



## Episode 9-06 – Three Steps Forward

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You are a Devore assimilated only a few days after birth. When you were disconnected from the hive mind, you had no memory of what your name had been. You chose Daylok, which is a common name in the Imperium (according to your memory banks).

In your sixteen years, you have experienced many changes. You remember Unimatrix Zero and the games you played there. You remember losing that paradise, unreal though it was, and helping the Borg Resistance fight to free all drones. You remember the Cataclysm, the fall of the Abomination at the hands of a human, the wonderful knowledge that you were no longer hunted. You remember Axum's Complex, the ideals he tried to uphold...and you remember Pavriquir's Constructive, the power he promised. Like all the former drones, you had to choose a side. Like all the former drones, you went where your now-free heart told you to go.

You are the defense officer on this sphere, and your skill saved it from destruction in the battle with the Sernaix. The crewmates who walk past you speak words of congratulation

and gratitude. Ankin Rotor, director of the Constructive, has personally contacted you to thank you for a job well done. You feel prouder than you've felt since the day you liberated your scout ship after Unimatrix Zero fell.

You reach your station and look out the sensorscope. To your surprise, the flagship of the BCF is in the sector, on course to intercept your sphere. You hail it to ask what its mission is, and whether you can help in any way.

The ship sends back an audio-only message, three deciseconds long. It comes over the sonic processor like a wave of static. To a humanoid, it would not sound like a message at all. To a Borg, even former, it conveys information.

One sentence in the simple machine language Borg use to communicate. One sentence that still brings to bear all the terror and power of the Old Collective. The first sentence ever spoken by a Borg, the last signal to slip from the Secondary Node's artificial consciousness on the day the New Collective died.

Two words in Devraic, three in English.

Kishyen veratallat.

Resistance is futile.

Words no being was ever supposed to hear again.

Behind you, your crewmates stand stock-still as if frozen in place. Their eyes take on a distant, hollow look. As you meet their dead stares, you realize what has befallen them, and know it will now befall you.

You lose control of your movements. Your body immobilizes. You sense a presence drawing your energy away for its own use. Your mind cries out, just once -- and then all is silent.

You are reduced to a living consciousness in an dead, useless shell.

You are one of the victims of Ankin Rotor.

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Stardate 56247.9 U.S.S. Voyager, somewhere in the Delta Quadrant

Harry's warning went out to all: "Incoming!"

Harry had correctly anticipated the launch from the available outward signs, but was not in a position to do anything but warn the others. The projectile flew through its inevitable arc, finally impacting where a warned crewmember had just vacated.

The crewmember looked down at the glob of infant gruel flung into his seat. "Well, at least everyone is getting better at getting out of the way."

B'Elanna was not as complacent, horrified that her daughter was inconveniencing others at best, and creating a mess at worst. "This throwing of food has got to stop. Especially since I think I noticed her giving that one an extra little push with her abilities."

Tom, whose offspring could do no wrong, tried to calm her. "It's not like she's actually hurting anyone. She's just a normal kid doing what normal kids do." He beamed false bravado, putting on the front for effect. "She's just better at it than other kids." He dropped back to a smile and added, "Think of it as extra combat training for the crew."

B'Elanna, somewhat defused, didn't know whether to strangle him for his insipidness or simply appreciate what he was saying, so she just gave him a look. "It needs to stop. Food should be eaten, not thrown."

An amused Seven, much more open with her comments than she used to be, added the observation, "She seems to be getting much more consistent in where the food lands. The number of what appear to be accidents seems to have dropped, and her average distance has increased by a factor of two."

Tom smiled at the tacit support while B'Elanna turned to Seven and pleaded, "You're not helping. I thought you were supposed to be on my side in this against these irresponsible men. I have enough problems keeping him --" indicating Tom -- "in line without you encouraging him."

Seven quipped, "I am sorry. I occasionally forget you are dealing with two children."

Tom grinned and returned to the issue at hand. "She eats fine the rest of the time. As far as I can tell, she just doesn't like this stuff."

B'Elanna responded, "The Doctor recommended this. It's the best infant oatmeal- type food for babies her age. A single serving contains all the nutrients and vitamins she requires in a day, so if she doesn't eat well at her other meals, she'll still be getting what's required. And it's easily digested."

B'Elanna picked up the bowl and started trying to feed the baby again. Miral stubbornly refused to open her mouth, and started to avoid the spoon in a typical child manner, her head moving this way and that to escape the spoon. Then, less typically, B'Elanna found herself having trouble keeping the spoon near Miral's mouth -- much like trying to push two opposing magnets together. "Great, now she's pushing it away with her abilities."

Tom piped up, "That's my daughter."

B'Elanna skunk-eyed him again. "Making the meal more difficult is *\*not\** progress." She pushed the bowl over to him, saying, "If you think this is so great, you get her to eat."

Tom took the bowl and tried the old "shuttle into the landing bay" trick. "Here comes the shuttle into the landing bay. Vrrmmmm...." Miral, caught up in the game, opened her mouth as far as she could and then clamped down when the spoon was in her mouth. She was then obviously reminded why she had quit eating in the first place, and although she swallowed, she refused to be taken in by the same ploy again.

"Well, I made it by the force fields once." Giving up, Tom put the bowl down and turned back to B'Elanna. "You know, it doesn't matter how good the food is if the baby won't eat it." B'Elanna wasn't having any of it. "I need you to work with me. This is what's good for her -- we have to get her to eat it."

Harry offered a suggestion. "Miral's pretty smart. Maybe she smells the scents of the food around her and can tell that no one else is eating what she has."

B'Elanna considered. "That sounds like an idea. Tom, try eating some to show her how good it is."

Tom picked up the bowl. "Sure. I mean, how bad could it be?"

Tom took a spoonful, and, turning toward Miral, smiled, went, "Mmmm," and put the spoon into his mouth. He made a big production of chewing...before he froze. At that point he continued with the appreciative noises and kept smiling while he chewed a few more times and then, overcoming obvious resistance, swallowed. He kept the smile glued to his face until he had turned away.

Tom's eyes were wide with disbelief. "This stuff is terrible!"

Seven quickly assumed her standard expression of 'Borg knows best, silly humans' superiority, and, reaching for the bowl, took a spoonful of the gruel. "When I began to ingest solid foods," she said, "the Doctor recommended a very similar substance. It was neither attractively flavored nor notably repellent. I cannot imagine this is that different."

Inserting the spoon into her mouth, Seven removed the gruel -- and, a moment later, also froze. After a pause, to the accompaniment of a few facial quivers, she choked it down as Harry nearly choked on his coffee with laughter.

Seven considered the remainder in the bowl. "Then again, the Doctor, being a hologram, has no sense of taste, so it is possible he doesn't understand how vile this concoction is."

Harry finished his laughter and reached for the gruel. "Here, let me try something," he said, picking up Tom's plate and surreptitiously spooning some of the gruel onto it, among the regular food. He then picked up the spoon and ate a little of the other food, making noises about how good it was. Miral watched this production with great interest, and as Harry moved the plate closer to her, she leaned over to examine it. Harry then spooned up some of the gruel and she greedily gobbled it up. Harry smiled. "It must be disappointing to find out that all that good-smelling stuff still tastes like gruel."

Seven questioned the approach. "Is this not deceiving the child, teaching it incorrect associations?"

"Whatever works," Tom cheerfully responded as B'Elanna took the plate from Harry and continued the process of feeding. Then, noticing that his plate was gone, he added, "Hey, now I don't have anything to eat."

B'Elanna smiled and indicated the remaining gruel in the bowl. "Miral gets your plate, and you get her bowl."

Tom contemplated the gruel in the bowl and decided he'd had enough. This was worse than anything Neelix had ever produced, and that was saying something.

B'Elanna relaxed and lamented, "I used to be able to manage her, but she's changing on me. It's like fighting the Borg -- she keeps on adapting." Seeing Seven's eye's light up, she pointed the spoon at Seven: "And don't you go telling me it's an admirable trait right now. I'm not in the mood."

Tom noted the time and began to stand up. "Time for the duty shift. Come on, Harry." B'Elanna picked up Miral and said she would drop her off with the Doctor on her way to Engineering.

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Which she set out to do. On the way, there was an escape.

Miral was a good girl -- really, she was. She would never intentionally frighten her mommy. But there was so much out there that she couldn't see while being carried. Would it be so wrong to go off on her own for a minute? Just long enough to visit some of the other places on the ship that she never got to see? Mommy was always talking about that "warp core" thing...she loved it almost as much as Daddy. It would be wonderful to go inside it and see what it was that was so special about it.

See? She was just curious. Nothing dangerous about that.

As Mommy was turning a corner, Miral suddenly pushed with all her might. To her surprise, "all her might" felt just like that funny thing she could do that made her parents worry. She hadn't decided to do the funny thing; she'd just done it, instinctively, as soon as she'd started moving to escape. Before she knew it, she was loose.

Freedom! Glorious freedom! Miral scampered like a wild targ. This...this was living. Or crawling. She couldn't remember the word, exactly.

Behind her, Mommy sounded pretty upset, so Miral went faster to show that everything was fine and she was in control. But Mommy kept trying to catch her. What was *that* about? Surely Mommy could tell that she didn't want to be caught. As Mommy reached down for her, that funny thing happened again and she fell back. Miral kept crawling, faster and faster and faster and what the --

"Lieutenant? I believe this belongs to you," said Tuvok.

