get something a whole lot stronger. Dropping onto her couch and sipping the hot brew, she grimaced as she thought about her promise to Lynne. How on earth would she convince Chakotay to put her lover on away team rotation when she was neither trained nor a member of the crew? Her physical response to Lynne quickly ebbed as she turned her mind to strategic considerations. Her arguments would have to be more successful with Chakotay than they had been with Lynne.

Three hours later, she logged off her terminal and left the ready room. She had scheduled a meeting with both Chakotay and Tuvok for 0800 the next day, but any concern she had about that was already forgotten as she said goodnight to the beta shift bridge crew and stepped into the turbolift. Her mind was so full of what waited for her in Lynne’s quarters that she had no time to worry about tomorrow. And that, for a starship captain, was a rare and wonderful thing.
Commanders Tuvok and Chakotay sat in the conference room, waiting for the captain to arrive and start the meeting. She was already five minutes late, which was unusual in the extreme. Chakotay was just wondering how much longer he should wait before asking the computer for the captain’s location—after all, the only reason he could think of for the captain to be late and not notify him was if she were somehow in trouble—when the doors swished open and Captain Janeway strode in. One look at her flushed face and Chakotay realized that there was at least one other potential cause for her tardiness, and it was probably not worth the risk to his life to mention it.

“Captain,” he said, acknowledging her arrival in a carefully neutral tone. Tuvok spoke his greeting at the same time.

“Commanders.” Janeway took her seat and placed three PADDs on the table in front of her. “I’ve received an unusual request, and would like your input before proceeding with it.”

“What was the request?” asked Chakotay, when she did not immediately explain.

Janeway pushed one PADD to each man, then said, “Ms. Hamilton has asked me to put her on away team duty.”

Chakotay was completely surprised by this one, but Tuvok seemed
almost to expect it. “Does she wish to join the crew?” the security chief asked.

“No, she does not. Therefore I would like to examine the option of assigning her to away team duty on a contractor basis.”

Chakotay knew the captain had a personal agenda here, and he wasn’t going to make himself popular by pointing out the problems. But it had to be done. “Captain, this is highly irregular.”

“It may be unusual, but it is not irregular,” said Tuvok, surprising him. “Starfleet will contract certain jobs out to individuals who are especially qualified for the specific task. In order for a contract to be approved, the individual being contracted must be proven to be better suited to the task than any available Starfleet member.”

“Yes, I’ve read the regulations,” said the captain. “I believe that for away missions involving movement through difficult terrain, Ms. Hamilton can indeed be proven extremely well suited to the task. She does not need to be better than any available Starfleet member, because we do not make a habit of sending out away teams of one. She needs only to be as good as the best here.” She indicated the PADDs. “You will find Ms. Hamilton’s resume on your PADDs. I believe that you will find her experience quite relevant to our needs.”

The room was quiet as each man perused his PADD. Tuvok looked up first. “This is an impressive range of skills.”

“Yes, but many of them are outdated,” said Chakotay. “Wilderness first aid from four hundred years ago? How relevant is that?”

Janeway’s eyes flashed, but she gave no other indication that Chakotay was treading on thin ice. “In situations where our medkits are unavailable or inoperative, I believe that such knowledge would be extremely useful, Commander. First aid without benefit of powered healing devices hasn’t changed much. Or have you not been through Starfleet’s survival training?”

She knew damn good and well that he had, Chakotay thought. He might as well hit this head on. “I’m sorry, Captain, but I have to ask this question. Is it possible that you are bending regulations in order to satisfy the request of someone with whom you have a personal relationship?”

Janeway didn’t move an eyelash. “I expected your question, Commander. And I expect every other crewmember aboard Voyager to ask the same one. The answer is no. I have always done my utmost to satisfy the needs
of everyone on this ship, whenever it was possible to do so. This is no different. We have a passenger on board this ship who feels that her skills are not being used to their fullest, and she has offered us her services. Given that we have a use for those services, I fail to see why taking advantage of her offer would be considered bending regulations for personal reasons.”

Chakotay had nothing to say to that. Fortunately, Tuvok spoke up, saving him the trouble. But he surprised Chakotay a second time.

“I submit,” said the Vulcan, “that we should invest more time in determining how best to utilize Ms. Hamilton’s obvious intelligence and skills, and less time concerning ourselves with whether the crew will think the captain is showing favoritism. It is not to the benefit of the crew or the ship to refuse the services of a skilled individual out of a misplaced concern for what others may think.”

“I agree,” said Janeway. “Chakotay?”

Chakotay knew when he was outmaneuvered. And truthfully, Janeway had made a good case. If Tuvok in all his logic supported it, who was he to risk the captain’s ire by speaking out against it?

“All right,” he said. “So we have the legal precedent to contract with Ms. Hamilton. The next question is, what exactly will she be contracted to do? And who will supervise her?”

“In a contract situation, the contractor reports directly to the head of the department doing the hiring,” said Tuvok. “Although Ms. Hamilton’s resume includes a knowledge of biology, that seems to me the least valuable of her skills. Her extensive experience with wilderness travel would make her a valuable member of any away team moving through uninhabited terrain. It would seem logical that security would be the department to contract with her, and therefore I would be her supervisor.”

“That is exactly what I had in mind,” said Janeway.

“But Tuvok, you have no evidence of Ms. Hamilton’s skills other than this resume,” said Chakotay. Even without looking he could feel Janeway leveling a lethal glare at him. Hurriedly, he continued, “I’m not saying she would misrepresent herself, but are we prepared to justify this contract based solely on her claimed skill level? It seems to me that we require more positive justification than that.”

“Of course,” said Tuvok calmly. “That is why I will be testing her.”

“Excellent,” said Janeway. “When will you begin?”
“I am running a security training in Holodeck One until 1200, and will need to reprogram the deck afterward for the necessary tests. I believe that I can be ready to test Ms. Hamilton by 1330 hours.”

“I’ll inform her. Chakotay, if Tuvok feels after testing Ms. Hamilton that her skills are indeed relevant to our needs, will you have any further objections?”

“No, Captain.”

“Then we are agreed. Tuvok, I look forward to your report as soon as you finish it. Gentlemen, you are dismissed.”


Tuvok stood in the holodeck, surveying the results of his programming. A smooth, sheer rock face stretched for what seemed like several thousand feet into the air, and he had set the temperature for thirty-five degrees Celsius, an agreeable temperature for him but one that he knew would be draining to a Human. He did not waste his time with easy tests; it was far more logical to test to failure. Then one knew exactly what an individual’s limits were.

The holodeck doors swished open at exactly 1330 hours, and Lynne Hamilton entered. Tuvok was pleased with her promptness.

“Hello, Commander Tuvok,” she said, coming to a stop in front of him. She was wearing stretch pants, a long-sleeved jacket and a pair of low-cut climbing shoes. “Wow,” she breathed, craning her neck to gaze up at the rock face. “Maybe I’ve been underestimating the possibilities of the holodeck. That’s a fabulous climb.”

Tuvok raised one eyebrow. “Fabulous” was not the description he would have expected. “Good afternoon, Ms. Hamilton. I presume that Captain Janeway has explained what is expected of you?”

She was removing her jacket as he spoke. The tank top she wore underneath displayed a well-toned upper body, and he made a mental note of her obvious physical strength. “Yes, she said that you were going to test me in all of my claimed skills, using the holodeck to provide a realistic setting. I didn’t realize you could program in something like this, though. I take it you want me to climb this.” She indicated the rock face with a wave of her hand.

“That is correct.”

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“With gear or free climbing?” she asked, looking at the bag of climbing gear at his feet.

“I am not familiar with the term ‘free climbing,’” said Tuvok.

“Sorry; guess that one’s gone out of style. It means climbing with just your hands and feet, using chalk to keep your hands dry. For most climbers, free climbing still allows a safety line, but sometimes I go without.”

Tuvok gazed at the rock face, reassessing his parameters. It had not occurred to him that she would even consider climbing such a sheer wall without gear. But if she were capable of such a thing, then he wished to see it.

“You will ‘free climb.’ You may replicate the chalk you spoke of.” He was puzzled by her expression, which looked as if she’d just received a gift. Most trainees did not welcome tests that increased in difficulty before they even began.

“Computer, one full chalk bag on a thirty-two-inch waist belt,” she said. “No, wait, ah...an eighty-five-centimeter waist belt. The metrics are still getting me,” she added in an undertone.

“Please describe the item ‘chalk bag.’”

“No climbers on Voyager, eh?” She thought for a moment. “A tubular canvas bag thirteen centimeters in diameter and twenty centimeters deep, with an open, rigid top. Fill to within eight centimeters of the top with chalk in the form of fine powder.”

With a hum, the holodeck deposited the requested item at her feet. She picked up the bag, fastened the belt around her waist and turned to Tuvok with a grin. “I’ve already warmed up,” she said. “How do you want to do this?”

Tuvok approved her preparedness. “You have one hour to climb as high as you can go,” he said. “I will then time your descent. You will lose points for slipping, and if you fall the test will be over.”

“If I fall, it won’t just be the test that will be over,” she said.

Tuvok did not see the relevance of this comment, but declined to pursue it. “Your hour begins now,” he said.

Hamilton immediately began pacing back and forth at the base of the rock face, looking intently upward. She spent nearly ten minutes of her allotted hour examining possible routes. Then, choosing her starting point, she dipped one hand in the bag at her back, dusted chalk on her
hands, and began climbing. Her rate of ascension was beyond anything Tuvok had expected, and he was actually impressed by some of her feats of strength and balance as she made her way upward. For the purposes of his test, she had already passed at the forty minute mark, and still she climbed. When Tuvok called time, he had to crane his neck to see her. She acknowledged his call with a wave, and immediately began descending by the same route she’d gone up. In less time than Tuvok would have thought possible, she was once again standing before him, her shirt stained with sweat and a large grin on her face.

“God, that felt good!” she said happily, wiping sweat off her forehead and adding more chalk dust to the already considerable amount there. “There were a couple of tricky sections up there that were a bit nerve-racking, but what a great climb!”

“Why were you nervous?” asked Tuvok.

She looked at him incredulously. “Because I have no desire to take a fall and kill myself, that’s why.”

“But that would be impossible.”

“Commander Tuvok, I’m flattered by your estimate of my skills, but even the best climbers can fall. If they ever forget that, they’re as good as dead.”

“I believe you misunderstand me, Ms. Hamilton. I did not mean that it would be impossible for you to fall. I meant that it would be impossible for you to be killed.”

Her brows contracted. “I don’t understand.”

“Has Captain Janeway not explained the safety features of the holodeck?”

“I didn’t know there were safety features. We’ve only been here to play Velocity and use one other program, and…well, the program we used didn’t have any dangerous elements in it.”

“I see,” he said, drawing his own conclusions as to the nature of that particular program. “The holodeck has safety protocols built into it that prevent serious harm from coming to any individual using the system. For instance, if you were to fall, the holodeck would adjust for you and prevent you from impacting the ground at the normal rate of acceleration. You might sustain contusions, but you would not be seriously injured.”

“You’re kidding.”

He raised an eyebrow.
“I’m sorry,” she added, “I didn’t mean to imply that you were not speaking truthfully. It’s just that I never conceived of such a thing.” She turned around to look at the rock face, now marked with tiny blazes of white where she’d made her way up. “Kind of takes the fun out of it, doesn’t it?”

Tuvok would never understand this aspect of humanity. “I fail to see how it could be ‘fun’ to risk serious injury or death.”

“Maybe that was a poor choice of words. I meant that part of the challenge of rock climbing, the thrill that makes it so rewarding to me, is the knowledge that any mistake could result in a fall and injury. That knowledge makes me very careful, and every time I climb without incident I feel a great sense of accomplishment. Without the risk, the rewards are greatly diminished.” She paused. “Commander Tuvok, do you often use the holodeck to test or train your security forces?”

“Yes. It is an invaluable aid to training.”

“Then how do you know that your people are being as careful as they should be when they know that a mistake won’t cost them anything?”

Tuvok saw the logic in this, and appreciated her line of thinking even though it was incorrect. “You knew that a fall would cause you to fail the test. If you had also known that a fall would not result in injury, would you have been any less careful?”

Her response was immediate. “Ah. I see what you’re saying. No, I would have been just as careful, because to fail would have been almost as fatal to my purpose as falling.”

He nodded in satisfaction. “Then you understand why holodecks are useful for training even with the safeties on. No one wishes to risk failure. Ms. Hamilton, your performance on this test was exemplary. We will now proceed to the next. Computer, end program and run Tuvok gamma-seven-one.”

The rock face vanished, to be replaced with the foliage of an impenetrable jungle. Tuvok pulled a tricorder out of his belt. “Are you familiar with a tricorder?” he asked.

“I’ve seen them around, but never used one.”

“Your resume lists wilderness navigation as one of your skills. What type of tool did you use for that?”

“I always carried a map and compass, though of course a compass is a bit useless here. I also used a GPS, which was a handheld computer that..."
linked up with orbiting satellites to establish my position. GPS pretty much rendered map and compass skills obsolete, but I always liked to have a backup in case anything went wrong. Maps never run out of battery power."

"Your GPS unit sounds somewhat similar to a tricorder. I will demonstrate the use of this unit to you, and then you will make your way to a series of preprogrammed target destinations. You will have no other tool besides this, and I will time your efforts. Do you understand the test?"

"Yes."

It only took her a few minutes to grasp the principles of a tricorder’s navigation function. She commented that it was just like GPS only better, and seemed to look forward to her test. Tuvok had never tested such an enthusiastic individual, and found the experience to be...interesting. He sent Hamilton on her way and then watched her progress on a second tricorder tuned to her comm badge frequency. He was most curious to see how she would handle the deep swamp that he had purposely failed to mention, and which was located squarely between two of the destination points. To his surprise, the dot representing Lynne traveled straight across the swamp, losing only a little speed. Twenty minutes later, it arrived at the final destination without ever having moved off the most efficient path by more than a few meters.

"Computer, end program," called Tuvok. The jungle faded away to reveal the grid pattern of the bare holodeck. Hamilton stood at the other end. Quickly she jogged back to Tuvok and handed him the tricorder.

"That is one nice little tool," she said. "And this holodeck is amazing. I would have sworn I walked two kilometers."

"You did," said Tuvok. "The holodeck adjusts the visual matrix for your position, and I tied the tricorder into the program. The readings it gave you matched what you saw, but not your actual path of travel. You thought you were traveling in a series of straight lines, but in reality you were walking in circles." He raised one eyebrow. "Your performance was again exemplary, but I must ask you—how did you get through the swamp? I see no evidence of water immersion in your appearance."

"I didn’t go through it, I went over it. As soon as I realized how big it was, I knew I’d lose too much time going around, and going through wasn’t an option when I didn’t know what might be lurking in the water. Then I noticed that there were some fairly large trees growing out of the
water with good sturdy branches, so I just got up in the branches and used them as a bridge. It saved a lot of time.”

“Did it occur to you that there might be something ‘lurking’ in the trees?”

“Actually, yes, but I figured that at least there I had a chance to see a problem before it was too late. For that matter, there could have been all kinds of things hiding on the ground, too. The tree branches were more open than the undergrowth.”

Tuvok nodded in satisfaction. “Very good. We have four more tests, after which we will move on to sickbay, where the Doctor will review your knowledge of wilderness first aid. Do you require a rest period?” She didn’t know it, but this innocuous question was one of the tests.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t mind sitting down for a few minutes. I could use some water.”

“Very well,” said Tuvok, pleased with her answer. A good security person needed to know her limits. Any individual who pushed herself physically without taking sufficient time to recharge would soon end up injured or worse. Ms. Hamilton obviously knew the value of resting and hydration. Tuvok was more and more satisfied that they would be able to fully justify the contract that the captain had asked for, and looked forward to observing more of her skills. If her abilities in the next tests were as impressive as what he’d seen so far, then he would be completely confident in assigning her to an away team. She would just require a short training in Starfleet away mission protocols.

“Okay, I’m ready,” said Hamilton a few minutes later.

Tuvok nodded. “Computer, begin Tuvok gamma-seven-two.”

Janeway was waiting in her quarters and not doing a very good job at it. During the rest of her duty shift she’d managed to keep busy enough to not think about how Lynne was doing, but as soon as she’d returned to her quarters she could think of nothing else. She had forced herself to sit down upon realizing that she’d been pacing back and forth for several minutes, but within moments had bounced up again. It was impossible to sit still. She felt as if she were the one being tested rather than Lynne, and
was not dealing at all well with the suspense of not knowing the results. Finally she gave up and went to the replicator.

“Computer, whiskey and soda.”

As soon as the drink appeared, she picked it up and took a large swallow. The alcohol seared a path down her throat all the way into her stomach, and she welcomed the heat. Soon she resumed pacing, but her nervousness had calmed considerably.

She had actually managed to sit in a chair and read three whole paragraphs of her book when her door chime sounded. “Come,” she said, launching herself out of the chair as she spoke. The door swished open, admitting Lynne. Her face and clothes were stained and some hair had escaped from her normally neat braid, but that wasn’t what stopped Janeway in her tracks. It was the breathtaking smile on her partner’s face, and the spring in her step that she had never seen before. Lynne practically glowed with happiness.

“Kathryn!” Lynne closed the distance between them in a heartbeat and nearly lifted Janeway off her feet in an enthusiastic embrace. “God, that was fun! I haven’t felt this good since I got here, and Tuvok said that my performance was impressive. I passed, Kathryn! He’s going to take me on as a consulting member of security, effective immediately. I start training in Starfleet away mission protocols tomorrow, and I can’t wait. Thank you so much for doing this!” She hugged Janeway again.

“I didn’t do this,” said Janeway somewhat breathlessly, as Lynne’s hug threatened to squeeze the air out of her lungs. “You did.”

“Well, thank you for giving me the chance,” said Lynne, releasing her partner and kissing her happily.

As soon as she could disentangle herself, Janeway held Lynne at arm’s length and looked her up and down. “You look like you’ve been through a battle,” she said, amused. “You must tell me all about it. But first, did you say that Tuvok called your performance ‘impressive’?”

Lynne nodded. “Those were his exact words.”

Janeway felt a surge of pride. “Do you know what that means?”

“Yes, it means I did well.”

“No, it doesn’t. Tuvok is a Vulcan; he doesn’t use descriptive terms lightly. If he said your performance was satisfactory, that would mean you did well. When he says you were impressive, he means that you were one
of the best he’s ever seen. And Tuvok has seen a lot. Lynne, I’m so proud of you!”

She hadn’t thought it possible, but Lynne’s smile grew even wider, and her eyes fairly danced with delight. Taking Janeway’s hands in her own, she said, “You have no idea what it means to me to hear you say that.”

Guilt stabbed through her. Had she never said it before? Squeezing Lynne’s hands, she said, “I’ve been proud of you since almost the moment you stepped out of that tube. Didn’t you know that?”

“Well, sometimes I picked up on that, and I really appreciated it. It helped me to feel like I wasn’t just dead weight on board. But Kathryn, you have to understand that it’s a completely different feeling for me when you’re proud of what I’m proud of. For the first time you have some idea of what I’ve trained for, what I love—what makes me who I am. And for you to be proud of that means everything to me.”

Gazing into the animated features of her partner, Janeway suddenly realized the truth of what Lynne had been trying to tell her since yesterday afternoon. The person who stood before her seemed fundamentally different from the woman she’d known for the last four months. There had often been a touch of sadness in her smile, but now she saw nothing but joy and excitement. There was an energy about her that hadn’t been there before—it fairly crackled off her skin. Janeway felt her own mood lifting in the presence of the happiness that radiated off Lynne.

“I think I understand,” she said. “And I certainly see a difference in you. It may take me a while to get to know the new Lynne. But in the meantime—” she tugged her lover toward the table—“I made the old Lynne some of her favorite dessert. I hope the new one still likes tiramisu.”

“Oh, believe me,” said Lynne as she sat down, “no matter where, who, or what I am, I’ll still love tiramisu. And anyone who feeds it to me, as well.” She flashed a brilliant grin at Janeway, who was still a bit startled by this smile she’d never seen before tonight. But she thought she’d walk a long way to see another one.

“Well, in that case,” she said as she brought over the dessert plates, “I’d better make damned sure that this program is blocked on every replicator on Voyager except yours and mine.”

After dessert, Lynne asked to use the hydroshower. Permission was granted on the condition that Janeway could join her, and the two women
indulged themselves in the sensual feel of their soapy bodies sliding together. By the time the shower ended, they had succeeded in arousing each other to the point that the bedroom was simply too far away. They toweled each other off and resumed their caresses, each taking joy in the clean, smooth skin of the other. When their tongues met in a kiss more passionate than those they’d shared in the shower, Janeway couldn’t wait any longer. Without breaking the kiss, she backed Lynne up against the bathroom counter. Lynne winced, and Janeway pulled back in concern.

“Did I hurt you?”

“No, I’m just a little sore from today.” Lynne turned her leg out, and Janeway was shocked to see a large contusion on the back of her thigh.

“Why didn’t you have the Doctor take care of that while you were in sickbay?” she asked.

“Life is pain and so is love,” said Lynne enigmatically. When Janeway gave her a quizzical look, she added, “It’s a quote from a philosopher of my time. Pain is one way to know we’re alive. Except for the Sumak’s little gift, I haven’t been hurt since I got here because I haven’t had the opportunity. I know I can get this fixed, but I don’t want to yet. This probably sounds strange to you, but at the moment, it’s a kind of trophy. It doesn’t hurt except when I bump it, and then it’s just a reminder that I’ve done something I really enjoyed.” She ran her hands through Janeway’s damp hair. “I guess you’ll just have to treat me gently.”

And for a good portion of the night, Janeway did just that.
For the next several days, Lynne divided her time between the archeology lab, sickbay and the holodeck. Stating that her wilderness first aid experience made her a good candidate for medic training, Tuvok had assigned her to the Doctor’s tutelage to upgrade her skills. Each day, after several hours of medical training, she reported to the holodeck to train in mission protocols under Tuvok’s watchful eye.

Janeway didn’t see much of her lover during this time, as Lynne pleaded exhaustion and went to bed in her own quarters early each night. Even when the official training was over, Lynne continued to work with Tuvok after her shift several nights a week, telling Janeway that Tuvok had agreed to teach her Vulcan physical conditioning techniques, meditation, and martial arts on his off hours. She was thrilled at the opportunity and seemed to have no difficulty seeing Janeway only two or three nights a week. Janeway, who had finally caught up on her work and was ready to spend more time with her lover, thought this was an entirely unsatisfactory side effect of the training. Since she tended to spend her off hours feeling lonely and wishing Lynne could be there with her, she soon threw herself into work and fell back into her old habit of working late almost every night that Lynne wasn’t available. After a few weeks, she was surprised to find herself daydreaming about Lynne sharing her quarters.
She'd never wanted to share living space with a partner before—even when she'd been engaged she’d still maintained her own apartment. But the more she thought about the pleasure of coming home to a space with Lynne in it, the more appealing it seemed. Then she imagined herself asking Lynne to live with her, and realized that she couldn’t do it. Lynne seemed so content in her own quarters, and she had never given any indication that she wished for more time with Janeway. In fact, thought Janeway with an unpleasant shock, Lynne had never said “I need you” after their first night together. Was it possible that their relationship had been based more on Lynne’s emotional needs of the moment than on a real, long-term commitment?

Such thoughts temporarily robbed her of the self-confidence she’d been feeling in the relationship. But the next evening, Lynne came over to stay the night. Their time together was filled with such comfortable companionship and such physical joy that Janeway didn’t know how she could ever have doubted the strength of their love. Her renewed confidence quickly ebbed, however, when Lynne made no further effort to see her for another three days—when once again they spent a wonderful night together.

She knew that Lynne had begun to socialize more with other crewmembers, particularly B’Elanna, Seven, Harry and Tom, and the realization struck her that what she was seeing now was probably more the true Lynne than what she’d seen during her first four months on board. When they were together, Lynne was every bit as loving and focused on Janeway as she had ever been. She was also more animated, talking with enthusiasm about what she was learning from Tuvok, her friends, and her continued studies of Voyager’s database. But she did not seem to require nearly the same amount of togetherness that Janeway found herself wanting.

One evening, while giving the situation some thought over a soothing but lonely glass of whiskey and soda, Janeway realized that she had always been accustomed to her lovers wanting more from her than she wanted from them. This was the first time she’d ever been on the other side of the equation, and she didn’t find it at all pleasant. But, she thought wryly as she sipped her drink, there was little she could do. She loved Lynne more than she had ever loved anyone, and she would simply have to be
happy with whatever her partner could give her. She would not risk what she already had by asking for more.

So she didn’t ask, and Lynne didn’t offer.
Less than four weeks after her training began, Lynne had her first opportunity to take part in an away mission. *Voyager*’s sensors had located dilithium deposits on an uninhabited planet, the first they’d found since replacing the cracked crystals shortly after Lynne’s arrival. Unfortunately, the surrounding rock contained elements that prevented the ship from transporting the ore or mining it by phaser. They would have to do it the hard way, beaming down and mining by hand. Since the mining operation was going to involve traveling down a deep, vertical rock fissure, Tuvok recommended Lynne as a member of the team he was leading. His report to Janeway after Lynne’s initial test had indicated that he found her rock climbing and spelunking skills second to none, therefore she was a natural choice for the mission. Janeway trusted Tuvok’s assessment, but she still worried after the away team beamed down. Mining was a dangerous activity; anything could happen. She spent the next several hours making the lives of everyone on the bridge miserable: snapping at Tom for calling her “ma’am,” peering over the shoulders of several crewmembers to check up on their work, and asking questions in a clipped voice that demanded immediate answers. Normally, the bridge crew enjoyed a fairly informal atmosphere, but on this day they all sat ramrod straight in their chairs and kept their eyes fixed in front of them. When the shift came to an end, the crew vanished
into the turbolift so quickly that Janeway could almost see dust clouds in their wake.

She knew she’d been difficult, but couldn’t help it. The reports from the away team had indicated that Tuvok and Lynne had successfully descended the fissure, but the deposits in the rock prevented their communicators from reaching back to the surface. They’d agreed to signal the rest of the away team by tugging on the rope should anything go wrong, and so far the rope had not been tugged. Based on this paucity of assurance, Janeway felt she had every right to be tense. She wouldn’t be able to relax until Lynne was back aboard Voyager.

Retiring to the ready room in order to spare the beta shift bridge crew, she attempted to go through the departmental reports with limited success. At one point she actually considered contacting the transporter room and requesting immediate notification upon the team’s return, but that thought didn’t go far. She’d never done such a thing before, unless the team were in obvious danger or the ship needed to depart as soon as everyone was on board, and that certainly wasn’t the case now. Tuvok would notify her as soon as he returned with the team. She would just have to wait.

At last, midway into the beta shift, the call came.

“Tuvok to Captain Janeway.”

She felt a tingle go down her spine. “Janeway here.”

“Captain, our mission has been successful. All members of the team are on board, and we are delivering the ore to Engineering immediately.”

“That’s good to hear, Tuvok. B’Elanna will be happy to see it. I’ll look forward to your report tomorrow. Janeway out.”

Just to prove that she still had a little discipline left, she forced herself to finish the report in her hand before closing down her workstation. It seemed to take forever, but at last she signed off on the report and tossed it onto her desk with perhaps a little more force than necessary. As she rose to leave, a voice interrupted.

“Torres to Janeway.”

She suppressed a sigh. “Go ahead, B’Elanna.”

“Captain, I’ve just finished testing the dilithium. It’s a much higher grade than we currently have in the engines. I’d like to install it immediately, but that will require taking the warp engines off line for at least two hours.”

“I’ll get back to you in a moment, B’Elanna. Janeway out.” As soon as
the channel closed, she reopened it. “Janeway to bridge. Engineering wants to take the warp engines off line for two hours. Is there any reason why we shouldn’t do so?”

A pause. “No, Captain. Sensors aren’t picking up any shipping activity, or any phenomena that could affect us.”

“Then they’re going off line immediately. Janeway out.” She contacted B’Elanna again. “B’Elanna, go ahead with the replacement. Let me know as soon as the engines are back on line.”

“Will do, Captain. Engineering out.”

As soon as she closed the channel, Janeway was out of the ready room and striding across the bridge to the turbolift. She wanted to see Lynne. Now.

Activating the door chime a few minutes later, she was unreasonably relieved to hear Lynne’s voice telling her to enter. Inside, she was met with the sight of her lover so covered in dirt and dust that the whites of her eyes stood out by contrast. Then Lynne flashed an equally startling white smile. “Hello, Kathryn! I’d give you a hug, but…” and she indicated her filthy clothing. Janeway didn’t care, immediately enfolding her partner in a strong embrace. When they parted, the grin on Lynne’s face was even wider. “You must love me to hug me in this condition.”

“I couldn’t care less what condition you’re in, and yes, I do love you. How did it go?”

“Fabulous. Oh, Kathryn, I have so much to tell you and I was going to call you as soon as I got out of the shower. The computer said you were in your ready room but I was hoping I’d be able to see you anyway. I’m so glad you’re here!” Lynne was talking rapidly in her excitement. “Let me just get cleaned up…can you stay tonight?” she asked, looking doubtful for just a moment.

Janeway smiled broadly. “I’d love to.”

The answering smile she received was brilliant enough to fuel her for a year, she thought. These days she didn’t often see those half-smiles she’d thought were so characteristic of Lynne in her first few months; since the day she’d tested with Tuvok, Lynne’s expressions were far more overt. Now she tended to reserve her half-smiles for moments when she was teasing Janeway.

Lynne vanished into the ensuite, and Janeway winced at the whine of the sonic shower. She decided to replicate a light meal, partially because
she was sure Lynne could use it, and partially to distract herself from the annoying sound. After setting the table and bringing over the salad and sandwiches, she returned to the replicator for what Lynne called the “liquid appetizers.” When Lynne stepped out into the living area a few minutes later, clean and in fresh clothing, she found Janeway standing by the table with drinks in her hands. Lynne laughed and took the proffered drink. Janeway raised her own. “To successful missions,” she said.

“Hear, hear,” said Lynne as they clinked their glasses. She sipped her drink and sighed happily. “These are so much better since Tom helped me with the programming.”

“When did he do that?” asked Janeway in surprise, taking her seat.

Lynne sat as well, surveying the table with appreciation. “Thanks for making dinner; I’m starved.” Taking a hefty bite out of her sandwich, she chewed and swallowed before answering. “I was talking to B’Elanna and Tom in the mess hall last week, and somehow the subject of replicators came up. I mentioned that I’d customized mine for several different programs, but could never get the drinks to come out quite the way I wanted. Tom said that the programs for alcoholic drinks were very tricky, due to the chemical interactions, but he had a knack for it and offered to help. So I bartered my cheeseburger program for his services, and so far my drinks have been just right.” She indicated Janeway’s glass. “Doesn’t yours taste a little different?”

Janeway thought about it. “Well, now that you mention it, it did taste smoother.” She took another sample. “Yes, definitely smoother.” Then she frowned. “Do you mean to say that I’ve been drinking substandard whiskey and sodas for over five years when it wasn’t necessary?”

Lynne shrugged, her eyes sparkling. “I guess you just need to know the right people. And how to bribe them properly.” She laughed at Janeway’s snort, then put her sandwich down and grew more serious. “Kathryn, I had the most amazing experience today. It was like nothing I’ve ever done before.”

“Tell me.”

“Well, first of all, there was the experience of beaming down. I know you had me transported to sickbay when the Sumak microbot went off, but I don’t remember a thing about it. This time I got to really pay attention, and wow, what a sensation. I can’t quite wrap my mind around the
concept that you can actually take things apart at the atomic level and put them back together again.”

“You see it every day with the replicators,” Janeway pointed out.

“I know. But that’s different.”

“How so?”

“Because it’s not me. If something goes wrong with a replicator, I just get a bad sandwich. If something happened during my transport, the consequences would be a bit more dire as far as I’m concerned.”

“And those consequences happened in the early days of transporter technology,” said Janeway. “There were some pretty horrific accidents. But that was a long time ago. Now the technology has so many failsafes built in that the ship would have to be falling apart around us before anything would go wrong with a transport.”

“I know, I’ve read about it. But knowing something intellectually and knowing it emotionally are two different things. I’m sure I’ll get used to it at some point.” She took another bite out of her sandwich and continued her story. “So anyway, we beamed down right by the fissure. I had a few moments to look around while Tuvok verified the dilithium deposit and I was getting in harness. It was gorgeous. Huge mountain ranges all around; I wanted to climb them all. And not a single sign of habitation. On Earth, you have to go a long way to find a place where your field of view doesn’t include some sign of civilization. It was an awesome feeling to know that not only were there no signs of civilization in my immediate view—there weren’t any on the whole planet.” Her expression was one of sheer delight. Janeway, who remembered all too well being marooned on an uninhabited planet, couldn’t share Lynne’s enthusiasm, but she was happy to see it nonetheless.

“When Tuvok finished his scan, he gave me the tricorder and asked me to go first. He said my superior spelunking skills made me the logical choice.” Lynne looked as if she still couldn’t quite believe it. “So I got to be the first one down. We’d already determined that a comm signal wouldn’t make it to the surface, so we agreed that one rope tug would signal Tuvok to come down, and two would signal trouble. I roped up and started my descent. It was a little tricky due to a few bends in the fissure and a lot of rock spurs, and there was one section that I really had to wiggle through. I knew Tuvok would never make it through that part, so I wiggled back up through it again and used my phaser to widen the open-
ing. Let me tell you, phasers are a great tool. Worked like a charm, but what a cloud of dust! For a few seconds I could barely breathe.” Judging by her expression, Janeway suspected that getting dirty was something Lynne greatly enjoyed. As a connoisseur of engine grime herself, she understood.

“After the dust died down I finished the descent,” continued Lynne, “and found myself in a huge open space. But it was so bright that I had to just hang on the rope until my eyes adjusted. Kathryn—it was a giant cavern with walls of solid crystal. Everywhere I looked the walls were reflecting my light, and when I pointed my light at certain areas, the crystals refracted it and there were rainbows all over. It was fantastic.” She stopped for another bite of her sandwich, barely chewing it before swallowing and going on with her story. “It took me a minute or two to get over just staring at the cavern. Finally I dropped the rest of the way to the floor and tugged the rope. While Tuvok came down I scanned for the dilithium, and by the time he got there I knew right where it was. We set up and started drilling, so I had time to look around while the drill was going. And that was when it hit me: I was the first human being to ever set foot in this cavern.” Lynne’s face was lit up and she seemed to glow from within. “Think of it! Well, you probably don’t have to, you must have been the first person in a lot of places by now. But for me it was a hell of a realization. I don’t think there’s anyplace natural left on Earth for any Human to be first—on land, anyway—and I’ve sure tramped through a lot of wild places. That search for something different, something outside the experience of the average person—that has driven me all my life. And here I was, spelunking into a cavern that had never before been seen by Human eyes, on a planet that no Human has ever set foot on until now. It was magical, Kathryn. I wished you were there to share it with me.”

This last statement made Janeway warm all over. Happily, she settled into the atmosphere of acceptance, inclusion and love that she associated with her partner, and let the earlier stress of her day melt away. Any concerns that she had about their relationship vanished when they were together, and she had come to look forward to their times together not just for the sake of seeing Lynne, but also for the relief it gave her from self-doubt.

Taking a sip of her drink, she said, “It sounds incredible. And I know the feeling you’re talking about. That sense of magic, of finding something
new, is what keeps us going in the less magical times. I wish I’d been there too, if only to see you enjoy yourself so much.” Frowning a little, she added, “I also wish I’d been there just to know you were okay. Not having communication with you and Tuvok made me a bit tense. I’m afraid I practically drove the crew off the bridge today; you’ll probably hear about it from Tom later.”

“If he mentions it, I’ll tell him that he should be so lucky as to have someone like you to worry about him,” said Lynne. She sobered. “But I don’t want you to be concerned. Should I call you as soon as I get back from any future missions?”

Janeway gave that a moment’s thought. “Not when I’m on duty. Call me when I’m in my quarters, but if I’m on duty, send a message to my ready room terminal. That way I can take it in private.” She gave her partner an amused smile. “So, did you share your enthusiasm with Tuvok?”

Lynne laughed. “I must admit I tried. I just couldn’t believe that anyone could be in such a beautiful place and not be mesmerized by it. But Tuvok just got right to work and didn’t look around, even when he had time while the drill was running. So I asked him if he didn’t find the cavern the least bit attractive. He said—” and here Lynne deepened her voice in imitation of Tuvok—“‘I appreciate the aesthetics of our surroundings, but Vulcans do not have the need for overt displays of their appreciation.’ I said, ‘But Tuvok, if you don’t display it in some way, how will anyone else know that you’ve seen something beautiful? How many lovely places are there on Vulcan that only a few have seen, because those that do see it don’t share their appreciation?’ He said, ‘We share our appreciation, we simply don’t do it emotionally.’ So then I wanted to know how, without any adjectives that are inherently subjective or emotional, a Vulcan could describe something in a way that would enable a listener to distinguish between a place that was merely interesting and a place that was both interesting and beautiful. And if he couldn’t do so, then wouldn’t that limit his people’s ability to learn and experience different things?”

Janeway wished she could have been there. “What did he say to that?”

“Nothing at first. Then he said my question was interesting, and that he’d meditate on it tonight.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No, why?”
“Because that means you stumped him. I’ve been able to stump Tuvok like that maybe five times in all the years I’ve known him, and you just accomplished it in a few months. Congratulations are definitely in order.”

“It sounds like I’d better be prepared for a long wait before I pull it off again.”

“No, I wouldn’t be surprised if you beat my record. You have a way of thinking and phrasing things that often startles me, so I can certainly see how your approach might give Tuvok something to think about more often than not.”

“He certainly gives me things to think about,” said Lynne. “I really admire him, and I’m grateful for the time he’s spent with me. I’ve learned so much from him. But sometimes it makes me sad to think of what he’s missing because of that famous Vulcan discipline.” She cast a sidelong glance at Janeway. “For instance, the sheer hysteria that comes from listening to Ferengi torch songs.”

Janeway laughed at the memory. “It’s true that Tuvok misses out on some of what we would consider the great joys of life. But there’s another side to that: he also avoids some of the great pain and sorrow, as well.”

“Do you think he comes out ahead on the deal?” asked Lynne seriously.

Janeway had often thought about that herself. “I must admit that on some days I truly believe he does. But those aren’t my good days. Most of the time I’d rather take the bad with the good, because the good can be so very rewarding that it’s worth the bad. Then I’m glad that Humans feel as much as we do.”

“Me too,” said Lynne. “Though I will say that when I first came on board, I’d have been happy to give up my Human emotions for a little Vulcan detachment. In fact, I did a pretty fair imitation of a Vulcan sometimes, locking things up so deep that I couldn’t feel them at all. But when you knocked me out of that, you also changed my way of thinking about my situation.”

“How did I do that?” asked Janeway. This was new to her.

Lynne’s eyes seemed greener than usual as she looked at her partner. “By making me realize that I could no longer see my life only in terms of what I’d lost. From that point on, I began to see it in terms of what I’d gained. And I’ve been gaining ever since. For me, you’ve made the difference between living and merely existing. I owe you a debt of gratitude.”
Janeway’s throat closed on the words she wanted to say. *Is that why you’re with me? Because you feel you owe me a debt?* But she couldn’t bring herself to voice her thoughts. She swallowed hard and was surprised to hear how rusty her voice sounded. “It’s wonderful to hear you say that. And it’s done my heart good to see your happiness growing.” *Even if it means you don’t need me anymore.*

Lynne reached across the table to clasp her hand. For several seconds they simply stared at each other while Janeway fought an internal battle. She was desperate for a confirmation of what she felt when they were together, and just as terrified to have her worst suspicions proven true. She felt paralyzed by indecision, a new and extremely unwelcome state of mind for her. And then she was temporarily saved when the call came.

“*Bridge to Captain Janeway.*”

She hit her comm badge, her eyes still locked with Lynne’s. “*Janeway here.*”

“*Captain, we’ve just detected a ship orbiting the planet. It doesn’t match anything in our database.*”

Lynne pulled her hand away and leaned back in her chair.

