The Guardians

by redheadgrrl1960

Summary

A call for help leads Voyager to an encounter with another ship that is orbiting a planet on the brink of disaster. What happens next leads Janeway and Seven to examine their own values and past deamons as they and the Guardians attempt to save a people.

Notes

OBS!!!!!! This story is unfinished since 2005 and don't know if/when I can finish it. I hope one day, but I can't promise when. Please know this before you start reading! :-)

Classic Voyager fanfic, and some Uber Xena elements to it! (Hopes that makes sense!!! :-) )

This story was written in my VERY early fanfiction career. (Between 2000 and 2004) Please excuse my English and my fanfic habits when it comes to style and word choice.

I post this and some other Janeway/Seven stories here on AO3 since I thought it might be of interest to someone and I want all my stories in one place.
Chapter 1

There was an ominous silence before the body hit the floor with a muted thud. Air gushed out of caved lungs from the impact against the hard surface.

"Ah!"

"Captain, are you injured?" a cool alto voice asked and a tall blonde kneeled next to her fallen commanding officer.

"Damn," the petite woman groaned, pushing sweaty tresses of hair out of her face, glaring at the blonde. "Seven, where did you learn that move?"

The younger woman extended a hand and helped her captain up. She was equally dishevelled, her blonde hair tousled, framing her narrow face. She was a stunning woman with cybernetic implants adorning her left eyebrow and right cheek, remnants from Seven of Nine’s time as part of the Borg collective.

"I have been playing velocity with Lt Torres," the ex-Borg explained. "We have also practiced old Klingon combat skills. I find the Bath’let particularly intriguing, not at all as crude as it initially appears."

Captain Kathryn Janeway of the Federation Starship USS Voyager resisted the urge to roll her eyes. She should have known that her astrometrics officer’s budding friendship with the somewhat volatile chief engineer would produce some interesting results.

"Training behind my back, I see?" she said with an accusing tone of voice. "I guess I’ll have to keep that in mind. You’ve certainly learned your lessons well."

Seven frowned.

"It was not my intention to act with secrecy, Captain," she said. "I was not aware that …"

"I’m joking, Seven," the captain smiled. "I think it’s good that you are socialising with the crew, especially with B’Elanna. You two didn’t get off to a good start. I’m glad that you are getting along better these days."

The blonde nodded.

"It seems that Lt Torres has decided to accept me as part of the Voyager crew, possibly even as a … friend."

Janeway had begun to wipe her face with a towel and now she stopped, looking curiously at Seven.

The younger woman sometimes had vulnerability about her, almost childlike at times, that made the captain feel strangely protective. This was one of those moments.

"I would’ve thought you had lots of friends after three years on Voyager," she said casually. "You have more than proved yourself as a worthy and instrumental member of this crew."
A shadow passed quickly across the ex-Borg’s narrow features.

"I do not make friends easily, Captain," she stated slowly. "I am respected but not necessarily liked."

Janeway inhaled sharply. She had no idea that Seven felt this way. After three years surely the crew had gotten over their initial prejudices? Couldn’t they see what a remarkable person she was? Well, it was obvious to her. Seven was a brilliant young woman with a sensitive soul.

The captain walked close to the blonde and firmly met her eyes.

"I hope you know that I’m your friend," she said.

Seven cocked her head.

"You once said that because you are my captain, you can not always be my friend," she replied quietly.

Janeway cringed. She recalled saying those words to Seven while they were held in the brig aboard Arturis’ ship as he steered it towards Borg space intent on carrying out his revenge by delivering Voyager’s crew and her captain into the Borg’s hands.

"I remember," the captain admitted. "We’ve come a long way since then."

"Still, the facts remain the same."

"Yes, but …" Janeway replied insistently then stopped. She didn’t know why she wanted to object or even if her objections were valid. She was the captain, which meant that there were limits to the relationships she could form even if she personally desired something more.

Seven looked expectantly at her.

"I am your friend, Seven," Janeway stated firmly. "I’d like to think that you are my friend as well."

"I am, Captain."

The urgent tone of voice made Janeway eyes widen but before she had time to pursue the conversation further she was hailed by her first officer via the comm system.

"Captain Janeway, please report to the bridge."

Impatiently she slapped her comm badge as she began to walk, exiting the holo deck.

"On my way, Commander."

She walked briskly towards the turbo lift and entered it. Seven joined her.

"Bridge."

The lift rapidly transported them to deck one. The doors opened. Disregarding her appearance, Janeway strode to the centre of the bridge.

"Report."
"We are approaching the inhabited M-class planet we picked up on long range sensors a week ago. According to our readings, it appears that there is significant seismic activity occurring on the planet’s surface. These disruptions seem to be focused in the northern hemisphere, a highly populated region, and there is more," Tuvok responded.

"Go on," Janeway urged.

"We have picked up an urgent subspace message requesting assistance."

"I wasn’t aware that the inhabitants of this planet had that capability."

"They do not. The request originated from a ship orbiting one of the planet’s moons."

"We have identified their warp signature, Captain," Chakotay said as he crossed the deck to stand next to Janeway. "The ship appears to be Federation."

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Janeway let her gaze travel around the familiar faces on the bridge. Tuvok’s expression was as emotionless as always while her first officer had a deep frown distorting the tattoo on his forehead. Harry Kim looked apprehensive while Tom Paris had simply turned in his chair and regarded her steadily while he awaited her orders.

Her eyes fell upon Seven standing calmly at her station behind the command chairs. The young woman stood there, her face as emotionless as Tuvok’s except for the fact that she still looked tousled from their velocity game earlier.

"How long before we’re within hailing distance?" Janeway asked, keeping her voice calm and matter of fact.

"Twenty minutes at present speed, Captain," Tom Paris said.

"Good. That will give me time to change. Seven, I suggest you do the same and then report back to the bridge. Harry, find out everything you can from external sensors. I want to know more about the seismic activity that is disturbing the planet. Tuvok, I want you to verify the signature readings of that ship. If it is Federation I want to know as much as possible about it before we hail them."

"Yes, Captain."

"You have the bridge again, Chakotay," Janeway said briskly and walked back to the turbo lift with Seven following her lead.

"Deck three."

Neither of them spoke until the doors opened and Janeway stepped out.

"See you back on the bridge, Seven," she said with a crooked smile. "This should prove interesting."

"Indeed," Seven replied. "Deck eight."

The captain hurried down the corridor and entered her quarters. Discarding her velocity outfit she took a quick sonic shower.
Pulling on her uniform and attaching the pips to her collar she felt knots tightening in the pit of her stomach.

She remembered the ordeal with the Equinox all to well. How her colleague, Captain Ransom, had betrayed the Federation, its principles and ideals. The mere thought caused bile to rise in her throat. She had thought she was over the Equinox. Apparently she wasn’t.

If this was a Federation ship, how did it get here and what the hell was it doing interfering with a pre-warp civilization?

She would not be so open or trusting this time. If this were another example of the type of behaviour that Ransom had so recklessly displayed, then she would be her on her guard. She would not be taken in a second time.

She brushed her hair vigorously and then regarded her reflection in the mirror. Her blue-grey eyes were dark with shadows and her lips pressed to a fine line.

She was ready.

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Seven fastened the clasp in the back of her neck, securing her plum bio suit.

She tried to process the conversation she had had with the captain just after their velocity game.

After living aboard Voyager for almost three years, the ex-Borg now knew enough about the chain of command to have an idea of how lonely Janeway’s position could be.

When they travelled through peaceful areas of space, Janeway would relax and spend free time with the crew. Sometime she would show up at Sandrine’s or would join the crew for dinner at the mess hall. Seven discovered during these periods that Janeway made it a habit to stop by astrometrics at least once a day. She would ask Seven about her work as well as other topics of discussion while leaning against the blonde’s work console with one hand on her hip. Sometimes, like today, they would meet for a game of Velocity or Janeway would insist that she accompany her to some function to develop her social skills. Then there were those late nights when Janeway would show up unannounced at cargo bay two. She would enter the bay quietly and just stand there, watching Seven as she regenerated. The young woman assumed that Janeway was unaware of the fact that regeneration was not quite like sleep. Some of Seven’s cybernetic implants were still active and registering everything that went on around her during the regeneration cycles.

Seven was not sure why she had never mentioned this to the captain. All the blonde knew was that she felt comforted in an odd way by the captain’s presence and did not want the intermittent nocturnal visits to stop, so she refrained from raising the subject.

Seven arranged her hair in its usual austere fashion and then left the cargo bay.

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Tuvok had briefed her just minutes before they were within range. The ship orbiting the M-class planet’s far moon transmitted a Federation signal but with certain alien
"We’re coming into hailing distance now, Captain," Harry Kim announced.

"Good. Keep scanning the vessel, Harry, and open all hailing frequencies."

Janeway got up from her command chair, walking closer to the view screen.

"Vessel in need of assistance, this is Captain Kathryn Janeway of the Federation Starship Voyager. How can we be of help?" she hailed the ship.

There were static and only a blurry, flickering image on the screen but then a male voice replied.

"Please say again."

Janeway glanced around the bridge, raising an eyebrow. Moving a hand to her hip she repeated her greeting.

"My God," she heard an astounded voice over the comm system, "I don’t believe it!"

"This is getting silly," Voyager’s captain mumbled shaking her head. Raising her voice she continued. "Identify yourself."

The screen flickered again and then Janeway found herself looking at a dark haired man, apparently human, dressed in black leather like uniform with a tall golden collar. It wasn’t Starfleet but the communicator on his chest was.

She could make out some of the consoles behind him on what had to be the bridge.

"I’m Commander Max Toriello, First Officer of the Starship Excellence."

Only Janeway’s command training kept her from gasping out loud. The Excellence - it couldn’t be. It had been lost almost fifteen years ago, all presumed dead.

The large bear of a man on the view screen looked as shocked as she felt. Pulling herself together she nodded, vaguely remembering the name Toriello. Glancing at the small view screen on Tom Paris’ console, she could see the exterior of the Sabre Class starship. It was hardly recognisable due to the alien alterations. It boasted a number of weapon arrays and several other features which purpose eluded her.

"This is a surprise, Commander Toriello," she allowed. "We picked up your call for assistance on our subspace receiver. I’m sure you have a lot of questions, as do I, but before we get into how we all ended up in the Delta quadrant together; what can we do to assist you? I take it there is some kind of an emergency?"

"Affirmative, but our transmission was only meant for one of our sister ships."

"There are more federation ships here?" Janeway asked doubtfully, not quite understanding.

Max Toriello laughed.

"No, Captain. As far as we knew we were the only Federation ship here in the Delta Quadrant." He didn’t volunteer any more information. "My God, I can’t believe it! Tell me; are you any relation to Admiral Janeway? "
"Yes, I’m his daughter."

"That’s right, I remember he has a daughter named Kathryn. How is he?"

"He died a number of years ago."

The smile on Toriello face disappeared

"I’m sorry to hear that. He was a good man."

Janeway acknowledged the sympathy by nodding briefly.

"Commander Toriello, does Captain Montgomery still command the Excellence?"

"Yes, she does."

"Is she available? I’d like to talk to her."

A shadow passed quickly over the dark haired man’s face.

"The captain is down on the surface dealing with the local authorities. I don’t know when she’ll be back."

Janeway smirked.

"Surely you are in constant touch with your captain, Commander, or are you not operating under Starfleet regulations anymore? Unless I’m mistaken, she will want to know that you’ve run into some old friends, so to speak."

"I’m sure she will but the situation on the planet is chaotic, ma’am."

"Captain, sensor readings confirm that," Harry Kim informed Janeway. "The northern hemisphere is highly unstable and something is going on several kilometres below the surface that’s throwing our readings off the scale."

"Explanation, Mr Kim? Janeway asked.

"None, Captain," the ensign replied after punching in several commands. "There are too many unknown variables at work. I don’t have enough data to make an educated guess, all I can say is that it doesn’t look good."

"Can you shed some light on this?" Janeway asked, turning towards the view screen.

Max Toriello shook his head.

"We’re having the same problems monitoring the situation. Our captain is on the surface with an away team trying to find answers." He frowned. "We’re here to assist but something is not … right."

Janeway could see the man was worried. She got the feeling he wasn’t too happy that his captain was on the surface. What were these people up to? How was it that a Federation starship long presumed lost on a deep space mission, was there to assist?

"Well," she said calmly, "it seems that so far none of your sister ships have responded to your subspace signal. I’m taking Voyager into orbit for now. I think we have a lot to talk about, don’t you?"
"Captain, it would be better if you kept some distance. The planet has no clue of our
existence. The moon provides sufficient cover and concealment for us to remain
unobserved but I’m afraid that your ship would be spotted and the inhabitants aren’t up
to dealing with that."

"Of course, Commander. Maintain our current position Mr Paris."

"Aye, Captain."

"We have a lot to talk about, Commander Toriello."

"We most certainly do."

"Is there something we should be doing right now?"

"If you can be patient, Captain, we need to await Captain Montgomery’s return. If you
can continue to monitor the situation from your ship it would be of great assistance."

"Very well, Commander. When your captain returns from the planet, please have her
hail me?"

She knew she made the demand sound like a polite request but she was also aware that
the Excellence’s first officer understood.

"Of course, Captain," he replied smartly.

When his image faded from the view screen again, Janeway turned to her first officer.

"Chakotay, round up the senior staff in the conference room. I’ll join you as soon as I
can."

With that she crossed the bridge and entered the ready room. Sitting down at her work
console she punched in commands, set on finding what kept eluding her mind. She
knew there was something special she ought to remember about the Excellence.

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Captain Eliana Montgomery regarded the five officials sitting in dark wooden chairs at
the far end of the table. She had been on her feet for more than twelve hours, several of
them together with the authorities of Bunthora, the nation occupying the northern
hemisphere of the planet. Her accompanying crewmembers flanked her on both sides, as
did one of the officials from the Protectorate’s Embassy. She knew they were just as
exasperated as she was yet they were professional enough not to show any outward
signs of it.

"I assure you, Guardian, this is all the information we have at the moment," the
Bunthoran to the far left said smilingly. "These earthquakes are purely a natural
occurrence. So far we have dealt with the disaster to date but we are grateful for any
assistance you might grant us. However, I really do not see the need for alarm. I assure
you, this is something well beneath you or the Protectorate’s concern."

Biting back an urge to set the man straight in less than diplomatic terms, Montgomery
tightened her fists. A familiar headache flashed behind her eyes but she kept her steady
dark green eyes locked on the men in front of her.
She had been sitting in this briefing for over an hour trying to determine what these men knew but the politicians refused to be forthcoming. It was highly unlikely that this phenomenon was a naturally occurring event. There were far too many inconsistencies.

She realised then that there was more to the impending catastrophe that had taken the lives of hundreds and threatened the lives of thousands than she or her crew had predicted in their initial estimates.

She began to grow increasingly suspicious of the men in front of her, thinking them far too optimistic, oblivious, on the verge of stupidity even, regarding the dangers of their current situation. No, they knew something. These men weren’t in denial; they were in collusion.

"Respectfully, Prime Minister Nontha," she said digging deep for a diplomatic tone of voice when all she wanted to do was wipe the obliging grin off the man’s face with her infamous razor tongue, "there have been at least three disastrous quakes in the region over the past seven days and hundreds of aftershocks. Each quake has increased in intensity and the frequencies between the quakes get shorter. You have been fortunate that the areas affected to date have been mostly uninhabited but our models show that you can expect more events and that the coastline where most of your population resides could be destroyed. My experience tells me that an evacuation of the settlements along the coastal plains at this time is prudent."

"I admire your expertise," the minister interrupted condescendingly which infuriated the captain even more. "I assure you that our own experts …"

"Have you really listened to your own experts, Prime Minister? Do you have any clue what you are dealing with?" Montgomery said, losing her patience with the self-righteous little man. "Enough. The facts are undeniable. You have a serious situation on your hands with millions of lives at stake, perhaps the entire mainland population of Bunthora. I’ve talked myself hoarse for hours and we are getting nowhere with this procrastination on your part. I demand you put me in touch with the Emperor. I am sure that he will not be pleased when he learns that you and the civil authorities have not taken the appropriate measures to mitigate the danger to your people. I will also contact the officials of Gothiara since they too will feel the impact of this."

Her voice, low but strong, carried through the marble hall where they were conducting the meeting, causing the five men to flinch and her accompanying crew members to inhale and pale. They knew her well.

"Guardian, I assure you …" The prime minister began again but broke off when the tall blonde woman rose from her chair, not bothering with the protocol of these meetings.

"You will connect me with your best geologists, engineers and city planners as well. I also wish to meet with your emergency service officials as well as representatives of your military. I know disasters, Minister, but I will not be able to save anyone if my hands are tied or if certain facts are withheld," she said drilling the prime minister with her glare.

"The Protectorate is prepared to act but time is running out. Your inability to see the impacts of your actions or should I say lack of actions, on this planet are deplorable. Do you really want to waste any more of my time, sir?"

Prime Minister Nontha swallowed hard.
Montgomery regarded him sternly, not prepared to give an inch.

"There will be no need to involve His Majesty at this point," the Bunthora official said quickly. "I will give the order to gather all the expertise you need, Guardian."

"Thank you, but be assured, I will be in contact with the Emperor as well as the Protectorate. You will notify our Embassy when you have gathered the people I have requested but make no mistake, Prime Minister; I plan to hold you and the rest of your cabinet personally responsible if we are too late to prevent further loss of life," she replied with cold politeness. "Lt Commander Darok, my attaché, will accompany you to ensure there are no further misunderstandings. He is familiar with the expertise that is needed and can assist by advising you and your staff on what specific expertise is required. Do you have any questions, Prime Minister?"

"No, Guardian."

"Then I will leave you to your work."

She turned to her staff nodding towards the door; they stood and made their exit.

"Guess we have work to do, people." She glanced at the distinguished older man at her right. "So, Ambassador, you’re awfully quiet. Did I make a botch of it?"

He turned towards Montgomery and shook his head.

"No, Eliana, you said all the things I have wanted to say for weeks but I must be diplomatic in my approach. I take it from your comments that you too suspect something else is at work here besides nature?"

"I do but I have little evidence to go by. You know these people well J’Aoh. What might be they be hiding?"

"My dear the list is endless, but I don’t know what would cause this type of catastrophic instability. That is why I contacted the Protectorate."

Montgomery turned to address her staff.

"Darok, why don’t you take Ensign Graham with you and perhaps a member of the Embassy’s staff. J’Aoh, any recommendations?"

"Yes, I have a young woman on my staff who has been working on this situation from its beginnings."

"Perfect. Take two officers from security with you as well. I want to encourage the Prime Minister to do the right thing. Better get back in there, Darok and start encouraging him and his staff."

"Yes, ma’am."

"Ambassador, may we drop you off?"

"No Eliana, you have much to do, as do I, starting with a little diplomatic damage control with the prime minister. I will re enforce your statements to him and impress upon him the importance of cooperation and openness. I’ll also send for my assistant to work with Darok. Do you wish for me to contact the Emperor?"
"Yes. He has to be kept informed."

"He’ll want to see you, you know."

"Anyway we could do that without all the hoopla?"

"Hoopla? I love the way you Earthborn speak! If you mean can we dispense with all the protocols and procedures befitting His Majesty? I will do my best."

"Thanks, J’Aoh. There really isn’t time for it."

The old man looked deeply into the captain’s eyes.

"Then it is as bad as I feared."

"Yes, and there are limits to what we can do."

The Excellence had arrived at its current location in a less than desirable shape. Neither the crew nor the ship had had a chance to recover from its last mission. No one within the Protectorate had realised the magnitude of the impending disaster until the Excellence had arrived on the scene.

The initial assessment made by the crew was alarming. They weren’t prepared to handle this type of planetary disaster and neither were the planet’s inhabitants.

Making matters worse was the fact that government officials were being far from cooperative. Her gut told her the stupid bastards had violated one of the treaties but how? What could they possibly have done to trigger events of this potential magnitude?

As soon as she had recognized the enormity of the problem she had given the order to send an urgent subspace message to all ships in the Protectorate’s fleet, assessing them of the situation and requesting assistance. It was standard procedure but she was quite sure there were no other Guardians within proximity of this region of space. She then notified Ambassador J’Aoh, the Protectorate’s representative to the planet, and quickly briefed him on their findings and requested that he set up a meeting with the authorities immediately. J’Aoh had done so at once and had contacted the Protectorate directly through diplomatic channels to see what other assistance might be available. The Protectorate had responded and was dispatching assistance but help was light years away.

The seriousness of the situation and the escalating headache caused her stomach to turn over. Swallowing hard she hailed the bridge.

"Montgomery to the Excellence."

"Toriello here, Captain. Go ahead."

"I’m done here for now. Darok and Graham will stay to work with the prime minister’s office in rounding up the local experts. How are the away teams doing? Anything I should know about?"

"The away teams are reporting in every hour on the hour, Captain. The team closest to the epicentre of the last quake is reporting back every thirty minutes. They’re starting to form opinions on what’s going on down there."

"The old man looked deeply into the captain’s eyes. "Then it is as bad as I feared."

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"Hm, so am I."

"Are you ready to transport back here yet?"

There was something in Max’s tone of voice that tipped her off. Something wasn’t right.

"Max, what’s up?" she asked sharply.

"I’ll brief you as soon as you’re get back," he responded to her utter amazement. "You wouldn’t believe me if I told you so why waste time," he chuckled.

"I hate surprises, Commander," the captain mumbled. "Montgomery out."

She looked at the two security officers that were still with her.

"Okay, guys," she smirked joylessly, the throbbing headache now making her nauseous. "Let's go. Montgomery to Excellence, three to beam up."

One good thing about transporters was that for a second or two you felt nothing. Not even pain.

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Montgomery entered the bridge with her jaw firmly set.

"Report."

"All away teams are performing their duties accordingly," Max Toriello answered smartly, rising from the command chair. "As for that other matter, I recommend we discuss it in your ready room, Captain."

Studying the dark haired man for a brief moment before nodding, Montgomery tried to make out his expression.

"Very well," she said and entered her ready room. Forcing back a new wave of nausea she walked over to the replicator. "Club soda."

A tall glass took form and grabbing it, she held it to her forehead before lowering it to her lips, sipping it carefully.

"You okay?" Max asked.

"I’m fine. What’s going on?"

"I knew you were trying to close the meeting with Nontha and his men, I didn’t want to disturb you but something unexpected turned up. Someone responded to our call for assistance."

"Thank God!" the captain replied with relief. "Which ship? I want…."

She interrupted herself when her second in command shook his head.

"It’s not one of ours, Eliana," he said.

"Then who? How could they pick up on our coded subspace frequency?"
Max hesitated and walked closer.

"Would you believe, the Federation?" he allowed.

Not many things surprised or shocked the seasoned captain of the Excellence these days. They had seen too much, experienced things no other humans had ever dreamed existed in the universe. Still this piece of news stunned Montgomery and made her go weak at the knees.

"What?"

"We’re not the only starship hiding out behind this moon. We’re accompanied by the USS Voyager."

Slowly sitting down on the edge of her desk she sipped her club soda again, trying to not let on that her hands were trembling.

She trusted Max implicitly. He had held the position as her first officer for close to twenty years.

"Federation? Max, are you sure?" she asked quietly.

"Our sensors confirm that their ship is Federation. It’s Starfleet all right even though I’ve never seen anything quite like it before. It is a new class of ship called Intrepid; it has completely new Federation technology that is far more advanced than the Excellence’s was."

"The crew?"

" Mostly human. All, with an exception or two, originated in the Alpha Quadrant."

"How did they get here?"

"I have no idea. Thought I’d leave the honours to ask to you."

Montgomery rubbed her forehead, trying to grasp the news with composure.

"How do they look?" she asked cautiously.

"They look fine, Eliana. Really, they look fine."

"What was their reaction to our presence here?" Montgomery asked.

"The captain is no fool," he smiled. "She kind of reminds me of another Starfleet captain I know. Naturally, she’s on her guard. I can just imagine what’s going on in her mind!"

"Hm, so can I," the captain allowed. "What’s the captain’s name?"

"Her name is Janeway," Max stated, rubbing the back of his head.

Stopping the glass half way to her lips, Montgomery paused.

"Kathryn Janeway? I can’t believe it!"

"She politely demanded to talk to you."

"Would you believe, the Federation?" he allowed.

"Oh, I’m sure she’s a Federation captain," he said thoughtfully. "If you ask me, she looks like an admiral."

"What makes you say that?"

"She has a very strong presence, Montgomery. And her presence is authoritative."

"Not much different from you."

"Maybe."

"I didn’t think you’d like the idea of being followed, not to mention the idea of being accompanied by the USS Voyager, Montgomery."

"I didn’t say I didn’t like it. I’m just not sure what to do."

"You’ll do fine, Montgomery. And you’ll do fine, Max."

"Thank you, Eliana."

"Don’t mention it."

"I’m going to have a chat with the captain. You should come along."

"I’m not sure that’s a good idea, Montgomery."

"Trust me, Max."

"I think it would be better to have Starfleet know we’re here before they find out themselves."

"Agreed."

"We’re going to have a bit of an awkward situation here, Montgomery."

"I know."

"I’m not sure how to handle it."

"I’ll handle it."

She took the chair next to him and sat down, her hands still trembling. She was about to ask him a question when she realized the obvious.

"Max, I trust you explicitly."

"I know, Montgomery."

"That’s why I’m asking you."

"Ask what?"

"If you’re sure the ship is Federation."

"I am."

"I trust you, Max."

"Good. I can appreciate that, Montgomery."

"And I can appreciate you not taking it lightly."

"I don’t."

"Thank you, Max."

"No problem, Montgomery."

"I think we should talk to the captain."

"Agreed."

"I’ll do it, Montgomery."

"Thank you, Max."

"Nothing to it, Montgomery."

"I think this is going to be quite an interesting conversation."

"I think it will be."

"I’m not sure how to approach it."

"I’m not sure how to approach it either, Montgomery."

"I think we should start with a simple introduction."

"A simple introduction?"

"Yes."

"I think we should start with a simple introduction."

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"A simple introduction?"

"Yes."

"I think we should start with a simple introduction.
Smirking against the rim of the glass, the tall blonde chuckled.

"I’m sure she did. Well, we better not disappoint Captain Janeway then," she said and put the glass down after emptying it.

She walked onto the bridge again with Max right behind her. She regarded the image on the view screen. She couldn’t help but admire the sleek starship orbiting the planet behind them. Montgomery had to agree with Max, she had never seen anything like it.

"Hail Voyager," she ordered. "USS Voyager, this is Captain Eliana Montgomery of the Starship Excellence."

Momentarily the view screen flickered and the familiar of a compact auburn haired woman in her early forties came into view. Montgomery put her hands on her hips and smiled at the expression on the other captain’s face.

"Long time no see, Kathryn."

*****

Janeway found herself staring in disbelief, simply not accepting the image her eyes relayed to her brain.

Captain Eliana Montgomery, missing and presumed dead, was standing on the Excellence’s bridge. She looked different in her black uniform but other than that she seemed as vibrant and as charismatic as Janeway remembered her standing in the lobby of Starfleet headquarters in San Francisco so many years ago.

Willing her chin not to hit the floor, Janeway merely quirked an eyebrow and nodded.

"Captain Montgomery," she replied calmly finally finding her voice. "As I told your first officer, this is an unexpected surprise."

The Excellence’s captain smiled wryly.

"Formal as always, Kathryn. However, I find your observation a bit of an understatement. I never thought we’d see another human again in the Delta Quadrant let alone another Federation starship. I thought the Excellence was the only one to have that dubious honour."

"I’m afraid not. The Excellence is the second Federation vessel we’ve come across," Janeway said casually, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Really? How did you manage to get here?"

"A being known as the Caretaker hauled us and the other ship across the galaxy against our will sic years ago."

"Where is the other ship?"

"Destroyed," Janeway replied in a cold tone of voice. "And what of your fate? How did you and your crew manage to be stuck here?"

"A space anomaly, think of it like a galactic tidal wave, carried our ship here but that was a long time ago, almost more than fifteen years."
There was a moment of silence as the two women eyed each other trying to absorb what the other had told them.

"Kathryn, I’d be thrilled to catch up on recent events," Montgomery said briskly, "but I’ve got work to do and damn little time to do it in."

"We picked up your call for assistance," Janeway responded. "I can see that the planet is unstable and that the populations is at risk. How can we help?"

The direct question made the other woman miss a beat.

"I’m not sure there’s anything you and your crew can do, Kathryn," she said slowly. "We were hoping that one of our sister ships might respond to our subspace signal."

"I know, but it seems that we’re all you’ve got right now. Can you afford not to take advantage of what we can offer?" Janeway replied firmly. "Can the people down there afford it?"

Eliana Montgomery turned to her first officer and exchanged what seemed like some wordless communication. He only smiled and nodded. The blonde captain shrugged.

"What the hell, when all else fails …" she mumbled.

"… *improvise*," both women replied at once.

Montgomery looked at Janeway and shook her head.

"I’ll beam over with my senior staff members to discuss the current situation and possible courses of action. Expect us in fifteen minutes. Montgomery out."

The screen went blank for a moment and then showed a view of the moon.

"Correct me if I’m wrong, Captain," Chakotay said, "but did she just give you an order?"

Janeway smirked.

"In case any of you missed the obvious, that’s an old acquaintance of mine. You all heard the lady; we have fifteen minutes before they show up. All senior officers report to the conference room."

The command automatically reached all parts of Voyager, resulting in the quick gathering of the nine officers in the conference room adjoining the bridge.

Janeway stood by the view ports collecting her thoughts until the last person had taken a seat around the drop shaped table.

"People, we have twelve minutes before Captain Montgomery and her senior staff officers board this ship. Tuvok, what have you discovered so far?"

"It appears that the Excellence is boasting more alien technology than Federation."

"Captain," Chakotay began, "we have no way of knowing yet whether these people are really who they claim to be."

"I agree, Chakotay. I want each of you to be on your guard. Furthermore, I’m
concerned about what their true mission is regarding the planet."

"What do you mean?"

"Don’t you find it strange how reluctant they are to accept our help?"

"Perhaps it has something to do with the Prime Directive," Tuvok offered. "If you recall, they did not want us approaching the planet when we arrived."

"True, but there may be other factors at work here. They didn’t want the planet observing us yet Montgomery was on the planet when we arrived or so they claimed."

"I never saw a shuttlecraft return to the ship so how exactly did she get back?" Tom asked. "It’s too far to transport someone from here and I would think the moon would be in the way."

"Or might I offer an another explanation?" Tuvok countered. "Our technology would not allow it however that does not prevent the Excellence from boasting such capability. I do not believe you can discount the fact that there is much we do not understand about the Excellence."

"You’re right Tuvok. We really know very little about the ship, the crew, or its captain."

She let her gaze travel around the room, looking firmly at each and everyone of the serious faces around the table.

"We all know what impact the ordeal with the Equinox had on us all. In some ways we’re still dealing with it. The five crewmembers from that ship still struggle to find their place and earn our trust. I do not want to experience that again."

"You know this captain, ma’am?" Harry Kim asked.

"Yes, I knew Eliana Montgomery. She taught at the Academy when I was a cadet and became a mentor of sorts. She was someone I admired very much."

"Do you think it’s really her?" Tom Paris wondered. "She sure seemed very ‘Starfleet’ to me."

"The thing is, she is exactly as I remembered her," Janeway said slowly, putting emphasis on the word ‘exactly’. "She looks the same, she hasn’t aged at all."

"You mean; they could be clones?" B’Elanna Torres asked.

"I don’t know but it makes me very suspicious."

"If they’re clones, there are different techniques I could use to confirm that," the Doctor added. "Unless there is a method of cloning that leaves no trace."

"Captain," Neelix said, rising from his chair. "I think I might be able to shed some light on this."

Janeway looked at her moral officer who also served as Voyager’s unofficial ambassador, noticing the little man’s unusually serious demeanour. The little Talaxian was generally in a very good mood, inspiring all of Voyager’s crew to keep going both during hard and challenging times as well as when every day was the same as the day
"Yes, Neelix?" she encouraged him, not sure she liked the look on his face.

"I saw the ship and caught a glimpse of its first officer on the view screen when I was on the bridge with a tray of … never mind. The way they dress, the way they operate. It rang a bell, Captain. I talked to Ensign Kim about his findings and … well, I’ve heard rumours about these people."

"About the Excellence?" Chakotay asked doubtfully.

"No, Commander, of these kinds of people or should I say, these kinds of crews. They have been around for thousands of years. They travel across vast areas of space, saving people, in some instance entire planets and leave as mysteriously as they came."

"What are they? Guardian angels?" B’Elanna mocked, sneering at Neelix tone of admiration.

"I don’t know, Lieutenant, maybe they are. People worship them for the help they extend but the people who crossed them fear them. The myth says that they are as vindictive as they are merciful."

"That sounds like a not so angelic contradiction," Janeway said, not sure what to think. "I guess the myths add to the rumours and get better, or worse, for each person forwarding it."

"I’m not so sure, Captain," Neelix said, sitting down in his chair again. "The stories about the Guardians are many and very detailed. I didn’t pay them as close attention as I wish I had now, but their power is great, that much I remember."

"I too am familiar with the stories, Captain."

Janeway turned to look at Seven.

"Have the Borg come across them before?"

"There is a part of space that the Borg tended to avoid. It is a region of space known as the Protectorate. An elite force known as the Guardians guards it."

"Are you trying to tell me that the Borg fear the Guardians?"

"No, the Borg fears the Protectorate. I find it curious how a group of individuals from the Alpha Quadrant could become members of such an elaborate organisation," Seven of Nine replied.

"So do I," the captain agreed. "I think we will have to approach Captain Montgomery with caution and I suggest we do not let on that we’ve ever heard of this myth. Thank you for showing us this possibility, Neelix. It’s always good to have an ace or two up your sleeve."

She leaned down on her hands against the table.

"Two minutes before they arrive. Chakotay, Seven, you’re with me. Tuvok, Harry, keep scanning the planet and the Excellence; any abnormalities I want to know about them immediately. The rest of you will perform your regular duties. Dismissed."
They all rose and left the conference room.

When Janeway exited the room last with Chakotay and Seven, the tall blonde turned to the captain with a frown.

"I know caution is prudent during circumstances such as these, Captain," she said. "However, I think it is of importance to remember that all information points to the fact that this crew, whether they are ‘Guardians’ or not, are here to assist the inhabitants of the planet."

"You want me to keep an open mind, is that it, Seven?" Janeway asked, pressing her lips together. "I certainly will try to give Montgomery the benefit of the doubt but I must be honest and tell you that’s about as far as I’ll stretch it. Something isn’t right here and I plan to find out what it is."

"I am certain that you will succeed, Captain," Seven said as they entered the turbo lift.

Janeway wished she could have been as certain as her astrometrics officer. The muscles in her stomach clenched as she prepared mentally to face the woman who had influenced her more than any other person, with the exception of her father, the admiral, when she was young.

It was time to determine if the striking captain of the Excellence was indeed Eliana Montgomery.

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Continued in The Guardians - part 2
Everyone in transporter room one directed their attention to the dais where three human and two alien forms shimmered into existence.

Captain Eliana Montgomery, a tall woman with short, blonde hair that boasted a few grey streaks, was standing in the middle. Like the others, she was dressed in a shiny black uniform with a tall golden collar. Four golden braids adorned her right shoulder all the way down her sleeve. There was a Federation comm badge pinned on the left side of her chest. Her green eyes scanned the room only to stop when they reached Janeway.

The man standing to Montgomery’s right was tall and heavily built. His impressive form suggested that all were muscles. He had dark, curly hair, brown intelligent eyes and a friendly smile on his lips. Janeway recognised Max Toriello from the view screen and had to concede that he appeared to be an impressive first officer. When she had reviewed the history of the Excellence she had spent some time going over the incredible records of this officer. She was surprised to discover that he had served with her father on two separate occasions.

On Montgomery’s left side stood the Excellence’s tactical officer, a striking woman with piercing blue eyes and long dark hair in a tight braid down her back. She was holding what looked like some sort of alien disrupter. She was almost as tall as Toriello, with a discreet but deadly presence about her.

Behind the three humans stood two alien beings. Neither was of a species Janeway recognised. They too wore uniforms similar to Montgomery’s.

"Captain Montgomery," Janeway greeted formally. "Welcome aboard Voyager."

Montgomery stepped off the dais, walking up to Janeway, a slow smile forming on her lips.

"Kathryn Janeway. I must say command looks good on you."

Janeway nodded.

"Thank you," she offered superfluously. "This is my first officer, Commander Chakotay and my astrometrics officer, Seven of Nine."

The other captain nodded towards Chakotay and then did a double take when she looked at Seven.

"You’re Borg," she stated flatly.

"Yes," Seven agreed.

"She was Borg," Janeway emphasised. "She was severed from the Collective three years ago."

"I’ve never come across an ex-Borg myself. Leave to you, Kathryn, to recruit one as a crew member," Montgomery allowed as she tuned towards Janeway. "You always had a knack for trying and achieving the impossible."
"I learnt it from you."

"It’s a beautiful ship, Kathryn," Montgomery said as she glanced around the room. "I’m impressed, given your circumstances."

"Thank you," Janeway commented. "We run a pretty tight ship and do things the Starfleet way. It’s important to us in order to keep up morale and not deter from our main goal."

"And what is that?"

"To find our way home."

The simple statement seemed to have an unexpected impact on the Excellence’s captain. She pressed her lips together but then turned to her right, gesturing towards the man accompanying her.

"This is Commander Max Toriello, my first officer," she introduced and turned to her left. "Lt Heidi Bremer, my chief tactical officer, Ensign T’em, my Science officer, and Lt Commander T’oelargema, also known as Commander ‘T’ since we never can do justice to her name," Montgomery said with a smile. "Commander ‘T’ is our Chief Anthropologist."

After the introductions Janeway suggested that they all move to a location better suited for their meeting. Two security guards followed at a discreet distance, which did not go unnoticed by Montgomery.

"Taking all precautions I see," she smirked. "Very wise."

"Standard procedure in greeting a crew from an alien vessel," Janeway replied calmly. "We’re hardly aliens," Toriello objected with a lopsided smile.

"Perhaps, however your vessel is," Seven stated. "There is very little of the original Federation technology left."

"I agree," Montgomery replied. "We’ve had so many modifications performed on it over the years, I can hardly remember what it looked like before. We still have the original computer configuration, although it has been upgraded a number of times, and the console designs are still the same, simply because it had a … comforting familiarity about it."

"Comforting?" Janeway asked as she led the party to the bridge.

"Yes," Montgomery said. "When we made the decision to remain in the Delta Quadrant it was important to keep some of our characteristics, our special Starfleet trademarks in order to have some sort of feeling of home. It was a way for us to remember our roots."

Janeway remained silent as they entered the bridge reflecting on what Montgomery had said.

Upon their entrance, the crew stood. Janeway went around the room introducing each of her crewmembers.

Montgomery seemed surprised to see Neelix and raised an eyebrow and smiled as
Janeway introduced him as her ambassador.

"You’re Talaxian, aren’t you?"

Neelix seemed surprised by this statement.

"Why yes, Captain, I am."

"Well, I can’t think of a better species to be Voyager’s guide through the Delta Quadrant. Captain Janeway is fortunate to have you," Montgomery said with a gentle tone that caught Janeway off guard and totally charmed Neelix.

"Then you know of my people?" he asked.

"Indeed I do; a noble people with noble hearts. It saddened me when I discovered the fate of your people, Ambassador."

"Please, Captain, call me Neelix."

"Neelix. I’m pleased to see that you and others of your species survived and continue to be an example to us all."

Neelix seemed overwhelmed by all of this while Janeway wasn’t sure what to make of it.

The Montgomery she remembered did not hand out compliments lightly and yet she appeared sincere in her remarks to Neelix. Glancing at Montgomery’s crew she was further taken aback to discover that their demeanor towards Neelix was similar to their captain’s.

"Thank you, Captain Montgomery."

"I hope we’ll have more time to chat later, Neelix. I can always use tips on how to be more diplomatic."

Toriello laughed and Montgomery gave him the evil eye.

"Did you have something to add, Commander?"

Toriello just smiled at his captain.

Janeway moved on to introduce the remaining staff.

"Tuvok, you old scoundrel! How the hell are you?" Excellence’s first officer asked as he approached the Vulcan with his hand extended.

Janeway could hardly cover up her reaction to this second surprise.

"I am well as you can see." Tuvok replied. He hesitated for a moment then shook Toriello’s hand.

"My God, this is like old home week! Well, you don’t look a day over ninety, pal."

"I must say you look very good for a man who has been dead for fifteen years."

Max chuckled.
"Touché. Tell me, is it possible you found your sense of humour out here in the Delta Quadrant, Tuvok?"

"It was not my intention to be humorous Commander, only to state the obvious."

"It’s good to see you too old man. I just wish the hell it wasn’t here in the Delta Quadrant."

Janeway couldn’t believe what she was witnessing. Why hadn’t Tuvok mentioned that he knew Toriello? From the exchange she just witnessed this was not a casual acquaintance either. She wanted an explanation but it would have to wait.

"I hate to break up this reunion gentlemen but we have work to do," Montgomery said in her usual sardonic tone of voice.

The last member of the crew Janeway introduced to the visitors was the Doctor.

"So Doctor, what do you make of us?" Montgomery asked.

"I don’t know what you mean, Captain."

"I didn’t know that holograms could be coy. Have you determined yet if we are the ‘real thing’ and not a reproduction?"

Janeway decided it was time to take command of the situation again.

"I asked him to conduct the scans. We have no idea if you are who you say you are …"

"I would be disappointed in you if you didn’t question who and what we are. Let’s get this over with so we can move on from here, shall we?"

The doctor pulled out his tricorder and scanned the Excellence’s crewmembers.

"I will have my results to you as soon as possible, Captain, or should I say Captains?"

Montgomery smirked while Janeway gave the hologram one of her Level Ten glares.

"Well I best be off then," he said as he exited the bridge rather quickly.

"Let’s go into the conference room, shall we?"

"Lead on, Kathryn."

Janeway took a breath, turned and lead the way as the Excellence’s and her own senior crewmembers followed. Upon entering the room Janeway offered a seat to Montgomery then proceeded to the opposite end of the table and sat facing her.

Seven sat down on her right and Chakotay on her left, wordlessly showing their loyalty. If the other captain noticed it, she didn’t let on.

Toriello sat down next to his captain while Commander T and Ensign T’em took their seats. Bremer remained standing. Voyager’s staff filled the remaining seats. Janeway had never seen the conference room so filled.

"How would you like to begin this meeting, Kathryn?"
"Before we get into the crisis at hand I would like some explanations."

"Fair enough, but let’s not waste time trying to be polite, Kathryn. Ask what’s on your mind and we will answer your questions to the best of our abilities."

"How did you end up in the Delta Quadrant?"

"Fifteen years ago we were on a deep space mission. Some type of space anomaly caught our ship. It was as if we were a piece of flotsam on a raging sea, carried off with the tides. We had no choice but to ride out the storm. It was horrible. When we finally came to rest nothing around was familiar. I’ll be honest; it took us a while to realise we were stranded in the Delta Quadrant. There was damage to our systems; many of the crew were hurt, some dead. We were in uncharted territory with little chance of survival. We did what we could to maintain life support and make repairs so that we could try to get home.

"It must have been hard," Janeway allowed.

"It was. The ship was a disaster. The only thing that was functioning was the weapon systems but we had a limited supply of power."

Montgomery paused as she took a deep breath. Her face became an unemotional mask, as she no doubt relived the experience again in her mind.

"Our first encounters with the inhabitants of the Delta Quadrant were somewhat less than friendly. We looked like easy prey and every bastard in this realm of space wanted a piece of us. Each time we were successful in fighting off the vultures and each time they stole more and more of our ability and will to survive. For the next three years we travelled the Quadrant searching for a way home and when it became obvious that we would never see Earth again, we began our search for a new home.

We came across an uninhabited planet that seemed to be habitable. We were ecstatic. It was like finding a safe harbour of sorts. It was beautiful and it had everything we needed to make a new start but we were wrong."

At this point in the story Max picked up the dialogue.

"Some of the crew encountered an unknown virus on this planet. It slowly spread throughout the ship, killing a fifth of the crew. There was no cure. After further study we discovered that it was indigenous to the planet and that if we remained we would all die. So we buried our dead and began our journey again."

"What happened?" Chakotay asked. "Obviously you survived."

Montgomery glanced at her first officer, another wordless communication that intrigued Janeway, and spoke softly.

"When all seemed lost and we were dead in the water, so to speak, we were approached by a species we had not come across before. Most of our first contacts in this part of the galaxy had been blatantly hostile. We were suspicious, even hateful, but in too weak a state to do anything so we expected destruction. Obviously, it was not our time to die. They boarded are ship and cared for us, nursing us back to health."

"Who were they?" Janeway asked.
"A better questioned would be; what are they?" Montgomery replied. "They are known as the Protectorate, an advanced form of life, not like anything we’d ever come across. They sent ships to intercept us and administered medicine, food, and even counselling. Once our health was restored and our ship repaired they asked us to stay, to join them."