"Thanks," said Mommy, brushing herself off. She walked over to recapture Miral, who was straining like mad to no avail. Why? Why had the big serious man with the funny ear things picked her up? And why couldn't she escape again? Even her funny thing wasn't helping now!

"I take it she 'made a break for it?'" he said.

Mommy sighed. "It was so sudden. I was just taking her to Sickbay, as usual, and then all at once she was on the ground."

"It is likely that she used her latent telekinetic ability," Tuvok replied. (What did all those words mean?) "Now that you know she can do so, you should have no difficulty restraining her in future."

Taking Miral back, Mommy smiled at the ear guy. "Thanks, Tuvok," she said. "That's a big assumption, but it's nice to hear it."

The guy nodded. "Young Vulcans discovering their telepathic abilities frequently use them unconsciously. I have witnessed eleven such occurrences."

"Yeah, I guess with your family...." Mommy got that Hmm, I've got an idea expression. "Tuvok, Tom and I...well, we're a little worried. We love Miral very much, but these abilities are so new and confusing...."

The guy understood, Miral could tell, although his expression didn't change. "I am willing to render any assistance you require."

"How about dinner? You can come to our quarters...Tom and I will be off duty by then."

"I recommend that we make use of my quarters instead."

Mommy looked surprised for a second, but then it was gone. "Good idea," she said. "We'll be there at...nineteen hundred hours?"

The guy nodded. "Nineteen hundred hours. And I advise that Miral be elsewhere at the time. She is very young, but I sense great awareness in her. She may find our discussion a cause for concern if she is present."

Miral didn't understand most of that. It was something about her, but beyond that, she couldn't make heads or tails of it. Mommy apparently got it, though, and she said, "You're right. I'll find someone to leave her with. Oh! It's almost oh nine hundred -- we should be on duty by now. I'll see you later, Tuvok."

The guy nodded again -- it seemed to be his hobby -- and then headed for the turbolift. Miral thought about trying another escape but decided not to, since Mommy still seemed flustered from the last time. She let herself be carried for now.

"Wasn't that nice of Mr. Tuvok?" Mommy said in her slightly high-pitched tone, the one she only seemed to use for Miral. "He knew it would be a hassle for Daddy and I to get the quarters together in time for dinner, considering the mess \*certain people\* make." She smiled through this last part and finished by beeping Miral on the nose.

Well, all right. Beeping was good. Freedom was okay too, but...no beeping. So what was the point? Miral relaxed and made the rest of the journey to Sickbay, content.

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As Tom and Harry headed for the turbolift, Tom started talking about his latest project. "I've just put the finishing touches on my modifications to the old Tahitian holoprogram. It's got a lot more variety and detail."

He smiled knowingly at Harry. "Perfect for that romantic overnight date, hmm?"

Harry tried to keep his poker face on and gave a neutral reply, not really wanting to turn this into a discussion. "Sure. Maybe we'll try it some time." Grasping for an excuse, he quickly added, "I'm not sure I have enough holodeck time saved up at the moment."

Tom looked at him like he had two heads. "Huh? I thought Seven had tons of time saved up." He thought for a moment, and then a knowing grin came over his face. "...or have the two of you been busy behind everyone's back?"

Harry had known Tom long enough that he didn't need to have Tom elbow him in the ribs and wink to know that Tom was, in effect, elbowing him in the ribs and winking. So much for excuses on the fly to avoid subjects. He'd have to ask Tom sometime to teach him how he so smoothly steered people away from certain topics. Every time Harry tried, it never seemed to work, or, like now, ended up having the opposite effect. Harry sighed, realizing there was no way he was going to get out from having to discuss his relationship with Seven now. He and Tom were close, and although this meant they could talk about anything, at some times Harry didn't find that as beneficial as at others.

"Look, the truth is Seven and I aren't at the point where we could...um...use an overnight program, okay?"

Tom's knowing grin changed to a bit of a smirk. "Oh, come on, Harry. After all this time? It's not like either of you has moral scruples about this sort of thing before marriage." Tom's grin disappeared as a possibility occurred to him, "Are you two doing okay? She didn't turn you down, did she?"

Harry entered the turbolift and requested the bridge. "No, we're fine. We're just sort of stuck where we are in the relationship at the moment."

Tom knew what that meant, and, smiling again, translated: "In other words, you haven't gotten up the gumption to try to move things forward." He looked at Harry and added, "Or have you decided to try the monastic lifestyle?"

Harry tried to defend himself. "No! I just want to know she's ready, and I haven't gotten any of the signs yet."

Tom snorted out a small laugh. "What are you expecting, to find it written in the stars? Come on, Harry, you're the one with experience. Seven's made great progress personally since we took her from the Borg, but it's not like she has a lot of experience with this sort of thing. If you don't move things forward, they just aren't going to move."

Harry was going to respond, but the turbolift doors opened, and he decided it could wait.

As they exited the turbolift onto the bridge, an ensign nervously stood up from the captain's chair to make it available to whichever member of the senior staff was going to relieve her. Thanks to the slower level of activities, Voyager was taking the opportunity to rotate some of the newer ensigns through the night shift chair -- and from the nervous look on this one, it had to be her first shift. Tom tried to remember her last name...Parks?

Tom waved her down, "I'm not your relief, Ensign Parks. The captain will be coming up." He walked over to his station, and after relieving the pilot on duty, sat and turned to the still-standing ensign. He suppressed a grin. "You can sit back down, you know."

Parks shot back down into the chair. Tom wondered if she remembered that, at the moment, she was still in command. "So how was your first night at the conn?" he asked.

Parks seemed to relax a bit, and responded while fidgeting with her sleeve. "It went fine. It was a little nerve-wracking at first, realizing I was responsible for the whole ship, but after a while I got used to it."

Tom noted her sleeve still getting its nervous workout as he replied, "Harry used to do the night shift regularly, didn't you, Harry?"

Harry looked up from in back. "It was a great way to get some experience at the conn. Besides, not much usually happened on the night shift. It was a great time to just sit back, relax, and think."

Tom took the opportunity to tease him with, "Yeah, I guess you always have had this preference for the monastic life style, haven't you?"

He began to turn away as Harry gave him a look, but thought of one more dig to get in. Looking up at Harry, he asked Parks, "Oh, Ensign, in your long range scans last night, you didn't find anything that said 'Now is the time,' did you?"

He waved off Ensign Parks' confused look with a quick, "Never mind," and turned back forward.

Captain Janeway entered the bridge, and Ensign Parks once again did her jack-in-the-box imitation. "Good morning, Captain!"

Janeway moved down and slid smoothly into her chair. "Good morning, Ensign Parks. Anything to report?"

"No. It was very quiet last night," Parks responded, then muttered something under her breath.

Janeway smiled as she replied, "Yes, thankfully. Any activity in the sector we detected the Sernaix in yesterday?"

"None. We ran repeated scans of the area. There does not appear to be a Sernaix presence there any longer."

"Very well. Dismissed, Ensign. Harry, ship's status?"

"All departments report ready, Captain."

"Tuvok, weapons?"

Tuvok looked up from the console. "One shield emitter is down for scheduled maintenance but will be back online in approximately twenty minutes. All other systems are ready."

Janeway turned forward again and leaned back. "Very well. Mr. Paris, set a course for Sector 743. Let's go see what the damage is."

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Stardate 56248.3 U.S.S. Voyager, Sector 743

Janeway turned to look at Harry as they entered the sector. "Anything?"

Harry continued to work the sensors. "Not much. Some uninhabited systems, an uninteresting nebula --" he paused and worked a bit more, then found what they had come to expect -- "and the wreckage of a ship. It seems to be Borg. Or at least it \*used\* to be Borg."

"Used to be?"

"It's in so many pieces it barely registers as a ship anymore."

Janeway considered. "Then it doesn't pose a threat."

"Not unless we accidentally run into part of it."

The captain turned forward. "Fine. Mr. Paris, take us toward the wreckage...and try not to bump into anything," she added with a small smile.

Voyager arrived on the scene and found a spreading field of chunks of what appeared to have been a Borg cube. The Sernaix attack had clearly caused an internal explosion.

"Any signs of Sernaix?" the captain asked.

"Other than residual weapon signatures, no."

"Stand down. Harry, scan the debris field. Check for anything salvageable...though, considering the look of things, I can't imagine we'll find anything."

Harry started working the console, and after a few moments a beep caught his attention. Checking, he was surprised at what he found. "Captain, I've detected a life sign!"

Janeway looked incredulous and indicated the debris field. "In \*that\*?"

Harry confirmed, "There is a small piece of wreckage that may be large enough to contain a sealed environment. The reading is faint, but it's there." He looked up. "And it's definitely Borg."

Janeway turned to Tuvok, got up, and started to head for the turbolift. "Get a lock on it and beam it to Sickbay once security measures are in place," she ordered Kim. "Tuvok, I want full security and Level Ten force fields, and I want you there. Get Seven to sickbay as well." She and Tuvok entered the turbolift and the doors shut behind them.

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The Doctor and Seven stood back as the Borg drone was beamed into the waiting force field. The captain and Tuvok, along with the security contingent, waited a few steps back. Once materialization was complete, the Doctor and Seven went to work.

The drone was an average humanoid male. Surprisingly, there seemed to be little in the way of injury, considering the level of destruction sustained by his ship. Seven and the Doctor quickly came to a conclusion and approached the captain to reveal their results.