“I’m on my way. Contact the senior staff,” said Janeway, and closed the channel. She gave Lynne an apologetic look. “I have to go. I’m sorry.”

“No, I understand. Thanks for coming by.” Lynne stood up and walked her to the door. “Come back if you can,” she said, leaning in for a kiss.

“I will.” Janeway allowed herself to melt into the kiss for just a few moments, then pulled away and walked out.
Chakotay, Tuvok and Kim were already on the bridge when Janeway arrived. “Report,” she said, walking down the ramp and sliding into the comfortable contours of her chair.

“The ship was powered down and hiding in the polar electromagnetic field, Captain,” said Kim. “That’s why our sensors didn’t detect it at first. It’s small; I’m reading thirty-one life signs on board. Sensors don’t detect a warp signature, so I’m guessing it’s from the system Seven mentioned.” Seven’s weekly astrometrics report had included the presence of a populated binary system two light years out of their path. She had not detected any signs of a warp-capable society, so Janeway had opted to bypass the system once they left the planet they were now orbiting.

“If it is, they’re a long way from home,” commented Chakotay. Janeway nodded, looking up as the turbolift doors opened and Tom Paris stepped out.

“Ensign Paris, good of you to join us,” said Janeway. Tom flinched and hurried to the helm, taking his seat as the beta shift helmsman relinquished it. Chakotay looked down to hide his smile, but Janeway caught it and gave him a look of shared amusement. Sometimes Tom needed to be put in his place, and it was one of the privileges of the captain to do so.

“If it’s from the binary system, we should keep a low profile,” said
Chakotay. The Prime Directive was very clear on the issue of contact with a pre-warp culture: there shouldn’t be any. Starfleet ships were always careful to avoid detection when traveling near such systems.

“Agreed,” said Janeway. “But I’m not prepared to leave before making sure the ship doesn’t need assistance. There are certain things that we can do within the boundaries of the Prime Directive.”

“Captain, I don’t think we have to worry about the Prime Directive,” said Kim. “I’ve just run another scan, and that ship is warp-capable. However, their warp engines are dead and there’s no warp signature anywhere within sensor range. I think they’re broken down, running on impulse only.”

“Open a channel,” said Janeway. When Kim nodded, she faced the viewscreen. “This is Captain Kathryn Janeway of the Federation starship Voyager to unknown vessel. Do you need assistance?”

Seconds ticked by with no response. “I’ve sent it on all frequencies,” said Kim.

“Perhaps their communications equipment is also nonfunctional,” observed Tuvok.

“Perhaps,” said Janeway. “Tom, bring us about and approach the vessel. Let’s take a closer look.”

Voyager gracefully wheeled about and began moving toward the alien vessel—which suddenly was no longer there. A second later Voyager rocked under their feet.

“Captain, the ship has left orbit and is now firing on us,” said Tuvok in a calm voice. “Shields are at ninety-eight percent. The ship’s weapons pose little threat, but their effect will build over time.”

Janeway punched the communications panel on her armrest and spoke again. “This is Captain Kathryn Janeway of the Federation starship Voyager to unknown vessel. We are peaceful explorers who mean you no harm. Cease firing on our ship immediately.”

Moments later Kim shrugged apologetically. “I’ve sent both messages on repeating cycles on all frequencies, Captain. They’re just not responding.”

The ship rocked again as the alien vessel continued to fire. Janeway sighed. “Wonderful. Our warp engines are off line, and we can’t just sit here and absorb their fire.” She watched the viewscreen, which showed
the little ship dancing away before coming around for another run. “Per-
haps we can communicate another way. Tuvok, take out their weapons,
minimal power.”

Tuvok nodded, and a second later the red beam of Voyager’s phasers
sliced efficiently into the alien ship. If it had any shields at all, they did
nothing to stop the phaser beam, and a small explosion indicated an

“Captain, the ship is sending out a message,” said Kim. “On an ultra-
high frequency channel.” He sounded stricken. “I’m sorry, I didn’t think
to send the messages on UHF. It never occurred to me that a warp-capable
ship would use it. They may never have received our hails.”

Janeway spoke without turning. “Put it on screen.”

The viewscreen revealed a reptilian creature sitting in a chair. Its eyes
were large and brown, with vertical pupils, and its scaly skin had a bright
green tinge to it. Behind it, others could be seen standing at various
consoles. Some had the same green skin, others were more of a blue.
Sexual dimorphism, Janeway guessed. The creature spoke in a gravelly
voice.

“This is T’zak Vestin of the Imperial Fleet ship Sovereign to unknown
vessel. Why have you attacked us?”

Janeway was momentarily speechless with surprise. Taking a relaxed
pose in her chair, she said, “This is Captain Kathryn Janeway of the Feder-
ation starship Voyager. I was about to ask you the same question. Why
have you fired on my ship without provocation?”

The alien sputtered for a moment. “Without provocation? You
attacked us!”

“T’zak Vestin, your ship fired first. We only fired on you to defend
ourselves.”

“Your ship approached ours in a clear attack vector with no prior
communication. By all rules of Imperial law that is a direct attack, and
honor requires us to respond.”

Great, thought Janeway, another honor-bound culture. “Then we appear to
have had a misunderstanding. We did communicate with you, twice. But
our communications were unfortunately not sent on the frequency that
you use, so you did not receive them.”

The alien’s green skin brightened in tone. “A remarkably convenient
story, Captain Kathryn Janeway. This conversation is over. You are in Imperial space without authorization. You will depart this space immediately."

Janeway had no objection to leaving, but with warp engines offline that wasn’t an option. And she wasn’t about to reveal her engine status to this militaristic alien. Raising her eyebrows and deliberately crossing her legs, she sank even further into her chair. “I do not appreciate being called a liar, T’zak Vestin. Nor do I take orders from one who commands a ship without weapons. I suggest that you rethink your situation.”

T’zak Vestin’s color faded momentarily, then flared up again. “Our ship is not without weapons. We have merely ceased firing in order to give you the opportunity to leave. Your presence in our space is unwelcome. Depart now or be destroyed.”

Janeway glanced at Tuvok, who shook his head slightly. She suspected that the aliens had no idea of Voyager’s scanning ability, and so did not know that she could see right through their bluff. It was time to call it. “All right,” she said. “Then you’ll just have to destroy us.” She waited. All movement on the other ship’s bridge ceased as the aliens looked at their leader, whose green skin had dimmed again. After a moment it spoke.

“We do not wish to destroy you, we only wish for you to depart our space. If you leave now, we will consider this matter concluded.”

Janeway said nothing, letting the alien captain grow increasingly uncomfortable. Finally, when she judged that the tension had risen high enough, she said, “I believe it is time to conclude this matter. T’zak Vestin, you have now made two grave errors. The first was insulting me. The second was threatening my ship. We have scanned your ship and we are aware that not only do you have no weapons, but you also have no warp drive. You are limited to sublight speed.” She was amused to note that nearly all of the aliens on the other ship’s bridge suddenly faded in color. “By the laws of my government, a ship with no warp engines and no defense capability is legal salvage. The question is not whether we will leave. It is whether we will board your ship and salvage it for useful parts.”

She suppressed a wicked grin at the startled looks her bridge crew turned toward her. They all knew quite well that Federation law did not permit salvage of a vessel as long as a single crewmember remained
aboard. But the aliens had no idea that she, in turn, was bluffing. Several
of them burst into brilliant color, but the leader was still pale. Before it
could respond, Janeway played her next card.

“However, our government does not allow salvage of any ship allied to
us. And since I would rather make friends than enemies, I propose an
alliance. We are on a long journey, and would welcome the chance to
replenish our food and supplies. Perhaps you would be willing to trade...
in exchange for our help in repairing your engines.” One alien near the
rear of the Sovereign’s bridge suddenly flamed into a nearly blinding blue.
That would be the engineer. “While you think about that, we’ll resend our
original greetings on this frequency and you can reconsider whether you
wish to call me a liar. Mr. Kim?” Janeway thought briefly that, in fact, she
had lied, at least about the salvage. But then again, she decided, that
wasn’t a lie. It was a tactical ruse.

Harry nodded and entered a quick command on his board. “Messages
sent.”

All of the aliens on the other ship turned to watch a screen that was
out of view. Moments later T’zak Vestin went nearly white. It faced
forward again and spoke in a markedly altered tone of voice. “Captain
Kathryn Janeway, your messages prove the truth of what you have said. I
have greatly dishonored you. Your offer of an alliance in the face of such
dishonor is generous indeed. We would gratefully accept, but we are also
on a long journey, and do not have enough food or supplies for our own
crew.” It was hard to tell on such a reptilian face, but the alien looked
extremely distressed.

“How long would your journey be if your engines were repaired?”
asked Janeway. “Where is your homeworld?”

“We come from the binary system two light years from here,” replied
T’zak Vestin. “Our engines propel us at ten times the speed of light. If
they were repaired, we would be slightly more than one of our sun cycles
from home.”

That meant that the alien ship’s top speed was warp two, at which
speed the binary system was over a month away. Janeway didn’t have that
kind of time.

“I may have a solution to both of our problems. Perhaps you would
care to come aboard Voyager to discuss it with my staff.” She was counting
on the aliens to be consistent with other honor-driven cultures, which would mean that she commanded the situation simply by virtue of not destroying the other ship in retaliation for the insult. Until the aliens considered the debt of dishonor paid, they would be amenable to any suggestion she made.

The response of the alien captain seemed to bear out her expectation. “I would be honored to board your ship. My shuttle will leave immediately.”

“We will prepare our shuttle bay for your arrival. Janeway out.” As the screen switched to a view of the small ship before them, Janeway heard Chakotay advising the shuttle bay crew of an arrival. She paused for a moment, considering her next words, then stood and turned to face Harry Kim. He looked miserable already, and she felt her irritation die away. Kim was a good officer who rarely made mistakes, and had probably already been punishing himself more than she ever could. But the omission could not go unremarked. Her voice was low when she spoke.

“Mr. Kim. Your error caused a battle situation that need not have happened, and endangered this ship and her crew. May I expect that in the future, the term ‘all frequencies’ will actually mean all frequencies?”

Harry stood stiffly at attention. “Yes, Captain. I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

Janeway said nothing, waiting until Harry couldn’t stand it anymore and dared to glance at her. When their eyes met, she nodded shortly, dismissing him, and then turned to her first officer. “Chakotay, you have the bridge. I want you here in case our ‘friends’ get antsy out there. Tuvok, please have a security team meet us at the shuttle bay.”

“I assume that your decision not to beam the alien here means that you wish to be discreet regarding transporter technology?” asked the Vulcan.

“Yes. For the moment they are motivated to expunge their dishonor, but I don’t trust such an aggressive race. Let’s not give them any reason to feel that they’re honor-bound to seize advanced technology for their homeworld.”

“A wise precaution, Captain.” Tuvok spoke briefly over the comm system, ordering a security escort, then stepped around his console and raised an eyebrow, indicating his readiness. Janeway turned and walked
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into the turbolift, feeling the solid presence of her security chief at her side. As the doors slid shut, she remembered Lynne’s invitation to stay the night and sighed. The aliens hadn’t harmed Voyager, but they’d sure shot the hell out of her evening.
T’zak Vestin sat at the conference table, his large, scaly head a good fifteen centimeters higher than anyone else’s. During his tour of Voyager—which had not included engineering or the transporter rooms—Janeway had learned that her guess regarding the coloration of the aliens was correct. They were sexually dimorphic, and T’zak Vestin’s green skin marked him as a male. It seemed to be the only difference that Janeway could see, for the alien captain had brought his second-in-command with him, a female named Seenoth who looked nearly identical to her captain. Both of them created a formidable impression with their vertical pupils and sharp teeth. Seenoth said little, but seemed to observe everything with a keen eye. She addressed her superior as “T’zak,” which was not a name after all but a designation of rank. By now Janeway had convinced Vestin to drop her first name and simply call her Captain Janeway. Sometimes it seemed that sorting out appropriate naming protocols was the most difficult part of any first contact situation.

“T’zak Vestin, your ship is a long way from home,” she said as soon as the staff introductions were over. “How did you come to be here without a warp drive?”

The alien swiveled his massive head to face Janeway. “Sovereign is a prototype ship, Captain Janeway. She is the proud accomplishment of the Imperial government, which assembled the finest minds on our world to
produce a ship that would take our race to the farthest reaches of the galaxy. We were on our first flight, designed to test the new faster-than-light engines with a cruise to a neighboring star system three sun cycles away. But something went wrong. When we arrived at our destination and attempted to shut the engines down, they overloaded. The power surge destroyed the engines, and we were left nearly twenty-five sun cycles away from home. We have been making our way back ever since."

“We are in a similar situation,” said Janeway, “except that we were pulled far from our homeworld by a powerful alien. We have spent the last six years—that would be about seventy of your sun cycles—trying to get home.”

Both aliens seemed astonished to hear this. “You have been traveling for seventy sun cycles? How much farther have you to go?” asked T’zak Vestin.

Seven of Nine answered the question. “Approximately nine hundred and twenty sun cycles.”

The aliens paled. “Is this within your life span?” asked Seenoth.

“Seenoth!” hissed T’zak Vestin. “Your words are without thought.”

“It’s all right,” Janeway assured him. “We do not take offense at Seenoth’s question.” Turning to the female alien, she said, “Unless we find a means to shorten our journey, it is entirely possible that some of us will not live to see our return. But we have already cut our journey in half. By conventional means, it should have taken us over nine hundred sun cycles to get this far. We are confident that we will reach home soon.”

“To travel so far, with no support—your people are courageous,” said T’zak Vestin, baring his sharp teeth in what Janeway hoped was a smile. “We are honored by an alliance with such a race. We look forward to showing you our hospitality when we reach our homeworld.”

Janeway phrased her next words carefully. “That is precisely what I wished to discuss with you, T’zak Vestin. My engineering staff believe they have the ability to repair your engines.” The aliens burst into brilliant color, but Janeway plunged ahead to forestall any interruption. “However, even if your engines were repaired, at your top speed it would take us more than one sun cycle to reach your world. As you must realize, such a length of time is long indeed for us. We cannot afford to take so much time away from our journey home.”

The alien captain seemed highly agitated. “Then you will not come to
our homeworld? But you must! We cannot accept your assistance with our ship unless we are able to return your generosity. And you must allow me to expunge my earlier offense. Captain Janeway, I must ask you for a different decision.”

Janeway paused for a moment, appearing to think, and then made her offer. “There is another way. But I hesitate to suggest it for fear that you will not accept.”

Both aliens leaned forward in their chairs. “Make your suggestion, Captain Janeway,” said T’zak Vestin. “I assure you that we will consider it carefully.”

Glancing at B’Elanna, Janeway said, “My chief of engineering has examined your ship, and tells me that it is very strongly built. Strong enough, in fact, for us to attach a tractor beam and tow you to your home system.” She continued quickly, before the aliens could be offended by the idea of being towed home. “However, we will be going somewhat faster than your engines could take you—two hundred and fourteen times the speed of light, to be exact.” B’Elanna had advised Janeway that, to be safe, they should not tow the ship any faster than warp five.

The aliens were floored, judging by their open mouths and lack of speech. T’zak Vestin found his voice first. “How…how is it possible to travel so quickly? That is beyond the theoretical limits.”

“You may want to revise your theories,” said B’Elanna. “From what you’ve told me of your engines, and what I’ve seen of your ship, our propulsion systems are similar. We’ve just learned to fine tune ours, and we use a highly refined fuel source.”

Seenoth looked cagey. “And would it be possible for your people to share this technology with ours?”

Janeway had expected the question. “When B’Elanna says our systems are similar, she means the theories by which they operate are similar. In practice, the actual mechanical systems are quite different. Our technology is not compatible with yours.”

The aliens looked disappointed, but T’zak Vestin recovered first. “Perhaps, when we return to homeworld, your engineers and ours can meet to discuss these theories, Captain Janeway.”

“Then you accept our offer?”

“I do,” said T’zak Vestin firmly. Seenoth’s color faded slightly, and she turned to him quickly. “It is the best decision, Seenoth,” the alien captain
said. “We do not have sufficient supplies for the amount of time it will take us to return under our own power. There is no dishonor in accepting assistance from an ally.”

“Yes, T’zak,” muttered Seenoth, obviously not happy.

“Excellent,” said Janeway. “Before we attempt the journey, however, I suggest that our engineers take a look at your engines and help you to repair them if they can.”

“We would welcome them on the Sovereign, Captain Janeway. Your generosity has been great indeed.” The alien’s deep voice took on a note of pride. “When we return to homeworld, you will experience for yourself the legendary hospitality of the Tsian Empire. We will fill every hold of your ship with foodstuffs and every possible thing you could desire. Our homecoming will be a celebration to remember—the banquet will go on for days! We would be greatly pleased if you and your officers would be our honored guests upon our arrival.”

Janeway groaned internally at the idea of a multi-day banquet, but allowed no sign to show. “It would be our honor. We would greatly benefit from such hospitality—your generosity would make our continued journey easier.” She was ready to end this. “Now if you are ready, our engineering team will accompany you back to your ship and begin their work.” She rose, indicating an end to the meeting. “I hope that we will be underway very soon.”

The Tsians said their goodbyes to the rest of the staff and, preceded by B’Elanna, returned to the shuttle bay. Tom and Harry went back to the bridge, where Harry would be monitoring the transporter locks on the engineering team, a precaution suggested by Tuvok. As their best pilot, Tom was assigned to the helm in case Voyager needed to engage in any quick maneuvers. Janeway wasn’t worried; their warp engines were back on line and they could vanish from the system in the blink of an eye should the aliens try anything. But she was sure they would be eminently cooperative. Looking around the conference room at her three remaining officers, she said, “Well, the Tsians don’t seem to do anything by halves. They are either extremely aggressive or extremely polite and honorable.”

“They seem to have a strong code of ethics,” agreed Chakotay.

“Such codes are inefficient,” stated Seven. “They lead to much wasted time and effort satisfying cultural requirements. I believe that races bound by such codes limit their abilities to advance.”
“On the contrary, Seven,” said Tuvok, “races not bound by codes of conduct would soon devolve into chaos. Did not the Borg have extremely well-defined codes?”

“The Borg had clear expectations of duties. That is not the same as cultural codes which dictate behavioral and emotional responses.”

Janeway interrupted what was shaping up to be a spirited discussion. “You’re all quite welcome to stay here and finish your debate, but I’m going to get some rest. We’ve got a busy few days ahead of us. Good-night.” She left the conference room and gratefully headed back to her quarters. As the turbolift carried her to deck three, she checked her chronometer. It was far too late to recover any part of her evening with Lynne, who was undoubtedly in bed by now. She imagined her partner curled up, sleeping peacefully—and suddenly realized that she had absolutely no desire to return to her own quarters. Redirecting the turbolift to deck six, she tingled with the expectation of wrapping herself around Lynne’s warm body. Maybe, if she was lucky, she wouldn’t get any sleep at all.
B’ELANNA TORRES sat in the mess hall, pushing her food around her plate and attempting to discern what it was made of. Neelix often gave his dishes names that did not necessarily correspond to their actual contents, and this seemed to be one of those times. “Turnover Delight” was neither, as far as she could tell.

Her musings were interrupted when a shadow fell over her table. “Mind if I join you?” asked a familiar voice. B’Elanna waved her hand at the opposite chair, and Lynne Hamilton sat down, casting a doubtful glance at her own tray of Turnover Delight. “This stuff reminds me a lot of dorm food in college. They used to love using gravy on all the meats, but it wasn’t clear gravy—it was the kind that had flour or cornstarch in it, so it was opaque. We always had a rule: if you can’t see the meat, don’t eat it. I think a similar rule should apply here: if you can’t figure out what it is, don’t risk it.”

“For a fossil, you catch on fast,” B’Elanna said.

Lynne shot her a glare. “You know, you may have to stop calling me that now. Last night Tuvok told me that my martial arts training was progressing nicely, and he indicated that I was ready to kick your ass.”

B’Elanna snorted. “I don’t believe that for a second.”

“Which, that Tuvok said it or that I could do it?”

“Both.”
“Well, he might have used slightly more conservative phrasing…” said Lynne, letting the implication dangle.

B’Elanna rolled her eyes. “Anytime you want your ego knocked back down to size, just let me know and I’ll meet you on the holodeck.”

“My ego!”

“Why, yes. Klingons have no egos. We know we’re better, so when we say so, it’s truth, not ego.”

Lynne laughed. “Thanks, B’Elanna. I knew I’d feel better after listening to you bullshit.”

B’Elanna looked more closely at her friend, noticing for the first time a tightness around her eyes and mouth. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh, I’ve just been feeling sorry for myself,” said Lynne, stabbing her food with her fork. “Kathryn said that if all continues to go well, she’s scheduling shore leave for the whole crew on the planet. But what she wants to do and what I want to do are very different things. She wants to go somewhere quiet and just relax, lie around and read a book.”

B’Elanna didn’t see the problem. “And that’s bad? What do you want to do?”

Lynne looked at her with a gleam in her eye. “Have you looked at the scans of that planet? It has some fabulous mountains! The tallest one is twelve thousand meters—it makes Everest look like a mound of dirt. I’m just itching to climb it. This is my first chance at climbing since I came on board, and who knows when I’ll get another—but I don’t know how to get around my limitations.”

“You mean, physical? Haven’t you been working out practically every night?”

“No, that’s not the problem. The problem is that I have no way of acclimating to the altitude—we don’t have enough time. And even if I could, after a certain altitude I’d be out of breathable air, and I can’t carry enough oxygen to make up for it. On top of that, I can’t climb without a partner, both for safety reasons and because I can’t carry all the gear by myself. So there’s no way I can climb that mountain, and since Kathryn won’t go, I can’t climb any of the shorter ones either, unless I find someone else.”

“Altitude and oxygen aren’t a problem,” said B’Elanna. “Things have changed since your time, Fossil. Sometimes away teams need to function at altitude, and they don’t have time to sit around for days or weeks accl-
mating. We’ve got meds that increase the oxygen-carrying capacity of your hemoglobin. And when you get to an altitude where the air is so thin even the meds can’t help, a single oxygen tank will last you a couple of days. You shouldn’t need more than one, but if you get low, you can just have a fresh one transported down.”

Lynne looked astonished. “I can? Isn’t that an inappropriate use of the transporters?”

“No, why would it be?”

“Well, I just thought—I mean, I’ve heard all about power conservation and replicator rations and all that, so I assumed…”

B’Elanna waved her hand dismissively. “We’re doing fine on power right now, and we’re about to load up on all kinds of supplies, thanks to our grateful hosts. And Janeway tends to loosen the strings a little when it comes to shore leave. She knows how important it is to crew morale. Hell, for that matter, why stop at an oxygen tank? You could have a Starfleet shelter beamed down every night, complete with replicator, and carry practically nothing on your back. Janeway’s decided that it’s safe to use transporters as long as we’re discreet about it, and I doubt there’ll be too many Tsians where you’re planning to go. It shouldn’t be a problem.”

“No shit? Damn! I guess I’ve been thinking like a fossil. A whole shelter and a replicator?”

B’Elanna nodded, enjoying the dawning expression of happiness that was rapidly erasing all signs of stress from her friend’s face.

“Then I can climb! This is fantastic!” Lynne’s eyes shone, then narrowed slightly in a predatory fashion. “All I have to do now is find a climbing partner.”

B’Elanna held her hands up. “Oh, no. You’re not getting me up there. I plan to spend my down time following the Janeway method. A little sun, a little light reading, an appropriate number of cocktails to spice up the evenings…”

“Come on, get a little more imaginative. That’s nothing you couldn’t do on the holodeck any day of the week. But climbing a mountain bigger than Everest—now that’s something to remember. You could be on top of the world, seeing things that nobody else is seeing. Think of the views! Think of the stars!”

“Think of the cold,” said B’Elanna, who hated being cold.

“Don’t worry about that. I’ve checked into current climbing gear, and
it’s impossible for you to get cold. Besides, you’ll be working too hard. And after a hard day’s climb, you’ll stroll into a warm, pressurized Starfleet shelter, with your good buddy there to serve you a wonderful meal.”

“And will my good buddy also serve me a cocktail?” asked B’Elanna.

“No, no alcohol. Not good for climbing.”

“Forget it, then. I’m not going.”

“B’Elanna!” Lynne protested, then stopped abruptly and shrugged her shoulders. “Okay. I understand. And I don’t blame you.”

“Don’t blame me for what?” asked B’Elanna suspiciously.

“For thinking I’ll kick your butt on the climb. It’s true, I will. You may have superior Klingon strength, but you don’t have the experience that I do. The climb won’t be technical—it’s basically a walk-up mountain—but it’ll still involve five days of maneuvering through ice and snow and steep slopes, and you’re not practiced at that. You’ll get tired. It’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“What!” B’Elanna sputtered. Honestly, Lynne could be truly irritating sometimes. “There is no way you could kick my butt in anything physical, Fossil.”

Lynne leaned over the table. “Prove it. Come on the climb with me.”

B’Elanna sighed. She was backed in a corner and knew it. Lynne always seemed to have a way of getting what she wanted. Besides, the idea of climbing a mountain appealed to her a lot more than she’d been letting on —there was an element of danger that sparked her interest. No holodeck safeties, no rules or regulations, just a mountain and all of the things it could throw at a person.

“Okay, fine. If we get approval from Janeway. We still don’t know if there are any areas of the planet off limits to visitors.”

Lynne sat back in her chair, her face alight. “Excellent! Thanks, B’Elanna, you won’t regret it. You’ll have a great time.”

“Yeah, yeah,” grumbled B’Elanna. “I could have had a great time on a beach, too. So have you heard anything from Janeway about when shore leave rotations begin?”

“No. We’ve got that banquet tonight...you’re going to that, right? And then tomorrow the negotiations begin over supplies and visitation. Kathryn says she won’t know until later tomorrow what we’ll be able to do.”
“Yeah, and the banquet might last until tomorrow, if what I hear is true.”

“You don’t exactly look thrilled to be invited.”

“I’ve been to diplomatic functions before. They’re not as exciting as you might think.”

“Maybe not, but I’ve never been to a function like this before—not even on Earth. Toss in the idea of meeting an entire new race of people, and it sounds pretty interesting to me. Although Kathryn did tell me that attending diplomatic functions was the curse of being the captain’s girlfriend.”

“Well, she should know. And you’ll find out soon enough. I wonder what the Tsians will think of you two?” mused B’Elanna.

“What about us?”

B’Elanna looked at her friend as if she’d dropped half her brain on the table. “Not every race is accepting of same-gender relations, Lynne. Hadn’t you thought about that?”

Startled, Lynne said, “Actually…no. I mean, everyone here seems to take it in stride, so I really hadn’t stopped to think about how the Tsians might view it. I guess I got a little too comfortable here. It’s been so nice compared to my time—I haven’t had to worry about other people’s perceptions.”

B’Elanna was curious. “So what was it like, being involved in same-sex relationships in your time?”

“That’s not an easy question to answer. It really depended on where you were. Some cities and some nations were generally open to different types of relationships. Others weren’t, and it could be worth your life to hold your girlfriend’s hand in public.”

“You’re kidding. People were killed for loving someone of the same gender?”

“Oh, yeah. Especially in the ultra-religious or less developed nations. But it certainly wasn’t limited to them, and it happened in my own nation, too. Beatings were more common, though, and harassment and discrimination were just a fact of life no matter where you lived. A lot of people kept their sexual orientation a secret, even from their friends and family, to avoid that sort of treatment. We could be fired from our jobs or denied housing, and it was perfectly legal. We couldn’t get married. And Kathryn
would have been instantly kicked out of our version of Starfleet the minute anyone knew she loved me.”

B’Elanna’s mouth dropped open. “They’d have discharged Captain Janeway?”

“In a heartbeat. She’d have had to choose between Starfleet and me, because she couldn’t possibly have both.”

“That’s the most asinine thing I ever heard! I can see why you’d like it here in the twenty-fourth century.”

Lynne laughed. “When I first got here I hated the twenty-fourth century. It didn’t seem to hold anything but loss for me. But then I started picking up on the advantages. Social acceptance is wonderful, but this century has more going for it than just that. I can think of ten things off the top of my head that are huge improvements over my time.”

“All right. Name them.”

“Oh, let’s see. Not having to menstruate, for one. You have no idea how happy I was when the Doctor told me I could suppress that. My god, it’s every woman’s dream—I’ve been in bliss. And the vision correction. I was using reading glasses back home for close focus, and let me just tell you what a pain in the butt those are when you’re climbing. But the Doctor fixed that in about five minutes, all the while telling me how medieval medicine was in my time. He says I’ll never have to wear glasses, no matter what my age. And then there’s that shot that neutralizes bacterial byproducts in the mouth—you guys don’t even know what morning breath means.” She paused. “Replicators are fabulous. Holodeck technology. Warp travel, obviously, and transporters. I have a feeling I’m about to add modern climbing gear to the list. Oh, and Risan jazz.” She looked at B’Elanna.

“That’s only nine.”

“Well, the last one goes without saying.”

“Humor me.”

“Kathryn, of course,” said Lynne. “They didn’t make her model back in my time.”

Her happiness was so palpable that B’Elanna couldn’t resist teasing her. “You sound like a lovesick targ.”

“And I really don’t care. Besides, who wouldn’t in my situation? There’s an entire planet down there singing the praises of Captain
Kathryn Janeway, and I’m the one she wants to escort to the celebratory banquet.” She made goggle eyes at B’Elanna.

“You do have it bad,” said B’Elanna, grinning. “Let’s not forget that the planet is singing the praises of Voyager’s crew in general, not just the captain. That means I’m just as much of a goddess right now as she is.”

“I would never question your status as a goddess,” said Lynne, her expression saying otherwise. B’Elanna ignored it. “But let’s face it, Kathryn is the one who talked those stubborn Tsians into letting us help them, and she’s the one who cut them loose as soon as we entered the system so that they could sail home under their own power. They think she’s the greatest thing since sliced bread.”

“What’s so great about sliced bread?”

“Never mind. Old saying. My point is, I have every reason to sound like a lovesick targ. I love Kathryn, and I’m proud of her. And if she were just a little more available, life would be pretty much perfect as far as I’m concerned.”

“What do you mean, ‘if she were a little more available’?” asked B’Elanna, catching a hint of trouble in paradise.

Lynne looked slightly alarmed, as if she’d just been caught doing something wrong. Then she shrugged. “It’s just that she’s always so busy with her duties. We generally only see each other two or three times a week. I’ve managed to find ways to keep busy, but I really wish we could spend more time together. Every time I check to see if she’s available, the computer tells me she’s in the ready room. And I can’t disturb her there—she’s the captain, and the ship comes first. I accepted that from day one. But I don’t particularly like it.”

B’Elanna sympathized. “They always say that a captain is married to the ship. That’s a tough one, Lynne. In that department, Janeway’s probably the most difficult person on this ship that you could have chosen to get involved with. Except possibly Tuvok.” She patted her friend’s arm.

Lynne smiled wanly. “Thanks. I feel a little better already, just being able to tell you about it. The one person I want to talk to is the one person I can’t talk to, so I’ve just been holding it all in. It’s ironic, really—usually I’m the one who doesn’t have enough time for my lover. I guess this is cosmic payback.”

“But Lynne, if time with the captain is an issue, why the hell are you
climbing a mountain with me instead of spending your shore leave with her?”

“Counterintuitive, isn’t it?” said Lynne. “It’s just that mountain climbing is part of my soul, B’Elanna. I have a need for it, kind of like my need to breathe. I have to go if I can, and I'd do anything to get Kathryn to go with me. But if she won’t, I have to go anyway. It’s not really a choice.”

B’Elanna looked at her friend, trying to understand this contradiction. “I don’t get it. I mean, my engines are a part of my identity, but I wouldn’t choose being in engineering over being with Tom.”

“Maybe that’s because you’re in engineering every day. I haven’t set foot on a mountain since Denali, and that was nearly six months ago. How would you feel about getting to your engines if you hadn’t seen them in six months?”

“A squadron of shuttles with tractor beams attached to my legs couldn’t keep me away.”

“And if Tom didn’t want to go, would you go anyway?”

B’Elanna snorted at the idea of Tom wanting to rush to engineering. “You bet your sweet ass I would.”

Lynne held her hands out, palms up. “Then you understand my problem. That’s why I’m not spending my shore leave with Kathryn.” She slumped back in her chair. “Even though it’s killing me to give up that precious time with her.”

B’Elanna nodded. “I guess I’m honored that you asked me. But I still think you’re a few valves shy of a full plasma relay for wanting to do this.”

“You aren’t the first person to say something like that. I’m used to it.”

Lynne stood up, taking her tray with her. “And B’Elanna?”

“Yes?”

Lynne looked down at her warmly. “Thank you. For everything.”

“You’re welcome, Fossil.” Lynne’s expression turned a little sour, and B’Elanna laughed. This little expedition might even prove to be fun, if it gave her more chances to poke at her friend.
Janeway gazed around the cavernous banquet hall, trying to distract herself from her discomfort. The serving staff had just taken away the plates from their eighth or ninth course—she’d lost track some time ago—and she knew it was only a matter of time before the next course arrived. The Tsians were generous hosts indeed, and appeared to subscribe to the “more is better” philosophy of banqueting. She’d been pacing herself, eating only a few bites of each course, but that strategy still had limitations and her stomach was telling her that she’d just passed them.

The hall was filled with tables that seated perhaps five hundred people, including most of the crew of Voyager. The long table where she sat was on a raised dais at the head of the room, and was reserved for those in power and honored guests. Toward the end of it she could see Chakotay, Tuvok and Harry. B’Elanna and Tom were quite a bit closer. Seven was not there at all, having chosen not to attend, and privately Janeway thought her astrometrics officer was smarter than any of them. If she herself could have gotten away with not coming, she would certainly have declined the invitation. Unfortunately, that was rarely an option for a captain.

She looked at Lynne, seated next to her, and felt a little thrill of pride. When she’d picked Lynne up for the banquet several hours ago, her jaw had nearly dropped to the floor. Lynne was wearing a low cut, backless
gown made of a gossamer green material that matched her eyes and shimmered when she moved. Her hair had been released from its French braid, falling down her back in soft waves, and the delicate straps over her shoulders only served to emphasize her beautiful physique. Her daily workouts had transformed her body into something that Janeway thought was close to the ideal female form—not that she was biased. Watching her partner talking to the Tsian minister of government across the table, she reflected that Lynne bore little resemblance these days to the weak and starved prisoner who had literally fallen into her arms almost six months ago. She was strong, feisty, full of life—and stubborn as a mule. They had clashed before when a situation required that one of them back down, but Janeway had been particularly surprised and dismayed at Lynne’s refusal to join her for shore leave. She’d thought that Lynne would change her plans upon finding that Janeway had no interest in climbing some godforsaken mountain during the precious few days she had to relax. Time off was so rare for her that spending it in a quiet, relaxing manner was a requirement for her mental health. She desperately needed a recharge, and wanted Lynne to spend that time with her. Instead, she was having to look forward to reading a good book alone while her lover went off without her.

Lynne turned her head to find Janeway observing her, and offered a pained smile that communicated her own discomfort. Janeway leaned close and murmured, “How are you doing?”

“I think my stomach is close to the bursting point,” Lynne responded quietly. “How could anyone possibly eat this much food? And how the hell is B’Elanna doing it?”

Janeway glanced down the table to B’Elanna, who was laughing as she conversed with T’zak Vestin. The two had gotten along quite well during the four days it had taken Voyager to tow the Sovereign to the Tsian home-world, and the generous amounts of intoxicants served during the banquet had apparently turned their amicability into a fine, if loud, friendship. Somehow B’Elanna had managed to not only put away impressive amounts of the Tsian version of wine, but she’d also cleaned her plate for every course so far. Next to her, Tom didn’t seem to be enjoying himself nearly as much.

“Klingon stomachs are twice as big as ours,” whispered Janeway. “B’Elanna may only be half-Klingon, but she apparently got the full stomach.”
Lynne laughed. “Was that an intentional pun?”

Janeway adopted what she hoped was an innocent look.

Their quiet conversation was interrupted by the deep voice of T’sin Lessia, the head of the Tsian Empire. Her title translated to “mother of Tsians,” and she was treated with extreme deference by all of the Tsians in the room. Her blue skin was pocked with scars, and her eyes had a milky cast to them that seemed to indicate advanced age. Janeway knew that it was a great honor to be seated at T’sin Lessia’s table, and an even greater one to be placed at her right hand. T’zak Vestin had not exaggerated when he’d said that the crew of Voyager would be met as heroes. They’d been toasted, feted and praised right alongside the crew of Sovereign during what appeared to be a planet-wide celebration.

“Captain Janeway,” said T’sin Lessia, “I am most intrigued by this Federation you speak of. How do you control so many planets spread over so great a distance?”

“We don’t control them,” answered Janeway. “Every planet in the Federation retains its own government and conducts its own affairs, as long as those affairs don’t involve war with any other planet in the Federation. The consortium of planets exists for the purpose of promoting commerce, cultural exchange, and defense. It does not enrich any one government.”

“And how do you convince planets to join? Is that the job of your Starfleet?”

“Well, no. We don’t actually convince planets to join. Most often, a planet petitions the Federation for membership, because the benefits of being a member of the consortium can be very great for worlds interested in what we have to offer. When a planetary government petitions, a Starfleet ship is dispatched to carry an ambassadorial team to that planet. If the team determines that the petition is worthwhile, they’ll take it to the Federation Council, which then makes the decision as to whether or not a planet is accorded membership.”

“This is marvelous,” said T’sin Lessia. “You have created a situation where membership is exclusive, thereby making it more appealing. Other governments actually ask your permission to join your Federation and voluntarily place themselves under a foreign set of rules and expectations. You conquer without an army. Very clever! I am impressed by the wisdom of your leaders.”
Janeway was about to explain that the Federation did not go about
conquering anyone, but the t’sin was not done.

“And tell me, Captain—how many of your Federation planets have
matriarchal cultures?”

Janeway had to give that some thought. “Very few. I can think of only
four or five examples. Matriarchy is not common in the Federation.”

T’sin Lessia bared her teeth in the unnerving version of a Tsian smile.

“And yet you yourselves have this culture.”

Janeway was momentarily taken aback, then remembered that T’sin
Lessia’s understanding of Earth culture was based on Voyager. “Actually,
we don’t. Earth was originally matriarchal, then became patriarchal for
thousands of years, and in the last few centuries has returned to an even
balance between the two genders. We have finally come to understand
that neither gender is inherently superior to the other. My crew is not
commanded by a woman, it’s commanded by a captain. They would
respond the same whether that captain were female or male.”

Their conversation paused as the next course arrived, a dish of artfully
arranged meat that appeared to be raw. Janeway looked apologetically at
Lynne, who shrugged slightly and took a bite. “It’s good,” she said.
Janeway tried it and found the flavor to be excellent, though the texture
made her a bit squeamish.

T’sin Lessia put a far larger portion in her mouth and swallowed with
relish. “Your assertion is difficult to believe, Captain. We Tsians have
noted that the skills and abilities of females differ markedly from those of
males. Females tend to be wiser, more careful, more observant of the
long-term effects of their decisions and actions. We are far better suited to
govern than males, who tend to be more aggressive and prone to act in
the moment, without regard for long-term consequences. Males make
excellent soldiers and workers, but are rarely placed in positions of high
power. Vestin is one of the few t’zaks in the Imperial Fleet, and his male
aggressiveness can still be a liability to his career. Did he not endanger the
current friendship between our two peoples by his impetuous actions?”

Out of the corner of her eye, Janeway could see that T’zak Vestin had
looked up at the mention of his name and paled at hearing T’sin Lessia’s
question. Something in her bristled at the tone the T’sin had taken. She
did not care for discrimination in any form, but found it most objection-
able in leaders who were supposed to set examples.
“On the contrary,” she replied smoothly, “T’zak Vestin’s actions were appropriate for a captain who believed that his ship was under attack. As soon as the misunderstanding between our two ships was clarified, he behaved in a manner calculated to promote our alliance. T’zak Vestin is responsible for our presence here today.”