"You were given a choice once your vessel was repaired?" Seven inquired. "What was your reason for remaining? Gratitude?"

Montgomery dipped her head.

"Yes, that among other things," she allowed. "Even if our bodies were healed and our ship was functioning, our spirits were broken after three years of death, deprivation, constant malfunctions and depleted resources. We had travelled through hostile space for almost five years with hardly any time to catch our breath in between. We took a vote. The decision was unanimous; we were going to stay and make a new home for ourselves."

Janeway regarded her colleague. There was something, something still unspoken, that made her weary of Montgomery.

"I have to ask about the obvious," Janeway said, leaning forward on her elbows. "Captain, you look very young for being … how old are you? Sixty?"

"I’ll be fifty-nine soon and you know it," Montgomery smirked. "It’s one of the advantages of being part of the Protectorate, Kathryn. The ageing process is slowed down considerably."

"How considerably?" the auburn haired captain fired off. "You must realise how this looks to us?"

"Let me try to explain. The Protectorate’s knowledge and technology is far superior then the Federations. They invested a lot of time and resources into the Excellence and her crew. They found the short life span of humans quite appalling. When we were inducted as Guardians …"

There it was, out in the open. Neelix was right.

"Guardians?" Chakotay queried.

Montgomery gradually turned her head towards Voyager’s first officer, nailing him with her dark green eyes, her mouth a thin line.

"Yes, we are Guardians. We serve the Protectorate much like you serve the Federation. Our role is to assist those in need while enforcing the peace and safeguarding the realm."

The way Montgomery said it made the words sound like a pledge or a prayer. Janeway went cold inside. The part about helping people in need was all well and good but the second part, confirming the things Neelix had implied about the Guardians being vengeful, went against everything she believed.

"That sounds like an oath," Janeway said slowly. "What about the oath you took back in the Alpha Quadrant? What about the Prime Directive?"

"The two are not incompatible Kathryn, but let me be clear where our allegiance lies.
We are no longer members of the Federation. We have sworn allegiance to the Protectorate very deliberately and by our own consent. There is no question that the Federation helped mould us into who we are but what we have become is thanks to the Protectorate."

Janeway felt her chest constrict. Somehow these words angered her but she didn’t quite understand why. It took all her self-control not to lash out at Montgomery.

Sensing the hostility coming from Janeway, Montgomery thought it best to change the subject.

"Can we discuss the crisis now or do you want to question me some more?"

Janeway took a breath a held it.

"It can wait," she answered slowly.

"Good. Ensign T’em, please brief us on the current situation."

"Approximately four days ago we were contacted by one our embassy on Tulmaria Prime. At that time the planet was undergoing significant seismic activities throughout its northern hemisphere. What alarmed our personnel on the ground was the fact that these phenomena were inconsistent with the geological history of this planet. It was their conclusion that other forces besides nature, were at work. Since our arrival in the sector we have conducted several surveys. Although these surveys validate our authorities initial suspicions they have been … inconclusive in determining the actual causes."

"Bottom line?"

"We do not know what is causing the phenomena but if it continues our models show that the destruction to the region will be catastrophic."

"Thank you, Ensign. Commander T?"

"Captain Montgomery," she nodded, "Captain Janeway. The sociological and economical impacts of such an event will not be limited to the northern hemisphere. They will be felt planet wide."

"Explain," replied Montgomery.

"Most of the planet’s food production is found in the northern hemisphere. If the crops are destroyed we can expect tremendous food shortages for at least three years, maybe more. Their ability to recover depends on how much of their industrial base that survives. We have already begun to see the destruction of seventeen percent of their infrastructure. If these phenomena continue the destruction will be much worse."

Janeway leaned forward.

"Tell us a little more about the northern hemisphere’s relationship with the south.

"The southern hemisphere relies on the north for their food, water and the production of goods. The north relies on the south for its raw materials, mineral deposits, and fuel. It is a symbiotic relationship. One cannot exist without the other although the two would disagree on this point. In the past there has been tension between the two. Economically the north has had the advantage over the south for many centuries. Wars have been
raged because but the two have lived in harmony for the past two hundred years with a few regional disputes every now then."

"Were are the people on the evolutionary scale?" Tuvok interrupted.

"This planet’s people are in the later stages of an industrial development. Following this track they should be space borne within a century."

"Is it possible what we are witnessing is a man-made phenomenon?" asked Seven.

"Possible, or it may be caused from an outside sources. Anything at this point would be strictly speculation."

"Thank you, T." Montgomery said as the Lt Commander took her seat. "Questions?"

"What is your mission, Captain?" asked Janeway.

"The Excellence’s mission is to try to prevent this disaster from becoming catastrophic. If we can’t prevent it then we have to mitigate it as much as possible and try to save as many lives as we can. We’re also here to investigate why this is happening in the first place. The response from the civil authorities has not been quite what I expected."

"How so?"

"They are in extreme denial over the severity of the situation or they are trying to hide something."

"What can we do? I have to be honest with you. I have no intention of breaking the Prime Directive."

Montgomery stared at her for a moment. The tension between the two women was undeniable.

"Have I asked you to violate it? Since you are being so honest I will be too. I’m not sure you or Voyager can contribute anything to this situation. We came over here out of professional courtesy, to provide you with information, to share some discussion and brainstorm some possible courses of actions but I can see now that this was a waste of time."

There was an ominous silence before the younger captain spoke again.

"I wish to talk to Captain Montgomery in private," Janeway said, forcing her voice to sound calm. "Leave us."

Montgomery’s crew remained in place as Voyager’s crew stood and made their way out the door. Montgomery nodded towards her crewmembers.

"I know you all have work to do. Go on back to the ship. I’ll join you momentarily," she said quietly.

The crewmembers stood and slowly left. Max raised an eyebrow but then left with the others without saying a word.

"So what would you like to say, Kathryn, that couldn’t be said in front of the others?"

"You may have turned your back on the Federation but I haven’t. All I said was that I
would not violate the Prime Directive."

"It’s not what you said. It’s how you said it."

"The Prime Directive is a good set of rules," Janeway said in a low voice that would have made any member of her crew flinch. "I fail to see any situation where they would not be applicable. Brilliant men and women of the Federation of Planets wrote that Directive to ensure that every possible situation could and would be dealt with accordingly."

"Really? Correct me if I’m wrong, Kathryn," Montgomery said firmly, "but none of the good men and women who wrote those rules lived or knew of the circumstances here in the Delta Quadrant, did they? Are you telling me that you have spent, how ever long it is you have been here, in this part of the galaxy, without breaking the Prime Directive or at least bending it?"

"I have never broken the Prime Directive!" Janeway said furiously, getting to her feet. "I may have bent it in order to save my crew, or even to save someone else, but I have never blatantly broken it."

"Good for you! Bravo, Kathryn!" the other captain said getting on her feet, clapping her hands. "Now tell me, did I ask you to compromise yourself or your crew? No. You want to know what I think? This has nothing to do with the Prime Directive. This has to do with you and me. What exactly do you think we’ve done? What do you think we are doing or about to do?"

"I have no idea. All I know is that you gave up. You quit!"

"Is that what this about? Well, let me share something with you. I have no reason to defend the actions or the decisions that my crew and I made to you or anyone else aboard this ship. You know nothing about the Protectorate, who or what they are, their laws, and their directives. You know very little about our lives and what we’ve experienced. You amaze me with your ignorance and your arrogance. I find it incredibly condescending that you dismiss any rule, any code of conduct not sanctioned by the Federation."

Janeway was seething with anger.

"I have every respect for any sovereign planet’s laws. I live by them every time I make first contact. But when it comes to how I approach other worlds, other species than my own, I do that by the book. I do that according to the laws and rules by my world. I don’t switch loyalties …"

"I have not switched loyalties, for heaven’s sake, Kathryn!" Montgomery hissed, rubbing her forehead. "I have begun a new life and so has my crew. You don’t you get it, do you? We were practically dead. The Protectorate provided us with a second chance, an opportunity to make a life here, to do good things. Climb down from that ivory tower of yours and face the possibility that given the same circumstances you might have done the same thing."

"You presume too much. I don’t go running around changing the fates of worlds."

Janeway crossed her arms over her chest.
"Really? Then you’re naïve. The truth is that every world you encounter, every life you touch, you change it forever and it changes you. What’s happened to you Kathryn? What ever happened to that young ensign who was a born leader with a brilliant mind who could think outside of the box and see all the possibilities? When did you become so sceptical, so rigid and suspicious?"

"I have no idea who or what you are. Am I supposed to just blindly follow you lead and risk placing this ship and crew in danger?" Janeway began to pace. "Damn right I’m suspicious!"

Stopping in front of Montgomery she faced off with the woman.

"Let’s say for the sake of argument that you really are Eliana Montgomery. How do I know who or what you’ve become out here? You’re right. I don’t know anything about you or your crew or this … thing you call the Protectorate. But I will not go into a situation blindly. If that makes me sceptical, or rigid I don’t give a damn! I won’t apologise for who I am or what I believe."

The older woman threw her hands in the air, squinting at Janeway.

"You shouldn’t apologise, don’t you see? Don’t you understand that that is just what I …"

Eliana Montgomery broke off what ever she was trying to explain and became pale. She reached for the chair in front of her and tried to hold on to the backrest with one hand while fumbling for the chair behind her with the other.

"Captain?" Kathryn said, frowning and reaching out to her. "Are you all right?"

"Yes … yes … I just …"

The tall blonde began to tremble visibly and Janeway hastily put an arm around the older woman, carefully sitting her down in her chair.

Montgomery was now even paler and beads of sweat pearled on her forehead and upper lip. She began to slouch to her right and her eyelids fluttered close.

Janeway held the other captain upright by pressing the slender body against her own and then slapped her comm badge.

"Janeway to the Doctor. Two for emergency beam out to sick bay."

When the world turned into a blue shimmer, Janeway wasn’t even sure that Captain Montgomery was breathing.

*****

The Doctor hummed in a most annoying way while he scanned the unconscious woman on the bio bed, setting Janeway’s nerves on edge.

"Doctor, please," she muttered.
"Sorry, Captain, an old habit," Voyager’s chief medical officer apologised. "She’s breathing normally now and I think she will regain consciousness on her own shortly."

"What’s wrong with her? Why did she pass out?"

"Captain Montgomery is exhausted to start with. She is dehydrated and her low blood glucose levels indicate that she hasn’t eaten properly lately. There is also some abnormal readings concerning …"

"Captain!" Max Toriello exclaimed, entering sickbay together with Lt Bremer, Chakotay and Seven of Nine. Walking immediately to the bio bed he reached out and gently touched his captain’s shoulder. "How is she?" he asked the questioned the Doctor quietly.

Lt Bremer took position on the opposite side of the bio bed where Eliana Montgomery laid. After gazing down at her captain, she assumed a protective stance.

The doctor moved close to Max addressed him as he continued to monitor Montgomery’s bio signs.

"She’ll be fine once she wakes up and has something to eat and drink. She is on the brink of exhaustion."

"Thank you, Doctor…we’ll take her back to the Excellence," Max said and looked down at his captain before turning to Janeway, nailing her with his dark eyes. "May I have a word with you, Captain?" he asked looking far from jovial at this moment.

"What is it, Commander?"

"What the hell did you do to her?"

"I didn’t do a thing!"

"She was fine when I left."

"We had a somewhat heated discussion and all of sudden she went pale and collapsed. I had no idea …"

"Exactly," Toriello snapped, towering over Voyager’s captain. "You have no idea. You have no clue what we’ve been through the last couple of weeks let alone the past few years and the strain that she’s been under. Tell me, what gave you the right to put her through the ringer? That’s a hell of a chip you’ve got on your shoulder, Captain. I have no clue what your problem is and I have no idea why the Captain tolerated your behaviour as long as she did today but …"

"Commander Toriello," Janeway growled. "I had no intention to of cause your captain harm but you can’t expect me to take whatever she says for granted and without question …"

"I can and I do," the tall first officer said briskly. "I have served under Captain Montgomery for more than twenty years, back when you were merely an ensign, Janeway. I’m not impressed with the way you treat visiting officers on this ship and I sure am not impressed with you. You’re certainly not your father’s daughter. We’ll be leaving. We’ll all be leaving."
Tapping his comm badge he hailed his ship.

"Toriello to the Excellence. Three to beam over."

"I think she should remain lying down for a while yet," the Doctor objected tersely. "No need to cause her systems more stress by disturbing her."

"Belay that order, Max, I’m fine," a husky but insistent voice said.

Toriello turned and went straight to his Captain’s side. Helping her to sit up, he looked worriedly at her.

"How are you feeling?"

"Ridiculous. What happened?"

Janeway approached her.

"You fainted in the conference room," she said, still shaken and angry by the public scolding Max Toriello had just subjected her to. "Your loyal first officer just informed me in no uncertain terms that he holds me responsible. Apparently you have just gone through a particularly hard time and I …"

"Oh, don’t worry, Kathryn," Montgomery smirked, slowly easing off the bio bed. "It takes more than a heated philosophical discussion to knock me off my feet. This is merely a matter of skipping one to many meals and lack of sleep."

Janeway regarded her old mentor and role model with mixed feelings. She couldn’t help but admire the other woman’s tenacity and yet she was still in turmoil concerning their discussion as well as the way Toriello had nailed her.

She glanced over her shoulder, catching Seven’s eyes. The ex-Borg took a step closer.

"Captain, is it not prudent under these circumstances that Voyager assists in the rescue operations at hand?" Seven asked.

"It’s not that simple, Seven," Janeway said. "We don’t know what’s going on down on the planet."

"We’ll continue to assess the situation. There’s really no need for Voyager to delay its departure," Montgomery stated. She was still pale and had to steady herself against Toriello.

"Seven of Nine makes an excellent point," he said quietly. "If Voyager can delay its departure then what’s the harm? You should rest and at least consider all the options."

Montgomery looked past Max and locked eyes with Janeway.

"It’s your decision, Captain."

Janeway didn’t say a word.

"We should get back to the Excellence," Montgomery said and squared her shoulders. "We’ve got work to do."

"Captain, if I may?" the Doctor asked and stepped closer with a medical tricorder ready.
"You’re one persistent man," she muttered but let him scan her.

Janeway watched curiously as the EMH frowned at the readings.

"Captain," the Doctor began, regarding the tall woman in front of him seriously, "I recommend that you not only have something to eat and drink, but also that you get at least twelve hours of sleep. There is something pathological regarding some unusual …"

"Thank you, Doctor," Montgomery interrupted. "I promise to eat and rest. Got it." She turned to Max. "Let’s go. The away teams should have something concrete to report by now."

The Doctor rolled his eyes and stepped back.

"Excuse me, Captain Montgomery. We would appreciate it if you would allow us to at least observe your work," Chakotay said as the three officers from the Excellence gathered in the middle of sickbay.

"We’ll see," the other captain replied. "We don’t want to subject you to danger unnecessarily. Our missions tend to take a turn for the worst when you least expect it. We’ll be in touch. Montgomery to the Excellence; three to beam over."

The blue sparks appeared and transported the trio off Voyager.

Janeway looked at her crewmembers.

"Taking a turn for the worse, she said? What else is new in the Delta Quadrant?"

"Captain if I may…"

"What is it, Doctor?" Janeway snapped.

"I just wanted to inform you that the crew of the Excellence is who they appear to be."

"Meaning?"

"That the woman who just beamed back to her ship is truly Captain Eliana Montgomery."

*****

Eliana Montgomery leaned back and sipped her coffee. She was in her quarters with data PADDs scattered all around her containing reports from the away teams.

Lt Commander Darok and Ensign Graham were still working with the officials to round up the much-needed expertise. Montgomery was not pleased with the bureaucratic roadblocks that the civil authorities kept throwing up.

She put one of the PADDs down and sipped her coffee again.

Then there was Janeway. She reflected on her protégé. The younger woman had aged with grace but Montgomery found it hard to reconcile the young idealistic ensign she
had known so well and the woman she had had words with only a few hours earlier.

She wasn’t pleased with herself. She had allowed Janeway to get to her. Max was right. She had been pushing herself too hard lately. If she hadn’t been so exhausted, so on edge she would have realised sooner that there was something else going on with Janeway.

What had the younger woman accused her of doing? Let’s see. Quitting, disloyalty and what else? Montgomery shook her head. She knew Janeway possessed a unique knack for leadership, always had. It was probably the only reason Voyager had survived the Delta Quadrant. Then there was her crew.

Janeway’s first officer’s insignia showed that he held a provisional rank as commander. The Excellence’s captain was sure there were an interesting story behind that as well as the esoteric circumstances behind the fact that Voyager boasted a resident Borg.

She rose from the couch and walked over to the view port, as always drawing strength from the stars. No matter how long they travelled through space she never tired of this sight.

Many years had passed since she and the Excellence’s crew had sworn allegiance to the Protectorate. She had never regretted it. Being a Guardian had challenged and rewarded her in ways she never thought possible. Yes, there were times like these when the responsibilities were almost too much to bear but the feeling when everything fell into place, when every sacrifice, every painstaking measure was rewarded by the number of lives saved made it worth everything.

They had rescued space ships, entire species and ecology systems. They had prevented and ended wars, gone after perpetrators responsible for the most hideous of crimes and held them accountable. They had made a difference.

"Ramirez to Captain Montgomery."

Her chief engineer interrupted her thoughts and she tapped her comm badge.

"Montgomery here. Go ahead, Chief."

"We have a problem, Captain."

"That is not what I want to hear."

There was a sigh over the comm system.

"I know that, ma'am. The thing is that our main warp core is malfunctioning. It’s contaminated and all our attempts to purge the system have failed. With merely our two auxiliary warp cores we only have enough energy to power part of our systems."

This was not good. Their last assignment had depleted their resources and had seriously damaged the Excellence. The engineers and mechanics had worked hard to restore the main warp core to its usual flawless state. Obviously, things were not proceeding well.

With all the modification that they had made over the years, they were dependent on the warp core to power their most important systems, the weapon’s array, the external and internal sensors, long distance transporters and cloaking devices. The two auxiliary warp cores would allow the ship to function but only in a limited mode. They would lose their
ability to respond to the emergency planet side. Their mission and the safety of the planet were now seriously jeopardised.

"Damn," Montgomery exhaled. "Chief, have the engineering teams working in shifts until this is taken care of. I know everyone is tired but we're working against the clock. We need those systems up and running."

"Aye, Captain," Ramirez replied, sounding strained. "The order is already issued."

Montgomery wasn’t surprised. Her crew was well trained and worked together like well-oiled machinery. They anticipated many of her orders, which sometimes made her exasperated but she realised that this was due to their unusual long time of serving together in a command structure that had seen little change in the past twenty years.

"Good. Keep me informed, Chief. Get some rest and something to eat. Montgomery out."

She picked up the next PADD and tried to focus on Lt Commander Darok’s report from the Bunthoran minister’s office. The lieutenant had been able to round up some of the proper expertise but everything was taking far too long. The seismic readings from the northern hemisphere did show some good news; no new quakes had shaken the centre fault for the last twelve hours. Perhaps there was still time …

Her door chime rang.

"Enter."

Max Toriello walked in, frowning at the sight of the scattered PADDs.

"You call this resting?" he asked sternly.

"I can rest and read at the same time," Montgomery offered.

"I know you. You read and then your mind is at high warp sketching on alternative solutions and strategies. May I remind you that Voyager’s medical officer was damn close to finding out? Since I assume you don’t want to anyone to know, don’t you agree that it would be smart to forestall any more episodes?"

The captain sighed. He was right, of course.

She had been very disoriented. She recalled most of the argument between Janeway and herself. It was annoying that the fatigue and headache had left her so vulnerable and easily baited.

"I know, my friend," she allowed. "I'll just finish this one and then I promise to take a nap."

"Wrong."

Montgomery’s eyes narrowed.

"Excuse me?"

"You’ll let me read that while you get ready for bed. I’ll give you the short and sweet version and then tuck you in."
The tall blonde tried to look annoyed but failed at the sight of Max’ angelic smile. She felt a sheepish grin form on her lips.

"All right, all right, you bully," she huffed and got up, tossing him the PADD. "Go ahead. I should warn you; it’s Darok’s report. Though it may not be as longwinded as some of his past efforts he makes up for it by making it unreadable."

Max groaned out loud but bravely sat down on the couch and began to read.

"The things I do for you, Ellie," he muttered.

"I know, Max. I know. You’re all heart. I promise I won’t disclose the fact to anyone."

She walked into her bedroom and out of sight.

"You better not. I don’t want my reputation destroyed."

"What reputation?" Montgomery asked as she began to undress. "The only one I’ve heard regarding you is that the ensigns on deck nine call you ‘Mushy Max’."

"What?" Max barked from her living room.

"Or was that ‘Tender Toriello’?" she teased.

A stunned silence and then she heard a snort of laughter.

"Might have been ‘Clueless Commander’," she continued laughingly, feeling the stress decrease a little.

"You’re skating on thin ice, Captain," Max said grudgingly on the other side of the doorway.

Montgomery laughed and entered the bathroom.

Max always could make her laugh.

"You know, we’ve got trouble in engineering," she said as she stared at her reflection in the mirror.

"I know, Ellie. Ramirez is working on it. That’s actually why I came by."

Montgomery shrugged on her robe and walked back into the room.

"We’re going to need Voyager’s help."

"They’re not Guardians, Max. This is so far over their heads, they have no clue what the stakes are."

"Perhaps, but I remember a crew just like them a decade ago, don’t you?"

"Janeway has to volunteer her services Max. I won’t force her."

"I know Ellie. Just try to keep all options open. I know she angered you. Hell, she angered me too but if there’s anything, anyway we can persuade her and use Voyager to save these people …"
"Okay, Max, I’ll keep all the options open."

"Promise?"

"Don’t push your luck."

Max chuckled and motioned her to the couch. Laying down she finally closed her eyes while Max gave the abridged version of Darok’s report.

****

As the gamma shift kept Voyager operating and some of the beta shift worked longer hours than usual, crewmembers still occupied the corridors carrying out their assignments.

It was not an unusual sight to meet the ship’s captain on an evening stroll at this late hour but the young ensign who just turned a corner on her way to engineering was still mildly shocked when she bumped into the auburn haired woman, almost knocking her over.

"Captain," the young woman exhaled and steadied them both. "I’m sorry."

"That’s all right, Ensign, I wasn’t paying attention," Janeway said. "Carry on."

"Yes, Captain."

The ensign gratefully scurried along, leaving Janeway with her tumultuous thoughts.

She was still outraged over the entire incident with Montgomery and the other captain’s insolent first officer. She had a nagging feeling that there would be more humiliation and ethical discussions before this ordeal was over. Eliana Montgomery and Max Toriello were seasoned space travellers and both had put her in her place.

Janeway folded her arms across her chest and lowering her head she marched on with no particular goal in mind. She placed one foot in front of the other and kept walking the corridors, taking the turbo lifts until her steps had taken her to the doors of cargo bay two.

She halted and stared indecisively at the door.

"Computer, locate Seven of Nine."

"Seven of Nine is in cargo bay two."

"Is she regenerating?"

"Negative."

The captain hesitated for a moment and then raised her arm to push the door opener. Stopping before she reached the panel she reconsidered and tapped her comm badge.

"Janeway to Seven of Nine."
"Seven here. Go ahead, Captain."

"I’m just outside cargo bay two. May I enter?"

There was a moment’s silence and then the ex-Borg answered calmly.

"Proceed."

Janeway entered the cargo bay and spotted the tall blonde at her work console.

"Working overtime?" the captain asked casually, strolling up to the younger woman.

"In a manner of speaking," Seven allowed, continuing to punch in commands. "I have isolated the patterns Ensignment Kim detected showing the anomalies down on the northern hemisphere. I may be able to determine the cause within approximately two point three hours."

"Approximately?" Janeway smiled. "Thank you, Seven. The people on the planet will benefit from this, I’m sure. If there is anything that can be done to stop the threatening calamity down there …"

"I doubt it can be prevented, Captain. The readings show that this has been going on for an extended period of time and the way the faults have shifted during the last month indicates that it is not a matter of if but of when."

"You mean the people on the north hemisphere are doomed?" Janeway asked, feeling her heart sink.

"I did not say that. The risk of perishing is great along the coastline and along the major faults. The mountainous areas further inland should remain unaffected. Anyone living there should be safe."

"How much of the northern hemisphere is coastal plains?"

"Approximately fourth eight point six percent, Captain. However this will affect more than the coastal plains. There are a number of artificial barrier reefs along the coastline. Tuvok’s report indicates that the upper classes inhabit these reefs. Apparently it is considered a sign of success and wealth to reside there."

"What will happen to the reefs?"

"When the plates finally shift there will be a monumental tsunami no doubt capable of consuming anything in its path. That includes the reefs, the barrier islands, and the coastal plains."

Janeway rubbed her chin and leaned against the console.

"Seven, how many lives are we talking about?"

The blonde punched in a series of commands.

"There are approximately two point four billion inhabitants living within the hazard area."

"My God, Seven. How could you possibly move so many people in such a short time? What are Montgomery’s plans? How can she possibly hope to be able to do something
"And on such a large scale?"

"I do not know, Captain. Our scans of the Excellence suggests that it is a highly advanced vessel with impressive technology. However they are facing a great challenge as the latest sensor sweep showed that their main warp core is off line."

"What? When did this occur?"

"Sometime within the past four hours."

Janeway stopped to take in this news.

"I read Tuvok’s report regarding their specs. It’s interesting that the ship has three warp cores. The original Sabre class vessels had only one. Makes you wonder what elaborate systems they are powering with all that auxiliary power."

Seven regarded her curiously.

"You do not trust in these Guardians."

"Not by a long shot. The thought of a Starfleet captain changing loyalties and …"

"Captain, I disagree. I do not think that Captain Montgomery has altered loyalties. She has merely adapted. This crew found themselves in a situation that commanded a change of attitude, a brave decision to deal with the present and make the best of it."

Janeway flinched and regarded her astrometric’s officer. She wasn’t sure she liked what she was hearing.

"They take upon themselves to interfere and judge other races, other species," she stated.

"We do not know that for certain, Captain," Seven suggested. "Captain Montgomery operates under different laws now, protocols that are instigated by beings that have been living by them for millenniums."

"How do you know that? Oh, don’t tell me, the Borg have assimilated people from the Protectorate."

"No, they have not. We have however assimilated several species who have received help or were being hunted down by the Guardians and by doing so learned about this resourceful species."

Janeway flung her hands in the air and glared at the tall blonde.

"Why didn’t you tell me earlier? When Neelix suggested that Montgomery and her crew might be Guardians you didn’t open your mouth!"

"There was no need. I found it prudent to await confirmation before informing you."

"What kept you from doing it when we had confirmation?"

"You sent the staff and myself out of the conference room and then you beamed directly to sickbay. The discussion with Commander Toriello angered you. After Captain Montgomery and her crewed transported off Voyager you were even further agitated when the doctor confirmed that the Excellence’s crew were truly who they claimed to be."

"The crew?"

"The Excellence’s crew, Captain. They are in fact the Guardians."

"I thought you were not sure."

"I was. After we beamed the staff and myself back to Voyager, I questioned the crew of the Excellence as to their true identity. Captain Montgomery did not seem at all surprised when I told her what I had suspected. She confirmed that they were, in fact, the Guardians."

"Surely you have realized that the Guardians are not a new species."

"No, Tuvok. They are not. But their methods and protocols have evolved. They have adapted to the changing times."

"I think, Seven, that Captain Montgomery is the true traitor."

"I would not be so sure of that, Captain. She may have been manipulated."

"Manipulated?"

"I believe she was, Captain. Montgomery is not the first to change her loyalties."

"You mean you believe Montgomery is part of the Borg?"

"I believe she is a member of the Borg."

"And you believe that Montgomery has been assimilated?"

"I believe that she has."
be. You then ordered the commander and I to carry on our assignments and left rather abruptly."

The captain groaned inwardly, having to admit that the ex-Borg was correct. She really had not been very approachable after the scene in sickbay.

"You’re right, Seven. I’m sorry."

"No need to apologise, Captain. It is obvious that the Excellence’s senior officers regard you as a subordinate. I can understand how that must antagonise you."

Janeway’s head snapped up and she searched the blonde’s eyes for any underlying meaning.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"You stated that Captain Montgomery was your mentor when you were at the Academy and when you were a young officer. I can clearly see how you must have emulated her back then. You have many of the same mannerism. I find this very intriguing."

"And the rest? Go ahead Seven, there’s more. Say it."

Seven stood tall and looked her own mentor in the eyes.

"She has not been present in your life and watched you evolve into the formidable leader you have become. She still regards you as the young, inexperienced junior officer she knew even if she intellectually must realise that you are not."

Closing her eyes briefly, Janeway tried to remain calm.

"She does, doesn’t she?" the older woman allowed.

"So does Commander Toriello, otherwise he would not have reprimanded you in public and forgone the command structure."

Janeway felt the stress build up inside of her once again and began to pace back and forth in front of the work console. She had handled the entire situation poorly. What had got into her? Again the confrontations between her and the Excellence’s two senior officer played out in her mind. She cringed.

"This is a very complex situation, Seven," she managed, looking up and finding the tall blonde standing right before her. Surprised she stopped in her tracks.

To her amazement Seven reached out and held her gently by the shoulders.

"I realise that this is hard for you, Captain," she said, sounding unusually hesitant. "I want you to know that I am not only your crew member but also your friend. You will always have my loyalty. I want you to consider this when you regard Captain Montgomery’s situation. You can accuse me of doing the same. I was Borg and it took some time but then I swore a new allegiance … to you."

Janeway could only stare at the beautiful young woman in front of her.

"I … Seven … That was different."

"You are wrong, Captain. I changed my allegiance because my situation changed. I
could no longer go on as part of the Hive mind. I was alone, my immune system
rejected my implants and I was in dire need of assistance. You offered me an alternative.
I was reluctant, it was not easy to adapt but I did. I long thought it was not possible but
with your guidance and patience I also began a new life, much like Captain
Montgomery."

Janeway raised a hand and cupped Seven’s chin, unable to resist touching the serious
face. To her amazement Seven leaned into the touch, rubbing her velvety cheek into the
captain’s palm.

"You had no choice," Janeway whispered.

"There is always a choice, Captain," Seven said quietly. "In my case, the alternative
rapidly became … unacceptable."

"It did?" the older woman said, not sure how she could sound breathless so all of a
sudden.

"Yes. It did not take me long to understand that no matter how difficult it was adapting
to this new life - I could never leave you, Kathryn."

****

The mess hall was quiet, only two lieutenants from engineering huddled in a corner over
a midnight snack.

Neelix was cleaning up the cabinets. He knew it could have waited till the next day. He
was wound up and knew he wasn’t going to be able to sleep.

Briskly moving to scrub the counter the little Talaxian thought about the old stories, told
in revere or in fear, of the Guardians. They were figures of power and grace, all at the
same time.

The doors hissed open and Voyager’s first officer entered.

"Commander, what a surprise to see you here so late," Neelix said. "What can I get
you?"

"Herbal tea and some crackers, please, Neelix. I thought about replicating some in my
quarters but when I saw the lights were still on I felt like some company."

"That makes two of us, Commander," Neelix beamed.

He swiftly made two mugs of herbal tea and arranged some wheat crackers on a plate.
Carrying it over to a table by the view ports he sat down across from Chakotay.

"Thanks, Neelix," the tall man said. "Just what I need to wind down after a most
unusual day."

"I agree. It’s not every day you run into living legends."

Chakotay frowned.
"I guess that’s what they are," he mused. "I don’t know if we have anything equivalent in the Alpha Quadrant. From what I understood from your description, the Guardians’ reputation reaches over vast parts of this quadrant. If you heard about them all the way back where the Caretaker’s array was located …"

"Oh, these stories cover a much larger area than that, Commander," Neelix explained. "On Talax we heard the stories from all sorts of different traders and visitors. They would sometimes call them by other names but they were all synonyms for Guardians. You know, Protectors, Keepers and Custodians."

"When did you first hear about them?"

"Oh, already when I was a child. My father would tell the stories to us children, of how the Guardians would just appear out of nowhere, save the lives of people in need and then be on their way as swiftly as they came. Then there were the times when he would tell us stories about how they could relentlessly hunt down anyone who crossed them by causing harm to others. Those stories could make a young Talaxian boy almost scared of the dark, Commander."

"Sort of ‘if you’re not good, the Guardians will sort you out’?"

"Yes! My father was a kind man but he would sometimes use the stories about the Guardians as a mean of keeping us children in line."

Chakotay smiled.

"Did you hear more about them when you became a trader yourself?"

Neelix nodded.

"I most certainly did. When I visited other planets in the sector, I heard about how the Guardians had saved one particular planet that was under constant attack by a hostile species using a wormhole to enter and exit that part of space."

The first officer leaned on his elbows against the table, listening intently.

"Tell me how they did it," he queried.

"They met with that planet’s officials and happened to be present when the hostile aliens came through the wormhole and launched yet another attack on the planet. The Guardians quickly apprehended one of the vessels and questioned the crew. I don’t know the details but they let the crew go. They then waited by positioning their ship close to the wormhole and when they realised a new wave of attacks was about to begin, they collapsed the wormhole from their end."

Chakotay put his tea down, looking surprised.

"Just like that? They collapsed the wormhole without confirming who was using it?"

"As I said, Commander, the stories are old and they don’t go into detail. I don’t think the Guardians would have collapsed the wormhole unless they were certain. Perhaps they told the ship they caught red-handed that this would be the consequence if they didn’t stop their attacks?"

"That, or they made an example in no uncertain terms," Chakotay said seriously.
"I guess you can interpret the story that way too. Of all the stories I heard about them, both as a child and later during my travels, I never got the feeling that the Guardians were the ones to shoot first and ask later. They save people, Commander. They save whole worlds. No matter if the problem is of humanoid interest or ecological, they show up and do what they can to help. That’s what I’ve heard all my life. It’s funny that I’ve never heard any new stories while we’ve been travelling together. Perhaps there are not as many in this part of space."

"Perhaps there aren’t as many of them left," the first officer suggested.

Neelix gave that some thought.

"You could be right, Commander. Maybe that’s why Captain Montgomery and her crew aren’t getting any back up. We’re going to help them aren’t we?"

"That’s up to the captain to decide, Neelix," Chakotay said, sipping his tea.

"And she’s not pleased with this, I mean, about the Prime Directive and everything," Neelix said unhappily. "She doesn’t trust the Excellence’s crew. It’s because of that Ransom fellow isn’t it?"

Chakotay shook his head.

"I don’t know. However, I have faith that she will reach the right decision, Neelix. Don’t worry."

"Oh, I have every faith in Captain Janeway," Neelix stated, trying to perk himself up. "She will understand that these people are here to do good and she will offer Voyager’s help."

Chakotay didn’t look convinced but didn’t argue. Getting up from the chair he finished the last of his tea.

"Thanks Neelix, for the tea and for the information. I’m glad we got a chance to talk. I think I’ll be able to sleep now."

"I hope so, Commander. Something tells me the next couple of days will be eventful."

The first officer nodded.

"I think you’re absolutely right there."

When Chakotay had exited the mess hall, Neelix noticed that the two lieutenants also had left.

"Eventful," he muttered and cleared the table. "I think I just made the understatement of the year."
"Bridge to Janeway."

The auburn haired woman stirred on the couch in her living room. Fumbling on her chest she tapped her comm badge.

"Janeway here."

"Captain, the Excellence’s captain is requesting to speak with you."

Demanding more likely, Janeway thought.

"I’m on my way, Harry."

She staggered up from the couch, checking the time. Three thirty in the morning. Two hours of sleep with erratic dreams succeeding each other had made for inefficient rest. She made a quick detour for the bathroom, splashed water on her face, applied some lipstick and brushed her hair. Glancing in the mirror she rolled her eyes at the sight of her pale face and then left.

Walking onto the bridge she squared her shoulders and stood behind the ensign at the helm.

"Hail the Excellence," she ordered. "On screen."

The screen flickered and then showed Eliana Montgomery on the Excellence’s bridge.

"Sorry to disturb you in the middle of the night, Captain," the other captain said politely. "If there was any other way to do this, I would. This is not the way we normally operate."

"What’s going on?" Janeway asked, noticing the strictly professional stance Montgomery was taking.

"My first officer woke me up an hour ago with disturbing news. There are new developments on the planet. Normally we would handle the situation independently but our technology is failing and we’re running out of time."

"If there is anything we can do to help the inhabitants of the planet, we’re willing to try but I require all the facts. I’m not going to allow Voyager or its crew to walk into any situation blindly."

Montgomery set her jaw but nodded.

"Fair enough. We will share whatever is within our power to share. Some things are beyond our control, you understand. You have your Prime Directive, it shouldn’t be hard for you to understand that we operate under similar rules as well, even more rigid than yours in some cases."

Janeway was surprised but didn’t let on how much this information sparked her. She nodded to Harry Kim who had taken over his usual posting at the ops station.

"All senior officers to the bridge," she ordered then turning to the view screen again. "What’s going on down there?" she continued, walking to her chair and sitting down.

"The pressure along the major fault line has increase considerably. There are no new
quakes but our readings show that it won’t be long now. One of our problems is that our long distance sensors are down, we’re relying on the reading our sensors down on the planet are receiving."

Voyager’s captain leaned over the work console between the command chairs.

"My astrometric’s officer has worked half the night to interpret some of the anomalies in the readings," she informed Montgomery while pulling up the results. "Apparently there are something strange about them that she’s trying to interpret."

"I am not trying," Seven’s cool voice objected behind Janeway, making the older woman jump, having not heard the doors of the turbo lift. "I have concluded my findings in this report," the ex-Borg stated and handed the captain a data PADD.

Aware that Eliana Montgomery was watching, Janeway skimmed through the information on the PADD, the frown appearing on her brow deepening as she read. When she was done, she glanced up at Seven.

"You’re certain?" she asked quietly.

"Yes, Captain. I finished my calculations one point five minutes ago and was about to hail you about my findings when you summoned all to the bridge. The findings are conclusive. We must act now together with the Guardians or it will be too late."

Janeway knew that Seven had a point but her own trepidation regarding Montgomery and her crew, not to mention the Protectorate to whom these people had sworn allegiance, made it hard to get the words out.

She stood again, only nodding in passing to Chakotay, B’Elanna Torres and Tom Paris who arrived to the bridge together.

"Captain Montgomery," Janeway said politely, "you’re hunch was correct. Something is going on. Seven of Nine just brought me information that puts this entire thing in a whole new light. We need to meet to discuss how we best can assist these people. I’ll be willing to hand over any information Voyager has obtained since we came into orbit but I expect the same from you."

"I’m on my way," Montgomery said, not responding to the conditions stated by Janeway. "You’ll have to beam us over, Captain. We’re having significant problems with our warp core at the moment and it is affecting all of our systems.

Janeway made a sweeping motion with her arm.

"You and your crew are welcome. Let us know when you’re ready to transport."

"Thank you. We’ll hail you. Montgomery out."

Janeway turned to Chakotay who was standing behind her.

"I guess you realise that Seven’s found new disturbing facts regarding the planet?" she asked.

"I gathered that much."

"We’re going to meet with Montgomery and her people and see what we can do to
"Aye, Captain. Does this mean you and Montgomery have buried the hatchet?"

A sizzling glare made Voyager’s first officer take a step back.

"Have all updates on my desk within ten minutes, Commander, and inform me when the Excellence’s crew are aboard Voyager. I’ll be in my ready room."

Seven sank down on a chair next to Tuvok in the makeshift conference room set up in the mess hall. Janeway was at the head of the table and Montgomery was sitting to her right. The Excellence’s captain had brought her senior staff and Seven curiously regarded the ones she had not met before.

Lt Ramirez was an elegant man with a standoffish attitude. He seemed to regard the world along his long, thin nose and it was hard to imagine him getting his well-manicured hands dirty in the engine room. She could detect signs of fatigue in his face and realised that he must have been working around the clock to repair their malfunctioning warp core.

A woman with fiery red hair sat next to Ramirez. Her name was Lt Annette D’Antoine and she was the senior ops officer. She had sparkling pale blue eyes and freckles all over her triangular face. Her demeanour was as outgoing and vibrant as Ramirez’ was aloof.

B’Elanna Torres entered the mess hall and sat down next to Seven.

"Which ones is the engineer?" she whispered in the blonde’s ear.

"The man sitting across from you, lieutenant."

B’Elanna eyed the dark haired man.

"He looks kind of posh," she remarked.

"I am sure Lt Ramirez would appreciate the observation."

The Klingon hybrid rolled her eyes.

Seven directed her attention towards the last of the Guardians. Jon Takagi was the Excellence’s chief medical officer. He was a diminutive man with a firm gaze that she discovered, was examining her closely.

"You have cybernetic implants," he observed politely.

"That is correct, Doctor Takagi," she agreed.

"You were Borg?"

"Yes. She was," B’Elanna emphasised. "She is with us now."
A bit thrown by the engineer’s obvious standpoint, Seven looked at the other woman.

"I think that our guest only made an observation," she said calmly.

"I didn’t mean to offend anyone," Takagi offered.

"I was not," Seven assured him.

"Hm," B’Elanna mumbled, seemingly not entirely convinced.

"I think we’re all here," Janeway then said, standing up for a moment. "I want to welcome the senior staff from the Excellence and I hope we can work out a solution that will benefit all. Seven, I want you to begin the briefing with what you have found."

The blonde rose from her chair and walked over to the computer Harry had set up at the far end of the table. Punching in commands she let the computer display the latest seismic readings.

"This shows the movements along the centre fault. As you can see the pattern indicates regularity. The quakes take place at predictable intervals."

"What?" B’Elanna exclaimed. "That’s impossible. A natural occurrence is not that predictable."

"You are correct. That is the nature of … nature. It is unpredictable. There can be signs, there can also be predictions of probability but nothing mathematically exact like in this case."

"Are you saying that you can estimate when the next quake is going to happen?" Max Toriello asked. "We need to double-check these figures, Captain," he continued, turning to Montgomery.

"You are welcome to examine any of these findings," Seven offered calmly. "I would however suggest that you do it quickly since we have approximately eleven hours and fifty-four minutes before the centre fault shifts again."

Silence met her calm statement. Seven wondered for a moment if she had presented her findings in a rude or inappropriate way. A quick glance over to Janeway reassured her that this was not the case.

"You’re saying that it could be all over for the poor souls down there within less than twelve hours?" Annette D’Antoine asked seriously.

"Yes, Lieutenant."

"If this activity is not due to a natural occurrence, then what’s causing it?" Chakotay asked.

Harry Kim cleared his throat.

"I may be able to shed some light on that. When I heard about Seven’s theory, I began to run some more scans, directing our external scanners below the planet’s surface. It seems that there has been a redirection of the subsoil water for decades. The increase in the underground water flow has hollowed the crust from beneath the earth. This explained the weakening of the crust but not the regular pattern or the predictability of"
"the quakes."

"So how do you explain it then?" Toriello asked.

"I don’t know why, I have no clue regarding the planet’s politics or economical system, but someone has been re-routing subsoil water through a vast system of pipes, pumps and tunnels."

The silence around the table was ear deafening. Seven watched Montgomery communicate with Toriello in a non-verbal fashion.

"This is not as crazy as it seems," Lt Bremer suddenly interposed. "Lt Commander Darok’s report describes the southern hemisphere as fifty percent desert and wasteland. Something tells me that if we check their geological history five or ten decades back, we will find that the percentage were much higher then."

Tuvok nodded.

"Logic dictates that they would be the only ones benefiting from large amounts of fresh water."

"Let’s not jump to conclusions here," Janeway cautioned. "There can be off world interest in that water."

"This part of space has very few space faring cultures," Montgomery explained. "I agree with both our tactical officers. The water is still on that planet. If someone had moved such large quantities of water by ships it would have reached our intelligence."

Janeway clenched her jaws but nodded.

"Could you trace the pipes leading the water away?" Chakotay asked Harry.

"No, not all the way. They descend pretty deep."

"What did your crew find out during their away missions?" Seven asked Montgomery who raised her eyebrows at the direct question.

"There is not one structure that will survive a massive quake along the fault. The architects gave us little reason to believe that any of the infrastructures would remain intact."

"Then it would be prudent to act quickly now that we have a probable timetable of when it will occur?" Seven asked, clasping her hands behind her back.

"Knowing why, when and how is important but I’m afraid that this is one of those occasions when it may not be enough," Montgomery said and got up from her chair. Turning to Janeway she smiled tiredly. "We will do our best to convince the government to begin to evacuate their people at once but the bureaucracy will slow us down every step of the way. I’m sure your scans told you what shape my ship is in. We have no way of making repairs in time."

Janeway rose from her chair as well.

"Captain," she began, her voice firm and commanding, "I don’t think you should give up hope so quickly. Your ship is in bad shape but you have something you didn’t have
twelve hours ago. You have the critical information you need, you have the means to plan a course of action and you have twice as many hands to help make repairs and implement your plan."