Janeway inquired, "Well?"

The Doctor started. "From the state of the Borg transceiver, it appears to be one of the Borg freed from the Collective. It also appears to have suffered little injury from the destruction of its ship. Both organic and Borg systems are effectively functional."

The captain paused. "I don't understand. If it's fine, why isn't it conscious? And how could it have survived destruction on the level we're dealing with here, without a scratch?"

Seven spoke up, "The drone is in a type of dormant state used for self-repair. It also appears to have been in that state for longer than would be expected if the repair had resulted from combat injuries with the Sernaix. There are some cases where more valued drones, upon injury, will be put into repair chambers similar to the ones used to nurture new drones. I suspect that this was



the container the drone was discovered in. Some unrelated injury was under repair, and the combination of the protected environment of the container and the dormant state protected the drone from injury when its ship was destroyed, and preserved its life until we reached the wreckage."

Janeway considered what this implied for a moment. "So we could just wake our friend up and he'd be completely fine?"

The Doctor responded, "Yes."

Janeway then asked Seven the question she really cared about: "Will it have any information on the Sernaix that attacked its ship, even though it was dormant at the time?"

"No," she answered. "Assuming it was dormant at the time of the attack, it would have no such information. Information updates only occur upon revival from the repair state, to prevent interference with the repair process. It will know nothing after the moment of its entering the dormant state."

"Well, let's go ahead and wake it up. At least we can get an update on the state of the Borg and what happened to its ship."

Seven returned to the drone and used the medical interface to activate it. After a few moments, the drone opened its eyes and sat up, looking a bit confused. That, if nothing else, showed that it was no longer part of the hive. "Where am I?" he asked, and the officers found it disconcerting not to hear the echoes of the Collective in his voice.

"I am Captain Janeway of the starship Voyager," Janeway responded smoothly. "Your ship was destroyed in an attack by the Sernaix. We found you in the wreckage."

The drone's features took on an incongruous look of worry. "Were there any other survivors?" he asked.

Janeway kept her voice measured; she'd delivered this kind of news too often. "I'm afraid yours was the only life sign we detected. We can only assume that the other drones were lost."

Sudden anger flashed. "NO! They were not drones. Not anymore."

"The others on your ship weren't Borg?" asked Janeway, startled at the fierce reply.

"They were Borg, and they were their own races, and they were something in between," he answered, "but they were \*not\* drones. A drone follows his leader blindly. My crewmates were their own leaders. They deserve to be remembered that way."

And another first contact starts on the wrong foot, thought the frustrated Janeway. I'd better do a little damage control. "I apologize for insulting your shipmates. I wasn't aware that your... people felt so strongly on the subject."

"We do. Our first leader made it very clear that no citizen of the Complex was ever to be considered a drone again. Now that the Collective no longer controls us, we are not bound by its principles... or its terminology." To Janeway's surprise, the former Borg smiled slightly. Seven, however, was not smiling. "First leader," she repeated. "Who was he?"

"Axum," the man replied.

A moment of silence passed, and the former Borg suspected what it meant. "You must be Annika," he said. "This is Voyager; I should have remembered."

"I was Annika," she answered. "I \*am\* Seven of Nine."

The ex-Borg stared at Seven for a moment. "I regret to inform you of Axum's death," he said.

"I knew," she said simply, and now Janeway could see her purging the emotion from her face. She was calling on her Borg conditioning to keep herself efficient; feelings could come later.

Stepping forward, Tuvok asked the survivor, "What is your name?"

Good idea, Tuvok, Janeway thought. If he rejects Collective notions, he's bound to have a name instead of a denomination.

"I am Xale," the ex-Borg replied. "Before my assimilation, I was a member of a race called the Bufannsum."

"Species 7457," said Seven immediately. "Humanoid, graminivorous, limited to one solar system. Assimilated at time index 8A1.D96.2F. Their stamina was an asset to the Collective."

She's deliberately being more mechanical than usual, thought Janeway. She probably hopes the familiar Borg demeanor will help him feel at ease. But will it work, or just make him more uncomfortable?

Xale apparently had neither reaction - his tone didn't change at all. "Yes," he told Seven simply. "I am the last of my kind now. Only nine Bufannsum had access to Unimatrix Zero, and we were all on the ship whose remnants you found."

"What is the last thing you remember?" asked the captain, steering the conversation back to the Sernaix attack.

Xale thought for a moment. "I was making a difficult repair when I was seriously injured. To speed healing, I was placed into a repair chamber and entered dormant mode."

"So you don't remember the attack?"

"No."

Janeway sighed, having confirmed what they'd suspected. She moved on. "It's clear from what you've been telling us that you're not part of the Collective. Are you one of the Free Borg?"

"I am a member of the Constructive."

This term was new to Janeway. "The Constructive?"

"The Borg Constructive Force. We are a group of former Borg who broke off from the Complex, which is what you may be referring to as the Free Borg."

Janeway considered and, since the ex-drone seemed to be talkative, decided to see what she could get out of it. "I'm unfamiliar with these groups, and we haven't had contact with any Borg for a long time. Can you tell me about them?"

Xale considered, then began to explain. "When Voyager destroyed the transwarp network, the Queen and all drones connected to the hive mind were terminated. We have called this the Cataclysm - the end of the Collective's reign of terror. As soon as the resistance learned of this, we gathered all our ships together to take inventory and decide what action to take. While the census proceeded, our leaders met and discussed the problem; in the end, they officially

dissolved the resistance and founded a new entity called the Free Borg Complex. The goal was to help ourselves and others recover from the effects of domination by the Borg, and nearly all of us agreed to join. Axum was the first coordinator."

"No one opposed his leading the Complex?" asked Seven.

Xale laughed. "The Complex was his idea. Axum had been our leader from the beginning, and not out of ambition. He didn't seek power - power sought him."

The point clarified, Xale resumed his history. "We began research into de- assimilation, and scout ships were sent out to discover how the Collective was destroyed. In fact, the Collective was already rebuilding itself, but we didn't learn that until much later. Our problem at the time was what to do about the other Delta Quadrant races. Axum tried communicating with one, a species called the Kallidians -" Janeway and Tuvok both perked up at that name - "but they didn't believe his story."

Xale frowned. "That was when disaster struck. Mere days after our communications with Kallid ended, the entire population was assimilated by unidentified Borg vessels."

"The new Collective," Janeway realized.

"Yes; it was our first clue that some remnant of the hive still existed. To make matters worse, the Kallidians had sent out a desperate distress call, claiming that the Complex was destroying them for refusing to open communications. The call reached many Delta Quadrant races, and their reaction was to send two enormous multiplanetary fleets to end the 'threat.'"

"What happened to the fleets?" asked Tuvok.

Xale smiled grimly. "That's a rather long story, but I can tell you the final outcome. The fleet led by the Devore and the Krenim engaged Complex forces and lost. General Korok led the battle and was careful to disarm, not destroy, their ships. They returned home wondering why an empire of killers would let them live. The other fleet, which we believe was organized principally by the Vidians, was unlucky enough to enter Collective space first. They were assimilated."

"After that," said Janeway, "you must have had more than enough information to find the new hive's hiding place."

"Our concerns at the time were internal," said Xale. "It was clear by then that we would find no allies willing to look past our history, as Axum had hoped. Many of us wished to take the logical course of action, the one that would maximize our survival chances."

"Expansion," said Tuvok.

The ex-Borg nodded. "The Old Collective, for all its faults, was not above learning from the races it assimilated. One from your quadrant had a valuable rule: 'Expand or die.'"

"You wanted to consolidate your space," said Janeway. "And then use your power to gain more. You wanted to start the Borg agenda all over again."

"We wanted to defend ourselves," said Xale with a touch of anger. "Among unassimilated species, we would never be welcome. We had no other choice -- your kind taught us that when they answered our greetings with weapons fire."

"You broke off from the Complex," said Tuvok matter-of-factly.

Xale nodded. "A group of us led by Pavriqur, Axum's diplomatic officer, formed our own alliance - the Constructive. Our goal was to defend ourselves by retaking the old Borg territories. Axum did not see the need and tried to prevent us...finally he forced us into open conflict. We have had many battles. For a while we were evenly matched, but recently we have proven the stronger and have begun to push the Complex back."

"Axum died at the MIDAS array early in the war. He was followed by Pavriqur, who fell to a Complex spy. His assistant, Ankin Rotor, took on his role of Director and has led us ever since. He will find a way to conquer the Sernaix." A certainty came to the ex-drone's eyes: "We have defeated all others, and we will defeat this new foe."

"What about the Collective?" asked Seven.

"It no longer exists. Pavriqur's last military victory was over them -- and it was complete. Our forces annihilated their new homeworld and recaptured their ships."

Janeway paused while she absorbed all the new information. "Voyager and Starfleet originally opposed the Borg Collective. Do you consider us a threat?"

"You freed us from the Collective. As long as you do not ally with our enemies, we are in your debt, and will not oppose you."

"Do you have any needs while you are here? We have Borg regeneration cubicles if you have the need. In the meantime, we will do our best to find a Constructive ship to return you to your people."

Xale hesitated, then lay back down, giving a response that Janeway was not used to hearing under the circumstances. "Thank you."

Janeway moved into the hallway with Tuvok and Seven to discuss their passenger. "I don't see the drone as a significant threat, but I don't want it left alone. Seven, I want you to spend time with him. Give him a ship's tour, show him around...keep him talking and find out as much as you can about these new Borg groups. Tuvok, do you concur?"