T’sin Lessia turned toward her nervous captain. “Vestin, it would appear that you have made an excellent impression on our friends. You are to be congratulated.” As he momentarily blossomed into a brilliant green, showing a frightening number of teeth, the t’sin returned her attention to Janeway. “You will pardon me, Captain Janeway, if I find that your actions seem to belie your words. If your culture is as gender neutral as you say, why is it that you have chosen a female mate? It would be natural for an individual of your power to choose the superior of the two genders when deciding on a lifetime companion.”

Janeway glanced at Lynne, who had been listening intently to the conversation. “I’m proud to have Lynne for a mate. But I didn’t choose her because of her gender; I chose her because she is the best person for me, and I can’t imagine a life without her. I should add that in the past I have chosen males for mates, and Lynne has as well.” She felt a hand squeeze her thigh under the table, and turned her head to meet a green gaze that warmed her right down to her toes.

A rumble of laughter brought her attention back to T’sin Lessia. “You have just proved my point, Captain. Both of you have chosen males in your past, only to settle on females. Obviously the males were insufficient as mates, or you would still be with them.”

Janeway opened her mouth to respond, but heard Lynne’s voice behind her. “It’s true that my past mates were insufficient, T’sin Lessia, but that’s not because they were male. It’s because they weren’t Kathryn.”

Janeway felt a second rush of warmth down her spine, and knew her face was showing the heat. She smiled at Lynne, who answered with one of those brilliant smiles that made Janeway’s heart catch.

Again the t’sin laughed. “Ah, I see the situation now. You have not been mates long, and are still in the stage of thessan, when all you can see is each other. I have not felt thessan for a very long time, and it is a treat to see it here.” She leaned closer and lowered her voice, a gesture which had almost no effect since even her low voice carried for several meters. “Our
world has many locations conducive to the desires of a couple in thessan. I would be happy to make recommendations for you.”

“We would be grateful for any recommendation you might make,” said Janeway, anxious to change the subject before the Tsian leader could go any further. “We hoped that you would be amenable to our crew spending some time on your planet to rest and refresh themselves before continuing on our journey.”

“Of course! We would be honored to host such a courageous people.”

“Is there any location on your world where our people would not be welcomed?” asked Janeway. “Sacred places, or locations reserved for activities that don’t include the entertainment of a foreign people? I want to make certain that we don’t inadvertently offend.”

“Your caution and consideration do you great credit. There are a few small areas that your people should avoid. I will have my minister of lands draw up a list of coordinates tomorrow. But for the most part, our planet is open to your crew.”

“T’sin Lessia, are the mountains at the southern end of this continent included in those areas to be avoided?” asked Lynne.

The Tsian leader appeared nonplussed. “No, but why would anyone wish to go there? They are inhospitable to life.”

“I’d like to go in order to climb your tallest mountain,” answered Lynne.

“How very strange. For what purpose?”

“Simply for the purpose of doing it. I know that’s not a very clear answer, but many Humans are motivated to engage in activities solely for the sense of accomplishment in completing them. I would feel very accomplished to successfully climb to the top of your tallest mountain.”

“I do not see how it would be possible. No Tsian has ever attempted such a thing; the cold would put us into a torpor. We much prefer staying in warmer climates, where the sun heats our blood and gives us strength. Would you actually risk torpor and death simply to feel that you had accomplished something of no intrinsic value?”

Janeway was intrigued by the question, which revealed a facet of Tsian physiology that she hadn’t known about. Judging by her answer, Lynne had also noticed.

“Torpor isn’t a problem for me, T’sin Lessia. My body creates its own heat.”
“You are a warmblood?” The question was spoken loudly, in surprise, and all conversation near them came to a sudden stop.

Lynne looked distinctly uncomfortable at finding herself the focus of so many stares, but kept her own eyes on the Tsian leader. “Yes, that is correct.”

Janeway decided to help her out. “You seem surprised to learn this, T’sin Lessia.”

Their host had stiffened upon asking her question, but now she bent forward again. “Yes, I am surprised. Your type of physiology is... uncommon in our area. And you will be accompanying your mate on this journey?”

“No. She will be climbing with her friend, my chief of engineering.” Janeway indicated B’Elanna, who was watching them along with everyone else at this section of the table.

T’sin Lessia paused for a moment, then fixed her gaze on Lynne. “Lynne Hamilton, mate of Captain Janeway, you are certainly welcome to climb the mountain if that is what you wish. However, given the danger of the area and your importance to your leader, I would ask that you notify my minister of lands when you start, when you expect to reach the summit, and when you return safely. I will personally wish to be notified when you have returned.”

“I appreciate your concern,” said Lynne, “and I will be happy to give you those times. Thank you for your permission and your support.”

The momentary silence dissipated as those around them resumed their conversations, and Janeway breathed a sigh of relief. One never knew what would set off an awkward moment at these diplomatic functions, and more often than not it was something that could never have been anticipated no matter how much preparation took place beforehand. She found it quite interesting that T’sin Lessia had been so taken aback to learn that she and her crew were endothermic. In fact, the Tsian leader had seemed almost dismayed. Thinking back to their earlier conversation and the T’sin’s obvious prejudice against males, she wondered if perhaps the prejudice also extended to endothermic species. If so, she disguised it well, because the alien leader was the perfect hostess for the remainder of the meal.

After three more courses, which sorely tested the limits of Janeway’s endurance, a sudden fanfare of drums interrupted the evening. All heads
turned toward the stage along one wall of the banquet hall, which had filled with musicians while the guests were eating. Now the orchestra struck up a tune, and within moments half of the Tsians had left their tables and were dancing in the large space at the center of the hall. The music had a great deal of percussion in it, but the tune was pleasant and melodic. Janeway turned to Lynne, who was tapping her fingers on the table to the rhythm. With as much of a bow as she could manage given her full stomach, she asked, “Lynne Hamilton, mate of Captain Janeway, will you dance?”

Lynne laughed and rose from her chair in answer. As they walked to the dance floor hand in hand, Janeway felt a great sense of release. She’d thought the eating would never end. Now they could probably dance for a number or two and then make a discreet exit, having fulfilled their diplomatic requirements. She turned Lynne to face her and wrapped one arm around her waist. “I hope you don’t mind if we do a slow dance,” she said. “I think if I try anything more energetic, my stomach may explode.”

“Mine would probably go first,” said Lynne. “The slower, the better.”

With that, Janeway drew her partner close and let herself go, simply enjoying the music and the feel of Lynne in her arms. After several minutes of quiet closeness, she heard Lynne’s voice in her ear.

“Did I tell you how gorgeous you look in your dress uniform?”

Janeway drew her head back and looked into Lynne’s eyes. “Why no, you didn’t mention it,” she said.

“Well, I should have. You’re always beautiful, but sometimes you look so stunning that it stops my heart. Tonight is one of those times.”

Janeway felt a little self-conscious. She never thought of herself that way, but Lynne did not make a habit of saying things she didn’t mean. Janeway had no doubt that Lynne honestly thought she was beautiful, and the knowledge made her glow.

“If beauty really could stop a heart,” she said, “then I wouldn’t be standing here now. When I came by your quarters to pick you up, I was practically speechless. You look absolutely breathtaking. And I’m so glad you chose to wear the earrings.” Janeway had used the occasion of Lynne’s first away mission as an excuse to give her a pair of earrings that matched the pendant she always wore. Lynne’s reaction had made the expenditure of replicator rations more than worthwhile, and Janeway had been stealing glances at the sparkling gems all evening. It
gave her an unaccountable sense of warm pride to see Lynne wearing her gift.

“Thank you,” said Lynne. “And wearing the earrings wasn’t really a choice. The real question is whether I’ll ever take them off again.” She gave Janeway a slow, sensual smile, then pulled her close again. “I just had an old song flash through my head. I always thought it was kind of hokey, but suddenly it means a lot more. It applies perfectly to you right now.”

“Well, are you going to sing it to me?”

“No on a bet. I’m no singer. But maybe I can find it in the database and play it for you. The guy who did it was a one-hit wonder, so it’s likely the song made it to the twenty-fourth century.” Lynne had complained loudly and often that marketing, not talent, seemed to dictate which music had survived to the current time. The list of artists and musical selections that she thought should have survived seemed to grow longer every time Janeway saw her.

“What’s it called? Who sang it?”

“Chris somebody; I’m going to have to think about it. But the song was called The Lady in Red.”

“Come on, sing it.”

“No way.”

“All right then, just tell me the lyrics.”

“No, I don’t think so. I want to do this right. Give me a little time and I’ll figure it out.” Lynne pulled away again to look into her eyes. “Just know that I love you, Kathryn. And I really, really wish I could share with you the feeling of absolute freedom and joy that I get on the summit of a mountain. But I understand why you don’t want to go. I hope you understand why I have to.”

“I understand intellectually,” said Janeway. “It’s just my heart that can’t figure out why you don’t want to be with me.” She hadn’t meant to say it quite like that, but once it was out, she realized that she’d just spoken a much larger truth. For a moment she was aghast at her slip. But Lynne took her statement in the context of their conversation, and was oblivious to what had really been said.

“Oh, Kathryn, that is absolutely not true!” she said in dismay. “I do want to be with you. It’s just that this is something I have to do for myself. I don’t know how to explain it, but I honestly feel that I’ll have
more to give you when I’ve taken care of my own need.” She brushed a finger down Janeway’s cheek. “And believe me, I’d like to give you a whole lot more.” Her eyes took on an expression that Janeway knew well, and she felt her own body quickening in response.

Wrapping her arms more tightly around Lynne’s slender form, Janeway whispered, “I’d like that too. Just do what you have to and come back to me, all right?” She ran her fingers up her partner’s bare back, smiling at the shiver she felt rippling under her hands. “And as for what you plan to give me...maybe I can get a sneak preview tonight.”

Lynne smiled. “Have we stayed here long enough to satisfy your diplomatic duties?”

“Oh, I think so. Let’s just wander up and say our goodbyes.”

They wove their way through the dancers back to the head table, where T’sin Lessia expressed her sadness at their early departure. Janeway nearly snorted at this, since they’d been there for almost nine hours. But their hostess consented to let them go with a nod and a sly reference to couples in thessan, and minutes later they stepped off the transporter pad on Voyager.

“Home sweet ship,” said Lynne as they walked to the turbolift. “God, I’m glad to be back.”

Janeway squeezed her hand in response. “Your place or mine?” she asked when the turbolift arrived.

“Yours. Mine’s cluttered up with gear.”

“Lynne, you didn’t even know if the Tsians would let you go!”

Lynne shrugged, smiling. “What can I say? I like to be prepared.”

Janeway rolled her eyes. They walked to her quarters in a companionable silence, and as soon as the door hissed shut behind them she pulled Lynne against her and kissed her deeply, letting off some of the steam she’d built up in the interminable minutes it had taken them to get back. “You know,” she said against Lynne’s lips, “it’s a well known fact that captains tend to be impressed by preparedness.”

Lynne kissed her again and pulled her toward the bedroom. “Then come on in here and let me impress you.”

Later that night, as Janeway drifted toward sleep in a pleasant fog,
she felt Lynne kiss her gently just below the ear and whisper, “The lady in red is dancing with me.” For a moment Janeway’s descent into sleep was arrested; she realized that Lynne was referring to the song she’d mentioned earlier. She tried to rouse herself enough to ask for the rest of the lyrics, but the pull of sleep was too heavy, and in another moment she was gone.
B’Elanna trudged across the ice and tried to remember exactly how Lynne had talked her into this torture. The first two days of their climb had actually been fun—especially while Lynne was testing her self-arrest techniques and they’d gotten into a pushing match that eventually cost them nearly forty vertical meters—but that was back before every muscle in her body hurt. Now they were on day five, and she’d forgotten what it felt like to not be in pain. It didn’t help that Lynne seemed to be almost as fresh now as she had when they’d begun. Sure, she’d seemed a little tired last night when they clumped into their shelter and stomped the snow off their boots, but she was still able to buzz around, fixing up beds and meals and generally taking care of B’Elanna, who simply wanted to collapse.

“Kahless on a crutch, Fossil! Where the hell do you get your energy?” she’d said grumpily.

“Good living and plenty of sex,” Lynne had responded, dodging the boot B’Elanna had thrown at her. Then she’d called Voyager for her nightly check-in with Janeway. B’Elanna had tried not to listen to their conversation, but it was impossible to avoid. Janeway’s voice had taken on a tone that she’d never heard before, and once again she’d felt a little pang of envy.

Now, in the blinding glare of sun on ice, B’Elanna thought about the
conversation she’d had with Lynne after last night’s call, and felt herself grow a little warm in spite of the cold air. Lynne had finally opened up and talked about her relationship with Janeway, and B’Elanna had learned a few things about her captain that made her jaw drop. She was now in possession of the biggest, juiciest bit of gossip in the whole quadrant, but knew her life was forfeit if she ever let out so much as a squeak. Lynne had already threatened her with death, but it was the thought of Janeway’s wrath that guaranteed B’Elanna’s silence. Still, it was worth the burden of carrying this secret just to have heard Lynne, who could be so cool and in control, reveal that sometimes she was anything but. As for Janeway—well, B’Elanna had admired her captain before, but now her respect had ratcheted up several notches.

She was still lost in thought when Lynne’s voice came through the comm system in her oxygen mask.

“B’Elanna! Get up here—it’s incredible!”

Looking up, B’Elanna saw Lynne silhouetted against a sky so blue that it was almost black. She was waving frantically, and B’Elanna sped up her trudging as much as she could, which wasn’t much. Then she used the rope to pull herself the last few steps and forgot all about being tired.

They stood on the broad, flat summit of a mountain that was three thousand meters taller than its nearest neighbor. B’Elanna had seen views like this before, but she’d been in a shuttle at the time. She could hardly believe that she was standing on a point this high. Unclipping herself from the safety line, she pivoted slowly and gazed at the view in all directions, noticing that she could clearly see the curvature of the planet. A few fluffy clouds floated several thousand meters below her. And she had gotten here not by transporter, not by shuttle, but on her own two feet. Lynne was right, it was incredible. She felt fabulous, like the victor of a long and grueling race. She felt strong and invincible. She forgot that she’d spent most of the morning cursing Lynne’s name, and instead put a heavily gloved hand on her friend’s shoulder and grinned at her through the mask.

“Okay, Fossil, I get it. I know what makes you do this.”

Lynne beamed at her. “Amazing, isn’t it?” She unsnapped her harness from the safety line, coiled the rope and threw it down, then unzipped her coat and slipped her hand inside. “Don’t be alarmed, B’Elanna, but I’m turning off my comm system for a second.”
“Why?” asked B’Elanna, but Lynne had already deactivated her system. B’Elanna could only watch in confusion as her friend walked a few steps away, stood with her gloved hands clenched and her arms stiff, then suddenly thrust her fists in the air and began whirling around in circles. Taken aback, B’Elanna peered at Lynne’s face and saw that her mouth was wide open in a silent scream. Lynne twirled for several more seconds, then stopped her rotation and ran toward B’Elanna, throwing her arms around the surprised engineer and actually lifting her several centimeters off the ground. Letting her go, Lynne reactivated her comm system.

“Goddamn this feels great!” she cried, slightly out of breath. “We’ve just broken the climbing record for the whole fucking planet Earth, B’Elanna! You are a fabulous partner and I am so goddamn happy!” She let out a whoop and proceeded to whirl around again.

B’Elanna had to laugh—she’d never seen Lynne so happy. Janeway should be here. And when we get back I’m going to make sure she knows it.

“So is it better than Everest?” she asked, once Lynne had finally stopped twirling.

“Oh, god yes,” said Lynne, looking around as she spoke. “It was better than Everest before we even left the starting point. I don’t know what it’s like now, but in my time Everest had become less of an adventure and more of a tourism event. People with no experience who shouldn’t have been anywhere near the place were paying huge amounts of money to be guided up the mountain. Base Camp was a city, and Camp Four was a garbage dump of shredded tents and abandoned oxygen tanks. Nobody wanted to carry the weight back down the mountain, so they’d just leave their trash behind. I went once and that was enough. The next year I climbed a mountain in the same range that didn’t even have a name. It was two thousand feet lower than Everest, but a far more challenging climb, and we never saw another person on it. That’s the mountain I remember, not Everest.”

“Well, I’m going to remember this one,” said B’Elanna. She couldn’t get enough of the view. Eventually she sat down in the snow, pulling her knees up and wrapping her arms around them as she stared out. Lynne sat next to her, leaning against her slightly and resting her hands on her ice axe, and the two women simply absorbed the unparalleled vista. Theirs was a one-way trip, so they didn’t have to worry about leaving the summit anytime soon, just as long as they beamed off before the predicted
weather blew in later that day. Lynne had told B’Elanna about many climbers working three or four days to get to a summit and only having five minutes there before having to turn back or risk being caught away from shelter at nightfall. B’Elanna found this to be to most unfathomable thing she’d ever heard. She couldn’t imagine putting in all that effort to get to this point and only staying five minutes.

For almost two hours the women were lost in their own thoughts and the view. They spoke occasionally, but after a while it seemed more appropriate not to. Their companionable silence stretched on long enough for B’Elanna to be startled when she heard Lynne’s voice in her mask.

“What’s that?”

She followed Lynne’s pointing finger and saw a speck in the sky. Within seconds it resolved itself into a shuttle, flying toward them. Both women scrambled up, brushing the snow off their pants. Lynne still held her axe. “Why would they send a shuttle for us?” she asked.

B’Elanna felt her stomach contract. “It’s not ours.”

“It’s not?” Lynne turned toward her, but B’Elanna was watching the ship with a bad feeling gnawing at her spine.

“Lynne, I don’t like—”

Just then she saw a small bloom of light appear at the bottom of the shuttle. Her reflexes took over, and she launched herself at Lynne without thinking. She just had time to see Lynne’s look of surprise before their bodies collided, and the force of B’Elanna’s leap sent them both flying over the edge.

A second later the summit exploded in a white cloud of snow and ice, showering them with shards as they fell through the air. She heard Lynne scream, whether from pain or fear she didn’t know, and then they hit the slope of the mountain with such force that B’Elanna’s breath was driven from her lungs. An impossibly loud roar filled her ears as she tumbled and slid, losing all sense of orientation. Too late, she remembered that her ice axe was still at the summit—or had been, anyway. Twisting her body around, she managed to stop the tumble, but still she slid, face down and feet first, the white slope flashing by her at an alarming speed. She remembered to keep her crampons away from the slope, and jammed her hands and elbows into the icy crust topping the snow with all the force she could muster. The crust broke apart and stacked up behind her upper arms and under her hands before spinning off as she continued to slide.
She was grateful that the fabric of the snowsuit was impervious to the sharp edges of the ice, knowing that a lesser material would have quickly been cut to shreds—along with her arms.

Her efforts had no effect for what seemed like minutes, and then, gradually, her speed seemed to slow. Yes, she was sure of it now—she could almost stop herself. Then her knees hit something briefly, and with a sickening feeling she felt the lower half of her body drop into air. At last she stopped, her lower arms and hands digging into the snow and ice with every ounce of her strength while the rest of her body dangled into a crevasse. She didn't dare move and stared wildly around, gasping for breath.

Lynne was nowhere to be seen.

Looking up, B’Elanna saw the summit towering over her, at least six hundred meters away. A huge scar showed where an avalanche had swept down, ending not far above her and a little to her left. If Lynne had been caught in that...

No. She can’t be. B’Elanna scanned the avalanche path, desperately hoping to see a sign of her friend. The pristine white of the mountain, so beautiful only moments ago, now seemed malevolent and deadly. B’Elanna cursed as she searched frantically, then blew out a relieved breath when she saw it at last: a tiny yellow figure just below the summit and barely out of the avalanche path. Lynne had somehow managed to arrest her fall.

B’Elanna’s relief was short-lived. A flash of movement to the left of the summit caught her eye—the ship that had attacked them was banking around, coming back for another pass. Lynne’s yellow snowsuit made her an impossible target to miss, and she had no options as she hung there by her ice axe. B’Elanna’s heart leapt into her throat as the ship completed its turn and leveled out. And then she felt the snow under her forearms give way.

“Shit,” she said, as her body once more went into a free fall. This time, she didn’t feel it when she hit the bottom.

Ensign Nozawa completed his analysis of the transporter log and straightened with a sigh. Most of the engineering staff rotated through
Transporter Operations, and most of them hated it. It was ninety-eight percent boredom and two percent high stress, and he’d been experiencing the boredom part of it for his last four shifts. A person could only check the logs and realign the buffers and relays so many times before going stark raving space happy.

As he closed down the log, the room’s comm system came to life and he heard a female voice shouting.

“Hamilton to Voyager! Emergency beam out—two to beam out. Now!”

Nozawa dove for the control board, scanned for the coordinates of Lynne Hamilton’s comm badge, and found only one signal. Frowning, he scanned again, but the results were the same. He couldn’t afford to waste any more time and engaged the controls, setting the beam on maximum confinement.

Lynne Hamilton materialized on the transporter pad, her body bent at an odd angle while holding an ice axe over her head with one hand. As soon as the transport was complete she collapsed on the pad, then pushed herself up with one arm while keeping the other close to her body. She tore off her oxygen mask and looked around frantically. “Where the hell is B’Elanna?”

At the same time, Nozawa heard Captain Janeway’s voice over the comm. “Transporter Room One, do you have them?”

“I have Ms. Hamilton, Captain. Sensors can’t find Lieutenant Torres’ signal.”

The captain’s voice was calm, as always. Janeway would probably be calm even if the ship fell apart around her ears. “Is Ms. Hamilton all right?”

Quickly scanning the woman on the platform, Nozawa said, “She’s alive, but injured.”

“Beam her to sickbay immediately and keep scanning for Lieutenant Torres. Janeway out.”

Hamilton launched herself off the transporter pad and came toward Nozawa so fast, and with such an electric air around her, that the ensign actually took a step backward. “What do you mean, you can’t find B’Elanna’s signal?” she demanded, her eyes blazing. “She was right there with me!”

“Please, ma’am. I don’t know where Lieutenant Torres is, but we’ll find her. Now please get back on the transporter pad; I need to send you to sickbay.”
Hamilton looked outraged. “I don’t need a fucking transport, I can walk there myself. Just find B’Elanna.” She moved toward the door. Nozawa stepped in front of her, shrinking a little when she fixed him with an icy glare.

“Get out of my way.” Her voice was harsh and angry.

Nozawa stood firm. “I’m sorry, ma’am, but I have my orders. The captain wants you beamed to sickbay. You’re injured.”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake, I just wrenched my shoulder.”

She dismissed him and made to move forward again, but Nozawa sidestepped into her path. Pointing to her left side, he said, “You’re bleeding, ma’am.”

She looked down, seeming to see the bloody slash in her snowsuit for the first time. “Oh, hell,” she said, swaying in place. Nozawa took her good arm and tried to support her, but she shook him off irritably and turned around, stumbling back to the transporter pad. Nozawa moved to the control board and hurriedly set the coordinates. As he engaged the transporter, he looked up to see icy green eyes boring holes through him. “Find her,” she said, just before the beam took her.

When the hum of the transporter faded, Nozawa rubbed the back of one hand over his forehead and let out a long breath. He hadn’t seen anything like that in a long time. Captain Janeway was famous for having a will of solid duranium, but he bet she’d met her match in Lynne Hamilton. If those two ever got angry at each other, he didn’t even want to be on the same ship.
Sick with fear, Janeway just managed to keep herself from running as she made her way to deck five. She almost hadn’t recognized Lynne’s voice on that emergency call, and to hear that she was alive but injured—well, that could cover any number of horrible scenarios.

The sickbay doors barely got out of her way in time as she came striding in. She hesitated for just a second, seeing the still form of her partner lying on a biobed. A strong sense of déjà vu struck as she remembered the last time she had walked in here to find Lynne on the same bed. Except then Lynne hadn’t been the most important person in the world to her.

Steeling herself, she stepped up to the Doctor, who was busy with Lynne’s left side. Lynne was awake and staring up at the ceiling, and Janeway immediately felt her panic ease. Lynne turned her head.

“Kathryn! Have you found her yet?” Her voice was tight.

Janeway shook her head. “No, we’re still looking. But we can’t locate a comm badge signal.” She didn’t tell Lynne the worst part of it—that they couldn’t even find a Klingon life sign on the planet. Barring a miracle, they’d lost B’Elanna. But Janeway wouldn’t even begin to accept that yet; not before they’d exhausted every possible option.

Shifting her position slightly, she looked around the Doctor to see what he was working on. A deep, bloody gash ran the length of Lynne’s
abdomen from her breast to her waist, and she could see the dull white gleam of bone. Sucking in her breath, Janeway noticed the yellow snowsuit lying on the floor next to the bed. It was soaked in blood. Feeling her fear rising again, she moved around to Lynne’s right side and reached over to pick up her hand.

“Don’t!” Lynne growled. Startled, Janeway stopped and stared at her partner. “I’m sorry,” Lynne said in a more normal tone of voice. “I’d love for you to hold my hand, but that’s the wrong one.”

Without looking up from his surgery, the Doctor said, “Lynne has torn just about every ligament possible in her right shoulder, Captain. But I can’t do anything about that until I’ve repaired this.”

“And what is that?” asked Janeway.

“A shrapnel wound.”

“A what!” Janeway couldn’t believe her ears.

Lynne answered her. “We were attacked, Kathryn. Some ship tried to blow us off the top of the mountain.”

Janeway looked at Lynne’s white face in complete astonishment, then went very calm as she shoved her personal feelings deep down and allowed her command training to take over. Activating her comm badge, she said, “Janeway to Tuvok. We may have a combat situation on the planet. Inform the search team and issue phasers. Cancel shore leave and recall all non-search personnel to the ship immediately. And Tuvok, I need you in sickbay as soon as you can get here.” She and Tuvok were the only senior staff members on board; all of the others had taken the opportunity for shore leave. Tuvok, as always, had volunteered to stay aboard in exchange for compensatory time at a time-and-a-half rate. Chakotay had also offered to stay, but Janeway had sent him off, knowing she wouldn’t be able to relax until Lynne had returned. Now she was grateful she’d stayed behind.

She turned to Lynne and said, “As soon as Tuvok gets here, I’m going to ask you to tell us exactly what happened. Every detail. Do you think you can do that?”

“Yes,” said Lynne. “But there’s not much to tell.”

“There may be more than you think. Doctor, what exactly is Lynne’s condition?”

“She’s going to feel some residual pain,” said the Doctor. “Other than that she’ll be fine. This shrapnel wound is deep, but it didn’t reach any
internal organs. It looks much worse than it is. Her only other injury is her shoulder, which at this point is barely connected to her arm. And she lost a great deal of blood, which is being replaced right now.” He straightened up, took a tissue regenerator off the tray, and bent over Lynne again.

Janeway nodded, though the Doctor couldn’t see her. “Thank you, Doctor.” She looked up as the sickbay doors opened to admit Tuvok, and wasted no time in informing him of the situation. “Lynne and B’Elanna were attacked by a ship at the summit of the mountain.”

Tuvok moved to Janeway’s side and looked down at Lynne. “Was it a Tsian ship?” he asked.

Lynne shook her head. “No idea. I didn’t even know it wasn’t one of our shuttles until B’Elanna said so.”

“Tell us what happened from the beginning,” said Janeway. Lynne looked from her to Tuvok and took a deep breath.

“Okay. We got to the summit of the mountain late this morning. We sat there for probably two hours, just admiring the view, when I saw what I thought was one of our shuttles flying in to pick us up. It was coming from the north. I couldn’t figure why you’d do a shuttle pickup instead of a beam out, and while I was puzzling over that B’Elanna said, ‘It’s not ours.’ I turned toward her, and I remember her starting to say something, and then she suddenly threw herself at me. I thought she’d gone nuts. We both went over the edge, and then everything went white. I realized later that the ship, whatever it was, had blown up the mountain top. If B’Elanna hadn’t pushed us off the summit, we’d both be dead now.”

She stopped and looked back at Janeway, pain etched in her features. Janeway nodded encouragingly, and Lynne continued.

“When the summit blew, snow and ice went everywhere, and I felt something sting my side. I thought it was an ice shard, but it must have been some piece of whatever it was that hit the mountain, because the Doctor says there were metal fragments in the wound. Anyway, I didn’t have time to worry about it, because B’Elanna and I smashed into the mountain slope and started sliding. We got separated right away, but I still had my ice axe in my hand. I managed to roll over onto the axe and start braking, but the pick hit something and the jolt almost tore the axe right out of my hands. I felt something give in my shoulder, and came to a stop just barely holding on to the axe with one hand. I managed to dig my crampons into the snow just enough to support myself while I switched
hands on the axe. That was when I realized that the roar in my ears was an avalanche coming off the summit. The explosion had destabilized the snow layers, and everything was flying past me—I was just out of its path. I got my coat unzipped and hit the control for the mask-to-ship comm system. Then I looked up and saw that the shuttle or whatever it was had banked around and was coming back.”

“Do you think the pilot saw you?” asked Tuvok.

“I don’t think anyone could have missed me. These suits are designed for visibility, and we were the only things up there besides snow.”

“Were you able to observe the ship?”

“Oh yeah, I saw it up close and personal. It didn’t look at all like one of our shuttles; I don’t know how I could have mistaken it at first. This ship had the aerodynamic design of an atmospheric craft. It was white, and there were two black stripes running diagonally across each wingtip.”

“Then what happened?” asked Janeway.

“I looked around for B’Elanna, but I couldn’t see her anywhere.” Lynne paused, looking at Janeway with tears in her eyes. “If she wasn’t caught in the avalanche…” Her voice trembled, and she shook her head. “Then she must still have been falling. I remember she’d put her axe down at the summit because it was flat and we were just sitting there. She couldn’t possibly have stopped her fall without it. So I just prayed that the transporter could get her and called for an emergency beam out. And now I’m here, and she’s not.” Lynne looked haunted. “It’s my fault. I should have made her hold on to her axe. But we were done climbing, and the summit was so flat and safe—I just got lazy. I’m so sorry, Kathryn.” The tears spilled over.

“Lynne, you can’t blame yourself. It’s not your fault that you were attacked.”

“The captain is correct, Ms. Hamilton. There is no logic in castigating yourself for the actions of another,” said Tuvok. But Lynne just closed her eyes as the tears continued to flow.

The Doctor straightened up from Lynne’s side, which was now sealed almost seamlessly, and moved around the bed. Both Janeway and Tuvok stepped out of his way. “Don’t bother appealing to Lynne’s logic right now, Commander,” he said as he prepared the shoulder for surgery. “She’s in shock and on a considerable amount of pain suppression compounds. She may not be alert for much longer.”
“Ms. Hamilton,” said Tuvok, “I have a scan of the mountain here. It will aid our search efforts if you can show me where you think Lieutenant Torres might be.”

Lynne opened her eyes and focused, with apparent effort, on the tricorder that Tuvok held in front of her. Tuvok pointed to a small dot on the screen, just below the summit, and said, “This was your location when we beamed you out. Where should we focus our search?”

After several moments, Lynne pointed to the screen and said, “There. I couldn’t see her from where I was, so she must have already fallen beyond this point. Start looking below this elevation. And if she was caught in the avalanche, she would probably have been carried even further down.” She let her arm fall back and closed her eyes once more.

“Doctor, did you retain any of the metal fragments found in Lynne’s wound?” asked Tuvok.

“Of course,” said the Doctor, waving a hand toward a table near the biobed. “They’re in that tray.”

Tuvok took the tray to a scanner a few meters away, speaking into his comm badge as he went. Janeway stayed where she was, watching the Doctor work and thinking hard. “Lynne,” she asked, “did you see anyone at all during the five days you climbed? Or any aircraft flights overhead?”

“No,” said Lynne, her eyes still shut.

“So either you were under surveillance without knowing it, or someone that we informed of your climb set this up,” mused Janeway, almost to herself.

“The only people who knew about it besides us were T’sin Lessia and her minister of lands,” said Lynne. “I gave the minister the exact dates of the climb. I even gave her the expected time of arrival at the summit. But I think we got there a bit early.” She was beginning to mumble.

Both Janeway and Tuvok swiveled their heads to stare at Lynne, who remained oblivious. Then they looked at each other. Tuvok left the scanner and walked up to the biobed. “Ms. Hamilton,” he said, “do you remember what time you told the minister of lands you’d be at the summit?”

Lynne’s voice was faint and her speech was slowing. “Yes...I remember because it was so hard to convert ship time to Tsian time. I finally said we’d be there when the sun was directly overhead, which was about 1300 ship time. But I think we got there a little after 1100...” Her voice faded
to nothing, and the Doctor stopped his work long enough to glance at the readout above the biobed.

“She’s unconscious,” he said. “You’re not going to get any more out of her for a few hours.”

“Thank you, Doctor. Please inform me the moment she regains consciousness.” Janeway and Tuvok walked a few paces away, leaving the Doctor to his work. Janeway stopped and looked at her security chief. “So the ship arrived at exactly the time that the minister of lands expected them to be at the summit.”

Tuvok nodded. “I cannot, at this moment, conceive of a reason for the minister of lands to jeopardize a beneficial alliance with us. The government has indicated great satisfaction with the meetings between our engineering staff and theirs, even though the amount of information we are giving them is minor. Perhaps there is an element within the Tsian culture that does not approve of this alliance, and somehow obtained the information regarding Ms. Hamilton’s climb.”

“Maybe,” said Janeway doubtfully. “Tuvok, there’s something else you should know. It may not have any bearing on this, but I got the distinct impression at the banquet that the Tsians don’t like endothermic species. Or at least, the t’sin does not care for them. I forgot all about it, but now I’m wondering if this isn’t about the alliance at all, but about prejudice.”

“Anything is possible until evidence rules it out,” said Tuvok. “I will keep your suggestion in mind. The question now is, how much do we trust the Tsian government as we investigate this incident? I would like to compare my scan of the metal fragments from Ms. Hamilton’s wound with Tsian armaments. Should we give the scan to the government, or try to make the comparisons ourselves?”

“Both,” said Janeway. “We can’t proceed under the assumption that the Tsian government is guilty—but we can certainly nurse a healthy suspicion. I’ll contact T’sin Lessia and start things in motion. I’ll be most interested to see her reaction to the news.” She looked at the quiet, pale face of her partner. “Has the search team left yet?”

“They should be on the mountain now,” answered Tuvok. He touched his comm badge. “Tuvok to Lieutenant Baxter.”

“Baxter here.”

“What is the status of the search team?”

“We’re two hundred meters below the summit and preparing to descend the north
face. Commander, the avalanche covered a very large area. Tricorders aren’t picking up anything, and we’re using a standard search pattern. The wind is coming up and Mr. Kim tells us it will snow soon, so we don’t have long before any tracks are covered. This could take a while.”

“It will take as long as necessary, Lieutenant. Report to me when you have learned anything. Tuvok out.”

Janeway closed her eyes for a moment. B’Elanna Torres was an engineering genius, an excellent officer, and a friend. She simply could not believe that the vibrant woman was gone. And she wouldn’t believe it, either, until there was no other option. Opening her eyes, she started for the sickbay doors. “Keep me posted the moment anything happens, Tuvok. I’ll be in my ready room.”

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The scaly blue face of T’sin Lessia looked out at Janeway from the viewscreen on her ready room monitor. “I am shocked beyond words to hear this news, Captain Janeway. It saddens me to know of the fear and grief you must be experiencing for your lost officer. And I feel deeply responsible for this event.”

“How are you responsible?” asked Janeway.

“Because I gave your people permission to climb that mountain. I never believed that the Fallons would attempt to claim that area as part of their territory, but apparently they have.”


The alien leader lifted her shoulders and dropped them again, the Tsian version of a sigh. “A race that shares our planet. They are a very primitive species, and live in subterranean villages that never see the sun.” An expression of distaste crossed her face. “They are ignorant, dirty and lazy, and have resisted all of our attempts to raise them from the filth in which they live. We have offered civilization, education and compassion, and have been met only with violence. Though they are subterranean, they do have terrestrial and aerial combat capabilities, and will attack without warning anyone who crosses into their territory. We understood their territorial boundaries to be some distance from the mountain which your mate asked to climb, but apparently our intelligence was flawed. Please accept my most sincere regrets, Captain Janeway. Your
mate and your officer were the victims of a terrible mistake on the part of
the Fallons, and a tragic lack of information on our part.”

“T’sin Lessia, why did you not mention this race earlier?”

“There was no need. The Fallons would not be interested in an alliance
with a race as courageous and advanced as yourselves. They would only
wish to know what they could take from you. I saw no need to expose you
to that—I wished for you to have a good impression of our world.”

Janeway took a moment to process this new and unexpected informa-
tion. “I see. Now that we’re aware of them, would it be possible for you to
send me an image of a Fallon atmospheric ship?”

“Yes, I will contact my minister of defense. She will send the informa-
tion immediately. Captain Janeway, please inform me if there is anything
else that we can do to assist you. The Tsian people will be horrified to
learn of this; they have taken your people to their hearts. We will all burn
saphas for the safe return of your officer, and the full recovery of
your mate.”

“Thank you, T’sin Lessia. I am grateful for your help and for your good
wishes.”

“It is my pleasure, Captain Janeway. I hope our next communication
will bring better tidings.”

Janeway signed off and slouched back in her chair, her mind churning
with the various possibilities. As she went over her conversation with the
alien leader, she suddenly sat bolt upright. T’sin Lessia had said that the
Fallons lived in underground villages that never saw the sun.

They were warm blooded.

She got up from her chair and walked to the upper level of her ready
room, stretching her arms over her head to get the kinks out. Calling up a
cup of coffee from the replicator, she stood in front of her viewports,
gazing at the planet below while sipping her drink. While it was true that
cold blooded organisms often lived underground, they usually did so
during times of inactivity. Most active underground dwellers were
mammals. She was nearly certain that the Fallons were, as well.

T’sin Lessia’s description of the Fallons explained her reaction when
she’d realized that Humans were warm blooded. It was obvious that the
Tsians and the Fallons existed in a state of mutual hatred. Janeway shook
her head. In her experience, few races were actually as low as the t’sin had
portrayed the Fallons to be. There was probably a good deal of prejudice
here. She needed to sort out truth from prejudice, and she needed some way to contact the Fallons. If they had in fact mistaken Lynne and B’Elanna for Tsians, they might be willing to assist in the recovery efforts. But there was still that rather unbelievable coincidence about the timing of the attack. Something just wasn’t adding up. Was it possible that someone in the Tsonian government had tipped off the Fallons? And if so, why?

Her thoughts were interrupted by a hail from the bridge. “Tuvok to Captain Janeway.”

“Go ahead.”

“Captain, we have received a message from the Tsonian government. I’m routing it to your terminal now.”

“Thank you, Tuvok.” She returned to her desk, accessing the new message. It was from the Tsonian minister of defense, and included a visual of a Fallon air fighter. Janeway pulled up the visual, stared for a moment, and touched her comm badge. “Janeway to Tuvok. Report to my ready room.”

Moments later Tuvok stood before her, and Janeway wordlessly turned her terminal for him to see. On the screen was an image of a white ship with two black diagonal stripes across the tip of each wing.
The Fallon fighter filled the screen of the conference room terminal, providing a menacing backdrop for the officers gathered there. The meeting was smaller than usual: both B'Elanna’s and Tom’s chairs were empty, providing mute reminders of the situation. As the crew had returned from their shore leave, Janeway had taken Tom aside to give him the news. To his credit, he’d shown no reaction other than going pale. Then he’d offered to fly aerial support for the search team. Janeway had given her permission, knowing that the team could have no more highly qualified or determined pilot. With both Tom and B'Elanna gone, the conference room seemed empty and quiet.

“Do you believe that the Fallons are responsible, Captain?” asked Chakotay.

“I have little reason not to believe it. The Tsians have no motive to betray us that I can see. Even if they are prejudiced against endotherms, that alone would not explain an action so counterproductive to their own interests. However, I’ve certainly ruled nothing out.”