Montgomery nailed the smaller woman with her piercing green eyes.

"I can’t let you aboard the Excellence and give you access to any of the Protectorate technology."

Janeway shook her head, putting her hands on her hips.

"It’s not the alien technology that is failing, is it?" she replied, sounding irritated. "It’s your main warp core. That is still Federation technology from what our scans are telling us. If we get your warp core up and running your other systems should go online, correct?"

There was a brief silence when Montgomery didn’t speak. It seemed that everyone in the room were bracing themselves.

Then a faint smile graced Montgomery’s lips.

"I’ll be damned, Kathryn," she said, shaking her head. "I’ll be damned."

Continued in The Guardians - part 3
The impressive spaceship traveled at high warp through a sparsely populated part of space, its circular shape arching above the powerful nacelles that propelled it forward within the warp field.

A tall, blonde woman stood behind the dark haired helmsman, gazing at the large view screen on the far wall.

"How much longer before we’re within range?" she asked quietly.

"Two hours and fifteen minutes, Captain," a woman answered from the tactical station behind the command chairs. "Our orders are clear."

"I’m aware of our orders, Lt Bremer," the captain replied. "Remain on course. I’ll be in my ready room. Lieutenant, you have the bridge."

She turned and headed towards the door. Entering the calmness of her ready room she walked over to the large view ports behind her desk. Warp speed reduced the stars in the distance to silvery lines.

"Lt Ramirez to Captain Montgomery."

She tapped her comm badge.

"Montgomery here. Go ahead, Lieutenant."

"I’ve completed the diagnostics of the main warp core and also have the preliminary results on the renovation to our back up systems. We can maintain the present speed for another two hours but it’s going to take a bit of ingenuity," her Chief Engineer said.

"And you’re just the man for the job," Montgomery stated firmly.

"Yes, ma’am," he replied.

She could picture the sparsely built man with jet-black hair standing in the middle of engineering, looking immaculately elegant even after having been on duty for more than thirty-six hours, as had the rest of the crew including herself.

She was tired but knew that within two hours they would be at their destination and that their chosen calling would demand all of their attention again.

Sometimes these assignments pushed her far beyond what she thought was possible to endure. Still, despite the hardships, she had never known anything as fulfilling.

"So work your magic, Lieutenant. We’ve got a job to do and you know how I hate being late for an appointment with destiny," she smirked.

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Continued in part 1
The meeting was over.

Montgomery had been adamant in her orders that Voyager’s crew not be allowed anywhere near Protectorate’s technology. She had paced back and forth in the mess hall until Max had risen from his chair and stopped her by simply smiling his crooked smile and stepping in her way.

Janeway had watched the older captain clench her teeth and again witnessed the wordless communication between Montgomery and her next in command. The Excellence’s captain had then relented, shrugged and sat down without comments.

Both ship’s crews now had several tasks to attend to immediately.

B’Elanna Torres, Seven and Harry Kim had transported over to the Excellence together with three teams of engineers and mechanics from Voyager. Their job was to repair the other ship’s main warp core.

An away team from the Excellence was already working with Bunthoran authorities reviewing and modifying their evacuation plans for the cities along the coast but the authorities were still in denial and little progress had been made.

Tuvok, Lt Bremer and Chakotay were accompanying Commander Toriello to meet the Bunthoran authorities. They needed answers quickly regarding the latest findings that Seven had uncovered.

Twelve hours was a very short span of time.

*****

Chakotay regarded his reflection in the mirror.

He was standing in Commander Toriello’s quarters together with Tuvok, dressed in a Guardian uniform; it’s fabric almost like leather only smoother and lighter. The tall golden collar framed and sheltered his neck, it seemed to be made of a fabric spun of metallic fibres. The same material formed a gold braid down his right sleeve.

The doctor had already altered their appearances cosmetically. They now boasted the same appearance as the planet’s inhabitants.

“Will the Bunthoran think we’re one of you?” he asked Max Toriello who stood just behind him.

“Yes. They don’t tend to question the presence of a Guardian, Chakotay. They hold the Protectorate in great respect, as you’ll find out. They think they, as well as the Guardians, are indigenous to their planet.”

“How did the Protectorate manage that?”
“Let’s just say they tend to have a long term vision of things. They’ve been a part of this world and its history since its formation.”

Chakotay regarded Toriello solemnly trying to absorb what the man was telling him.

“The Protectorate has hidden their true nature from these people for millions of years?”

“To sum it up in one word … yes.”

“Doesn’t your coming and goings tip them off?”

Toriello smiled.

“We’ll beam down to the Protectorate Embassy. It’s well shielded and quite secure. After that we will use the local means of transportation. Your identities have already been constructed so to speak and have been entered into their databases.”

“How are we expected to learn all that we need to know to maintain our cover?”

Toriello laughed.

“We have a little device and I promise it’s harmless. You’ll get an overview of things that you’ll need to be familiar with before we even set foot on the planet’s surface. May I?” Toriello asked as he produced a small round metallic piece of technology and approached Tuvok.

Tuvok nodded and Toriello proceeded to attach the device to Tuvok’s temple.

“Quite ingenious,” the Vulcan responded as the history of the planet played out before him in his mind.

“Think of it as an immersion course of sorts.”

Toriello then attached the same device to Chakotay.

Voyager’s first officer turned around.

“This is amazing. Will we retain the knowledge?”

“Oh, yes, it’s quite effective. Now is there anything else we need to address before we go?”

Both Chakotay and Tuvok indicated that they were ready to continue.

“Okay then, let’s get out of here,” Toriello said as he led the way out of his room down the Excellence’s corridor. “I’m glad Janeway offered Voyager as a recourse. Since our transporters are down due to the warp core malfunction it would have been difficult to go on.

“Our transporters can’t take us to the planet directly,” Chakotay cautioned the other first officer. “We have to go in the Delta Flyer and take it into high orbit well out of range of the planet’s radar system.”

“Yes, we are aware of Voyager’s limitations. That’s why I asked Lt Bremer to bring along one of our small cloaking devices. In the event that the planet’s systems do pick up anything, the device will mask the shuttle as a piece of space debris.”
“How does it accomplish that, Commander?” Tuvok asked.

“How does it accomplish that, Commander?” Tuvok asked. “Please, call me Max. It’s another piece of borrowed technology from the Protectorate so forgive me if I don’t go into any great details about it. Trust me, it’s not intrusive to your systems and you are free to scan it for yourself.”

“How does it accomplish that, Commander?” Tuvok asked. “Please, call me Max. It’s another piece of borrowed technology from the Protectorate so forgive me if I don’t go into any great details about it. Trust me, it’s not intrusive to your systems and you are free to scan it for yourself.”

“You’ll forgive us for not taking everything you say at face value. We will be scanning it.”

Max laughed.

“You’ll forgive us for not taking everything you say at face value. We will be scanning it.”

“How does it accomplish that, Commander?” Tuvok asked. “Please, call me Max. It’s another piece of borrowed technology from the Protectorate so forgive me if I don’t go into any great details about it. Trust me, it’s not intrusive to your systems and you are free to scan it for yourself.”

“I’m in a forgiving mood. Feel free.”

The three officers continued down the corridor to the Excellence’s transporter room where Lt Bremer joined them. The silent tactical officer nodded briefly towards the officers from Voyager and greeted her commanding officer with a correct ‘sir’ and proceeded to give her report.

“I’ve notified the Embassy that we’re beaming down and I’ve also communicated with Lt Commander Darok and Ensign Graham. They are awaiting our arrival.”

Chakotay looked at the younger woman and then corrected himself. She was his own age, at least, he estimated. She looked around thirty years old but since the Excellence had been in the Delta Quadrant for fifteen years, she had to be a bit over forty. This would explain her quiet confidence. The youthful woman moved with a lethal flexibility that he easily could imagine turning into action.

Voyager’s first officer tapped his comm badge.

“Chakotay to Voyager. Four to beam over to the shuttle bay.”

“Aye, sir.”

They shimmered into existence next to the Delta Flyer where Tom Paris was just about to enter the sleek space shuttle.

“What a beauty!” Toriello remarked and regarded the specially built vessel.

Tom Paris smiled and patted the closest bulkhead.

“Yes, we’re proud of her,” he grinned.

“Tom and Harry built the Delta Flyer together with Seven of Nine and B’Elanna,” Chakotay explained as they all entered the ship.

The door closed and they took their seats. Chakotay granted permission to install the cloaking device after a quick scan. As soon as Lt Bremer had completed the task Tom Paris brought the warp core online. He requested permission from the bridge to take the Flyer out and the shuttle doors opened.

They circled the moon and approached the planet from the dark side. Placing the Flyer in a high orbit, undetectable by the planet’s radar system, Tom nodded over his shoulder.

“Guess this is your stop, folks,” he smiled.
“No unnecessary communication, Tom,” Chakotay warned the pilot. “Only if there is an emergency.”

“Got it,” the younger man said. “I must say you and Tuvok look spiffy in those uniforms, Chakotay.”

Chakotay smirked at the incorrigible pilot.

“Set the co-ordinates for the Protectorate’s Embassy and beam us down, Tom.”

“Aye, sir!” Tom grinned.

The four officers dematerialised. The last thing they heard was Paris’ ‘good luck’.

*****

Captain Montgomery rubbed her forehead, looking pale.

“Kathryn,” she said quietly. “I owe you one.”

The two women were sitting on Janeway’s couch in her ready room after finishing their meeting in the mess hall.

“You don’t owe me anything, Captain,” Janeway answered, sipping her coffee. “I just want you to understand that I and my crew will be watching everything you do. If we see anything, anything at all, that we perceive as misconduct we will withdraw our assistance at once.”

“I think you have made that point perfectly clear. I still don’t understand why you feel the need to make the same point over and over again. Tell me, what happened to you, Kathryn? What changed you?” Montgomery asked after studying the younger woman’s face. “Oh, I know you’ve matured from the young cadet I once knew but when did you become so … suspicious, so cynical? What happened to make you doubt the goodness in others?”

“What makes you think anything happened?”

“As a captain I can appreciate your concerns about the safety and well being of your crew. I can understand how you would want to be cautious and assess the situation before making a commitment or taking action.”

“And you have a problem with that?”

“Not at all. In fact I find it commendable. But there is something else at work here. Where does all this pent up anger come from? Are you always this way or do I simply bring out the worse in you?”

Janeway’s face hardened.

“I think you’re over stating the situation. It’s not personal.

“Really? I find it very personal.”
Janeway placed her coffee cup on the table and began to rise.

“You’ll have to excuse me. I have things to do on the bridge.”

“You know, Kathryn, I have thought many things about you in the past but I have never thought of you as a coward.”

Janeway inhaled sharply.

“How dare you? How dare you call me a coward? You have no idea what I’ve been through. None. I have never given up. I have never turned my back on the Federation. I have never lost my soul.”

“Is that what’s this is all about? Is that what you think I’ve done?”

“You and Ransom, you’re all alike. You ... ”

“Who the hell is Ransom??” Montgomery interrupted, sounding both irritated and confused.

“Another Federation captain who compromised himself here in the Delta Quadrant!”

“And how did he do that? His actions must have been tremendously despicable since it has eaten you up inside. What was his crime, Kathryn? In what way did he or his ship not live up to your standards?”

The auburn haired woman turned on Montgomery, her face red with anger and her eyes burning with unshed tears.

“He murdered a species.”

“What?” Montgomery asked in horrid amazement.

“He and his crew participated in the nasty business of murdering innocent aliens and using their dead corpses as fuel in a little experiment they cooked up to get home quicker,” she said, her eyes tearing.

As she continued to speak in harsh tones, Janeway began to pace, unable to look Montgomery in the eyes.

“They were in the same situation as you were when the Protectorate found you; running on impulse, starving and beaten. Half of the crew was dead, lost in one of their first battles in this Quadrant.”

Montgomery flinched but remained silent.

“They lied to us,” Janeway continued, her voice deepening with emotion. “They used the good faith we bestowed upon them just because they were our kind. They endangered this ship and its crew and by doing so ...”

Tears began to pour from Janeway’s eyes as she gazed down at her clenched fists.

“Yes?” Montgomery said gently.

Janeway inhaled audibly, bracing herself for what she considered to be the ugly truth.
“I was so damned angry,” she confessed. “When we found out their secret, Ransom escaped and took Seven of Nine and our Doctor with him. I lost it. I went after him with everything this battered ship had and by doing so, I endangered the crew just as much as he had, maybe more.”

“What happened then?” Montgomery asked quietly.

“He manipulated our Emergency Medical Hologram, removed his ethical subroutines and had him perform experiments on Seven’s cortical implant in order to find out the encryption codes she had used to lock down his warp core.”

“Did he succeed?”

“No. She never gave in. She was willing to die to keep us safe.”

“She’s quite heroic, this Seven of Nine of your.”

“Yes. Yes, she is.”

“How did you save her?”

“We caught two of Ransom’s men and I … I threatened to turn one of them over to the aliens that he had been destroying, knowing that it meant certain death, unless he gave me the Equinox’ position. Of course he didn’t.”

“Did you turn the man over?”

“I wanted to. I would have but Chakotay intervened. He saved him and perhaps me … from myself. Eventually we were able to pick up their trail and beam our people to safety. Ransom forced my hand. No, that’s not true. I let him force my hand.”

Janeway became silent, withdrawing into herself.

“Kathryn, how long ago did this happen? How long have you been letting this thing eat inside of you?”

“Several months.”

“Look at me,” commanded Montgomery in a gentle but strong manner.

“I am not Ransom and neither are you.”

At that moment Janeway broke down completely and a flood of emotions that she had suppressed for months was set free.

Montgomery reached out and pulled the younger woman into her arms to comfort her.

“How do you know?”

“I just do. You’re stronger than that. You’re one of the strongest people I have ever known, even as a young know-it-all cadet.”

“I’m so afraid of …”

“What? Failing? Don’t you think we all are? Listen to me, Kathryn. We’re all afraid, every last one of us at one point or another.”
“Even the indestructible Captain Montgomery?” Janeway managed to smirk.

“Even me,” the blonde said as she led Janeway back to the couch to sit.

“The secret is in how we handle those fears, how we control them and not allow them control us. You know, ‘be brave, be ...’”

“... ‘bold’,” both of the women said in unison. Janeway smiled through her tears.

“Why haven’t you talked to anyone about this before?” Montgomery asked. “You could have approached Chakotay or perhaps one of the others?”

“Chakotay is a very good friend,” Janeway allowed.

“Yes, he reminds me of Max.”

“I couldn’t. I was too ashamed.”

“And the others?”

“It’s complicate. I’m the captain.”

“Really? I hadn’t noticed.” Montgomery replied with sardonic grin. “Well, here’s some earthshaking news for you, Captain. You’re human. Now, where do you hide the Kleenex or do I have to replicate some for you?”

Janeway made a face and stood up.

“I’ll be right back.”

She went into the bathroom, washed her face, and returned. Meanwhile Montgomery had helped herself to another cup of coffee.

Janeway regarded the other captain solemnly.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Do you understand my trepidation, Eliana?” she asked.

“I do. All I can do is try and reassure you that you will not regret assisting us. There is so much that I can’t tell you, Kathryn. We’re not trying to cover anything up or hide some sort of misdeed. It has to do with our oath to the Protectorate.”

“Maybe if you could explain it to me more I might not be so ... what did you call me? Cynical?”

“Fair enough. I’ll tell you as much as I can.”

Eliana Montgomery leaned back against the couch and sipped her coffee as Janeway joined her.

“It’s hard to know where to begin. Since the Prime Directive is your concern let’s start with that.”
“That works for me,” answered Janeway

Montgomery nodded, inhaled deeply and began. “If you think the Prime Directive is hard to live by, then the rules of the Protectorate are even harder. We can’t share any technology with anyone who is not at the same technological levels as we are and that includes those we’re supposed to assist. We are supposed to use whatever technology is indigenous to the population we serve.

“But you …”

“Oh, we can monitor and use all of the equipment and knowledge we have on board to assess the situation. We can even deploy technology in a covert fashion but we cannot do so openly with the indigenous populations knowledge. We have to minimise our impact on them, much like the Prime Directive.”

“Then how are you able to function with these people?”

“It’s complicated. The Guardians, as well as the Protectorate, have cover stories that hide our true identities. As far as the population is concerned we are from their own world.”

“How is that possible?”

“There are ways, many of them cosmetic. The more advanced a civilisation is the harder it becomes to hide our identities. There comes a time when there is what is known as an ‘Awakening’ occurs. This is when a world or civilisation comes to know the true nature of the Protectorate.”

“Is this about to take place here?”

“No. The Bunthoran people are nowhere near that level of enlightenment or technological advancement. Hell, I would guess they are about where earth was in the late twenty-first century.”

Janeway froze.

“They didn’t have transporters or anything back then!” she exclaimed. “How are we going to …”

“There will be other ways,” Montgomery stated.

Janeway wasn’t sure whom she was trying to convince.

“I didn’t understand your restrictions.”

“They apply to you and your crew as well, Kathryn.”

“I came to that conclusion on my own just now.”

“Very astute of you, my dear.”

“How will you handle the problems on the planet within the limitations you have?”

Montgomery sipped her coffee and pondered the question for a moment before answering.
“That’s what we’re trying to work out now. The problem is we still don’t know what exactly is going on. Yes, it is true that the subterranean water is being diverted but how, why and by whom?”

“There are so many lives at stake. I find it hard to imagine that someone would be so stupid or so greedy that they would place millions of innocent people at risk.”

“My gut response is that the individuals behind it are out for profit or some kind of gain.”

“What if the individuals involved risk annihilation without the water?” Janeway asked.

“You mean the folks from the southern hemisphere? The away team is mapping the political climate between the two nations. If there’s any antagonism between them, they’ll figure it out. They’re also looking for any involvement by the resident criminal elements. The fact that none of us can pin point the type of technology they are using really bothers us. These people do not have the knowledge or resources necessary to pull this off, or so we thought. If we could figure out what is doing this we could come up with something to counter it.”

“What about off world interference?”

Montgomery’s face hardened.

“It’s a possibility that can’t be ignored but it is something that the Protectorate will not tolerate.”

Janeway felt a chill as she regarded her colleague. She wasn’t worried about someone crossing the Protectorate. She was more concerned about someone crossing Eliana Montgomery.

Montgomery returned the gaze for a couple of seconds and then spoke again.

“You never finished your story you know. You never told me what happened to Captain Ransom or his ship.”

Janeway looked down at her hands again. She couldn’t bring herself to look into Montgomery’s eyes.

“I allowed the ship to be destroyed with him onboard.”

“Did you fire upon it?”

“No, I let the aliens destroy it.”

“And what was Ransom doing at the time?”

“He allowed it to happen. He welcomed it in the end.”

“What about his crew?”

“He sent most of the crew to this ship. We have several members on board.”

“Look at me Kathryn,” Montgomery urged her again. “He chose his fate; to die. Not you. You are responsible for your own actions in this matter. Not his. You have got to take the time to deal with that. Do you understand?”
“I don’t necessarily agree with you.”

“So what else is new?”

“I … this is hard.”

“Just take some time to deal with it. You can talk to me, or Max or … how about that ex-Borg of yours?”

Janeway’s head snapped up and she locked eyes with Montgomery.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she asked defensively.

“You’re fond of this Seven of Nine person, aren’t you?” Montgomery asked casually.

Janeway clenched her fingers around the fabric of the couch.

“Why do you ask?” she wondered, trying to sound calm.

“The way you look at her. The way she adores you.”

Stunned beyond belief, Janeway shook her head.

“Seven’s is not into adoring anyone. She’s very matter of fact and even though I think of her as my protégé, and I am indeed very fond of her, she certainly doesn’t adore me.”

Montgomery laughed.

“She most certainly does! She looks at you like she would die for you, Kathryn. The look on your face when you described how this Ransom fellow had taken her from you … you don’t fool an old fox like me, Captain.”

“I would never pretend to. I admit that Seven and I share a special bond since I was the one responsible for severing her from the Hive mind. I vowed to help her regain her humanity and she has made remarkable progress. She has a way of approaching me that is completely free from ulterior motives. She is painfully honest sometimes but also without deceit.”

“You must realise how you sound when you talk about her?” Montgomery smiled gleefully. “I don’t think you are without ulterior motives when it comes to that impressive young woman, Kathryn, even if you haven’t acknowledged it yet. Denial must be a wonderful thing. You seem to cling to it so,” the older woman ribbed.

Janeway did something she hadn’t done in years; she turned bright red. Yes, it was true, she cared about Seven but that was all. Eliana Montgomery was getting far too personal, she thought uncomfortably.

“Seven is my crew member, my responsibility,” the younger captain insisted.

Montgomery was about to reply when the Excellence’s chief of engineering hailed them over the comm system.

“Lt Ramirez to Captain Montgomery. We have an emergency in engineering.”

The Excellence’s captain slapped her comm badge.
“What’s the problem, Lieutenant?”

“The warp core was even more damaged than our scan indicated, ma’am. A core breech was imminent after several plasma explosions. Seven of Nine managed to get the safety devices up by using Borg technology.”

Janeway got up from the couch, an uneasy feeling stirring in the pit of her stomach.

“What did she do, Lieutenant?” she asked.

“She linked herself to the computer using her Borg tubules. I had to evacuate engineering in case we would need to eject the warp core. The doors are secure and the automatic force field is up according to protocol. Although Seven of Nine says she’s working on the problem, she’s in there alone. My concerns are that she might be injured and that she is unsupervised around Protectorate technology.”

“I don’t give a damn about your technology,” Janeway hissed. She moved quickly across the ready room with Montgomery hot on her heels. “There’s an urgent problem on the Excellence, Lieutenant,” she addressed the beta shift lieutenant who rose from the command chair as she strode onto the bridge. “Captain Montgomery and I will beam over.”

“Aye, Captain,” he replied smartly.

The two captains got into the turbo lift. Janeway pressed her lips together and tapped her comm badge. She hailed the Doctor, informed him that Seven might be injured and ordering him to beam over to the Excellence as well.

While they rode the turbo lift Montgomery regarded Janeway seriously.

“I hope she’s is all right and I hope to God she hasn’t compromised any of our systems by her unauthorised actions.”

Janeway’s head snapped up.

“You heard your engineer. They were facing a threatening core breech. She probably saved your ship.”

“She entered systems she knows nothing about. She may have irreparably damaged herself.” Montgomery said harshly.

Janeway braced herself, realising that Montgomery had no way of knowing how Seven had saved Voyager so many times by thinking on her feet and acting accordingly.

“If Seven acted quickly, it’s because her brilliant mind as well as her Borg enhanced perceptions has given her reason to do so.”

“Let’s hope her quickness didn’t cost her her life Kathryn.”

******

The two captains materialised outside the Excellence’s engineering only seconds before
the Doctor.

“Report,” Montgomery barked and her chief engineer walked over to them.

“There is no change, Captain,” he stated. “Seven of Nine is still in there alone. The system is stable and there is no immediate need to eject the core. I have accessed the computer from the corridor console and she is still linked to it.”

Montgomery sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. The headache was reasserting itself and she found it increasingly difficult to concentrate.

“Is she responding to hails?” she asked.

“Only briefly. She seems to be struggling quite hard to keep the system in check, ma’am.”

Janeway tapped her comm badge.

“Janeway to Seven of Nine. What’s going on?”

There was a silence and then a slightly breathless voice replied.

“Seven here. I am linked to the computer and trying to …” Another silence passed and then she continued. “I am … trying to stabilise the system, Captain. There was no other way …”

“Are you injured?” Voyager’s captain asked. “Lt Ramirez said there were plasma explosions.”

“I am functioning within acceptable … “

The comm link was broken.

“We have to get in there,” Janeway said.

“Agreed,” Montgomery replied. She punched in a code on the panel next to the door. “Let’s hope this beats those Borg-encrypted little tricks of hers. Computer, override door lock, authorisation Montgomery Beta Alpha Zero Zero Five Four.”

To Montgomery’s relief the door hissed open and a thick cloud of smoke belched out, obstructing their vision.

The two women entered engineering, the smoke slowly dissolving as the ventilation system in the corridor began to replace the air.

Several consoles had burned out. Shattered pieces of ceramic glass were scattered across the floor. The warp core glimmered in the red tinted emergency light. It was still off line.

“Seven!” Janeway called out, circling the core looking for the ex-Borg.

“Captain, you need to leave. It is not safe,” said a calm but weak voice from the far left corner.

Montgomery moved in the direction of the voice. Behind her Lt Ramirez and three security officers with their phasers out did the same.
When she reached the console most damaged by the plasma explosion, the sight that met her made her gasp.

The tall blonde astrometrics officer was kneeling next to the console, her cybernetic hand firmly linked to the computer by two tubules interfacing with broken circuitry. Seven was holding on with her human hand to the duranium frame, her face and neck scorched with plasma burns and her hair tousled and blackened at the ends.

A soft shimmer in the smoke filled air showed the parameters of a force field.

“Lower the force field,” Montgomery ordered.

“I can not. It is for protection.”

“We will not harm you.”

“For your … protection,” Seven managed, breathing shallowly.

“Seven, lower the force field. Let me help you,” Janeway said. “Let me near you.”

Seven turned her head and regarded her captain.

“Seven, please let me help you,” Voyager’s captain said. “Trust me.”

The ex-Borg lowered her head and the force field shimmered quickly and was gone.

Janeway reached her first. Throwing herself down next to the younger woman she slapped her comm badge.

“Janeway to the Doctor. Get in here!”

“I’m already here, Captain,” the calm words of the Doctor reached them as Voyagers physician pushed himself through the crowd to attend to Seven.

“I am functioning within acceptable …”

“Seven, you’re seriously injured,” Janeway interrupted, clearly upset.

Montgomery raised her left hand, forestalling any intervention by her crew. She nodded at Ramirez.

“Start running diagnostics,” she ordered. “See how she’s linked and what systems her implants have tapped into.”

“Yes, Captain.”

The chief engineer began to carry out his assignment at nearest undamaged console.

The tall captain walked closer to Janeway and Seven, squatting next to them.

“How is she?” she asked quietly, studying the slight tremors in the other captain’s hands as Janeway brushed blonde tresses of hair out of Seven’s face.

“Have your crew put away their weapon, Captain,” Janeway growled, snapping her head up and glaring at her colleague. “Does she look like she’s about to assimilate anyone?”
“Possibly my ship,” Montgomery replied calmly. Nodding at the security personnel they holstered their phasers.

“I am not,” the ex-Borg replied. “I am linked to you computer, Captain Montgomery, but I do not intend to assimilate any of your databases nor any of the Protectorate technology you possess. I …”

Seven frowned and then began to fall, slumping to the side.

Janeway gasped and caught the blonde before she hit the floor, steadying her from the right while the Doctor carefully held on to her damaged side.

“Seven?” The Doctor called out. “Seven!”

He began scanning her, shaking his head at the readings.

“One minute to core breech,” the cool computer voice stated.

“What? I thought the situation was under control,” Montgomery exclaimed. “Ramirez!”

“I heard,” the lieutenant answered, poking his head around the corner. “Suddenly all the control Seven of Nine had on the computer was lost. What’s going on?”

“She fainted,” the Doctor stated. “Probably from pain.”

“Fifty seconds to core breech.”

“She can feel pain?” Montgomery asked. “I didn’t know pain bothered the Borg.”

Janeway didn’t take her eyes off Seven but her voice betrayed her fury.

“She’s not Borg anymore. She’s human,” she hissed. “Doctor, this breaks my heart, but give her something for the pain and then wake her up. She is the only thing holding this ship together right now. We need her to control the warp core.”

The Doctor looked at Janeway and then nodded solemnly.

“Aye, Captain.”

He administered a hypospray to Seven’s neck and then sat back as the blonde opened her eyes.

“Forty seconds to core breech.”

Montgomery watched Seven as the young woman regained consciousness and her eyes found Janeway’s. The full lips softened and then the blonde tried to sit up. Her left mesh covered hand hung by its assimilation tubules, still linked to the computer.

“Seven,” Montgomery said, leaning over the blonde. “Listen to me. A core breech is imminent. What ever you were doing earlier … do it again.”

Seven looked at Janeway and then nodded.

They helped her to kneel up and the ex-Borg closed her eyes briefly.

“Thirty seconds to core breech.”
Seven trembled and Janeway put a supporting arm around her waist.

“You can do this, Seven. Just focus on directing the information through your cortical implant. It worked before.”

“It is difficult, Captain, I am disoriented,” the blonde managed weakly.

“The painkiller,” Montgomery sighed. She turned her head over her shoulder. “All hands to the escape pods!”

The order sent most of the Excellence staff away but Ramirez was still punching in commands at another console.

“Twenty seconds to core breech.”

“Give me an antidote for the painkiller,” Seven slurred. “It is interfering with my cortical implant.”

“She might faint again,” the Doctor cautioned.

“Do it!” Janeway ordered.

The Doctor administered another hypospray. A second later Seven gasped out loud from the returning pain but her blue eyes resumed their focused expression.

“Ten seconds to … Core is stabile.”

“Thank God,” Montgomery said and wiped her forehead. “That was too close.”

“It’s not over yet,” Janeway said, holding the young blonde in her arms, keeping her kneeling upright next to the console. “Can you finish stabilising the core, Seven? The Doctor can’t give you anything for the pain.”

“I will try, Captain,” the younger woman managed.

“I can begin the dermal regeneration, Captain,” the Doctor interrupted. “That will help with the pain.”

“Do it,” Montgomery ordered.

She watched the Doctor begin the medical procedure to heal the burns. Deciding that Janeway and the physician had things under control she got up and walked over to Ramirez.

“What’s the situation?” she asked.

“She saved the warp core Captain. It’s stabilising. It’s going to take us several hours to purge the contamination, but we won’t have to eject it.”

The Excellence’s captain realised that she had never heard her elegant chief engineer sound so in awe before. The proud man ruled the engineering like it was his personal kingdom and for him to sound this impressed was truly a novelty.

Looking over her shoulder, the sight made her quietly inhale.

Janeway was kneeling next to Seven, holding her close by the slim waist. The younger
woman was resting her head on the captain’s shoulder as the Doctor was performing the
dermal regeneration on her left cheek.

Montgomery smirked, willing herself to relax just a little.

She wondered if Janeway realised that she was comfortingly rubbing her cheek against
Seven’s hair.

******

Chakotay closed his eyes at the glittering sparkles around him as his dematerialised on
the Flyer only to rematerialised seconds later in a large inner foyer where several people
were awaiting their arrival.

A tall, thin Vulcan dressed in a Guardian uniform stepped up to them.

“Welcome, Commander,” he addressed Toriello.

“Everything okay here, Darok?” Excellence’s first officer asked.

“Yes, sir. Ensign Graham and I are ready to escort you to the closest shuttle area.”

“Good. This is Commander Chakotay and Lt Commander Tuvok from the starship USS
Voyager. I assume that you were briefed regarding the extraordinary circumstances that
brought a Federation ship in our path.”

“I was, sir. Most unexpected.”

Lt Commander Darok nodded towards the Voyager officers.

“Why don’t you bring us up to date on your efforts at the prime ministers office?”

“We have scheduled a meeting with the appropriate experts, Commander.
Representatives from their leading scientific institutions, civil and military authorities,
and some of the non governmental agencies involved in the relief efforts will be in
attendance.”

A young man entered the foyer walking at a quick pace and approached the group
immediately.

“They weren’t very co-operative, Commander.”

“Gentlemen, may I introduce to you Ensign Graham.” Toriello said with a grin. “As you
can see from his comments and demeanour he is a born diplomat.”

He then proceeded to make introductions.

Graham was a young man with blonde hair, blue eyes and freckles, looking like he just
graduated out of Starfleet Academy. Looks could be deceiving, Chakotay mused.
Graham was probably close to forty. Besides, he must be very talented or Montgomery
would never have left him planet side to deal with government’s leadership.
“It’s been difficult. I don’t know if it’s a case of denial; shear stupidity, or criminal negligence. The Prime Minister continues to be a problem even after the Captain Montgomery dealt with him. By the way, I think the captain scared him beyond words.”

“She has her ways,” Excellence’s first officer muttered.

“It wasn’t until Ambassador J’Aoh mended some fences, so to speak, did the Prime Minister issue a direct order to round up the people with the talent and expertise we needed. When the Ambassador’s staff member, Sha’nee J’Oy, came to our aid, things really began to come together. I’ll say this for her - she’s sharp. She has been working on this from the beginning. J’Oy was the first one on staff to understand the true magnitude of the problem and its possible outcome. She was the one who alerted the Ambassador and brought it to the Protectorate’s attention.”

“Is she around?” Toriello asked.

“She’s waiting for us at the shuttle area. She’s chartered a craft to take us to the area around the centre fault.”

Toriello nodded.

“Good, I want to get out there immediately and see the area for my self.”

“Yes, sir. We anticipated that. After we complete an aerial recon we’ll move on to the Emergency Operation Centre.”

“Our colleagues from Voyager will be joining us,” Toriello informed his subordinates. “They’re here to participate in the assessment and to be readily available to answer any questions on what Voyager’s capabilities are. We’re going to have to do some crisis planning on the run.”

Lt Bremer had taken off down one of the hallways as soon as she arrived. She now returned with a grim look on her face.

“Reports from the away teams, sir,” she stated. “A series of aftershocks caused considerable damage in a sparsely populated area. Some casualties among the people, nothing the local search and rescue people can’t handle but it caused some significant avalanches along their Lines of Communication.”

“And the away teams?” Toriello asked sharply.

“All safe and accounted for.”

“Communication? Utilities?”

“They’re out, sir, and the grid looks extensive.”

“We’ve got to get out of here. Okay, Graham, lead the way.”

The group quickly moved out down a series of corridors through numerous security checkpoints. The place was a maze and yet Toriello and the Excellence staff manoeuvred it with ease. Exiting the building the group quickly approached an Embassy staff member that was standing by to assist them.

“Are our vehicle ready to depart?” Graham asked.
“Certainly, Guardian,” the woman answered. “Our pilots and crafts are at your complete disposal. We have two hovercrafts ready to launch. Their orders are to be available at any hour during the day until this crisis has past.

“Thank you. Shall we?” Graham motioned for the others to follow him.

The air was sweet, perfumed with a scent that Chakotay didn’t recognise. It reminded him of jasmine, but lighter. Large trees grew along the path down to the large gates. Chakotay looked up at the pink bluish sky, amazed at the colour and the height of the enormous trees. He thought they must be ancient.

The guards saw them coming and opened the tall gate the led to the launch pad. They stood ramrod, saluting as the Guardians passed.

On the pad sat two black hovercrafts awaited them. Two crewmembers held up the doors and Chakotay climbed into the first one after Toriello and Lt Commander Darok. Tuvok, Lt Bremer and Ensign Graham took place in the second vehicle.

A quiet humming sound was all he could detect as the large vehicles rose above ground and took off. Soon the crafts were flying down busy city streets.

Various means of transportation cluttered the streets. Chakotay noted that the craft handled smoothly through the heavy traffic, the pilot obviously used to handling the hovercraft as well as the congestion.

Tall buildings seemed to reach for the beautiful sky. As he looked out the silver tinted windows of the hovercraft, Chakotay tried to not think about the catastrophic destruction a major quake would have on a city such as this.

Dressed in glowing colours the inhabitants of Bunthora gave an impression of being a vivacious people. He saw men, women and children in various grouping hurry down the street. Perhaps on their way home, back to work or to school. Did they know about the quakes that were threatening their world? Did they have a clue that their way of life, even their existence were threatened or had the prime minister’s cover up been so effective that he had managed to keep most of them in the dark?

“They look oblivious,” Chakotay commented quietly.

“I would assume most of them are. The quakes are hardly noticeable here and from what we understand, the Prime Minister has not been very forthcoming in his reports to the public. He refers to his people as ‘happy children’ that need to be sheltered but from what our away teams can tell, these are hard working, well-educated people,” Toriello said.

“Logic would dictate that if this were true they would question the authorities,” Lt Commander Darok replied. “However, the prime minister and the government control the media. For all we know the people are unaware of perils they face. The only way anything is going to change is if the Emperor intervenes.”

“Captain Montgomery will inform the Emperor as soon as Ambassador J’Aoh can arrange a meeting,” Toriello answered.

“The information device tells me is that this is a monarchy.” Chakotay said.

“Yes. Bunthora is an ancient culture and the current Emperor is the twenty-first of a
dynasty that has ruled for almost a millennium. He is very old and his son will take over soon once they have the opportunity to perform the Burden of the Crown rite.”

“The Burden of the Crown?” Chakotay asked as the hovercraft took a turn and drove up a broad avenue. The information induced by the device had not been this detailed.

“It is the tradition that when the Emperor reaches a certain age and the successor to the throne is due to take over, they perform what is called the Burden of the Crown rite. It takes place in public in the palace courtyard. The air to the throne relieves the old Emperor of the burden of ruling by removing the crown jewels; the crown, the staff and the necklace and also by a symbolic act of cutting off his long hair.”

Chakotay found this intriguing. He found archaeology and social anthropology fascinating and firmly believed in that it was possible to find explanations to current problems in historical events.

The hovercraft pulled up to a large structure.

Lt Commander Darok looked out the window.

“We have arrived at the shuttle area,” he informed them. “Sha’nee J’Oy is expecting us. We do not have to move through the main hall; instead we can walk directly to the hangars.”

They left the hovercraft and joined the other three.

Chakotay regarded the busy shuttle area. Several enormous vessels that looked like a cross between a blimp and a shuttle, probably capable of transporting a couple of thousand individuals at a time, hovered around the terminal. At another building he could see smaller aircraft, shuttles of different design and smaller versions of the large ones at the terminal.

A diminutive woman approached them, walking briskly across the open area between the hangars.

“Welcome, Guardians,” she said, directing her gaze at Darok. “The pilot is ready to leave when you are, sir.”

“Thank you, Ms J’Oy,” Darok replied. He introduced his commanding officer and the other four, allowing for the implication that they were all Guardians. Sha’nee J’Oy greeted them politely but Chakotay could see she was eager to begin their mission.

They followed the young woman to a large hangar where a man in a grey coverall waited for them. He saluted them, recognising them as Guardians.

Chakotay climbed aboard after Toriello, taking the seat next to his colleague.

“We’ll be launching soon. It will take less than an hour to arrive over the affected area,” Sha’nee J’Oy told them as she sat down and secured her seat belt. “This is the fastest aircraft. It’s quite versatile. It can set down on water as well as on land.”

The unfamiliar sound of an alien engine filled the air and the aircraft rolled out of the hangar. When it was at a certain safety distance from the building, the pilot sped up the engine and it rose vertically from the ground. Chakotay heard the pilot inform the tower when he reached the desired altitude and after receiving clearance from the flight co-
ordinator, the aircraft took off in a wide sweep around the shuttle area.

Chakotay looked out the small window to his right.

They were on their way to the disaster area. He realised that he might be in for sights beyond anything he had ever come across. He glanced at his chronometer.

Time was running out.

*****

The Doctor had dimmed the lights in sickbay to a more soothing level.

Seven was lying on a bio bed, her hair in loose tresses around her narrow face. The newly regenerated skin glimmered and Janeway slowly began to calm down.

She pulled up a stool and sat down at the head of the bio bed. Seven was asleep after her ordeal in the Excellence’s engine room. They had transported her there shortly after the younger woman had instructed her assimilation tubules to retract back into her Borg hand.

Seven had collapsed on the floor in Janeway’s arms. To her amazement, Montgomery had rushed to help Voyager’s captain and the Doctor support the blonde.

They had held Seven steady while the Doctor stabilised her condition enough for transport. The burns on her face and arm were severe and she had inhaled smoke from the plasma fires.

Montgomery had promised to come by Voyager’s sickbay once she knew the work in engineering had resumed. Janeway was sure she must barely have nodded. When the immediate danger was over and the core stable, she had only been able to focus on Seven.

Just before they transported Seven back to Voyager, B’Elanna Torres had pushed her way past the security staff at the door, frantic to find out what had happened to the ex-Borg. She had growled at the sight of the injured blonde. Janeway had assured her that Seven was not in any immediate danger. Shooting Montgomery a look, the auburn haired captain also stated out loud that Seven had saved the Excellence from having to eject the core and then from an impending core breech.

B’Elanna’s eyes had softened. She had bit her lip and then taken a firm grip of the closest toolbox and nudged a somewhat startled Lt Ramirez in the chest.

“Guess we have work to do, don’t you agree?” she had said abruptly and who was to argue with that?

Janeway reached out and pushed a blonde lock from Seven’s forehead. The blonde mumbled something inaudible, turning her head in the direction of the captain’s hand.

“You don’t have to stay, Captain,” the Doctor said from behind, making Janeway jump. “She is out of danger now. She will need to regenerate for a couple of days but she’ll be
Janeway glanced over her shoulder, a terse remark on the tip of her tongue but the soft look on the hologram’s face made her swallow it.

“I’ll just sit here for a while,” she insisted. “Believe it or not, the others are handling things just fine. Torres is working with Harry in the Excellence’s engineering, Chakotay and Tuvok are planet side assessing the situation and Captain Montgomery is keeping an eye on the away teams progress.”

“Surely you don’t consider yourself obsolete, Captain?” the Doctor asked, astonished.

“No, of course not,” Janeway smirked. “I’m sure we’ll run into trouble soon enough. But for now I just want to sit here.” Turning her gaze back to the young blonde laying on the bed, Janeway became quite sober.

“We damn near lost her, Doctor.”

“I am aware of that.” His normally lively and exuberant expression had taken on a seriousness that made the captain frown.

“Is there something you’re not telling me, Doctor?” she asked sharply, inadvertently causing Seven to stir on the bio bed.

“No, Captain. Seven will recuperate. I’m trying to come to terms with having to act against my ethical subroutines for the greater good.”

Janeway looked puzzled at Voyager’s physician.

“What are you talking about? When did you act against your ethical subroutines?”

“I realize that your order was correct, Captain,” the hologram tried to explain. “Please don’t think that I question the validity of it. Still, to have to cause harm to my patient in order for her to regain consciousness and perform for the greater good goes against my programming.”

Janeway now understood.

It had broken her heart to give the command to revive Seven without any relief from the excruciating pain but their had not been many choices. Without Seven they would have lost the Warp Core, the ship, their lives. The choice tore at her soul.

She looked down at Seven, noticing the softness of the slightly parted lips and the faint shadows under the blonde’s eyes.

“If it’s any consolation, Doctor, the responsibility was mine” Janeway mumbled. “We did what we had to do, so did Seven. If it helps, she wouldn’t have expected us to act any other way.”

The doctor was silent for a moment then said. “I’ll be in my office if you need me, Captain.” He turned and left the two women alone.

The captain sat there for a while, her mind wandering, until a soft moan interrupted her thoughts.
“Captain?” Seven whispered, trying to sit up.

“How are you feeling, Seven?” Janeway asked. She cautiously put a hand on the blonde’s shoulder. “Don’t get up. Give yourself time to find your bearings.”

“I feel … weak,” the younger woman stated with dismay. “I do not think I can sit up unassisted.”

“Then don’t,” the captain smiled. “Are you in pain? Should I get the Doctor?”

“No. I am not in pain. I do not require the Doctor.”

To Janeway’s surprise, Seven reached for her. Janeway took Seven’s human hand between hers.

“There,” she said quietly. “I’m here.”

“Yes,” the blonde replied. “It was good to see your face when I regained consciousness. I am disoriented by the unfamiliarity of reclining.”

“That’s what friends are for, Seven, to support each other in need.”

The ex-Borg shivered and her clear blue eyes darkened.

“What is wrong?” Janeway asked.

“I am not accustomed to dealing with such pain,” Seven admitted. “My nanoprobes have always dealt with most of my bodily functions, including preventing my implants from shutting down because of any malfunctioning of my human organs. It is unsettling for me to be vulnerable in this fashion.”

“All part of embracing your humanity, Seven. The Doctor has told you on more than one occasion that your human side will manifest itself more and more as time goes by. The pain caught you off guard.”

“It did.”

Janeway regarded the younger woman, her heart flooding with emotions she didn’t understand and had no intention of exploring at this point.

“When you decided to take the situation into your own hands the pain from the plasma explosions must have frightened you, didn’t it?” the captain guessed. “You were trying to be efficient and to save the warp core, the crew, and it took a greater toll than you anticipated.”

“Yes.”

Seven rolled onto her right side, towards Janeway. Her uncharacteristically clumsy movements made Janeway’s heart skip a beat. She assisted the younger woman and by doing so, she ended up with her arm under Seven’s neck. Not sure how to free herself without making Seven think she was being rejected, she kept her arm where it was and leaned over the other woman.

“It is okay to be scared, Seven,” she whispered into the blonde’s ear. “You were afraid but still did the right thing. You saved the ship. You saved us all. If there had been a
core breech, it would have seriously damaged Voyager as well.”

Seven regarded her for a moment and then sighed and closed her eyes.

“That’s it. Go to sleep. You need to rest.”