Tuvok considered. "Though this new group, the Constructive, appears to be quite formidable, I see no reason not to use the opportunity to gather as much information as possible. Not being a member of the Collective, the powers of a single ex-drone should not be a threat."

Janeway turned back to Seven. "Give him the works. Engineering, the bridge, you know the drill. I want you to appear open: show him the whole ship, but without revealing any sensitive details. See what you can get out of him."

Seven replied, "Yes, Captain," and returned to Sickbay.

Is this fair, what I'm asking her to do? thought Janeway. She's going to be dealing with someone who embraces the Borg ideals that destroyed her life. That wouldn't be easy for anyone.

Watching the doors to Sickbay close, Janeway reminded herself of Seven's record and felt reassured. If anyone can handle it, she can.

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"Come."

Commander Chakotay entered the room in Borg armour. He raised his prosthetic arm and extended its crackling electric tip to Janeway, coldly intoning, "Your culture will adapt to service --"

Janeway shook her head vigorously. No. Chakotay's fine. Your mind is playing tricks on you.

The doorbell chimed. "Come," Janeway said.

To her relief, there was no Borg waiting on the other side of the door. There was only Chakotay, and while he still didn't look quite like his old self yet, he was clearly doing fine. "Kathryn," he said warmly.

Part of Captain Janeway wanted to come out from behind the desk and embrace him. That was the Kathryn part. The captain part knew that this was the ready room, that it was time for discussion rather than socialization, and its decades of experience kept her in her chair.

Chakotay took the seat opposite her and leaned forward. "I'm surprised at you, you know," he said. "Letting a disconnected Borg on the ship? We haven't even gotten rid of the \*last\* one yet."

She had to laugh at that. "I don't think Seven has much in common with our friend Xale. Which brings me to why I called you here. What do you think of him?"

The first officer's expression grew serious. "I'll tell you, but I think it'll be redundant. How many times have we had this conversation now, Kathryn?"

"I've lost count," admitted Janeway. "But every situation is different, and I always need your input."

"You're right, this situation \*is\* different. Xale isn't part of the Collective we're used to dealing with. He presents us with an unknown risk."

"And unknown possibilities. The Collective is gone, Chakotay. The Borg Constructive Force is a potentially valuable ally for the Federation. The technology of the Borg could be an asset in this war with the Sernaix."

"But we need an alliance with the Constructive before we can expect them to share any of their technology," Chakotay pointed out.

"We have Xale. By keeping him on board as a representative of the Constructive, we would be building the framework for an alliance. What do you think?"

It was obvious to Chakotay that the captain had come to a decision. Still, she hadn't convinced him that it was the best course of action to take, so he simply said, "You know how I feel about the Borg, Kathryn. You've proved me wrong before, though, and I hope you can do it again."

Kathryn smiled, knowing that Chakotay was offering his support. "We'll make sure our guest feels at home here, but in case you're right and his staying is a problem, we'll continue to look for another Constructive vessel. On a more personal note," she said, coming out from behind the desk and placing her hands on his shoulders, "I'll see \*you\* tonight. My quarters."

Resting his hands on her hips, he smiled down at her. "Will you be making dinner tonight?"

"Yes, I was thinking about cooking something," she answered after a moment. Pulling out of the near-embrace, she turned back to her desk.

With a sigh, Chakotay said teasingly, "I guess I can work that into my schedule."

"You...guess?" Kathryn asked, glancing up from the PADD she was reading. She had adopted a hurt tone and was looking at Chakotay as if she'd been deeply wounded by his response.

"I'm still trying to decide if the benefits of our relationship make up for your cooking," he explained, looking contemplative.

"With that attitude, I'd have no qualms about cutting you off from those benefits, Commander," she said sweetly.

"In that case, I've made up my mind: I love your liquefied pot roast."

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Seven entered sickbay, her attention immediately drawn to the former Borg drone. "Captain Janeway requested that I give you a tour of the ship, Xale."

"That is acceptable, however if I was simply allowed access to this vessel's computer core, I could access the ship's schematics and crew complement. The process would be more efficient and I would have a greater understanding of Voyager." Xale fell into step alongside Seven as she led him from the confines of the medical bay.

Seven knew that Xale was correct, however that was contrary to Captain Janeway's instructions. It took her only nanoseconds to fabricate an explanation that the drone would accept however. "It would be more efficient. However, Captain Janeway is showing you a level of trust and acceptance by allowing you to have access to the actual physical locations on board the ship."

Xale inclined his head slightly as he followed Seven into the turbolift. "Their manner of communication is inefficient and inexact."

"Engineering." Seven called. "Their method of communication reflects individuality."

"Some aspects of individuality must be sacrificed for the common good. Accurate dissemination of information enhances the ability of each member of a group to attain perfection." Xale's tone was neutral but held an aspect of barely hidden superiority. "This is why humanity and the other races of the Alpha Quadrant persist in their inefficiency."

Seven could feel something inside her rankle at the barely hidden slur against her family, but she could also feel an edge of uncertainty deep inside. Had she embraced her humanity to the extent that she had become less than she had been? "Their method of communication communicates many levels of meaning and understanding..."

"All of them unclear and easily misinterpretable," Xale interrupted and continued with his thoughts on the matter. "The group often suffers to ensure that an individual's personal method of expression can continue to exist. Their methods of communication promote misinformation."

As the two Borg entered Engineering, Seven found herself unable to find flaw with the drone's logic. He was essentially correct. The methods of communication used by the crew were inexact and allowed for misinformation. Purposeful and not. The entire conversation had been started because she had misled the Borg to comply with Captain Janeway's orders.

Perhaps her association with humans had proven detrimental to her over all development. A strand of hair slipped from the French twist that would have held it in place and subconsciously Seven moved immediately to replace it in her immaculate hairstyle.

"Come on Miral... You know Aunty Kathryn and Mommy don't like grape juice in the Engineering consoles." Tom shifted his overly active daughter to his other hip and set to wiping up the spill from the so-called spill proof cup that his daughter had managed to thwart. "Oh, hey, Seven," Tom greeted her, and eyed the other Borg with suspicion. "I'm just waiting for B'Elanna to be free to come take our little terror off my hands. Harry and I have to do some fine tuning of the helm system after our little run out here to the Delta Quadrant."

Seven arched her eyebrow. "This is Tom Paris and his daughter Miral."

"Human child rearing techniques seem to allow too much possibility of stress on the child's environment and a higher than necessary cost in resources. This individual's time could be better spent elsewhere if the child was placed in a maturation chamber. Then both could be productive members of Voyager's crew," Xale observed coldly. Luckily for him Tom was still working on cleaning up the mess before B'Elanna could see the state that Miral had left her engineering console in.

Seven turned away from the scrambling father and focused on the drone once more. "There are advantages to the individual approach. The child learns necessary interaction skills from her close association with her parents." Seven looked back towards Tom and Miral to find the child gleefully grinning as she emptied the rest of her cup on another console. "Though I believe that there are times that human parents would agree with you. Ensign Vorik..." Seven turned her attention to the Vulcan officer who happened to be passing them. "Please show Xale the slipstream drive and our integrated Borg circuitry." The Vulcan nodded and led the other Borg away, while Seven stepped to Tom and scooped the active child off of Tom's hip.

"Thanks, Seven." Tom grinned at his shipmate as she demonstrated the maternal instinct and skill she had developed with the Borg children. "I swear with Miral sometimes you need eight hands, not two."

Seven nodded slightly, as she focused her attention on the child on her hip. "It is very obvious to those of us who know you Lieutenant, as to who her father is." Harry slipped up behind Seven and grinned at Tom who turned away from the mess and towards the former Borg drone, eyeing her perspectively.

"Good one, Seven," Harry piped up, grinning at his best friend. "Keep him on his toes. He's gotten slack since he became a father."

"Very funny Harry... Trust me Miral doesn't need your and Seven's help... I do. I'm plenty on my toes everyday." Tom finished mopping up the last of the spills and focused on Seven once more. "So how goes the tour, Seven?"

"Xale is difficult. I find his assumption of superiority difficult to deal with," Seven admitted with a sigh as she handed the child back to her father.

Tom and Harry shook their heads and did their best to keep the grins from their faces. They failed. "An opinionated drone... Who would have ever thought?" Harry shot Tom a dirty look, but Tom just shrugged.

Seven frowned. Something inside her ached at the thought that her crewmates found her equally annoying. "This does not surprise you, which would lead me to the conclusion that you have a similar reaction to me."

"Had, not have. You're nothing like Xale anymore Seven, but when the Captain first started socializing you..." Tom tried to scramble to make up for his callous reaction. "Let's just say you've come a long way from what you were."

Seven pulled herself straighter and looked at Tom defensively. "I believe you are mistaken, Lieutenant. I adapted to my circumstances. I learned that Captain Janeway was often correct. Would you not agree, Harry?"

"Ah..." Harry winced. The kimchee was somewhere around his waist as far as this question went. His answer would determine if he held his own, or sunk below the surface. "You know I didn't really spend that much time around you at that point, Seven. You'd be better off asking Captain Janeway something like that."

"That's why they pay her the big bucks, cause she isn't afraid." Tom grinned slightly directing that comment at Harry.