“I have contacted T'zak Vestin and given him the scans of the metal fragments,” said Tuvok. “He has agreed to compare them to scans of Tsian armaments, although he naturally feels that this is a useless exercise. He is fully in agreement that the Fallons are responsible, and was quite insulted that we would suggest otherwise. I was able to convince him that
we are simply investigating all options, and that while we would never accuse his government of duplicity, no government can control the actions of all of its citizens. I further added that if any Tsian were to act independently of the government, and if those actions were detrimental to the interests of that government, he might wish to know about it. He saw the logic in this and agreed to run the scans. I expect his results by early tomorrow.”

“Very good, Tuvok.” Janeway was grateful for Tuvok’s logic, especially in situations like this. “What about our own scans?”

“We have located a Tsian military base housing a munitions warehouse, and are preparing a short visit during their night watch. You should have our report by 0800.”

“Thank you. Have you heard from the search team?”

“The team has nothing to report, Captain. They have searched an area one thousand meters in diameter without finding any sign of B’Elanna. Tom has completed an aerial survey of the entire mountain from the summit down to eight thousand meters; his scans have also produced nothing. He is continuing to scan to the base of the mountain.”

“I don’t get it. How could she just disappear like that?” asked Harry. “Why aren’t we at least finding her comm badge? Even if it’s no longer functional, scans should still be able to locate the metal alloys.”

“Unless,” said Seven, “the physical scans are set for the complete comm badge, rather than its components.”

There was a short silence as everyone in the room looked at Seven, then at each other.

“Seven, Harry, get on that right now. Set parameters for scans for every component and alloy in a comm badge and send them to the search team as soon as possible,” said Janeway. “And while you’re at it, send scan parameters for any metals in B’Elanna’s gear, right down to the zipper in her snowsuit.”

“Yes, Captain,” said Harry, while Seven nodded and rose. As the doors closed behind them, the feeling of emptiness in the conference room grew more pronounced.

Chakotay looked at Janeway. “Do you really think that will help?” he asked gently. “Any impact that could break up a comm badge would almost certainly have killed B’Elanna.”

Janeway rubbed the bridge of her nose; her headache was threatening
to overwhelm her. “I don’t know, Chakotay. Maybe I’m grasping at straws. But I’m not leaving her. We’re either going to find her, or we’re going to find out what happened.”

“Have you heard back from T’sin Lessia?” asked Tuvok.

Janeway looked up again. “No. She’s in a meeting with the ministers and can’t be disturbed, or so I’m told. Her assistant said that such meetings often run all night, so we may not hear from her until tomorrow. My hope is that when we do hear from her, she’ll have some way of contacting the Fallons.”

“Then I guess we just wait and hope for the best,” said Chakotay. “We’ll find her, Captain.”

“Yes,” said Janeway in tones that allowed for no doubt. “We will.”

At 1830 Janeway got the call she’d been waiting for—Lynne was awake and asking for her. She turned the bridge over to Chakotay and made her way to deck five for the second time that day.

Entering sickbay, she found Lynne standing by the biobed, fully dressed and with her arm in a sling. The Doctor was just closing his tricorder. “Doctor,” said Janeway as she walked up, her eyes on Lynne. “How is she?” Lynne met her gaze but said nothing. Janeway could see the lines of tension in her face.

“Despite her best efforts to tear her own arm off, I’ve managed to get everything put back together,” said the Doctor. “She’ll need to keep the arm stable for three days while the ligaments finish healing. Other than that she’s ready to be released.”

“Kathryn, I’m ready to go,” said Lynne.

“All right. I’ll walk you to your quarters.”

“No, not to my quarters,” Lynne corrected impatiently. “I’m ready to go down to the planet.”

“For what?”

Lynne looked at her like she’d grown a second head. “To join the search team.”

Janeway should have expected this—of course she would want to be involved. But it wasn’t possible. “You’re injured,” she said, pointing out the obvious.
“Not anymore. The Doctor has fixed me up, and even with one arm I can still help out. Hell, I used to climb with a friend who’d lost an arm in the Vietnam War. It never slowed him down.”

“Will you excuse us, please?” Janeway asked the Doctor. An uncomfortable silence settled over the room as she watched him walk into his office, aware of Lynne’s eyes on her face. The moment his door closed, she faced her partner and said, “I know you want to help. But you’ve already done everything you can, and there’s nothing else for you to do at the moment. We have a search team down there right now, thanks to the information you gave us, and they’re doing everything possible to find B’Elanna. There’s no need for you to risk further injury.”

“Yes there is! I’ve never left a member of a climbing team behind, and I’m not about to start now.”

“You didn’t leave her behind—”

“Of course I did. I’m here, safe and sound, and she’s down there in god knows what condition, and you haven’t found her.”

It almost sounded like an accusation.

“We haven’t found her yet,” Janeway began, but Lynne was having none of it.

“It’s been over five hours! Five critical hours, and you’re coming up empty. I’ve got more experience than anyone on this ship in mountain search and rescue. You need me down there. Please let me go!”

Janeway had never seen her so agitated. Putting a gentle hand on her good arm, she said, “You certainly do have experience in mountain search and rescue; no one is questioning that. What you don’t have experience in, or even any training for, is combat. And this is now a combat situation. If it were just a matter of search and rescue, you could probably talk me into sending you even with your injury, but it’s not. I simply cannot send you down. The risk is too great. I’m sorry.”

Lynne shook her hand off and took a step back. “Goddammit, I am sick of you telling me what I can and cannot do! If I were home I’d have people calling to beg me to join this search. But all you can think of is that I haven’t been through whatever Starfleet training you need to carry a phaser. Well, fuck that! You know I’m a good shot, you know I’ve got the mountaineering experience, and you know I’m more qualified than anyone down there for the search. I’m willing to take the risk. Don’t you care about finding B’Elanna?”
“Of course I care!” Janeway was shocked that she could even ask the question. “Don’t forget, I’ve known B’Elanna far longer than you, and she’s my friend too. But the question isn’t whether I care about her, it’s whether I’m justified in making the decision to send someone into a combat situation when that person is not trained to handle it. And since I already have a team of personnel there who are trained to handle it, I can’t make that justification.” She stopped, realizing that her voice had gotten hard. With an effort, she softened her tone to add, “You’re a civilian, not a soldier. It doesn’t matter if you’re willing to take the risk. I’m not willing to let you. You have great courage and loyalty, but the situation is simply too dangerous—and since you’ve never been in combat, I don’t think you realize how dangerous it is. Please accept that I know what I’m doing, and I’m making the best decision I can under the circumstances.”

Lynne threw her good arm into the air with an expression of disgust. “Well, that’s just it, isn’t it? It’s your decision, and you’re not willing to let me. Seems like you haven’t been willing to let me do much around here at all. I had to fight you for away mission duty, and I’m having to fight you now.” She stepped into Janeway’s personal space and glared at her. “Tell me, what was the point of all that maneuvering to keep me off the crew roster? You treat me like a crewmember anyway. You act like you control me!”

Janeway had had a long and very trying day, her fear for both Lynne and B’Elanna had pushed her emotions to the limit, and having Lynne in her face right now was just a little more than she could handle. She met Lynne’s glare with one of her own and spoke in a tone of icy calm. “I do control you. You’re a passenger on this ship, and I’m the captain. Get used to it. Now I’ve tried to explain to you why I’ve made my decision—which is more than I would do for any crewmember—but you just won’t hear me. So I don’t see the need to continue this discussion. You can return to your quarters whenever you’re ready.”

She turned on her heel and walked out, but she hadn’t been fast enough to avoid seeing the look of shock on Lynne’s face. As the doors shut behind her, her step faltered and her shoulders slumped briefly. Then she held her head high and strode down the corridor. She was the captain—and she was alone.
Seven of Nine had been in Astrometrics for most of the night, running scans of her own. The search team had been recalled just before sunset, when the predicted storm had made any further activities too dangerous. Seven felt that it was a great waste of time to cease search efforts for an entire night. She had no great fondness for B’Elanna Torres, but the engineer was an extremely valuable member of the crew, and vital to the efficient functioning of Voyager. She also knew that Captain Janeway was greatly troubled by the situation, and Seven was never so motivated to accomplish the impossible as when it affected the captain.

As yet another scan returned a zero result, the doors to Astrometrics swished open. Seven turned, expecting to see Janeway—since no one else was likely to visit her at this hour—and was therefore surprised when Lynne Hamilton walked in. Her friend was pale and agitated, and had one arm bound in a sling.

“Lynne,” said Seven by way of greeting. “It’s good to see that you have recovered.”

“Thanks, Seven. I’m, ah…I’m here to ask for your help.”

Noting the stumbling speech, Seven said, “I would be glad to assist you in any way I can. What do you require?”

Lynne hesitated, looking at the image of the Tsian mountain that was currently displayed on the giant viewscreen. “I need to go there,” she said.
“To the mountain?”
Lynne nodded.
“I do not understand. I am not authorized to give you permission to depart the ship; only Captain Janeway can do that. Why do you not ask her?”
“I already have. She said no.”
Seven was growing more confused by the minute. “In that case, I do not see how I can assist you. What is it that you were hoping I could do?”
Lynne began pacing around the room. “I was hoping you could help me get off the ship without Kathryn’s permission. I know,” she said, forestalling Seven’s objection, “you don’t think it’s a good idea. But I have to do it.” She turned to face her friend. “Seven, Kathryn is letting her personal feelings for me get in the way of finding B’Elanna. She’s worried about me getting hurt, but the fact is, that search team spent the whole day on the mountain without seeing so much as a shadow of a Fallon ship. And they found nothing.” Her voice was rising. “I’m more qualified than anyone on this ship to find B’Elanna by visual search. Obviously what they’re doing isn’t working. I know you and Harry ran scans all evening.”
“I am still running them,” said Seven. “And I have still had no success.”
“My point exactly. If an entire search team, a pilot flying aerial support, and you and Harry running scans can’t find B’Elanna, then maybe it’s time to let me go down there and practice some good old-fashioned intuitive searching. I can’t help the team from here. I’ve got to get down on that mountain, see the terrain, and get a feel for it. Seven, I can find her.” Lynne’s voice broke, and Seven was surprised to a tear sliding down her face. Impatiently Lynne wiped it away. “But I can’t get off this goddamned ship without help. I feel like a rat in a trap. Nobody will transport me without Kathryn’s permission, and even if I could figure out how to transport myself, I’d be detected in an instant. I know you’ve got the technical knowledge to disguise a transport. Will you send me?”
Seven looked wonderingly at her. “I have never seen you weep. Nor have I ever seen you this agitated.”
“You’ve never seen me out of my mind with frustration and worry, either,” said Lynne tightly. “It’s killing me to be trapped here when I know I can help. If B’Elanna is still alive somehow, every hour that passes makes
it less likely she’ll stay that way. I can’t bear to just sit in my quarters, watching the chronometer and waiting for news. I have to go. Please, Seven—I’m begging you to help me. Please send me down, and disguise the transport so that I have as long as possible before discovery. No one needs to know you were involved; the risk is entirely mine.”

Seven considered her friend’s words. She understood Lynne’s feelings of entrapment; she herself had often felt that way when Janeway made a decision she didn’t agree with. And it was quite possible that the captain was making a mistake in not allowing Lynne to go. Unlike most of the crew, Seven did not view Janeway as infallible, and she was quite willing to challenge or defy her decisions if they were illogical or incorrect. Lynne’s skill and experience could improve their chances of success, and if there was any statistical likelihood that Lynne was capable of accomplishing what the rest of the crew could not, then it was foolish to allow emotion and personal attachment to prevent the safe return of Voyager’s chief engineer. Even if Lynne found nothing but a body, that would still end the search and prevent possible harm from befalling additional members of the crew.

Of course, she didn’t believe for a moment Lynne’s assertion about the risk being entirely hers. Janeway would know instantly who had masked Lynne’s transport. If she helped Lynne, there would be a price to pay for it.

She made her decision. “I will assist you.”

Lynne looked relieved and astonished at the same time. “God, thank you! I can’t tell you what this means to me.”

But Seven wasn’t finished. “There is a condition.”

“Name it. I’ll do anything I can.”

“I will accompany you.”

“What?” She shook her head. “No. You can’t do that. You know I’m going to be in the shit house for this when Kathryn finds out. It would be even worse for you—you’re under her command. She’ll skin you alive. This isn’t your fight; don’t risk it.”

Seven had no idea what a shit house was, and filed the term in her eidetic memory for later research. She also found it highly unlikely that Janeway would ever attempt to remove her epidermis, and put the wild suggestion down to Lynne’s emotional state. “The welfare of B’Elanna Torres is important to everyone on Voyager,” she said. “Finding her
certainly is ‘my fight,’ as you put it. In addition, you yourself have told me that no one should climb alone. I assume that you do not exclude yourself from this rule; therefore you need a partner on this search. My offer is nonnegotiable. Either you allow me to accompany you, or you find someone else to defy the captain’s orders and disguise a transport.”

Lynne stood for a moment with her mouth open. “Jesus, Seven, you’re worse than me. And I don’t have time to talk you out of being so stubborn, even if it were possible. All right, I agree to your condition. If you want to put your butt on the line, I guess that’s your choice.”

Her demeanor changed dramatically as she stepped up to the viewscreen; now she was all business. She pointed to a set of coordinates on the scan of the mountain. “That’s where I want to go. I’m betting she fell down this face. The search team won’t see us here, either, because they’ll be starting over here when they resume the search tomorrow. And the storm’s supposed to blow out by 0300, so things should be nicely settled down at first light.” She looked back at Seven. “I’ve been checking the mission logs—very handy for learning what the hell is going on around here. Now, I can get the gear together for both of us. We should transport out at first light. Can you be ready by then?”

“Yes,” said Seven. “Come to Cargo Bay Two at 0430. I will do what I can to prevent our discovery, but we will likely have three to four hours at most. My absence from Astrometrics at the start of the shift will almost certainly be noticed.”

Lynne nodded. “Then we’ll just have to make the most of our time.”

 Atatürk 0440, a transporter beam deposited Lynne and Seven several hundred meters below the summit of the Tsian mountain. Both were in harness and roped together. Lynne looked around in the early morning light, saying nothing as she used a rangefinding scope to scan the mountain below them. Seven waited easily. Unlike most Humans, she was comfortable with silence.

After several minutes, Lynne turned. Her voice came through the comm in Seven’s mask. “We’re going to start over there.” Seven followed Lynne’s pointing finger, nodded, and set off in her friend’s footsteps. Both women carried ice axes; Lynne had made it abundantly clear as they were
packing up that Seven should never let go of hers. Seven had accepted the axe with one hand and held out a phaser with the other. Lynne had hefted the phaser thoughtfully, then pocketed it. “I'll just think of Velocity if I have to use it,” she'd said.

As they searched, Lynne stopped often to pull out the scope and scan in a 360-degree circle. “Things tend to look different when you look back at them,” she explained. But nothing looked different enough; the hours passed by with no clues as to B'Elanna’s whereabouts.

At 0715 Lynne stopped once more and began scanning. Her slow sweep came to a halt as she faced upslope. “Seven, do you see that?” Her voice was excited as she held out the scope.

Seven had some difficulty adjusting the scope with her heavy gloves, but soon had it focused on a faint line in the snowy slope. “What is it?” she asked.

“A crevasse, and we walked right past it. Come on!”

A ten-minute scramble found the two women at the edge of the crevasse. It was deep, and this early in the morning the sunlight did not penetrate it. Seven activated her tricorder. “Scans show nothing,” she said. Then she paused. “No, that is incorrect. There is a high concentration of a metal alloy than I have not seen elsewhere on this slope. It is not natural.”

Lynne looked at her. “Well, it's the best lead we've had so far. I'm going down. Give me the pack.”

Seven obligingly shrugged off her pack—she had refused to allow Lynne to carry any gear—and opened it.

With her good hand, Lynne selected an ice screw mount, looped a knotted rope through it, and held it against the ice at the lip of the crevasse. A flick of her thumb activated the pressurized mount, driving the screw deep into the ice. She looked up at Seven and grinned. “I love this gear,” she said.

Getting the rope through her harness was a little more problematic with only one arm, and Lynne didn’t protest when Seven completed the task for her. A few minutes later, having donned a headlamp, she began the descent with her injured arm around the rope at chest level and her good hand below her as the brake. Pausing a few feet below the lip, she looked up at Seven. “If you don’t hear from me in ten minutes, call the ship.” Seven nodded and waited as Lynne smoothly descended into the darkness. Soon all she could see was Lynne’s headlamp beam, getting...
smaller and smaller. Eventually it ceased diminishing and the rope went slack. Seven heard Lynne’s voice in her mask, but the comm signal was oddly distorted.

“Seven, get down here.”

Seven pulled on her own harness and headlamp, slid both of their ice axes through the straps on the pack face, and slung the pack onto her back. Clipping into the rope, she began her descent. After six meters she noticed that the ice gave way to solid rock. It seemed odd that a crevasse would be positioned directly over an open crack in the rock, and she paused for a moment to run a tricorder scan. The wall was what it appeared to be; however, she could only scan the surface. The rock contained high concentrations of an element that disrupted any attempts to scan deeper. Such an element would also disrupt a comm signal, which explained the distortion when Lynne had called her. She resumed her descent and found Lynne waiting for her when she arrived at the bottom.

“Look,” Lynne said, pointing. Seven turned to see a metal door set into the rock. She detached her harness from the rope and both women moved to the door, which presented a seamless surface.

“Can you get it open?” asked Lynne.

Seven passed her tricorder over the door. “Yes. It uses an electronic release.” She programmed the tricorder to emit the required frequency and activated it. The door slid open silently, revealing a small antechamber and a second door. Both women stepped inside. A quick scan revealed that a slightly different frequency was required for the second door. As it slid open, a rush of air blew past them. The long, well-lit passageway beyond was pressurized.

“I believe we should contact the ship,” said Seven. “But the substrate is blocking comm signals. We’ll have to return to the surface.” Lynne nodded, and the women stepped toward the outside door—which abruptly slid closed.

Seven transmitted the release frequency, but this time it had no effect. She ran her tricorder over the door again and turned to Lynne.

“The power supply to this door has been severed, and there are no controls nearby. I cannot restore the power, nor can I open it manually.”

Lynne looked alarmed. “Does that mean we’re being watched?”

“Not necessarily. It could operate on a timer once opened. If left open
indefinitely, the pressurized air in the corridors would eventually drain out."

The air was now still, and no sounds could be heard. Seven tested the air with her tricorder and then removed her mask. Lynne pulled hers off as well, and said quietly, “Our crampons.” A few minutes later Seven shouldered the pack once more, detecting the weight difference with two masks and two sets of crampons added to the load. She stepped forward and immediately stopped when Lynne put a hand on her arm.

“Seven, thank you for coming along. I was an idiot to think I could do this alone.”

Seven looked at her friend in some surprise. “‘Idiot’ is an inappropriate descriptor for you. Your intelligence cannot be questioned. I believe, however, that Captain Janeway would call you ‘stubborn as a mule.’” She raised her eyebrow. “She has occasionally used that phrase to describe me as well.”

“I guess that explains why we’re both here,” said Lynne.

Seven nodded, then drew her phaser. Lynne’s eyes widened, but she said nothing, pulling her own phaser out of her pocket. Cautiously, the two women moved down the steeply angled passage. After descending for several hundred meters, they stopped at a three-way intersection.

“Which way?” asked Lynne softly.

Seven shook her head as she passed the tricorder in front of each opening. “I do not know,” she said. “Something in this rock blocks scans as well as communicators, so the tricorder cannot see any farther than you or I can visually.” Folding the tricorder, she put it back in her pocket. “I suggest we try the steepest passage. It seems logical that areas of importance will be deeper within the mountain.”

They moved into the central passage, arriving five minutes later at another three-way intersection. Once more Seven chose the central opening. This time, however, they only walked fifty meters before finding their path blocked by another door. Seven pulled out her tricorder.

“You will drop what you are holding and turn,” said a voice behind them. Seven stopped her movements, then carefully crouched to deposit her tricorder on the ground, using her body to hide her other hand as she pocketed the phaser. Rising again, she held both hands slightly out from her body, palms down, and slowly pivoted. Lynne had put her phaser on the ground and turned with one arm held out.
Four humanoids faced them from less than ten meters away. Their faces were oval, pale and hairless, and three small openings occupied the space where a nose would be. They wore garments of a shiny material—probably heat reflective, Seven thought, since it was very cold in the passageway—and were all holding weapons of some sort. From what Seven could see, one of them was female and the others were male.

“You,” said one of the males, gesturing toward Lynne. “Hold both arms out where we can see them.”

“I can’t,” said Lynne. “This arm was injured when your people attacked me and my companion at the summit of this mountain.”

The aliens looked at each other, then back at Seven and Lynne. “We have attacked no one,” said the one who had spoken first.

“You are of the race called the Fallons, are you not?” asked Seven.

The leader made a sound that might have been a laugh. “You have been speaking with the Tsians. We do not call ourselves by that foul name. We are proud to be Santori.”

“I did not mean to offend,” said Seven. “We were unaware of the existence of your race until the Tsians mentioned you. They said you were responsible for an aerial strike on my shipmates that took place yesterday afternoon. We lost one of our people in that attack, and have been searching for her ever since. That search is what led us here.”

“The Tsians have been playing with you,” said the leader. “It is exactly like them. They are cowards and not to be trusted. They have a long history of aggression and betrayal, and now they have betrayed you as well.”

The female in the group spoke. “But who are you? No Santori had ever seen your like until yesterday, when the injured one was brought in.”

Seven and Lynne looked at each other. “Is she alive?” asked Lynne quickly.

The leader spoke. “When we found her we thought not, but she breathes still. But you have not answered Lia’s question. Who are you?”

“We are Humans,” said Seven. She tried to think of what the captain would say in a situation such as this. “We are peaceful explorers, and have no quarrel with anyone on this planet. We simply wish to find our lost crewmember and return to our ship.”

Lynne was not so diplomatic. “If the Tsians betrayed us and hurt B’Elanna, then I certainly have a quarrel with them.”
The Santori made a series of noises that Seven was now sure was laughter. Then the leader spoke. “The Tsians make many enemies. If you have a quarrel with them, then we share your quarrel and call you friend. Come, we will take you to your companion. But first you will need to remove your pack.”

Seven shrugged out of her pack and lowered it to the ground. “There is nothing here but tools to aid us in locating and healing our companion,” she said.

“Of course,” said the leader. “I’m sure you will not object if we carry it for you. Step forward.”

Seven and Lynne moved toward the group. The leader made a motion with his hand, and the other two males walked up, weapons at the ready, and frisked the intruders. Seven briefly considered incapacitating their captors, but thought better of it. First of all, she could probably get two of them before anyone got off a shot, but not all four; and secondly, the aliens could lead them to B’Elanna faster than she and Lynne could get there on their own. She stood straight and stiff while the alien patted her pockets. He found Seven’s phaser and pulled it out, showing it to the leader.

“One of your tools?” said the leader in a tone that made his disbelief obvious.

“Our shipmate was attacked on this mountain,” said Seven in even tones. “It would have been unwise to come here unarmed.”

The leader inclined his head, but said nothing as the others finished checking Seven and Lynne. Finding nothing else, they went back toward the door to collect the pack, phaser and tricorder.

“Come,” said the leader, as he and Lia turned and began walking away. Seven and Lynne followed, sandwiched between four armed Santori.

They walked in silence for some time as the aliens took them through several turns and intersections to a bank of lifts. Judging by the amount of time the lift descended, Seven thought they must be going nearly to the base of the mountain. The doors finally opened on a very large room, filled with Santori bustling this way and that, all bent on some apparently critical errand. The arrival of Seven and Lynne, however, caused the aliens nearest them to come to a complete halt and stare in astonishment. Seven was beginning to feel like a particularly fascinating zoo exhibit.

The guards pushed their way through the crowds, and Seven noted the
location of the door through which they exited the room. As they traveled, she was committing each turn to her eidetic memory in anticipation of coming back this way once they found B’Elanna and escaped.

Eventually their captors led them into a hallway lined by many doors on both sides. Stopping in front of one of them, the leader pressed a button and stood back. The door slid open. “You will enter,” he said.

Seven and Lynne stepped through and stopped. There, on a low bed and surrounded by electronic equipment, lay an unconscious B’Elanna.
JANEWAY STOOD in front of Lynne's quarters at 0730, waiting for an answer to her chime. She'd debated about the early hour, but with her shift starting in a few minutes and a long day ahead of her, this was the only time she could count on to speak with Lynne. She'd spent a sleepless night thinking about the situation on the planet, but what her mind came back to over and over again was her last conversation with her partner, and the look of shock she'd seen on Lynne's face just before walking out. Lynne's angry words had torn her apart, and she could not remember ever feeling so lonely before. She hadn't realized how much she'd come to depend on Lynne's support, and to have it suddenly withdrawn at a time when she needed it most was worse than never having it at all.

By the early morning hours she'd finally realized that Lynne was simply lashing out, motivated by her fear for B'Elanna and guilt over what she seemed to think was her role in the accident. And once her own anger had abated somewhat, she was able to see Lynne's point of view and acknowledge that she'd had a perfect right to feel frustrated. She knew that she would feel equally unhappy at not being able to actively help if she were in Lynne's place. That final expression on Lynne's face tore at her heart, and she wanted nothing more than to heal this rift. Both of them had spoken harshly in the emotion of the moment, and she was
hoping that they could reopen the discussion with more love and less recrimination now that they’d each had time to cool down.

But Lynne wasn’t answering. Janeway activated the chime a second time, wondering with some pique how Lynne had managed to fall asleep so soundly while she herself had tossed and turned all night.

When there was no answer to the second chime, Janeway grew concerned and keyed in the code to open the door. Lynne’s quarters were dark and empty, and a quick check of the bedroom showed a bed that had already been made. Frowning, Janeway said, “Computer, locate Lynne Hamilton.”

“Lynne Hamilton is in Cargo Bay Two.”

Talking to Seven about their argument, no doubt. Janeway hesitated, then walked out of Lynne’s quarters and back to the turbolift. A few minutes later she entered the cargo bay to find it equally deserted. Confused, she said, “Computer, locate Lynne Hamilton.”

“Lynne Hamilton is in Cargo Bay Two.”

Janeway looked around with a growing suspicion. “Computer, locate Seven of Nine.”

“Seven of Nine is in Cargo Bay Two.”

If Lynne and Seven were in this bay, she was a Tarellian frog. But just to make sure... “Computer, scan for life signs in Cargo Bay Two.”

“There is one life sign in Cargo Bay Two.”

All of her anger from the previous night came roaring back, with a little extra added in for good measure. Lynne wasn’t capable of fooling the computer. Only a few individuals on Voyager had that level of skill, and of those few, only Seven would have the temerity to actually do it in this situation. If Lynne had talked Seven into getting her onto the mountain, then her lover had gone far beyond the limits. This wasn’t going to be an argument, it was going to be a battle.

She tapped her comm badge. “Janeway to Transporter Room Three.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Scan the mountain for Lynne Hamilton and Seven of Nine, and beam both directly to Cargo Bay Two.”

There was a pause. “They’re not showing up on scans, Captain. I’m widening the scan now.” Another pause while Janeway curled her hands into fists and held them stiffly at her sides.
“I’m sorry, Captain. Scanners don’t detect their comm badges or their life signs anywhere on the planet.”

Janeway closed her eyes and dropped her head. “Keep scanning. Janeway out.” She took a few minutes to get her breathing under control, her anger vanishing as it was buried under a wave of paralyzing fear. Gone? No life signs at all?

They can’t be dead, she thought, her mind refusing to accept it. First B’Elanna, now Lynne and Seven… Then her head snapped up as she made the connection. Dammit—why didn’t I think of that before? She activated her comm badge again. “Janeway to the bridge. Have all senior staff meet me in the conference room immediately.” She looked around one last time and walked out, the clicking of her boot heels echoing in the empty bay.

Once again the conference room held two empty chairs, but this time the mood was different. The day before, Janeway had been just as shaken and bewildered as the rest of them. She had hidden her emotions during the meeting, but Chakotay knew her well enough by now to read the signs. And the signs this morning said that she had replaced bewilderment with wrath. From what she’d just told them, he thought, they might not stay that way once Janeway got through with them.

“So we’re left with the same mystery,” said Harry. “Why can’t our scans detect their life signs or comm badges?”

“They may not have taken their comm badges,” said Chakotay.

“I don’t think they’d do that,” said Janeway, “and besides, the computer isn’t registering their comm badges anywhere on the ship. No, our scans aren’t detecting them—or B’Elanna, for that matter—because we’ve been looking in the wrong place.”

Every pair of eyes in the room were fixed on her. “Do you know where we should be directing our scans, Captain?” asked Tuvok.

“No, but I have a hunch. Do you remember how we were unable to contact you and Lynne while you were mining dilithium?”

Tuvok nodded. “An element in the rock prevented our comm signal from reaching the surface.”

Janeway tapped her comm badge. “Janeway to Ops. Run a scan
directed ten meters below the surface of the Tsian mountain and tell me
the composition of the rock.”

“Yes, Captain.” The seconds ticked by while everyone in the conference
room waited. “Captain, our scanners can’t penetrate. Some component in the
mineral structure is reflecting the scan back.”

“Thank you. Janeway out.” The captain’s expression did not flicker.
“T’sin Lessia said that the Fallons live underground. I think all three of
our shipmates are in Fallon hands, somewhere under the surface of this
planet. So we just need to figure out how to get a scan through that rock,
if possible. If it’s not possible, then we need to set our scans to locate any
non-Tsian life signs on the surface of the planet. The Fallons can’t be
underground all the time, and as soon as one comes to the surface, we’ve
got a lead. Both of these methods will take some time, however, so I’ll
keep pushing to get through to the t’sin in the hopes that she can put us
in touch with the Fallons and save us the effort. Harry, I want you to work
on resetting our scanners to penetrate the rock. Get Lieutenant Carey to
assist you.”

Chakotay saw Tom wince at this, and he sympathized with the pilot.
Normally, that assignment would have gone to B’Elanna.

“Tuvok,” continued Janeway, “I’ll need you to conduct constant scans
for any non-Tsian life signs. And if anyone has any other ideas on how to
locate the Fallons, by all means share them.”

There was a moment’s silence. “I think your plan is the best we have,
Captain,” said Chakotay. “And it’s far more than we had yesterday.”

Janeway nodded, then fixed her gaze on Tuvok. “Do you have a report
on those metal scans?”

“Yes, Captain,” said Tuvok. “Our team infiltrated the base without
incident. Scans show conclusively that the metal fragments in Ms. Hamil-
ton’s wound match the metals in several different Tsian weapons,
including missiles.”

Chakotay watched Janeway’s jaw harden. When she spoke, her voice
lowered the ambient room temperature by several degrees.

“For the moment that information stays in this room. Does everyone
understand their assignments?”

No one seemed willing to risk attracting the captain’s attention by
speaking, and if the situation weren’t so dire Chakotay could almost laugh
at the heads nodding in unison.
“Then let’s get moving on it.”

Over an hour had passed since the morning meeting, and Janeway was still ready to chew a spanner in half. Harry had reported no progress in altering their scans to penetrate the planet’s surface, and Tuvok hadn’t located any Fallons aboveground. Janeway had nothing to distract her from her worry for the three missing women except, of course, her anger. She knew Lynne had been unhappy at her decision, but it had never occurred to her that her partner would actually defy her authority. It was bad enough that Lynne had betrayed her trust, but she’d talked Seven into joining her in the crime. And it was a crime—if she ever got those two back on board in one piece, she’d have to deal with their punishment. At the moment, she was favoring the idea of putting them on duty cleaning the waste reclamation system with sonic toothbrushes. A year or so of that should straighten them out, she thought sourly.

When the call from T’sin Lessia came through to her ready room terminal, she was relieved to have something to do. She activated her terminal with a fervent hope that this would put an end to her forced inaction. There was nothing she hated more than sitting around and waiting.

“Captain Janeway, I received your message,” said the t’sin. “I offer my sincerest apologies that it has taken me so long to respond; our ministers were in meeting all night. Have you found your missing officer yet?”

“No, I’m afraid not. In fact, not only is she still missing, but two more of my crew have now vanished while searching the mountain.”

T’sin Lessia’s blue skin brightened perceptibly, then faded to her normal coloration. It occurred to Janeway that she’d never seen the t’sin’s color change until now. Perhaps she was more adept at controlling it than the other Tsians.

“This is very upsetting news. How is it possible that you have lost two more people? Have there been more attacks?”

“No, not as far as I know. They simply vanished. T’sin Lessia, I have reason to believe that my people are being held by the Fallons in one of their underground villages. We are searching for these villages now, but in
the meantime it’s imperative that I speak with a representative of the Fallon race as soon as possible. Can you arrange for this?”

The t’sin shook her head sorrowfully. “I am sorry, Captain Janeway. We have no diplomatic relations with the Fallons. In fact, we don’t even know where they live. We have never been able to locate their villages; we only know that we’re inside their claimed territory when they attack us.” She paused. “But perhaps, with the technology on your ship, you will have better fortune. If you can locate a Fallon village, I will provide you with an honor guard and a team of negotiators to assist you in your cause. We have been dealing with them for a very long time. We could be of invaluable assistance to you, and I would consider it a favor if you would allow us to help. It would make me feel better about my own role in this tragedy, having given your mate permission to climb within Fallon territory. Please allow us to assist. It is a matter of honor.”

Janeway didn’t think a Tsian team of negotiators would be all that helpful, but it would be impolitic to refuse. “I appreciate your offer, T’sin. Thank you. I’ll contact you when I have any news.”

“I look forward to it with great anticipation,” said the t’sin, smiling. “Good fortune with your search.”

Janeway cut the channel and sat back in her chair. Damn. There went her best hope for a lead, right out the airlock. Now she was reduced to waiting for their own efforts to turn something up. She reached for a PADD and did her best to distract herself with a departmental report. After only a few paragraphs her tenuous concentration was shattered by the intercom.

“Bridge to Captain Janeway. You have an incoming message from the planet. I’m routing it to your terminal.”

“Thank you, Tuvok.” Janeway activated her terminal once again. “T’zak Vestin! It’s good to hear from you. What news do you have for us?” This was a call she’d been anticipating; his report regarding the metal fragment scans would tell her a great deal about the Tsian involvement in the attack. Would he confirm or contradict their own findings?

T’zak Vestin did not look happy. “I do not bear good news, Captain Janeway. And the news I do bear is better spoken to you directly. Is it possible for us to meet on board your ship?”

“Certainly. May we beam you aboard?” The Tsian captain had experi-
enced transport during their four-day tow of the Sovereign, so she did not hesitate to offer it now.

“Yes. I will wait here.”

“It will be only a moment,” Janeway said. She tapped her comm badge. “Janeway to Tuvok. Trace this call to its source and beam T’zak Vestin directly to the conference room.”

“Yes, Captain.” Janeway watched as the t’zak dissolved, then cut the channel. She strode onto the bridge, said, “Tuvok, Chakotay, you’re with me,” and continued on into the conference room without pausing.

Their guest was standing at the conference room viewport, gazing at the planet below. His color was quite pale, and when he turned to face Janeway, the expression on his face was one of sorrow. “Captain Janeway. Thank you for responding so quickly.”

“You’re welcome. Please, have a seat,” said Janeway, as she took her usual chair at the head of the table. T’zak Vestin sat with his back to the viewport, and Tuvok and Chakotay faced him across the table. He began without preamble.

“You must know that when Commander Tuvok asked me to run the scans of those metal fragments, I was quite affronted by the implied insult to Tsian honor.”

“Yes, I was aware of that,” said Janeway. “I was saddened to think that we had insulted you. It was not intentional. You have behaved toward us with the greatest honor.”

“Unfortunately, some of my compatriots have not afforded you the same respect,” said T’zak Vestin. “When your scans arrived, I gave them to Seenoth. Shortly afterward, I received word that the minister of defense wanted to run the comparisons herself, so I sent the scans to the ministry. The report that came back stated that the fragments were from a Fallon weapon.”

Janeway kept her reaction off her face, and hoped that Chakotay was doing the same. Tuvok she didn’t worry about.

“But Seenoth is very efficient,” T’zak Vestin continued. “She had already run the comparisons before the order came from the ministry. Her results contradicted those of the minister of defense, and Seenoth is unlikely to be wrong. Captain, your people were fired on with a Tsian missile.”

Realizing that she’d been holding her breath, Janeway exhaled quietly.
They were finally beginning to get somewhere. She felt relieved to know that at least one Tsian was telling the truth.

“Is it possible that the Fallons have access to Tsian weaponry?” asked Tuvok.

“Yes, it is. And I considered that explanation. But the fact that our minister of defense sent me falsified results made me doubt such a simple conclusion.” T’zak Vestin shifted his gaze to Janeway. “Captain, you may not realize this, but your words at the celebratory banquet saved my career. T’sin Lessia has never supported my rise through the ranks, and her comment about my male aggressiveness was designed to embarrass me before my peers and my superiors. She does not believe that males are qualified to be in positions of leadership. If I were female, my military career would have led me to a ministry by this point in my life. But I am still a t’zak. And if you had not responded to the t’sin’s words as you did, I would be much less—she would have me commanding an intercity shuttle. I owe you a debt of honor for that, and I am repaying that debt now.”

Janeway nodded silently; she had a feeling that any words would be inappropriate for the moment. T’zak Vestin needed to finish what he’d come here to say, and it was obviously difficult for him.

“You were not informed of this after the attack,” he said, “but the Tsian military is in possession of several operational Fallon air fighters. When I received the falsified report, I became suspicious and went to the base where these fighters are kept. The t’zak of that base is a friend; we completed our training together. She told me that one of the fighters had recently been flown on a mission so secret that it was not even recorded in the logs. The mission had been to fly to the tallest mountain at the southern end of the continent, where the pilot would find two Fallons at the summit. She was instructed to destroy the Fallons and return immediately to base. This mission was completed as assigned. I am afraid that my own people attacked your crew.”

Janeway looked at Tuvok. “This certainly explains the coincidence of the timing.”

“It does answer one of our questions,” he acknowledged.

T’zak Vestin’s long chin had sunk to his chest; he appeared the picture of reptilian dejection. Gently, Janeway said, “We understand that it must have been very difficult for you to come here and give us this information.
Your honorable behavior does your race great credit. We will not forget this.”

The Tsian captain raised his head. “My gesture is small compared to the crime that has been committed against you and your people. This situation is much greater in scope than you are aware. Not even the minister of defense could have concealed a mission such as this without approval from higher up in the government, and the only individual higher than a minister is the t’sin. I fear that there is only one conclusion: T’sin Lessia herself ordered the attack on your people. It was a deliberate betrayal of trusted allies. I cannot imagine why she did it, but the dishonor to the Tsian people is almost too great to bear.”

Janeway was shocked to the core by this revelation. As soon as Tuvok had confirmed the scans, it had been obvious that Tsians were involved somehow—but she hadn’t thought this involvement would go all the way to the top. She recalled the t’sin’s exclamations of sorrow and sympathy after the attack, and felt a hot fury burn slowly down her spine to settle at the bottom of her stomach. The t’sin dared to attack Lynne and B’Elanna? After meeting them at the banquet? After laughing with herself and Lynne, and teasing them about their obvious new love? She was so focused on her blind rage that for a moment she forgot where she was. It was T’zak Vestin who brought her back to reality.

“There is one more thing I must tell you. You are not versed in our laws, but you understand the concept of honor very well. Among the Tsians, the crime of attempted murder is punishable by death. When that crime is committed against one member of a legally recognized Tsian couple, the death sentence is carried out by the wronged mate. You will never be able to prove that T’sin Lessia ordered this attack. She is too powerful, and the layers of concealment are too thick. If I were to mention my conclusions to anyone but you, my own life would end shortly afterward. But if you could prove it, you would have the right to claim vengeance. I say this because I wish for you to understand that the t’sin’s actions are not representative of Tsian society and would be universally abhorred if knowledge of them were to become public. Despite your experience with us, we are an honorable people. It is important to me that you believe this.”