As the young woman drifted off to sleep, Janeway ignored her own discomfort; sitting hunched over Seven. She knew her friend needed her there.

Not realising what she intended to do before she did it, she surprised herself by leaning further down and pressing her lips to Seven’s forehead.

It seemed a perfectly natural thing to do.

*****

“Voyager to Captain Montgomery. We have a problem.”

“Report.”

“The readings…they’re are off the chart! It’s another quake!”

*****

Continued in The Guardians - part 4
Chapter 5

The away team had just completed its latest scans of the mountainous area. They had recorded thousands of aftershocks in the region since the last significant quake. Standing on a ridge the team could see the devastation in the valley far below.

Ensign Hannah Blake had just completed packing the last of the surveying equipment when a sudden rumble alerted them of another aftershock. Looking across to the mountains that enclosed the valley to the south, the team watched in horror as the face of one of the mountains gave way, destroying a small village and everything else that lay in its path.

The earth below them began to shake.

This was no aftershock. This was another quake along a new fault line. Hannah grabbed her tricorder trying to obtain readings when the ground beneath her feet began to tremble and crumple. Lt Schwartz, the senior officer and leader of the away team of six, lost his footing and fell.

"Lieutenant!" Hannah yelled out as she reached for her commanding officer. Soon the entire team was fighting to stay upright but it was impossible.

The ground shook violently making a shattering noise.

Hannah leaned against an outcrop of bedrock and held on with all of her strength. Terrified she saw an avalanche of rock and debris began to fall no more than one hundred meters to her left.

She closed her eyes. They were not going to make it.

She tried in vain to activate her communicator but she could not let go of the rock, to do so would mean certain death. She clung to the hard surface, feeling her nails break painfully. The dust and debris were thick around her as she began to choke on the air she breathed. She had no idea where her crewmates were or if they were dead or alive.

The quake went on for what seemed an eternity, ripping at her frantic grip around the rock as if it desired nothing but to hurl her into the abyss with the rest of the debris.

Then she heard a hoarse voice call her name.

"Hannah! Hannah! Are you all right? Can you hear me?"

She recognised the voice of her friend Rhyssa. Rhyssa Langtara was one of the crewmembers onboard the Excellence who were from the Delta Quadrant. The tall, dark haired woman and Hannah had become friends when Rhyssa accepted a commission six years ago.

Hannah tried to focus, her eyes burning from all the dust, and find her friend.

"Rhyssa," Hannah croaked and began to cough. "I'm over here by the rocks!"

"I can't see you. I can't see any of the others either."
"Stay where you are," Hannah yelled. "Find something to hang on to."

"I’m trying but I keep slipping, Hannah," the other woman said.

Hannah could detect fear in Rhyssa’s voice. She was terrified herself but knew if she let panic take over, she might never make it through this.

"I’m right here," she shouted over the noise. "Hang on, Rhyssa!"

After an unknown amount of time, most likely not as long as it had seemed to her, the rumbling diminished. Hannah held her breath, her fingers still clutching at the rough surface of the rock. She didn’t trust the sudden stillness. Every muscle in her body was prepared to brace against the tremors.

"Rhyssa," she tried, appalled at her weak and hoarse voice. "Are you okay? Rhyssa?"

There was no reply.

Hannah tried to squint through the air but it was too thick with dust to allow her to see more than half a yard in front of her.

"Lieutenant!" she tried again. "Lt Schwartz!"

When nothing happened she carefully freed her right hand and tapped her comm badge.

"Ensign Blake to the Protectorate Embassy."

There was nothing, not even static. She tried again with the same discouraging results.

Hannah cautiously let go of the rock and searched for her tricorder. Finding it on the ground near by where it had fallen, she reached out and picked it up. She tried to scan her surroundings but the readings were erratic and off the scale indicating severe magnetic disturbance of unknown origin.

"Rhyssa? Lieutenant Schwartz?"

She kept calling the names of her crewmates while coughing. She slowly moved toward the direction where she had last heard Rhyssa’s voice. The terrain was rough to begin with and the quake had made it even worse. She realised that there could be new dangers along the path.

With one hand extended in front of her she stumbled over the uneven ground. Her head ached and she felt a slow trickle of something run from her forehead down her cheek. Hannah realised that she must have hit her head.

She called out again, unable to understand why she couldn’t hear the others. There was the obvious reason of course, but she refused to acknowledge the fact that they might be dead. Rhyssa had been so close, how was it possible that she could have slid away out of earshot like this?

Hannah cried out as she banged her foot hard against a rock. She fell down on her knees, feeling the uniform rip. Her palms hurt from trying to break the fall. Losing her balance and falling on her side, Hannah began to roll downhill.
Dust whirled around her. Frantically she tried to stop her tumbling descent but to no avail. The dry ground was too hard and she could not get a foothold.

Suddenly she was hanging in mid air where she just had been bouncing and rolling. She cried out in surprise and fright as she fell over some edge that had not been there before. She hit a steep surface and continued to tumble down, now at a neck breaking speed.

Fighting to remain conscious, her body struggled against the onslaught of devastating pain as it continuously made impact with the hard surface over and over again.

Just as the darkness was about to consume her, her bruised body came to a sudden halt.

Hannah groaned as she landed on something more yielding than the hard rock.

Sobbing, she touched the broken form beneath her. A cry escaped her cracked and bleeding lips.

She had found Rhyssa.

*****

Eliana Montgomery rematerialised on the transporter dais onboard Voyager. Nodding briefly to the ensign operating the controls, she swiftly stepped down.

"Captain Janeway is expecting me," she informed the young man.

"Yes, ma'am," he answered smartly. "Do you require an escort to the bridge, Captain?"

Montgomery smirked.

"That won't be necessary Ensign. I'm sure I can find my way."

She walked briskly through Voyager's corridors, nodding to the crewmembers as she passed.

She stepped into a turbo lift.

"Deck one."

Reaching the bridge and she crossed it after greeting the Voyager crew with a short 'at ease' as they stood to acknowledge her.

She rang the door chime to the ready room.

"Enter."

Janeway was at her desk. The younger woman was punching in commands into her computer, hardly looking up.

"We've got serious trouble below," Montgomery stated and took the seat across from Voyager's captain without waiting for an invitation.

Janeway looked up.

"What do you mean?"
"Lt Ramirez has managed to restore our long range communication array. All of the teams reported in after the last quake with one exception, Lt Schwartz’s. We need to launch a search and rescue mission as soon as possible.

Janeway regarded her evenly.

"I agree," she said, "but where do we begin? Do you have their last coordinates?"

"Yes, but we’re not picking up any readings. There is too much magnetic disruption in that area since this last event occurred. My people can’t make out any life signs in that region let alone the team’s. Look Kathryn," the older captain explained, "I can’t do this by myself. I need your help. These are my people and for all I know they are hurt and in need."

"All right. We’ll launch a joint away team to their last known coordinates and I’ll have my bridge begin scanning the area for bio signs as well," Janeway stated.

"Thanks," Montgomery smiled. "I anticipated your response so I ordered three of my people to stand by to assist. I figured three from each crew would suffice."

Janeway tapped her comm badge.

"Janeway to the Delta Flyer."

"Paris here. Go ahead, Captain."

"Return to Voyager, Mr Paris. You have new passengers."

"Aye, Captain. Paris out."

Janeway then proceeded to hail the senior security officer onboard Voyager and told him to put together an away team of three officers to join the Guardians in a search and rescue operation.

"The situation down there is bound to be difficult," Montgomery cautioned. "Since my people are more experienced in these matters, I recommend that my crew retains seniority in this effort."

Janeway nodded.

"Agreed. Tom will beam the search and rescue party down to the coordinates where your people were last heard from."

"Good."

"I was just going to make myself a cup of coffee. Do you want some? You sure look like you could do with one."

Montgomery chuckled.

"Is that your way of telling me I look like hell? Well, I’m sure I do and yes I’d love a cup as long as you don’t tell Max. Speaking of Max, he reported in that they were still in the air when the quake occurred."

"I know. Chakotay briefly sent a message through the Delta Flyer."
"What a mess. This wasn’t the one we were expecting. It appears along an entirely new fault line but it’s making our work damn near impossible down there," Montgomery said, rubbing her forehead.

"So, Seven’s predictions are still relevant?"

"Oh yes. The stress has continued to build along the old fault line just as she predicted. This last bit of business was one of nature’s anomalies meant to make our lives even more complicated then they already are."

Her head pounded again, the pain making her slightly nauseous. She was accustomed to transporters aggravating the pain and the fact that they sometimes could cause slight disorientation if she wasn’t careful.

"You okay?" Janeway asked cautiously.

"I’m fine."

Janeway didn’t look convinced but nodded.

"You know, our Doctor is at your disposal if you need anything," she offered.

Montgomery bit back an impatient retort, realising that the younger woman was genuinely concerned.

"Thank you," she managed and then changed the subject. "There is something else I need to talk to you about. It’s quite serious."

Janeway frowned.

"I’m not sure I like the sound of that."

"It has to do with Seven of Nine."

Voyager’s captain seemed to hold her breath for a moment.

"Go on."

"Lt Ramirez has been running diagnostics on all our systems. There is evidence in our database that your ex-Borg compromised Protectorate technology. This is a serious offence."

The anger flashing from Janeway’s eyes, turning them into a blazing grey did not surprise Montgomery.

"She rescued your ship, your crew and you accuse her of compromising the database?" Janeway hissed.

"Don’t blow a fuse, Kathryn, hear me out. She did save us all by stopping the core breech, no one is disputing that. What she also did, perhaps out of necessity, was access classified Protectorate files and technology. She now possesses knowledge that only members of the Guardians are entitled to."

"Are you sure about this? Seven was interfaced with your computer but as far as I could tell, only to …"
"I’m sure, Kathryn. Lt Ramirez showed me the computer logs. Seven of Nine saved us, but the heart of the matter is, she unwittingly violated a Protectorate rule and according to the regulations I’m obligated to report her to the High Council."

"You can’t be serious!"

"I’m very serious."

"Damn it! She saved us all, for heaven’s sake," Janeway exclaimed. "You can’t do this."

Montgomery knew she had to. She had sworn allegiance to the Protectorate and honoured their rules and regulations for more than ten years. There was no way she was going to break them.

She hesitated briefly.

"I don’t have a choice in this matter. I have to report the incident but what I can do is delay it," she found herself say. "I can wait until our mission is complete and then brief the High Council of Seven’s heroic action and ask that they show leniency."

Janeway rose from her chair and leaned over the desk.

"And what if the Protectorate fails to understand?"

"They are very wise and compassionate, regardless of what you think," Montgomery explained. "Besides, the responsibility lies with me and I will make them see that if anyone is at fault it is me. Kathryn, you have to trust me in this."

Janeway slumped back into her chair.

"Do I have a choice?"

"Not really."

"Thank you, Eliana," the younger captain said quietly after a moment’s silence.

"You’re welcome."

Janeway’s comm badge chirped.

"Seven of Nine to Captain Janeway," an uncharacteristically distraught voice hailed.

"Janeway here. What’s wrong, Seven?" Janeway asked.

Montgomery leaned back into her chair and smirked.

Of course, more trouble.

*****

Seven of Nine stood in the centre of sickbay, regarding Neelix stubbornly.

She realised that the little Talaxian was simply performing his duty but she had no intention of regenerating at a time like this when every moment worked against the crews.
"Regeneration is not necessary," she insisted. "Doctor, you can simply replicate more nanoprobes and administer them into my bloodstream and …"

"And Captain Janeway will have both our heads," the Doctor sighed. "Seven, you’re not being reasonable."

"I find the fact that I am expected to regenerate when there is a major crisis at hand to be unreasonable," the ex-Borg declared, firmly setting her jaw. She tapped her comm badge. "Seven of Nine to Captain Janeway."

There was a brief silence.

"Janeway here. What’s wrong, Seven?"

"Captain, I do not require regeneration at this stage. Please adjust your previous orders to Neelix."

"What are you talking about? Of course you need to regenerate. The Doctor …"

"The Doctor can administer replicated nanoprobes. I will function within acceptable …"

"Is the Doctor there?"

"Yes, Captain," the Doctor sighed.

"Would such a thing be as efficient as regenerating?"

"No, Captain. It will keep her going for a bit but it might put her already strained cortical implant in jeopardy if she wasn’t careful."

"There you go, Seven. Now, follow the Doctor’s recommendations."

Seven bit her lip, exasperation filling her as she tried to get through to Janeway.

"I cannot remain passive, Captain," she said. "The people on the planet need our assistance. There are many things I can do to contribute. I can be of …"

She was very tired and having argued with the Doctor and Neelix had taken almost all her strength. If she couldn’t get the captain to order the Doctor to administer the nanoprobes, she would have no choice but to regenerate.

"Seven, listen to me," Janeway said over the comm link. "I know you want to help out and you have. You put your life on the line for the Excellence and for Voyager too. Now go and regenerate. The Doctor said you would need to do that for several days."

"No!"

Tears filled the frustrated blonde’s eyes. It was important for her to participate in this rescue operation and she felt something close to panic at the prospect of not being able to.

"Seven, I …" Janeway paused. "Wait there. I'm coming down. Janeway out."

The comm link was broken.

Seven regarded the Doctor and Neelix cautiously. She disliked going over their heads to
the captain but knew it was necessary. She wanted to be part of this. No, what she was feeling was much stronger than simply wanting to be part of something. Something deep within her demanded that she take part in this effort.

Seven struggled trying to understand the competing emotions that recent events had stirred inside her. When she had linked with the ship’s computer aboard the Excellence she had briefly gained insight into the Protectorate and the role of the Guardians.

In some strange way the Protectorate reminded her of the Collective but instead of perfection these beings were on a quest, but for what? Goodness? Justice? Salvation? Redemption?

These were new concepts for her to explore, as was the role of the Guardians who served as the Protectorate Avatars here in the Delta Quadrant.

Since Captain Janeway had severed her from the Collective, she had come in contacts with these concepts and ideals through the deeds of Voyager’s crew and her captain and in the research she had conducted in her search for humanity. She knew however, that the true meaning of these words still remained too abstract for her to comprehend fully. Late at night she would engage the captain in philosophical discussions on these topics but Seven had found the captains explanations, as well as the behaviour of the Voyager crew, at times contradictory.

Yet here were these beings that seemed to exemplify these qualities and the fact that they had chosen humans to be among their champions fascinated her. Seven yearned to explore these matters further. Perhaps if she could come to terms with these concepts she could come to terms with her past and find what? Forgiveness?

She ignored the fatigue and squared her shoulders. She would not be ordered into a regeneration cycle.

"Captain Janeway only wants what’s best for you, Seven," Neelix tried.

"I am aware of the captain’s admirable intentions," the blonde replied shortly.

"You were very badly injured."

"I know that also." Her face took on a steely expression. "I was there."

"Yes, of course." Neelix sounded confused.

"I regret that I am displaying such a difficult side, Neelix," Seven said, displeased with the way she was addressing her crew mate but unable to stop herself.

"Then why are you?" a throaty voice said from the door. Janeway stepped inside sickbay, eyeing Seven carefully. "Why are you deliberately going against the Doctor’s recommendations and my explicit orders?"

Seven knew this would not please her captain.

"I have to. I need to …" The blonde broke off, feeling dizzy from the fatigue. She knew she needed the nanoprobes quickly if she was going to avoid regenerating.

"What do you need?" Janeway asked. She stepped closer to Seven and put a hand
around the younger woman’s elbow, carefully steadying her.

"I need nanoprobes. I need to be apart in this mission. I do not mean to sound
impertinent but you need my assistance, Captain," Seven said urgently.

"You have done more than your share, Seven," Janeway said and guided the blonde
towards a bio bed. "Doctor, didn’t you say that an extended regeneration cycle was the
only thing that would normalise Seven’s implants?" she asked while motioning for
Seven to sit down.

"I did, Captain. That is still true."

"There. You see, Seven?" the captain said convincingly. "You need to regenerate."

"I do not. I will require regeneration later but for now I can function in a satisfactory
manner by administering nanoprobes using a hypospray. That will sustain me and keep
my implants operating within acceptable parameters for a minimum of twenty-four
hours."

Janeway regarded her solemnly and then lowered her head, shaking it slowly.

"You are the most stubborn woman …" she muttered. "Doctor, do you agree with this?"

"No, Captain. I actually think that you are the most stubborn …” He stopped himself
when he noticed Janeway glaring at him. "Oh, you mean regarding the nanoprobes. I
wouldn’t recommend it on a regular basis but Seven has a point. She could function for
a short time if nothing strenuous to her system occurred in the meantime."

Seven looked hopefully at Janeway.

"Captain? Please."

The older woman walked closer to Seven.

"I have several conditions, Seven," Janeway stated slowly, leaning into the younger
woman’s personal space. "You will not do anything physically demanding that will
deplete your system. You report directly to me and take your orders from me only. I
expect you to supervise in astrometrics or in Voyager’s engineering - I know they need
help but you are not to overdo it. If there are any indication that you …"

"I will not disobey, Captain," Seven said. "I am grateful. This is important to me. I need
to help." She dipped her head. "Thank you, Captain."

"Don’t make me regret this, Seven."

"I will not."

"Hm. I’m not so sure. All right, Doctor. You can administer the nanoprobes and then I
expect you to run frequent scans of Seven’s implants and check up on her in general.
Even if this means hauling her into sick bay against her will."

The Doctor rolled his eyes.

"Yes, Captain. It will take me a little while to replicate the nanoprobes according to the
specifications in the pattern buffer. It is a complex technology."
He left them to carry out his orders.

Seven turned to Neelix.

"I regret that I was so unpleasant towards you."

"Don’t worry, Seven. I know you only want to help out. I feel the same way. To think that the Guardians rely on us to help them out is pretty amazing, isn’t it?"

"Yes." Seven closed her eyes when another wave of fatigue and slight nausea hit her.

Janeway leaned against the bio bed and put an arm around the younger woman’s shoulders.

"Well, I have duties in the mess hall to attend to," Neelix smiled. "I think you have all the support you need here right now, Seven. See you all later."

The captain shot the little Talaxian a look but didn’t let go of Seven.

Neelix left sickbay and Seven leaned against Janeway, her head suddenly so heavy.

"I do not like this weakness," she muttered.

"I know," Janeway replied. "You get very cranky when you’re ill, do you realise that?"

"I do not. I simply state the truth."

"To silently endure something is not for you, is it?" Janeway said with a crooked smile.

Seven wanted to reply but couldn’t think of anything to say. She was so tired and the closeness to Janeway made her slightly dizzy. The captain held her close with a strong arm around Seven’s shoulders and the faint perfume Janeway wore was intoxicating.

Not quite realising what she was about to do, Seven slid down on the bio bed, only wanting to lie down but ending up with her head in Janeway’s lap. The captain went rigid for a second but then Seven felt soft hands adjusting her head into a more comfortable position. The same hands began to comb through her blonde unfastened hair, pushing it off her face.

"You’re tired," Janeway determined quietly.

"The nanoprobes will rectify that."

"Yes, but it is only a temporary solution. The Doctor will be a while. How do you feel?"

"The fatigue is annoying and the pain is bearable."

"You’re still in pain?"

"It is of less importance. It does not debilitate me. I am merely weakened by the depletion of my systems."

The hands in her hair never stopped moving. Over and over, the captain let her elegant fingers comb through Seven’s hair. The feeling was unfamiliar but enjoyable. The ex-Borg sighed and closed her eyes.
"I find this sensation most agreeable," she said quietly. "I did not realise that being touched in this manner could also replenish my resources."

The hands stopped.

"What do you mean, Seven?"

"Your touch is soothing. It reduces the pain and it makes the fatigue less important since I cannot focus on anything but your hands."

Janeway inhaled audibly.

"Why did you stop?" Seven asked wonderingly.

Slowly the captain’s hands resumed their slow caresses.

"I’m glad it helps," the older woman whispered. "I can’t stay long. We have a new challenge on our hands. I have to return to the bridge."

"I understand, Captain. Please do not keep from performing your task at hand merely because …"

"A few minutes more won’t do any harm. Here comes the Doctor now. I’ll stay until he has administered the nanoprobes."

Seven remained with her head on Janeway’s lap as she felt the coolness of a hypo spray against her neck. It hissed and she could feel the content infiltrate her bloodstream. The invigoration was immediate and she opened her eyes.

Looking down at her with the softest blue gaze she had ever seen from her captain, Janeway smiled crookedly.

"There, all better?" the older woman asked.

"Yes. I am ‘all better’. Thank you for your assistance, Kathryn."

"You’re welcome, Seven. Can you manage without me now?"

Suddenly afraid of answering the simple question with a yes, Seven bit her lip. Then she inhaled deeply and nodded.

"Of course. I am functioning within normal parameters, Captain."

Janeway helped her to sit up.

"Good," she said briskly and jumped off the bio bed. "We have work to do."

*****

Ensign Brovskij materialised at the foot of a mountain and surveyed his surroundings. Before him were the remnants of what must recently have been a scenic vista. Now all that remained was evidence of nature’s destructive forces.

Less than an hour ago he had received orders to join two of his colleagues from Voyager to conduct a search and rescue operation along with members of the Excellence’s crew. Apparently some of their members were unaccounted for. He, Lt
Carlson and Ensign Mercier had rendezvoused with three Guardians in Voyager’s shuttle bay where Tom Paris had arrived to take them into high orbit around the planet.

The Guardians had introduced themselves. All of them projected themselves as quiet professionals, confident yet unassuming. It was this attitude and their manner that impressed Brovskij.

The tall, dark lieutenant in charge of the mission, Lt Peters, quickly briefed them on the current situation and what their goals and objectives were. The crew from the Excellence had brought some unusual gear with them. Lt Peter asked the Voyager crew to quickly layout their equipment. After a quick inspection he contacted the Excellence and three backpacks materialized in the cargo bay.

"What this?" asked Lt Carlson as he examined on of the backpack.

"It’s our standard rescue equipment. We will familiarize each of you with the items once we are aboard the shuttle."

"Isn’t this stuff a little primitive?" asked Mercier.

"Primitive? Perhaps, but it’s our standard equipment, guaranteed to work under any conditions. Have any of you helmets?"

"No," responded Carlson.

"T’Pol?"

"I’m on it sir. Would you three show me were your closest replicator is?"

"There’s one on the far side of this bay."

"Very good. Come."

The two Guardians that had accompanied Peters were not of the Alpha Quadrant. They looked almost human, only their tall foreheads with an intricate pattern of ridges made them appear alien. None of them had undergone any cosmetic alterations since the area they were about to search was remote and it was highly unlikely that they would encounter any of the planet’s inhabitants. T’Pol had quickly punched input into the replicator. Within second three helmets appeared. Quickly he handed them out, inspected each and nodded with approval.

Assembled once again each member grabbed one of the packs and quickly boarded the shuttle.

The trip passed quickly as Peters went over the equipment that the Voyager crew had just received. Peters explained the hazards of the situation below and emphasized the importance of pairing up. "I want each of you to pair up with one from the other crew. Ensign … Brovskij, was it? You’ll be with me."

Once the team had materialised they quickly assumed their duties by pulling out their tricorders and scanning the area for life forms.

Initially, Brovskij did not detect any life signs bigger than small rodents in the area. The silence around them was eerie in a foreboding sort of way.
"Let’s fan out people," Lt Peters, ordered. "Search your designated grids and stay in contact with me.

Ensign Brovskij could not believe his luck. Teaming up with the officer in charge of the away mission was an adrenalin rush. He wanted to learn from one of the best. Rumours below decks were that these Guardians were supposed to be the real deal. Well, he would show these guys that the Voyager crew were not slouches either. He just hoped to god he didn’t make a fool out of himself in the process. "Stay sharp!" he murmured to himself.

He had just graduated from the Academy when he had received his assignment onboard Voyager on her first mission. Who could have foreseen that he would become a seasoned space explorer in a part of space so many light years from home?

He now followed Lt Peters as the tall man began climbing up along what appeared to be the remnants of a mountain trail. It looked more like a broken line drawn by a giant finger in the ground.

"Careful," Peters said when a small landslide of rocks came tumbling down to their left. He hefted his backpack further up on his shoulders. "We’re no good to them dead," he said with a grin.

Feeling less nervous at the other man’s casual way of joking in the middle of all the gravity, Brovskij smiled, shaking his head.

"No, sir."

They slowly worked their way up, stopping every ten minutes to scan the area. The Guardians had configured the Voyager team’s tricorders to omit a signal that could both detect and alert the missing away team, should any of their tricorders still be functioning.

Despite the briefing regarding the probability of aftershocks, Brovskij wasn’t prepared when the surface below him began to rock. The ground acted like a live entity beneath his feet. It shifted sideways, trembled and heaved over and over for what seemed an eternity when in fact it was only seconds.

The ensign fumbled for support but began to slide down the broken path.

"Brovskij! Grab on to something," Lt Peters yelled.

Squinting at the older man, Brovskij could see that his commanding officer was securely holding on to a thick branch and a rock just to his right. He felt something scrape painfully against his thigh and automatically grabbed for it, relieved to find a protruding rock that he could get a firm grip on. His tricorder fell to the ground and then suddenly all was still.

"You okay?" Lt Peters called.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, quit laying around on the job. We’ve got a trail to climb."

Listening to Peters checking the status of the other members of the away team, Brovskij reluctantly let go of the rock, feeling utterly unprotected as he reached for his tricorder.
If an aftershock was this unsettling, he could only imagine how it would feel to experience a full-blown quake.

The sudden faint beep from his tricorder made his heart jump. Not sure if it was a sensor glitch he stared at it. The reading flickered over the small screen and was gone again. He adjusted the sensors and made a sweeping motion up the path.

The tricorder beeped again and now a reading interfered by static appeared for several seconds.

"Lieutenant," he called. "I think we may be on the right spot. I’m not sure what I’m seeing but it’s worth a check."

Peters quickly skidded down to him and scanned the area himself.

His tricorder was quiet.

"Must be a sensor echo," the lieutenant offered. "I’m not getting anything."

"Look here," Brovskij insisted.

He scanned up the mountain again. His tricorder now transmitted a definite pattern.

Peters regarded it solemnly.

"I don’t know why my tricorder isn’t registering this, but you’re right. Good job, kid. We need to check this out."

He tapped his comm badge.

"Peters to away team. Report to grid four six two."

The other teams gave affirmative answers.

Brovskij began to climb the path once again walking slightly to the left in an effort to avoid the greatest amount of debris. As he rounded a curve along the treacherous trail a long signal erupted from his tricorder. Looking ahead, he could see Peters just rounding next curve along the trail.

Looking down at his tricorder he began to adjust its frequency as he slowly moved along the trail. Focusing his attention in the readings, he took another step forward and…

Suddenly he was falling. It was as if the ground below him was swallowing him whole. All he could hear was the scream that came out of his mouth as he plummeted into the darkness below.

*****

Ensign Hannah slowly worked her way into a sitting position. Her body was in agony from the uncomfortable position she had found herself in. Taking a deep breath, she managed to get to her knees and with an effort she rose to her feet and peeked up towards the small circle of light that shone above her. She tried to estimate what her position was and how far she and the others had fallen but her tricorder was not making sense. Her best guess was that they were at least thirty metres below ground.
She was not sure how it had happen but she and her away team had fallen down a steep chasm into an underground cavern.

Initially she had lost consciousness but had regained it over time. She had literally landed on poor Rhyssa who still remained unconscious. It had taken her several minutes to discover the remaining members of her team. All were injured and in serious need of medical attention.

After recovering her team members she had rested briefly. It had been mistake. Now her limbs were rebelling even more.

"That will teach me to lay down," she grumbled as she again began to assess their situation.

Examining the premises, she had formed a theory why the tricorders were acting crazy. The inside walls in the cave were of a metallic kind of rock. She had worked on adjusting her scans but so far she had been unable to determine its makeup.

Hannah had tried several times to send up emergency flare beacons through the hole. The disturbance from the cavern interfered with their guiding systems, sending them crashing into the walls. She had no way of adjusting the remaining two.

A soft moan made her return to her shipmates. Gently she reached down and pulled a thin metallic blanket closer around Rhyssa.

Her friend had suffered several fractures to her arms and ribs. Hannah had tried to splint the bones the best she could but there was little material available and no way of knowing the severity of the injuries. The fall had badly damaged the emergency medical kit. There was no way to knot the bones. All she could do was administer drugs to keep Rhyssa sedated and as pain free as possible.

Lieutenant Schwartz’s condition was even graver. The medical tricorder had confirmed internal injuries and bleeding. All she could do to counter his internal blood loss was to administer re-hydration ampoules from the emergency medical kit using a hypo spray. He was already showing signs of shock. His breathing had become thready and his pulse was slowly weakening. There were not enough ampoules to sustain him. If the rescuers did not come soon he would bleed out and die.

The rest of the away team members were slowly returning to the land of the living. Most had some type of trauma injury, all debilitating but not life threatening. Pain itself was not the only problem. They all suffered from thirst due to the lack of water, including herself.

Hannah had conducted an inventory of their resources once she had taken care of everyone. The news had not been good. Some of their packs had been lost in the fall; the ones she had managed to find had been destroyed or damaged. It was a miracle that they were still alive.

Looking down at her injured friend, she mustered her courage once again and went in search of water.

The cavern was treacherous. Every now and then the earth would shake as another aftershock rocked the planet’s surface. Each time more and more debris fell from above. Ducking for cover Hannah would try to shield herself from the worst.
After an hour of searching she turned and began making her way back to the group. All her efforts had been in vain. If there was water in this cavern then it had to be at a deeper level and that would mean leaving her crewmates behind for a more extended period of time than this.

As she made her way back her frustration grew with each step. Angry tears welled up. Wiping her hand across her face she refused to let them fall. This was unacceptable. There would be no more tears.

Returning to her crewmates she checked on their progress. Their conditions had not stabilised.

Rhyssa had regained consciousness. The painkiller had worn off and it had begun to take its toll.

Hannah knelt down beside her and gently touched her cheek.

"How’s it going?"

"Not too well. How about you?" Rhyssa whispered huskily.

"I’m fine," Hannah replied, caressing the other woman’s hair. "Just relax. I have another hypospray here. You’ll feel much better in a few moments."

"What’s taking so long? Why haven’t they come for us?"

"They’ll be here for us soon. You know the procedure."

"Yes, I do but it’s taking forever," Rhyssa said with a grimace as the hypospray released the painkiller into her system and the pain began to leave her body. "Maybe it’s this place. You have to admit it’s the creepiest place we’ve had the honour to dwell in for some time."

"Ah, don’t exaggerate," Hannah tried to smile. "You remember that hotel at Dogodar Prime? Now, that’s what I define as creepy."

Her friend gave a hollow laughter, bordering on exasperation then began to cough.

"Ahh! Don’t make me laugh you fool. It hurts like hell."

"Sorry, Rhyssa. You have to admit, though, that hotel was a roach infested hell hole."

"It was but we had a wonderful time together on that shore leave."

"The best."

Hannah did not like the serious way the conversation was taking. She felt like they were almost saying goodbye; there was such finality in Rhyssa’s voice.

"Hannah?"

"Yes," the ensign managed.

"How is Schwartz doing?" the other woman asked quietly.

"Not too good."
For a time the two just looked at each other remaining silent.

"How about the others? Is everyone accounted for?"

"Yes, we’re all here. The others are hurt but alive. The problem is we lost a lot of our gear.

"The tricorder?"

"It’s here but it’s worthless. The readings are off the scale one minute and the next it isn’t registering anything at all. I don’t want you to worry. The Excellence will track us down. They always do."

"There’s always a first."

Silence descended upon them again.

Rhyssa turned her head and Hannah knew she was trying to make out the other members of the crew. Hannah had taken a phaser and heated three separate piles of stone. The glow of the rocks warmed the cavern and provided a small amount of light. The crew was in bad shape. Besides the trauma they had suffered hypothermia and dehydration were the greatest threats.

With the exception of Hannah none of them were mobile.

"How are we on water?"

"We have some but it’s not enough to sustain us for any great length of time."

"How long?"

"Maybe a day, perhaps two."

Turning her had once more she captured Hannah’s eyes and held them.

"You know what you have to do, don’t you?" Rhyssa said, her voice dry and cracking. Suddenly tears sprung to Hannah’s eyes as she looked down on her beloved friend.

"Yes," she whispered quietly, her heart breaking as she realised that might never see Rhyssa again.

"It’s time. As a matter of fact, sweetie, it’s long overdue."

Her throat constricting, Hannah swallowed hard.

"No, no, there’s still some time," she whispered as a tear fell from her cheek.

"Hannah, time is running out for all of us " her wounded friend urged her softly. "You have to leave me. You have to start climbing. You’re our only chance. Now let me rest. I’ll be here when you return, I promise. Now, go be a hero."

She leaned down and touched Rhyssa’s forehead with her own. A defiant tear untangled from her eyelashes and fell on the other woman’s cheek.

"Hero my ass!" she said as she choked on her tears.
"Don’t cry," Rhyssa whispered huskily. "Check on the others and then just go. Don’t come back and say goodbye, I can’t take it. Just make sure Schwartz and the others are okay and then get the hell out of here."

When Hannah didn’t move at once, a small shudder went through the broken body underneath her.

"Hannah, for God’s sake. Just do it!"

The ensign knew she was making it harder on Rhyssa and clumsily got on her feet. The pain of what she had to do consumed her but she angrily wiped her wet cheeks. Looking down on her friend she shook her heard, then pointed a finger at her.

"You listen to me and listen to me good. Don’t you dare do anything stupid while I’m gone. Do you understand? Don’t even think of dying. And that goes for the rest of you too!"

There were chuckles among the crew as she walked in the midst of the fallen Guardians. She tried to console them with words of comfort. They in turn teased her with their own brand of warped gallows humour.

"Try not to get lost along the way, Blake."

"Yeah, even you should be able to follow directions, Blake!"

Looking down on one of her injured comrade she smiled.

"And what direction would that be?" she inquired.

"Up."

"Funny, very funny."

Taking her phaser out she recharged the rocks once more. At least they would be warm. Grabbing one of the rucksacks she made a quick inventory. She was short a few item.

Quickly she rummaged through the others gears she began to find the items she needed.

They had all been wearing helmets. It was probably the only reason that had all lived. She just needed to find a reasonably whole one.

"Looking for your brain bucket Blake?"

"Good guess. Unfortunately I found mine, and it's non functional."

"Take mine."

She looked over at McGuire.

"I don’t want to take your helmet Mac"

"Honest, I may be in bad shape but I’m smart enough to duck if something starts falling from above. Take it, Blake. Attach a light to it and you’ll be good to go."

"Thanks, Mac"
"Just remember where you got it, okay?"

"You’ve got a deal."

"What else do you need?"

Among them they were able to scrounge up enough gear for her to make an accent. Quickly she got into her full body harness and attached the tools of the trade. Next she lifted the pack onto her shoulders she synched it tightly to her body.

After worriedly checking on a comatose Lt Schwartz, she left her shipmates behind. As she walked away she could hear their words of encouragement and good luck wishes. She never looked back.

Hannah let her flashlight lead her to the part of the cavern where the walls appeared to have some footholds. Above she could see a ledge of sorts. There seemed to be some indirect sunlight coming through but she could not make out its source.

She debated for a moment whether she should leave the pack behind or not. In the end she opted to take it. Pulling on a pair of gloves she made some last minute adjustment before starting her vertical ascent.

It had really bothered her when the first officer insisted that every away team member received a thorough education in search and rescue techniques. He wanted them to know how to climb the old fashion way with ropes, carbines, harnesses, pitons, and the rest of the antiquated gear. Now all she wanted to do was give him a big kiss.

"Like the man said, up!"

She checked her equipment and adjusted the harness. Uncoiling the rope she began her ascent.

At first it was not very hard. She found good hand and foot holds. Her years of being a Guardian had prepared her for this. She was making sufficient progress when she decided to drive her first anchor into wall. Once that task was completed she attached her rope to a solid belay anchor and then proceeded upward. Using an ascender Hannah pulled out just enough rope to make her next move.

Carefully scaling the wall she spotted the place for her next anchor. Once she had established that, she would repel back to the first anchor, detach it, and climb up again to the second anchor, slowly repeating this process until she made it to her goal.

She had thought about free climbing the face of the cavern but had ruled it out. Part of the climb would have to be aided it was just too treacherous. It might have been a hell of a lot faster but it was not safe and she could not risk getting hurt.

The special disrupter became useful when the cave wall became almost vertical and very smooth. She fired it at close distance and it formed small-elongated seam.

"Beats the hell out of using a hammer," she muttered to herself as she wedged a cam into the crack.

Time passed as she slowly made her way up. Funny, the ledge had not seemed all that high up when she began.
The further up she climbed, the harder and more metallic the walls became. Finding a safe grip got increasingly harder. It slowed her down to have to use the phaser to blast holes in an unforgiving surface. Whatever the metal was, it was the most unyielding material she had ever come across.

Her head ached and she felt the muscles in the back of her neck and shoulders begin to throb from tilting her head back so much. The flickering light from her flashlight revealed that she was trembling from exhaustion.

An aftershock made her cling to the face of the cave. It was as if she were trying to will herself to be one with the rock. Debris bounced off the helmet as a shower of small rocks and gravel hit her as the earth shook. It only lasted very briefly. A frustrated whimper escaped her lips as she pressed on.

When she had to pull the disrupter out and blast against the wall again, she was on the brink on giving up. Pieces of metal scattered over her face and she chastised herself for not taking more precautions.

She holstered the disrupter and was reaching for the hole she had made when a sound from above made her flinch and look up.

The light from above disappeared temporarily and then a large object hurled towards her. She could hear it more than she could see it.

She did not think of the consequences to herself. She let go of her vicelike grip of the wall. By doing so she was able to kick off and swing out.

The object hit her body hard and she instinctively grabbed on to it.

To her amazement the object was warm and definitely alive.

"Damn!" she heard a male voice exhale. "What the …"

Strong hands had gripped her harness immediately. Hannah reached out and tried to hold him with one arm as she belayed herself and braced for impact.

She was in pain and out of breath but she couldn’t let go.

"Hold on!" They hit the face of the wall. "Ah!"

The pain was staggering.

With her left arm she held her passenger while her right arm belayed their fall.

"Can you get a foot hold?" she demanded.

"I think so."

"Then do it!"

The young ensign struggled trying to get a foothold into the cliff so that some of his weight would not hang on his rescuer.

"Good."

"Do you see the karabiner with the rope attached to my harness on my left?" Hannah
"What's a carbine?"

"A snap link? A metallic thing that’s shaped like a ‘D’?"

"Yes."

"Slowly unhook it, uncoil the rope, tie it around your waist."

The young man flinched.

"I’ll fall!"

"You’ll fall if you don’t do it. Come on. Try!"

With one hand gripping the harness, the young ensign reached for the snap link.

"That’s it. Just pass me that ‘D’ ring and don’t move until I tell you."

Slowly Hannah tied herself off and made sure that the anchor was still holding. Their combined weight had almost been too much for the device.

"Now tie it around your waist. That’s it. Good."

She quickly attached him to her harness using the snap link.

Hannah worked quickly. The entire procedure was awkward.

"Are you right handed or left handed?"

"What’s that got to do with anything?"

"Just answer the question - right or left?"

"Right!"

"Now, instead of gripping me I want you to reach out and grab a hold of that rock face. Understood?"

The shaken ensign only nodded. Reaching out he was able to stabilise himself against the rock’s face. He could feel the woman doing something with the rope.

"All right. I’m going to fix you a seat of sorts out of the rope. Then I’m going to tie you in. Have you every done any climbing like this before?"

"No."

"Just my luck. A virgin. Okay, just do as I say."

It took Hannah several minuets but she successfully secured the young ensign.

"Are there … more of you up there? Do they know we’re down here … tell me …" she gasped from the effort, her flashlight flickered over a blonde young man.

"Yes, they know you’re in the vicinity but not your exact location," he said breathlessly.
The pain Hannah was feeling was becoming unbearable. If she did not start moving soon she would not be able to move at all.

"Are there Guardians up there?"

"Yes. Look, Lt Peters saw the readings I took and knew my location before I …"

"Peter’s is above? Thank God." She closed her eyes in relief. Peters. He was a resourceful man who never gave up.

"All right, what’s your name?"

"Brovskij."

"Blake. All right, Ski, now that the introductions are over, here is the plan. Can you make out that ledge above us?"

"Yes."

"That’s where you and I are headed," Hannah said as she began to move to the ensign’s side.

"I’ll go first. You’ll move when I tell you, how I tell you. Got it?"

"Got it," Brovskij said. "You saved my life."

"So it seems," she said through clenched teeth as she began her ascent once again this time with a companion. "I expect you to return the favour.

*****

Eliana Montgomery rose from Janeway’s desk and rubbed her aching neck. She had huddled over the computer far too long. Her eyes were tired and she felt the by now so familiar headache begin to stir again.

She walked towards the replicator when a hail interrupted her steps.

"Ambassador J’Aoh is requesting to speak with you, Captain," the ensign manning the ops station informed her over the comm link. "Should we break radio silence?"

"Yes, Ensign. Patch the ambassador through Voyager’s ready room," Montgomery said and quickly fetched a large glass of water from the replicator. What she really wanted was another cup of coffee but knew it would only cause her more discomfort in the long run.

"Ambassador," she greeted the serious man gazing back at her from the work console on Janeway’s desk.

"Captain Montgomery," he returned politely. "The statistics are coming in from the latest quake so we have some idea of the extent of it."

"Go on," the captain said and sipped her water, sure that the numbers would be discouraging.

"It’s bad," the ambassador stated as she had anticipated. "Two smaller cities have sustained serious damage and they are completely cut off from the rescue workers. The
only way to get in there is by air … or walking."

"What about my first officer? Any word from him?"

"Yes. They witnessed the devastation from the air. They are at the EOC now, assisting the local military in their efforts. My understanding is that Commander Toriello intends to cut to the chase with the officials from now on."

Montgomery smirked against the rim of the glass. She had other pressing matters to attend to but she would have given anything to witness her first officer in action.

"I wish him luck," she smiled sardonically at the ambassador. "Or should I say - my condolences to the prime minister?"

Ambassador J'Aoh shook his head.

"I'm sure Commander Toriello and Commander Chakotay are up for the task. They seem made from the same mould. However, I need you to come to the surface as soon as you can, Captain. I have arranged an impromptu audience for you with the Emperor and his son."

Montgomery frowned.

"How soon can they see me?" she asked.

"The old Emperor’s strength is limited and most of his duties are delegated to his son these days. Still he insisted to meet the famous Captain Montgomery. You are a legend my dear."

She huffed.

"Honestly Captain, he was appalled to realise that his world is in such a dire state. I had to use unconventional methods to reach him. The prime minister has successfully managed to block the door on me when I have tried to go through official channels."

"Good job, Ambassador," Montgomery commended. "If you can let me have one hour to prepare, I can brief the Emperor on all the latest findings and bring enough facts to demonstrate what we are witnessing is no act of nature. Does he realise that the royal palace is in danger of being destroyed?"

"Yes, I warned him myself."

There was no way the palace would remain intact when the big one hit. A large park near the waterfront surrounded it just where the rivers ran into the sea.

Montgomery paused to ponder for a moment. Was that the intent? Was someone out to destroy not only the seat of government but also the Emperor himself?

"How did he respond to you warning, Ambassador?"

"He understood my concerns but reassured me that nothing would happen to him or the palace. It seems that the structure has survived numerous catastrophes in the past. Hurricanes, earthquakes…"

"Yes, all act of nature my friend. This is no act of nature. This is man up to no good."
If she was going to be successful she knew that she had to convince the old man to evacuate his family and staff from there immediately.

"All right, forget what I said earlier. Make it thirty minutes," she nodded towards the screen. "I'll brief Janeway. She is more than capable of handling the situation up here."

"Thirty minutes then" the ambassador confirmed.

Montgomery emptied the glass and set it down firmly on the desk.

"Thirty minutes."

*****

The climb to the ledge had been gruelling. Some inner strength drove her on.

The young ensign had turned out to be a surprise as well. Although he had never climbed like this before he was a natural athlete and a quick learner. She had come to admire Brovskij. With only a makeshift harness he had he climbed up behind her doing exactly what she told him to do. Soon the two had found a rhythm, which made the climb much smoother. There even were a couple of times that he had to belay her when fatigue had caused her to lose her footing.

The two had finally reached the ledge. Both were exhausted.

"How’s it going Ski?" Hannah asked as she rested against the wall of the cliff.

"Nothing to it, Blake," he smiled as he joined her.

Slowly the two caught their breaths. Where the hell was their help?

"Brovskij! Can you hear me?" A call echoed through the cavern

"That’s Peters! Peters! Can you hear me?" Hannah yelled.

"Blake? Blake!"

"We’re over here!" yelled Brovskij.

Just above them lights began to appear.

"I see you. Stay where you are and we’ll get rope to you. I assume neither of you would mind a lift?"

"Lieutenant, we’ve got injured below."

"Hang in there, Blake. We’ve got you covered. Help is on the way."

"Hurry, Pete. The rest of the team is hurt. Schwartz is dying."