Harry narrowed his glare at Tom. "Wouldn't that be why you asked Chakotay to talk to B'Elanna about those romance novels she was always reading?"

"Alright boys. Break it up." B'Elanna shook her head at the two men, "And they call themselves grown ups." She reached out and plucked Miral off of Tom's hip. "Don't you two have helm controls to run diagnostics on or something?" Both the men nodded and they moved on out of Engineering still arguing amongst themselves. B'Elanna looked at Seven. "Don't ever let them convince you that men actually mature... They just turn into bigger versions of little boys."

Seven nodded as Vorik returned Xale to Seven's custody. Xale focused on the mother and daughter. "There is an interesting adaptation of Borg technology in this ship. I find it interesting that you are willing to adopt superior technology, but not superior social developments. I would like to observe more child rearing situations."

B'Elanna took a slight step back from Seven and Xale and subconsciously shifted Miral back on her hip, away from the Borg. "I don't know, Seven. I know the Captain wanted Xale to see the ship. Sitting and watching Miral and me together isn't like touring the bridge."

"I learned to appreciate Voyager's crew's methods of interaction by observation and participation. Perhaps that will be the same for Xale," Seven offered.

B'Elanna shook her head and against her better judgment agreed. "All right. I don't know what he's going to get out of it, but let's go before she spills something on one of my consoles."

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Seven and the ex-drone walked through the door of the Conference room that was typically used as a children's play area. It had been a lesser-used conference room, and had the advantage of having a view of space, avoiding the closed in feeling some areas of the ship without viewports created. The table and chairs were gone, and in their place were some smaller furniture, assorted toys, and various objects of interest to children of various ages.

Voyager had gone a long way toward integrating family life into its operations.

B'Elanna looked up from rolling a ball back and forth with Miral on the floor. It was obvious from her expression that she was not happy about the intrusion, especially considering who was accompanying Seven, but was aware of the Captains wishes. She also didn't like the feeling of being a specimen on display. Miral, on the other hand, did not seem to mind, and having seen the ex-drone previously, gave a glance and went back to the far more interesting game of rolling the ball with Mommy.

Seven surveyed the room, "This room has been adapted to child rearing activities. Children may come to this room to exercise their minds thought an activity known as play. This reinforces the



various connections in the cerebral cortex which organize the behaviors that the children will need to learn to perform as functional adult members of the ship's society."

B'Elanna hadn't heard Seven this into her old borg speech habits in a long time. It was a bit scary, and served to remind her of how far Seven had come in her socialization. She wondered how rolling a ball back and forth fit into the ongoing description, but decided she didn't want to ask. Since if she did, she was sure to get an answer. And, as it turned out, she was going to get one anyway.

Seven continued, "Currently B'Elanna is engaging in a type of play activity involving the rolling of a small pliable sphere back and forth. As well as acting as a practice session for the child, allowing the development of motor skills and manipulative control refinement, it reinforces the emotional bond between the mother and the child."

The ex-drone asked, "Which is more important, the emotional bond or the motor skill development?"

"It depends on the species. With Humans the maintenance of the emotional bond between guardian and child is as important to future successful behavior as is the development of the motor skills. In other species, such as the Vulcan's, the maintenance of the bond is less critical, as long as the child has an adult of the species from which to learn the various cultural approaches to intellectualization and emotional control."

Their visitor considered a moment, and finally responded with an answer that had a familiar ring to B'Elanna, "It seems very inefficient."

Seven hesitated, then softened a bit as Miral turned and threw her a smile before returning her attention to her mother, "I thought so as well when I first saw it, but I have discovered the system does have it benefits."

There was a chirp from Seven's commbadge, "Seven?"

Seven responded, "Seven here."

"Do you have a couple moments to spare? We're having a problem here in astrometrics, and we could use your help on it."

Seven looked at B'Elanna, "May I leave our guest here for a few minutes to observe? It does not appear that I will be long."

B'Elanna wasn't happy, but the drone seemed harmless, "Sure. Just don't be too long."

Seven responded, "I will be there in a moment," and to the drone, "I will return in a few minutes to continue our tour." She turned and left.

Seven had been gone a few minutes when B'Elanna noticed that the drone had begin to approach. She looked up, "May I help you?"

The drone looked down on her and Miral, "There are much more efficient ways to train the neural network of your child. The methods you are employing are erratic and slow."

B'Elanna was uneasy, but tried to be cautious not to offend, "It is what we are used to, and it has worked well for generations."

The drone was not placated, and B'Elanna started getting nervous, "It does not matter, your methods are inefficient. The pursuit of perfection requires the adoption of newer methods and

approaches when exposure to superior cultures makes them available." He reached down for Miral, "Here let me show you."

B'Elanna's nervousness exploded into full-blown Klingon combat mode in the defense of her child. She drove herself upwards, attempting to push the drone back and away, "No!"

The sudden yelling startled Miral, and she looked up, suddenly afraid at what she saw above her.

The drone was pushed back, but undaunted. "You will allow me to show you our superior ways. You must be shown how inferior your approaches are." It stepped forward again toward Miral.

B'Elanna had placed herself between the startled Miral on the floor and the drone in front of her, "You keep away from my child!"

This time the Drone did not simply push back. As B'Elanna reached for her com badge, the drone reacted to the assault by raising its arm and stunning B'Elanna, who fell back, hitting the floor in front of Miral.

Miral screamed.

\*\*\*

Harry and Tom were in a corridor working on a system behind a panel when Harry suddenly stood up straight, looking suddenly tense.

Tom looked up at Harry, "What's up Harry, you ok? You look like you've seen a ghost."

Harry dropped his tools, and without knowing quite why, took a step down the corridor. "Tom, where's Miral?" he took another couple of steps.

Tom got up and began to follow, confused at the sudden behavior of his friend, "She's in the kid rec area with B'Elanna. Why?"

Harry's tension and sense of urgency rose as he began to jog then run down the corridor, "I don't know, but we have to get there. Now. Something is wrong." He ran faster, "Very wrong."

Tom had no idea what was going on, but quickly followed, summoning Security to the children's rec area as he did.

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Harry, having a head start, reached the door of the rec area first. Upon opening it, he found a nightmare.

The ex-Borg was standing in the middle of the room holding Miral. B'Elanna lay next to it on the floor, obviously stunned and beginning to shake it off. Miral was squirming and screaming, scared and frightened, and doing what little she could to escape the horror.

Harry pulled out his phaser, but Xale saw it and activated his Borg shielding before Harry could get a stunning shot off.

It was then that Harry saw what the drone was attempting to do. It was trying to hold Miral still so it could line up its assimilation tubules to a spot on the back of her neck.

He hit his comm badge, "Seven! Get down here now! The drone has Miral, and is trying to perform some sort of Assimilation."

Harry heard a response, accompanied by the sound of running, "I will be there in 30 seconds."

Tom came through the door, phaser drawn, "Miral!" He raised his phaser as an automatic response, then lowered it, unable to use it with his daughter so close. Instead he dropped it, and started to throw himself at the drone.

Harry had remembered something he had learned from Seven about Borg personal shielding, and held Tom back, "It won't do any good."

Tom turned, "I have to do something!"

Harry looked at the ceiling panels, and finding what he was looking for, aimed and fired. The beam cut a hole, exposing a plasma conduit above. "Look I'm going to try something, but you have to get B'Elanna away from there. Go get her, now!" He shoved Tom toward B'Elanna, and Tom grabbed his wife and dragged her toward the corner. Getting there, he looked up to see Harry point his phaser at the conduit and fire. The conduit exploded, sending sparks and flame out from the point of impact. The flexible section of conduit broke free from the ceiling and hung down loose, the light show ending as the plasma breaker in the ceiling detected the break and cut off the flow to the ruptured length of conduit.

The ex-drone had been momentarily distracted from his attempts with Miral, but retained a firm grip on her as she continued to squirm. Sure of his defenses, he returned his attention to his captive.

Harry grabbed the loose end of the hanging conduit, and bringing it near to the drone, aimed his phaser at the plasma breaker in the ceiling, disabling it. The break ceased to function, and released the stream of plasma held back behind it. The next breaker in sequence detected the break moments later, but the few moments of plasma flow were enough for Harry's purposes. The brief plasma stream flew out and stuck the Borg shields, causing an explosion that was directed back outward, lifting Harry and throwing him against the wall. The former drone's shields also ceased to function and though the blast directed no energy inward, there was obvious shorting and disruption of many of the drones Borg systems.

He staggered, then fell back, a scared and screaming Miral bouncing off the still form onto the floor behind as the drone hit the floor.

Initially jarred by the explosion, but farther away and not in its direct path, Tom rushed over and grabbed his daughter, retreating back to his wife's side even though the drone appeared to be unconscious. Miral reached for her father, still crying in terror, and other than that appeared miraculously free of injury. Tom hugged her to him, reassured that she was fine by the crying.

Security and Seven came through the door at the same time,

Indicating the drone, he yelled, "Get that thing out of here! Lock it up in the brig."

It was then that he noticed Harry lying in the corner, unmoving.

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Seven now knew exactly how the Captain had felt sitting at Chakotay's bedside. This wasn't the detached concern that she had felt standing at Chakotay's bedside, hoping that a good friend, a member of her family would survive. At one point in time she would have been able to list off her vitals, explain exactly in pure scientific terms what was going on in her body. Now all she could do was feel. Fear, anger, and confusion raged through her mind and her body reacted accordingly.