With great difficulty, Janeway pushed her fury down to a small corner
of her mind and focused on the sincere shame and sorrow of this Tsian, who had just risked everything to do what he felt was right.

“I do not judge all Tsians by the actions of T’sin Lessia,” she said. “From what I have seen, you are a more accurate representative of the honorable nature of your people. It is your behavior that I will remember when this is over, and it has been guided by only the highest standards.”

The Tsian captain pushed his chair back, stood and bowed to Janeway. “Thank you, Captain Janeway. Your words give me great comfort.” He straightened. “I must return before I am missed.”

“I understand. Tuvok will return you to your prior coordinates immediately. Tuvok?”

The security chief rose and, to Janeway’s surprise, bowed briefly toward T’zak Vestin before departing.

“T’zak Vestin,” said Janeway, standing up, “you have our respect and our gratitude. Be well.”

The Tsian captain nodded his massive head, and dissolved in the transporter beam.

Janeway dropped back into her chair and sat silently for so long that Chakotay finally cleared his throat. “Well, that was a surprising development,” he said. “But I can’t think what possible motive the t’sin would have to betray us in such a manner.”

“I can,” said Janeway, her voice tightly controlled. “She’s played us for fools from the moment she learned we were endotherms. The t’sin had an agenda, Chakotay, and we fell right into it. We’ve done exactly what she planned for us to do.” She favored her first officer with a smile that she suspected was not pleasant. “But I think it’s time to change our behavior. As soon as we find our missing people, I plan to pay the t’sin a visit.”
Lynne rushed to B'Elanna's bed, checking the pulse in her throat. She turned back to Seven with a worried expression. “I can barely feel her pulse, Seven. I need the medkit.”

Seven turned to the leader of the Santori guard, who stood just outside the door. “I did not deceive you when I said that pack contained tools to heal our companion. It is obvious that your people have already attempted to assist her; why would you not allow us to do the same thing?”

The Santori leader paused, then motioned toward the male who carried the pack. In a moment the pack had been deposited at his feet. “I am sorry for the necessity of such distrust,” he said, “but I cannot give you this pack. We have not survived this long by letting down our guard. Name the item you require, and I will determine if it is safe to give you.”

Seven resisted the temptation to roll her eyes. “I require the small box at the bottom of the pack. It contains medical instruments and compounds that will help her.”

The leader unzipped the pack and rummaged through the contents, coming up with the medkit. Opening it, he examined the contents thoroughly. Finally he rose and entered the room, handing the kit to Seven, who immediately passed it to Lynne.

Lynne looked up at the leader. “Thank you.” She pulled out the medical tricorder and passed it over B'Elanna, checking the readings with
a frown. “God, Seven, she’s a mess. Cuts and broken bones everywhere, a punctured lung, bruised liver and internal bleeding. I can fix the bones and the surface injuries, but she needs surgery. We have to get her back to the ship as soon as possible.” Pulling out the bone knitter, she set to work healing the most critical fracture.

The Santori leader stared. “Do you mean to say that instrument can heal a broken bone? Without even touching it?”

Lynne answered without looking up from her work. “Yes. It works by sending out a frequency that stimulates the cells of the bone to regenerate. But you still have to make sure the ends of the bones are lined up properly, or you’ll just heal it wrong.”

The room was silent except for the humming of the bone knitter. After a few moments, the leader looked at the ceiling and spoke. “Soonan, have you heard all that has passed between us?”

A voice came from speakers that were mounted in the wall above B’Elanna’s bed. “Yes. Let the dark one continue, and bring the light one to me.”

Motioning to Seven, the leader said, “Come. You will walk with me.” Seven hesitated, looking from him to Lynne. “She will be safe,” said the leader. “Soonan only wishes to speak with you.”

“I think it’s okay, Seven,” said Lynne. “They must mean well since they’ve made such an effort to help B’Elanna.”

Seven did not share Lynne’s optimistic view of their captors’ behavior. She could think of many reasons to attempt the healing of an unknown alien, few of them motivated by benevolence. “I will not go. I do not wish to be separated from my shipmates,” she said. “Why does Soonan not come to us?”

Laughter boomed from the speakers. “She is wise to be so cautious in the territory of another. I believe I can accommodate this request.”

The Santori looked at each other in astonishment. “Soonan greatly honors you,” said the leader. “He does not normally leave his quarters.”

Privately, Seven thought that Soonan did not normally find aliens in his hallways, either. She doubted that she was all that honored.

While they waited, Lynne finished healing the first bone and set to work on another. “Seven,” she said, “could you get out the dermal regenerator and heal her surface injuries? They’re not critical, but we might as well do everything we can.”

Seven knelt beside Lynne, pulled the regenerator from the medkit and
began passing it over the cuts and contusions on B’Elanna’s face. As the
injuries faded and vanished altogether, she could hear gasps among the
watching Santori.

Soon Seven’s keen ears caught the sound of something motorized in
the hallway. It grew louder as it approached, then slowed as it reached the
doorway. The guards outside the room stepped back, and a Santori in a
wheeled chair moved into the room. He paused, looking over at the two
women. “I am Soonan. Please pardon our cautious behavior toward you;
we have spent many lifetimes overcoming our natural tendencies toward
trust. It is a requirement when sharing a planet with the Tsians. What are
your names and from where do you come?”

“I am Seven of Nine,” said Seven. She gestured toward Lynne. “This is
my friend and shipmate, Lynne Hamilton. The woman in the bed is also
our shipmate, B’Elanna Torres. We come from a planet far from here, and
have stopped on your world at the invitation of the Tsians. They have
offered us supplies for our continued journey.” She thought it wise not to
mention the alliance at this time.

Lynne looked up from her work. “Thank you for caring for our ship-
mate. How did she come to be here?”

“She was found outside one of our portals,” said Soonan. “The same
one you entered. We keep several portals open on the mountain, and each
has a proximity detector. That is how we found her, and you as well. We
were aware of you before you crossed the threshold.”

Lynne nodded. “We’re very grateful to you for all you’ve done to help
her. But she’ll die if we don’t return her to our ship. If your people had
nothing to do with the attack yesterday, then you can have no objection to
letting us go. May we leave?”

Soonan curved his thin lips in what might be a smile. “How delightful
to experience courtesy from another species. You cannot be too close to
the Tsians, obviously, or they would have taught you to drop such behav-
ior. Unfortunately, I cannot grant your request.”

Lynne opened her mouth to respond, but Seven spoke first. “You speak
ill of the Tsians, just as they do of you. How did such enmity begin?”

“It began long before my grandsire was born,” said Soonan. “The
Tsians have attempted for generations to eradicate our species. Once we
enjoyed an aboveground existence, glorying in the sun during the day and
the stars at night. It has been long since a Santori dared to show his head
aboveground without a squadron of armed fellows behind him. The Tsians had superior technology, and used it to take our land and force us into a starvation existence on poor lands. Then they decided that even those poor lands had resources that could be useful to them, so they attempted to remove us from the planet altogether. By then we had discovered their limitation—they cannot function in areas of extreme cold—and we fled to the only place where the Tsians could not follow. Since then we have built entire cities underground, but we live for only one thing: to someday exterminate the Tsians and resume our existence in our old lands."

“Do the Tsians know the locations of your cities?” asked Seven.

“They do not, and that is why you will not be leaving us. We cannot risk that you will reveal this location to the Tsians. We have remained safe this long only because we guard this location so carefully. The rock surrounding us blocks all of our internal communications and the Tsians’ scans; there is nothing they can use to track us here.”

“Except for us,” said Seven.

“Precisely. You see now why I cannot allow your departure, much as I regret the situation of your friend.”

“You misunderstand me,” said Seven. “I meant that the Tsians will track us here if we do not leave.”

Soonan sat forward in his chair, his pale eyes fixed intently on her.

“You will explain this statement.”

Everything had clicked into place for Seven, and Lynne’s expression showed that she had come to the same conclusion.

“So that’s why they attacked,” Lynne said softly. Seven nodded.

Soonan struck his hand against the arm of his chair. “I asked you for an explanation; you will do me the courtesy of responding. What do you mean by this?” The other Santori crowded in the doorway, intent on the conversation.

Lynne spoke as she moved the bone knitter to a third fracture. “Soonan, my friend and I were both injured when we were attacked at the summit of this mountain. I was able to get a good look at the fighter that shot us off the summit. It was white with black stripes across the wingtips.”

“One of ours,” said Soonan. “But we did not even know of your existence, and even if we had, we would not have attacked. It was obviously
the Tsians—they have downed several of our fighters and salvaged
the ships."

“Yes,” said Seven, “we realize that now. But our shipmates do not.
When our captain contacted the Tsians about the attack, she was told of a
race called the Fallons who were responsible. The fact that it was one of
your fighters seemed to confirm it. She has been spending every moment
since then trying to find either B’Elanna or your people, and our captain is
not the type to cease her efforts until she is successful. The Tsians may
not be able to locate your cities, but our ship is technologically advanced
and will eventually find you. It is only a matter of time. Then, believing
that you are responsible for the attack, our captain will inform the Tsians
of your location.”

“You said the Tsians were playing with us,” said Lynne, looking at the
lead guard. “You were more right than you realized.” She shifted her gaze
to Soonan. “They’ve been playing with both of us. They’re using us to get
to you.”

Soonan sat back in his chair. “I do not believe you. These cities have
gone undetected for two generations; it is unlikely that your ship will find
us as you say.”

Lynne held up the bone knitter. “You’ve just seen me heal broken
bones without touching them, and you’ve seen Seven heal cuts and contu-
sions the same way. If our medical technology is this advanced, why
would you doubt that the rest of our technology is equally advanced?
We’re telling you the truth. Unless you let us go, your generation will be
the last to live in these cities.”

Seven saw Soonan hesitate, and pressed the advantage. “We will tell
our captain that the Santori are innocent,” she said. “When she learns
that the Tsians have betrayed us, it will not be the Santori who need fear
the technology of our ship. But we cannot tell our captain of this while
you keep us here. Return us to the surface; our ship can retrieve us as
soon as we are aboveground. Once we are safely aboard, our captain will
no longer have a reason to expend resources locating your cities. But the
longer we are absent, the more likely it is that you will be found.”

Soonan stared at the women for several seconds, then whirled his
chair around. “Get them to the nearest portal, now! Move!”

The small room seemed to fill with people as the Santori guards
poured in. Lynne stood back in surprise as two of them brushed past her
to disconnect and deactivate the machines surrounding B’Elanna’s bed. At the same time, the other two lifted the bed and dropped a set of rollers from beneath it. Without a pause, all four wheeled the bed past Soonan and out into the hall.

“Go!” said Soonan. “I will be right behind you.”

Lynne and Seven paused only long enough to gather their tools into the pack, which had been dropped by the lead guard. Then they ran after the guards, who were already at the end of the hallway and vanishing around a corner. Seven could hear the motorized chair whirring behind them. The strange parade attracted a great deal of attention from other Santori as they passed, but they soon left the more populated areas and were pounding down empty corridors. The guards did not slow until they finally came to a metal door, which opened as the group ran toward it. A second door slid open behind it, and Seven blinked as she emerged into brilliant sunlight.

They were on a ledge far below the elevation at which they’d entered the city—Seven noted the difference in atmospheric pressure—but still high in the snowfields of the mountain. After their sojourn under the mountain, the sun glittering on snow and ice made her organic eye hurt.

“You said your ship could retrieve you as soon as you reached the surface,” said Soonan, arriving in his chair. “Why do you delay in contacting it?”

Seven turned to the Santori leader. “We will leave now. But I am sure our captain would be interested in speaking with you about the Tsians. We can take you with us if you wish. You will be returned safely.”

Soonan gazed at her. The lead guard moved forward. “Soonan, do not! It could be a trap!”

Seven fixed the guard with a look of disdain, then turned back to Soonan. “Whether you come or not makes no difference to me. I am simply making an offer. But you must decide now.”

Still the Santori leader said nothing, looking from Seven to Lynne and back again. Finally his eye fell on B’Elanna, still unconscious in the bed. “I will go with you,” he said.

“Soonan, no!” The lead guard moved in front of the chair, but Soonan lifted his hand.

“Josen, go back inside,” he said. The guard paused, then withdrew to join the other Santori just outside the door.
“I am ready,” said Soonan.

Seven unzipped her snowsuit and tapped her comm badge. “Seven of Nine to Voyager.”

“Seven. Are you all right?” Captain Janeway’s voice sounded calm as usual, but Seven’s enhanced hearing picked up a slight tremor.

“I am undamaged, as is Lynne. We have recovered B’Elanna Torres. She is alive, but in need of immediate medical attention. We also have with us the leader of the Santori people, whom you know as the Fallons. He wishes to speak with you. Permission to beam him aboard.”

“Granted. We’re beaming you directly to sickbay. Janeway out.”

The Santori guards stared in shock and alarm as their leader and the three women all dissolved. In a moment there was nothing left on the ledge but an empty bed, its sheets rustling in the icy wind.
Janeway looked around the bridge and knew that the relieved expressions she saw mirrored her own. “Tuvok,” she said, “dispatch a security team to sickbay. Chakotay, recall the search team and tell Tom to come home. I’m going to meet our new guest.” She rose from her chair, her sense of relief so profound that it almost made her lightheaded. All of my shuttles are back in the bay, she thought, with a smile at the image produced by the old saying. But the unknown extent of B’Elanna’s injuries was still a concern.

Entering sickbay a few minutes later, she found Seven, Lynne, the Doctor and an alien in a wheeled chair all gathered around a biobed. She strode up to the little group, feeling an electric jolt go through her as Lynne looked up and met her eyes. With her command mask firmly in place, she offered a quiet greeting.

“Seven. Lynne. It’s good to have you back on board.”

“Thank you, Captain,” said Seven.

“It’s good to be back,” Lynne added. Janeway heard the careful tone of her voice and knew that Lynne was, for the moment, on her best behavior. She knows she’s in trouble. But she has no idea how much. Janeway turned to the alien in the chair. “I’m Captain Kathryn Janeway. Welcome aboard my ship.”

“Thank you, Captain Janeway,” he said, his voice exuding a quiet
authority. “I am Soonan, leader of the Santori people. I am somewhat astonished to find myself here. When Seven of Nine said your ship could retrieve us, I did not realize she meant that you could do so without sending an atmospheric ship. I have never heard of such technology. It would appear that she was not bluffing after all.”

“I do not bluff,” said Seven indignantly.

Soonan turned to her. “Perhaps you should learn. It can be very useful.”

Stifling a smile at Seven’s expression, Janeway said, “I’m pleased to meet you, and look forward to a private conversation. If you will excuse me, however, I need to speak with our doctor first.”

“Certainly,” said Soonan. He turned his chair and wheeled across the sickbay, stopping to speak with the security guards who flanked the door.

Janeway moved closer to the bed, looking into the face of her unconscious chief engineer for the first time. “How is she?”

The Doctor tapped a few controls on the bed’s panel. “Her injuries are serious, but not fatal—at least, not now that she’s back in my care. She’ll make a full recovery in time. Fortunately, the redundant systems of the Klingon half of her physiology have kept things running. A full Human would not have survived such a fall.”

Janeway turned to Seven and Lynne. “Where did you find her?”

It was Lynne who answered, still in that careful, almost formal tone. “The Santori found her—outside their back door, so to speak. She fell into a crevasse about 600 meters from the summit, and the crevasse itself was almost fifteen meters deep.”

“Captain,” said Seven, “the Santori were not responsible for the attack. It was a carefully planned ruse by the Tsians, designed to draw us into their conflict and help them by revealing the location of the Santori cities.”

“Yes, I know,” said Janeway. Lynne looked surprised, but Seven merely raised an eyebrow. “We’ve been busy up here while you two went for your little unauthorized away mission,” she continued, staring directly into Lynne’s eyes and seeing her slight flinch. “And there’s still a lot to be done, which is why I don’t have the time right now to deal with you. I’ll want a full report from both of you on my desk in one hour. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Captain,” said Seven. Lynne simply nodded, her face pale.
“Good.” Janeway turned to the Doctor, who was ignoring the conversation as he prepared B’Elanna for surgery. “How long do you expect B’Elanna’s recovery to take, Doctor?”

“Several days. Her body has been severely traumatized by the impact, and there is some internal bleeding. Now if you three wouldn't mind taking your discussion elsewhere, I can start repairing some of that trauma.”

Janeway clamped down on her irritation at the Doctor’s clipped speech, reminding herself that he was just doing his job. “All right. We’re leaving.” Addressing Lynne and Seven, she said, “I’ll take Soonan from here. You’re dismissed.”

Seven immediately headed for the doors, but Lynne hesitated. She looked at Janeway, seemed about to say something, then turned without a word to follow Seven out of sickbay.

Janeway let her breath out slowly and walked over to Soonan, who had watched this interchange with interest.

“You don’t seem overly pleased with the performance of your people,” he observed. “They did accomplish their goal, did they not?”

“Yes, they did,” said Janeway. “But I did not assign them that goal.”

“Ah. So you now must punish them for acting without authorization, even though they were successful and even though you benefit from their success. That is one of the greatest trials of being a leader.”

“You see very clearly, Soonan.”

The alien made a sound that Janeway assumed was a chuckle. “One learns to see clearly from down here,” he said. “It is perhaps the only advantage of being on the wrong end of a Tsian missile.”

“That is a topic we shall have to discuss. Will you accompany me?”

Soonan turned his chair around. “It would be my pleasure. I suspect I will only receive such an offer once in my lifetime.”

Janeway dismissed the security team as they left sickbay, to Soonan’s apparent surprise. “Captain Janeway,” he said a few moments later, “I am surprised that a leader of your stature would allow a stranger to accompany you without benefit of guards. Are you not concerned about your safety?”

“I believe that trust is one of the most powerful tools of leadership,” said Janeway, pressing the turbolift call button. Soonan looked at her with open skepticism.
“Then you are either very foolish or very fortunate. Or both. In my experience, trust is something given only to friends, not to strangers. Otherwise it may have fatal results.”

The turbolift doors opened, and Janeway stepped in. “I said trust, not blind trust,” she said as she waited for him to roll across the threshold. “When you were brought to my ship, the transporter beam deactivated any energy weapon you might have been carrying. The security team then scanned you for any other type of non-energy weaponry, and if they had found anything, they would have removed it from you immediately. I am satisfied that you are worthy of my trust at the moment.”

He chuckled. “Now you are making more sense. Tell me, were you also satisfied that the Tsians were worthy of your trust?”

She’d seen this one coming. “Yes. And I still believe it.” The turbolift doors opened on deck one, and she gestured for Soonan to go first. He rolled into the corridor and seemed barely able to wait until she came up alongside him before expressing his astonishment.

“How can you say such a thing when they betrayed you?”

“The Tsian people did not betray me. One individual Tsian did, and I will not judge an entire culture by the actions of one.”

“You are an idealist,” he said, radiating disapproval. She smiled and stepped ahead to activate the conference room door, watching as he came to a sudden halt in the entry. His eyes widened and for a moment, he lost the hard-bitten aura of a battle leader. Rolling slowly to the expansive viewports, he whispered, “Great glories above.”

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” said Janeway, joining him as they viewed the blue and green planet below them.

“More than I ever dreamed,” he breathed. “I’ve seen the vids from the Tsian excursions into space, but that’s nothing like being here myself.”

Janeway gave him a few minutes to bask in the view, then walked to the conference table and removed a chair opposite the viewports, making space for him. He rolled himself to the table as she took her customary seat.

“You speak of idealism as if it were a negative attribute,” she said once they were settled. “Yet it was idealism that propelled my people into space, and it is idealism that has sustained my crew for seventy sun cycles of travel in often-hostile space.”

“I do not mean to be disrespectful,” said Soonan, “but seventy sun
cycles is nothing. You can afford to be idealistic here in your powerful ship with your advanced technology. We have been at war for generations, and have spent the last two generations hiding underground. On my world, idealism is nothing but foolishness, resulting in disappointment at the very least and death at the worst.”

“And would you call it foolishness that the locations of your cities have not been revealed to the Tsians?”

“Of course not. That is a blessing.”

She sprang the trap. “Then you should know that it is only because of one Tsian’s idealism that your cities remain undiscovered.”

“What do you mean?” he asked suspiciously.

“I told you that one individual Tsian had betrayed us. That was T’sin Lessia herself. She arranged the attack in order to make us believe that your people had done it, knowing that my ship had the technology to find your cities. It would have worked, too, but for one thing that the t’sin couldn’t have predicted: another Tsian found out what had happened, and risked both his career and his life to come to us and inform us of the truth. He did this because he believes in the code of honor that his people espouse, and was ashamed of the dishonorable actions of the t’sin. He is an idealist, Soonan. And he is the only thing that stood between you and the exposure of your cities. Would you call him foolish for saving you? Or would you call his actions a blessing?”

Soonan sat back in his chair with a chuckle. “Well done, Captain Janeway. No, I would call his actions a blessing. And I suppose you now expect me to be so grateful for the actions of this one obviously atypical Tsian that I will rethink my entire philosophy.”

“I’m not so idealistic as that,” said Janeway with a faint smile. “I just wanted you to understand that, although it was a Tsian who almost exposed you, it was also a Tsian who saved you. They are not all the same, Soonan, just as all Santori are not the same. Every race has its good and bad elements, and it is only when people forget this that war becomes possible.”

“A very pretty speech,” said Soonan. “I will allow that your beliefs are good ones and do credit to you and your people. But generations of war will not suddenly end because one Santori knows that one Tsian did a good and honorable thing.”

“No, it won’t. But what if more Santori know that more Tsians do
good and honorable things? Every war does end, and there are only two possible outcomes. There will be a victor—which means there will be a loser—or the two sides will come to an agreement to stop fighting. What happens when the Tsians find you? Will they annihilate you? If your best defense is to remain undiscovered, then I hope you’re making plans for the day your cities are found, because it’s only a matter of time. It may be two more generations, or it may be tomorrow, but it will almost certainly happen. You must know this. And if, when that time comes, all Tsians and all Santori still hate each other, then the bloodshed will be enormous. Can you afford to risk that? Do you want the Santori to live in a state of war for generations after you? Or would it be more sensible to begin building bridges now, with individual Tsians who live by their code of honor, in the hopes of eventually ending this without so much death? Maybe even ending it so that the Santori can once again live in peace?”

The room was silent as Soonan stared at her for long moments. She met his gaze evenly, hoping that some tiny piece of her message had gotten through.

“You are a persuasive speaker,” he said at length. “For a moment I could actually envision an end to our conflict without the annihilation of one or both races. But that is only a dream. It will never happen as long as T’sin Lessia remains in power. She will allow nothing less than the total destruction of our people. And I want nothing less than the total destruction of the Tsians, so that the Santori can live free once again.”

Janeway restrained a sigh. “Then you have made the stakes very high. And from what I’ve seen of the Tsians, their technology is quite advanced. Do you have the technology to match them? A good gambler doesn’t bet everything unless he can afford to lose, and this isn’t something you can afford to lose.” She leaned forward, trying one last time. “T’sin Lessia can’t remain in power forever. She is not young. And when she passes her role to another, younger Tsonian, there will be a window of opportunity for a new kind of communication between your peoples.” She saw him preparing a hot response and forestalled it, holding up a hand. “I’m not here to tell you how to lead your people, Soonan. Nor am I prepared to involve myself or my crew in starting or mediating negotiations that will probably take many sun cycles. I just wanted you to know what I know about the Tsians, namely that they are not all bad, and some are very honorable.”
It was time to end this line of conversation, she thought. There was nothing she could say that would make a difference to one so entrenched in prejudice. She offered the Santori leader a smile and added, “I also wanted to thank you for rescuing and caring for my crewmember. For that I am very grateful.”

Soonan narrowed his eyes. “And would your gratitude perhaps manifest itself in the sharing of technology that would aid us?”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible. Neither my own beliefs nor those of my government would allow it.” She moved her hand in the direction of the viewports. “I can, however, offer you a once-in-a-lifetime view.”

He stared at her for a moment, then relaxed into a smile. “Well then, Captain Janeway, I will accept your gift. It is a magnificent view.”

“Yes, it is. Now,” she said, sitting back in her chair, “tell me about the Santori. I would like to know more about a people who could build underground cities and remain undiscovered for two generations.”

Soonan seemed more than willing to share stories of his people’s accomplishments. Janeway listened attentively, appreciating the courage and persistence of the Santori in general and Soonan in particular. She only hoped that he had listened to her in turn, and would remember her advice. The time for him to act was approaching rapidly, though he did not know it.

Josen stood on the snowy ledge, watching and waiting. His vigil had lasted for some time now, and the others had all retreated inside, not wishing to remain in the freezing air. But he could not bring himself to leave. What if Soonan actually did come back, and found himself alone? It was unthinkable for the leader of the Santori to be outside unguarded.

He shivered and pulled his wrap closer about his body. The heat reflective material kept his body warm, but he had no headpiece and the wind was chillingly cold on his face and ears. He squinted toward the sun, unwilling to pull his hands out of the wrap to check his timepiece. The sun had passed zenith, and he knew from experience that the temperature often dropped considerably at this time of day. He was just stepping toward the door, intending to fetch more appropriate gear for the cold, when a hum filled the air behind him. Quickly turning back, he saw the
same strange sparkling effect that had taken Soonan. Two shapes appeared, acquiring solid form as the sparkles died away. Josen sagged with relief.

“Soonan! You are safe!” he called out, striding toward his leader. Soonan turned to him and smiled.

“Yes, Josen. I see that only you were foolish enough to stand out here and freeze to death waiting for me.” Patting Josen’s arm in a gesture of appreciation, he added, “I am grateful for your loyalty.” He indicated the woman standing next to him. “May I introduce the leader of the Humans, Captain Kathryn Janeway.”

Josen bowed to the woman. She was quite small and wore a curious red and black uniform, much different from the bulky coats that the other three Humans had worn. Like them, she had an ugly protuberance where her nose holes should be, but Josen supposed that he should not judge by appearances. “I am pleased to know you, and even more pleased that you have returned our leader to us,” he said. “When Soonan vanished we did not know what to expect.”

Captain Janeway acknowledged his bow with a nod. “I am pleased to know you as well, and impressed by your loyalty to your leader,” she said. Turning to Soonan, she added, “I would enjoy spending more time with you, Soonan, but I have another appointment. I wish you the best of fortune.”

Soonan inclined his head. “I thank you, Captain Janeway,” he said formally, then added his people’s traditional farewell. “May the sun shine upon you, now and always.”

Captain Janeway smiled and touched a gold symbol on her chest. “Janeway to Voyager,” she said. “One to transport.”

Immediately her body was obscured by the humming sparkles, and in moments she was gone. Josen looked at his leader, who appeared to be in remarkably good spirits.

“Come, Josen!” Soonan said genially. “We must go to the monitoring room. From what I understand, there will shortly be some excitement in the Tsian capital, and I want to see it when it happens.”

Josen gladly followed his leader back into their home, only too happy to get out of the cold. He wondered what Soonan was talking about, but then, it was not his place to question. He would find out soon enough.
Janeway pressed the control unit in her hand as soon as she materialized, activating the portable force-field generators that had been beamed into place a half-second before her own arrival. She had only a moment to note the sumptuous décor in the large room before its occupant addressed her in imperious tones.

“Captain Janeway! Perhaps in your culture it is acceptable to enter one’s private quarters without permission, but I assure you that in my culture it is not. If you wish to speak with me, there are other ways to arrange a meeting.”

“Good afternoon, T’sin Lessia,” said Janeway, forcing a pleasant tone to her voice. “I apologize for the intrusion, but I don’t have time to arrange a meeting through normal channels. My ship is preparing for departure, and this is my last visit to your planet.”

T’sin Lessia looked startled, her sharp teeth showing through her slightly parted jaws. “You are leaving? But what about your missing people?”

“We have located them. And I’m pleased to report that all of them are well, despite your best efforts.”

The t’sin’s eyes narrowed. “I do not understand what you mean.”

“I believe you understand me perfectly. We are quite aware that you personally ordered the attack on my mate and my chief engineer. We
know that you ordered your military to use a stolen Santori fighter to carry out the attack, and we know that you hoped this attack would induce us to use our technology to locate the Santori’s underground cities for you.”

“This is preposterous!” T’sin Lessia looked outraged. “I did nothing of the kind, and I am astonished at your behavior. First you break into my private quarters, then you accuse me of conspiracy and a cover up?” She drew herself to her considerable full height, forcing Janeway to crane her neck to look up at her. “It is only your unfamiliarity with our laws and our ways that prevents me from killing you where you stand for the insult you have just given me. On my world, Captain, you do not lightly accuse a person of attempted murder. Particularly when that person is the t’sin.” Walking to her desk, she pressed a button on its surface. “But I will overlook your affront and put it down to your lack of knowledge. My guards will escort you out. Immediately.”

Janeway waited. As several long seconds passed, the t’sin looked alarmed and pressed the button again.

“You needn’t bother,” said Janeway calmly. “I’ve arranged for us to be left alone. I wanted complete privacy for our little discussion. There is a force field surrounding this room, and no one can enter or leave until I turn it off. Really, you should be more careful about betraying people who have far more advanced technology than you.”

The t’sin’s bluster faded considerably at that, and Janeway was fairly sure she could detect actual fear in the alien’s features. It surprised her that she was enjoying this so much—and even more, that she didn’t feel the slightest bit guilty about it.

“I imagine this is quite a unique experience for you,” she continued. “You have absolutely no control over this situation, and no guards to protect you. And you can’t lie to me, because I know that you ordered the attack on my people. My ship has eyes that you cannot see. Your plan was good, T’sin Lessia, but it did not take our technology into account. We have proof of your guilt, or I wouldn’t be here.” This was a bluff, but she was counting on the t’sin’s fear—and lack of knowledge of Voyager’s capabilities—to prevent her from seeing through it. Nor was she about to give the t’sin any time to think about it. Striding closer, she stared into the alien’s eyes, allowing her white-hot fury to come to the surface. “You’re wrong when you say I’m ignorant of your laws. I know that as the mate of
one whom you tried to murder, I have a legal right to vengeance. And I am here to exercise that right. Are you as prepared to die as you were to kill?"

T’sin Lessia went almost white at this. But she said nothing, standing her ground with her head raised as she waited for Janeway’s next move. Reluctantly, Janeway had to admire her courage. The alien might be full of bluff and bluster, but there was obviously a core of steel in there, as well. Their eyes remained locked as the silence between them grew, but it was the t’sin who broke first.

“Why do you wait?” she hissed.

Janeway stared at her for a few seconds more. “Because,” she said at last, “my own laws forbid me to kill you. I am required to let the Tsian justice system deal with you.” She moved a few steps away and turned back, allowing her posture to relax ever so slightly. “Of course I realize that means you will likely escape with no punishment at all for your attempted murder. But there is nothing I can do about that. What I really came here for was to ask you a question before we leave.”

The t’sin’s color had returned, and she spoke in her normal tones. “And what is that?”

“Why? Why would you betray your allies? Why would you risk angering a people who could annihilate you? You knew that we had technology far ahead of yours. It seems very short-sighted of you, and you once told me that what you disliked about males was that they tended to be short-sighted, to not foresee the consequences of their actions. What you have done seems to fall squarely in that category. I’m surprised that you wouldn’t think something like this through.”

She could see that she had stung the t’sin’s pride. Drawing herself up, T’sin Lessia answered as if she were addressing a student. “I had thought better of you than that, Captain Janeway. You yourself seemed a very forward-thinking leader. Surely you must realize that I knew exactly what the risks and benefits were, and I chose the short-term risk and the long-term benefit. Our alliance with you would have ended in a matter of days, but our conflict with the Fallons has gone on for generations, and will go on long after you leave. If I could use your technology to enable us to destroy the Fallons at last, then it was certainly worth the risk.” She bared her teeth in an insincere smile. “And you see that I was right. Even though my gamble did not bring the results I’d hoped for, the
risk was worthwhile. Your own laws prevent you from taking action against me. I have lost nothing in the effort.”

“Nothing but your honor. You betrayed your allies and attempted to murder two innocents, both of whom you knew were very important to me. You have acted completely without honor. In a culture where honor is held to be of the highest importance, it must be very difficult to know that you have none.”

T’sin Lessia regarded her with a dismissive expression. “You and I both know that a cultural expectation of honor is simply a means of controlling the masses by social law. When the Tsians act according to a set of tenets, their behavior becomes predictable and falls within the guidelines that their leaders set for them. But if we leaders allowed our actions to be controlled by those same tenets, we would restrict ourselves unnecessarily. It would impede our ability to govern. Leaders cannot be held accountable to the same laws that apply to the general populace.”

Janeway shook her head. “Then this is where we part ways in philosophy. Far from being above the law, I believe that leaders have the obligation to set the standard for the people. If anything, we are ruled *more* by the law than those we lead. If my crew see me upholding the highest standards that I expect from them, they will be motivated to uphold those standards themselves. But if they see me engaging in behavior from which they themselves are restricted, they will soon begin to wonder why I should lead them, or why they should not allow themselves the same behaviors that I allow myself. A leader cannot lead by declaring herself exempt from the very laws she enforces among her people.”

The t’sin seemed almost relaxed now, and her expression was condescending. “But Captain, you are assuming that my world is as small as your ship. Your actions cannot help but be noticed by your people. Mine can. The Tsian people have no idea what I do unless I tell them, and naturally I tell them what I want them to know. Anything else would be political suicide.” She drew her robes about her, smoothing down the fabric, and in the process apparently dismissing the importance of her opponent. When she raised her head again, her expression seemed to indicate surprise that Janeway was still standing there. “This conversation is over. Go back to your ship with your high ideals and your juvenile expectations. If you are fortunate and live long enough, someday experience may teach you what I have learned. In the meantime, this little episode will have no
effect on my life or my government. It was a gamble, but it means nothing now. I have enjoyed your company, Captain Janeway, and I thought it would be a wonderful irony to have one warmblood race find another for me. But now I tire of you and it is time to end this alliance. Go home.”

Janeway did not move. “You’re mistaken when you say that the Tsian people have no idea what you do. They certainly know what you have done this day. I’ve made sure of that.”

The t’sin turned away, displaying her contempt for the Human captain by presenting her back. “You can do nothing to me, Captain Janeway. Your illusions of your own power prevent you from seeing clearly. I am the leader of many, but you are the leader of a pitiful few.”

“Even a t’sin is not immune to public opinion. And I would imagine that at this moment, public opinion is very much against you.” She glanced at a console in the corner of the room. “I see that you have a video broadcast unit in this chamber. You might wish to activate it.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re on it right now, telling your people that not only have you committed attempted murder, but you also consider yourself above Tsian law.”

T’sin Lessia turned and bared her teeth, but this time it wasn’t a smile. “You lie.”

“And you judge me by what you would do in my place. You may lie, but I do not.”

Something in the captain’s bearing must have unsettled her, because the t’sin moved to the video unit and turned it on, gasping when she saw herself. The video feed was live. She turned to Janeway, her face a mask of anger. “What have you done?”

“Nothing but allow your people to see for themselves.” Janeway smiled. “As I said, you really should be more careful about betraying people who have more advanced technology than you. I’ve recorded this entire conversation, and my ship has broadcast it to your world. Every channel, every frequency. You can’t tell the Tsians what you want them to know, because you have already told them what they should know: the truth. Even now your people are wondering why you would expect them to act with honor when you do not.”

Silence filled the room as the two women stared at each other, the air between them sizzling with their mutual dislike. Suddenly the t’sin
flashed into brilliant color, and in a rapid blur of movement she pulled a weapon from a drawer and fired.

The color flash had given Janeway a half-second of warning, and many hours in the holodeck playing Velocity with Seven and Lynne had honed her reflexes. She dove away, rolled and came up in a crouch with her phaser out, her shot knocking the weapon out of the t’sin’s hand. Rising to her feet again, she held the phaser on her furious opponent.

“You continue to surprise me, T’sin Lessia. On a planetwide broadcast you’ve now upped your attempted murder count to three. I fail to see how your people will allow you to continue as their leader after this. Perhaps you should reconsider your philosophy on honor.” She leaned forward and lowered her voice to a near-whisper. “Do you know what the best thing is about upholding your own laws? It doesn’t matter if the whole world knows what you’ve done.”

As she straightened, the t’sin went completely pale. Shouts could be heard in the hallway outside the rooms, the sound growing louder by the second. The t’sin glanced nervously toward the door, and Janeway thought she looked a great deal smaller now than she had seemed before.

“That would be your ministers, I believe,” she said. “They’re probably wanting your instructions on how to deal with the political fallout from this broadcast. I don’t wish to delay your response, so I’ll be leaving now.”

She paused. “Oh, and by the way—I certainly hope that your successor will see more clearly than you regarding the conflict with the Santori. They are a good and honorable people, and you have wasted a considerable amount of the Empire’s resources trying to destroy them. Think of the money and lives your government could save if you made peace with them instead. But that’s a job for someone who truly thinks in the long term, and obviously that isn’t you.” She tapped her comm badge. “Voyager, one to beam out.”

Janeway stood in her ready room, watching the Tsian planet drop away as Voyager turned about. Then the stars changed from points of light to moving streaks as the ship went to warp, resuming its long journey home. She allowed herself a sigh of relief. It had been a long couple of days, but everyone she cared about was safe once again, and they were on
their way once more. She wished she could find out the results of her broadcast, but there was no reason to order a delay. It was time to go.

Walking to the lower level and seating herself behind her desk, she rested her forehead on the heels of her hands. Her actions this day could be couched in the best of terms and presented in the light of promoting peace—and her mission log would certainly reflect that—but she knew that it all came down to a personal agenda. She hadn’t lied when she’d told the t’sin that she was there to exercise her right to vengeance. In reality, she should have left orbit as soon as her missing crewmembers were on board, but she’d been so furious at the attack on Lynne and B’Elanna that she had allowed her anger to cloud her judgment. She wasn’t proud of herself at this particular moment. Certainly she hadn’t upheld her Starfleet ideals to the best of her ability.

The memory of T’sin Lessia’s expression as she realized that her words had been broadcast to the world flashed across Janeway’s mind. Dropping her hands, she raised her head once more and smiled. She might not be proud of herself, but for some reason she didn’t want to examine too closely, she felt…good.

Her smile vanished when the terminal beeped, reminding her of an appointment. She looked at the chronometer and decided that she had just enough time to get some much-needed coffee into her system before facing the final task associated with this whole sorry mess.

Fifteen minutes and one very strong cup of coffee later, she was back behind her desk when the door chimed. “Come,” she said.

The door slid open, admitting Seven and Lynne. The two women walked to Janeway’s desk and stood stiffly. Of course, Seven always stood stiffly, even in her usual military “parade rest” position, but Lynne’s rigid posture was unusual. She met Janeway’s gaze unflinchingly, while Seven stared at the wall somewhere above her head.

Janeway leaned back in her chair and looked up at them. Their height alone made them a formidable-looking pair, she thought. Add in Seven’s arrogant expression, and Lynne’s rakish look with her arm in the sling, and these two presented a team that most people would probably rather not tangle with.

But she wasn’t most people.

“Seven of Nine and Lynne Hamilton,” she said formally, “you have violated my orders, left the ship without permission, sabotaged the ship’s
computer, and conducted an away mission without authorization. Do you deny these charges?”

“No, Captain,” they said simultaneously.

“I see.” Janeway darted a glance at her empty coffee mug and wished she’d thought to refill it. “Before I pronounce your sentences, I want you to know—you did the right thing.”

Lynne looked startled, and Seven shifted her gaze from the wall to Janeway’s eyes, a faint expression of surprise in her face as well.

“Unfortunately, you did it the wrong way,” Janeway continued. She rose from her chair and paced behind the two women, stopping just in front of Seven’s shoulder. “Everyone on Voyager owes you a debt. I’m also grateful to you, and proud of you for risking your own lives to save another. But the way you went about it puts me in a very bad position. If I discipline you, it will appear as if I’m punishing you for saving B’Elanna’s life. And if I don’t discipline you, it will appear as if I’m letting you off the hook because the ends justified the means. But just for the record, ladies: in my book, the ends rarely justify the means. Particularly when those means involve violating my orders. No matter how beneficial the outcome, I simply cannot overlook such a transgression.”