"Got it," Peters’ addressed the other crewmembers behind him. "Get the rest of the equipment in here at once. Notify the shuttle we’ve found the missing away team."

"Pete, you’re going to have to do this the old fashion way. None of our equipment is working properly."
"Thanks for the heads up." The lieutenant proceeded to give orders above them. "I want a rope down there now! Start setting up the riggings. Let’s move it, people."

In moments Peters repelled to their position.

"I won’t even ask how you two hooked up I’m just damn glad you’re both still alive. Where are the others, Blake?"

"Below us, east about 50 meters. The lieutenant is seriously injured. The others all suffer from fractures, at least two possible concussions and internal damage. We tried to hail the surface but the minerals in these rocks are some type of metal that makes communication impossible."

"I agree. Worse stuff I’ve ever seen."

Two ropes dropped to their position. Lt Peters and another of the Guardians set down on the ledge.

"Okay, Blake, let’s get you topside," Peters stated.

"No, listen to me, Pete. Let me go back down with you. I can lead you to the others."

"Blake, you’re in no shape to be descending into this hole again. I need you on top in case something goes wrong. Come on, you’re one of our best."

"You don’t understand. Rhyssa is down there."

"I know, Hannah," he said quietly as he helped her gently to her feet. "We’ll take good care of her, I promise, but I need you up top. That’s where you’ll do her the most good."

Hannah bit her lip but obeyed. She staggered forward and hooked in.

"All set?"

"All set."

"You know the drill, let the folks up top pull you. You just walk the walk. As soon as you get topside inspect the riggings and make sure there are no mistakes. We have a couple of newbies along."

"Well, if they’re anything like Ski here, we’re lucky."

"Yes, we are. How about you, Brovskij? Ready for a lift?"

"Sir, I’ll do what ever you need me to do."

"I appreciate that, Ensign. What I need if your brawn if you’re up to it."

"Count on me, sir. I’ll do whatever it takes."

"Good. Have you ever done this manoeuvre before?"

"He’s new to it, Pete, but he catches on quick," Hannah offered. "Just follow my lead, Ski. Good luck, Pete."

"Okay, folks, nice and slow. Bring Blake up first, then Brovskij."
Slowly Hannah walked up the face of the cavern to the top where her fellow shipmates and the folks from Voyager gave her a warm reception. Next came Brovskij.

Slowly she checked each of the riggings making sure that every knot was secure appropriately anchored into place. Quickly, she and her other two shipmates began working on a series of pulleys. It was the only way they would get the litters up. Once that was completed T’Pol descended into the cavern to assist Peters. Ensign Mercier had gone above surface to relay a message to Paris.

The team had then assembled a litter from one of the pack. It was quite ingenious. Two parts attached together quickly, securely forming a basket of sorts. The material was of an alloy unfamiliar to the Voyager crew. They quickly attached the ropes and lowered it.

"Have you got water?" Hannah asked.

"Yes, plenty" replied Lt Carlson

"Then secure some on the litter. Beside medical care they need water the most."

"No problem."

Quietly Hannah slid to the ground and rested against a rock.

"You okay?" Brovskij asked quietly.

"I want to go down again."

"I heard that. I guess it’s better to send the others, they are in great shape, you’re not."

Hannah sighed.

"Don’t remind me," she said grudgingly. "It’s just … my friend Rhyssa is down there and I …"

The young man smiled as if he understood and cautiously took her hand.

"She’ll understand," he assured her. "Leaving an injured crewmate behind in order to get help is hard. To leave a friend is even harder."

"Yes."

They sat in silence for a while. Hannah realised that she knew nothing of this young man. It had only registered in her mind moments ago that he must be from that other ship, the one that had so mysteriously turned up from the Alpha Quadrant.

"Thank you," she muttered. "I may have saved your neck when you fell … but you saved mine by helping me climb."

He grinned, looking very boyish.

"Then I guess we’re even, Ensign."

"I guess."

J’Tal, the third member of the Excellence came over to Hannah.
"They have the lieutenant and are ready for us to bring him up."

"Let’s do it then."

Slowly the combined crews worked together to raise the stretcher. In time their efforts produced the unconscious body of Lt Schwartz.

Ensign Mercier had returned with medical supplies and equipment. Quickly Hannah reached for the equipment and began primary survey.

"I don’t believe this! This damn rock is still interfering with the readings!"

"Is he stable enough for transport?" J’Tal asked abruptly.

"How the hell do I know? All I know is if we leave him here any longer he’ll die."

"All right, let’s move him out and get him onboard the Delta Flyer. Blake, you need to go with him."

Hannah’s head snapped up.

"What?"

"They should you in flight but if they have to fly him on the shuttle then you are his only hope for survival. Now get going."

Hannah knew what J’Tal had said was true but it did not help. She followed the stretcher up to the surface. Lt Carlton tapped his comm badge.

"Carlton to the Delta Flyer. Two to beam up and then relay to Voyager sickbay."

"Two? But …" she began but then felt the shimmering sensation of a transporter beam.

She got a short, almost indistinguishable view of a shuttle and a blonde human man before another transporter beam lock onto to her and sent her molecules to her destination.

"Welcome, Ensign," a slightly bald man in a Starfleet medical uniform greeted her when she rematerialised in a strange room.

"I take it this is the sickbay," she managed faintly, still huddled over Lt Schwartz’ unconscious body that had ended up on a bio bed.

"Correct," the man said. "I’m the Doctor and you’re onboard the Federation Starship Voyager."

"I’m Hannah Blake," she muttered. "I’m not the one in need of medical attention, though."

"I think you are, but first things first," the Doctor said and began scanning Lt Schwartz. "He is not in great shape but nothing I can’t handle."

"I take it our transporters are still down?" Hannah asked rhetorically and glanced around the room.

"That’s right. From what I understand, your communication array is up and running and
so is your short-range sensors. Everything else is undergoing repairs."

"We received a very brief information about this ship and … you’re really from home, aren’t you?" she asked tentatively.

"Yes. We’re travelling this Quadrant just like you did, trying to get home."

The concept of trying to get home was so long ago that Hannah had forgotten how it felt. She vaguely remembered the hard times when they had struggled to stay alive against hostile aliens and an overpowering illness that claimed so many of her colleagues and friends. After they had taken the decision to stay she had blocked out the painful memories but being here with this man in a familiar uniform, although more modern than she remembered, brought so much of the old pain back.

"Are you all right, Ensign?" The Doctor asked, eyeing her carefully. "You’re quite pale."

"I’m fine, Doctor."

"Hm. Please take a seat over there," he pointed towards another bio bed. "I won’t be long. The lieutenant’s injuries are serious but lucky for him, easy to heal."

Hannah walked over to the bio bed when the doors hissed open. She glanced up and saw her captain walk into the sickbay.

"Captain," Hannah exhaled and regarded her commanding officer, relief flooding her.

"Ensign Blake," Montgomery greeted her. "I was on my way to transporter room one when I heard the good news. You had us all worried. How are you feeling, Hannah?"

The younger woman bit her lip, feeling utterly stupid for letting circumstances affect her so much.

"It was … bad, ma’am," she confessed.

Montgomery walked up to her and cupped Hannah’s cheek. This did not surprise the ensign; her captain was a tactile person.

"You look like hell, Ensign," the captain stated softly. "Let the good Doctor take care of you, I’m sure …"

The sound of the transporter beam interrupted her and a body rematerialised on bio bed next to Hannah and Montgomery.

"Rhyssa!" Hannah exclaimed, nudging her captain to the side without realising it. "Are you all right?"

She leaned over her dust-covered friend, anxiously looking for signs of consciousness. To her relief her friend opened her eyes and looked bemused at her.

"You scared me half to death," Rhyssa accused hoarsely.

"What do you mean?" Hannah smiled between tears.

"When Peters and his gang had hauled me up through that hole, I expected you to be there. Then Peters said that you had been beamed to some strange sickbay and … Well,
if it hadn’t been for that nice young man, Brovskij, I would have gone berserk!"

Hannah had to laugh, immediately regretting it when the pain from her collarbone stabbed her.

"He’s a nice guy," she concurred. "I’m fine, just a minor fracture and lots of bruises."

The Doctor came up next to them, moving the medical scanner over Rhyssa. The dark haired woman looked up at him, awaiting his diagnosis.

"Three broken ribs, broken wrists and four broken fingers, a mild concussion and a large amount of bruises," he sighed and turned to Montgomery. "Since Mr Paris normally is my part time nurse, may I suggest that some of your medical staff is beamed over to assist me, Captain? I anticipate that the last three of the away team has similar injuries."

"Of course, Doctor," Montgomery said. "I’ll give the order immediately."

"I’m sorry, I didn’t see you, Captain," Rhyssa said, looking pleased to see her commanding officer.

"That’s all right, Ensign. Just get better, that’s an order."

"Yes, ma’am."

"Make sure Blake is seen to as well. We all know her distaste for medical procedures," Montgomery smirked.

Rhyssa grinned and nodded.

Montgomery went over to the other bio bed and briefly touched Lt Schwartz’ shoulder. Then she turned around and left sickbay after nodding briefly.

Hannah gazed down at Rhyssa, the relief of seeing her friend out of harms way.

"I’m sorry," she offered with a weak voice.

"For what?" Rhyssa asked surprised.

"For being difficult down there."

"Ah, don’t worry about it. You did great. You saved that Brovskij guy and got us out, didn’t you?"

Hannah swallowed hard but nodded reluctantly.

"I was so scared," she muttered.

"So was I. Shall we make a pact?"

"A pact?"

"Let’s not do that again anytime soon?"

Hannah had to smile at the funny look on Rhyssa’s face.
"Deal."

Seven of Nine leaned closer, her eyes darting over the computer screen as she tried to process the information.

Double-checking it, something she normally never did, to verify her startling findings, she then tapped her comm badge.

"Seven of Nine to Captain Janeway."

"Janeway here. Go ahead."

"Report to astrometrics," Seven requested absentmindedly, her thoughts focusing on the data in front of her.

"What's up, Seven? Can you brief me over the comm link?"

"Yes, however you will want to verify my findings yourself so reporting here will save time."

"You seem awfully certain. Very well. Computer, a site to site transport to the astrometrics lab."

The transporter system delivered Janeway next to Seven and the captain looked expectantly at the blonde, a crooked smile gracing her lips.

"Yes?"

"I have managed to filter out what you would call a 'smokescreen' of misinformation, of data, to cover up the technology behind what is causing the earthquakes, Captain," Seven stated, clasping her hands behind her back, suddenly experiencing what she assumed was nervousness.

"What do you mean, 'smokescreen'?", Janeway said and stepped up to the work console, putting a hand on the other woman's smaller back. "Show me."

"Here," the ex-Borg pointed, feeling her captain's touch and basking in it, willing her hands to remain steady. "The readings did not make sense so I used a Borg encrypted decoding algorithm and by examining one strand of data at a time I managed to isolate the disturbance. It is a cleverly disguised programming that works like a cloaking device, in a manner of speaking."

The captain regarded the data flickering over the screen. Her frown, as she kept reading and comparing the information, grew deeper by the second.

"Who ever came up with this knows what they're doing," Janeway muttered.

"Let me show you what else caught my interest," Seven explained and punched in new commands. "I managed to trace the signal. I can pinpoint it to a location with an accuracy of five hundred square metres."

"You know where this originates from?"

"Yes, Captain. This is not all. I have proof that this is indeed no accident or unforeseen
"technological catastrophe."

"Well, we were fairly certain about that, Seven."

"Yes, I have recorded evidence that puts this into a whole new perspective of the powers behind it."

Janeway leaned against the console and crossed her arms over her chest. Her eyes flashed a singing grey as she regarded her astrometrics officer closely.

Seven put her mesh-covered left hand over the computer screen as to safeguard the information. She knew Janeway would recognise the severity of her findings.

"The equipment used to re-route the water and by doing so, causing the impending disaster, is not indigenous to the planet. The signal it omits shows that it is alien."

Janeway stiffened, stepping closer to Seven.

"Alien? Are you sure?"

"Yes. That is not all. I have reason to believe it is Protectorate technology."

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Continued in The Guardians - part 5
Chapter 6

Seven of Nine walked into the shuttle bay and up to the Delta Flyer.

Tom Paris was standing in front of what he considered his pride and joy, embracing his girlfriend Lt B’Elanna Torres. The Doctor had cosmetically altered the Klingon’s proud features to resemble the indigenous population of the planet below.

"Have I told you how much I like the new look?" Paris asked as he hugged B’Elanna close.

"Watch it, fly boy. It’s only temporary I assure you," she said giving him a quick nudge to his ribs. "I’m all for blending in with the locals but this …"

Paris chuckled and pulled her closer.

"I’m sure Doc will reverse the process as soon as you get back."

"He’d better or he’ll be space junk."

Tom’ eyes became serious.

"Be careful down there, B’Elanna," he murmured against her neck. "I’ll be within transporter range. If you need a beam out, I’m your man."

"Don’t worry, Tom," the Klingon replied. "I’m a big girl and what’s more, I’ll have Seven with me."

"Let’s not forget the stern Lt Bremer," Tom grinned. "She looks like she can kick some serious ass."

"I assure you I can kick with the best of them," a cool, sonorous voice said, making them all turn around.

Seven hid a smile when she saw Tom Paris pale slightly at the sight of the tall woman with the black braid down her back. She was not dressed in the usual Guardian uniform; the away team was equipped with dark grey coveralls.

"Lt Bremer," Seven greeted her. "Captain Janeway is joining us shortly for a last minute briefing. I understand that Captain Montgomery left for the planet a while ago."

"That’s right," Lt Heidi Bremer concurred. "Is the Delta Flyer ready to launch, Lt Paris?"

"Yes, ma’am," Tom said smartly.

Lt Bremer had seniority on all of them, having served as a lieutenant for twenty years.

Seven moved her shoulders, trying out the comfort of the unfamiliar garment. The coverall were loose compared to her biosuit and she decided she liked the freedom it gave her. It was a standard Guardian away team outfit. The away teams used it when they expected to meet unusual and demanding conditions. It was efficient against water, fire and cold temperatures.
"You really look different with those cosmetic changes and that new outfit, Seven," B’Elanna stated. "Will you be okay without your biosuit?"

"The Doctor assures me that I can function within normal parameters for a limited time in this garment."

"For how long? How’s your cortical implant holding up?"

Seven frowned.

"I appreciate your concern, Lt Torres," she said formally, not comfortable with the turn the conversation was taking in front of Lt Bremer. "I received additional replicated nano-probes twenty-seven minutes ago and I am wearing my Velocity biosuit underneath. I will be fully operational for several hours."

B’Elanna nodded, not commenting any further on the matter.

The doors hissed open. Captain Janeway entered and walked up to the away team consisting of Lt Bremer, Seven, B’Elanna and two security officers, Ensign Brovskij from Voyager and Ensign Vak from the Excellence, a woman indigenous to the Delta Quadrant.

"You all set?" Voyager’s captain asked shortly. "Good."

Seven regarded her, clasping her hands behind her back and willing her eyes to remain emotionless. She remembered the tumultuous feelings when the captain had invaded her personal space in astrometrics not more than half an hour ago. The auburn haired woman had stood beside her and touched her lower back while listening to Seven.

Seven had informed her captain about her findings. The news had been disturbing. There were indications that someone was using what appeared to be Protectorate technology to re-route the subterranean water and by doing so, causing the impending disaster.

Seven had narrowed the search grid down to a building in an industrial area on the outskirts of the capital of Bunthora.

Janeway had remained close to the ex-Borg and Seven’s heart had fluttered making her almost dizzy. She had not been able to keep from staring at the captain’s wine shaded lips. Janeway had to repeat a question twice before the blonde pulled herself together and focused on the task at hand.

Janeway had relayed a message through the Delta Flyer that had reached Montgomery just before the Excellence’s captain joined Bunthora’s emperor and his son for an impromptu audience.

Montgomery had left the preparation for this away mission to Janeway but suggested that Lt Bremer, who just returned to the Excellence, redeploy with whom ever Janeway chose to execute the mission. Montgomery’s logic was that the team would need someone with her experience.

"Here are the latest readings from the area you’ll be investigating," Janeway said as she handed over two data PADDs to the Bremer and Torres. "You’ll find everything we know about the building. The data is not complete since there appears to be an active jamming device interfering with our scans. Your orders are to go in, scan the building
and locate the technology. You are then to determine its origin and terminate it. Lt Bremer, I’m relying on your experience to determine the fastest and safest method of doing this. By the way, you’ll be linking up with Sha’nee J’Oy. She’ll rendezvous with you on site. Brief her on a need to know basis only."

"Aye, Captain," Lt Bremer said smartly.

"Good hunting," the captain said with a crooked smile.

Torres, Bremer and Paris along with the security officers entered the Delta Flyer and Seven turned to join them.

"Seven, wait," Janeway said in a low voice.

The blonde turned around. Janeway walked closer and looked up with concern in her eyes.

"How are you feeling?"

"I am functioning within acceptable parameters, Captain," Seven replied.

"Did the Doctor replenish your systems?"

"Yes."

Janeway looked down and then raised her eyes to meet Seven’s again.

"Promise me to be careful, okay?" the older woman murmured.

"Of course, Captain."

"Just don’t … take any unnecessary risks. I couldn’t bear it if …" Janeway broke off and abruptly took a step back.

"Captain?" Seven said, trying to understand what Janeway meant to say.

"Just be careful, that’s all," the captain said and began to turn around.

Seven knew there was more to the captain’s choice of words. There had been a glimpse of fear in Janeway’s eyes.

"I will not jeopardise my safety," the blonde said quietly. "I will return to you, Kathryn."

This made the captain pivot quickly. Her eyes, wide and radiating the deepest shade of grey, glazed over briefly.

"I take that as a promise," Janeway managed. "Do not let me down."

Seven was breathless.

"I will not."

"Good. Carry on."

Janeway turned around again and briskly walked out of the shuttle bay.
Seven stared at the closed door for a couple of seconds and then joined the others in the Delta Flyer.

They had a mission to carry out and not much time to do it in

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Sha’nee J’Oy pressed herself against the wall of a tall brick building.

She had rendezvoused with the five people the Protectorate embassy had sent fifteen minutes ago. After receiving an address and orders to meet them in an industrial area, an embassy driver had taken her there in a hovercraft. She had found the team waiting nearby.

Sha’nee had guided them to the building in question, using a small access road that took them to the back.

Sha’nee regarded the woman in front of her.

Lt Bremer was a tall dark woman with strong, handsome features. The icy blue gaze she had bestowed the young Bunthoran had left Sha’nee feeling uneasy. Bremer moved with ease and displayed an aura of both competence and danger.

The team had waited until there had been a shift of guards before running the last hundred yards, sheltered by a low hedge. An extended surveillance was a luxury they could not afford. They had to act quickly in order to reach the technology in time.

Lt Bremer led the team up to a door. Sha’nee realised that the guards would soon begin their rounds again and was nervously looking over her shoulder.

Bremer pulled out a thin tool from a small bag attached to her belt and inserted it into the lock. Within moments the door was open.

The tall woman pulled her phaser out. Silently she signalled Vak and Brovskij to slip inside and secure the premise while the rest remained pressed against the building barely hidden in the shadows of the structure.

Once given an all clear by the team members inside, Bremer nodded to the remaining members, "Let’s go."

Silently the group entered the structure assuming defensive positions, weapons ready.

As her eyes adjusted to the interior lights, Sha’nee gasped at the sight of the vast machine hall that stretched throughout the entire building. A myriad of tubes and computerised machinery filled it, reaching all the way up to the tall ceiling.

"I want sensors placed here and here," said Bremer in a low tone, pointing to the locations she wanted the equipment deployed. "Once they are in place, I want us to fan out. Ms J’Oy, you’re with Ensign Vak and me. We’ll investigate the offices to our left. Lt Torres, I want you, Seven and Ensign Brovskij to begin searching the factory floor. Keep an eye out for guards or factory workers. Phasers on stun only."
Torres and Seven nodded. With their modified tricorders ready and with Brovskij guarding their backs, they methodically began making their way through the maze of machinery.

Sha’nee followed Bremer’s lead to the left side of the enormous machine hall. Ensign Vak walked just behind them. Bremer stopped at the first office door and scanned it. When it was clear of life signs she tried the door handle. The door was unlocked and she opened it a little, peeking inside.

"A storage room for office supplies," she informed Sha’nee over her shoulder.

They moved stealthily down along the doors, opening them one by one, not finding anything of interest.

Sha’nee wondered where the workforce was. How could such a large facility function automatically? The offices looked not only abandoned; it was as if nobody had used them in a very long time.

They carefully worked their way through a long corridor, checking each office area they passed. So far they had not stumbled over any incriminating evidence nor had they seen another living soul.

Sha’nee sighed and scanned the area again. Having worked closely with the Protectorate embassy staff for more than a year she was privy to more information about them and the Guardians than most Bunthorans. She was however not very familiar with their technology. Using a radiacmeter from her own world she suddenly began to pick up unusual readings.

"Lieutenant," she said, pointing to the erratic readings. "Something is wrong. I’m picking up low levels of radiation. Any ideas where that’s coming from?"

Bremer reached for the radiacmeter. Quickly, she made adjustments to her tricorder.

"Damn. We’ve been scanning for the wrong thing. I’m detecting a massive energy source fifteen metres that way." The tall lieutenant pointed in among the machinery. "Good catch, Ms J’Oy."

Sha’nee wanted to smile broadly at the brief acknowledgement but only nodded.

Bremer and Vak scanned the immediate area again, adjusting their tricorders accordingly. The readings were the same.

"Over here," Bremer said, moving lithely between the two large machines closest to them. "I think we just struck gold."

Sha’nee followed the tactical chief and noticed a faint but triumphant smirk on Bremer’s lips as the signal led her to a large black metal cabinet. Ensign Vak kept her guard up, standing with her phaser rifle ready and scanning for life signs.

Bremer unhooked the small bag from her belt, opened and placed it on the floor next to her. The Bunthoran watched her curiously. The bag held an assortment of thin tools.

Working quickly and skilfully, Bremer picked the lock of the metal door and opened it. Inside was a large piece of technology that boasted a wide range of multicoloured flickering diodes. She scanned it.
"Got it!"

"What is it? Some kind of computer?" Sha’nee asked.

"Yes. Not anything that you’d expect to find in this kind of facility."

"I thought this plant produced hover craft parts?"

"Far from it. I’m no too sure what it’s producing besides low levels of radiation at the moment."

Bremer oriented herself to the control panel. It was obvious that someone had made various modifications to the computer.

"Let’s see what this can tell us."

"What can I do to help?"

Bremer gave Sha’nee an approving look.

"Help me decipher these readings. They are in your native tongue, you may interpret the symbols more adequately."

She had not even finished her sentence when Vak’s tricorder gave a muted beep, shortly followed by the sound of approaching steps. Bremer quickly assembled her tools and picked up her phaser. Quickly closing the metal cabinet she nudged Sha’nee behind it. Nodding to Vak, she raised her weapon, making sure it was set to stun.

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"What did the captain want?" B’Elanna Torres asked in a low voice as she tentatively poked her head around another of the large machines in the big room, her phaser in one hand and her tricorder in the other.

Ensign Brovskij was walking a couple of steps behind them, making sure there were no unpleasant surprises.

"Lieutenant?" Seven asked, surprised.

"She asked you to stay behind. Obviously she wanted to talk to you about something important. Is she still concerned about you?"

"The captain wanted to assure herself over the state of my cortical implant."

"Anything I should know about? I mean, are you okay?"

"Yes, I am functioning well, Lieutenant, how are you doing?"

B’Elanna grinned.

"I see you have acquired some manners Seven. I’m impressed."
"Then you impress easily, Lieutenant."

The team cautiously approached a narrow area between two large columns. Turning the corner B’Elanna halted abruptly at the sight ahead.

"I’ll be damned. Seven, Brovskij, look at this," she said, a new energy in her voice. "Have you ever seen anything like it?"

Seven and the ensign walked up behind her. Tall, narrow cylinders in groups of nine filled the rest of the machine hall, stretching as far as the remaining part of the building. There was a soft humming that appeared to originate from the technology.

The blonde scanned the cylinders and frowned. Trying several different settings, she looked up, shaking her head.

"I can not make out what kind of metallic alloy this is," she said.

"Let me try," B’Elanna replied and adjusted the settings on her tricorder. She performed the scan only to get the same disappointing result as Seven. "Damn!"

"Do not be discouraged, Lieutenant," Seven said. "The reason we can not obtain any readings indicates that this may be the Protectorate technology we are looking for. All alloys indigenous to this planet can be determined by our tricorders."

B’Elanna glanced over her shoulder and nodded.

"For once, you’re annoying habit of always being right is not a bad thing," she grinned.

Brovskij’s tricorder beeped a warning just before a sound coming from the part of the machine hall that hosted the offices. They raised their phasers.

B’Elanna lifted her hand to her lips to signal silence then motioned Seven to follow her. She signalled Brovskij to move in behind the tall machinery at a slightly different angle to provide cover. Once Brovskij was in place, she and Seven manoeuvred around the first row of cylinders.

Heavy footsteps made them press tightly against the cool surface behind their backs. Seven saw B’Elanna swallow hard.

The blonde’s Borg-enhanced hearing picked up on four sets of steps coming from two different directions.

She glanced at B’Elanna and held up four fingers and then pointed in the direction of the sound. She then cautiously turned towards Brovskij and repeated the gesture.

Brovskij nodded in acknowledgement and took up an offensive stance he slowly took cover from his position and aimed his weapon towards the sound of the approaching steps.

"I was sure I heard something over here," a male voice called out as its owner came closer. "Mah’noo? See anything?"

"Nothing. I keep telling you, these noises you always hear come from the damn cylinders. I swear they sing at night too," the first guard’s colleague said in a tired tone of voice.
"Funny, Mah’noo. One of these days you’ll be grateful that I’m so careful. They don’t pay us this handsomely to sleep on the job."

The steps came closer. The two men were now immediately behind the two women. B’Elanna motioned to Seven to start moving and they stealthily made their way around another group of cylinders. Here the frequency of the humming noise was both louder and faster. Seven felt it reverberate deep inside her cortical implant, the pounding waves was causing her to experience nausea.

"You okay?" B’Elanna mouthed and put a hand on her arm.

Seven nodded and swallowed. She did not enjoy lying but she had to pull herself together for the sake of the mission and for the people of this planet. As long as it was not in danger of incapacitating her, she was not going to disclose her discomfort to B’Elanna.

"Let’s go back," they heard the man called Mah’noo try to convince his colleague. "There’s nobody here, I tell you."

"I want to check the back door. They didn’t suddenly increase security just for fun, you know."

The steps hesitated and then Seven heard them begin to fade away towards Bremer’s location.

She decided to risk it and tapped her comm badge. It gave a muted chirp and then went quiet. She tried again with the same result.

"We have no way of communicating within this structure at this point," she informed B’Elanna who made a face.

Seven knew they were in trouble when there was a new energy in Mah’noo’s voice.

"Damn, you were right! This door’s been tampered with!"

*****

Bremer knew it was the only course of action.

"My comm badge isn’t working and I have to assume that the other’s aren’t either." She glanced at Sha’nee Joy who was standing next to her. "I guess you’re it."

"Excuse me?" Sha’nee asked sounding worried.

"You have to get out of here and make contact with the Embassy," Bremer hissed and nudged the young Bunthoran.

"Yes, but …"

"Circle around slowly. I’ll make a diversion. Exit the same way we came in. As soon as you are clear of this building make contact with Captain Montgomery. Here, take this." She handed the young woman her comm badge. "Captain Montgomery is within radio
range. Trust me on this; tap this device and hail her. Inform her of the situation. She’ll
tell you what to do next."

Bremer glanced around the corner and saw the shadows of two men approaching.

"Damn it. We just ran out of time. Now go!"

She pushed Sha’nee J’Oy in the right direction. The young woman began to run. Her
footsteps alerted the men to their whereabouts.

Bremer produced a small incendiary device from her pocket. Nodding to Vak, the two
took cover as she threw it into the path of the oncoming guards. The device exploded
into flames throwing the guards to the ground and blinding them with its light.

Vak and Bremer moved swiftly raising their phasers.

One of them men reached towards his weapon.

"Don’t even think about it," Bremer said as she took aim at her prey.

Both she and Vak opened fire, stunning the two men.

A sound from behind alerted the two that reinforcements were about to arrive.

"Cover me!" Bremer yelled as she leaped and then rolled behind a column.

Vak laid down cover fire as Bremer manoeuvred into position.

Vak hit the first guard who was rushing her position squarely in the chest. Another
guard, a large Bunthoran, dropped behind another column and was laying down some
fire of his own.

As the debris began to fly Bremer realised that the bastard’s intentions were to kill Vak
and herself. She moved cautiously to the left, trying to find a good angle where she
could fire. Vak was doing a great job of keeping the guard’s undivided attention but
Bremer knew she had to act quickly. There was a small chance that these idiots had not
called for backup yet.

She needed a clear field of fire. Moving quickly she spotted her target between a narrow
space among the columns and the closest machine.

Bremer heard a click and then the sound of the guard’s voice speaking in a low, urgent
tone. Realising that the Bunthoran was alerting someone about the intrusion, she aimed
at him just as he turned with his weapon and spotted her.

Simultaneously, the weapons fired.

Pain exploded just beneath her left shoulder, tossing her to the ground.

Then all went black.

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Vak watched in horror as Bremer went down. The antiquated weapon had done its damage and she could see the dark red human blood spilling on the floor from her colleague.

"Vak!"

Looking to her right she saw Brovskij, moving like lightning, weapon drawn and ready.

Maintaining her aim on the down guards she motioned with her head towards the still form on the floor.

"Bremer's down. One of those stupid projectile weapons hit her."

Brovskij cautiously moved forward, removing the guns from the men on the floor and swiftly immobilising them by tying them up securely, using the guards' own belts.

Seven and B'Elanna had quickly followed.

The Klingon sank down next to Bremer, rolling her cautiously onto her back.

"Seven have you got the medical kit there?"

"Yes. What is her condition?"

"I need to stop the bleeding."

Swiftly, B'Elanna ran the tricorder over Bremer then began to repair the damaged tissues just below her shoulder. Once she completed the task she pulled a hypo spray from the kit and revived Bremer.

"Kah’less, Bremer," she growled. "What kind of Guardian crap is this? Is self-sacrifice always on the agenda with you guys?"

"No more than it is with you," Bremer moaned, trying to sit up. "Anyway, it had nothing to do with self-sacrifice."

"Really? Then what’s your excuse?"

"Old age. I failed to duck."

"Well, old lady, try to make yourself a smaller target next time."

Bremer groaned.

"The scum was in the process of alerting his superiors when I stunned him. We’re running out of time," she said between clenched teeth.

Seven regarded the impressive woman on the floor. She wondered how you reached such a calm self-control and confidence. Bremer was in agony but she kept her demeanour calm and her voice was low with a lethal tinge to it as usual.

"I hope you got to him in time. Hm, let me look at you," the Klingon muttered. She scanned the tall Guardian with a medical tricorder once again. "The good news is; there’s no immediate threat to your life. I’ve stopped you from oozing you life’s blood all over the floor."
"Thanks. And the bad news?"

"The projectile damaged your lung somehow. You won’t make it for long unless we receive backup."

Bremer held her breath, trying to ease the pain.

"Don’t underestimate me."

"I’m not. I’m stating a fact. I’ve stabilised the fragments for the time being but you’re going to need surgery. Perhaps the thought of a Klingon with a surgical cutter in her hands bending over you inspires confidence?"

Bremer made a face.

"I get the picture."

"Where is Ms J’Oy?" Seven asked.

"I sent her for backup. She has my comm badge." Bremer coughed and shuddered. "We need to move - now. No doubt we’ve worn out our welcome. Even if the guard failed to notify the officials we’ve made enough noise in here to wake the dead. I don’t think the perpetrators of this set up would have hired complete idiots, do you?"

She broke off as Seven bent down and effortlessly pulled her to her feet.

"Seven!" Torres gasped. "Are you crazy? Didn’t you two hear anything I just said? She shouldn’t be moved!"

"Lieutenant Bremer is correct. If we stay here, we may all die. We are running out of time. I will assist her but we can not remain here."

"Lead the way, Seven," Bremer said grimacing in pain, holding on to the ex-Borg.

B’Elanna swore as she gathered the supplies and the two teams, reunited again, moved out among the machines, making their way between the tall cylinders.

They needed to put distance between them and any potential assailants until help arrived.

"Oh, by the way, Torres," the tall tactical chief said, "did I mention anything about the low levels of radiation?"

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Captain Eliana Montgomery left the palace in a state of sheer exasperation. She did not even glance at Ambassador J’Aoh walking beside her.

The Emperor and his son had received her information, given it serious thought and despite the grave danger decided to remain in the palace. The old emperor had said in a gentle voice that he wanted to share the fate of his people. He had added that he and his son put their trust in the Guardians’ ability to help them counter the impending disaster.
Montgomery had urged them to move to higher ground in the mountains, knowing that the royal family had a summer residence there. The enigmatic smile on the Emperor’s lips when he softly spoke, telling her of his decision, made it clear that he and his family were remaining where they were. He would however encourage anyone in his staff to either join their families or flee to the mountains.

The Excellence’s captain had then proceeded to inform the emperor of the nature of the quakes, of their suspicions towards the prime minister and his cabinet. There were no outward signs of outrage in the older man’s features but his eyes betrayed a glowing anger that did not bode well. The Emperor’s son was not as subtle as his father. He seemed determined to confront Bunthora’s prime minister as soon as opportunity presented itself.

Montgomery sighed and took her seat in the hovercraft provided by the Protectorate embassy. Ambassador J’Aoh sank down next to her. She gave the driver instructions to take them back to the compound. Just as he pulled out into the busy traffic, a breathless unfamiliar voice hailed her.

"Sha’nee J’Oy to Captain Montgomery."

Montgomery raised her eyebrows at the ambassador, instantly recognising the name of the young woman. It was the young Bunthoran who had been instrumental in alerting Ambassador J’Aoh and the Protectorate about the impending disaster. The captain tapped her comm badge hidden underneath her jacket.

"Montgomery here. Go ahead, Ms J’Oy."

"Captain, I’m assigned to the team that is investigating the industrial plant. Guards showed up and now we need help … I mean, backup," J’Oy said breathlessly as she rushed to explain the urgency of their situation. "Lt Bremer and the others are still inside but your communication devices failed because of some type of interference, maybe it’s because of the radiation? I don’t know. Bremer handed me this device and told me to get out of the warehouse and call you. Listen, just as I escaped the building the guards opened fire!"

The captain groaned soundlessly and covered her eyes.

"We found a computer. It didn’t look like any computer I have ever seen."

"Are you in imminent danger now?" Montgomery asked.

"No, ma’am. I made it safely back to the embassy’s hovercraft that brought me here. The driver is keeping guard. So far we have not been discovered."

"Stay where you are. I will deploy backup at once. Stay out of sight and out of trouble. Hail me if you’re in danger or if there are any new developments."

"Yes, of course, Captain. I … I’m worried about the team, ma’am. The guards… …." Sha’nee’s voice trailed off.

"I understand," Montgomery assured her. "Stay calm. Help is on its way."

"Understood, ma’am."
"Montgomery out."

The captain sighed. This was not good. If anyone was down it could mean the difference between success and failure of the mission. She rubbed her aching temple before tapping her comm badge again.

"Montgomery to the Delta Flyer."

"Paris here."

"Start scanning for the away team and patch me through to Captain Janeway, Lieutenant."

"Yes, Captain. Stand by."

There was a brief silence and then, through some static, Janeway replied.

"Janeway here."

"The young Bunthoran woman that’s a member of Bremer’s away team just hailed me with disturbing news. They’ve run into trouble. Apparently some guards showed up, weapons blazing. Something inside the building has disrupted their comms. Bremer sent J’Oy out of the building with her comm badge to hail for help and probably to get her out of the line of fire."

"Paris to Montgomery. I can’t detect their bio signatures. Something is interfering with our scanners."

"Tom informed the captains. "There is no way I can beam them out. What’s going on?"

There was a brief silence.

"They ran into trouble, Tom," Janeway answered shortly. "Captain Montgomery, was anyone injured?"

"I have no way of knowing. The shooting started just as J’Oy left the building."

"What are our options? Have we got any other teams that can get there quickly?"

"If I try to divert a team from here it will take too long. I’m headed to the embassy now and will try to reach them from there but time is running out."

Montgomery ran a hand through her hair as she tried to play out the different scenarios in her mind. Their options were getting fewer. "That’s it. We don’t have any other choice. Scramble a rescue team ASAP. Forget about normal standard procedures. Launch them as soon as possible and hail me as soon as they deploy" she continued firmly. "According to Seven’s calculations the next quake, the final one, will take place in less than an hour."

"Affirmative," Janeway said, her voice solemn, "It’s going to be close … too close if you ask me."

"Any suggestions, Kathryn?"

There was only a slight pause in Janeway’s response but it was enough to make Montgomery frown.

"Yes, since we aren’t following normal standard procedures - but you’re not going to
"like it," Janeway said sardonically.

"Try me."

"Better yet, I'll show you. This way you can claim plausible deniability when the Protectorate questions you later, asking if you knew what I was about to do. Trust me Eliana. Janeway out."

Montgomery slapped her comm badge.

"Montgomery to Janeway." There was no reply. "Janeway come in!"

There was only static.

A mask of indifference settled over her classic features. Dragging her fingers through her blonde hair again she noted that her headache had returned.

"Go back to the embassy," she instructed J’Aoh. "Evacuate your staff by transporter to the Protectorate property in the mountains within an hour."

"Yes, Captain."

She had no time to accompany him back to the Protectorate embassy for a protected beam up; all she could do was raise the privacy shield between them and the Bunthoran driver.

"Montgomery to Paris."

"Paris here."

"Determine my current position." She paused briefly. "Beam me to the Delta Flyer and relay me to my ready room on the Excellence."

"Aye, Captain."

There was a tingling sensation when her molecules dematerialised and the hovercraft disappeared in a soft green glow.

She materialised briefly in the Delta Flyer and the next thing she saw was her ready room.

Montgomery strode onto the bridge. The crew did not even raise an eyebrow.

"Hail Voyager and get me Janeway on the screen," she ordered briskly.

"Yes, Captain," the ensign at ops said smartly and then frowned. "Ma’am, Voyager is breaking out the moon’s orbit."

"What?"

"She’s on a trajectory towards the planet at full impulse, Captain!"

"Hail Voyager!"

The ensign punched in commands and then shook his head.
"They’re not responding to hails."

Montgomery regarded the sight on the main view screen. The sleek intrepid ship moved lithely towards the planet.

Montgomery clenched her fists at her side watching Voyager’s captain take her ship in, certainly set on saving the Bunthorans, the numerous away teams still down there and, no doubt, her Borg.

"Take the Excellence closer but do not enter orbit," Montgomery said between clenched teeth. "Damn it, Kathryn, is this what you call plausible deniability?"

*****

Janeway regarded the view screen.

The planet came into focus and she hailed the Delta Flyer.

"Tom Paris here."

"Give me the co-ordinates of the away teams last known location, Tom," the captain said. "Follow Voyager and return to shuttle bay. I need you at the helm."

"Aye, Captain." Paris gave her the requested information. "I just beamed Captain Montgomery back to the Excellence," he said. "Can you tell me what’s going on, Captain?"

Janeway was pleased to hear that Montgomery was back on the Excellence, one person less to worry about down there.

"Not at this point, Tom. The away team needs assistance and time has run out for anything else but the big guns."

"Captain?" Tom sounded puzzled.

"Report to the bridge as soon as possible. Janeway out."

She entered the co-ordinates provided by Paris into Voyager’s navigational array. She brushed the gamma shift ensign aside and punched in new commands at the helm.

"I’m taking Voyager into low orbit," she informed the Tuvok and the bridge crew. 
"Alert the beta shift security team. When I’m in position, beam them and myself down to these co-ordinates."

"Yes, Captain," Tuvok replied.

Janeway knew Eliana would have her head afterwards but there was no way she was letting anyone perish without exhausting every solution possible. As far as she was concerned, the Prime Directive had gone out the window the moment they had discovered technology that was not indigenous to this planet.

Voyager entered a low orbit around the planet and Janeway rose from the helm.
"Everyone in place?" she inquired.

"Yes, Captain," the ensign at ops confirmed. "Security team is standing by."

"Good. You have the bridge, Tuvok. Energise."

Just before the transporter beam engulfed her, sending her molecules through space, her thoughts went to Seven. She could only pray that the young woman was all right.

*****

Heidi Bremer bit down hard on her lower lip to not gasp out loud as Lt Torres carefully palpated her left shoulder. She had trouble breathing and every now and then her vision blurred.

The Klingon moved the medical tricorder over the area.

"The projectiles from that guys weapon is still in there, Bremer," B’Elanna said. "Fragments from the damaged clavicle have caused a rift in the upper lobe of your left lung. You need a doctor, not an engineer."

Bremer sucked her breath in, beginning to feel faint and hating it.

"There is no way out until backup arrives," she managed. "At least not for me."

"We are not leaving you behind," Seven said, squatting next to the Guardian. "There is still the matter of the computer you found. We must determine its origin if we are going to stop it from causing catastrophic damage to this planet."

They were hiding among the tall cylinders. Seven had carried the tall, imposing tactical officer to an opening after she had collapsed.

"Lt Bremer, I have performed some additional scans," Ensign Vak stated as she rejoined the others. "Brovskij has set up sensors along a perimeter. Nobody will be able to approach us without revealing themselves."

"Oh really? Did you forget that the damn things didn’t warn us about the guards the first time?"

"Sorry ma’am." Vak blushed faintly at the reprimand.

"It’s not your fault Vak. It’s whatever is interfering with our systems in here. Just keep your wits about you and rely on your eyes and ears rather than depend on our technology or we’ll all be dead. Go on," Bremer said, trying not to cough.

"The technology around us is of an unknown origin," the ensign reported quickly. "There is no resemblance to anything existing currently within the Protectorate. The readings are curious but there are several indicators that suggest it once belonged to an advanced race."

"What do you mean, once?" B’Elanna asked.
"This technology is more than six-hundred years old."

There was a stunned silence.

"That is curious," Seven said, "but it would explain how such a large piece of machinery could be missing without anyone enquiring about it. It also provides an interesting mystery. How did it fall into the hands of some ruthless Bunthoran?"

"Maybe it was something that the Protectorate abandoned years ago and forgot about it. Perhaps because of its age the readings are not the same as they would have been if it was contemporary," B’Elanna suggested.

Bremer tried to keep up with the other’s reasoning, agreeing with the theories, but the blood loss and the collapse of her left lung was taking its toll on her.

"Hey, Bremer, you still with us?" B’Elanna said and leaned over her.

"I’m … fine …"

"She’s passing out. Elevate her feet. If we don’t get backup soon, she’s not going to make it," Voyager’s chief engineer stated and grabbed a hypospray. "I’ll give her something more for the pain. Damn, I hope that Bunthoran girl got through to Montgomery."

Gentle hands pulled Bremer’s feet up and put a wooden box under her calves to keep them elevated. Bremer managed to open her eyes and saw Seven gaze down at her, a frown betraying the blonde’s concern.

"Keep scanning the technology," Bremer said weakly. "Get as much information as possible. We don’t have much time …"

"We are aware of that, Lieutenant," Seven nodded. "We will gather as much information as possible. There is still a chance that we may forestall this catastrophe."

"Don’t give up …"

"We will not …"

A throaty voice calling from a distance interrupted them.

"Nice job on the perimeter sensors, Ensign Brovskij, but would you mind letting your captain through?"

*****

Janeway hefted her phaser rifle onto her hip and walked in among the tall cylinders, taking in the scene.

Bremer was on the floor, injured and being tended to by B’Elanna and Seven. Brovskij and Vak stood guard and now looked with apparent relief at the heavily armed auburn haired captain.
Six security officers accompanied her from Voyager and they were now securing the area as their captain assessed the situation.

"Ensign Vak, take two security officers with you and bring Lt Bremer to a location that allows you to beam her directly to Voyager’s sickbay, then report back here."

"Yes, Captain,” the ensigns said in unison and cautiously lifted the by now unconscious Lt Bremer and began to carry her towards the exit.

"Report," Janeway said, glancing around her.

"This is the technology we’ve been looking for, Captain," B’Elanna said. "According to Vak’s assessment, it is more than six-hundred years old. We need to get to the computer to see if we can shut it all down."

"Sha’nee J’Oy is already there with two more from security," Janeway stated.

B’Elanna nodded and together with Brovskij and another security officer she began to walk back towards the area where the computer was located.

Seven was about to follow them when Janeway stopped her, putting a hand on the younger woman’s arm.

"How are you feeling?"

"I am functioning within acceptable parameters, Captain," the ex-Borg stated.

Janeway studied the blonde, noticing the dark circles under her eyes and that Seven looked unusually pale.