This was the reaction to the possibility of losing part of herself. She wasn't even aware of the Doctor's words as he reported on Harry's condition.

"... in a few days, he will be as good as new." These words finally broke through the miasma of emotion in her brain and her head came up to regard the Doctor.

The Doctor sighed slightly regarding Seven with a mixture of pain, tolerance and impatience. "As I was saying, Seven, I have managed to stabilize Mr. Kim. He'll be healing for the next few days but he should make a full recovery."

"Thank you, Doctor. What Mr. Kim attempted was extremely dangerous. When Borg shields overload, the energy dissipates outwards. Therefore he could be certain that Miral would be safe. However..."

The Doctor looked again at his patient, "... He knew he was putting himself at risk." Shaking his head, the Doctor pressed another hypospray against Harry's neck and released the drug into the sleeping officer's body. "It never ceases to amaze me how many of the Captain's bad habits this crew has managed to pick up over our stay in the Delta Quadrant. I could write an incredible thesis on it, but the Captain would likely have Lt. Torres do something to my program as revenge..."

Seven looked at the Doctor questioningly, not quite understanding that his diatribe was not serious but was in fact a way of covering his extreme affection for all members of the original Voyager crew from the Captain down to Crewman Geron. The Doctor under her scrutiny fell silent and went back to work on the unconscious Lieutenant. Taking readings and administering other medications. After a few moments, Seven once again spoke. "What I fail to understand, Doctor, is how Lt. Kim knew that Miral was in danger."

"They seem to be linked in some way. I haven't been able to conclusively determine the cause of their link as of yet, either. I have a theory that it is in some way connected to both the powers that Mr. Kim and Miral are developing though they are different in application and an event in Voyager's history before you joined us, that both Mr. Kim and Ms. Torres shared." The Doctor continued to work as he spoke.

Seven cocked her head to the side. "You are referring to the Caretaker kidnapping both Lt. Kim and Lt. Torres." The Doctor nodded in confirmation. "Then I fail to see why Lt. Torres' offspring would develop both the link with Mr. Kim and powers, while Lt. Torres would not. You are more likely dealing with two unrelated events."

"Possibly, but I tend to doubt that, Seven. However, as I said, it is a theory at this point. The fact remains that Miral and Lt. Kim share a mental link and at least in this incident, it was incredibly useful." The Doctor looked at Seven. "Now, I believe you should rest as well, Seven. It's been a very stressful day for you as well." He watched as Seven focused on Harry once more. "Or perhaps I could make up the Captain's chair for you to sleep in." His voice found its sarcastic edge once more.

"That will not be necessary, Doctor. I have other matters to attend to before I regenerate."

The Doctor could only shake his head. "Perhaps it's some sort of viral infection that the Captain is spreading," he mumbled to no one in particular.

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Xale stood immobile in one corner of his cell as Seven approached. She nodded to the two guards and they stepped away leaving the two Borg, one former and one of the new, but just as dangerous species alone.

"You are an individual, yet you tried to assimilate Miral Paris and in the process you injured my mate. Explain." Seven's flickered with anger though she kept her expression and her voice carefully neutral.

Xale's face was purely impassive. It was not a mask he wore to disguise feelings beneath the surface, it was simply him. "The child would have benefited from the Borg enhancements I was attempting to implement. There would not have been a need for the inefficient activity that they were engaging in to improve the child's motor coordination. I saw no logic in not completing those enhancements."

"Miral is a child. A child's parents are responsible for making decisions for that child." Seven stood impassively on the outside of the cell. "You tried to force them to accept your decision for their child."

Xale looked to Seven with an almost mirror image of her expression on his face. "Their method of teaching was inefficient. The enhancement I would have implemented was a more efficient manner of achieving the same goal."

"The end does not always justify the means. Miral should be allowed to grow naturally to come into her own and make decisions for herself. The pursuit of perfection should not be forced on any individual," said Seven, hands clenched behind her back. How could one be an individual yet not understand the basic tenants that Captain Janeway had instilled in her? "You attempted to take the decision away from Miral, away from her parents. As the Borg once took the decision away from yourself."

Xale continued to stare impassively at Seven. "She would still have been an individual. A superior individual."

"It is not possible to be a superior individual. It is the nature of an individual to be different from all other individuals. In my time here I have come to understand that we all have our own strengths and weaknesses." Seven's voice was losing some of its neutrality and a frown was beginning to play at the edges of her mouth. "What you and I perceive as a weakness may prove not to be so. To take away even a weakness without the consent of the individual is to dishonor that being's individuality."

"They take their individuality too far. Why would they not automatically consent to a procedure that would bring about the same goal they were attempting to bring about more quickly." Xale was still as impassive as before.

"It is not the goal that mattered in this case. The journey that the child would have gone through to achieve the goal is at least as important as the goal itself." Seven's voice was passionate now and her expression conveyed her dismay at the actions of the Borg Constructive Force drone. "This is not what Axum foresaw when he broke away from the collective. This is not what your first leader wished for you all."

"What the first leader wished for us is irrelevant. This is what the Borg Constructive Force is and what you obviously are not." Xale looked at Seven as if re-appraising her. "You have lost the clarity of thought that you once had Seven." The Borg's tone conveyed that he saw Seven's moral stand to be a flaw in achieving what they still sought. "If you continue in this line of reasoning, you will have to give up the quest for perfection and adopt the ways of these inefficient creatures."

Seven pulled herself straighter, looking Xale in the eyes. Images of Harry, Captain Janeway, Chakotay, the Doctor and the rest of the crew flooded her mind. All those who had taught her what being an individual, what being human really meant. "I believe I will."

\*\*\*

Seven entered sickbay and moved directly to Harry's bed as the Doctor finished his lecture. "You're off duty for twenty-four hours, Mr. Kim." The Doctor turned as he became aware of Seven's approach. "Seven, I trust that you will see to it that Mr. Kim follows my directions. Far too many of the senior staff seem to have inherited the same lack of concern for their own health that the Captain has."

Seven inclined her head towards the Doctor. "I will see to it, Doctor." The EMH moved away from the pair, as Seven closed on Harry. His actions could have been interpreted as giving the young couple some space, but in reality it was more difficult for him to see them together than he would ever let either of them know.

Seven's attention was so focused on Harry that she failed to notice the Doctor's departure. "Your propensity for taking risks has once again led you to be injured. I have noted this pattern with you in the past as well. I find it concerning."

Harry shook his head and smiled at Seven. Her version of concern was odd but it warmed him nonetheless. "There wasn't any choice. I couldn't let anything happen to Miral and I was the only one who could help her."

Sighing slightly, Seven put her hand over Harry's, her fingers wrapping around his. "While it may have been necessary, I still find I would rather not have had you become the one to be put at risk." Her eyes reflected emotion that she still found difficult to verbalize.

"I know, Seven," Harry said softly and smiled at her. Where words failed them their body language spoke volumes.

The Doctor, who had observed the pair's interactions re-entered the main medical bay and leveled a glare at them both. He was doing his best to keep his voice friendly, but for the most part it failed. "You know, I fail to understand this crew. When I don't want to discharge you, you leave anyway. When I do discharge you, you loiter around my sickbay..."

Harry held up his hand and slipped off the biobed. "We get the message, Doc... Leaving sickbay. Now."

The Doctor nodded in satisfaction as Harry and Seven moved towards the exit. "As you are recovering, you will require what I have heard Lieutenant Paris refer to as TLC." Harry turned towards Seven slightly surprised. Seven regarded him with a quirked eyebrow. "I am the logical choice to be the practitioner of this treatment for you. Therefore I will cook you dinner this evening."

"You don't have to go out of your way for me, Seven." Harry smiled and placed his hand in the small of her back, guiding her down the hallway.

Seven sighed slightly, from the look on her face he could tell she was contemplating something. "On the contrary, I feel that I do."

\*\*\*

Tom and B'Elanna arrived at Tuvok's quarters. It felt a little odd to be together in their off hours without Miral in tow, they weren't sure how to feel. On one level, they were having some rare social hours together without having to care for the third member of the family, while at the same time something in the back of their heads kept telling them that something was missing. Add to that the point of the evening being discussion of Miral's issues, and it just didn't end up as one of those "fun to get away" evenings.

Tuvok answered the door, greeting them with, "Good evening."

Tom and B'Elanna took their cue from the less formal greeting, that the evening would be more in line with a Human social encounter rather than a Vulcan one. This was a bit of a relief, as it would allow more open discussion of Miral.

"Good evening, Tuvok."

"Won't you come in.?"

They entered. His quarters, as always, reflected his culture, uncluttered, but sparsely decorated with various cultural and family items. Of course, Tuvok did not consider these decorations, but items, which by their presence reminded the occupant of his own culture, helping him to maintain his mental balance. As the end result in both cases was comfort, it was possible that the difference between the two cultural approaches were not as great as it at times seemed.

Tuvok seated himself at the table and Tom and B'Elanna followed his lead. Tom resisted the urge to help B'Elanna into her seat as would be appropriate on a human formal occasion. Knowing that it was not expected by their host, as well as knowing how much she disliked such attentions.

Tuvok began the conversation by asking about Miral. "I assume that Miral has recovered from this afternoon's incident?"

B'Elanna felt anger rise at the reminder of what had been done to her child, but took a moment and suppressed the rage. It would do no good here. "Sometimes she amazes me. She went through something that traumatic, and just two hours later she acts as if nothing happened. She didn't even mind us leaving her behind."