She moved from Seven’s shoulder to a position in front of the two women, staring directly into Lynne’s eyes. “Lynne Hamilton, as a contract employee, you cannot be disciplined under Starfleet jurisdiction. However, as the captain, I have the authority to restrict your movements if I believe that you are a danger to the ship. Since you have prevented this ship from a free and clear response to danger by leaving it without permission, as well as inciting a crewmember to disobey my orders and commit computer sabotage, I consider you to be a danger. I am therefore confining you to quarters for a period of seven days.”

Lynne showed no reaction, watching her without any of her usual warmth. It was appropriate, Janeway thought, but that didn’t make her feel any better. She shifted her gaze to Seven.

“Seven of Nine, because you are a department head on this ship, I hold you to a higher standard and expect better behavior. You were fully aware of the consequences when you chose this course of action. Your position places you under the guidelines of Starfleet discipline, and I am therefore sentencing you to seven days confinement in the brig.”
She took one step back, looking at both women. “Your sentences have been noted in the ship’s logs and take effect immediately.”

“Wait a minute!” Lynne burst out, her stiff expression giving way to outrage. “You can’t punish Seven more than me! It wasn’t even her idea—I talked her into getting me off the ship!”

“Whether or not it was her idea has no bearing on this situation,” said Janeway. “I am not punishing Seven for her ideas or her motives. I’m punishing her for her actions.”

“But her actions were taken to save B’Elanna’s life, and to protect me from danger. Kath—Captain, this isn’t right. Leave Seven out of this and let me take the blame. I’m the one who’s responsible.”

“That would be easier for you, wouldn’t it? I suspect that the worst part of your punishment is knowing that your actions have caused hardship for Seven. Perhaps you’ll keep that in mind the next time you consider approaching a member of my crew and inciting them to disobey orders. Seven’s sentence stands.”

“Captain, please! At least reduce her sentence to confinement to quarters.”

Janeway shook her head. “I’m sorry. I’m not any happier to pronounce this sentence than you are to hear it, but Starfleet sentencing guidelines are very clear. I’m already giving her the minimum punishment.” She noticed that Seven had been staring straight ahead during this discussion, refusing to take part. At least she knows I have no choice.

Lynne opened her mouth to respond, then closed it again as she changed her mind. Drawing herself up to her full height, she said, “I refuse to accept a lesser punishment than Seven. If you’re going to throw her in the brig, then you’ll have to put me in there too.”

Janeway looked at her sharply, and saw a flicker of something in her eyes. A wave of anger rushed over her as she recognized the expression: Lynne was bluffing. She was betting Janeway wouldn’t throw her own partner in the brig, and was using that leverage in an attempt to reduce Seven’s sentence. Shocked that Lynne would take advantage of their relationship in that way, Janeway spoke in her iciest tones.

“All right. I agree to your terms.” Without breaking eye contact, she called Tuvok in. When he appeared through the door, she ordered, “Escort Seven of Nine and Lynne Hamilton to the brig, where they will serve a sentence of seven days.”
“Yes, Captain.”

Lynne favored her with a look of pure contempt before turning and walking out of the ready room. Seven showed no emotion, merely nodding at the captain as she withdrew.

When the door closed behind them, Janeway allowed herself to lean back against her desk. She was shaking with rage, and felt shattered at the realization that Lynne’s ethics were so very different from her own.

Oh god, she thought. I don’t know if I can get over this one. Over the rush of emotions roaring through her mind, a little voice made itself heard.

If you can’t get over it—what will you do?

She didn’t have an answer.
For the first two days of Seven and Lynne’s incarceration, Janeway stalked around like a tiger with a thorn in its paw. She knew the crew was giving her a wide berth, and that irritated her even more. She was so angry with Lynne that she could hardly see straight, and it seemed completely unfair that her crew was avoiding her, obviously siding with Lynne and Seven. Once again her captaincy had set her apart, forcing her to stand alone when she needed support the most. She thought bitterly that it was no wonder she had found so much strength within herself on this journey. Every time she needed someone to lean on, just for a moment, she ended up alone. Time and again she found no one to rely on but herself. It was better this way, she thought—better not to need, not to trust. If she didn’t trust anyone to be there for her, then nobody could let her down.

On the third day she woke up feeling melancholy. She realized that it had been over a week since she and Lynne had spent a night together, and she missed her partner tremendously. God, how she wanted Lynne there to hold her. She would have given anything to hear that laugh, so distinct that she’d recognize it in a crowd of hundreds. But her quarters were empty, and would be for a long time, because Lynne had crossed the line. She felt the familiar flash of anger and pulled its threads around her like a comforting blanket, protecting her from the unwanted sorrow.
Her day was spent going through departmental reports, with nothing to distract her except one brief visit from Chakotay. He tried to address the issue of Seven and Lynne, but managed only to increase her irritation. After she snapped at him, he withdrew, leaving her alone. *As usual,* she thought.

On the fourth day, Janeway’s anger had burned itself out and she was left with nothing but depression. Her partner hated her, her crew hated her, and she wasn’t too thrilled with herself. But she’d only done what she’d had to do. Why didn’t anyone understand that?

It was difficult to force herself out of bed and into the shower. She pulled her uniform on, fastening it with listless fingers, and walked to the bridge with a weary step. It was going to be a very long shift. She retired to her ready room as soon as possible and spent most of her day on the upper level, sipping coffee and watching the stars streak by. She supposed she should feel guilty about not getting any work done, but her mind just wasn’t focusing. It would probably help if she could get a decent night’s sleep, but that hadn’t happened in a while.

Late that morning the Doctor contacted her, telling her that B’Elanna was awake and ready to leave sickbay after a few more hours of observation. It was the highlight of Janeway’s week. She requested that B’Elanna come to the ready room after being released, and spent the next several hours looking forward to the visit. It was about time she saw a friendly face.

When her door chimed that afternoon, Janeway felt an unreasonable jolt of happiness as she called for her guest to enter. “B’Elanna,” she exclaimed warmly, walking around the desk and enfolding the surprised Klingon in a hug. “I can’t tell you how good it is to see you up and about. We’ve all been so worried for you.”

“Thank you, Captain. It’s nice to be out of sickbay. I can’t believe I was in there for four days. All I can say is, it’s a good thing I was unconscious for most of it.” She followed Janeway to the upper level.

“Can I offer you something to drink?” asked Janeway, as she replicated a cup of coffee for herself.

“No, thanks. My stomach is a little edgy yet.” B’Elanna sat on the opposite end of the couch. “I went over the mission logs while waiting for the Doctor to release me. Looks like I slept through a lot of excitement.”

“You could call it that. Personally, I could live without that kind of
excitement for a while—having three of my people vanish without a trace
tends to make me a bit tense. I’m just glad everything worked out.”

“Well, it worked out for us, anyway. I doubt things went so well for
T’sin Lessia. By the way, Captain, I watched the recording. That was truly
inspired—the t’sin is probably still wondering what hit her. Remind me
never to piss you off.” B’Elanna grinned.

“Thank you,” said Janeway, smiling for what seemed like the first time
in ages. “You know, it’s entirely possible she found some way to wiggle
out of it. She was an accomplished politician, and may very well have
managed enough damage control to keep herself in office. But even if she
did, she’ll have to watch herself much more carefully after this. If the
broadcast accomplished only that, it would still have been worthwhile.”

“I guess.” B’Elanna didn’t look convinced. “Seems to me you could
have made it very worthwhile. If it had been me, I would have taken my
phaser shot a little differently. She tried to kill you, Captain. And she’d
tried to kill Lynne and me before that. You had every right to take her out
in self-defense.”

“Don’t think it didn’t cross my mind,” said Janeway calmly. She was
amused by the shocked expression on B’Elanna’s face. “That doesn’t need
to leave this room,” she added.

“Of course not. I just didn’t expect you to say that.”

“I have no problem admitting that I felt the same way anyone else
would in my place. It’s my actions that I’m more concerned about. Those
are what Starfleet will judge me by, not my thoughts.”

B’Elanna nodded. “There’s just one thing I don’t understand about
this whole episode,” she said.

“What’s that?” Janeway sipped her drink.

“Why are Lynne and Seven in the brig? They saved my life, and
although their methods were somewhat unorthodox, I wouldn’t expect
anything less of them, and I don’t think you would, either. Seven has
certainly found her way around the chain of command before, and you
haven’t punished her like this since her first few months here. And Lynne
doesn’t even really understand the chain of command yet. Captain, I know
you’re a stickler for the rules, but isn’t this a little harsh?”

Janeway abruptly put her coffee down and finished swallowing the
mouthful that had suddenly turned bitter. She looked at B’Elanna, waiting
for the expected surge of anger at being questioned in her methods. But it
didn’t materialize, and she was left with nothing but her fatigue and depression—and an instant headache. Pinching the bridge of her nose, she said, “If you’d asked me that yesterday, I probably would have taken your head off. But today I’m just too tired.”

Her chief engineer looked concerned. “Okay, now I’m worried. You never admit that. What’s going on?”

Janeway was horrified to feel tears stinging the backs of her eyes. She could withstand censure and judgment, but B’Elanna’s concern cut right through her. Rising from the couch, she turned toward the viewports to give herself time to recover. It was completely unacceptable for her to show that kind of emotion in front of a crewmember.

“Captain?” B’Elanna hadn’t left the couch, but her voice was alarmed. “Are you all right?”

Reining in her emotions and slamming her command mask down, Janeway turned back. “I’m fine. It’s just been a long week.”

“Oh, okay.” Though her doubt was obvious, she didn’t push it. “So why the harsh sentence?”

Janeway summoned up a glare, but it was a pale shadow of her normal Glare O’ Death, as Lynne called it. “You do realize that I have absolutely no reason to explain myself to you.”

“Yes,” said B’Elanna, waiting expectantly. The glare had apparently bounced right off her. When Janeway said nothing, she looked away for a moment and sighed. “Captain, I know I’m out of line asking you about this. But Lynne and Seven are in the brig because of me. It’s my life they’re being punished for saving, and I feel responsible. I just don’t understand why you’ve come down on them so hard.”

Janeway gave up. She had no reserves at the moment, and besides, she wanted someone to understand. She was so tired of standing alone.

“The sentence isn’t harsh. Given the various offenses, which neither Seven nor Lynne contested, seven days incarceration is the minimum sentence under Starfleet disciplinary guidelines. I could easily have given them thirty days, but I didn’t because of the circumstances of their actions and the motivations behind them. And since it would have been unfair to punish Seven but not Lynne, I gave Lynne the same seven days despite her civilian status. However, I only sentenced her to confinement to quarters. Going to the brig was her choice.”

B’Elanna waved this aside. “I know they got the minimum Starfleet
sentence. What I don’t get is why you used Starfleet disciplinary guidelines at all. You’ve been known to bypass them at your discretion. When Chakotay disobeyed your orders and went after Seska, he did everything Seven and Lynne did, in addition to stealing a shuttle and putting this whole crew in danger. Yet you let him off with a slap on the hand. Why be so much harder on Seven and Lynne?”

Janeway remembered the incident. It was just over a year after their stranding, and the joining of her Maquis and Starfleet crews had still been somewhat tenuous. Throwing Chakotay, former captain of the Maquis, into the brig at that time would have been disastrous—she might have ended up with a mutiny on her hands. So she’d chosen an alternative course of action, which had turned out to be just as effective. She’d crushed Chakotay by telling him that she was disappointed in him, and had put him on report. She could still see the look of pain on his face.

“B’Elanna, you’re treading on thin ice,” she said in a voice just this side of a growl. “You have no idea what Chakotay’s punishment was.”

“No,” conceded B’Elanna, “but I know you didn’t put him in the brig. I’m just wondering if maybe you were so concerned about appearing to show favoritism for Lynne that you went to the other extreme instead.”

Janeway paused. Was that what she’d done? Could she have been so blind to her own motivations? She examined this thought from all angles, and concluded that there was a distinct possibility that B’Elanna was right.

“It’s true that I have to be very careful about the slightest appearance of favoritism,” she said. “And maybe that did play a role in my decision. But it was important that Lynne understand the consequences of her actions. She defied my authority, and I simply cannot let that stand. No captain could. She has to learn that she can’t just go off on her own when she doesn’t agree with my decision.” And she has to learn that she can’t use our relationship as a bargaining chip, she thought sadly.

“What was her alternative?” asked B’Elanna in a carefully mild tone. Janeway was instantly suspicious, but answered anyway.

“Her alternative was not to leave the ship. To trust that others could take care of the situation.”

“But was it really? Think about it from her point of view. She honestly believed that she could locate me when nobody else could. And as we now know, she was right. She asked you for permission to join the search, and
you refused. That left her with only two options: obey your orders and, to
her mind, condemn me to certain death if I was still alive—or disobey
your orders, find me and pay the personal price later. She knew you were
going to be angry, Captain. She even thought your relationship might not
recover from it. But she didn’t feel that she could just stand by and let me
die without doing everything possible to prevent it. Lynne understood the
consequences very well, and she made the only choice she could under the
circumstances. If you had been in her shoes, would you have chosen
differently? Would you have let me die if you honestly thought you could
save me?”

Janeway stared, rocked to her core. She’d been so angry at Lynne’s
willful disregard of her authority that it hadn’t occurred to her to
consider it from her partner’s side. It was true—her own refusal of
Lynne’s request had put her partner in an intolerable position. And if
she’d been in Lynne’s shoes, she knew she would have made the same
choice. They’d both done what had to be done, and now they were both
paying the price.

A realization struck, renewing her suspicions. “You seem to have a
great deal of insight into Lynne’s state of mind. How do you know
all this?”

“Because I stopped by the brig before coming here. She looks like hell.
Captain, permission to speak frankly?”

“Granted,” said Janeway without thinking. She was stuck on the vision
of Lynne suffering.

“You look just as bad as she does. This is tearing both of you apart,
and I think you really need to talk to each other.”

Janeway sat down, closing her eyes as she rubbed the bridge of her
nose. Her headache was getting worse. “I’d love to talk to Lynne about it,”
she said. “Unfortunately, at our last meeting she made it quite clear that
she held me in the lowest contempt.”

It was more than she meant to say—normally she would never have
allowed this conversation to take such a personal turn. But after four days
of complete isolation, B’Elanna’s approach had somehow gotten through.

“That’s not true. Kahless, it couldn’t be farther from the truth. Anybody with eyes can see that. I mean, she was pretty furious about the
whole thing, but she’s had time to cool down now. And Seven’s been
working on her with that Borg logic. Nobody’s emotional reactions can
stand up to Seven when she starts dissecting motivations and reasoning. She’s even worse than Tuvok.”

Janeway found herself actually smiling at the thought. B’Elanna caught it and smiled back. “Captain, you and Lynne have something truly special. I mean it. I’ve never seen anything quite like it, but maybe that’s because I’ve never seen two people so equally matched in intellect and sheer will. When you disagree, it’s bound to be spectacular. But don’t let it damage what you have together. You’ve got to talk to her. She loves you, you know. And right now she’s afraid your relationship might be the price she’ll have to pay for my life. And I gotta tell you, I don’t want that on my conscience.”

Janeway blinked back the tears that had made another mutinous foray to her eyes. She thought about approaching Lynne in the brig, then realized that even if she dismissed the guard, Seven would still be there as witness. No, that was not going to happen. Any discussion between Lynne and herself was likely to result in either more fireworks, an emotional breakdown on her part, or both. And there was no chance that she would risk such a thing in front of anyone else on this ship.

Reaching out for B’Elanna’s hand, she gave it a brief, gentle squeeze. “Thank you for coming here and talking to me about this. It took a lot of guts to beard the tigress in her den.”

B’Elanna dipped her head. “Well, someone had to do it. And since I just got all my guts sewn back together, I figured I was a good candidate. You know, Voyager just runs better when her captain is happy. And when you’re not happy, I swear, even the engine efficiency goes down.” She looked at Janeway questioningly. “So you’re going to talk to her, right?”

“Yes, but not until she’s out of the brig.” Janeway held a hand up to forestall B’Elanna’s protest. “When Lynne and I have this conversation, it’s not going to be in a brig and we’re not going to have any company. Which means it will have to wait.” Her voice grew gentler. “But I would appreciate it very much if you would take her a message.”

“I’d be happy to.”

There was so much Janeway wanted to say, but nothing seemed appropriate for delivery by messenger. In the end she settled for something much less than she wanted, hoping that Lynne would be able to read between the lines.

“Tell her I miss her.”
The next three days crawled by on thrusters. Janeway’s mood had improved dramatically after her conversation with B’Elanna, but she still wasn’t getting enough sleep, and she counted the hours until she could feel Lynne’s arms around her once more. Then she could lay aside the captain part of her and just be Kathryn once again, a comfort that she missed tremendously. Of course, this was assuming that Lynne would even want to hold her again, and that was by no means guaranteed. The glad certainty she’d felt immediately after her talk with B’Elanna had soon wilted under the weight of her continued isolation. Without the confirmation she so desperately needed from Lynne, her own doubts and worries nearly overpowered her hope.

The days were so long that there were times when she wasn’t sure she’d make it. During those low moments she felt that she was serving a much harsher sentence than Lynne, who at least had Seven for company—and B’Elanna as well. The chief engineer had been spending her lunch hours and evenings at the brig, keeping the two women company until their sentence had been completed. Janeway was still a little astonished by this development. Who would ever have guessed that B’Elanna would voluntarily spend hours at a stretch in Seven of Nine’s company? Normally even a few minutes was sufficient to push her into a homicidal frame of mind. She foresaw only two possibilities when this was over:
Seven and B’Elanna would abandon their previous tolerance and openly despise each other, or they’d finally develop some mutual respect. She hoped it would be the latter; then at least something good would come out of this whole mess.

Ironically, the one thing that fueled her through these last interminable days was not hope, but the renewal of her belief in Lynne’s ethics. Even if they couldn’t get past this test of their relationship, at least she knew that Lynne was still the honorable person she’d believed her to be. B’Elanna’s words continued to echo in her mind, giving her a whole new perspective on the situation. She even thought your relationship might not recover from it…right now she’s afraid your relationship might be the price she’ll have to pay for my life.

She saw Lynne’s actions in a different view now. Yes, her partner had defied orders, but she hadn’t done it lightly. She’d known from the outset that the price might be very high, but she’d been willing to pay it to do what she felt was right. Far from being angry, Janeway now felt proud of Lynne for upholding her ethics, even in the face of her lover’s wrath. And when she thought about the scene in her ready room, she realized that she’d misread Lynne’s expression. Her partner hadn’t been bluffing. If she’d believed that her actions had already destroyed their relationship, then she would have had nothing to bluff with.

But every time Janeway thought hopefully of their reunion at the end of Lynne’s incarceration, she remembered that final look of contempt. Nothing B’Elanna had said could overcome the power of that memory. That look wasn’t because of Lynne’s own punishment—she’d been furious at Janeway for punishing Seven as well. And if Lynne still felt that way, well, they’d never get past it. Because Janeway could no more apologize for doing the right thing than Lynne could.

At 1635 on the seventh day, Janeway logged off her terminal. She’d put in enough extra time these last few days to make up for taking a half hour off, and she was not about to be even five seconds late for her final duty of this day. Turning the bridge over to Chakotay and feeling ridiculously nervous, she made her way to the brig, greeted the security guard on duty, and stepped in front of the single occupied cell.
Both Lynne and Seven were standing in the center of the cell, waiting. Janeway realized that Seven's internal chronometer would have informed her of the exact second that their sentence had been served. It was a good thing she'd arrived on time.

As her eyes met Lynne’s, she felt a familiar jolt of electricity run down her spine. She could read nothing in Lynne’s expression, and the butterflies in her stomach doubled in number. Ignoring them, she deactivated the force field and spoke in formal tones. “Seven of Nine and Lynne Hamilton, your sentences have been served in full. You are free to go. And may I add that I sincerely hope to never see you in here again.”

“Amen to that,” muttered Lynne, stepping forward. Janeway stopped her.

“Lynne, will you accompany me, please?”

Lynne searched her face, then turned to Seven. “I'll see you later. Thanks for everything.”

“You’re welcome,” said Seven as she stepped past. Pausing, she added enigmatically, “You will remember?”

“Yes,” said Lynne in tones of exasperation, but she smiled at her friend. “It’s not like I could forget even if I wanted to. You’ve been drilling me for seven days.”

“Only because that was the length of time required to overcome your stubbornness. You would give even the Borg Collective pause.” Seven turned and left the brig, and when Lynne looked back at Janeway, all trace of the smile was gone from her face.

“Where did you want to go?”

“To my quarters, if you don’t mind.”

After a pause, Lynne nodded once. “All right.”

Janeway led the way out of the brig and down the corridor, acutely conscious of Lynne at her side. All of their easy camaraderie, their comfort in being together, had vanished as if it had never been. In its place was a sharp-edged awareness of how different Lynne’s physical presence felt when not accompanied by their emotional connection.

They rode in the turbolift without saying a word, both staring straight ahead at the closed doors. A stiff and formal distance yawned between them, and Janeway wondered if she would ever again see Lynne smile at her the way she just had at Seven. The suspense of not knowing where they stood was about to kill her, and Lynne was giving nothing away.
The turbolift opened, and in a few more steps they were in front of Janeway’s quarters. She motioned Lynne through and entered after her, feeling some of the tension leave her shoulders as the door hissed shut behind them. At last she’d made it to this moment: just her and Lynne, off duty, out of the brig and in the privacy of her own rooms. She turned to Lynne, suddenly realizing that there was something she needed far more than a discussion.

“Kathryn, we have to—”

Janeway held up a hand, then brought her finger to her lips. Stepping close, she looked into Lynne’s eyes, searching for confirmation that her life could go on with any semblance of happiness. “Let’s not talk,” she said quietly. “Not yet. Just for tonight, let’s practice some of Seven’s non-verbal communication.” She slipped her arms around Lynne’s waist and rested her head on her partner’s shoulder.

For a few agonizing seconds Lynne’s body was stiff, and Janeway thought with a sinking heart that she really had lost everything. But then she felt arms go around her, holding her tightly, and she sagged against her partner with a relief so profound that it made her legs weak. She raised her head and saw at last what she’d been looking for, a familiar softness in Lynne’s eyes that hadn’t been there moments before.

“Can I just say one tiny thing?” whispered Lynne.

Janeway nodded.

“Thank you,” Lynne breathed, and kissed her so gently that it seemed she was afraid of breaking something fragile. Janeway understood, returning the kiss with the same care. She pulled away and nudged her lover’s chin up, kissing her way up and back down the slender throat and delivering a delicate bite near Lynne’s shoulder.

Slowly Lynne pushed her away, and Janeway stood still as her tunic was unzipped and her shirt pulled out, allowing warm hands to slide around her waist. Lynne’s lips were just as warm, and she reveled in the soft kisses marking the length of her throat. Then she shivered as Lynne slipped her hands under the shirt, running light fingers up and down her spine. Lynne knew that was one of her sensitive areas, and to feel those caresses again, delivered so gently, was like waking up after a nightmare. Already the fears of the previous week were receding into the darkness.

Lynne seemed to have her own fears to vanquish, as she cupped Janeway’s face in her hands and held her in place for a deep kiss. When at
last they broke apart, Janeway reached up to undo Lynne’s braid, raking her fingers through the thick hair and delighting in the sensation. She loved the look of that French braid, but she loved taking it down even more.

They traded caresses for what seemed like hours, unhurried, knowing they had all the time in the world. Their touches were tender and loving, as if trying to make up for all of the anger that had stood between them. Janeway had rarely felt so content as she basked in the love that flowed from Lynne’s fingers and lips. *Who knew we were so good at non-verbal communication?* she thought, and smiled to herself. Lynne saw it, raising her eyebrow and opening her mouth to ask the question. But Janeway put a finger to Lynne’s lips, reminding her of their agreement. Lynne promptly kissed the finger, then grasped her wrist, pulled it up and kissed the pulse point, all the while staring at Janeway with eyes that were as dark green as Janeway had ever seen them.

The emotions that swirled around them were almost palpable as each of them strove to show their love through touch and look alone. Somehow, Janeway thought, the inability to speak was intensifying their awareness of each other. Every gesture, every expression was meaningful, and nothing went unnoticed.

At last Lynne’s hands stilled for a moment, and she looked toward the bedroom and back again. Janeway nodded, slipping her hand into Lynne’s, and they walked through the doorway to stand at the foot of the bed. Lynne put her hands on Janeway’s shoulders and pressed down gently, nudging her to a sitting position. Then she knelt to remove Janeway’s boots and socks, capturing the bare feet in her hands and massaging them. Janeway let her head fall back as she lost herself in the pleasure of this simple caress. Was there anything better in this universe than a foot massage from a lover? Then her head snapped upright as she felt fingernails being lightly dragged up her ankles. She narrowed her eyes and squirmed—that was one of her ticklish spots. Lynne’s eyes danced as she watched her reaction.

Quickly pulling her feet away, Janeway hooked them around Lynne’s back and crossed them at the ankles, leaning back on her elbows and using the leverage to force Lynne forward. Lynne resisted and Janeway put a little more muscle into it, only to find herself flat on her back when Lynne suddenly reversed direction. Taking advantage of the moment,
Lynne broke her hold and stood up again, moving out of reach. Without taking her eyes off her partner’s face, she began to slowly peel off her clothing. Janeway watched with a dry mouth as Lynne gradually revealed herself, and when her lover at last stood naked, Janeway thought that her non-verbal communication skills might just have reached their limit. How could she tell Lynne how exquisite she was without words?

Rising from the bed, she stood in front of Lynne but did not touch her. Deliberately, she raked her eyes from Lynne’s feet to her face, taking a long time to make the journey. By the time she finished, she knew the message had gotten across. Lynne was actually blushing slightly, but her eyes held an expression of joy that Janeway hadn’t seen since the night of the Tsian banquet.

Janeway removed her own clothes in a fraction of the time Lynne had taken, then reached for her lover and pressed their bodies together in a crushing embrace. Relaxing her hold slightly, she pulled Lynne with her as she moved backwards, allowing them both to fall on the bed. Their caresses escalated, both women knowing exactly which buttons to push and how to push them. Experience had made them very skilled at bringing pleasure to each other, and the last several days had given them considerable motivation.

She had no idea what time it was when she finally caught her breath and felt Lynne curl up behind her, wrapping a possessive arm around her chest. Her throat felt a little raw, and she was certain that her body was quite incapable of any further exertion. Her last thought before falling asleep was that Seven’s theory had been exactly backwards. Copulation did not necessarily produce non-verbal communication techniques, but good non-verbal communication could definitely lead to some of the best lovemaking she’d ever experienced.
Sometimē in the middle of the night, Janeway woke to find herself alone. She sat up and listened, hearing no sound of movement in her quarters. Slipping out of bed, she went to her closet and pulled her robe on, noting that while her clothes were still lying where she’d left them, Lynne’s were gone.

Tendrils of panic curled around her spine as she stepped into the living quarters, but they faded when she saw her partner sitting on the couch, fully dressed and watching the streaks of stars. Lynne didn’t look up when Janeway joined her, and for long minutes neither one spoke.

At last Lynne broke the silence.

“The view is a lot better here than it was in the brig,” she said quietly.

Janeway could think of no appropriate response. She studied her partner’s profile, noticing the way the light from the stars brought out the silver in Lynne’s hair.

Lynne turned her head to look directly at her. “We need to talk about this.”

“I know,” said Janeway. She uncrossed her legs and stood up. “But before we do, let me take care of something. Computer, lights one-eighth.” She had rarely felt less inclined to start a shift, and after all, she’d never taken her shore leave. Crossing the room to her workstation, she sent a message to Chakotay informing him that she was taking the next
two days off. A second message to both the archeology lab and Tuvok made sure that Lynne would also be on leave for two days. She didn’t know whether Lynne would choose to spend that much time with her, but they both needed time to recover and she was making certain they had it.

She returned to find that Lynne had made a few preparations of her own, and was leaning back against the arm of the couch with a steaming mug cradled between her hands. A second mug sat on the coffee table, filling the air with the scent of coffee. Janeway picked it up, directing a look of gratitude toward her partner, and closed her eyes as the first sip seared a path down her throat. She might survive this after all.

Indicating Lynne’s drink, she inquired, “Hot cocoa or tea?”

“Hot cocoa.”

“Is this going to be a two-cocoa night?”

Lynne’s expression was serious. “I don’t know, but I’m prepared for the possibility.”

Janeway regarded her partner as she took a larger gulp of her coffee. Lowering the mug, she said slowly, “There’s so much to say that I really don’t know where to start.”

“I do,” said Lynne. She took a deep breath. “I’m sorry, Kathryn. Some of the things I said and did over the last few days were stupid and ill-considered and, in at least one case, downright hurtful. I know I put you in a bad position, and I’m sorry for that too. Can I assume from last night that you’ve forgiven me?”

Janeway shook her head. “I forgave you before last night. And I accept your apology only on the condition that you accept mine. I was pretty hard on you in sickbay, but if I’d been thinking instead of just reacting, I would have approached it a lot differently. I reacted to you far more emotionally than I should have, and I really regret what I said that night. It’s just that...” She stopped, considering her words. “I was angry and hurt. Mostly hurt. And I’ve been wondering ever since—do you really feel that I’m acting like I control you?”

Lynne dropped her eyes and studied her mug. When she finally looked up, her face wore a troubled expression. “You like to start out with the hard ones, don’t you?”

Janeway’s heart sank. “So that means yes.”

“No, it doesn’t. It means it’s not easy to explain.” She paused, and Janeway could see that she was weighing her next words carefully.
“Kathryn, I’m not Starfleet. I’ve never lived in this kind of environment. Until I came here, I managed to live my whole life in a condition as close to total freedom as anyone in my time could have. Hardly anybody could tell me what to do, and I liked it that way. I used to climb with a couple of ex-military friends and the stories they told me—well, I just couldn’t imagine being in a system like that. And now I am, to some extent. My movements are restricted, and the woman that I love is also the person who holds absolute authority over me. That’s been a little hard for me to deal with. I didn’t mean to bring that up in our argument; I was just so terrified about B’Elanna and so angry that you wouldn’t let me help, and I couldn’t accept the fact that you could actually prevent me from doing what I thought was right.”

“As it turns out, I couldn’t,” said Janeway wryly.

“No, you couldn’t,” agreed Lynne. “But I proved myself the wrong way, and I jeopardized everything that mattered to me. I’ve had a lot of time to think about the whole thing since then, and I’ve realized that you were right. The fact is, you do control this ship and everyone on it, and that includes me. And the more I thought about it, the more I realized that you’ve never pulled rank on me except when you felt that what I wanted wasn’t in the best interests of the crew and the ship. So even though I still don’t like it all that much, I’m getting a little more accustomed to it.” She raised an eyebrow. “It’s who you are, Kathryn. It’s not as if I have a whole lot of choice about this.”

Janeway winced. “Are you saying that if you had the choice—if you weren’t stuck on Voyager—you wouldn’t be with me?” The moment the words were out of her mouth, she wished she could take them back.

“That’s not what I meant. This is a completely separate issue from my being with you.”

“Is it?” Now that the topic was out there, she felt compelled to find out the worst. “You just said that it’s who I am, and you’re right. How can the two issues be separate when you resent the captain side of me? You can’t be with just part of me.”

“I know that.” Lynne set her mug down and rubbed her face with both hands. “Damn. It seems like whenever it really matters, I just don’t have the words to explain to you what I feel.” She dropped her hands and looked up. “I understand that you can’t always respond to me as my partner, and that sometimes you have to be my captain. It’s just taking me a
little while to come to grips with everything that means. It was easy to fall in love with you as a person. It’s a little harder to deal with the captain’s role that comes with you, but I am dealing with it, Kathryn. When I said I have no choice, I didn’t mean that I’m stuck because I can’t get off this ship. I meant that I’m stuck because I can’t imagine not being with you.” She shook her head. “I never wanted to get into this with you. I should have handled this on my own, without dragging you into it. Being the captain is not something you can change—at least, not without huge repercussions—and I am so sorry that I threw that whole control thing in your face in sickbay.”

Janeway felt a great sense of relief, even though Lynne’s words didn’t quite put all of her fears to rest. Then she remembered her own words that evening and felt a little sick. “And I’m sorry that I responded the way I did. I must have justified all of your doubts about that part of our relationship.”

Lynne shrugged. “You told me the truth.”

“I know, but there were better ways of saying it. I felt like an ass afterward. I went looking for you the next morning to apologize.” She paused. “That’s when I found out you were gone.”

“I’ll bet you forgot about apologizing to me after that,” said Lynne, not quite meeting her eyes.

Janeway didn’t want to think about that moment. “Let’s just say that if I could have gotten my hands on you right then, you’d have been in the brig a lot longer than seven days. And then when I tried to have you and Seven beamed back, the transporter room couldn’t find your life signs, and for a few horrible seconds I thought I’d lost you forever. Lynne, please don’t ever do anything like that to me again.”

Lynne looked up, a pained expression on her face. “Believe me, I don’t have any intention of repeating this. The odds are against it anyway, don’t you think? And I didn’t want to do it then, but I felt I had no choice. It seemed to me that you’d suddenly turned into the captain, and had left me no other options. Of course, Seven has since informed me that I was quite incorrect in my way of thinking.”

“Wait a minute. Is this the same Seven who slipped you off the ship?”

“This is the same Seven who just spent the last week giving me the education of my life. Let me tell you, that woman is merciless. You don’t want to spend seven days in a cell with her unless you enjoy having all of
your Human failings and poor logic pointed out and dissected. It's a truly
humbling experience. She told me that if she'd known the whole story,
she wouldn't have assisted me. She said that I misrepresented the situa-
tion to her, that I was completely illogical in my initial approach to you—
which of course I was—and that if I had simply made my request in an
appropriately logical manner, you would have seen the proper course of
action and done it.”

Janeway wasn’t sure how she felt about Seven of Nine analyzing and
predicting her decisions, but she had to hear this. “I see. And what did
she feel was the appropriately logical manner?”

“She said that as soon as you told me your concern was not my skill at
search and rescue, but my lack of training in combat, I should have
addressed that concern by presenting options for you. For instance,
keeping a transporter lock on me so that I could be beamed out at the first
sign of trouble, or making sure I was flanked by a security escort assigned
to protect me while I was distracted by the search effort. She felt that if I’d
tried to work with you to find a solution to your concern, rather than
getting emotional and insisting that you had to let me go, I’d have avoided
the whole mess. Seven’s not big on emotion.”

Lynne’s deadpan understatement took Janeway by surprise, and she
burst into laughter. “Oh, my,” she said, wiping her eyes, “that’s the truth.
And even when Seven is emotional, she’s still logical.” She grew serious
again, sipping her coffee and thinking. “If I hadn’t been so emotional
myself, I might have thought of those options. But all I could see was that
you had already barely escaped with your life as it was, and I couldn’t
imagine putting you right back into danger when you didn’t have the
training to deal with it. I was so focused on you that I didn’t have the
distance I needed to see the big picture.”

“That’s something else Seven said about you.”

“What, that I don’t see the big picture?” Janeway was indignant.

“No, just the opposite. That you have to look at the big picture, and
sometimes that results in different decisions than if you were seeing only
a piece of it. I’m the one who doesn’t look at the big picture, according to
her. She said I have to remember that you’re the head of our collective,
and it’s your job to use your available resources properly and efficiently. It
was my job to help you see that I was a resource you could use. And I
failed at it.”
“So that’s how Seven sees the chain of command,” mused Janeway. “Well, that explains a great deal.”

“Seven sees a lot of things,” said Lynne. “In her own way, she’s one of the most clear-sighted people I have ever known. I mean, it’s true that she’s behind the ball on some things that the rest of us know without even being aware that we know it, but that’s just because she was brought up in a completely different culture. In many other ways she’s so far out in front that the rest of us look like we’re not even running the same race.”

Janeway had stalled on the first part of this statement. “Behind the ball?”

Lynne looked down with a smile. “You know, that’s one thing I am not going to miss about being with Seven twenty-four hours a day. Do you know how many idioms I had to explain to her? Usually I’d get about halfway through an explanation and she’d be looking at me with this expression that made me realize how totally inane my slang terms really are. I think she called half my vocabulary into question.”

“And I can certainly see why. You still haven’t explained ‘behind the ball.’”

“How about ‘not up to speed’?”

“Ah,” said Janeway. “Got it.” She looked at her partner, curled up with her ubiquitous mug of cocoa, and felt a rush of love and contentment that surprised her with its strength. Since Voyager’s stranding, moments of pure happiness were few and far between for her, a fact she’d accepted years ago. That just made those occasional perfect moments all the more precious, and she was basking in one right now. Having Lynne explain yet another of her unfathomable idioms, the comfort of her physical presence so close by, the familiarity of their positions on the couch...after their recent argument and separation, these simple things filled her with joy. She thought that if the ship hit a cosmic string and winked out of existence right now, she’d go out happy.

“God, I’ve missed you,” she said. “You have no idea what it means to me to have you sitting here now. When we walked back here last night, I didn’t know if we’d ever get to this point again.”

“I didn’t either,” said Lynne. “It was so strange to be walking right beside you and be afraid.”

This was unexpected. “Afraid?”
“Oh, yes. I was afraid of touching you, afraid of saying anything for fear it would be the wrong thing, and desperately afraid that when you got me to your quarters you were going to tell me it was all over. I couldn’t believe it when you hugged me instead. It was like getting a reprieve from a life sentence.”

“You’ve definitely got a command mask, then,” said Janeway. “You didn’t look afraid; you looked intimidating. I was really worried. And the last time I’d seen you, the look you gave me was—well, it wasn’t very loving.”

“I don’t doubt it. I was furious with you for giving Seven a harsher sentence than me, and really, I thought you and I were finished at that point. You were so cold and professional—I couldn’t see any sign of the Kathryn I knew in your face. I guess I’ve just never before seen Kathryn the captain, at least not like that. My relationship with you has always been more personal, and I’ve never really had to deal with you on a purely professional level. Obviously my first attempt at it was not a resounding success.” She offered a wry half-smile, but Janeway could see something else behind it.

“Hey,” she said softly, “we both made mistakes. Don’t take all the blame on yourself.”

Lynne’s eyes were shining with unshed tears. “Oh, Kathryn, how can I not? I was so blind about your responsibilities and so sure of my own actions, and I made a huge mistake. When Seven told me I’d failed at my responsibility to help you see me as a resource, it really knocked me down to size. I just hadn’t considered it from that angle until then, and when I did consider it—well, it scares me to think of what I could have lost.”

“It scares me to think of what I could have lost if you hadn’t done what you did,” said Janeway. “The Doctor said B’Elanna would certainly have died in another four to six hours. She only lasted as long as she did because she’s half-Klingon and has redundant organs that kept her vital systems going. But those organs couldn’t do everything, and she was on limited time. If you hadn’t found her when you did, she wouldn’t be here now. You know the search team had already been over that area and missed what you saw. They wouldn’t have found her. You did exactly what you told me you could do, and I didn’t take you as seriously as I should have. Seven was right about one thing—you were a resource that I should have.
have used. But I’m the one who didn’t see it, and it was a bad decision on my part not to send you down.”

Janeway was realizing the truth of this even as she spoke. Lynne had called herself blind, but she wasn’t the only one. I was too close to her, she thought. I didn’t see what should have been done. I let my personal feelings get in the way. She was shocked and horrified at the realization. All these months she’d been congratulating herself that Lynne wasn’t a member of the crew, because it meant she’d never have to worry about a conflict between her personal feelings and her responsibilities as a captain. But the conflict had happened anyway, without her even recognizing it—and she’d blown it. She’d made the wrong decision.