"Okay, carry on," she said, motioning towards the direction she came from. "We better make good use of the time we’ve got here. Tom is back at the helm on Voyager and Tuvok has the bridge. He has orders to fire two photon torpedoes at this structure if we have not successfully shut this facility down within forty-five minutes. We have to beam out all of our away teams as well as the Guardians ten minutes before that, at the latest."

"We have no way of knowing how such an impact will effect the technology or the area," Seven offered as they strode towards where they computer was located.

"I know and that’s why it’s a last resort. I’m still hopeful that we will end this in a less violent way."

"How did you manage to boost Voyager’s transporter array to work at such a distance?" Seven asked.

"I didn’t. She’s in low orbit," Janeway confessed, pressing her lips together.

Seven could not hide her surprise.

"The Prime Directive …"

"Lives are at stake here, millions of lives. I have no intention of sitting idly by and discussing the Prime Directive when there is a chance to save them. I know Captain Montgomery and the Protectorate will ask for my head …"

Janeway shook her head, refusing to think about how furious Eliana Montgomery
would be with her for breaking now only the Protectorate’s equivalent of the Prime
Directive but also the one from the Federation that they both had once sworn to uphold.

"I agree with your assessment of the situation," Seven offered, her voice soft.

"Thank you," Janeway murmured, surprised how much the words meant.

The two moved quickly and soon reached the area where the computer was located.

Janeway nodded at B’Elanna and Sha’nee J’Oy who were trying to interpret the
readings.

The security officers kept a meticulous eye on their surroundings, not about to let
anyone interrupt the women’s work. They all kept their phaser rifles raised, set on stun.

"This isn’t working. There is no way of deciphering this. The scans show that the
computer and the tricorders are not compatible at all," B’Elanna said with exasperation.
"I have no way of communicating with it, Captain. I can’t download anything into it
either."

Janeway looked over her chief engineer’s shoulder. The computer and its components
were unlike any she had encountered before. She soon came to the same conclusion as
B’Elanna; there efforts were not going to work.

"We can’t afford to waste any more time. I guess this leaves us with little else than to
blast this place from space," she sighed.

"This is not true, Captain," Seven claimed and stepped closer. "Since I linked to the
Protectorate computer onboard the Excellence I could interface with the computer and
run its readings through my cortical implant. If this is ancient Protectorate technology or
something they have come across in the past, I may be able to find the abort codes and
apply them."

"Your systems are damaged, Seven," Janeway objected, her heart twitching at the
thought of the blonde endangering herself again. "We have no way of knowing if this
will work or how it may affect you."

"Please, Captain. ‘The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.’"

Janeway did not enjoy hearing Seven quote Ambassador Spock’s famous saying but she
recognised the truth in it.

"Give us two minutes, people," she growled.

The others gave Seven encouraging glances and walked out of sight, leaving her alone
with Janeway.

"Seven, you don’t have to do this," Janeway tried.

"I disagree," the blonde said and walked closer to her captain. "You know I have to try
and save these people. If I am unsuccessful, you can bring us all out and transport us to
Voyager and attack this location from there. However, I do not intend to disappoint
you."

The tone of self-confidence tore at Janeway. She wanted to order the ex-Borg not to
proceed with something that could endanger her already depleted systems.

"I'm not going to allow you to hurt yourself again," she murmured.

"I do not have it in mind to cause myself injury. It is my opinion that the procedure can be done quickly."

Janeway was not sure Seven was being entirely truthful but knew she had little choice but to let the younger woman proceed.

"All right. Go ahead."

Seven smiled faintly and then, surprisingly, she raised her right hand to the captain’s cheek. She softly brushed her fingertips along Janeway’s jaw line.

"I told you I would not fail you, Kathryn," she whispered.

Janeway’s heart skipped a beat. The soft touch was a shock and so was the overwhelming feeling of loss when Seven removed her hand.

Seven pivoted and stepped up to the tall cabinet.

Not missing a beat the tall blonde let her assimilation tubules make contact with the computer and enter its systems. There was a shower of sparks. The force behind the exchange of information drove the young woman instantly to her knees.

Janeway rapidly stepped closer and held on to the blonde’s slumping shoulders.

"Seven!"

*****

Montgomery sat at the desk in her ready room, fuming.

"Report," she barked at the small screen on her computer where Max Toriello and Chakotay looked back on her from a secure room at the Protectorate embassy.

"The evacuation of the smaller cities is progressing well, but in the capital and its surroundings … it’s going far too slow, Captain," Toriello said. "We met with the military leaders in charge at the EOC and gave them instructions as well as support on how to handle this."

"Were they receptive?"

"Yes, they were grateful for everything we could tell them. Colonel B’Ara at the EOC is achieving nothing short of a miracle given the limited recourses at his disposal."

"You realise that there won’t be enough time to save as many as we hope, don’t you?" Montgomery said her voice strained.

"Yes, I do, Captain."
"There is another matter; that of your captain," Montgomery hissed, directing her
attention at Chakotay.

"Captain?" he asked, concern darkening his eyes.

"She’s taken Voyager into low orbit and from what our sensors tell us, she’s down on
the planet near or inside the building suspected to host the technology we think is
causing all this."

Chakotay’s expression would have been funny if the situation was not so grave. His
eyebrows almost left his face and he seemed at a loss for words.

"She took Voyager in?" he asked incredulously.

"She did. I hate to admit it, but this may be the last chance we have to stop this. Is she
always this reckless, Commander?"

There was an immediate ‘yes’ in his eyes but being the correct second in command that
he was, Chakotay only replied that his captain utilised unconventional methods on
occasion.

"Unconventional, indeed," Montgomery mumbled and leaned back into her chair.

Her comm badge chirped.

"Lt Bremer to Captain Montgomery."

"Montgomery here. Are you all right, Lieutenant?"

"Yes. The Doctor is treating me in Voyager’s sickbay. Janeway is down on the planet
with a security team."

"We’re aware of this. Do you have any idea if they’re making progress?"

"No, Captain. I was unconscious until the Doctor revived me a couple of minutes ago."

"Rest up, Lieutenant. Montgomery out."

The Excellence’s captain regarded the two men on her computer screen.

"Voyager has so far refused to respond to my hails, no doubt on Janeway’s orders. Get
through to whoever holds your bridge, Commander Chakotay. Get back to me with
explicit details of your captain’s intended course of action. This is not a suggestion,
Commander."

"Yes, Captain."

Chakotay disappeared from the screen. Toriello looked thoughtfully at her.

"You okay, Captain?" he asked carefully.

"I’m furious, Max," she confessed quietly. "She’s reckless! She and the others may be
dead down there and we have no way of knowing."

"She’s like you," her second in command stated softly. "She is just as reckless and
unconventional as you used to be … and still are, to some extent."
Montgomery glared at the computer. She hated when he was right.

"We’re responsible. We brought them into this, Max," she growled. "We sent out that distress call and they responded to it. You know as well as I do that no Federation star ship would ever turn there back on people in need, no matter the risks."

"I know. Give her some benefit of the doubt. Let’s see what Chakotay finds out. Here he is, by the way."

Max moved a little to the side as Chakotay reappeared on the small screen.

"I apologise for the delay in communications," Voyager’s next in command said diplomatically. "Tuvok informed me of the Captain’s plan. She will request a massive transport of all remaining away teams in less than twenty minutes if she has not succeeded in shutting down the technology responsible for the quakes."

"What’s her progress?"

"The senior security officer on site reported back five minutes ago that Seven of Nine is interfacing with the computer that operates the technology. Only your tactical chief was wounded when they were discovered by the guards and so far there has been no signs of anyone else trying to intervene."

Montgomery exhaled quietly.

"All right. What are her plans if this last attempt fails?"

"She has given the order to destroy the facility with two simultaneous photon torpedoes." Chakotay’s expression was devoid of emotions but he was the spitting image of Max Toriello when delivering bad news.

"We have no way of knowing the repercussions. Max, what’s your opinion?" she asked, feeling the headache beginning to escalate again.

"I hate using that much force but I have to agree. It is either that or watching the northern hemisphere crumble and millions of people die."

"I know, Max. I want to strangle her but at the same time … I agree as well. Begin transporting the crews now. Tell your tactical chief to stand down, Chakotay. This is my call."

Montgomery’s lowered her voice and nobody could misunderstand the gravity of her words.

"If anyone is to break the Prime Directive and blow up this building from space … the responsibility is mine."

*****

Continued in The Guardians - part 6
Chapter 7

Janeway and Torres both rushed to Seven’s side when the tall blonde fell to her knees.

"Seven!" the captain exclaimed as she grabbed the young woman’s shoulders, keeping her upright as the surge of from data stream rushed through her cortical implants.

"I am unharmed," Seven managed. "The data is very complex and it is hard to make out …"

She trembled under Janeway’s hands.

Voyager’s captain felt her own heart race. This was a last minute resort, a gamble against time in order to save the planet. Seven had about fifteen minutes to solve the problem before they had to beam back to Voyager. Unless Seven came up with a reason not to, Janeway would give the order to destroy the large structure and its foreign technology with two simultaneous photon torpedoes.

B’Elanna Torres moved closer to the alien computer and began to scan its content.

"I see a pattern in the data stream," she explained. "Seven, it’s possible that you can filter the signals through your cortical implant and translate our commands to the computer."

"I will try," Seven said, closing her eyes in concentration. "I recognise some of the language used in this technology. It is similar to some I encountered onboard the Excellence."

"That would confirm its origin at least," Janeway murmured. She kept her supportive grip of the ex-Borg, not about to let go of Seven until the other woman was done.

"How is she doing?" she asked B’Elanna who kept scanning with both the standard and the medical tricorder.

"She’s holding up well," Torres replied. "Her cybernetic implants are strained, but so far she’s okay. She seems to be translating commands."

Janeway forced back a relieved sigh. She knew this was their best chance of solving the problem without the use of force.

"Captain, I need you to keep scanning the computer," Torres said, handing Janeway one of the Protectorate enhanced tricorders. "Seven is transmitting data quicker than I can monitor.

The captain accepted the tricorder and began scanning the computer. The enormous exchange of data baffled her. Seven was feeding the computer with a series of commands and the entire screen was filled with flashing alien signs when it responded.

"Something’s happening," Janeway informed B’Elanna. She glanced around her, pleased to notice that the security team led by Ensign Brovskij had the area secured. It would be devastating if more guards interrupted them now that they may be getting somewhere.
"What do the readings show?" Torres asked, keeping a close eye on her own scanning devices.

"I'm not sure. The exchange of information is massive. It must be a good sign that they are communicating."

B'Elanna reached down and put a hand on Seven’s left shoulder.

"You have to close it down," she emphasised. "Find the command codes to shut it down, Seven."

"How much more time do we have until she has to abort?" Janeway asked, checking her chronometer.

"Eight minutes."

Seven seemed emerged in communicating with the ancient technology. With a frown and her eyes closed, she leaned into the console, tremors shaking her body as she focused hard on her task at hand.

Two more minutes passed and Janeway had an eerie sense of déjà vue. The similarity to the situation on board the Excellence’s engineer deck was unsettling.

"You have five minutes left before you have to abort," Janeway said out loud, hoping that the blonde heard her.

"More like four," Voyager’s chief engineer stated. "We don’t want to yank her loose without knowing how to."

Janeway scanned the computer again. Several of the signs on the screen had begun to blink rapidly.

"This is not good," she said out loud. "B'Elanna!"

More and more multicoloured signs blinked furiously on the computer screen. A muted beep emerged from the left side of the console as several switches began to glow stronger.

"Disconnect her!" B'Elanna yelled as she scanned Seven. "Seven, break the interface. Now!"

The ex-Borg did not reply but stayed connected with her assimilation tubules buried deep within the alien technology.

"Seven! Abort!" Janeway ordered in a loud voice. "That’s an order. Abort! Now!"

Trembling and clinging to the computer Seven did not seem to hear them.

Janeway dropped to her knees next to Seven and clasped both hands around the blonde’s cheeks. "Seven, listen to me! Disconnect!"

Suddenly all the lights on the computer screen stopped blinking and began to sparkle with an almost blinding light. Squinting, Janeway tried to cover her eyes.

"B'Elanna, what’s happening?"
"I have no clue!" B’Elanna said as she rushed to Seven and began punching commands into Seven’s cybernetic hand, trying to disconnect the assimilation tubules manually.

"Damn, I can’t override her system. She locked to this machine!" she yelled, frustration and fear in her voice.

Janeway could hear Ensign Brovski talking to someone over the comms.

"Captain, we’ve got to get out of here!" Brovskij said. "That was Commander Tuvok relaying orders from Captain Montgomery. She’s going to blast this place in seven minutes. She doesn’t have any other option. If we’re not out of here …"

Janeway turned to B’Elanna. "What if we beam her out?"

"If we do that without disconnecting her, we could kill her!"

Suddenly the blonde fell towards the Klingon and the tubules withdrew from the computer and retracted into her cybernetic hand. The light from the screen grew in intensity.

Backing away from the large machine, pulling Seven’s slumping body with them, Janeway, B’Elanna and Brovskij tried to keep their eyes on the switches that shone with the same, blinding light.

"Janeway to Voyager. Beam us out of here!"

There were only static. The transporter boosters that Ensign Brovskij had assembled around them were not working.

"Janeway to Voyager. Beam us out now!"

Still nothing. They would have to get everyone outdoors. Was there enough time?

A sound emanating from the computer made the captain gasp. Looking up at it, blinking against tears caused by the searing lights, she could not believe her eyes.

She swallowed hard as she kept staring.

She heard Brovskij inhale sharply behind her.

"Oh, my god …"

*****

Captain Eliana Montgomery rose from the command chair on the bridge of the Excellence.

"Hail Voyager," she ordered Lt Annette D’Antoine at ops.

"Yes, ma’am," D’Antoine replied.

"Commander Tuvok here," a cordial baritone voice answered over the comm system.
"On screen," Montgomery said, leaning on the railing behind the helmsman.

The big screen in front lit up and Tuvok came into vision.

"Captain," the Vulcan greeted formally.

"Commander Tuvok, I need a status report. What’s the situation on the planet?"

"I spoke with Ensign Brovskij less than two minutes ago. I briefed him of your orders and he informed me that Seven of Nine was interfacing with the alien computer. We are attempting to establish a transporter lock on the away team but so far the interference has prevented us from locking in on to them."

"Tell me, does Seven interface with every alien technology she comes across?" Montgomery muttered in an acerbic tone of voice. "Don’t answer that. Get them out of there, Tuvok. Time’s up!"

"Understood, Captain. Tuvok out."

Montgomery paced back and forth, nervously awaiting Tuvok’s report. She glanced at her chronometer. Two minutes before she had to push the button. Two minutes before she would be forced to choose between the survival of the planet and thousands, perhaps millions of Bunthorans and Janeway and her away team.

The headache burst into flames around her temples and she had to summon all her willpower to not stagger from the throbbing assault to her senses.

Damn it, Janeway, she thought. Why did you have to answer our hail?

She knew the answer to her own question. No Federation ship, no matter where it was located in space, would turn down a distress call, regardless of its origin.

There was thirty seconds left of the stipulated time when the comm system chirped.

Someone was hailing them from the planet.

*****

Janeway knelt on the floor, holding on to Seven’s unconscious body as they stared at the unbelievable sight before them.

The computer lights gradually increased in intensity, making them all squint, only to abruptly switch off one by one.

Within half a minute the computer turned itself off and by doing so, began shutting down the large groups of cylinders.

The humming gradually ceased around them.

Their comm badges came alive with a joint chirp.

Janeway slapped hers, hailing both ships in orbit.
"Janeway to Voyager and the Excellence."

Both ships acknowledged.

"Hold off the torpedoes! Seven shut the plant down. I repeat; hold your fire, Excellence!" Janeway continued as she kept a close eye on the ex-Borg.

"She did it?" the Excellence’s captain asked.

"She did it," Voyager’s captain replied firmly.

"Thank God," Montgomery said, the relief in her voice apparent. "I can’t believe it."

"The danger’s not over yet," Janeway emphasised. "There will still be a major quake, but hopefully not as bad as it would have been if …"

"Got it. Will talk more later at the moment I want all of you out of there now! Tuvok, have you got a lock on them?" the Excellence’s captain said impatiently.

"Yes, Captain."

"Then get them the hell off that planet."

Janeway interrupted, "Seven needs to be beamed to sickbay."

"No, Captain, there is not time for sickbay yet," an alto voice next to Janeway objected. "You need me in astrometrics."

Janeway looked down at the blonde woman who was struggling to get on her feet. Janeway helped her up and steadied the ex-Borg with an arm around her waist. B’Elanna and the rest of the crew quickly assembled their gear.

"Enough chatter!" Montgomery said, sounding on edge. "Tuvok?"

"I am initiating transport now, Captain."

A green tinted shimmer surrounded them and the next thing Janeway saw was the Doctor in sickbay.

"What have you done to yourself this time Seven?" the EMH asked.

Seven regarded the Doctor coolly.

"I have done nothing that you should be concerned about, Doctor. I am quite capable of assuming my post."

"We’ll see about that!" The Doctor picked up a medical tricorder and scanned Seven as Janeway watched.

"Is she all right, Doctor?" Janeway inquired.

"She needs to regenerate."

"There is no time," Seven emphasised, sounding exasperated. "I am not a child. I know my limits."
"Very well, Seven, if the Doctor clears you, you may resume your duties. Doctor?"

The Doctor finished his scan and shook his head.

"She’s clear."

"Good. Report to astrometrics and run a sensor sweep of the planet, Seven. I’ll be on the bridge."

"Yes, Captain," Seven said and strode off towards the turbo lift.

"Computer," Janeway said, "initiate a site to site transport to the bridge."

She shimmered into existence next to the command chairs. Tuvok vacated her chair immediately and sat down in the on her left.

"Where’s Commander Chakotay?" Janeway inquired.

"The commander informed me that he and Commander Toriello will remain on the planet until the last minute. They are still working with the local authorities to vacate the major cities along the fault."

"Damn," the captain gushed, "he’s disobeying a direct order. Have you got a lock on him?"

"Yes, Captain. Mr Kim can transport the commander instantaneously on your mark."

Janeway nodded.

"Seven of Nine to the bridge."

"Go ahead."

"The major quake that we are anticipating will take place in two minutes and fifteen seconds."

"I’m not taking any chances," Janeway said and pivoted, fastening her gaze on the ensign at ops. "Transport the commander and Toriello back to their respective ships now, Mr Kim."

"Aye, ma’am." Harry Kim punched in commands and then smiled in relief. "They’re both safely onboard, Captain."

"Keep scanning the planet, Seven," the captain ordered. "Mr Kim, run diagnostics on our transporters. We will need to deploy search and rescue teams as soon as the major quake is over."

Harry proceeded to run the necessary tests on Voyager’s transporter systems. The turbo lift door hissed open behind them and Chakotay entered the bridge.

"Good of you to join us," Janeway said, regarding her next in command.

Chakotay walked over and took his seat as Tuvok again got up, reclaiming his ordinary position at the tactical station.

"I take it the quake’s about to hit sooner than we expected?" the tall second in command
asked.

"Seven stopped the alien technology but it’s still going to be bad," the captain said grimly. "Time left, Seven?"

"Fifteen seconds and counting, Captain," the cool alto voice replied over the comm system.

Harry Kim kept an eye on his console as he began the countdown.

"Ten, nine, eight …"

Janeway rose from her chair, walking up behind Tom Paris, putting a hand on his shoulder.

"Five, four, three, two, one. There it goes," Kim said, his voice solemn.

"Oh, god," Janeway sighed as the view screen showed the enormous force at work crumbling the ground like silk paper.

They all watched in horror as vast cracks opened up and swallowed houses and even whole villages. Giant new rock formations rose and recreated a new, alien landscape where farmland had existed just prior to the quake.

"I pray they all had time to get out of there," Kim murmured.

The disastrous tremors only lasted for about forty-five seconds but seemed to last a lifetime for the people on board the orbiting starships watching the extensive catastrophe.

When all seemed to quiet down for a while, Janeway squeezed Paris’ shoulder tight and took a deep breath.

"How are we doing? Are the teams ready to deploy?" she asked.

"Yes, Captain," Tuvok replied. "They are already standing by at both transporter rooms."

"Chakotay, I guess you’re eager to get back down to the planet. I suggest you contact Commander Toriello and arrange to head the rescue operation together with the local authorities. Co-ordinate the efforts with the Excellence and make sure that the teams all have experienced team members from her crew. There are bound to be aftershocks and I don’t want to lose any of our crewmembers."

"Aye, Captain," the commander replied.

"Harry, hail the Excellence."


"On screen," Janeway ordered.

Eliana Montgomery came into focus on the main view screen. She looked tired and the fine lines around her eyes revealed to Janeway that her colleague was in pain.

"Our teams are ready to join yours in the rescue operation," Janeway said. "Commander
Chakotay will team up with Commander Toriello again and continue from where they left off.

"Thank you, Kathryn," Montgomery said. "We have every available crewman standing by. I’ll beam over to Voyager as soon as I know everything is back to normal here. We need to strategise our response and review your recent actions."

Voyager’s captain groaned inwardly. The recent events in question were no doubt the fact that she had taken Voyager into low orbit and made the ship visible from the planet. She had not hesitated to break the prime directive to save as many people down on the planet as possible, including her own crewmembers.

"I’ll be expecting you, Captain."

They broke the comm link and Janeway turned to her senior staff present.

"All right. Carry on. I’ll be in my ready room. You have the bridge, Mr Kim."

She entered the ready room and sank down at her desk and switched on her computer screen.

"Janeway to Seven of Nine."

"Go ahead, Captain."

"The immediate danger is over and there is nothing you can do right now. I want you to finally obey a direct medical command. Go and regenerate before you irreparably damage your systems, Seven."

"I will comply," the blonde said with some hesitation. "However, may I come by your ready room to discuss an urgent matter first?"

Janeway frowned.

"Of course, Seven," she replied.

"Thank you. Seven out."

The captain leaned back into her chair. Seven had sounded slightly out of breath. She knew the ex-Borg bordered on exhaustion after her recent ordeals but there had been more. Was Seven nervous?

Her door chime chirped. It could not be Seven already.

"Enter."

The door hissed open and the Excellence’s tall imposing tactical chief stepped inside. She walked briskly up to Janeway’s desk and stood there, her hands clasped behind her, not unlike Seven’s characteristic pose.

"Lt Bremer," Janeway greeted her friendly. "How can I help you?"

"Your Doctor gave me a clean bill of health," the dark haired woman stated. "I contacted my captain from sickbay and she asked me to report to you, Captain. Is there anything I can do before reporting back to the Excellence to join the rescue teams?"
Janeway smiled crookedly. She regarded the dark haired woman with the ice-blue gaze beneath jet-black bangs. The muscular woman wore her hair in a tight, long braid down her back and the re-cycled Guardian away team outfit looked crisp and immaculate on her impressive frame.

"Thank you, but I think we got things covered from this end. I understand that you’re heroic actions planet side saved several lives among the away team."

Heidi Bremer smiled faintly, her gaze steady.

"That’s my job, ma’am," she replied smartly. She hesitated briefly. "Captain, do you know what happened to the Bunthoran girl that helped us locate the industrial plant?"

Janeway could first not remember who the Excellence’s tactical chief was talking about.

"Sha’nee Joy, ma’am?" Bremer reminded her.

"The girl from the embassy? No, I’m sorry, I don’t remember. Wasn’t she sent back to the Embassy and then to the high grounds for protection?" she asked.

"I have not been able to find anyone who remembers giving her that specific order, Captain," the tall woman said, a trace of worry shining through. "Captain Montgomery last talked to her when she was waiting with her chauffeur a couple of blocks from the plant. Nobody among the Embassy staff has seen her."

Janeway rose from the chair and walked up to the other woman.

"Didn’t the girl talk to Montgomery earlier by using your comm badge?" she asked.

Bremer flinched.

"Yes, of course," she muttered. "Request permission to scan for it, Captain."

"Certainly. Come here."

Janeway led the way to the bridge. The younger gamma shift ensign at ops looked nervous as the two women approached her.

"Ensign, help Lt Bremer track down her comm badge. It’s important."

"Yes, Captain," the young ensign said and began punching in commands. "If you would give me the frequency of your comm badge ma’am?" she asked shyly.

Voyager’s captain looked at the tall dark woman. She was an intimidating person and yet the look on her face when she realised that the young Bunthoran girl could be in danger had told of a gentler heart than her demeanour suggested.

The gentle hiss of the turbo lift door alerted her that Seven had arrived. Glancing over her shoulder towards the blonde, Janeway’s heart sank.

Whatever the younger woman wanted to talk to her about, it could not be good, judging from her solemn face.
Seven of Nine stood in the middle of the elevated part of Janeway’s ready room.

The captain was walking back from the replicator carrying a steaming mug of coffee. Seven had declined any beverage; sure she would not be able to swallow anything passed the lump in her throat.

"Sit down, Seven," Janeway urged softly.

Biting back a negative response the tall blonde sat down on the couch beneath the view port. She clasped her hands tightly together on her lap.

"I have come to let you know that I have betrayed your confidence, Captain," the younger woman said, pleased that her voice did not let on how nervous she was.

Stopping the mug half way to her mouth, Janeway put it down on the coffee table as she sank down next to the blonde.

"What are you talking about?" she asked incredulously.

"I have not told you the whole truth about my experience in the Excellence’s engineering. I have not been truthful." To her dismay, a slight tremor had worked itself into her voice. Seven cleared her throat softly.

"Explain to me what you mean and then we can decide just how bad this betrayal of yours is," the captain said and raised the mug to her mouth again, this time taking a careful sip.

Seven inhaled deeply and tried to relax.

"When I was linked to the computer to stop the warp core breach … I processed several gigaquads of information. This is in direct violation of Protectorate rules and regulations. Since I possess an eidetic memory I still hold that knowledge. I do not think it will count as atonement even if I purge myself of that information now."

She held her breath, so sure that she had let her captain down by not telling her this from the beginning.

"You realise that this is the reason you were able to save the people of Bunthora from the disastrous quakes that would have meant the end of their civilisation as they knew it?" Janeway asked gently, scooting closer to the ex-Borg.

Not sure she had understood her captain, Seven protested.

"Captain Montgomery has to be informed," she claimed. "She needs to uphold the laws in this sector and when the Protectorate is made aware …"

"She already knows, Seven," Janeway said gently.

To her amazement Seven felt small tears forming in her eyes. Not sure what to do she brought her human hand up and ran her fingertips across her eyelashes.

Janeway scooted closer and surprised the younger woman by pulling her into an embrace. Stroking the blonde hair over and over she rocked the distraught ex-Borg.
Seven felt her heart skip several beats and then compensate for it by rampaging in her chest. The captain’s soft perfume permeated her senses. Not concerned whether it was prudent or not, the blonde leaned back against the backrest of the couch and hid her face against Janeway’s neck.

"Oh, Seven," the auburn haired woman whispered. "Don’t worry. Everything will be all right. You’re tired and in dire need of an extensive regeneration cycle. The Doctor told me that minimum was forty-eight hours straight."

"I will comply," Seven breathed against the soft skin.

"Good girl."

Soft hands stroked her hair and her back in long, languid movements. Suddenly the ready room was an oasis of stillness in the middle of chaos for a few minutes. Seven basked in the attention of her captain. Janeway’s hands induced comfort and something else, something she did not recognise. Not anticipating her own intentions, she turned her head and pressed her lips against the delicate neck just above the four pips adorning the captain’s turtleneck.

Janeway’s hands stopped for a moment. Seven realised that she had crossed the line and gone too far. She pulled back and sat up, holding her breath as she noticed that Janeway’s hands did not seem eager to let go of her.

She looked into the dark blue-grey eyes before her. She could not read their expression but Seven was certain that there was no resentment.

"I thought I would lose you," Janeway said quietly.

"I did not mean to worry you."

"You’re important to me, Seven."

"You are important to me as well, Captain."

Janeway reached down and took both of Seven’s hands in hers.

"We have a lot to talk about, my dear," she said, rubbing her thumbs over the back of the blonde’s hands. "After you’ve regenerated we could perhaps share a meal in my quarters?"

Seven cocked her head.

"That would be acceptable."

"Good. Now, it’s time to regenerate."

"Yes, Captain. What about Captain Montgomery? Should I not report to her first and explain why I did not inform her of …"

"She has known from when you were in sick bay," the captain interrupted. "You are the least of her problems right now. Even before you helped save the planet, she promised me to explain to the Protectorate High Council of the extraordinary circumstances behind your security breach. They owe you for helping them."
"I lied to you, Kathryn," Seven whispered.

"I know and we will talk about that later," Janeway smiled. "Truth be told, I’m the one in trouble for breaking not only the Federation’s Prime Directive but also the Protectorate version of it. Let’s hope they are so grateful about your input that they will show me leniency."

"Don’t count on it, Janeway," a husky, cool voice said from the door.

The two on the couch flinched and looked at the Excellence’s blonde captain standing there, one hand on her hip and her eyebrows raised.

"Don’t worry, Seven," Montgomery said. "You’ve performed an outstanding and most courageous act and saved millions of lives. The first reports are already reaching the Excellence and even if we lost a lot of lives down there, it’s not even a fraction of what would have taken place had you not prevented the ancient Protectorate technology from causing Armageddon."

Janeway slowly let go of the young woman’s hands.

Seven looked at her with tremors in her midsection, not sure how to act.

The auburn haired woman took care of that for her by standing up. Feeling robbed of the human warmth she had shared with her captain for a brief moment, Seven rose as well.

Janeway smiled tenderly towards the blonde.

"Go regenerate, Seven."

Seven sighed in relief. She enjoyed the soft sparkles

"That is acceptable," she agreed and started walking towards the door, nodding to Captain Montgomery in passing.

The older captain reached out and stopped her by putting a gentle hand on her arm.

"Seven, don’t worry. You’ve nothing to fear from the Protectorate. You’re a brave young woman and I’ll put in a good word for you in my report." She glanced at Janeway, a smirk playing on her lips. "When it comes to your captain, however …"

Seven resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

"Captains," she greeted them and walked towards the door while she still had strength left to do so.

Before she exited the ready room she heard Montgomery’s dry voice.

"Well, Kathryn, I may want to go easy on Seven of Nine but you? Now that’s an entirely different story. Tell me, did you always possess this tendency or has your years in the Delta Quadrant turned you into a space cowboy?"

*****
Lt Bremer walked among the rubble in the Embassy garden. She had beamed down half an hour ago and was now assessing the damages visible from her current location.

"Lieutenant!" a voice called out behind her.

She turned around, squinting in the light of the setting sun.

"Ensign Brovskij," she greeted the young man. "Any news?"

Ensign Brovskij had been among the first to transport down to the planet to assist the local authorities in the search and rescue work. She liked the young man. She was impressed by his actions both in the rescue of the missing Guardian away team in the cave as well as how he handled himself when he was assigned to her away team at the plant.

"No, ma’am," the ensign now replied, his brow furrowing. "Ms J’Oy did not return here and nobody has seen her or her driver since before the quake."

"Did anyone remember giving her the order to return here after she briefed Montgomery?"

"Nobody talked to her at all, ma’am. It’s possible she’s still out there. I guess all we can hope for is that she managed to take cover."

Bremer did not know why the thought of the young woman’s precarious situation disturbed her so much. Her life as a respected Guardian had put her in many dangerous situations where she had been forced to both take and sacrifice individual lives to save thousands.

"Come with me, Ensign," she now muttered and began walking towards the garages where the embassy kept their hovercrafts.

Several of the doors were jammed but with a well-aimed phaser shot she managed to pry one open. The roof had partly collapsed but the left side of the structure were still intact.

They pulled out a small hovercraft for two people.

"Let’s go," Bremer said and pushed the button to the ignition. The engine roared to life and soon they were off, carefully manoeuvring between pieces of debris.

Bremer drove like someone possessed. She had a strange; unsettling feeling that time was running out.

When she had gone to Montgomery with her request, the Captain had listened intently before giving her approval.

Bremer had requested that she personally be allowed to search for the missing Bunthoran woman. She pointed out how instrumental the young girl had been in the success of their mission and that Ms J’Oy may prove to be invaluable in the planet’s recovery.

Montgomery had been surprised and a little intrigued by Bremer’s uncharacteristic
request. She had agreed that they owed Ms J’Oy a great deal and that it would be prudent for Bremer to try to locate her. "The last I remember is that I told the girl to remain with her embassy driver and await further instructions," the captain had admitted regrettfully.

Bremer drove the hovercraft as quickly as it was possible through the capital and towards the outskirts where the industrial area was located. She wanted to go faster but debris and rescue vehicles filled the streets, making it impossible.

She knew that the city had sustained a lot of damage. Chakotay and Toriello had worked hard to assist the local authorities evacuate as many people as possible but there were still thousands left that needed help.

Bremer watched the fire brigade’s large hovercrafts ascend just above the debris and oncoming vehicles. She knew that these rescue vehicles had the capability to almost fly. They boasted a powerful propulsion system that allowed them to perform such manoeuvres. She felt the warm gush of air from the vehicle as it passed overhead.

Fires plagued the city. Several government building had not survived the quake. Most of them were evacuated but Toriello had informed them that a large number of civil servants were missing. Bremer had watched the Excellence’s commander as he and Chakotay briefed the two senior staff crews of the two ships.

The amicable man had shown signs of severe fatigue, as had Commander Chakotay, but both of them were already back planet side to assist Bunthora’s EOC Commander.

Commander Tuvok and four security officers from both ships worked on establishing who was responsible for the plan that almost had destroyed the planet. Bremer realised that she was supposed to be on that team as well. She was glad that Montgomery had allowed her to pursue this search.

Finally they were approaching the area where they all had beamed down to not long ago.

"Look!" Ensign Brovskij exclaimed next to Bremer. He pointed towards a large, severely damaged structure.

Bremer stared, not believing her eyes.

It was the same brick building that she and the away team had entered earlier that day. Now it looked like someone had not only crushed it, but also twisted the metal around giant fingers and dropped it haphazardly on top of the debris. The tall cylinders that had been part of the massive construction that had depleted the subterranean water were now distorted and scattered over a vast area. All the smaller buildings were levelled with the ground. There were fires going on everywhere and heavy smoke filled the air.

"This whole area has been completely destroyed," Bremer said through tight lips. "If she was still here … I can’t imagine where she could have taken shelter."

"She’s no fool. She must have known it was time for the big one," the tactical chief replied and stopped the hovercraft. She stepped out and began following the pavement where once a low hedge had grown.

She glanced over her shoulder and saw Brovskij make his way in the opposite direction.
Bremer knew that her old comm badge was probably destroyed. Harry Kim had scanned for the device and had even used the enhanced sensors from astrometrics onboard Voyager but to no avail. She pulled out her tricorder and began scanning the area around her.

She kept walking in a wide circle around the destroyed structure constantly scanning for bio signs.

Suddenly her foot hit something that was sharp enough to almost slice through her boot. Cursing under her breath, Bremer looked down and saw a piece of twisted metal. At first she thought it had to be from the building but then she saw the familiar markings on a part of it.

She picked it up. The Protectorate’s emblem. The piece of metal was from the hovercraft that had taken Sha’nee J’Oy to the industrial area. Setting her tricorder for a closer range, Bremer performed another scan.

Suddenly the tricorder gave a beep and kept beeping.

Walking with new energy towards the source, the tactical chief prayed that she would find the young Bunthoran alive.

She rounded a corner and saw a set of large rocks in a triangular formation, probably meant to be a landmark of sorts. She rushed towards it, the signal becoming stronger as she did so.

The rocks were enormous, reaching to her shoulders, and Bremer had to stand on her toes to be able to peek over the edge of the closest one.

The first thing she saw was long golden red hair and a small body in a grey Guardian away team coverall.

"J'Oy," Bremer called out. "Sha’nee!"

There was no reply. Bremer slapped her comm badge.

"Bremer to Brovskij. I found her. She’s at the north side of the building."

"On my way."

"Bring the med kit and get over here. Look for three large rocks; that’s where she took cover. Bremer out."

The tall woman walked backwards a couple of steps and then ran forward quickly, jumping up on the nearest rock, holding on with both hands. She pulled herself up and when she was up there she could see a Bunthoran man lying next to the motionless girl among the rocks.

Bremer carefully jumped down to them and knelt beside Sha’nee J’Oy, scanning her limp body.

To her relief, there were weak but definite life signs emanating from the young woman. She was covered with dust and small debris and Bremer carefully removed it from her with one hand while scanning the large man with the other.
The tricorder showed steady life signs and Bremer was grateful that Sha’nee had not had to suffer through this ordeal alone.

"Lieutenant? How’s she doing? Is the driver with her?" she heard Brovskij ask.

"I got them both. They’re alive. Get up here and give me a hand."

Moment later she saw Brovskij’s face as he jumped up on one of the large rocks and passed her the med kit box.

"How’s it going?"

"The man is unconscious but I scanned him and he’s stable."

"Can he be moved?"

She paused and scanned the man again.

"Yes, beam him to the embassy and have him transported to a local hospital from there."

"What about her?" Brovskij motioned towards the Bunthoran young woman.

"Not good. She needs to be stabilised."

"Options?"

"Letting her die or beaming her to Voyager’s sick bay. Look, she needs immediate attention. She won’t survive anything else. Protocols be damned," Bremer growled.

"Did I say a word?" Brovskij asked holding up his hands.

"She’s a trusted agent. She has worked closely with our embassy for years - and she is only one person."

"Lieutenant, who are you trying convince, me or you? Just do what you believe is the right thing."

"You better transport the driver before he regains consciousness."

"Yes, ma’am." Brovskij tapped his comm badge and requested an emergency transport of the driver. Soon he and the Bunthoran man disappeared in a green tinted light.

Bremer leaned over Sha’nee and pushed the long hair out of the girl’s bruised face. She attached a cortical stimulator at the base of the young Bunthoran’s skull and tapped in some commands. Soon Sha’nee’s pulse was stronger and slower, her respiration not as shallow.

The tall dark Guardian scanned the girl’s slender extremities and found fractures on both arms. Getting out a bone knitter, she pulled it twice across the injured arms and a new scan showed that the fractures were stable. Voyager’s EMH would do the rest.

"I think it’s safe to move you now," Bremer murmured and pulled the smaller woman up, cradling her in her arms. She managed to move her hand to her comm badge and tap it.

"Bremer to Voyager. Lock onto my comm badge. Two to beam to sickbay," she said
"One life sign is Bunthoran ..." the officer in charge in transporter room one began.

"You heard me. This transport is authorised by Captain Montgomery. Energise!"

"Yes, ma’am."

The green tinted light filled her view and then she found herself in familiar surroundings, having been a patient in the very same place only hours ago.

The Doctor came towards her as she materialised next to the main bio bed.

"She’s been seriously injured," Bremer heard herself say, taken aback at how much her voice trembled.

"Put her down here. Gently, that’s it. Now step back, please," the Doctor said and ran a medical tricorder across the young woman.

"How is she doing?" Bremer asked.

Finishing his initial scan the Doctor grabbed an instrument and began cutting lose Sha’nee’s clothes. He quickly uncovered the battered body underneath the coverall. Bremer gasped as she saw all the cuts and bruises on the fair skin.

"She’s bleeding internally. She has multiple fractures to her arms and ribs and also a concussion. Her eyes are damaged by foreign particles. If you had not gotten to her when you did she would be dead by now," the Doctor replied, his voice solemn. "You did well to attach a cortical stimulator to regulate her vital signs. She would not have lasted more than minutes otherwise. Good call, Lieutenant."

He raised an arch from the bio bed around the young woman. Pressing in commands he set the machines to keep Sha’nee fully saturated and stable, as he would perform the necessary surgery.

"What’s going on here? Who is that?" a throaty voice said from the door.

Bremer turned around to see Voyager’s captain enter sickbay.

"Captain, this is Sha’nee J’Oy," Bremer replied.

Janeway stepped up next to the Excellence’s tactical chief and looked down at the young woman on the bio bed.

"How is she?" she said in a low voice. "Will she be all right, Doctor?"

The Doctor only nodded, preoccupied with his patient.

"She’s in the best of hands," the captain said reassuringly, placing a hand on the tall dark haired woman’s shoulder. "You know first hand that she’ll get first rate care here."

Bremer was surprised that she did not mind the comforting hand on her shoulder. She was otherwise an extremely private person that did not let anyone close. She glanced down on the compact woman next to her.

"How is Seven of Nine doing?" she asked in a low voice.
Janeway looked up, a soft smile on her lips.

"She’s regenerating and will do so for," she glanced at the chronometer on the computer screen on the wall, "another twenty-one hours, at least. She’ll be fine."

"I will have to ask you both to leave," the Doctor said. "I’ll let you know the outcome of the surgery but I don’t foresee any problems. You saved her life by bringing her to me when you did, Lieutenant."

Bremer felt a lump in her throat. She swallowed hard. The sight of the unconscious, bruised girl on the bio bed was almost too much.

Chastising herself for the lack of composure, Bremer squared her shoulders and nodded.

"Please inform me when you have any news regarding Ms J’Oy," she said her voice short. "There is the matter of the Prime Directive in her case. Captain Montgomery sanctioned this breach of protocol, but she can’t remain here unsupervised."

"She’s not going anywhere anytime soon," the EMH huffed but then relented. "I’ll let you know when the surgery is over and also when she regains consciousness."

"Thank you."

Bremer nodded towards Captain Janeway and then walked out of sickbay. She kept walking until she reached a niche where she slowed down and paused. Leaning against the wall, she tried to pull herself together.

"Lieutenant, join me in my ready room," she suddenly heard Janeway say behind her. "I’m expecting your captain back in half an hour and I think she’d like an update regarding Ms J’Oy. She was quite concerned about the young woman."

Bremer found herself steered towards a turbo lift by the dynamic captain. They entered it and Janeway gave the command.

"Bridge."

The turbo lift gave a whining sound and ascended.

Janeway regarded her with kind eyes.

"Now, Lieutenant," she said with a lopsided grin, "please tell me you’re a coffee person."

*****

"On screen," Montgomery ordered and rose from her command chair on the Excellence’s bridge.

The main view screen flickered for a fraction of a second and then showed a tall man in a Guardian uniform.

"Captain Montgomery," the man said politely, "I’m Captain Dar’Gaian of the
Protectorate ship Rak’Tar. We’ve come to aid you as requested.”

Montgomery smirked inwardly. She knew of Dar’Gaian but had never met him face to face before. His reputation had him as an able Guardian but he also possessed an inclination for being pompous and sombre. Some Guardians were more human than they realised, she thought to herself and not for the first time.

"It’s good to see you, Captain Dar’Gaian," she now said, equally polite. "We have most of the situation under control but there is still a lot to be done for the Bunthorans and our ship is still under repairs. Several of our crucial systems are still failing."

Her colleague nodded.

"We’ll take over from here," he said promptly. "I understand that you’ve been working under some unusual circumstances, Captain?"

To say the least, Montgomery thought.

"I’m sure the elders have informed you that when the Excellence used the subspace beacon to request assistance, another non-Protectorate vessel responded. It turned out to be the USS Voyager from my home world. Without Captain Janeway and her crew, this mission would have been lost and so would this ship."

Dar’Gaian frowned.

"It is against the rules …" he began.

Tired and with a splitting headache, Montgomery cut him off.

"It has been sanctioned, Captain Dar’Gaian," she snapped. She outranked this man, having been a Guardian captain twice as long as he had. "Or do I need to address the Elders with your concerns regarding their judgement?"

The other captain paled. He had obviously not counted on the fact that she would defend having to resort to help from non-Guardians. Dar’Gaian probably considered such an action a failure.

"That won’t be necessary."

"I think before we go any further we need to clear a few things up. First, verify your orders. You are here in support of the Excellence. I remain in command of the relief efforts until I choose to transition with you."

"I just assumed…"

"You assumed too much Captain. I will immediately send a member of my command staff to brief you and your staff on the current situation. I will expect you to begin deploying assistance teams to rendezvous and reinforce the current relief efforts on the ground as soon as that briefing is concluded," the Excellence’s captain said icily.

"I understand." Captain Dar’Gaian replied tersely.

"There is one other matter. There is an ongoing investigation as to who is responsible for this catastrophe being conducted by my first officer, Commander Toriello and two of Voyager’s officer, Commander Chakotay and Commander Tuvok, their tactical chief.
They are working closely with the local authorities. Focus on the relief efforts, Captain. Do not interfere with the investigation. There is a great deal at stake. The technology was Protectorate.

"I … I was not aware of this."

Montgomery sighed inwardly. She was tired. She needed this man to work with her not against her. This conversation was not going the way she wanted it to go. Taking a deep breath, she began again.

"Captain Dar’Gaian, you have an excellent reputation as does your ship and its crew, which is why the Elders chose you for this mission. We are grateful for you arrival. Your support and assistance are severely needed but … this mission, this situation is unlike any we have encountered before. I need you trust the Elders and work together with me, my crew, and the crew of Voyager knowing that we are embarking into areas were … protocols may or may not apply.