"She was willing to stay behind this evening? It is better that she not be here for our discussion."

Tom smiled and said to Tuvok, "I was able to find someone to take care of her for us."

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Harry walked down the corridor toward Seven's quarters for their dinner. Considering he had just had another of his brushes with death, he was feeling rather well. Maybe it had happened so many times, he was getting used to it. Almost kill me, and I don't notice a few hours later.

He looked down at the bundle of energy he was carrying and figured he wasn't the only one who bounced back so quickly. From the smiles and joyful play, you wouldn't know from looking at her what had just gone on either.

Tom had come by sickbay with Miral when Harry was about to be released. Harry had thought he was stopping by to see how he was, and though he did ask, Tom had obviously heard he was fine, and had more important matters on his mind. Like baby sitting.

"I need a favor. Besides, you owe me one."

Harry grinned, "I almost die, and you come by to ask for a favor? Maybe you should be taking bedside manner lessons from the doc." Harry started making faces at Miral and got some gleeful giggles. "Besides, I don't remember owing you one."

"Well, you will eventually. Besides, I'm in a bind. B'Elanna and I need to discuss Miral's new abilities with Tuvok and T'Pel tonight, and they said it would be better if we didn't have her along to distract us. She seems fine, but frankly, considering today's events, I'd rather I left her with

someone she's comfortable with." He looked down and smiled at the joyful interactions going on between Miral and Harry, "Not that you make her happy or anything."

Harry grinned back at Tom, "The problem is you know I like her too much to ever turn you down. Sure, I'll take her. Seven and I are having dinner tonight, but I'm sure three won't be a crowd." Taking Miral from Tom, he held her with one hand while he played with her with the other. "It's not like we're having a quiet romantic dinner or something like that."

As Harry approached Seven's door, it occurred to him he should have given her a heads up that he was bringing Miral. Not that he would imagine Seven would mind, she enjoyed Miral as much as everyone on board. He rang, and the door opened up, giving him a view of the inside.

Seven was dressed in the attractive gown she had worn to Tom's last formal party at Sandrine's, and as then, had her hair down, allowing it to flow freely about her shoulders. On the table were two lit candles, and a variety of prepared foods that must have cost Seven quite a few of her saved replicator rations. On second thought, he noted that some of the ingredients had to have been fresh. She must have cooked things herself.

He looked around the room, and noted that the lights were appropriately dimmed, there was soft music playing at just the right level, and he was even noting a gentle scent in the air, something soft, inviting.

Seven was wearing perfume.

She was also looking at him with that raised eyebrow look that told him he had missed the shuttle on something. Actually, she had initially been looking at Miral with that look, but had definitely settled on him in the end. He suddenly distinctly remembered his comment to Tom about not having a romantic dinner.

Oops.

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Tom responded to Tuvok's query, "Oh, they'll be fine. Harry assured me they didn't have anything special going tonight."

\*\*\*

Back in Seven's quarters, Harry was discovering that Seven was becoming more and more interactive as their relationship grew. Unfortunately, \*this\* wasn't the kind of interactive he'd had in mind. He was afraid she might be learning her technique from B'Elanna, as Seven continued good naturedly, though obviously a little put out, "You were just injured."

"Tom said if he took into account when I was injured, I'd never get around to covering what I owe him. Besides, I'm fully recovered. My mind wasn't affected, "

"Of that we have no evidence...."

Harry attempted to continue, "...and I'm fully physically capable of doing anything."

"You plugged a Plasma conduit into a Borg shield, and took the back flash. And you don't owe Tom sitting, you have done far more than your share."

"The Doctor was going to release me, there was no reason not to take her."

"You had a scheduled dinner with me, and you did not even contact me to ask."



"For that, I'm sorry." Harry pulled out his trump card, picked up Miral and held her on his lap. "But it was just before I came here, and how could I say no to such a cute face."

Seven considered a moment, then responded, a small tick of amusement in the corner of her mouth. If nothing else, Harry always surprised her. "I'm going to inform B'Elanna that you were hiding behind her child. We will see if you get to baby sit any more."

Harry bounced Miral a couple times, then put her back in her seat, "Here, lets try to have that dinner you planned."

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B'Elanna shook her head, "Actually, the eating situation seems to have improved since Harry's suggestion."

\*\*\*

Seven looked on somewhat annoyed as Harry again tried to get the food into Miral's mouth. She noted that the success of mixing the baby food with other foods had worn off as Miral was once again rejecting her dinner. Harry sighed and put the spoon down. "I guess I'll just wait until later and try again."

Seven wished to avoid further distractions, and did not want to have to go through the entire feeding ritual later if possible. She pulled Miral's food plate toward herself, and picked up the spoon. "I will attempt it now."

Harry warned as Seven brought the spoon up directly in front of Miral, "Uh, Seven, I don't think a different approach is going to do the trick right now. She really doesn't want to eat." And noting Seven was keeping the spoon stationary within reach, "Um, I also think you might not want to keep the spoon right there...", but it was too late. Miral reached out and pushed the spoon away. Expectedly, some of the gruel ended up smeared across her arm. Unexpectedly, the spoon continued its path beyond her reach, and pulling itself out of Seven's hand, continued off the table and across the room.

\*\*\*

Tom explained, "Miral's powers of telekinesis only seem to get exhibited as extensions of her desires, she hasn't seemed to use them to consciously manipulate her environment."

\*\*\*

Harry crouched as the spoon of food hung by itself in the air outside his reach over the couch as Miral babbled away. He eased toward it little by little, having learned that if he was obvious she would just move it away from him. "Tom didn't tell me she had gained this much control. You think he could have warned me about her new game of 'keep away'." He took a deep breath and dove toward it, but only succeeded in ending up prone across the back of the couch as once again the spoon was kept outside his reach. He looked over at an annoyed Seven, and decided that enough was enough. "Uh, why don't we just go back to eating, and ignore it. Maybe she'll lose interest and get distracted by something else."

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B'Elanna continued, "And I haven't, thank goodness, seen any indications of her using her powers against a person. She really doesn't appear to be conscious of them."

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Seven froze with her fork half way to her mouth as the errant flying food suddenly impacted on the side of her head to the sound of gleeful giggling from Miral. She looked up at Harry as the spoon stayed stuck to the gruel, and began a long slow slide down her hair, leaving a trail of creamy goop behind it.

"Apparently, she did not lose interest."

\*\*\*

Tom and B'Elanna had just left with the now sleeping Miral. They had started being rather conversational (though whispering) when they had first entered, but upon seeing the scattered remains of a romantic dinner set, had quickly accelerated the process of retrieving their daughter. Harry had seen Tom turn to say something to Seven, but whatever it had been, it died when Tom noted the gruel trail running down Seven's hair. He stared for a few moments, looked around the room again at what had obviously originally been 'romance interrupted', and then turned and favored Harry with a slightly horrified look. Harry simply raised his eyebrows and shoulders slightly in an accepting gesture. Tom turned back to Seven and changed whatever he had been about to say into a very quick "Thanks a lot. I'm sorry if it was inconvenient. Good evening" and practically ran for the door.

Harry sighed, and looked at Seven, who returned his gaze from across the room. He smiled slightly as he noted again the various food stains about Seven's person. "Why don't you go take a quick shower and put something else on? You still have gruel in your hair."

Seven's hand reached up and touched the prominent smear. She shook her head, and headed for the bathroom. "Your suggestion has merit. I appear to be wearing more food than she consumed."

Harry moved to clean up as much of the mess as he could.

\*\*\*

Harry had just sat back on the couch when Seven returned from the bathroom. Her hair remained loose, and now appeared free of goopy encrustations. The gown had been replaced by the more casual off duty attire she had taken to wearing since gaining her own quarters. Harry smiled as she approached. It didn't matter what she was wearing; gown, casual clothing, or food, she still looked incredible. Seven sat on the couch.

Harry and Seven sat close on the couch, contemplating the remains of their desert. The cake had landed mostly upside down near the center of the coffee table, crunching the upper corner and causing a large chunk to split off, as well as shifting the second layer sideways off the first.

Harry tilted his head slightly sideways, "You know, it actually ended up being a sort of interesting shape."

Seven looked at the remains, "It is similar to the appearance of the ships used by species 322."

Looking surprised, Harry turned toward Seven, "Someone made ships that looked like that?"

"It was not a very technically competent species. The majority of the ships encountered looked like this because they had broken apart upon landing. The species eventually gave up space travel, having concluded it was unsafe."

"And the Borg assimilated them?"

"No."

Harry looked back at the mess, "Good choice." He sat for a moment, then asked, "You want some of the cake? It may not look as nice, but it probably still tastes the same."

Seven sighed, "Perhaps later." Looking around the room, she admitted, "This evening did not turn out as I had planned."

Harry snorted, "Just a bit," and a bit more seriously, "I'm Sorry."

Seven turned to Harry, "You have nothing to apologize for. I had not told you what I had planned, and bringing Miral with you would have been welcomed any other time." She smiled, and turned to him, "Her presence did not exactly contribute to the desired ambiance."

Harry smiled back, grinning playfully, "And what was the goal of the 'desired ambiance'? I assume you had something in mind?"

Seven hesitated a moment, then responded, "This." She leaned forward, and cupping his head to her, kissed him.