Her earlier feeling of contentment evaporated as a crushing guilt descended. She put her coffee mug on the table and turned toward the viewport, needing some distance. Lynne was the one apologizing, thinking she’d failed, but it hadn’t been her job to convince Janeway. It was the captain’s job to see the situation clearly and make the best decision. And she hadn’t. How was she going to deal with this? Could she afford to continue this relationship? It had already affected her ability to make command decisions badly enough that she’d almost lost a crewmember. What if the next time her mistake was bigger?

She heard a click as Lynne put her mug down, then felt the couch shift. A moment later Lynne’s hands were clasping her own. “What just happened here?” asked Lynne. “You went away.”

It took an act of will to face her, and the concern she saw pierced right through to her heart. She felt completely undeserving.

“Lynne,” she said, her voice threatening to betray her, “I am so sorry. This whole thing is my fault. And the worst part of it is, I didn’t even see it until now. I was so angry at you for defying my orders, and then for challenging me in the ready room, that I never really examined my own part in this. I can’t believe it took me this long to see it, but I’ve just now realized how much responsibility I bear for this whole situation—and that’s just about all of it. I made a mistake, and then I made you pay the price. And if you hadn’t had the guts to call me on it and do what you did, B’Elanna would have paid the price. God, I can’t believe I was so dense, and so completely wrong.” Her guilt was threatening to drown her, and it was a familiar feeling. This was how she’d felt in the Void, when the lack of anything to do had forced her to
actually sit and examine her decision to destroy the Caretaker’s array and strand Voyager. She’d finally understood then that her arrogance, her blind belief in Starfleet ideals, had condemned not just herself but her entire crew to a possible lifetime away from home. The guilt had been a deep, crushing blackness, and she could feel it now, pressing in on her.

“Whoa, hold on,” said Lynne, squeezing her hands. “You just got finished telling me that we both made mistakes, and now you’re trying to take all the blame? I don’t think so. This is as much my fault as it is yours. More so, I think.”

Janeway shook her head unhappily. “No, you don’t understand. It wasn’t your responsibility to convince me to send you on the search and rescue mission. It was my responsibility to recognize that you were the best qualified person to do it, regardless of my own feelings for you or my fear that you could be injured or killed in a combat situation. I was blinded by my relationship with you, and it affected my ability to make a command decision. I can’t ever let that happen again. I’m not sure if I can do this.”

“What do you mean?” asked Lynne, a touch of fear in her voice.

Janeway steeled herself. “I mean, I’m not sure if I can stay in this relationship. Not if it means compromising my command.”

Lynne let go and sat back on her heels, a stunned look on her face. “I can’t believe you’re saying this.”

Janeway’s hands felt suddenly cold, and she tucked them under her arms. “I can’t either,” she said, her voice flat. “Believe me, it’s not what I want. But it’s something I have to consider. This is it, Lynne—this is the big picture you were talking about. The safety of this ship and crew come first, and I have to do whatever it takes to ensure that safety. My command has to come before my personal happiness.”

“And what about my happiness? Goddammit, Kathryn—” Lynne began hotly, then stopped herself with a visible effort. Shaking her head, she got up from the couch and paced to the dining table and back while Janeway watched in mute misery. When she looked up, Janeway could see a familiar expression in her eyes. She prepared herself for the onslaught as Lynne came back to the couch. But what came next wasn’t at all what she expected.

“No way,” said Lynne as she sat down. “There is no way I’m letting
you quit that easily. You’re not running away the first time we hit a wall. I love you too much to let you go like that. I need you too much.”

Her words pierced Janeway’s guilt like a ray of sunlight in the darkness of a prison cell. “You need me?” she asked, not quite believing it.

Lynne was incredulous. “Of course I need you. How could you think otherwise? Kathryn, you’re my lifeline. I can’t imagine an existence without you. I’ve already had to learn to give you up to this ship in every other way, working late practically every night and not having nearly as much time for me as I’d like. I’ve accepted that, though it hasn’t been easy. But I can’t see giving you up altogether. You can’t ask me to do that.”

Janeway was shaking her head, trying to come to terms with what she was hearing. “I don’t have enough time for you? You’re the one who’s been busy practically every night. You’re the one who chose to climb a mountain rather than spend time with me. I’ve been available, Lynne, how can you say I didn’t have time for you?”

“Because you’re always working! Every time I checked to see where you were after your shift, you were still in your ready room. So I started spending more time with B’Elanna and Seven and the gang because it was a hell of a lot better than staying in my quarters, wishing you were with me.”

“I can’t believe this. I started working late because you were always busy training or socializing, and working was better than sitting home alone.”

“You have got to be kidding me,” said Lynne.

“No, I’m not. I wanted to spend more time with you. You weren’t there.”

“Then why didn’t you ask me to be there?”

“Because you seemed perfectly happy with the way things were, and you never offered to spend more time with me. I thought I wanted more than you were ready to give, and I didn’t want to risk what we already had by asking for more.” She paused. “Why didn’t you ask me to be there?”

“Because you’re the captain,” said Lynne. “I didn’t think I had the right to ask for more from you.”

They stared at each other in silence.

“Well,” said Lynne at last, “this is a clusterfuck of biblical proportions.”
“A what?” Janeway began to laugh. Really, this whole situation was just too awful.

“A clusterfuck. A really, really big fuck-up, usually comprised of lots of little fuck-ups all added together.” Lynne was laughing too. “I can’t believe that one didn’t make into this century. Clusterfucks are timeless.”

“They certainly are,” said Janeway, “as we’ve just proven.” Her laughter slowed, and then the full import of Lynne’s revelation hit her. She looked at her partner with wide eyes. “Oh, Lynne. It would have made such a difference to me if I’d known. And now…” She couldn’t finish the sentence.

Lynne knew, her face instantly sober. “Are you about to say that now it’s too late?”

Janeway nodded disconsolately. “I’m sorry. I love you, but it just terrifies me that I lost my focus so badly when it came to you. I made a mistake that almost cost B’Elanna’s life. What if the next time the stakes are higher? I can’t risk it. What I want, and even what you want, simply isn’t as important as the safety of this ship and crew. And I don’t know if I can keep one without risking the other.”

She waited for the inevitable argument, but Lynne didn’t respond right away. She had her head tilted to one side, thinking hard, and when she focused on Janeway again her expression was one of wonderment.

“I just realized something,” she said slowly.

“What?”

“That we’re both being idiots. Do you recall what Seven said when we left the brig?”

“Yes,” said Janeway, wondering where this was going and not sure she wanted to find out. “She told you to remember something.”

“Right. She’d been pounding several different concepts into my head, most of them to do with the necessity of not letting my emotions rule me as I have in the past. You may have noticed that I tend to react to things emotionally before I think them through.”

Janeway nodded. Another time she would have laughed at that statement, but Lynne was deadly serious.

“Well, I’ve been getting some lessons in Borg logic, and I think now is an excellent time to apply them. Because right now, I’m reacting emotionally—and so are you.”
Janeway opened her mouth to answer, realized how stupid her response would sound, and shut it again.

“Kathryn,” said Lynne earnestly, “we’re both trying to take the blame for this when the truth is that neither one of us needs to. I’m kicking myself for not approaching you more logically and convincing you to let me go, and you’re kicking yourself for not seeing that you should have let me go—but you couldn’t have sent me. Period. And you told me why that night.”

“You mean when I said I couldn’t justify the risk? True, but if I’d been thinking more clearly I’d have realized that the risk could have been minimized, and you were the best person for the job.”

Lynne shook her head. “You were thinking clearly then. You’re not now. Tell me, with the exception of Seven—who probably has more combat experience than everyone else on this ship put together—how many times have you sent a civilian into combat?”

“Never.” Comprehension was dawning.

“And why haven’t you?”

Janeway looked at her partner with new respect. “Because it’s against Starfleet regulations, for one thing, and ethically wrong for another.”

“Then how can you call your decision a mistake when, in fact, it was not only in compliance with Starfleet regulations, but ethically correct as well? You told me that night that you couldn’t send me because the risk was too great for a civilian. I think you’ve just forgotten that part because you’re trying so hard to take responsibility for everything. But you don’t have to—you made the right decision.”

Janeway was speechless for a moment. Her mind furiously processed Lynne’s statement, trying to find a hole in it. But there wasn’t one. Lynne was right: she could regret that decision all she wanted to, but the fact remained that it was the only one she could have made under the circumstances. The crushing blackness ebbed away, and she looked at Lynne in wonderment. When she finally found her voice, she said, “I may have to throw myself in the brig with Seven for a few days. It’s obviously done wonders for you, and I think I could use some of those same lessons.”

A slow smile spread over Lynne’s face. “Do I take that to mean I’ve made my point?”

“Oh, you’ve made it and then some. Now I feel like a fool. I’ve just scared the hell out of both of us for nothing.”
Lynne leaned forward to capture her hands. “You’re not a fool. You’re the most brilliant, ethical, and caring person I have ever known. You torture yourself trying to do the right thing, and I love you for that, even though it means I get tortured right along with you. I just want you to understand that you didn’t lose your focus with me. In fact, you kept it in the face of some pretty strong pressure on my part. I pulled out all the stops, right down to fighting dirty, and you still did what you felt was right. And you were right—I wasn’t prepared for a combat situation. Let me tell you, when Seven and I had four Santori guards pointing weapons at us, that little fact became blindingly obvious. This was a no-win situation, Kathryn. I may be a resource for you, but the way we’ve got things set up right now, you couldn’t use that resource without compromising your ethics and your beliefs. I didn’t like it, and we may have to think about changing our arrangement, but I have to respect the choice you made given the options at the time. And I respect you, more than I have any other person in my life. I’m proud to call you my partner.” She tugged on Janeway’s hands, closing the distance between them.

Gratefully, Janeway let herself relax into the kiss. When she pulled back several luxurious minutes later, she whispered, “Thank you.”

Lynne raised an eyebrow. “For kissing you?”

Janeway knew she was being deliberately obtuse. “For saying all the right things. For loving me. For being stubborn enough to defy my orders and save an impossible situation. For being courageous enough to risk our relationship to do the right thing. I’m not the only one in this room with ethics, and I respect yours tremendously.”

“Wow,” said Lynne. “That’s quite a list. I think I may get a big head. You may have to widen the entrance to your quarters.”

Janeway laughed. “No, I think I’ll keep it just the width it is, because then you’ll never be able to leave.”

“Who said I wanted to?” Lynne reached for her again, and Janeway was very glad she’d had the foresight to log them both off duty. It looked like they weren’t going anywhere for a while.
If B’Elanna’s theory was right, then Voyager’s engine efficiency took a noticeable jump upward over the next several weeks, because her captain was happier than she’d ever been. She and Lynne had found a new level to their relationship that surpassed the old. Days of discussing and dissecting recent events and their emotions, motives and reasoning had brought them both to a much greater understanding of each other, as well as a comforting knowledge that, despite their differences, they shared the same core beliefs and ethics. As Lynne said, everything else was just window dressing. Janeway of course had no idea what this meant, and threatened to start recording all of Lynne’s idioms just so she could see how truly incomprehensible she really was to most civilized people.

Voyager made good time for two months, stopping only twice to acquire supplies, once to examine a nebula with unusual radiation readings, and once to take part in a mediation between two races who were negotiating an agreement over resources on their moon. Lynne accompanied the away team on both supply-gathering missions, and Janeway managed not to worry too much about her—at least, not so much that she drove the bridge crew off the deck. Remembering their earlier agreement, Lynne sent a message to the ready room terminal immediately upon returning from each mission. Then she complained that Janeway hadn’t had the consideration to do the same when she returned from the media-
tion sessions. Janeway laughed at her and asked where in Starfleet regulations did it require the captain to notify a civilian passenger of her safe return? After several minutes of Lynne’s demonstration that she was not a typical civilian passenger, Janeway breathlessly agreed that, after all, it was only fair for her to send a message to Lynne whenever she got back from an away mission.

They had one difficult evening when Lynne asked permission to begin combat and general security training with Tuvok. Janeway resisted at first, hating the very thought of it, but Lynne reasonably pointed out that whether or not she was a civilian, she was still under contract as a member of the security department and it was logical for her to have some training. After all, even the most innocuous of away missions could get into trouble. And if that were to happen, wouldn’t she prefer that Lynne be able to assist, or at least protect herself, rather than ducking down and hoping for the best? In addition, she said, having her be trained in combat could help avoid the sort of no-win situation that Janeway had found herself in during the search for B’Elanna on the Tsian planet. Put that way, Janeway was forced to agree to the sense of it, grumbling all the while that her life had gotten a lot more difficult ever since Seven had given Lynne a lesson in Borg logic. Lynne responded that Janeway had only herself to blame for that.

Lynne had taken to the training like a duck to water, and before Janeway quite knew what was happening, her partner was working in the security department full time, having said that she’d done all she could with the archeology lab. Johnson and Slater had agreed, releasing her from her duties with them, and Tuvok had immediately requested permission to devote time to training Lynne as a student in the more formal Vulcan martial arts as well as several specialized areas of security. Feeling somewhat as if the ground were sliding under her feet, Janeway agreed. She couldn’t see any reason to deny the request, but she wasn’t comfortable with it. She really didn’t want to know the details of what Lynne was learning, and Lynne seemed to understand. When they talked about their days together, she gave Janeway the highlights of her training but didn’t go into much depth.

B’Elanna and Seven found themselves regularly invited to dinner in the captain’s quarters, hosted by Janeway and Lynne. Janeway was delighted to see the change in the relationship between her two officers. Somehow
they’d found a mutual respect for each other’s strengths, and their previous antagonism had turned into a prickly sort of friendship. Many of the crew found the new friendship indistinguishable from their earlier dislike, but those close to them knew better.

B’Elanna said at their first dinner that she’d decided to give Seven a chance after watching her dissect Lynne in the brig. “Anybody who could get through that woman’s thick head,” she said, pointing at Lynne, “was somebody I wanted on my side in a fight.”

“Well, of all the people on this ship, you’re the best qualified to judge the thickness of a skull,” said Lynne.

“Was that some sort of Klingon insult?” demanded B’Elanna.

“No, it was a personal insult. And now that Tuvok has taught me to kick serious butt, you’re welcome to take me outside to discuss it if you’d like,” said Lynne. “We never did finish that discussion about whose ego was bigger, so we might as well lump it in with a chat about whose head is thicker.”

“Any holodeck, any time,” said B’Elanna.

“Ladies,” said Janeway mildly, “please remember that I will be forced to respond to any fisticuffs with the appropriate discipline. Except that this time I think I’ll use Neelix’s cooking rather than time in the brig. How does a week of Turnover Delight sound?”

“We’ll be good,” B’Elanna promised, with a sidelong glance at Lynne.

“Kathryn, I believe it would be more efficient simply to let them fight,” said Seven. “Your only alternative is a constant use of threats to control their behavior, and that is an inefficient use of your time. Besides, I would be most interested to view the outcome.”

“Why, Seven, I had no idea you were so bloodthirsty,” said B’Elanna.

“Normally I am not,” said Seven, raising an eyebrow. Janeway and B’Elanna smiled, but Lynne laughed and raised her glass.

“Well done, Seven,” she said. “A nicely dangled implication.”

Seven raised her own glass of sparkling cider and tapped it to Lynne’s.

“Thank you. You were not the only one who acquired new social techniques in the brig.”

“If only I’d known that the brig was the social hot spot of the ship,” said Janeway. “Somebody should tell Neelix.”
Janeway sat in her bridge chair, idly contemplating the viewscreen. She was taking a mental break from the mission log she’d been reviewing, and found the constant passage of star streaks to be a soothing distraction. Her mind wandered to the previous night in Lynne’s quarters. They’d spent the whole evening just relaxing, sipping wine and talking about their day. Lynne had put on a musical selection from her time that she’d just located in the database—it was filed under an incorrect name, she’d said—and Janeway had loved it. Lynne’s excitement over finding the album was transparent and contagious. She’d told Janeway that Bel Canto had been her favorite band, and of all the albums she’d known in her time, this was the one she would have chosen to take if she were stranded on a desert island.

“I hope you don’t think of Voyager as a desert island,” Janeway had said jokingly.

“No,” Lynne had answered. “But I am stranded. Though I couldn’t ask for better company.”

It was small moments such as this that continued to worry Janeway about her relationship with Lynne. On the one hand, she’d never felt so comfortable with another person before, and their partnership seemed to be getting stronger and more rewarding every day. They’d been seeing each other far more often since clearing up their misunderstanding. Now
that most of Lynne’s training was taking place during the duty shift, she was spending fewer evenings a week with Tuvok, and Janeway had taken full advantage of that. Everything seemed to be perfect…but then there were the occasional little reminders that Lynne was not quite as happy as Janeway wished she could be. She supposed she should expect it; after all, from Lynne’s perspective it had been only eight months since she had been torn away from everything she’d ever known. She’d made an amazing adjustment in that time, and Janeway was proud of her for fitting in so well. But she was obviously still adapting.

It was partly for this reason that Janeway continued to put off taking the next step in their relationship. She’d been thinking more and more about asking Lynne to move in with her, but didn’t know if it was wise. Should she ask such a thing when Lynne was still adjusting to her new environment? What if she wasn’t ready? What if she said yes, but they couldn’t make it work? She knew from hard experience that the worst thing in the world was living on a small ship with an estranged lover. The emotional strain she’d experienced during her disagreement with Lynne over B’Elanna’s rescue, and her partner’s subsequent confinement, was something she never wanted to repeat.

She had one other concern—whether or not Lynne could fully accept Janeway’s captaincy. The topic hadn’t come up again since their pivotal discussion about authority and control, but Janeway still had doubts and wasn’t quite sure how she could put them to rest.

Despite these worries, their relationship was still the best thing that had ever happened to her. She wasn’t going to get unduly stressed over it—they had time to work things out at a pace that Lynne was comfortable with. It never occurred to her to wonder whether she was the one who needed to get comfortable.

She shook herself out of her reverie and picked up her PADD. A moment later the log was forgotten when she felt a subtle vibration through the deck plating. Looking up sharply, she saw that the scene on the viewscreen had changed. Where before there had been nothing but stars, now there was a small blue rift in space, dead ahead of them. Even as she watched, the rift grew in size.

“Full stop,” she called out. “Mr. Kim, what is that?”

Harry’s console beeped, indicating that he’d already been scanning the anomaly and had just gotten a result back. “It’s a tear in the fabric of
space, Captain. It wasn’t there a second ago, and it doesn’t conform to any recognized type of wormhole.”

Janeway felt a surge of adrenaline go through her. Anomalies such as this were usually far more trouble than she ever wanted to get into, but they also held the tantalizing possibility of a fast ticket home. Keeping her excitement out of her voice, she asked, “Can you determine where it leads?”

“Our sensors can’t penetrate it. We could try a probe.”

Tuvok had also been conducting scans. “Captain, the anomaly is increasing in size at a logarithmic rate. I believe it would be prudent for us to withdraw to a safe distance.”

Janeway could see that for herself; the image on the screen was indeed growing quickly. “Mr. Paris, move us back fifty thousand kilometers, one-quarter impulse.”

“Aye, Captain,” said Tom as he input the command to the helm. Janeway watched the anomaly shrink as they retreated, but then the ship shuddered slightly, and the anomaly began to grow again.

“Report,” she demanded of anyone who could answer.

“Captain, the helm shows that engines are at one-quarter impulse. We’re just not moving,” said Tom.

Harry’s fingers flew over his board, and he looked at Janeway with concern. “Confirmed. The engines are operating within normal parameters.”

“Increase speed to full impulse,” said Janeway.

“Increasing speed,” said Tom. “No response.”

“Warp one,” said Janeway.

“Warp one,” repeated Tom. They could all hear the familiar hum of the warp engines coming on line, but Janeway didn’t need a report to see that they were still going nowhere, and the anomaly was getting alarmingly close. A second later B’Elanna’s voice came over the comm system.

“Engineering to bridge. What are you doing up there? The warp engines are getting hot.”

“Stand by, B’Elanna,” said Janeway. “Helm, increase to warp two.”

The air on the bridge grew thick with tension as they all waited. Nothing happened.

“Captain, the engines are at maximum heat tolerance. Whatever you’re doing, you’ve got about thirty more seconds before they overheat and shut down.”
“Tom,” said Janeway, “reverse course, increase speed to warp eight and use that thing’s gravitational attraction to give us escape velocity.” It was a desperate gambit, but they’d run out of conventional options.

“Aye, Captain.” The anomaly nearly filled the screen as they flew toward it, then began sliding to the left as Tom used their speed to shear away. Janeway was just thinking they’d made it when the anomaly suddenly and inexplicably moved back to center screen, and a second later Voyager crossed the threshold. A blinding blue light filled the bridge. Janeway closed her eyes against it, able to see the brilliant light even through her eyelids. When it faded, she carefully opened her eyes and felt her jaw drop.

“Mr. Kim,” she said when she could find her voice, “please tell me that we’re not where—and when—I think we are.”

Everyone on the bridge was staring with equal amazement. Harry tore his eyes away from the screen and checked his board, then looked at Janeway with the confirmation written all over his face.

“We’re back at Earth,” he said. “That’s Voyager in orbit, and the year is 1996. We’ve been thrown back somehow to our encounter with Captain Braxton and Henry Starling.”

“Great,” muttered Janeway. Three years ago, Voyager had been attacked by a Starfleet captain piloting a timeship from the twenty-ninth century, who informed them that their ship would be responsible for the destruction of the Sol system. During the attack, both Voyager and the timeship had been sucked back to Earth, the timeship landing in 1967 and Voyager arriving in 1996. In their search for Captain Braxton, Janeway and her crew had found that an entrepreneur named Starling was in possession of the timeship and was using its technology to fuel the microcomputer revolution and, incidentally, his own personal fortune. It had taken them two days to straighten everything out, but they’d eventually been sent back to their own time by Braxton. Unfortunately, they’d been sent back to their own place, as well, having gained nothing from their trip through time and space except for the Doctor’s mobile emitter.

And here they were again, except that they were also here—the other Voyager they could all see orbiting the planet. How could they both be here at the same time? And why wasn’t the other ship hailing them? Surely they’d seen them as soon as they’d arrived. Janeway felt a familiar headache settle in; she hated temporal mechanics with a passion.
She stood up. “All right, everybody in the conference room. Helm, set an orbit that avoids the surveillance satellites.” As the senior staff filed in, she contacted Seven and B’Elanna. This was going to be an interesting meeting.

Two hours later, Janeway pulled an extra-large mug of coffee from her ready room replicator, hoping like hell that it would do something to ease her headache. They’d run every scan they could think of, gone over every possible theory and explanation, and had ended no further ahead than they’d begun—except that her headache had intensified. Even Seven couldn’t come up with an explanation for the anomaly’s bizarre behavior, when it had actually seemed to jump in front of them. She did, however, offer a theory as to why the other Voyager didn’t seem to be detecting them: that they were slightly out of phase from the other ship, and were therefore not registering visually or on any sensors. Since nobody else could come up with anything better, that was their working theory for now.

The meeting had left Janeway with only one option: to wait for the historical events to unfold, and be prepared to follow the other Voyager out when they set off for their fateful rendezvous with Captain Braxton. Assuming that Braxton would be able to detect them along with the other Voyager, he’d send them back to their own time. And if Braxton couldn’t detect them—well, then they’d just dive into the time rift along with the other Voyager and follow it back. This option was one that Janeway could hardly bear to consider, since it meant having to relive the last two years over again. Not only that, but the implications of having two Voyagers and two complete crews traveling side by side was something she really didn’t want to think about.

The sound of her door chime brought her up straight. There was another, very large implication to their current situation, and the person it concerned had just arrived at her request.

“Come,” she called. The door swished open and Lynne strode in. As soon as she saw Janeway she leaped the stairs to the upper level, coming to a stop with an electric air about her.

“Is it true?” she demanded. “It’s 1996?”
“Yes, it’s true.” Janeway indicated the replicator. “Would you like some tea or hot cocoa?”

“I think I’d like something a whole lot stronger.”

“Well, we’re on duty so that’s out of the question,” said Janeway. She looked Lynne in the eye. “Unless you’re here to resign your contract, in which case we’re both going to have a stiff drink.”

Lynne stared at her, then collapsed onto the sofa as if her legs had been cut out from under her.

“You’re telling me I can go home, aren’t you?”

Janeway sat next to her with only slightly more grace. She was feeling a bit wobbly herself, though she tried very hard not to show it. It seemed to her that the rest of her life depended on the next few minutes.

“I’m telling you that you have a choice,” she said. “And exactly thirty-two hours in which to make it. After that, we’re leaving with or without you.”

Lynne let the air out of her lungs. “A hell of a choice, I’d say. Give up everything here to go home, or give up everything at home to stay here. Damn—if this had happened a few months ago, there would have been no question. But now…” She buried her face in her hands. “Jesus, Kathryn. I have to decide in thirty-two hours?”

“I’m afraid so.” Janeway put a comforting hand on Lynne’s shoulder, wishing she could find some way to comfort herself as well. She knew in her heart that her partner was leaving. After all, Earth had been her home for over four decades, while she’d been on Voyager for less than a year. Certainly her old life must be exerting an irresistible pull, and Lynne had never been truly happy here.

“We’ve been here before,” she said. “This is an event that Voyager experienced three years ago. I know exactly what’s going to happen over the next thirty-two hours, and I know that our only chance of getting back to our time will be at the end of that time span. And this is your only chance. You’re not stranded anymore. You can go home if you want to, even though it’s not quite the home that you knew.”

Lynne raised her head. “What do you mean?”

“It’s 1996,” said Janeway gently. “If you go back, you’ll have to keep a low profile and make sure that you do nothing to contaminate the timeline for the next five years. And I mean nothing—the Temporal Prime Directive is very clear. If you do anything to alter the timeline, no matter
how minor, the repercussions could be severe. You won’t be able to see any of your friends or family during that time. Only after the Lynne who is down there right now vanishes in 2001 will you be able to contact anyone you know and love.”

There was a long pause while Lynne studied the view. When she looked back at Janeway, her eyes held a haunted expression.

“Do you want me to stay?”

Janeway hadn’t expected that one. How could she possibly answer it? She couldn’t admit to Lynne that her heart was breaking even now, because she couldn’t influence her partner’s decision. It wasn’t her right to ask Lynne to stay. With as much resolve as she could muster, she said, “What I want doesn’t matter. This is your decision, Lynne. Only you can make it. You have to leave me out of it.”

“What you want matters to me. And I can’t leave you out of it—you’re the most important person in my life, now or ever. But we’ve never talked commitment before, at least not like this. It’s been too soon…and tomorrow it will be too late. Kathryn—” She stopped, shook her head, and went on in a softer voice. “If I don’t mean as much to you, then I need to know right now.”

“How can you say that?” Janeway was shocked. “Don’t you know how much you mean to me? Haven’t I told you, shown you in every way that I can?” She leaned forward and took Lynne’s hands in her own. “I love you, but I can’t stand in the way of your one chance to go back home. What kind of love would that be? Wasn’t it you who gave me the quote about loving something and setting it free?”

Lynne nodded slowly, a mounting tension showing in her face. She squeezed Janeway’s hands and let them go. “Yes, it was. How ironic—I told you that when I was trying like hell to get off this ship. And now it comes back around when I have to decide whether to stay on it.”

Janeway picked up her coffee mug and cupped her hands around it, its warmth a contrast to the cold dread that was seeping into her heart. She desperately wanted to ask Lynne to stay, to tell her that she couldn’t imagine going on without her—but she had to set aside her own needs. This wasn’t like asking Lynne to move in with her. It was asking her to give up everything she thought she’d lost, and Janeway couldn’t be that selfish.

“Lynne,” she said at last, “I can’t help you with this one. This is your
choice, and you must understand that I have to stay out of it.” If her tone
was a little cooler than usual, it was only because she was having to
control the tremor threatening to work its way out of her throat.

Lynne looked out the viewport, and Janeway watched as conflicting
emotions chased across her face. She saw her features settle into resolve,
and knew what Lynne was going to say before she even opened
her mouth.

“I have to go.”

“I know,” said Janeway, feeling the bottom drop out of her stomach.
She took a deep breath. “When will you leave?”

“As soon as I can get some things together from my quarters. Kathryn,
this isn’t my final decision. It’s just that I can’t make my choice from here.
I’ve got to go down there and see it again before I decide. And if I’ve only
got thirty-two hours, then I want to leave as soon as possible.” She
squeezed Janeway’s knee, her eyes shining suspiciously. “If I decide to go
home, I’ll still come back to say goodbye. I won’t leave it like this.”

Janeway thought she knew what the gladiators must have felt when
they stood in the Roman coliseum, waiting for the emperor to decide their
fate. Except that they only had to wait a few seconds, while she had a day
and a half to hang by a thread. This was going to be absolute hell.

“All right,” she said. “Just tell the transporter operator where you want
to go. I’ll send over my authorization.” She glanced out the viewport at
the familiar blue and green planet revolving slowly beneath them. “So
where are you going?”

Lynne’s face took on a glow. “Boulder, Colorado. If I can’t actually go
home, that’s close enough.”
The next thirty hours seemed like thirty years to Janeway. When she'd sent her authorization to the transporter room, she'd also included orders to be notified of Lynne's departure and return. Less than one hour after Lynne had left her ready room, she'd gotten the word from the transporter operator that the transport was complete. Suddenly Voyager seemed like a different ship to her—a place where she existed and worked, but not a place where she had any kind of life. The remainder of her shift dragged on forever, and when it was finally over she found that she had no desire to go back to her quarters. Instead, she continued to work until she was nearly dropping from exhaustion. When she got to the point where she'd read the same paragraph three times without comprehending it, she retired to her ready room couch for a few hours' sleep, then resumed working as soon as she woke up. As long as she could keep busy, she didn't have to think. And right now, thinking was a bad idea.

She was already in her bridge chair before Tuvok arrived at the beginning of alpha shift. The Vulcan raised an eyebrow at seeing her there—he was normally the first one on the bridge—but otherwise gave no sign that he had noticed anything unusual. She'd traded her wrinkled uniform in for a newly replicated one, and was reasonably sure that no one could see through her command mask to the ever-increasing fear beneath it. The
more time that went by without word from Lynne, the more certain she was that Voyager would be leaving without her. The knowledge weighed her down, and she felt as if her mind was wrapped in gauze. It seemed to take her longer to make decisions, to comprehend what she was reading, even to process simple questions. She appreciated the irony of the situation—for so long she’d worried that a personal relationship might interfere with her command, but that hadn’t been the case. It was the end of the relationship that was playing havoc with her command abilities.

The shift crawled by, and she found herself wishing that something would happen just to take her mind off her situation. The fact that they were forced to sit and wait until their moment of departure made things worse. There were only so many mission logs and GDRs she could read before going space happy, and she felt dangerously close to that point by mid-afternoon, when she took a break from the reports to gaze at the viewscreen. Even though it wasn’t her Earth, it was still mesmerizing. At the moment, North America was sliding by, and she could see the spine of the Rocky Mountains marching down the continent. She stared at the range of peaks, wondering where Lynne was now and what she was doing. But that thought hurt, so she shifted her gaze to the midwestern plains, locating the general area where she’d grown up in the agricultural park of Indiana. How she longed to be there once more, walking through the cornfields on a hot summer day and feeling her ears vibrate with the incessant hum of insects. For a moment she lost herself in pleasant memories, then snapped back to the present when the other Voyager moved across their viewscreen. Their orbit was such that they didn’t see the other ship very often, and Janeway thought as she watched that she really preferred it that way. It was just a little…spooky to see themselves as they were three years ago. She knew there were people on that ship who were gone from hers, and she ached for the memory of the crew—and one very special friend—that she’d lost since then. Of course, she had added two new people as well, both of whom had immeasurably enriched her life.

And now you’re leaving one of them behind. The unbidden thought was sharp, cutting through her musings and causing such a pain in her heart that she couldn’t help but wonder: if just thinking about it hurt this much, could she survive the actual event?

She looked at the other Voyager again. Of course she could survive it.
Look at what she’d survived in the last three years. The Janeway over there had no idea what lay in store for her, but she’d get through it. They’d both get through whatever they had to.

At 1600 she dismissed the bridge crew for an early dinner break. They were all expected to return for a double shift, since Voyager’s departure from Earth would occur toward the middle of beta shift. She herself was unable to eat, being too keyed up about their upcoming jump, not to mention worried beyond belief about Lynne. It seemed to her that her partner had been gone for a week rather than just over a day, and their time was running out. Why hadn’t Lynne contacted the ship? Janeway could only think of two reasons: one, that she’d decided to come back and was making the absolute most of her remaining time on Earth; or two, that she’d decided not to come back and was delaying her goodbye until the last minute. She tried to think positive, but in her heart she knew that option one was unlikely. If Lynne had decided to return to Voyager, she would have called by now. She’d have known that Janeway would worry until she’d gotten word, just as she always worried when Lynne was on an away mission. And Lynne had always been so prompt about sending a message upon her return from a mission; she simply wouldn’t let her partner dangle like this. Unless…

Her eyes widened.

Unless there was an option three: something had happened to prevent Lynne from contacting the ship.

Oh, my god. Janeway turned the conn over to the beta shift officer and practically ran to her ready room. As soon as the door closed behind her she hit her comm badge. She’d sworn to herself that she’d give Lynne the space she needed, but this was too frightening a scenario. She had to resolve it.

“Janeway to Hamilton.”

Silence.

She closed her eyes and wrapped her arms around herself. “Janeway to Hamilton. Please respond.”

Ten seconds later she gave up. “Janeway to Transporter Room Two. Lock onto Lynne Hamilton’s comm signal. If there are no Human life signs in her area, transport her immediately to my ready room.” This was going against everything she’d promised herself she wouldn’t do, and
Lynne would have every right to be angry, but she just couldn’t see any way around it.

She turned at the sound of a transporter behind her, watching eagerly for the first signs of her partner’s form. But there was nothing taking shape in the beam. Chills ran down her spine as the beam faded, leaving a small object behind.

Stepping forward, she picked Lynne’s comm badge off the floor, gazing at it for several seconds before closing her fist around it and holding it to her chest. Then she turned and sprinted for the door.

As she strode back onto the bridge, the alpha shift personnel were filing back in and taking over their stations. She went straight to Harry Kim.

“Harry, Lynne’s lost her comm badge. If she meant to return, she has no way of letting us know. We’ve got to find her.”

To his credit, he didn’t flicker at the news. “I’ll get on it now. The Doctor may have some ideas on how to distinguish her from...the others.” Janeway almost smiled at his tact, but she knew what he’d been about to say. How to distinguish her from the other five and a half billion Humans down there.

“Good. Keep me apprised of your progress.” She didn’t have to tell him that they were running dangerously low on time. Harry nodded and left the bridge, the beta shift officer stepping immediately to his station. Janeway returned to her captain’s chair, settling back into the comfortable leather and still clutching Lynne’s comm badge in her fist. There was nothing she could do but wait, but oh, how different the waiting seemed now than it had just a few minutes ago.

An hour went by with Harry and the Doctor reporting no progress, and Janeway was ready to chew duranium rivets. Their departure countdown was now less than two hours. The tension on the bridge was thick, and she knew it wasn’t just because of their imminent departure and the dangers it posed. Lynne Hamilton had impacted the lives of everyone on the bridge, and they were all worried about her.

It didn’t occur to her that the bridge crew were also worried about their captain.

She’d just closed the comm channel after another non-progress report from Harry when the bridge suddenly flared with a bright white light. Looking up, she saw a dark-haired man in a captain’s uniform
leaning against Tom’s console, an insufferably smug expression on his face.

Oh, shit. I don’t have time for this.

“Q,” she said, her voice dripping with distaste. “Now is not a good time.”

Q was a member of an omnipotent race of beings known as the Q Continuum, and for some reason he seemed to take special joy in harassing Janeway and her crew.

“Kathy!” he exclaimed jovially. “I’ve missed you as well. It has been a while.”

Janeway resisted the temptation to pull her phaser from the console and shoot him. It would be useless, of course, but it might make her feel better.

“Why, Kathy, such an... uncivil thought,” said Q, shaking a finger at her. “Of course I shouldn’t have expected hospitality, even though I’m here to save your pitiful crew from a fate they richly deserve—lifelong anonymity in the dismal dark ages of this planet.”

Janeway didn’t try to repress her resigned sigh. “All right, Q, what’s this about?”

Another flash of light, and she found herself looking at Chakotay. Rolling her eyes, she turned to Q, who was now lounging in Chakotay’s chair. He gave her a puppy-dog look. “I really must apologize, Kathy. I’m afraid that it was my delightfully precocious child who has put you in this situation. He was manipulating the space/time continuum and...well, these things take practice to get right. You’ve unfortunately been caught in one of his first attempts. Being the responsible and thoughtful father that I am, I’m here to correct the error.”

Janeway narrowed her eyes. This made more sense than any of their earlier theories, and if Q was genuine, she would certainly take him up on his offer.

“So you’re going to send us back to our own time?” she asked. “Without any clauses or conditions?”

Q stood up, tugging on his tunic to straighten out the non-existent wrinkles. “Such a distrustful attitude. You really should work on that; it’s very unattractive.” He looked around the bridge, sniffing in distaste. “Why you trust these narrow-minded little specimens and not me, I’ll never understand.” His tone changed to one of cheerful bonhomie. “But fortu-
nately, I don’t need to. It’s time for you to go. It’s been lovely seeing you again, as always.” He raised his fingers to snap them, but stopped in surprise when Janeway suddenly launched out of her chair.

“No! Q, you can’t send us back yet,” she said vehemently. “I still have someone on the planet. We didn’t expect to leave this soon.”

Q looked at her with uncharacteristic sympathy. “Kathryn, everyone who is meant to be on this ship is already here. Goodbye.”

“Wait!” she shouted, but Q was gone—and so was Earth from their viewscreen.

There was a roaring in her ears, and dimly she could make out Tom’s voice announcing that they’d returned to their original coordinates and time. She stood there unmoving, waiting for the darkness to clear from her vision. When at last it faded, she was horrified to see every member of the bridge crew regarding her with expressions of sorrow and pity. She couldn’t bear to stay there a moment longer. In a voice that surprised her with its even tones, she said, “Resume course for the Alpha Quadrant. Chakotay, you have the bridge. I’ll be in my ready room.” Then she turned and walked off the bridge, holding her head high.

As soon as the ready room door closed behind her, her erect bearing collapsed. She barely made it the few steps to her chair before her legs gave out beneath her and she slumped behind her desk, staring dully at the PADDs spread across the surface. More reports and logs, and the personnel reports were due tomorrow, weren’t they? She and Chakotay would have to set up a meeting; those things usually took all morning. Her gaze shifted to her terminal. An icon in the lower corner showed that she had new messages; not surprising since she hadn’t been behind her desk for the last six hours. She’d get to those eventually. She’d get to it all eventually. Just not now. Sometime later, when she could think again.

Using the desk as a support, she pushed herself upright and made her way to the replicator on the upper level.

“Whiskey and soda,” she said, barely able to recognize her own voice. She’d never before had alcohol in her ready room, but now seemed like a good time to start.

The replicator dutifully fulfilled her request, and she took the glass over to the sofa. Had it only been yesterday that she’d sat here, holding Lynne’s hands? It seemed a lifetime ago, and she’d been a different person then. A person who could conceive of being happy. Now, however, she
knew with complete certainty that she would never take joy in her existence again. She might achieve some form of contentment here and there, but anything beyond that would always elude her. Years of emptiness stretched out ahead of her, mocking her with the promise they’d held just one day earlier. She’d had her chance, and she’d lost it.

She remembered the stark expression on Lynne’s face when she’d asked if Janeway wanted her to stay. How very like Lynne, distilling a difficult situation down to one simple question. And Janeway had refused to answer.

“Of course I wanted you to stay,” she whispered. But there was no one to hear, and her words came almost four hundred years too late.

A curious dullness settled over her. How interesting that she could consider her future so dispassionately; that she could foresee a joyless existence and yet feel nothing. She welcomed the numbness, knowing that never feeling again was the only way she could continue to function.

As the alcohol blazed a trail down her throat, she thought about Q’s parting words. What had he meant about everyone being on board who was supposed to be there? Was Lynne destined to stay behind on Earth? When had she made that decision—before or after she’d lost her comm badge? Or had she thrown her comm badge away after deciding not to return?