"I understand Captain." Dar’Gaian replied, sounding much more respectful.

"Good. My staff officer will transport over immediately. In the mean time we’ll begin to download everything we have on the situation. I meant what I said, we are grateful to see you and your crew and your help is desperately needed."

The face of the other captain softened.

"Thank you, Captain," he said, "There will be no more misunderstandings. We are standing by to assist."

"Thank you. Montgomery out."

The blonde captain walked across the bridge.

"I’ll be in my ready room," she informed the crew. "You have the bridge, Lt D’Antoine."

Lt D’Antoine left her station and walked towards the command chairs. The small woman frowned as she passed her captain.

Montgomery knew that her crew worried about her sometimes. They had been together for so long and they were closer than most families. Still, she knew that D’Antoine would never voice her concern out loud in public.

Montgomery managed a faint smile as she left the bridge and entered the blessed silence in her ready room.

She walked over to a small cabinet next to her desk. She opened it and pulled out a little box. Taking two small, green items from the box she walked over to the replicator.

"Hot water with sugar."

A steaming mug appeared. The captain brought it to the desk with her and put the two green items into the hot water. She let them dissolve and then carefully sipped the hot beverage. Closing her eyes she leaned back in her chair, letting the medicine take effect.
She knew she was becoming addicted to it but as long as it did not affect her performance she was not too worried. It was not a narcotic drug and it kept her going.

Most of the headache had gone away when the comm system came alive with a chirp.

"Janeway to Montgomery."

"Montgomery here. Go ahead, Kathryn."

"I've just been hailed by a colleague of yours. He doesn’t seem overly enthused about my ship's part in all this."

Montgomery smirked.

"Don’t worry about Dar’Gaian," she said. "He’s a good man but has a lot to learn. He is still wet behind the ears as a Guardian."

She could almost hear Janeway smile.

"Chakotay just hailed me with good news. There have not been any aftershocks in one hour. The rescue workers were able to reach a lot of people in that time."

"I know. I heard from Max just before the Rak’Tar showed up."

There was a brief pause.

"Yes, Kathryn? What can I do for you?" Montgomery asked, knowing that there was something on the younger woman’s mind.

"I guess, it is … well, you know how it feels when you’ve been in the middle of chaos and then everything calms down …" Janeway’s voice trailed off.

"Empty," the Excellence’s captain concluded. "A kind of withdrawal. The adrenaline rush is over and you feel empty."

"Exactly."

"She’s still regenerating, isn’t she?" Montgomery smiled to herself.

A stunned silence.

"Oh … yes, she is."

"And you’re feeling lonely."

Janeway was no coward.

"Yes, I feel lonely," the younger woman admitted, sounding exasperated. "I've sent Seven into harms way more times than I can count and …" she hesitated for a brief moment. "I guess it’s taking its toll on me."

Montgomery could understand the other woman’s trepidation. As a new Guardian, she had been terrified of losing more members of her crew, even more than when the Excellence had struggled through the Delta Quadrant all alone. Now that they had all this new technology and the possibility of back up from an armada of other Guardian ships, any casualty was a personal failure.
"She’s your special protégé," she mused. "You feel responsible. You saved her, gave her a new existence once. It’s different with her compared to the rest of your crew. After all, they all chose to be Starfleet officers or Maquis members knowing what it they were getting themselves into. Seven of Nine was lost to the Borg as a child and let’s be honest, you chose her new existence, not her."

"Yes," Janeway sighed.

"But you are forgetting something," the older captain said. "She may not have made the initial choice to join your crew but she most certainly has chosen to stay with you. If she wanted to, she could leave Voyager, refuse to function in the chain of command but she chooses not to. As I see it - she has chosen you."

"What are you talking about?" Janeway asked, her voice startled.

"Kathryn, can’t you see it? She does everything you ask of her and more both because she is a dutiful, capable young woman but also because she has chosen to live her life your way. She wants to please you. You said it yourself; in the beginning she contradicted you constantly and disobeyed orders. Once she understood what was expected of her onboard your ship, she relented. She found her place, not necessarily as one of many among the crew because they still feared her and what she stood for as a Borg, but with you."

Montgomery sipped her hot water with the medicine. The pain was slowly dissipating.

"She told me that Voyager is her collective now," the younger captain said. "She talked about the entire ship."

"She has made some friends but ask yourself if she looks at them the way she looks at you. Kathryn, she loves you."

The silence from the other end was revealing.

"I don’t know what to do," Janeway eventually confessed. "I really don’t, Eliana."

Montgomery raised a tired hand and rubbed her throbbing temple.

"Take it from someone whose only regrets are the things I let slip through my fingers," she managed. "Don’t miss out on the chance of happiness, love or friendship. These are rare commodities and you don’t know when you’ll see the Alpha Quadrant again - if ever. I know you think you have to stay detached from your crew but under your special circumstances, it’s not worth it."

"What do you mean?"

"If you have someone to be yourself with, not the captain, just Kathryn," Montgomery said wistfully, "you won’t have to suffer the repercussions alone like you did after the Equinox incident."

"Do you follow your own advice, Eliana?" Janeway asked sounding a bit exasperated.

The Excellence’s captain laced her fingers through her hair. Of course Kathryn would challenge her, ask her if she put her money where her mouth was.

"I didn’t for the longest time," she confessed. "I thought I had to do things all by myself,
all the time. It took me a while, way too long of course, to realise that nobody expected me to do that - but me."

"You’re in a relationship?" Janeway asked. "How does that work with being an esteemed Guardian?"

Montgomery laughed.

"Guardians do not take a vow of celibacy, Kathryn," she said, amused. "Yes, I am in a relationship as you put it. We’re both Guardians and that means we don’t get to spend as much time together the way we would like. There are many advantages too, though. We understand each other very well both professionally and emotionally."

Janeway was quiet for a while and Montgomery let the younger woman mull her words over.

"You make a lot of sense," Janeway murmured. "It’s not that I don’t want to … hell, I’d give everything to … oh, damn …" The throaty voice disappeared and the older captain knew that Janeway was fighting against her tears.

"It’s okay, Kathryn," she said calmly. "You and Seven will find your way. If nothing else, that girl will wear your resistance down with her love. She radiates it, you know."

A muted sob was heard over the comm link.

"She does, doesn’t she?" Voyager’s captain whispered.

"It’s pretty clear if you know what to look for."

"So you think I should tell her how I feel?"

Montgomery smiled.

"I do. Do you realise that you just admitted it not only to yourself but to me as well, Kathryn?"

A stunned silence.

"You old fox," Janeway growled but Montgomery could hear the reluctant smile in her voice. "You conned me."

"Takes one to know one."

Janeway sighed.

"You have an irritating habit of being right, Captain," she said.

"I know. It’s a gift."

The loud groan made Montgomery laugh out loud.

There was a brief silence again and then Janeway spoke.

"I have to ask you something on a completely different matter, Eliana. If I offer you and your crew the opportunity to come onboard Voyager and try their luck at getting home to the Alpha Quadrant, would that meet with your approval? Would you want to
Montgomery pursed her lips, thinking. She had expected this question.

"My crew can follow their hearts. They will most likely take your generous offer into consideration since it’s their first real chance since we were stranded here. Me? It’s simply not an option. I couldn’t leave even if I wanted to."

"What do you mean? Because of the relationship you’re in?"

"That among other things. Actually Kathryn, there are several reasons and I promise that before we part, I’ll let you know."

"Eliana, I don’t like how you’re sounding. There is something wrong, isn’t there?" Janeway asked.

Montgomery rose, feeling almost light headed since the headache had dissipated.

"I promise I’ll level with you, Kathryn. Some things are easier to talk about face to face and … well, that, and I think you deserve nothing less."

Janeway held her breath to not let Montgomery know how worried the other woman’s words made her.

"You can tell me when ever you deem appropriate, Eliana," she said, her voice soft. "I will not pass judgement."

"Thank you. My reasons are valid and the sums of them are that I’m in the Delta Quadrant to stay. Nothing can ever change that."

There seriousness of the other woman’s tone of voice made Janeway swallow hard.

"So, you’re stuck," the auburn haired woman tried to joke.

"No, not stuck. I’m home, Kathryn," Montgomery answered, her voice serious. "I said I couldn’t leave even if I wanted to. The truth is; I don’t want to leave. I have a good life here with an important job that takes me all around the sectors. I have friends, some old ones from the Alpha Quadrant and some new ones that I’m equally fond of. But can you guess what the best part is?"

Kathryn stood and turned towards the view screen. She saw the sleek outline of the Excellence where repairs were still being conducted. Several crewmembers were out on the hull.

"Yes," she said her voice soft. "I do. I think, since I learned a lot from you and we’re not all that different, that the best part of being here, settling down and finding your place in this society as a Guardian, is that you get the opportunity to make a difference."

"Oh, Kathryn," Montgomery said in a low voice. "You do understand, don’t you? You know how important that is to me. I lost so many to senseless, wasteful deaths when we"
were hurled into this quadrant. Now it feels like it wasn’t for nothing. Every life I save I do in their memory, to honour them."

"I know, Eliana," Janeway offered softly. "I know."

"So the answer to your question, my dear, is that if anyone in my crew wants to join you, I’ll make it easy for them. I’ll encourage it if they approach me."

"Fair enough."

"Now, a question for you, Captain," Montgomery said briskly. "What if I asked your crewmembers if they would like to stay?"

Taken aback, Janeway covered her mouth with her hand. She felt her heart sink. She had not considered that.

"I don’t know," she said. "I’m being brutally honest here, Eliana. I simply don’t know. I need more than a skeleton crew to get Voyager home. If too many were to jump ship, we’d all have to stay until I could round up enough people to run the ship."

"Do you think this is likely to occur? You’re crew is loyal and adamant to get home."

Janeway shuddered.

"Yes, they are," she agreed. "But we’ve never faced this exact situation before, have we?"

"No, neither of us," Montgomery agreed. "We are both facing something we weren’t exactly prepared for, Kathryn. We may lose a few or gain a few … or both."

Janeway regarded the ship next to hers in orbit.

"Still, I don’t regret answering your request for assistance," Voyager’s captain replied. "Finding you here in the Delta Quadrant makes it seem … well, I guess, less lonely. I know I was suspicious in the beginning because of Ransom. Your story paralleled his initially."

"I know, Kathryn, you don’t have to explain."

"Yes, I feel I have to." Janeway sank down on the couch. "You were always aware of my weaknesses when I attended the Academy."

"More than that, I was always aware of your strengths, Kathryn," the older captain insisted.

Janeway smiled.

"Thank you. But they are two sides of the same coin, as you know. My strengths have a nasty habit of becoming my greatest weaknesses. Running into you, the Excellence … I re-evaluated my own actions … reactions, really, and by doing so put a lot of things, regarding the Equinox among other things, into perspective."

"Is that why you’re able to reach out to Seven?" Montgomery asked in a gentle voice.

Janeway leaned against the backrest of the couch, pulling one knee up and wrapping her arms around it.
"It may very well be, Eliana," the auburn haired woman said. "I don’t know when it began and I don’t know when I’ll be ready to take the next step. All I can say is that I’m grateful to run into you."

She heard the older woman chuckle.

"Oh, don’t mention it," Montgomery said casually. "Just think of it as my way of welcoming you to the neighbourhood."

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Sha’nee Joy ached all over.

She knew that if she opened her eyes, the bright light would blind her so she kept them closed. Gentle hands moved her right arm and she felt heat radiating against her skin. To her astonishment the pain slowly went away.

"What happened?" she murmured.

"You barely escaped the quake," a sonorous female voice said to her left. She recognised it but could not remember whom it belonged to.

"There, how does that feel?" another voice said, this time decidedly mail and with an energetic tinge to it. "Move your wrist for me, Ms J'Oy."

She cautiously did as he told her and was surprised to only feel a dull ache where it had been in such agony just a moment ago.

"Open your eyes, please?" the man said. "I need to make sure that your corneas have healed."

Sha’nee stiffened.

"What’s wrong with my eyes?" she asked, panic in her voice. "Did something happen to my eyes?"

"Both your eyes were subjected to massive amounts of dust that was in the air after the quake demolished the buildings," the man replied.

Was he a doctor? Where was she? Sha’nee wanted to sit up but found that she could not move.

A gently hand was suddenly on her shoulder. The touch was strong yet soft and the young woman knew it was futile to struggle.

"Sha’nee, you’re safe," the woman said. "I brought you to an undamaged hospital to treat your injuries. Now, go ahead. Do as the Doctor says and open your eyes."

Swallowing hard, the young Bunthonan girl slowly opened her eyes. The light stung but her vision was normal. Tears of relief welled up as she looked at the two standing over her.
The man to her right moved an object over her face and then he smiled.

"Very good," he said, sounding pleased. "Your eyes are as good as new."

Sha’nee turned to her left. A tall, dark woman stood there in a familiar uniform. She was a Guardian.

"Lt Bremer," Sha’nee suddenly remembered. "You were injured …"

"I’m fine. You’re going to be fine too, the Doctor here assures me," Bremer said with a lopsided grin. "I’m glad we got you out in time."

Sha’nee shuddered as she recalled the frightening moments when the quake hit and she realised that nobody was coming to save her or the driver.

"The driver," she gushed. "What happened to …"

"He’s recovering. He had minor injuries and are being treated at a local hospital as we speak," Bremer explained.

"Why am I not there? Why am I in this place? What is this place?"

The Doctor and Bremer exchanged enigmatic glances.

"Don’t worry about that now," the Doctor said and patted her shoulder. "We still have one more arm to fix up."

"I demand to know where I am!" the young woman insisted, looking at Bremer.

"You’re at a Protectorate facility that has a clinic for the Guardians," Bremer said.

Sha’nee knew that there was more to this; she had never seen such technology before. The fact that this doctor was mending her broken bones in seconds without the use of surgery was more than enough evidence.

"I know you’re not telling me everything, Lieutenant," she murmured. "I’m grateful that you came back for me. I thought I was going to die."

"Ensign Brovskij and I went back and the way I see it, we owed you …"

There was a hissing noise and then footsteps. Lt Bremer interrupted herself and stood at attention as someone approached the bed.

"Ms J’Oy," a determined voice said, "this is all my doing. I beg your forgiveness."

A woman in a Guardian uniform came into focus and all Sha’nee could do was stare. The woman was a little older than Lt Bremer with blonde hair framing her face. She outranked the dark haired woman, the Bunthoran decided, judging from her uniform as well as her attitude.

"You’re Captain Montgomery?" Sha’nee guessed.

"Clever girl. Well, I’m happy to see that the Doctor has mended you. How is she doing, Doctor?"

The slightly bald man smiled.
"She will make a full recovery, thanks to the persistence of the Lieutenant here. It was touch and go for a while …" he glanced at Bremer and then broke off. "Well, she’ll be up and about in no time."

Montgomery nodded approvingly.

"Good, very good. Well, Lieutenant, now there is the small matter of how we get the Protectorate to endorse Ms J'Oy’s presence here."

"My thought was that the same arguments that you used for Voyager could be applied, ma’am," Bremer offered. "Ms J'Oy has worked closely with Ambassador J'Aoh for quite some time, a trusted agent that deserved our help as well as a commendation for bravery."

The Captain looked vaguely amused.

"A commendation, huh, Lieutenant?" she said. "I see you have really thought this through. It’s not that I don’t agree with your assessment but don’t you think it should be my call to initiate such a proposal?"

Sha’nee watched with fascination as the tall, imposing woman to her left blushed faintly. Bremer cleared her throat softly and then nodded.

"Of course, Captain," she said, to Sha’nee’s amazement not sounding repentant at all.

"Very good," the captain stated and turned to the young woman again. "You’re countrymen owe you a lot, Ms J'Oy. I will make sure the Emperor knows just how much as well as the Elders of the Protectorate."

Sha’nee knew that the Protectorate was a remote nation on her planet that nobody had ever visited as they lived in seclusion. They only communicated with the outside world through their embassies. To think that the charismatic Guardian captain would not only mention her to the Emperor but also to her elusive superiors was flabbergasting to say the least but if her beloved country was destroyed it would all be for nothing.

"Thank you, Captain," she said. "Tell me, did the quake destroy everything as we feared," she asked eyes full of tears.

Captain Montgomery glanced at Bremer as she moved closer to the biobed.

"No, Sha’nee. We succeeded and you were part of that. The one that hit was bad enough, but the rescue workers were able to evacuate as many and most of your citizens in the capital survived."

Sha’nee shivered as the tears poured down her face. She had lived with the frustration of knowing about the impending disaster and not being heard, for so long, it was difficult to understand that Bunthora had a future in spite of everything.

Lt Bremer reached out and wiped the moisture from the young woman’s face.

"Sha’nee, please don’t cry. It will be all right."

"Do you have any family members or loved ones that you’re worried about?" the captain asked. "We would be happy to send word and look for them?"
"No, ma’am," Sha’nee replied, trying to regain her composure. "My parents are dead and there is no one else. I’ve pretty much worked around the clock these past two years."

The three people around her exchanged strange glances again.

"All right, Ms J’Oy. You rest and get better. The Doctor and Lt Bremer will see that you get anything you need."

"Thank you, Captain."

Sha’nee relaxed as the blonde woman nodded friendly at her and left the infirmary. Turning her head towards Bremer, the young woman cautiously reached out her hand.

*****

Bremer looked down on the slender hand that reached out to her.

Carefully she took it in hers and held it.

"You’ll be fine now," she assured the young woman. "The Doctor said that you’d make a full recovery."

Sha’nee bit her lip and then shook her head.

"It’s not that," she said in a low, muffled voice. "It’s … I just thought that … When the quake hit and I realised that nobody was coming, I …"

Sha’nee began to cry again. Bremer realised that horrible memories haunted the younger woman. She looked up at the Doctor and motioned with her chin for him to leave them alone. The EMH nodded and walked into his office.

Bremer pulled up a stool and sat down next to the biobed. Sha’nee was only covered by a Starfleet issue blanket. Her small triangular face was framed by long golden blonde hair that welled down over her shoulders. Her eyes were green with a blue edge around the iris.

"I know, Sha’nee, and I’m sorry," the lieutenant said. "When Seven shut the computer down inside the plant they only had minutes left to vacate the premises. I was incapacitated on this very bed and Captain Montgomery was occupied with having to decide whether to use heavy weapons or not, to ensure shutting the technology down."

The young Bunthoran nodded that she understood but still the tears were streaming down her cheeks.

"Come here," Bremer found herself say. Not really thinking, she pulled the distraught young girl into her arms and rocked her.

Sha’nee clung to her.

"I was so afraid," she confessed. "The last thing I remember is the driver pushing me up on some large rocks and then I fell down … debris were falling on top of me … and
everything went black …"

Bremer made a mental note to make sure that the driver was recognised for his bravery.

"He saved you by doing so," she said and held the young girl close. "He saved himself too and you will both be fine."

Sha’nee pulled back a little, looking at Bremer with wide, moist eyes.

"Thank you for coming back for me," she sniffled. "Thank you, Lt Bremer."

"Call me Heidi," Bremer surprised the young woman as well as herself by saying.

Sha’nee’s gave a trembling smile.

"Heidi," she tried the name out. "What an unusual name."

Bremer made a face.

"Nothing special," she allowed.

Thinking that she should let go of the young woman now that she had calmed down, she found herself wrapped up in a firm hug.

"It’s a beautiful name," the Bunthoran girl said.

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"Regeneration cycle complete."

Seven opened her eyes and stepped off the alcove dais. In front of her stood Janeway leaning against her work console.

"Captain," the blonde greeted, clasping her hands behind her back.

"How are you feeling, Seven?" the auburn haired woman asked.

"I am functioning within normal parameters," the ex-Borg replied.

The captain gave a slow smile.

"That’s good news, Seven," she said.

"How is the rescue operation progressing?" Seven asked.

"If you care to join me for dinner, I’ll fill you in on all the latest developments."

Seven nodded in agreement, pleased that Janeway wanted to share a meal with her. She was hungry since she was becoming more and more used to digesting nutrition the human way.

"Are we going to the mess hall?" she asked, hoping that this was not the case.
Janeway stepped closer and pushed an errant tress of blonde hair from Seven’s forehead.

"No, I thought it would be nice to share a meal in my quarters. I’m not much of a cook but there are a few things I can program that aren’t half bad."

Seven gave a faint smile at the remark. She knew Janeway did not enjoy preparing food and it was often a joke among the crewmember that had been subjected to the captain’s cooking.

"I can assist," the blonde offered. "I have researched the culinary database on more than one occasion. It is merely a matter of physics and chemistry."

Janeway laughed.

"Is it? Well, then, I will gladly accept your help."

They walked to Janeway’s quarters; the silence as they rode the turbo lift was a little unsettling. Seven did not know what to talk about or what topics might be prudent. She was not sure about the nature of this … meeting?

Janeway punched in set of commands that opened the door to her quarters. She stood back to let Seven enter first. The blonde walked inside and stopped just inside the door.

The dining room table was already set for two. Two tall candles burned with a soft glow and a large bouquet of red roses stood in a crystal vase.

Seven heard the door hiss shut behind them. She turned to Janeway, her heart fluttering in her chest.

"Captain?"

Janeway walked up to her and led her towards the table with a gentle hand around her elbow.

"Do you like the flowers?" the older woman asked.

"Red roses," the Borg observed. "Are you aware of the symbolic meaning of these flowers?"

The captain seemed uneasy for a moment but then she smiled and shrugged. Leaning into Seven’s personal space her eyes twinkled.

"I am," she said with a crooked grin.

Not dwelling any more on the subject, Janeway approached the replicator and made her requests.

"Two glasses of Vine Sanbiel."

Two crystal glasses shimmered into existence and she carefully handed one to Seven. The blonde looked at it with trepidation.

"My cortical implant reacts inappropriately with synthehol, Captain," she said and was about to hand over the glass again.
Janeway smiled.

"This is not Champagne, Seven," she said. "You can sip it and if it makes you feel uncomfortable you can just leave it. I think you’ll like it though."

"Very well," the blonde agreed. "I will attempt this beverage with caution."

The captain laughed softly and raised her glass.

"I would like to propose a toast," she began. "To friendship …"

"To friendship," Seven echoed.

"… and us."

Stopping her glass half way to her lips, Seven stared at the other woman.

Janeway smiled and sipped her wine. Her eyes followed Seven’s movements as the blonde mimicked her captain’s action.

"There, did you like it?" Janeway asked.

Seven found it almost impossible to answer. Her throat seemed constricted and it was as if she needed to swallow over and over.

"Yes," she finally managed. "This beverage was very palatable."

"Good," Janeway beamed. "Now, help me out here. Double-check what I punch into the replicator so I don’t screw it up."

The captain moved over to the replicator again and Seven followed, standing behind the older woman as she entered the variables.

She noticed immediately Janeway making an error.

"No, Captain," she said and put her hand over the captain’s to forestall her turning their salmon into charcoal. "That is not correct. You need to set the heating parameters differently."

Janeway glanced over her shoulder. Her eyes were the deepest shade of blue that Seven had ever seen.

"Show me, then," the captain said.

Seven moved Janeway’s hand but kept it in hers as she reached up with her cybernetic hand and entered the correct commands.

"Like that," she explained. "If you do it this way, Captain, you will not disintegrate the dish upon entry."

Janeway gave a short bark of a laugh where she stood between Seven’s arms. Her hand rested in Seven’s and she did nothing to remove it.

"Funny," the captain huffed, smiling broadly. "I’m glad you caught it though."

They watched the two plates appear inside the replicator and carried them to the table.
As they sat down, Janeway reached across the table and took Seven’s hand again.

"I’m so relieved that you’re safe," she said, her voice soft. "I was very afraid for your sake when we thought we would have to detach you from the alien computer by force."

"That would have damaged my systems," Seven agreed. She watched the captain’s brow furrow. "However, I am as you said, safe. I have regenerated and am back to a normal, Captain."

Janeway squeezed her hand.

"Call me, Kathryn," she said slowly, "like you did down on the planet. Please."

"Kathryn," Seven repeated.

"I have something important I need to talk to you about, Seven," Janeway said as she let go of the blonde’s hand. "It’s not easy for me but the time has come for me to be frank with you."

Seven’s throat began to constrict again. Her eyes narrowed and she felt her right palm become moist for a brief moment before the nano probes took care of the sweat.

"Kathryn?" she said, her voice weak.

"I know you’ve just regenerated after a difficult ordeal but I know that if I don’t talk to you about it now … I may lose my nerve. So bear with me, Seven …"

"Commander Chakotay to Captain Janeway."

Seven watched the captain close her eyes in exasperation. She herself wanted to sabotage the comm system to prevent any interruptions.

Janeway tapped her comm badge.

"Janeway here. Go ahead."

"I have important information, Captain. Commander Toriello is briefing Captain Montgomery and Captain Gar’Daian as we speak."

"What’s going on, Commander?"

"As you know Commander Toriello, Tuvok and I have focused on the investigation of who’s behind the long term depletion of the subterranean water. We worked under the assumption that the entire operation reached all the way up to the government."

"What did you find out?" Janeway asked and leaned back into her chair.

"We have to call a meeting between the three ships in orbit immediately." Seven saw a familiar look of determination and resolve on Janeway’s face.

"Chakotay, it’s serious, isn’t it?" the captain said, her voice dark.

The first officer’s voice was solemn.

"Yes, Captain. If the Protectorate doesn’t act immediately, the planet could be facing a
global war."

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Continued in The Guardians - part 7
Lieutenant Heidi Bremer hit her comm badge.

“Bremer to Toriello.”

“Toriello here.”

“Commander, we have a problem. The embassy is under attack. Literally thousands of Bunthoran’s have broken through the outer perimeter. We need reinforcements.

“Understood. Is the embassy itself secure?”

“Yes, Sir,” Bremer replied. “Ambassador J'Aoh has ordered the shield up.”

They had erected an impenetrable force field around the structure and nothing available in Bunthoran technology could get through it.

“You know the dangers, Lieutenant,” Toriello warned. “We have to get the situation under control before anyone gets hurt.”

Bremer knew the Excellence’s First Officer was not talking about the safety of the embassy staff or the guardians. It was the large Bunthoran crowd that was at risk.

“Sir, any recommendations? The guards have fallen back. We’ve lost control of the crowd.”

There was a brief pause.

“We both know they’ll continue to work themselves into a frenzy,” Toriello said, his voice serious. “You know the mechanics behind mob violence. It’s too late to try to reason with them; they are beyond that point. Freeze them.”

There was a stunned silence and Bremer noticed the Voyager crew exchanging glances beneath raised eyebrows.

“I … Yes, sir.”

“Bremer, I know you’re reluctant, but there are two reasons for doing it. First, we have to buy time for reinforcement to reach your position and second, we need to move on Nontha before he can cause any more harm.”

Toriello was referring to the apprehension of Prime Minister Nontha. Bunthora’s leader had launched a highly successful propaganda campaign. Operating from his office in the nearly destroyed capital, he had managed to incite the emotions of suffering Bunthoran’s by putting the blame of the recent tragedies on the Protectorate and its Guardians, as well as the southern nation of Gothiara.

“Don’t delay,” Toriello cautioned. “Things can only get worse.”

“We’ll initiate actions immediately,” Bremer replied.

“I’ll keep you informed about the back up. Toriello out.”
Bremer closed the comm link. Turning to the people dressed in Guardian uniforms she squared her shoulders. “We don’t have much time. There’s a technology available we seldom use and then only as a last resort.”

“Would this be the ‘freezing’ Commander Toriello referred to?” Tuvok asked.

“Yes, Commander,” Bremer replied, turning toward J’Aoh. “Ambassador, we need to return to the control room.”

“Of course, Guardian Bremer,” the ambassador said. “This way.”

Bremer turned toward the others.

“Follow me.”

The five members of the party followed the ambassador back to the control room hosting a large Protectorate computer. Although it was smaller than the one onboard the Excellence, its technology was still far superior to anything Bunthora or Gothiara would come up with for many centuries.

“What does this ‘freezing’ entail, Lieutenant?” Tuvok enquired as he stepped sideways to avoid running into an embassy clerk who was in a hurry to pass them.

“It’s a non-lethal method to control large crowds of people. However, there are risks.”

“Define risks.” Tuvok frowned.

“The technology in itself may not be lethal, but once the humanoids are released from the weapon, they can display a wide range of side effects. Some of the side effects are quite benign. Others are violent and, in the extreme, can manifest themselves as homicidal tendencies.”

Brovskij took a step closer. “You’ve got to be kidding!”

“Now you know why it’s not a weapon of choice very often,” Bremer stated.

“Are you experienced in this procedure?” Seven asked.

Bremer smiled joylessly. Forcing down unfamiliar butterflies in her stomach she shook her head. “I’ve performed this task countless times – under simulated conditions.”

They entered the room. Bremer ordered the computer to provide a 360 degree visual display of the area surrounding the embassy on the various screens.

Large crowds had pressed their way through the gates, even demolished the cast iron looking fence. Men and women of all ages, fury and fear distorting their features, were pressing against the invisible wall that now was in place around the building because of the force field.

“Oh, god, some of them are children!” Brovskij exclaimed. “They’ll be trampled to death.”

“That’s what we’re going to prevent,” Bremer murmured and took a seat at a large computer console with Protectorate markings.

She punched in initial commands as she issued orders. “Seven, get on the other console.
You know the Protectorate systems as well as I do by now. I need to know how many people are out there within a radius of two-hundred metres of the main building.”

“Understood, Lieutenant,” the ex-Borg said.

Out of the corner of her eyes, Bremer saw Seven sit down next to her and send her assimilation tubules into the console. The computer gave a long muted beep at the intrusion. Bremer groaned inwardly at the quick and no doubt efficient way Seven accessed the computer.

“Approximately 4850 individuals are within the radius you specified, Lieutenant,” Seven informed. “The computer estimates that there are twice as many outside of it.”

“The beam will only work safely within a six-hundred metre radius. Stay connected, Seven. If I’m not mistaken, the situation is deteriorating rapidly. I need to get the device online ASAP.”

Seven nodded and let her tubules stay buried inside the alien technology.

“Peters, I need you on the other console!”

The Guardian security officer quickly took a seat at the console to Bremer’s left and started a series of protocols.

“Begin starting sequence on my mark,” Bremer ordered. “Mark.”

Seven and Peters initiated the command.

“I never thought we would need to use this thing,” the ambassador murmured behind her. “The Bunthoran’s have never …” He broke off, his voice filled with sorrow.

“These are not normal circumstances, Ambassador,” Tuvok stated. “They are misguided by a leader they have trusted for decades.”

Bremer quickly calculated the strength of the beam that would emanate from eight different cannons mounted on all four corners of the embassy as well as in the middle of each wall. If she made any miscalculations, she could seriously injure the individuals out here, possibly even kill them.

“The cannons are online, ma’am,” Peters stated. “You’re good to go.”

Bremer could hear the screams coming from outside and on the monitors she saw the people closest to the building starting to fall. She could not hold off any longer.

Praying that her estimates were correct, she punched in the final command. There was a distant vibration as powerful relays switched and the cannons directed their beams towards the angry crowd.

Carefully studying the monitors, Bremer was prepared to abort the procedure at the first sign that something was amiss. The beams were not visible to the human eye but they quickly realised it was in effect. First the closest line of outraged Bunthorans froze as if time stopped, then the rigidity spread quickly and within seconds every individual within sight was standing in the position the beam had found them. Bremer knew that people further back were still able to move, but the pressure would not be as overpowering among the crowd at the outer perimeter. They were probably frightened
by their countrymen’s sudden frozen state and would run in the opposite direction.

“I take it they are not literally frozen,” Tuvok offered behind her.

“No, it’s not a cryogenic technique. Think of it as an immobiliser of sorts,” the Excellence’s tactical chief said as she kept her eyes firmly on the screens. “Seven, how are the readings? I’ve always managed to keep everyone alive this early in the simulation. I assume my record remains unblemished?” She meant the comment as a bad joke, but still held her breath as she waited for Seven to respond.

“The computer confirms that the procedure was successful. The countdown has started.”

“What countdown?” Brovskij asked.

“There are limits on how long they can stay like this,” Peters explained as he rose from his chair. “It is only possible to keep people frozen for half an hour. The Protectorate only allows twenty minutes. There can be unforeseen effects depending on the species that we have no way of anticipating. Twenty minutes is considered the right side of the safe margin.”

“The beam affects the brain by engaging muscle tonus continuously. However, their autonomous system controlling breathing and circulation is operating normally. Their conscience is subdued,” Bremer continued the information. “They normally don’t remember anything afterwards.”

“Like anaesthesia,” Peters added. “When they wake up, they are sore but have no recollection of what happened.”

Tuvok seemed to consider this. “What happens if Commander Toriello can not make it here in twenty minutes with the Royal Guardsmen? Is it possible to repeat the procedure?”

“No, you can’t subject anyone to this twice within a twenty-four hour time span, Commander,” Bremer said. “The average brain can’t handle it.”

Seven let her assimilation tubules retract within her Borg enhanced hand. “This means Commander Toriello has seventeen point eight two four minutes to arrive with reinforcement,” she offered.

Bremer frowned and glanced at the monitor. “I’ll take your word for it, Seven,” she replied. “In the meantime, we have work to do. Let’s get to it.”

Seventeen minutes.

Toriello better be right about the Royal Guardsmen.

Montgomery walked into her ready room.

Striding up to the replicator she ordered a large black coffee. She knew it was not good for her since caffeine to some degree countermanded the effect of her medication. Still, she needed the energy boost the aromatic beverage provided, even if it was only
She brought the mug to her desk and sat down. Before taking the first sip she simply inhaled the aroma, knowing it would be a while before she dared to have another one. Two enjoyable sips later she cleared her throat.

“Computer, open a subspace connection to the Rak’Tar on a secure Protectorate frequency.”

“Subspace connection established.”

“Montgomery to Dar’Gaian.”

There was a brief pause and then a husky male voice replied.

“Dar’Gaian here, Go ahead, Captain Montgomery. No one can overhear our conversation.”

“What is your current status?” Montgomery asked.

“I’m onboard the president’s private aircraft, approximately one hour from the rendezvous point. The Gothiaran President and the First Lady are onboard as well as several of his administrators, according to your latest instructions. I have four Guardian tactical officers and the president’s security officers to ensure his as well as the other’s safety.”

“Good,” Montgomery said. “I know this was difficult.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing. With all the instability in Bunthora at the moment, I do not see how you can ensure the safety of the President or his entourage.”

“First of all, I have total faith in your ability to handle any unexpected situation that may arise while enroute. Second, I assure you, once you reach the rendezvous site, no harm will come to them.”

“How can you be so sure? I’ve seen the digital displays and broadcasts. So has everyone else aboard this craft. You’re asking these people to blindly follow us when you yourself have no idea whether the Bunthoran government will topple from the chaos and violence that has erupted in the capital.” Dar’Gaian said angrily.

Montgomery went cold with rage and took a deep breath to control her anger. However, experience had taught her that it was best in moments like these to step back before responding. She asked the computer to put the transmission on hold while she reached for the coffee, sipped it and quietly placed the cup back on the table. Tapping here comm badge, she resumed the transmission, continuing speaking in a tone of voice that few in the past had heard. Those who had, had never forgotten.

“Captain Dar’Gaian, I presume you’ve been under a great deal of stress, so I will allow you the benefit of the doubt. It will be the last time I’m this forgiving. Listen carefully to what I’m about to tell you, without interruption. I’m fully cognitive of all that’s going on in Bunthora. I’m also aware of what’s about to take place in the foreseeable future. For reasons that I’m not at liberty to share, it’s imperative that Gothiara’s President as well as part of his administration be present when these events unfold. Do you understand?”
“I… yes.” Dar’Gaian’s voice was serious.

“I need you to be completely committed to this effort. Do you honestly think the Elders would have chosen me for this mission if they doubted my abilities?”

The other captain was quiet for a moment. Montgomery realised that her words must really have put him on the spot. It was one thing to question her, however, quite a different matter to second guess the Elders.

“I meant no disrespect, Captain. I do not doubt the Elder’s judgement. Perhaps if I understood more about the plan…”

“Your mission, Dar’Gaian, is to safely deliver the president and his entourage. That is all you need to know. We all have our parts to play; I have mine – you have yours. Do your duty. Have I made myself clear?”

“I will do what is expected of me by the elders. I am committed, Eliana. I would never let the Protectorate down. You have my word; I will do my duty,” Dar’Gaian vowed.

“We will not mention this again. Contact me when you’re ready to land at the rendezvous point. I’ll provide you with further instructions then. Crown Prince Ragh’nall will be at your final destination and so will I.”

“Understood. I’ll report when we’re making our final approach for landing.”

“Just remember, I can ensure their safety upon their arrival at the rendezvous site and beyond. Until then, they are in your care,” Montgomery said, her voice serious. “You’re right, you know; there are people out there who would gain a lot if something happened to the Gothiaran President.”

“I know the dangers,” the Rak’Tar’s captain stated, “and have taken every precaution necessary to ensure his safety.”

“Then I’ll see you in a couple of hours. Montgomery out.”

She broke the subspace link and sipped her coffee.

It was time to hail Janeway.

*****

Commander Toriello and members of the Royal Guards, loyal to the emperor, walked among the people, seemingly frozen solid around the Protectorate’s embassy.

The scene was eerily silent, a macabre garden of life like statues in suspended animation. He noticed both the Guardian officers and the Royal Guardsmen regarding the rigid people of all ages with uncertainty.

On the outer perimeter, medical personnel were standing by, as well as other emergency workers. They were not allowed near the inner perimeter; only the Guardians and the Royal Guardsmen equipped with special headgear that provided hearing protection, face shielding, and communication, protecting them against the beam, were allowed to enter the inner zone.

Max tapped into his communication system.
“Toriello to Bremer.”

“Bremer here.”

“All briefings and final checks are completed. Medics at the outer perimeter are prepared to receive casualties. All security forces have been dispatched to their assigned grids. Give me a time check.”

“They’ve been in this state for twenty-two minutes; we’re pushing it, Commander.”

“I know. Release the beam, grid by grid, Lieutenant.”

“Affirmative.”

There was a sudden quiet that made Toriello realise the loss of a low humming which had been present earlier.

He hoped the Guardians scattered among the Royal Guardsmen would be able to keep the outraged Bunthoran’s at bay without injuring anyone of them. He had consulted Montgomery and then issued orders that only stun guns would be employed. The Guardians had their phasers set on heavy stun.

The simulations he had participated in had shown how the people subjected to the paralysing beam reacted when they became conscious. Disorientation, fatigue and nausea were common. The upside of that was such crowds were fairly easy to control.

On the outskirts of the massive crowd, medical personnel awaited their orders.

Slowly people around him began to move. They rubbed their eyes, blinked several times against the sunlight and some coughed. So far Toriello did not see anyone seriously affected.

“What the hell’s going on?” he heard an older man mutter behind him.

Toriello moved, keeping his phaser low but ready to stun if required. “Take it easy. No one’s going to harm you,” he offered.

The man squinted at Toriello. “What …” His voice trailed off as he paled. Sinking to his knees, he tried to stay upright.

The Excellence’s first officer tapped his comm badge again. “I need medical evacuation in grid 2:4,” he ordered.

“On our way, sir,” one of the Guardsmen replied.

“How many cases so far?” Toriello asked.

“Only sixteen, that’s not so bad, sir,” the same voice replied. “It looks like the manoeuvre was a success.”

“Let’s hope so.”

As each grid was deactivated, personnel were directed to its outer perimeter, triaging those needing medical attention immediately and providing treatment. All of the children in the crowd were evacuated to a provisional children’s clinic, even if they displayed no symptoms since there was concern over the effect this procedure would have on them.
Toriello had made clear to the personnel involved; they should try to keep families together. If it was not possible, reunions would take place later at the processing centre.

The ones not requiring medical attention were quickly placed on hovercrafts and sent to a processing centre at a safe distance away from the embassy. There, the Bunthorans could safely reorient themselves while the authorities determined if they would be charged with trespassing, rioting or other crimes.

Toriello walked up the stairs to the entrance to get an overview of the situation. People were coughing, some were choosing to sit down, obviously dizzy from the experience.

Guardians and Royal Guardsmen were scattered among them, keeping a watchful eye on the crowd as well as assisting the ones feeling disoriented.

“Toriello to Bremer. I’m pleased to let you know we have the situation under control. It will take the affected individuals at least half an hour, if not more, to find their bearings. This will buy the guards time to evacuate the crowd.”

“I agree, Commander.”

“Lower the shield enough for your team to get out the door, Lieutenant. We’ve got work to do.”

“We’ll join you at the eastern exit, Commander. The surveillance monitors show the crowd is less dense there.”

Toriello acknowledged and began making his way through the dazed group of people at the foot of the stairs. Tapping his comm badge again he ordered the hovercrafts to the eastern gate. He checked his chronometer.

They were on a tighter schedule than Bremer realised. Montgomery’s plans demanded that they apprehend Nontha and put him out of commission as soon as possible.

Toriello rounded the corner just in time to see Bremer, Tuvok and Seven of Nine emerge together with Brovskij and Peters. They spotted him and he waved them over to the east gate that was levelled to the ground by the masses.

“I have hovercrafts standing by,” Toriello said. “We don’t have much time.”

They made their way through the gate, carefully pushing the people out of the way to reach the hovercrafts.

Toriello glanced pointedly at the others. “This circus stops now,” he said gravely. “It’s time to bring in the ringmaster.”

*****

Seven, Tuvok, Toriello and Bremer rematerialised on a downtown rooftop together with Brovskij and Peters.

They had carefully used Voyager’s long range scanners to scan the roof before beaming up from the hovercrafts parked several blocks away. The streets were filled with agitated Bunthorans, screaming and roaming the streets, demanding the Guardians leave their country. Prime minister Nontha’s propaganda seemed to work. They had alerted the
other teams to use caution while moving about the city which seemed to be in total chaos. There had even been signs of looting, which was uncharacteristic of the normally good-natured Bunthorans.


One after another the Guardian away teams hidden around the structure reported in. They had all reached their assigned positions where they awaited their orders. They were there mostly as back up in case the team on the roof ran into trouble. Toriello hoped they would not; there simply was not enough time.

Seven pulled her phaser and set it to heavy stun. Bremer nodded to her and the two women began moving towards a door at the far end of the flat roof together with Toriello.

Tuvok, Peters and Brovskij approached the other door leading down into the building.

Seven used her tricorder and scanned the door. There were no life signs behind it. She tried the door handle. It was open.

The trio turned to signal the other team and watched them open the door at their end.

Soundlessly they slipped inside.

Seven knew this was the easy part of the mission. They would make their way down the stairs to the top floor and by doing so, bypassing most of the guards.

She searched her eidetic memory for the details of the interior of Prime Minister Nontha’s offices. The top floor hosted the prime minister’s main office as well as the twenty two ministers heading the different departments.

Guardian security officers that had interrogated the ministers had reported that seven of them remained loyal to Nontha and were present during his propaganda campaign. The apprehension of Deputy Prime Minister Tanka had sorted out the ones either bailing out or simply taking a stand against Nontha’s treacherous actions.

They knew that the seven ministers loyal to Nontha were in the building, probably on the top floor.

Toriello took the lead down the stairs. Seven and Bremer followed behind him, phasers ready.

They reached the top floor and still there were no guards. Seven assumed this was yet another display of Nontha underestimating the Guardians. She found it curious how the man who had kept his people in the dark about his true nature and illegal activities could show such blatant carelessness.

They reached the door leading into the far east end of the corridor. With a nod in their direction, Bremer continued down the stairs.

Toriello opened communications. “Toriello to Tuvok. Is your team in position?”

“A affirmative,” Tuvok’s muted voice came back over the comm link. “Ensign Brovskij is on his way to rendezvous with Lt Bremer on the next level.”
“Good. Initiate phase two. Toriello out.”

He nodded towards Seven who took up position on the right side of the door. As expected the door was locked. Toriello pulled out a similar welding gun that Tuvok had used at the prime minister’s private residence and cautiously cut a small ring around the lock. Attaching a suction devise he pulled the lock out towards him. He placed it on the floor next to him and tried the door handle. It moved without making a sound and the door opened effortlessly.

Toriello did not let it open more than half an inch. Pressing close to the wall he glanced through the crack. After a moment he held up his hand towards Seven holding up four fingers.

At least four guards in the corridor inside the door.

Seven knew that Tuvok had performed the same operation and was standing by.

“Phasers on stun,” Toriello whispered. “Now we have to wait for Bremer and Brovskij to get in position.”

He pushed the door almost closed, leaving only a small crack open.

The minutes seemed to stretch and defy normal time. Seven knew the operation was based on the element of surprise.

Suddenly they heard a familiar female voice emanating from the corridor, sounding desperate.

****

Bremer continued down the stairs, cautiously keeping her phaser raised.

She knew Ensign Brovskij was mirroring her movements on the flight of stairs at the west end of the building.

They had worked out this plane at the embassy and fine tuned it in the hover vehicle coming here. Lowering and closing the blinds towards the crowded streets they had beamed onto the roof.