Harry was pleasantly surprised by the physical nature of the kiss. Until now, their kisses had always seemed like an oral version of a handshake; stayed, sterile. This was different. He sensed her desire for him, tentative, but there; presented almost as a question to be answered, accepted or rejected. It roused him, and reaching around, he pulled her to him, soon sensing the warmth of her against him. He felt her relax, the question fading, erased by their growing passion. She eased into his embrace, and they slowly slipped into the enjoyment of the new experience, the novel sensations of truly opening up to each other.

After a few moments, Harry separated from the kiss, and held her eyes for a moment. He then glanced around the room, and responded to her earlier statement, "Ambiance can be irrelevant, you know." He looked back, and returned her current smile before moving toward her again.

For the first time, she began to search him out, discovering his back with her fingers as they embraced, kissed. Eventually, her wandering hand found its way to his waist and having slowly untucked his shirt, soon traveled up against the bare skin underneath, pulling his shirt up as she did. She caressed his skin, gently, slowly moving to his chest, adding her other hand, finishing her exploration by pulling his shirt up and off.

His form had always been visually pleasing to her, and was again, but this time it was different, better. This time there was the added sensation, the rush, of other possibilities, the potential of more to come. She kissed him again, lingered in the sensations, the warmth of his chest, his mouth against hers, his arms surrounding her, his hand warm against her neck. Warmth, touch, caresses, the sharing of their forms. Wanting more, she pulled his hand from her neck and moved it down.

In the past, Harry would have hesitated, but knew, could sense, that now the time was right. His fingers carefully caressed her, exploring the curves of her upper body through her garment as he sought to give her pleasure. He felt her hand slow on his chest, then hesitate, as her awareness was distracted by these new sensations. Reassured, his attentions became more confident, eager. Fingers becoming hands as he sought to extend her enjoyment and distraction. His actions continued, less and less driven by conscious thought, ardor and instinct becoming the driving force behind his actions, his own excitement growing at the knowledge of the pleasure he was giving her. He pulled her closer, pressing, driven toward more, and she responded. He quickly shifted, and brought his other hand up to aid the first. After a few moments, he was

rewarded by the sensation of a small shudder and an intake of breath for these added ministrations.

To Harry's surprise, Seven suddenly placed her hand on his shoulder and pushed him back. He met her eyes, staring into his, not being sure if he had intruded, gone too far, or if she was having second thoughts. They remained that way for a instant; both of them tense, Harry waiting. He watched her, searching for a clue, his senses tuned to her. Her palms remained on his shoulders, their contact conveying heat, touch, and hesitation. Her breathing was short, irregular, the tension from the new sensations drifting through her. After a few more moments, she took a full breath, and letting it out, a small smile formed, beginning in her eyes and transforming her features, filling them with a humor and assurance that lit her face, releasing the emotions so often hidden under the surface. Harry lost his breath as the change overtook her. She was truly beautiful.

Harry tried to move to her, but she pushed him back, maintaining their distance, her dancing eyes taking him in. Those eyes drilled him as they contemplated, in control, then narrowed slightly as she spoke, an eyebrow raising slightly in amused question.

"You suggested earlier you were physically capable of doing anything you wanted?"

Harry hesitated, still balanced between the sensations of being with her, desiring her, and the remaining uncertainty of the moment, "Yes."

She hesitated one last time, then continuing to hold his eyes with hers, removed her hands from his shoulders, and raising them up behind her head, began to unfasten the clasp of her garment.

"Then let us make sure...."

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"Captain," Ensign Dewhurst swung around from his position at ops to face Janeway, "We have a Borg cube on the far range of our sensors, closing rapidly."

Janeway looked at Chakotay and nodded. "Yellow alert. Full stop. Shields up." She stood and straightened her uniform then looked up at Tuvok. "Weapons ready, but don't take the first shot."

"Understood, Captain." Tuvok focused his attention on bringing all the weapons online.

Kathryn could see Lt. D'Tar's antenna's twitch as the young Andorian spoke, "We have a communication from the cube, Captain."

"On screen." Janeway moved instinctively to the center of the Starfleet insignia on the carpet beneath her feet.

"I am K'Mar of the Borg Constructive Force. You seek us, Janeway." The Borg onscreen had obviously once been Klingon.

Janeway could feel Chakotay stand up and move behind her. His presence near to her lending her strength as the tension on the bridge thickened. "You seem to have me at a disadvantage, K'Mar."

"I remember you from Unimatrix Zero. I remember Voyager from the Collective's knowledge of it." K'Mar inclined his head slightly. "You have a member of the Borg Constructive Force aboard your vessel. You will return him."

The Borg's words formed what could either be an order or a question. To keep the tensions from escalating, Janeway interpreted it as the latter. "I will return him to you. We rescued him from the remains of a battle between your fleet and the Sernaix. It seems we have a common enemy, K'Mar." Janeway tapped her communicator. "Seven, you and Security escort Xale to the transporter room."

"Aye, Captain." Seven's disembodied voice filled the bridge and the tension began to climb by degrees. The shields would have to be dropped when they beamed the drone back to his people. The shields that kept the Cube from destroying Voyager with one shot.

"Xale will be returned to your vessel momentarily, K'Mar," Janeway added. The Borg didn't acknowledge Janeway's words only cut the transmission.

Chakotay and Janeway settled back into their seats and Chakotay focused a slight smile at Janeway. "Hospitable fellow isn't he?"

"As long as this doesn't escalate, I don't care if he wants to call Voyager a glorified garbage scow." Janeway grinned.

Chakotay smiled back. "I bet you wouldn't say that if this was the original Voyager, Captain."

"That's a sucker bet, Chakotay," Janeway started to tease as Seven's voice filled the bridge once more.

"We're ready to transport, Captain."

Janeway took a deep breath. "Acknowledged, Seven." Looking up at her old friend she took the leap of faith. "Drop our shields, Tuvok."

"Aye Captain." Tuvok responded as the entire bridge fell silent waiting for the other shoe to drop.

The seconds ticked past with not even a breath to break the silence until Seven's voice once again echoed from the communicator. "Xale has been returned to the Borg vessel, Captain."

"Raise shields, Mr. Tuvok." Janeway turned to Lt. D'Tar once more. "Give me a visual, Lieutenant."

The main view screen lit up with the view of a Borg vessel hanging in the space before them. Seconds seemed like hours while Voyager waited to see whether there would be a response, negative or positive from the other vessel. The only response was the green glow of their transwarp drive being engaged and the cube disappearing from sight.

Chakotay released a breath he hadn't known he was holding. "Overall, I'd say that went exceptionally well." He looked at Janeway, who just shook her head at him slightly but didn't say a word.

\*\*\*

Tom and B'Elanna were sitting in the Mess Hall while B'Elanna fed Miral. "Well, at least she's eating better."

Tom responded, distracted, "Yeah. I wonder where Harry and Seven are. I've known him to be late, but she's always on time."

On queue, Harry and Seven walked in, Seven nodding hello then heading to the counter, and Harry coming over to say good morning. Miral reached up to give him a hug, so Harry leaned over to reciprocate. "Good morning to you too."

As he went to sit down, Miral's hand caught in his collar, pulling it down to reveal a small welt on his neck. Both Tom and B'Elanna noticed, and grinned at each other. Noting the grins, Harry asked what was up.

Tom indicated Harry's neck with his head, "Now I understand why you were in such a hurry to get back to 'sleeping' last night." Harry obviously didn't understand, so B'Elanna added, "Miral pulled your collar down. Rather interesting mark there, Harry."

Harry realized they were referring to the hickey, and responded sheepishly, "Well, so much for keeping secrets."

Seven walked over to the table and sat with their meal, and Tom probed to see if the newly added dimension to Harry and Seven's relationship was a sensitive one for her. "I'm sorry if sitting for Miral at the last minute disrupted any plans last night. We're not used to Harry being unavailable and, um, encumbered."

B'Elanna spoke up, adding, "Though, considering the number of times he has interrupted us over the years, I guess a little pay back was due."

Harry decided to change the subject and asked how Miral was this morning. B'Elanna turned from watching Miral spooning in food. "She's fine. I think we have finally figured out how to keep Miral happy and out of trouble." Behind B'Elanna, Harry noted that Miral had ceased to shovel and was beginning to push the food around a bit with her spoon. He smiled and decided a little payback of his own was due. "So you have the food thing all set?"

B'Elanna smiled confidently. "Not even a hint of flying food."

Harry grinned as he watched Miral load up her spoon in a very familiar way as he responded, "Uh huh," and turning behind him, yelled "Incoming!" as the morning's breakfast sent the neighboring crewmen scrambling.

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You are a Bufannsum assimilated fifteen years after birth. When you were disconnected from the hive mind, you remembered only your name: Xale. On your world, it meant "son of courage."

Back on a Constructive cube at last, you reach your station and look out the sensorscope. To your surprise, the flagship of the BCF is in the sector, on course to intercept your cube. You hail it to ask what its mission is, and whether you can help in any way.

The ship sends back an audio-only message, three deciseconds long. Behind you, your crewmates stand stock-still as if frozen in place. Their eyes take on a distant, hollow look. As you meet their dead stares, you realize what has befallen them, and know it will now befall you.

You lose control of your movements. Your body immobilizes. You sense a presence drawing your energy away for its own use. Your mind cries out, just once - and then all is silent.

You are reduced to a living consciousness in a dead, useless shell.

You are one of the victims of Ankin Rotor.

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