Oh, god, she thought. Did she never mean to say goodbye? This was a possibility so painful that she immediately pushed it away. But then, like a child with a bandage, she was compelled to pick at it. Had Lynne just walked away? Had she taken one look at her home state, her beloved Rocky Mountains, and decided it would be easier to make a clean cut?

By the time the second whiskey and soda was empty, however, she’d decided this last thought was a disservice to her partner. Lynne would never have taken the easy way out; she would never have allowed Janeway to leave without saying goodbye. No, that damned Q had sent them off before they’d had time to find her. Because of him, she’d never gotten to touch Lynne one last time, to hold her as tightly as she could, and tell her just how much she loved her.

She stumbled slightly while bringing her third drink back to the sofa, which reminded her that she hadn’t taken a dinner break. Or a lunch break, for that matter. Maybe she should eat something.

She leaned back, sipping the drink and trying to decide what to order.
An hour later she realized with some surprise that her glass was empty and she still hadn’t thought of what she wanted to eat. In fact, she hadn’t thought of much of anything. It was as if her brain was on standby, powered down but ready to be brought back to full service should it be necessary.

She hoped it wouldn’t be necessary for a long, long time.

Standing up was a little more difficult than she’d expected, and it occurred to her that as much as she wanted the dulling effect that a fourth drink would provide, she really should take it in her own quarters rather than here. Otherwise she might never get to her quarters at all, and she didn’t want to spend two nights in a row here.

Carefully she made her way down the steps to the lower level. Stopping in front of the door, she brushed her hands down the front of her uniform to straighten out the creases, brought her head up and shoulders back, and strode onto the bridge. She paused momentarily, wondering where her bridge crew had gone, but then realized that it was shading toward gamma shift and the relief personnel had taken over hours ago. Chakotay had most likely notified her when he’d left the bridge, but knowing him he’d chosen to send a message to her terminal rather than disturbing her with a call. She nodded to the lieutenant covering the bridge and continued on to the turbolift, not allowing herself to relax until the doors closed.

“Deck three,” she said, slumping against the wall as the turbolift hummed. It took a monumental effort of will to stand up straight when the doors opened, and the short walk to her quarters seemed like a kilometer at least. But she made it, and at last she was safe from the sympathetic eyes of her crew.

She walked straight to the replicator and took her fourth drink to the couch, where she sat watching the star streaks. How many times had she and Lynne sat here together, talking about history and philosophy and whatever else struck their fancy? If she closed her eyes, she could almost feel Lynne there, tucked against the arm of the couch in her favorite position, her legs curled beneath her and a cup of tea or hot cocoa cradled between her hands.

Keeping her eyes shut, she called out, “Computer, play Bel Canto, Shimmering Warm and Bright.” It was the last musical selection she and
Lynne had listened to together, and she needed to hear it now. Needed that connection.

As the ethereal strains of the music filled her quarters, Janeway finally began to relax. The alcohol coursing through her bloodstream dulled her brain to the point where consciousness was no longer an option, and at last she fell into welcome oblivion.
Jolting awake, Janeway looked wildly around her. She’d heard Lynne laughing and calling her name, and it had been so important that she find her…but Lynne had stayed just out of reach, never letting her get close. She couldn’t catch up with her, couldn’t see her, and panic was taking over as she realized that she was running out of time.

The pounding of her heart slowed as the dream faded. Gradually her mind cleared and she remembered.

Lynne wasn’t here. She’d never be here again.

The terrible sense of loss hit her, and she wished she’d never woken up. Frightening as the dream had been, reality was far worse. She wanted nothing more than to sleep forever, never again feeling the pain that was weighing down her mind and body, making her wonder if she’d ever be able to live again. Right now, living wasn’t something that looked all that appealing. Of course, the alternative was out of the question. All that was left was some sort of in-between state—functioning, but not really alive.

She rose from the couch, a little wobbly on her legs, and paced around the room. She needed something, but wasn’t quite sure what it was. She was wide awake, so going to bed wasn’t it. Not that she particularly wanted to get into her bed anyway—all that did was remind her of the last time she’d shared it with Lynne.

She supposed she should get some food into her system, but the
thought of actually having to decide what to order was overwhelming. She just couldn’t make a decision of that magnitude right now.

After another circuit around the room, she found herself heading out the door. It wasn’t until she stood in the turbolift that she realized where she wanted to go.

“Deck six,” she said. The doors closed and she listened to the quiet hum of the ‘lift as it swiftly carried her to a deck that she now knew as well as her own quarters. She needed to be closer to Lynne, and there was only one place she could go for that.

Stepping into the familiar room, she stopped just inside and brought up the lights. It was strange that these quarters could look just the same when everything was so terribly different now. She could almost believe that Lynne had never left, except for the desolate feeling of emptiness in the room. She’d always thought these quarters were the most comfortable and inviting on the whole ship, but now realized that what made them that way was Lynne herself, not anything in the décor. The room was lifeless now that Lynne was gone.

Slowly she wandered along the right hand wall, examining the pictures. It occurred to her that she should put one or two of these up in her own quarters, since she had few other reminders of her partner. When she arrived at the picture of Denali, she knew this was the one she’d take. She reached out and ran her finger down a ridge line, wondering which route Lynne would choose to climb when she went back. Because of course she would go back—she’d probably be on that peak as soon as it was remotely safe to climb.

“I hope you finish your business with this mountain,” she said aloud, remembering Lynne’s oath.

Turning toward the viewport, she stumbled when her foot struck something on the floor. A large box sat there, looking out of place in the otherwise neat quarters. She’d never seen it before—Lynne must have beamed it up.

Her brain caught on that. Beamed it up? Why?

Kneeling, she opened the box. Hundreds of small squares of plastic were stacked inside, all bearing different images. She reached in and pulled one out, reading the text on the front. George Gershwin, Rhapsody in Blue. She turned the square around in her hand, saw the hinge and opened it. Inside was a reflective metallic disc and a small booklet held against the
case cover by plastic tabs. Now she knew what this was—Lynne had told her about the media used in her time to record and play back music. These were all albums.

Closing the disc case and putting it on the floor, Janeway pulled a stack from the box and began to look through them. She recognized some of the artists and titles from her many evenings comparing musical tastes with Lynne. Here were three albums by Bel Canto. Here was one by Duke Ellington—she remembered Lynne being particularly astonished to find that he hadn’t made it to the twenty-fourth century. Kate Bush, Ella Fitzgerald, somebody named Sting, a group called the Doors, and a collection of “disco hits,” whatever that meant. A few more discs down and she reached one that sent chills down her spine. Chris de Burgh, The Lady in Red. With shaking hands, she opened the case and pulled out the booklet. There were the lyrics that Lynne had kept to herself the night of the Tsian banquet.

I've never seen you looking so gorgeous as you did tonight
I've never seen you shine so bright
You were amazing
I've never seen so many people want to be there by your side
And when you turned to me and smiled
You took my breath away
And I have never had such a feeling
Such a feeling of complete and utter love
As I do tonight
The lady in red is dancing with me

She remembered what Lynne had said that night, when she’d laughingly refused to share the lyrics. “I want to do this right,” she’d said. “Give me a little time and I’ll figure it out.”

The booklet dropped from Janeway’s nerveless fingers as the realization hit her with stunning force.

She was coming back. Oh, dear god, she was coming back.

Lynne had collected all of this music in preparation for leaving Earth for good. She’d made sure, while she was putting this together, that she included a song that would mean something to both of them. She’d
beamed this box up and then, somehow, she’d lost her comm badge before beaming back herself.

An image came unbidden to Janeway’s mind: she could see Lynne looking up at the sky, an expression of utter despair on her features as time ran out and she understood that she’d been left behind. It was the same expression that Janeway had seen the night she’d finally gotten Lynne to talk about her feelings of loss. The night they’d become lovers. And now, just when Lynne had decided where she really belonged, she’d lost everything a second time.

*Again,* she thought, her mind suddenly coming alive. *It happened again.* *And she never got to say goodbye.*

And then she felt for the first time since they’d left Earth. The merciful numbness that had protected her for so many hours dropped away, and the pain tore a hole right through her heart, shattering it into so many pieces that she was sure she’d never, ever reassemble it. The wave of grief that rolled over her was so overwhelming that she could no longer hold herself upright. Slumping against the wall, she covered her face with her hands, unable to stop the agony that she felt for Lynne. And that unwanted emotion provided a conduit for her own anguish, the pain of knowing that Lynne had chosen her, irrecoverably and with all her heart, and she’d lost her anyway.

A choked cry ripped from her throat, and she finally let go of the grip she’d had on her emotions. She was safe in these quarters; there was no one here to see her break. Her body shook with a paroxysm of grief, the sobs coming so hard and so fast that she was gasping for air. A parade of memories passed through her mind, each remembered smile and touch sending her deeper into despair. She could almost hear Lynne’s voice calling her name, and the knowledge that she’d never again hear that voice anywhere but in her memories made her cry even harder.

Gentle hands touched her shoulders.

“Kathryn! What’s wrong?”

Janeway sat bolt upright, so shocked that she couldn’t breathe. Her sobs were cut off as if a valve had been turned, and she stared uncomprehendingly into the very concerned eyes of her partner. Lynne was wearing a robe, and her tousled hair flowed loosely about her shoulders. Janeway’s first wild thought was that she was seeing an angel; her second was that she’d lost her mind completely.
Lynne’s grip tightened. “My god, what happened? What’s wrong?” Her expression was getting more worried by the second.

Janeway couldn’t process this. She reached out with a shaking hand to touch Lynne’s face, half expecting her fingers to pass right through. But they touched warm, solid skin.

“How is this possible?” she asked, her voice hoarse. “How can you be here?” Then an explanation occurred to her, and she jerked her hand back as if it had been burned.

“If you’re a Q trick,” she snarled, “I swear I’ll find a way to kill you no matter how omnipotent you are.”

Wide-eyed, Lynne let go of her shoulders and grasped both of her hands. “Kathryn, it’s me. I’m not a trick, and I’m right here. But you’re scaring the hell out of me. Please tell me what’s going on.”

The hands holding hers felt real. She looked into Lynne’s green eyes and thought that even Q couldn’t imitate the mixture of bewilderment, alarm and love she saw there. The shock that had held her body so rigid relaxed its grip, and she sagged against Lynne, feeling welcome arms encircle her.

“Don’t go,” she whispered, burrowing her face into Lynne’s shoulder and holding on with all her strength. “Please don’t go; I can’t take it.”

Lynne’s arms tightened around her. “I’m not going anywhere, love. I’m right here.”

Janeway felt Lynne kiss the top of her head and rest her cheek there, and the reality of her deliverance began to sink in. She snuggled closer, trying to fit every centimeter of her body into Lynne’s, gratefully breathing in the familiar scent of her lover’s skin. Slipping one arm inside Lynne’s robe, she wrapped it around the slim waist and reveled in the contact. Right now the universe was just too big for her to handle, and she needed someone to hold it back. Lynne’s arms were the only thing between her and the blackness that had yawned before her moments ago, and she wasn’t about to move a millimeter beyond their protective embrace.

It was a long time before she finally felt able to pull back far enough to look into Lynne’s face.

“I thought I’d lost you,” she said. She swallowed hard and winced. Her throat hurt, and speaking made it worse.

Lynne saw it. “Don’t move. I’ll be right back.” She gently extracted herself and went to the replicator, returning with a glass of water. Janeway
watched her every step, feeling that if she looked away for even a moment, Lynne might disappear again. Gratefully, she took the glass Lynne held out and drained it, then cleared her throat experimentally.

“Thank you,” she said. Her voice was still hoarse, but at least her throat didn’t hurt as much. Her head, however, was a different matter. The numbness had now given way to a raging headache.

“You’re welcome,” said Lynne, watching with a concerned expression as she knelt in front of her. “How could you think you’d lost me? Didn’t you get my message?”

“What message?”

“The one I sent to your ready room. Like I always do. I knew you’d be busy with the timing of our departure, so I just asked you to come here as soon as you could and join me in bed. I fell asleep waiting for you.”

Janeway remembered the icon on her terminal that she’d ignored. “Oh my god. I didn’t read it. I was already sure you were gone by then, and I was so destroyed that I couldn’t do anything but sit and drink myself into oblivion. Catching up on my work messages was not on my priority list.”

Lynne considered this, tilting her head as she studied Janeway’s face. “But that doesn’t make sense. Why were you so sure I was gone?”

“Because Q showed up on the bridge and sent us back early, and when I tried to stop him, he said that everyone who was meant to be on Voyager was already on board. Since you weren’t here, I assumed he was saying that you weren’t meant to come with us. That you were back where you belonged.” She put the glass down and reached out for Lynne’s hands, needing the connection. “How did you get here without me knowing about it? I’d ordered the transporter room to notify me as soon as you returned. And how the hell did you transport back without your comm badge?”

“I didn’t transport back,” said Lynne. “Q brought me.”

“What!”

Lynne looked a little startled at Janeway’s outburst. “He said that you were having problems with your transporters, and he was there to retrieve me. I thought you knew I was back on board.”

Janeway shook her head. “I think you’d better tell me everything from the beginning.”

“I will,” said Lynne, “but first things first. You look like you’re in shock, and I mean physically. Come on, let’s get you to the couch.” She
stood up, pulling Janeway with her, and supported her as they walked the short distance. Janeway had rarely felt so weak and sank gratefully onto the cushions, putting up no resistance as Lynne removed her boots, then lifted her legs onto the couch and turned her so that she was leaning against the armrest. Moving to a cupboard beneath the viewport, Lynne pulled out a pillow and blanket, returning to tuck the blanket around Janeway’s legs and helping her sit up long enough to place the pillow behind her shoulders. Janeway leaned back, feeling surrounded by comfort and love and more pampering than she could ever remember allowing in her adult life.

Lynne sat on the edge of the couch, eyeing her with the professional air of a medic. “You smell like a distillery. How much alcohol did you have?”

“Just four whiskey and sodas,” said Janeway. “I think.”

Lynne frowned. “You look worse than four whiskey and sodas, though that alone would be enough to wipe most people out. What have you had to eat recently?”

She had to think about that. “Nothing since breakfast yesterday.”

“Anything to drink besides the alcohol?”

“Coffee. I drank quite a bit of coffee.”

“Great, another diuretic. You’re dehydrated and low on blood sugar. If I bring you some food, will you eat it?”

“I’ll try,” said Janeway, although the thought of food was extremely unappealing at the moment. “If you’ll promise to tell me everything while I’m eating.”

“Deal,” said Lynne, rising from the couch. “Don’t go anywhere.”

Janeway could almost laugh at the command, considering the events of the previous day. But she was far too wrung out for anything requiring that much energy, contenting herself instead with watching her partner as she ordered several items from the replicator, then leaned over and pulled something from a bag on the floor. As Lynne came back to the couch, Janeway levered herself to a more upright position. The scents wafting off the tray were suddenly far more appetizing than she’d expected, and she thought she might actually be able to eat something. Lynne put the tray on her lap and sat on the edge of the couch as Janeway inspected the meal. A tall glass of water, a steaming bowl of chicken vegetable soup, a small dish of applesauce, and...fresh bread?
She looked up and pointed at the bread. “This didn’t come from the replicator.”

“No, it didn’t,” said Lynne, smiling for the first time. “You now have in your possession a precious piece of the only fresh-baked baguette in the entire Delta Quadrant. I got it from my favorite bakery this afternoon, and it’s worth its weight in gold. You can dip it in your soup if you’d like, but I’d recommend just eating it straight so you can really taste it.”

Janeway broke off a piece and tried it, closing her eyes as the flavors hit her taste buds. “Oh my god, that’s good,” she mumbled around the bread. “Do I detect rosemary?”

Lynne nodded. “I’ve also got two regular loaves in the bag, both different flavors. Of course you’ll have to help me eat them, and quickly. It would be tragic to let them go stale.”

“I’ll be more than happy to assist you with that,” said Janeway. She was still dazed that Lynne was even there, but for some reason, hearing her partner talking about something as mundane as bread seemed to solidify her presence. She was beginning to feel a little more normal, and suddenly realized that she was famished. Tucking in to the meal, she said, “All right, I’m eating. So fill me in on what happened. How did you meet Q?”

Lynne rested her arm on the back of the couch and leaned over Janeway’s legs, making herself more comfortable.

“I’d done everything I needed to in Boulder, so I took a cab out to a trailhead where I could hike up to a peak with a good view of the Rockies. I’ve always been able to think best in the mountains,” she explained, “and I had a lot to think about. I’d pitched a tent just below the summit, but I ended up sleeping in my bag right at the top because the weather was so fantastic. By the next morning I’d made my decision to come back to Voyager. I was going to call you, but I wanted to have my campsite packed up first. So I started the climb back down to my tent, and as I was squeezing between two boulders, my comm badge got ripped off my shirt. God, I’ve never been so scared in my life. I saw the badge fall down a crack and dove after it, but I wasn’t fast enough. It ended up in a little crevice way beyond my reach. I was sitting there, racking my brain for some way of getting it out of there, but I knew there wasn’t anything in my pack that would work. And while I sat there, all alone, here comes this man in a Starfleet uniform with captain’s pips on his collar. I’d never seen
him before, so you can imagine my confusion. I didn’t know where the hell he’d come from. He just walked right up and called me by name, like he’d known me for years.”

Janeway nodded. “It’s one of his more annoying habits. He calls me Kathy because he knows I hate it.”

“I didn’t find him annoying at all,” said Lynne. “He was really very friendly. He introduced himself and said he was a friend of yours, and that he was repaying a favor he owed you. He told me that your transporters weren’t working, and that you’d asked him to bring me back if that was what I wanted. And oh god, was that ever what I wanted. But I still had a few errands to run first, now that I knew I wasn’t staying on Earth, so I asked him to take me back to Boulder. I knew who he was once he introduced himself—Voyager’s logs are full of stories about Q. And I must say, I didn’t really expect him to do what I asked. But he was very nice about it, and took me where I wanted to go. After we finished my errands he brought me back here and told me that you’d be very busy for the next few hours, but that you’d be along as soon as you could. Then he gave me a message for you.”

Janeway looked up from her soup and frowned. “What was it?”

“Well,” said Lynne, “it was kind of odd. He said to tell you that to repay his debt, he’d given both of us clarity of mind, which we seemed to be lacking. And he hoped that now that we both knew what we really wanted, we’d get on with things and stop being so ridiculously limited. Then he vanished. Do you know what he meant?”

Janeway dropped her spoon on the tray with a clatter and swore for ten seconds straight while Lynne looked on in amazement.

“I’ve never even heard some of those words,” said Lynne, her eyes wide. “You must be feeling better.”

“That insufferable, arrogant bastard!” spat Janeway, who wasn’t quite finished yet. “I’ll kill him with my bare hands! He set this whole thing up. I can’t believe even he could be so fucking heartless.”

She saw Lynne’s bewildered expression and tried to calm herself. “Q is no friend of mine. He’s an omnipotent being who loves to amuse himself by torturing other life forms such as this crew and, for some reason, me in particular. I think the favor he’s referring to dates back to when I helped him during a civil war in the Q Continuum, and he’s found a way to repay it that appeals to his warped sense of humor. It’s never good to have Q
‘help’ in anything, because his assistance usually makes things far worse before it makes them better. This is a classic example. He knew I had doubts about our relationship, and this was his way of removing them. Kind of like amputating a leg to get rid of an itch.”

Lynne sat up straight. “Doubts? What sort of doubts?”

Janeway groaned internally. Now she’d put her foot in it. Goddamn you to hell, Q, she thought. Taking a deep breath, she said, “Let me rephrase that. Not doubts about our relationship, but about your happiness. Lynne, you’ve told me a number of times that you’ve felt trapped here, restricted from the type of freedom you were accustomed to having. You said you were having to adjust to the fact that I hold ultimate authority over the ship and everyone on it, including you. And you’ve also said that you felt stranded. I didn’t doubt your commitment or your love, but I have questioned how much you wanted the captain part of me, and all of the conditions that come with shipboard life. I think Q set this up so that you’d have to choose, knowing that if you chose to stay with me, I’d be free of those doubts.”

Lynne stared at her, storm clouds gathering on her face. “Are you telling me that Q brought Voyager to 1996 Earth just so that I’d have to choose between staying here and going home?”

Janeway nodded.

For a moment Lynne seemed about to explode. “He put me through hell! And he put you through more than hell, judging by the condition I found you in. And to think I actually thought he was nice.” She was working herself up into a towering rage, which Janeway certainly understood. But then she suddenly stopped—and laughed. This Janeway didn’t understand at all, and for a moment she feared for her partner’s sanity. Lynne laughed again and shook her head, her eyes shining with tears.

“Sorry, Kathryn, I’m right on the edge here. I’ve never before wanted to kill someone and thank them at the same time. I hate that bastard for what he did to us—mostly for what he did to you—but on the other hand, he also did us both a favor.” She got up from the couch and paced back and forth a few times before coming to a stop and kneeling in front of Janeway.

“You’re right, I haven’t been truly happy here. I’ve made a great life for myself, mostly thanks to you, and my relationship with you is the best thing that has ever happened to me, in this life or my old one. But I’ve
missed my old life, and I could never get over the fact that I had no closure with the people I loved. And yes, I’ve had some trouble dealing with your role as captain of this ship. But today I put all of that to rest. I feel free, for the first time since I got here, and I can’t tell you how good it feels. I’m finally free of my past—and free to love you with all my heart, instead of just part of it.”

Janeway looked at Lynne’s glowing face, seeing for herself the truth of her partner’s words. Despite her momentary anger, there was a deeper relaxation about her, a smoothing of the lines around her eyes, and the love that radiated out of those eyes cooled Janeway’s own anger considerably. Gently, she ran the back of her hand down Lynne’s cheek.

“Then maybe, in about ninety years, I can forgive Q his little favor. Because it means everything to me to hear you say that, and to know that you’ve chosen to be here with me.”

Lynne grasped her wrist, turned it and kissed the pulse point. It was a gesture that never failed to send a thrill down Janeway’s spine, and she felt a little breathless at her rapid transition from utter despair to blind anger to the complete happiness that now brightened her soul. Even her headache was gone. The universe had shrunk back to its normal, conquerable size, and she thought she could face anything as long as Lynne was here beside her. She watched as Lynne leaned in to kiss her, only to pull back abruptly when she bumped into the food tray.

“How are you doing with that?” asked Lynne. “Can I spill anything for you?”

Janeway laughed. “No, I think I’ve got it under control. Actually, I’ve eaten all I’m going to. Can we get rid of this?”

“Gladly.” Lynne took the tray from Janeway’s lap and carried it over to the table, returning to sit on the edge of the sofa. Janeway immediately took the opportunity to wrap her arms around her partner, who was examining her appraisingly.

“You look a lot better,” said Lynne.

“I feel a lot better. But I think having you here has more to do with it than the food.”

Lynne smiled then, the brilliant kind of smile that always made Janeway’s heart stop for a moment.

“Have I mentioned to you how much I love you?”
“Not in the last five seconds,” said Janeway. “But you did give me a small gesture of your affection recently.”

“Ah, you mean the bread,” said Lynne knowingly. “You’re right, I wouldn’t share that with just anyone.”

Janeway dug her fingers into Lynne’s ribs, making her squirm and giggle. “That’s not what I meant and you know it.” Her hands stilled and her tone grew more serious. “You make me feel...well, humbled. I can’t believe what you gave up for me, and I don’t know if I can ever express how much it means that you freely chose me over a life that you’ve missed so desperately.”

Her earlier vision of a future without Lynne crowded in on her, and she felt chilled despite the blanket over her legs. Focusing on the warmth beneath her hands, she added, “I would have gone on without you, but I wouldn’t have been the same person. Who I am right now depends on you. I need you, and I am so grateful you came back.”

Lynne’s mouth curved in a slow, delighted smile. “Do you know that’s the first time you’ve ever said you need me?”

“Is it?” Janeway couldn’t believe it. She’d thought it so many times, but...had she ever said it?

“Yes, it is,” said Lynne. She took Janeway’s hands from around her waist and held them in her own. “But I figured it out anyway. You know, it really hurt when you wouldn’t ask me to stay. I thought that maybe I’d been wrong, that maybe what we had wasn’t quite as deep for you as it was for me. It took me until this morning to realize that I had to think about it from your point of view, not from mine. Then I remembered how many decisions I’ve watched you make for the good of the ship, or the good of another person, even when it cost you personally. And I realized that you were doing it again, and you’d told me as much when you said you couldn’t have any part in my decision. That was when everything fell into place, and I knew that I didn’t belong on Earth anymore.”

“You didn’t belong on Earth?” Janeway was startled. “That’s not what I expected you to say.”

“I didn’t expect it, either. But it became very obvious after a while. You say that who you are now depends on me; well, I can say the same about you. With you I’m more than I was before, and I’m a part of something much bigger than I ever was on Earth. And...well, Earth isn’t the same as
I remembered it.” She squeezed Janeway’s hands. “Do you know what I did when I left here?”

Janeway shook her head.

“I went straight to my favorite coffee shop, bought a paper—oh, and a treat for you, by the way.” She waved a hand toward the bag by the replicator. “I got you a fifty-pound bag of the best Columbian blend I could find. That cost a mint, let me tell you.”

Janeway sat up straight. “You brought me coffee? Real coffee?”

“Oh, yeah.” Lynne grinned. “Would you like a cup?”

She thought about it, then relaxed against the armrest again. “I’d kill for one, but later. Right now I want to hear your story.”

“Okay.” Lynne settled down as well. “So, I got a paper and a cup of hot cocoa, and then I just sat there for an hour, reading the paper and bringing myself up to date on what was happening in 1996. And when I was done, I felt like I was on an alien planet. The news was full of armed conflicts, environmental assaults, crime and greed and poverty—it was the ugly truth about my time that I’d conveniently forgotten. And I knew that it was going to get a lot worse before it got better, and that I’d be in the position of knowing when the next world war would begin, without being able to do a thing to prevent it.”

“Surely you didn’t base your decision on that. Those problems are timeless,” said Janeway, thinking about the conflicts she’d seen in the Federation, the races that were poisoning their planets, and the universality of greed. “Voyager seems to attract some of those things on a regular basis.”

“Don’t I know it,” said Lynne. “I never got myself shot off a summit until I came here. But I know that those problems will never be solved on Earth in my lifetime, whereas in this time, they have been solved—or at least greatly minimized. We’ve finally gotten it right. That’s the Earth that I want to go back to if we get the chance.”

Janeway shook her head. “But those are just the negative aspects of your time. What about your family? Your freedom? What about all of the good things you’ve been missing?”

“Are you playing Devil’s advocate?” asked Lynne. “You’re a bit late.”

She couldn’t help but smile at that. “True, and I thank any available deity in the universe for it. But I don’t think I’m getting the whole picture here.”
“No, you’re not,” said Lynne, leaning over her and putting a supporting arm on the back of the couch. “But let’s start with my freedom. You’re right, that was one of my most compelling reasons to want to go back. So after I left the coffee shop, I headed straight out for the mountains. I’d brought gear from the ship, so I just hopped into a cab and went, reveling in the fact that I could go anywhere and do anything I wanted. And I spent all the rest of that day hiking up one of my favorite peaks. It was marvelous, Kathryn—everything that I had remembered and missed. I pitched my tent just below the summit and then sat up on top and watched the sunset. It was a calm night, and I ended up sitting there and watching the stars for most of the night. And I found myself scanning the sky for satellites and wondering which of those points of light might be you. By the next morning, after a glorious day and night of doing exactly what I wanted to do, I’d made an astonishing discovery. I would never in my life have thought it, but it’s true.” She paused, pushing her hair back from her face. “Sometimes, freedom is just another word for loneliness.”

Janeway stared at her, understanding that her partner had just made a paradigm shift in her way of thinking. “You mean because you had no one to share your experience with?”

Lynne laughed. “Not exactly. I could have eventually found someone, if only a climbing partner. But it wouldn’t have been you. You’re the one I want to share my experiences with, and if you can’t be there with me, then I want to be able to come home and tell you about my experiences. And I want to hear about yours. I sat there and thought about all of the peaks I wanted to climb on Earth, and the appeal was just gone. It doesn’t mean anything without you. The freedom that I cherished and missed and fought you for isn’t what I remembered. I think I was fighting for a memory more than a reality.”

“Does that mean you’re not going to fight with me about it any more?” asked Janeway in a hopeful tone. She couldn’t pass up the opportunity to tease Lynne, even as her heart constricted with the import of what she was hearing.

Lynne laughed. “That depends. Are you going to let me do whatever I want, whenever I want?”

Janeway didn’t miss a beat. “That depends, too. On whether what you want and when you want it is at odds with what’s best for this ship and her crew.”
“Ah yes. I knew that.” Lynne leaned forward, planting a gentle kiss on her jaw before straightening again. “And I decided, while sitting on that mountain, that I could live with it. It’s a smaller price to pay than I used to think, and the rewards are incredible. Not just you—though that would be reward enough—but also the possibilities that exist for me here. Kathryn, you’re on an amazing journey, and the things that I’ve seen and done in just eight months with you transcend almost anything I could hope to do back home. I realized that if I stayed behind, I’d be taking a giant step backward—that I’d be running away from the possibility of being more than I thought I could be, of being a part of something so much bigger than myself. And, I’d lose the most important person in my life. Given those facts, it was actually a pretty easy decision to stay with you, especially once I’d also figured out that the reason you didn’t ask me to stay wasn’t because you didn’t want me.”

“God, no,” said Janeway. “I wanted you badly enough that when I thought I’d lost you—” She stopped and shook her head. Lynne’s expression was somber, and when she spoke, her voice was gentle.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Janeway thought about the overwhelming grief and darkness that had nearly swallowed her such a short time ago, and knew that it was still far too close.

“No,” she said. “Not yet.”

She suddenly felt drained; the wild extremes of emotion she’d been dragged through were catching up with her. She closed her eyes briefly, opening them when she felt the couch shift. Lynne was standing over her with hands outstretched.

“Come on,” said Lynne quietly. “I think we’ve both had enough of this for now. Would you mind terribly if I just took you to bed and held you for about two days?”

Janeway pulled the blanket off her legs, took Lynne’s hands and stood up. “I can’t think of anything I’d rather do,” she said.

Her mind seemed to be closing down again, but this time it was from fatigue rather than shock. The next few minutes passed in something of a blur, and she was only marginally aware of Lynne undressing her and guiding her into the bed. She turned onto her side and began to drift away, coming back to the surface when she felt Lynne’s arms wrap around
her from behind. A thought occurred to her, and she smiled in the darkness.

“So,” she said sleepily, “does this mean you’ve decided to embrace your future?”

A sigh tickled the back of her neck. Lynne’s voice sounded exasperated, but Janeway could hear the amusement in it as well.

“Honestly, Kathryn. Was that an intentional pun? Do I have to look forward to a lifetime of those?”

Janeway snuggled closer into her warmth. “You can’t complain; it was your choice,” she said, feeling a solid, confident happiness at the truth of that statement. Lynne made no response other than kissing her shoulder, and soon Janeway’s body was sinking into the mattress and pulling her consciousness with it. Then she remembered that there was something important Lynne hadn’t told her. With an effort she dragged herself back up again.

“What about your family?”

Lynne’s arms tightened around her. “I found a way to say goodbye. Now let it go, Kathryn. Go to sleep. We can talk more in the morning.”

Janeway relaxed, and this time she didn’t fight the pull. A quiet contentment wrapped itself around her heart as she slid into the heavy darkness. Yes, they could talk in the morning. Lynne wasn’t going anywhere, and neither was she. Q had said it himself: everyone who was meant to be aboard was here. His way, she now realized, of saying that they were meant to be together.

Well, who was she to argue with destiny?
EPILOGUE

The July sun had already dried out the previous night’s dew as a tall, silver-haired woman walked down her gravel driveway to the main road. She checked the mail every day at this time, and it seemed to her that in these last few days her routines and habits were all that kept her going. Five days ago her daughter had been lost on the slopes of Denali, and last night she’d gotten a phone call from the head of the search and rescue team, telling her as gently as he could that a heavy storm system had settled over the mountain, ending any further efforts. The system was not expected to clear for several days, he said, and by that time—well, not even an experienced mountaineer such as Lynne could survive that long on Denali, in storm conditions, without a tent or any gear. He expressed his sympathy and sorrow for her loss, but she hardly heard him. She’d spent the night staring into the darkness of her living room, thinking of her beautiful daughter and wondering how she could go on. No mother should outlive her child. It was just shockingly wrong.

The morning had dawned bright and clear, but the sunshine and warm scents of her beloved Colorado woods could not reach her this day. She seemed to see everything through a veil, her senses and even her thought processes dulled. When she reached the road, she realized that she was early—the mail truck was just now coming up the hill. She wasn’t in the
mood to talk to anyone, but Phil, their postman, had surely seen her already. She couldn’t turn and leave now.

Resting an arm on her mailbox, she waited as Phil rolled up. He put the truck in neutral, pulled the handbrake and hopped out. “Mornin’, Elizabeth.”

“Good morning, Phil,” said Elizabeth Hamilton.

“Any word yet?” he asked. It was a small town; everyone knew.

Elizabeth looked over his head to the pines on the opposite side of the road, noting idly that the angle of the sun was sending shafts of sunlight through the branches. Normally she loved that kind of light, but it didn’t touch her now.

“They’ve called off the search,” she said.

Phil looked down at his feet for a moment, seemingly at a loss for words. “I’m really sorry. If there’s anything I can do…” His voice trailed off.

“Thank you, Phil. I appreciate it. But right now there’s nothing anyone can do.”

He nodded, and Elizabeth was thankful for the man’s taciturn nature. Phil wouldn’t try to make small talk.

“I’ve got a package for you in the back,” he said, jerking his thumb over his shoulder, “but it’s heavy. The thing must weigh over fifty pounds. Can I give you a lift back to the house?”

Elizabeth blinked in surprise. She wasn’t expecting anything. “All right,” she said, moving toward the passenger side. Phil opened the door politely, closing it after she’d settled in her seat. Soon they were bumping up her drive, a quarter mile of gravel winding through tall pines. Neither of them said a word until they’d arrived at the house, when Phil offered to carry the package in for her. She held the screen door for him, directing him to the kitchen table. He put the box down and turned to her, remembering to take off his ball cap.

“We were all proud of her,” he said.

All she could do was nod. He turned and walked out of the house, giving her a final wave as he stepped into his truck.

As the sound of the engine faded, she returned to the kitchen to examine the box. Curious—the return address was a legal firm in Boulder. What could they possibly have to do with her?

She pulled a knife from the drawer and cut the tape on the package,
opening the box to find a sealed manila envelope. She lifted the envelope out and stared in shock. Underneath was some sort of electronic device—and several rows of gleaming gold bars. She sat down, feeling a little shaky in the knees, and opened the envelope.

There was a second, smaller envelope inside, along with a single piece of stationery headed with the law firm’s logo. The letter was a notarized affidavit stating that the package had been brought into the firm’s office on August 22, 1996, and that their client had instructed that the package be held in the office safe and not mailed until July 19, 2001. It was signed by one of the firm’s partners.

Bewildered, she tossed the letter on the table and opened the smaller envelope. Her eyes widened as she saw the handwriting on the paper inside, and the envelope fluttered to the kitchen floor. It was from Lynne.

Dear Mom and Dad,

The little computer in the box is called a PADD. I’ve recorded a message on it that will explain everything—just hit the green key in the upper right corner, then the larger key at bottom center. Do make sure you’re sitting down. I love you both always
—Lynne

Elizabeth put the letter on the table, breathing hard, then leaned over the box and pulled out the PADD with hands that were shaking so badly she was afraid she might drop it. She set the device on the table and examined it, wiping her suddenly sweaty hands on her jeans. Then she carefully tapped the two keys as Lynne had instructed.

She gasped when her daughter appeared on the small screen, smiling at her.

“Hi, Mom; hi, Dad—I sure wish I could talk to you face to face. I can’t tell you how much I miss you, but when I explain what’s happened, I think you’ll understand why I’ve made this choice.

“First things first: If they haven’t already called off the search for me on Denali, then get on the phone and tell them to call it off. I don’t want anyone risking their lives up there, and they’re never going to find me. I am so sorry that you had to go through this, but there was no way I could prevent it. I’ll have this package shipped to you the day of my disappearance; hopefully it will get there quickly and spare you any unnecessary pain. Because I’m all right.
“I’ve got a long story to tell you, and it’s going to sound pretty unbelievable. But it’s true, and you know I’ve never lied to you. Well, not since high school, anyway.”

Elizabeth watched in increasing amazement as Lynne talked. Her story sounded like something that might be showing at the local multiplex, and Elizabeth wouldn’t have believed it for a second if it had been anyone else. But she and Lynne had always had a very open and honest relationship, and she had the utmost faith in her daughter. Besides, she had never seen such a look of love and happiness on Lynne’s face before. When Lynne spoke of her partner, Elizabeth felt her throat tighten at the sight of her daughter’s breathtaking smile.

“I understand now that I’ve never really loved before—not like this. And now that this chance to go home has appeared out of the blue, I find that I have to let it go. Much as I love you two, and much as I’d like to see everyone else, I can’t if it means losing Kathryn. She’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me, and I’m so much more with her than I am without her. Besides, Mom, I know you’d kick my butt if I gave up my future for my past. You drummed into my head practically from birth that I should always strive to grow. I’m growing now, believe me! I’m just sorry that I can’t do it without leaving you behind.

“I’m including a little something in the box to help you through the next few years. Being able to replicate the local currency of whatever planet we’re orbiting is pretty damned handy, let me tell you. The gold in this package should be worth close to a half million dollars, and it will be worth a lot more if you take my advice on what to do with it. And in this case, past performance does guarantee future returns.”

Elizabeth shook her head in amusement as Lynne outlined some very specific investment advice, swearing them to secrecy. She already felt that she had everything she needed in the world just by knowing that her daughter was not only alive, but happy and in love. Well, she’d talk to John about it when he got back from his morning walk. Once he got over the shock of seeing this.

Lynne looked offscreen as a flash of light came and went. Elizabeth could hear the low tones of a man’s voice, but she couldn’t make out the words. “Oh, I think you’re going to forget you ever heard any of that,” said Lynne to the offscreen man. “Besides, I don’t recall inviting you to listen in on this. Butt out.” The man said something else and laughed. Then there was another flash of light and Lynne faced forward once again, smiling.

“Sorry about that. I have to get this to the lawyer, so I’ll say goodbye now. Once
you’ve both heard this, I’m going to ask you to destroy the PADD. My friend Seven
rigged it for a self-destruct. Take it outside, press the top left button three times and
get yourself a good ten meters away. Please do this—it’s vitally important that this
technology doesn’t get out of your hands. You’re the one who got me started reading
Isaac Asimov, so you know how nasty things can get if the timeline gets
compromised.

“That’s about it,” said Lynne, her face crumpling. Elizabeth felt her own
eyes tearing up as she watched. “God, I wish I could hug you both one last time.
Consider this a long-distance hug—across both years and miles. I love you both
desperately, and I am so grateful that I got to have you for parents. You’re the best. I
hope you’ll be happy for me—and if you ever want to see me again, go outside at
night and look up. I’m in the stars.”

The screen went dark. Elizabeth continued to stare at it, tears rolling
down her cheeks. She was still sitting there an hour later when her
husband came home. He called for her as he came in the front door, then
appeared in the kitchen with a worried look on his face.

“Elizabeth? Why didn’t you answer? Have you heard
something?”

Elizabeth looked up as John stopped beside her, his warm hand on her
shoulder. “Yes,” she said slowly, “I have heard something. Lynne’s all right.”

John sat heavily in the nearest chair. “Oh, thank God! Where is she?”

Elizabeth turned the PADD toward him, her sense of wonder making
her feel a little lightheaded.

“She’s in the stars.”
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The further adventures of Kathryn Janeway and Lynne Hamilton can be found on the Fanfic page at my website, fletcherdelancey.com.

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