She and Tuvok had debated whether to split up the away team while entering the structure. Toriello had decided it was crucial that they approached the top floor in three groups simply because there were three entrances. Two staircases led to the prime ministers office floor and then there was the main entrance towards the reception area where the elevators were.

They knew that Nontha had reinforced the number of guards around him. Having enjoyed a tremendous popularity before the disaster, there had been need for very little security around him. Recent events had changed this and even if his campaign was currently a success, he was obviously taking the required measures in an attempt to keep the Guardians out.

Bremer smirked. He was a sly, cunning man, but like so many men before him he would go down because he underestimated the Protectorate and thought too highly of himself. She could not blame him. He had gotten away with his reprehensible scam for decades.
She reached the floor beneath Nontha’s offices and scanned the door. There were no life
signs at all which made her frown. Was the whole floor deserted?

She tried the door handle but realised she had to weld it open. She quickly performed
the procedure and then tapped her comm badge.

“Bremer to Brovskij,” she murmured.

“Brovskij here, ma’am. I’m almost done. There. The door’s open.”

“See you inside.”

She closed the comm link and moved lithely to stand close to the door. She opened it
carefully and scanned the corridor again. The lights were off and there were no life signs
present.

She slipped through the door and quickly walked along the dusky corridor. There were
no sounds coming from the offices, no shadows moved behind the doors of frosted
glass.

Bremer spotted Ensign Brovskij moving towards her. The Voyager security officer kept
checking around him and had his phaser ready.

They rendezvoused at the centre, next to one of the elevators. Bremer nodded solemnly
and pressed the button. The elevator would take them to the reception at the top floor.

Inside the elevator, she glanced at Brovskij.

“You’re a good actor?” she asked casually.

“When I have to be, Lieutenant,” he replied in a calm voice.

Bremer looked down her away mission standard uniform, a seemingly simple grey
coverall.

“I think I have to look the part,” she mused.

Before the elevator door closed she unbuttoned the coverall and pulled the sleeves down
her arms, tying them around her waist. Dressed in a pale blue tank top she looked far
from as vulnerable as she would have liked, but perhaps the Bunthorans would just see
her as a woman and not notice her wiry arms and strong physique in the commotion.

She reached behind her and freed her long black hair from its usual tight braid. Shaking
it loose she hoped the rich, flowing hair would render her a softer look. She bit her lips,
trying to make them redder.


He hid a smile when Bremer instead gave him what he considered damn close to a
Janeway level ten death glare.

The Excellence’s tactical chief took her foot from the door and let it close. She pushed
the button leading to the top floor.

“Here goes,” she murmured.
The elevator reached the floor in a matter of seconds and the door opened automatically.

Brovskij hid his phaser behind his back and put an arm around the tall woman. “We need help,” he shouted as soon as they stepped out of the elevator. “We need to speak to the prime minister!”

The two men guarding the door leading into the corridor located behind them stared at the stunning woman who seemed obviously distraught.

Bremer did her best to look desperate. Clinging to Brovskij’s arm without actually restraining him in case he needed to let go of her quickly, she blinked as if trying to hold back tears.

“I’m his niece,” she said. “I was attacked in the street … I need to see him!”

The guards looked stunned but they did not move from the door.

“Don’t just stand there,” Brovskij said, sounding outraged. “Help her!”

They kept walking towards the guards, Bremer feigning the look of a woman shocked by the terrible treatment she just suffered.

They closed in on the guards, pushing at the door. It gave way some and Bremer was pleased that it was not locked. She pushed at it and at the same time managed to nudge the perplexed guards halfway into the corridor.

“He has to help me,” she moaned and then raised her voice. “Uncle Nontha! I need to talk to you!”

****

“I want to talk to the prime minister! Let me pass! Don’t you understand? I have to talk to him!”

Seven recognised the voice belonging to Lieutenant Bremer and she had to admire the other woman’s acting abilities. Bremer sounded desperate and no doubt she had the guards’ undivided attention where she and Brovskij stood at the main entrance, causing a riot among them.

“That’s our cue,” Toriello said and flung the door open, his phaser raised as he quickly moved into position with Seven right behind him.

At the far end of the corridor, they saw Tuvok and Peters coming through the door at their end of the corridor.

“On behalf of the Protectorate and the High Council, I order you to lower your weapons,” Toriello yelled, his voice loud and intimidating.

The guards halted, unsure how to handle the situation. Torn between their allegiance to their prime minister and a life long reverence of the Protectorate and its Guardians, they stood motionless long enough for Bremer and Brovskij to pull their phasers out from behind their backs.

Facing six armed Guardians, the prime ministers security officers paled considerably. Toriello and Seven moved in closer. Tuvok and Peters followed suit from their end.
There were eight guards. Two at the door, now at gun point by Bremer and Brovskij. Four other guards had their weapons drawn but not raised.

“Surrender your fire arms!” Bremer ordered, motioning with her phaser.

The guard closest to Seven and Toriello took one step back and raised his gun. Without hesitation Seven mimicked his manoeuvre and fired. Stunned, the man fell to the floor, his weapon dropping from his listless hand.

Most likely believing their colleague to be dead, the others lowered their arms. Tuvok and Peters quickly gathered the weapons. Brovskij and Bremer scanned the closest room, found that it was empty and horded the guards inside.

“Regardless of how it may appear,” Toriello explained as he and Seven pulled the last guard between them into the room, “your colleague is not dead, merely unconscious. He will be all right.”

“What the hell is going on?” one of the guard’s said. “The prime minister …”

“… will be taken into custody and stand trial for his crimes against the people of Bunthora and Gothiara,” Toriello finished. “Peters, keep the peace in here.”

He left the room with Bremer and Brovskij, rejoining Tuvok in the reception area inside the entrance. Seven made sure Peters had the situation under control before following.

“The entrance is now bolted from the inside,” Tuvok reported. “Despite Ensign Brovskij’s and Lt Bremer’s display, no one inside the inner chambers has shown any interest. This confirms our theory that the prime minister’s offices are well soundproofed.”

“Yes, how else could he conduct his dirty business?” Bremer muttered.

Seven regarded the tall, dark haired woman. Lt Bremer possessed great tactical and combat skills and the ex-Borg admired the deadly litheness with which the other woman carried herself. Now she also could add acting abilities to the lieutenant’s list of talents.

Posting two Guardians at the front door, Toriello nodded solemnly.

“It’s time to introduce ourselves to the ministers.”

*****

Janeway raised her hand to press the door chime to Eliana Montgomery’s quarters. She had been onboard other Sabre-class star ships back in the Alpha Quadrant and walking from the transporter room she had noticed that even in the corridors, new technology had been added.

The bulkheads had been reinforced and all boasted the capability to raise extremely powerful force fields at any given location – similar to the ones featured on Voyager but much more diverse and powerful.

She pressed the door chime and took a step back. Montgomery had summoned her; there were no better word to describe the short conversation over the comm link.

The door opened and to Janeway’s surprise, the Excellence’s Chief Medical Officer,
Jon Takagi, opened. He looked concerned but nodded to her in a friendly manner.

“Captain,” he greeted her. “I believe you are expected. Go right in.”

“Thank you,” Janeway said and stepped inside.

The captain’s quarters’ lights were set at twenty percent, and small candles were lit on the coffee table in front of the couch.

“Captain?” Janeway called out when she could not spot Montgomery anywhere.

“I’ll be right with you, Kathryn. Take a seat.”

The husky voice was coming from the bedroom and with some hesitation; Janeway sat down on the couch. She looked around, curious what things Montgomery would consider prudent or desirable to bring on a mission.

There was a collection of small statues on a narrow shelf at the far side of the room. A dining table set for four people with what looked like crystal from earth. In the middle of the table, a solitary red flower that seemed alien sat in a slender crystal vase.

To her right was an extensive collection of old fashioned books. Glancing at the titles Janeway noticed some of her own favourites dating back as long as the nineteenth century. She also saw alien writing and recognised modern Protectorate letters. These books were not leather bound but covered with what looked like a thin metal.

In the corner of the couch a stack of pillows with Victorian embroideries on suggested that the captain or someone she knew had a sense for crafts.

“Glad you could tear yourself away,” Montgomery said from the bedroom door and entered the room. She was in uniform and just fastening her insignia to her chest. The blonde hair was pulled back from her face and Janeway thought the other captain looked exhausted.

“Are you all right, Eliana?” she asked, knowing that this question might not get her on Montgomery’s good side. “You look tired.”

“Actually I am,” the Excellence’s captain admitted without wavering, surprising Janeway. “It’s been hectic, hasn’t it?”

“It has,” Janeway conceded, dipping her head. Crossing her legs and putting one arm along the backrest of the couch, she took a closer look at Montgomery. “What is it you need to discuss with me? Or perhaps inform me about?”

“Direct as ever,” Montgomery smirked and sat down in a recliner in a ninety-degree angle from the couch. “I have several things I need to discuss with you. First of all, I wanted to talk to you on the behalf of the Protectorate Elders, before I announce it in public.”

Janeway frowned. There was something new in Montgomery’s voice, something that made the small hairs in the back of her neck stand up. “Go on,” she said.

“What I must tell you know could change Voyager’s future completely,” the other woman stated, her voice serious. “This can not be taken lightly and it will require you to do some soul-searching. You need to figure things out, that’s the only reason I tell you
first. Consider this a personal favour and a professional courtesy because this is not how it usually is done.”

Janeway wanted to rise from the couch and pace the floor. “I appreciate that, Eliana,” Janeway said in a low tone of voice although the sudden tension was pure agony.

“I have been in contact with the Protectorate Elders of the High Council again, that’s twice one week. They had news for me.” Montgomery’s voice trailed off and she tilted her head, looking at Janeway.

“Go on.” Janeway urged her. “Something tells me this was not good news.”

“Depends on your viewpoint. It could be a new beginning and also an end to everything as you know it.”

“Come on,” Janeway said with exasperation. “Stop this and just tell me what’s up.”

“There is a protocol on how to do this,” Montgomery stated, not sounding annoyed with the other woman’s impatience. “Bear with me, Kathryn.” Montgomery leaned back in her chair and it immediately adjusted to her position, folding out a footrest to support Montgomery’s boot clad feet.

“All right,” Janeway said and settled against the backrest of the couch. She wanted to drum her fingers, her nerves playing havoc.

“The Protectorate has granted Voyager Guardian status and is offering you and your crew to remain here as revered Guardians with all that entails.”

Janeway’s heart skipped several beats and then began to race with an almost nauseating speed. Montgomery’s words echoed in her mind and the urge to run and pretend she never heard the words, surfaced again. She wanted the other woman to take them back, say it was a mistake … “What does that mean, exactly?” Janeway heard herself ask, amazed at how calm she sounded.

“The courageous actions by you, your crew and the fact that you put your ship on the line to save this planet have made a great impact on the Elders. They are not easily impressed and this is not how they usually operate. When they approached us with the offer to become Guardians, we had lived among them for almost a year. This is quite unheard of and it has made other people curious about you and your crew.”

“Other people?”

“The Protectorate is a vast area in space, covering a multitude of sectors. Still, you can’t accuse the grapevine to be slow around here. Once your actions became known, especially those of Seven of Nine as well as your decision to take Voyager into low orbit around a ‘sleeping planet’, you became celebrities of sorts.”

Janeway rolled her eyes. “I certainly don’t have a fan in Captain Dar’Gaian,” she muttered. “So are you telling me the Elders are swayed by public opinion?”

“No, but the public opinion, as you put it, is very in tune with what the Elders say. It’s an ancient culture, Kathryn, far older than anything you and I ever encountered in the Alpha Quadrant.”

“You said they have granted us Guardian status … what happens if we turn this down?”
“Again, this is not how we see it. If you are granted Guardian status, you are a Guardian whether you want to or not. It’s a privilege.”

“What?” Janeway exclaimed.

“You are Guardians, but you have a choice.”

“What do you mean? You just said …”

“You can choose to be active or not. You can choose to stay and shoulder the responsibility or …” Montgomery’s voice trailed off.

“Or?” Janeway prodded.

“You can accept the honour in which way it was intended and decline going on active duty.”

Janeway gave in to the desire to pace and rose from the couch. She walked over to the view port and gazed over at the sleek outline of Voyager against the planet revolving behind it.

“This will change everything,” she said. “If too many of my crewmembers decide to stay behind, it will mean that Voyager is stranded. You know as well as I do, Voyager can’t operate on merely a skeleton crew for the amount of time it will take us to get back to the Alpha Quadrant.”

“By that, I take it you yourself have no interest or desire to remain in the Delta Quadrant and serve the Protectorate as an esteemed Guardian.”

Janeway carefully considered her reply. The last overwhelming days when events beyond her imagination had rocked her world, changed her ways of looking at herself, her life and her choices forever.

“I can never back down from my promise and my obligation to get this crew home, Eliana,” she said, turning around. “I made a vow at the Caretaker’s array to never give up. Even if I only have a handful of my original crew left onboard wanting to go home … I don’t care if or where I have to sign on new crewmembers. I will if I have to. I can’t go back on my word.”

“What does Seven say?”

Janeway cringed. This was something she and Seven had not addressed. They had not had the opportunity to talk about anything personal. She sighed.

“I don’t know. I’d like to think that she’d want to go where … well … where I go. I guess that’s rather egotistical of me. She’s fascinated by the Guardians and I know she carries a lot of guilt … she may see it as her opportunity for atonement.”

“I can see where you’re coming from, Kathryn, but I also think her first loyalty and priority is you.”

Janeway was not sure. She had seen the look on Seven’s face in sickbay when she had pleaded with her to be apart of the Guardian away team – to make a difference.

“You said it is not customary to tell someone they are to become Guardians like this.
What did you mean by that?”

Montgomery smiled.

“It’s a pretty formal thing. You gather the crew in question onboard their ship and hold a ceremony. It’s an ancient tradition stemming back more then three millennia. However, I just couldn’t spring this on you. You’ve been known to hold a grudge, Kathryn.”

Janeway paled at the familiar words, once tossed in her face by Chakotay when she went after Ransom. She realised that Montgomery were being facetious, but they were both right. She did have a long memory for certain things. “I appreciate it, Eliana,” she murmured. Slowly walking back to the couch and sitting down, she fixed her eyes on her colleague. “I think we better get it over and done with as soon as possible. I need to know where I stand.”

The Excellence’s captain sat up, the chair following her movements. She dragged a slightly unsteady hand through her hair, dishevelling it completely. “How about tomorrow?” she asked. “We have important things to take care of today. A lot depends on how we carry out the third phase, in order to save lives in Bunthora and Gothiara. Also, postponing it until tomorrow will give you time to talk to Seven.”

Janeway’s head snapped up. “How …”

“How did I know you would?” Montgomery asked. “Oh, Kathryn, did you think I wouldn’t understand? I know it would be too hard on you, witnessing Seven’s reaction to this news in front of the crew. You want to know now how she’d react now, beforehand. You’d want to be prepared.”

Janeway groaned and shook her head. “God, I really must be transparent,” she said.

“No, not really. Takes one to know one, Captain. I would’ve done the same.”

Acting on impulse, Janeway rose again and scooted closer to the other woman. Now she could see the fine lines that had deepened around Montgomery’s eyes and mouth. The Excellence’s captain was pale and trembling.

“Eliana, when are you going to tell me what’s wrong? Am I going to have to guess?” she asked in a low voice.

“Soon enough, Kathryn. Soon enough,” Montgomery said, making a face. “It’s not going to change anything. I promise you that I’ll answer any questions you might have - soon.”

Janeway nodded, knowing that this was Montgomery’s choice to make. She reached out and gently squeezed the other woman’s shoulder. “When you’re ready,” she smiled.

To her amazement, Montgomery reached up and patted her hand.

“Deal.”

“Now, what was the other matter you needed to discuss with me?”

“The third phase to save the planet need to commence.”

Janeway frowned. “Yes? What are you planning? We will soon have Nontha in
custody. I expect to hear from Tuvok any minute now.”

“We will,” Montgomery acknowledged, “but it’s not enough. There is still an uproar that might cost thousands of lives when people will start demanding an eye for an eye regarding his crimes against them.”

“So how can I help?”

“The Excellence is still not fully repaired and since you’ve already put Voyager on display, in plain view from planet, so to speak …”

Janeway gave the other captain a suspicious look. “What are you saying, Eliana?”

“I have taken the decision to initiate this planet’s awakening; we’re going to make first contact. One hour from now, I want you to take Voyager into low orbit again and land her in the centre of the capital of Bunthora. I don’t see any other solution to the crisis on the planet than to initiate the awakening.”

*****

Prime Minister Nontha watched with stunned fury how the door to his office suddenly was blown off its hinges. It landed on the floor with a louder noise and within seconds of the, the hateful view of the Guardian officers burned itself on his retina.

“Remain where you are! We will not hesitate to use our weapons!”

The tall woman with jet black hair that entered first aimed her weapon directly at the prime minister. It was a weapon of a kind that he had never seen. Stealthily he tried to reach for the gun he kept taped under his desk, but she detected his movement.

“Go ahead and try,” she snarled. “That would make this day just perfect.”

“I would advice you to heed the lieutenant’s order,” a stunning blonde woman entering his office recommended in a cool voice. “It has been a long day and our patience is wearing thin.”

“You have no business breaking into this office …”

“We are here on the orders of the Protectorate Elders to apprehend the person guilty of the attempt at genocide.”

Another Guardian appeared, holding the remaining part of his cabinet at gunpoint. The ministers looked to Nontha for guidance and he detested their weary glances. It was because of their spineless actions, their cowardice ambivalence that he was in this position. “You’re outside your jurisdiction in this building … “ he tried, before the insolent dark haired woman interrupted him.

“The entire country of Bunthora is a member of the Protectorate sovereignty – so that’s where you’re wrong, Nontha. Commander Toriello?”

The highest ranking Guardian approached, pulling out hand restraints which he firmly attached after having pulled Nontha’s hands behind him. “Prime Minister Nontha, I here by relieve you of your role as leader of Bunthora and the Bunthoran people. A temporary civil servant will replace you until such circumstances exist when a democratic process can commence.”
“Democratic process,” the ex-prime minister spat. “I am the rightful leader of my country! You can’t do this!”

Guardian Toriello ignored his rage, infuriating him further. The commander tapped a badge on his chest as other Guardians started leading his cohorts out of the office.

“Toriello to Montgomery.”

A female voice emanating from the badge replied. “Montgomery here. Go ahead.”

“We have apprehended Nontha and the part of his cabinet we suspect are in on this with him. We’re taking the accused to the secure location we discussed earlier.”

“You are not taking me anywhere!” Nontha hissed. “I will not be removed from this office.”

*Duly noted. I can hear him. I’ll be there to greet him, Commander.*

“Aye, Captain. Toriello out.”

Nontha tried to resist when the female Guardian put a strong hand on his shoulder, nudging him forward. “Move.”

Throwing himself sideways, in an attempt to knock the tall woman over, Nontha found his left arm caught in a painful hold when the strange looking blonde woman grabbed him, yanking him the other way. “Do not proceed to disobey. Resistance is futile.”

Despite his attempts to dig his heels in and refuse to leave his office, the officers manoeuvred him into the deserted corridor and reception area.

“What have you done with my staff?” he barked.

“No harm has come to anyone working here,” Guardian Toriello replied in a calm voice. “Only you and the members of your cabinet will be apprehended.” He turned to a younger Guardian who joined them after locking a door behind him further down. “Everything secure, Peters?”

“Yes, sir. The door is locked, but it won’t be hard for the staff to free themselves in a matter of minutes.”

“Excellent.” Nontha watched the Guardian in command pull out a device and moving it around in a circle. “It is safe to leave.” He again tapped the badge on his chest. “Toriello to Mr Paris. Lock on to Ensigns Brovskij and Peters, as well as the six Bunthoran signatures in close proximity to them and transport them to the Excellence’s brig.”

“Affirmative, Commander. Energising.”

Nontha felt a tingling sensation and a slight nausea before the hallway disappeared before his eyes, only to be replace with a strange looking environment. He had no idea where he was, only that he and part of his cabinet now were in the custody of more Guardians.

“Where am I?” he gasped as he fought not to vomit. “What the hell is happening?”

“You’re right where you belong,” a familiar voice replied calmly.
Nontha turned around, almost losing his balance. “You! I will have your head for this, Montgomery!”

“From where I’m standing, you don’t seem to have much of anything, Nontha.”

He looked around, seeing that the opening in the wall where the blonde Guardian was standing was unblocked. He launched forward, only to be stopped in midair by an invisible wall giving him what felt like an unpleasant electrical shock. “Damn!”

“You’re not going anywhere for quite a while,” Montgomery stated. “The High Council will try your case and until then … you’re my guest.”

“I demand to …”

His word remained unheard. The Guardian captain had already turned and walked away.

*****

“Bremer to Montgomery.”

“Montgomery here, go ahead, Lieutenant,” the Excellence’s captain responded.

“I assume you are busy dealing with the ex-prime minister,” Bremer stated. “I don’t mean to bother you with details, but there’s the matter of Sha’nee J’Oy, ma’am.”

“I guess there’s no time like the present,” Montgomery said, her voice casual. “Beam to Voyager’s sickbay and take care of it.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Let’s hope Ms J’Oy finds it in her heart to forgive us.”

Bremer sighed inwardly. “I’ll let you know how it goes later, ma’am.”

“Do that. Montgomery out.”

Walking towards the hovercraft that would take her back to the embassy for a secure transport, the tall woman fought the sinking feeling in her stomach.

She had a feeling that she was the least suitable person for this particular assignment.

*****

“Why can’t I leave right away?” a soft, insistent female voice said. “I’m feeling as good as new and I want to return and assist the rescue workers!”

Sha’nee J’Oy sat in a chair across the desk from the Doctor. She had grown increasingly impatient when he could not provide her with an explanation nor was he inclined to discharge her. She had asked him what his name was and that was another weird thing about this man – he did not have a name.

“I assure you, Ms J’Oy, that you will be discharged any time now,” the Doctor said.

“That’s what you said two hours ago. That’s it. I’m leaving now and there’s nothing you can do to stop me.”
Agitated she rose from the chair when a voice from the door startled her.

“It’s all right, Doctor,” the tall dark haired woman said with a lopsided grin. “I’m here to escort Ms J’Oy.”

Sha’nee looked at Lt Heidi Bremer as the other woman leaned against the doorframe, folding her arms across her chest. The imposing woman had her hair in its usual tight braid and was dressed in shiny black guardian uniform. The tall golden collar framed her jaw line, lending her a predatory elegance.

“Lt Bremer,” Sha’nee greeted her politely. “I want to leave now.”

“So I understand,” Bremer nodded. “You can leave whenever you want but there are things you need to know first. I have received orders from Captain Montgomery to make sure you are aware of what is at stake – and your options.”

Was there nobody around this place who could say something in a straightforward manner? Sha’nee thought. “Then tell me,” she sighed. “I’ve been sitting here twiddling my thumbs, when all this time I could’ve helped out with the rescue operation.”

“I know it’s been hard for you, but it was important that you could be so patient, Sha’nee. Now, come with me. It’s long overdue that we talk.”

Bremer gestured towards the corridor outside of sickbay and Sha’nee quickly walked past the tall woman. When she reached the door she glanced back towards the Doctor, her face changing into a gentle smile.

“Thank you, Doctor, for everything you’ve done for me,” she said and raised her hand. “All in a day’s work,” he replied. “If it had not been for the lieutenant here, I would not have been so successful.”

Sha’nee shot Bremer a look. Was that a faint blush over the other woman’s high cheekbones?

“I know that too,” the young Bunthoran said.

The two women walked out into the corridor and the automatic door closed behind them. The greyish walls in the corridor boasted no windows. There was a very faint humming sensation under Sha’nee’s feet as they began to walk. It was as if some large machine vibrated far away.

They stepped into a lift of sorts that seemed to move effortlessly from one floor to another.

“This is a military facility,” Bremer explained as they began to walk down another corridor. “The commanding officer, Captain Janeway, has provided us with some vacant quarters so we can talk. It should be right over here.”

They approached a door and Bremer reached out to touch a control panel when she hesitated and stopped with her hand half way. She glanced at Sha’nee.

“I better tell you that no matter what you think you may expect to be told – what you see in here will astound you. Do not be afraid. Remember that this is of the Protectorate, the same Protectorate that you’ve belonged to all your life.”
The young Bunthoran had no idea what Bremer was talking about. The tall woman seemed quite nervous as she punched in a set of commands and stood back as the door opened. Sha’nee hesitated for a moment before walking inside.

She glanced around the room. At first she did not notice anything out of the ordinary other then the furniture being different from what she was used to. She glanced at the window at the far wall. It was dark since it was evening …

A chill ran down her spine, and then another. Her heart accelerated and she took an uncertain step towards the unbelievable sight.

“It’s okay,” she heard Bremer say. “You’re not hallucinating. We are onboard a spaceship, the USS Voyager. Walk up to the view port. There, you see?”

Sha’nee looked out into the vastness of space, not believing her eyes. A large blue-green orb floated in the distance. It seemed so close, yet so far away. She squinted. Familiar outlines made her gasp.

“Oh, my …” she breathed, reaching out towards it with a trembling hand. “Is it … is that …”

“Yes, it’s your planet, Sha’nee.”

“So far away...” Her voice was a mere whisper.

“I can have you back there in less than ten minutes.”

Sha’nee pivoted to look at the other woman but quickly turned her face towards the planet again. It was as if she feared that it might disappear if she did not keep her eyes on it.

“I can’t believe it,” she murmured. “I don’t know what’s going on? Am I dreaming? Or am I dead after all?” Her voice quivered.

“No, you’re fine. This is real. The Protectorate High Council granted Captain Montgomery the authority to decide how we should handle your case. It was her decision that you would see this site at before anyone else on your home world. We honour you with this trust for several reasons. You’ve proven your allegiance towards the Protectorate. You’ve shown devotion towards your planet and its people and acted selflessly and without concern for your personal safety during the rescue operation.”

“I don’t understand.” Sha’nee took a step back from the window and bumped into Bremer.

The tall woman put her hands on the young Bunthoran’s shoulders. Sha’nee leaned back against Bremer, finding comfort and much needed stability in the touch.

“I don’t expect you to understand. It is an overwhelming sight for a person from a non-space faring world.”

The words had lost their meaning. Suddenly Sha’nee caught a glimpse of something moving to the left. She leaned forward to see and to her amazement there was what looked like two large vessels floating in space next to … What had Bremer called this place? Voyager, was it?
“What are those?” she pointed.

“The closest one is Captain Montgomery’s ship, the Excellence. It’s where I work. The one next to it is the Rak’Tar, another Guardian ship.”

“Another?”

“There are more than seven-hundred Guardian ships patrolling Protectorate space. Not all are as big as these but some are much bigger.”

“I have wanted to know more about the Protectorate for years, ever since I started working closely with Ambassador J’Aoh. I found what I did learn about their, your, culture, fascinating. I saw things at the Embassy that were hard to explain: People coming and going; Technology that no one in Bunthora possessed.” The young woman gave a muted sigh. “That is why you look so different now, than you do when I saw you at the Embassy, isn’t it? I couldn’t tell what it was at first … but now I see … you don’t look quite Bunthoran.”

Sha’nee turned around again, gazing up at Bremer with misty eyes. “You’re right; I’m not Bunthoran,” the tall woman explained in a gentle voice. “Nor do I belong to any of the worlds within the Protectorate space. I come from a planet called Earth a long way from here.”

“How did you end up here? How is it that you’re a Guardian?”

“That is a very long story, Sha’nee,” Bremer said, still steadying the girl with her hands. “I can’t go into that right now, perhaps later. There are more important questions to be answered.”

“There are?”

“Yes. When I decided to transport you onto this vessel to save your life, I inadvertently but not unknowingly, sealed your fate. You now have two choices. You can go back to Bunthora and continue your life there or …”

Bremer’s voice trailed off and the tall woman looked slightly bemused.

“Yes?” Sha’nee prodded.

“Or you can decide to stay onboard either Voyager or the Excellence.”

Stunned beyond words, the young Bunthoran’s jaw lost all cohesion. She looked dumbfound at the other woman and then her knees gave in.

Bremer helped her to sit down on the couch. The dark haired woman joined her, still holding a reassuring hand on Sha’nee’s left arm.

“W-what?” the girl stuttered.

“If you go back to Bunthora, there are many confidential issues regarding the Protectorate you will need to remain confidential. Betraying the confidence Captain Montgomery and the Elders have put in you, would be considered a criminal betrayal of trust by the High Council.”

“I would never do that!” Sha’nee gushed.
“I know,” Bremer smiled crookedly. “There is the possibility of you joining this vessel. Ensign Brovskij, Seven of Nine and B’Elanna Torres live here. Voyager’s crew also comes from earth or planets near it in a part of space called the Alpha Quadrant. They are on their way back there – no matter how long it takes them.”

Sha’nee looked at the other woman. Bremer’s ice-blue gaze held hers without wavering. Her short bangs were cut just above slender, black eyebrows, framing her strong features.

“And your ship?” she whispered.

“Captain Montgomery has given me permission to speak on her behalf. She told me that she would be honoured to have you serve onboard the Excellence as a member of the Guardians.”

All Sha’nee could do was gasp softly and then hold her breath. Her heart pounded almost painfully in her chest. There had been so many surreal revelations in the last hour that she almost began to fear she was dead after all.

Turning her head she watched her planet in the far distance, just above Bremer’s shoulder. It had turned a little and now she could see the outline of the ocean where it was at its widest between Bunthora and Gothiara.

“Can I ever go back?” she murmured.

Bremer gave a broad smile. “Oh, Sha’nee,” she said with something resembling tenderness. “Of course you can. If you decide to swear the Guardian oath, you will always be one. There are Guardian’s from many different planets in this part of space. They all come from space fairing cultures so you would be unique since your planet has not gone through the awakening yet.”

“What’s the awakening?”

“When a planet reaches a certain level of technological and cultural development they learn the truth about the Protectorate. It’s called the awakening and occurs over a longer period of time, sometimes a full century. As for Bunthora and Gothiara, things will happen differently, but you will understand what I mean later.”

“I don’t have anyone that will miss me …” Sha’nee's voice was low but steady.

“Regard that as being free to choose,” Bremer offered. “If you decide to join the Guardians, Bunthora would still be there when you want to visit.”

Sha’nee regarded the dark haired woman, not knowing what to think, let alone what to say.

“When do I have to make my decision?” she finally asked.

“There’s no time limit, Sha’nee. If you go back to Bunthora now and then change your mind a year or two down the line, the offer is still valid.” Bremer’s eyes seemed to cloud over and the Sha’nee woman was suddenly intrigued.

“I’m overwhelmed,” she said softly. “I’m very honoured that your captain thinks I could become a Guardian. I’m just an ordinary person from Bunthora. I don’t have any special skills or …”
“Yes, you do. You possess a keen and investigating mind. You refuse to give up and you’re not easily intimidated. You can be trusted and you think on your feet. You’re mature for your age and …”

Bremer’s voice trailed off.

“And?” Sha’nee asked, again urging the other woman to continue.

“It’s not hard to see that you have a gentle heart,” Bremer murmured, removing her hand from Sha’nee’s arm.

Looking closely at the lieutenant, Sha’nee tried to understand what was going on. “I know this is my decision,” she offered, “but would you please tell me what you think?”

Bremer looked quite taken aback by the frank question. Her eyes became narrow slits as if she was trying to hide her feelings.

“What do you mean, Sha’nee?”

Mustering her courage, the Bunthoran girl held the other woman’s gaze. “Since I would be a Guardian onboard your ship, I want your opinion, Heidi.”

Bremer flinched. “It really isn’t for me to say,” she said wryly. “However, since you ask my opinion; I think you would make an excellent Guardian.”

Sha’nee bit her lower lip. “That’s not what I mean,” she said. “I want to know what you think about it, personally.”

“What do you mean?”

“You came back for me and saved my life. I have not asked why you would refrain from the opportunity to participate in any of the major rescue operations of my countrymen to save just one person.”

The tactical officer looked decidedly uncomfortable, but Sha’nee wanted answers.

“So you think saving you was a personal decision for me?”

“Yes.” The young Bunthoran held her breath, knowing that she may have pushed Bremer too far.

“Very well,” the tall woman said and got up from the couch. “I confess I don’t understand this myself. When I regained consciousness in sickbay and they briefed me – nobody seemed to know what happened to you. It’s not like the Guardians – or the Voyager crew – to forget about a member of an away team. I thought you were dead.”

“What did you do?”

“When even our most elaborate scans of the capital came up with nothing I received permission from Captain Montgomery to perform a search personally. Ensign Brovskij came along for the ride. We found you and the driver unconscious. It was a close call. The rest you know.”

Sha’nee raised her eyebrows at the staccato sentences, realizing that the imposing woman in front of her was feeling extremely self-conscious. Getting on her feet,
Sha’nee walked up to her. “You cared enough to go through all that trouble to find me,” she said slowly. “You took a very big chance by having me transported – I still have no clue how, by the way – to this facility … I mean this space ship, to save me. Now I need to know, if I join the crew onboard your ship, will you merely be my superior officer?”

“What do you mean, ‘merely’?”

“I have lived a very lonely life the last two-three years, Heidi. What I need to know is – will you also be my friend?”

Several seconds passed while Bremer seemed to consider the question carefully. Eventually the Guardian exhaled deeply and smiled wryly.

“There is a saying on my home planet, Sha’nee,” she said in a low voice. “When you save someone’s life – you’re responsible for that person. I think there is every chance that we can be very good friends.”

Sha’nee glanced over her shoulder at the slowly revolving orb. Bunthora had a long way to go before it was healed. Her services would no doubt be in high demand. She would probably be officially recognised for her part in forestalling the impending disaster.

She let her eyes drift towards the incredible sight of the powerful space ship next to Voyager. She still had problems fathom the idea of travelling in space among alien cultures. The decision was not going to be easy.

Sha’nee turned her head back and gazed up at Bremer. “I will need some time to make up my mind,” she said slowly. “Please, thank Captain Montgomery for me. How can I reach you when I've made my decision?”

Bremer squared her shoulders. “Just contact Ambassador J’Aoh. He’ll know how to get in touch with me.”

“Can I go home now?”

The other woman pressed her lips together but nodded amicably.

“Of course. Let me take you to transporter room one. I will have them beam you to the Embassy. It’s a safe and harmless procedure for instant travelling.”

They began to walk towards the door. When they reached it Sha’nee turned to Bremer and stopped her putting a hand on her right arm. “Heidi?”

The tactical officer looked down at her companion. “Yes?”

“For what it’s worth, I think, given the chance, we could become great friends too.”

Something in the blue gaze softened. A smile rapidly graced Bremer’s lips and then she nodded, motioning for the young Bunthoran to go through the door that hissed open.

Sha’nee walked out into the corridor. She wondered if the Excellence’s interior resembled this ship’s. Was it possible for a girl from a ‘non space faring culture’ to feel at home in this kind of environment? She stole a glance at the dark haired woman walking beside her as a small inner voice told her that it might just work.
Seven regarded her captain with an unsettling feeling in her midsection. There was something utterly wrong and she did not know how to best approach the subject. When they had spoken last time in these quarters, there had been a warm atmosphere, a hope that they would discover common ground.

Now Janeway was staring wordlessly into space.

It was late evening and Seven had worked at her computer in cargo bay two, filing reports from the audience she had attended at the palace. She had had to correct errors on several occasions. This had led her to run a diagnostic of her cortical implant. It showed no sign of malfunctioning. She waited patiently for Janeway to turn around and finally talk to her.

Had the captain changed her mind about the conversation they were supposed to have? Had she realised that she did not harbour any feelings for the Seven at all? Or perhaps what Seven had interpreted as true affection had merely been a captain’s consideration for a valuable member of her crew, all along?

The ex-Borg shuddered. This was unnerving. She experienced problems with her respiratory system and she wanted to clear her throat but was afraid to disturb Janeway’s thoughts. Somehow she sensed that the captain needed to collect herself in order to address whatever was on her mind.

Janeway pivoted abruptly, making Seven flinch. “We need to talk,” she said, her voice solemn. “There has been an unexpected turn of events.”

So, Seven figured, her fears were correct. Whatever hope there had been that Janeway would find it in her heart to care for her, it had changed. Not being able to refrain from clearing her throat any longer, Seven coughed. The sound seemed to startle the captain who looked lost for a moment.

“Please, have a seat,” Janeway motioned with her hand towards the couch.

Seven would have preferred to stand, no, to leave, but sat down anyway. It was as if her limbs weighed several tons, her movements were jerky and uncoordinated. “Please, proceed, Captain,” she managed, surprised to hear her own alto voice sound as cool as usual.

Janeway stood up, one hand on her hip and the other one rubbing her left temple. “Seven, this isn’t easy for me,” she began. “I know this will put a strain on us and I hope you believe me when I say I had no idea it would come to this.”

Clutching her hands together, Seven bit the inside of her lower lip to keep from bursting into tears. What she had hoped would be a special evening, a breakthrough in their relationship, was quickly turning into a nightmare. “I am certain you would never wilfully misinform me,” she said, swallowing hard.

“Of course I wouldn’t,” Janeway replied, sounding a little surprised. “This is something I had no power to foresee. I just found out and I have to be frank with you, it made me very concerned.”

Janeway actually looked quite distressed and it was to be expected since the captain was
a warm-hearted person who never was careless with other people’s feelings.

“Please, tell me what you mean to say” Seven tried not to sound as if she was begging.

“First I want you to know that whatever you decide to do, whether you consider remaining here or staying on Voyager, I’ll understand,” Janeway said, sounding as strained as Seven was feeling.

“Remaining behind?” Seven breathed, her voice losing its coolness. “I do not understand, Captain?” Did Janeway expect her to leave Voyager because the captain had changed her mind? Suddenly it dawned on Seven that it may be her only option if she was to survive this rejection.

“Seven, you can’t tell anyone yet. I have received permission by Captain Montgomery to inform you about it due to … special circumstances.”

Seven barely avoided trying to shake her head to dissolve the confusion. What was Janeway talking about? What special circumstance?

Janeway lowered her head and inhaled deeply. She walked over to the couch and sat down next to Seven, taking the bewildered young woman’s hand between hers.

“Seven, today is going to end as turbulently as it began – by landing Voyager in Bunthora’s capital and thus making first contact. Tomorrow, Captain Montgomery will announce to our crew that Voyager has been granted Guardian status. The Protectorate is offering everyone onboard Voyager to stay on as Guardians with access to their technology and … all the other benefits the crew of the Excellence possess.”

“We will be Guardians?” Seven said, her voice trembling.

“Yes, it’s a true honour that we can’t refuse, it seems. We can choose to stay or not – but the Guardian status is granted us nonetheless.”

Seven looked down at her hand. Janeway were holding on hard to her and she could feel that the captain’s hands were cold. Something was still wrong. “If this is an honour, something to be proud of, Captain, why are you so distraught about this?” she asked.

“There’s more. Voyager’s crewmembers will have to make up their mind on an individual basis whether to stay or continue with Voyager. If too many decide to stay … Voyager will be stranded until I can find enough new crewmembers to run the ship.”

Seven could not believe that Janeway would think that anyone would consider not serving under her command. “They would forfeit their chance of reaching the Alpha quadrant,” she tried to reason logically.

“Some may be entertaining the idea of staying here already,” Janeway said. “It is their prerogative. I’ve been pushing them hard for six years towards an uncertain fate. It is only to be expected that some of them might be very tired of this endless journey. Even I am, sometimes.”

Seven tried to grasp what Janeway was saying. “So you fear that the crew will abandon ship, strand Voyager here and … that I would be among them?”

The sharp intake of breath from Janeway told Seven that she had understood the full extent of the problem.
Considering her options, she let Janeway cling to her hand, not letting on that the captain’s nails were digging into her skin. Janeway’s eyes were stormy grey, her lips pressed thin together. Seven rushed to reassure her. “Kathryn,” she said, trying not to stumble over the still unfamiliar way of addressing her captain, “whatever the future holds for me; I will not abandon you. My desire is to remain with you, in whatever capacity you should choose or need me to fulfil.”

Janeway stared at her. Freeing one hand the captain dragged through her hair. “Just like that?” she asked, a catch in her voice. “You’ve been fascinated by the Guardians and their duties since day one … and now …”

Seven’s eyes followed the elegant hand. The soft lights reflected in the auburn hair and caught the shimmer in Janeway’s eyes as tears welled up. “I am intrigued by the morals and the duties of these officers,” she allowed. “This has however nothing to do with my emotional state.”

Janeway raised her hand and cupped Seven’s cheek. “I was so afraid …” she murmured. “I thought you might want to take this chance, this opportunity to … and since I could never go back on my word to bring the crew home …”

The captain broke off. Her thumb caressed Seven’s chin, making Seven forget what she had just said.

“Kathryn?” she exhaled almost inaudibly. The fingers around her chin moved slowly, making her lean into the touch.

“There hasn’t been time for us to talk, Seven, and there really isn’t time now. Tomorrow morning we are going to stand among our crewmembers and hear Captain Montgomery grant us Guardian status and a home away from home. We’ll have to get used to the idea that we may lose a great number of people to this part of space, to this new challenge.”

Seven was not ready to agree this quickly. “You do not know that,” she objected. Not thinking about it, just expressing a desire to somehow comfort her captain, she turned her head and pressed her lips into Janeway’s palm.

Janeway scooted closer and leaned her forehead against Seven’s temple, placing her free hand around her cheek. The ex-Borg inhaled the soft perfume emanating from the other woman. With a muted whimper, she freed her hands and then pulled Janeway into a fierce embrace.

Seven wrapped her arms around Janeway’s neck as the other woman buried her face against her. She remembered how she sometimes held Naomi when the child was distraught and tried rocking the captain gently.

It seemed to work as the smaller woman settled into the embrace, her breathing slowing down. Seven kissed Janeway’s soft hair.

Janeway looked up at her. Her face was pale and her lips trembling now that she was not pressing them together into a fine line anymore.

“Seven, I need to know how you feel,” the captain said. “I need to know where I stand.”
Seven gazed down at the other woman, trying to assess what the Janeway was saying. “Are you referring to the Guardian status … or us?” she asked with hesitation.

Janeway cupped her hand behind Seven’s neck, caressing it gently. “Us.”

Seven reached deep into herself, trying to find the courage to express what had been in her heart for so long. “I need to be with you,” she managed, her voice almost betraying her. “I require your presence in my life, not just as my captain and mentor … but also as the individual I love.”

Janeway pulled her closer with her hand around the back of Seven’s neck. “You love me?” she breathed.

“Yes.”

Lips almost touching, Seven realised they were going to kiss. Her heart fluttered in her chest, the nanoprobes were obviously malfunctioning, unable to regulate her heart rate. Softly, Janeway’s mouth touched hers, pressing against it. Seven’s mind whirled. She did not quite know how to respond, not wanting to assume too much. Janeway kept the light pressure up, caressing her neck just above the bio suit as the tip of her tongue caressed Seven’s lower lip.

When she finally pulled back, she smiled at Seven. “Tomorrow will be hard,” she said, her eyes moist. “I will see it through, whatever the outcome of the Protectorate’s offer. I know I’ll be all right now.”

Seven cocked her head. “I do not understand,” she said.

“No matter what happens in the future I’ll be fine, Seven, because you love me.”

Seven gave a tremulous smile. “And you, Kathryn? How do you feel?” she boldly asked, already reading the reply in the other woman’s eyes.

“Oh, Seven,” Janeway leaned forward, breathing her answer against the ex-Borg’s full lips. “I … ”

“Montgomery to Janeway.”

Cursing under her breath Janeway tapped her comm badge. “Janeway here. Go ahead, Captain.”

“It’s time, Kathryn. I’ve beamed over to Voyager and so has Commander Toriello, Lt Bremer and most of my senior staff. Captain Dar’Gaian is in place at the rendezvous place with the Gothiuran president and his entourage. Crown Prince Ragh’nall and his wife are also present, all under Protectorate protection, using shields.”

Blue-grey eyes looked into ice-blue. Wordless communication, the regret Janeway’s features expressed and the frustration Seven felt for having been interrupted by something far more important … there was always something more important.

The captain gently cleared her throat. Raising her hand, tracing the Seven’s lower lip with one finger she responded to Montgomery’s information.

“I’ll see you on the bridge, Captain. Janeway out.”
The old man in the bed reached for the bell. The pain in his chest had tortured him for more than an hour and he had fought the urge to call for his medicine. The servant entered his bedroom and after one glance at the old emperor, he rang for the doctor.

The medicine worked its magic, sending his fragile body into a state of oblivion. Just before he dozed off he thought of her, the tall blonde Guardian that had impressed him so much. Bunthora’s people could use someone of her stature, of her resourcefulness. He would suggest to his son that they work with Ambassador J’Aoh to find a way to convince Seven of Nine to stay.

He had sensed something about her that made him think this was possible. All may not be lost, after all.

To be continued in The Guardians - part 9

As I mention in my author's notes - this is not a finished story and I don't know when I may get around to it.

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