

Summary: Janeway shows Seven the original Christmas story, and then shares a special holodeck program with the entire crew.

Content Disclaimers: Sometime in Voyager's latter 5th season.

The Christmas Story

by Lara Zielinsky

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Part One

Seven of Nine, Personal Log, Stardate 51997.2 It is the third day of my extended duty shifts in Astrometrics and Engineering. I am reporting for my own shift at 0h-600 hours, and then continuing in Engineering to cover Lieutenant Janice Miller's shift until 2200 hours. Lieutenant Miller requested someone to pick up her shift so that she can do some "holiday shopping." Indeed much of the ship has variously requested time off for 'shopping for gifts' though I cannot understand the concept of gift giving in a society where money has no meaning and everything desired can be produced through energy matrix-based replication.

"Computer, stop recording."

The Voyager's computer obediently beeped. Blue eyes, the left one eclipsed by a crescent-shaped piece of remaining Borg technology, darted over the status board in cargo bay two. Behind her, the hulking alcove that was necessary for her sustenance cast dull green lighting throughout the area.

Logging off her console, Seven of Nine scanned her appearance in the reflective black surface and quickly repinned several locks of undone blonde hair that seemed to insist on drifting across her cheeks. Sometimes she wondered why she did not cut it off, but then considered her original appearance when she first had arrived on *Voyager*, the Borg implants having left her quite bald until the Doctor stimulated the follicles. So she maintained the thick blonde mass as a matter of vanity she supposed.

The captain did the same, she justified. If there was anyone less inclined to worry about her appearance than Seven, in whom the inclination had never been trained, it was Voyager's captain. The small deceptively strong woman currently wore her auburn hair in a short wash 'n' go style that Seven found quite complementary for the older woman's high, smooth cheekbones and glinting blue eyes.

Seven frowned as she reached the entrance to the cargo bay. She wondered when her aesthetic observations of appearance had begun. She was not uncomfortable with her assessment of Janeway. Many people identified the captain as one of the more attractive persons on board. However she was shocked to discover that 'beauty is irrelevant' was no longer something she could espouse. Her Borgness had been considerably diminished in the nearly two years since her arrival on the ship. The realization did not give her as many disquieting thoughts as it would have only a year ago.

Perhaps she was finally truly adapting to being Human.

Captain Kathryn Janeway rolled out of bed at the sound of the computer's wake up call.

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Alpha duty shift on the bridge began shortly and she still had one thing left to do, since she had fallen asleep too early the previous evening to complete it. Unlike many of the crew, the captain would not take any time off until the actual holiday, unable to justify herself when the ship she had stranded by destroying the Caretaker's array still hadn't made it home.

The jumble of crew had finally managed to mold itself into something of a family and she felt closer to each one of them than she had to those she had served with on a half dozen other Starfleet vessels since receiving her commission at the Academy two decades earlier. Through terrible times and good times, she had weathered a lot, but nothing came close to the camaraderie she found aboard *Voyager*.

For the last five years Christmas had been a token, barely noticed as the ship was in one spot of trouble or another. But this year, Janeway had decided, come hell or Kazons, her crew was going to *celebrate*, their accomplishment of it, and the promise and hope for the coming year to bring them home.

She popped a data-recording disc, for the holodeck, into her personal station and transferred several files she had spent off-duty hours programming for her Holodeck gift to the command staff. How better to show how much they had become a part of her than by sharing a part of herself with them, she thought.

Back home Christmas was the most incredibly festive of times for her mother Gretchen and sister Phoebe, and Kathryn, when she was planet-side--which was something she had worked hard to arrange nearly every year--enjoyed the intimate, playful times. Her mother's tradition of hot chocolate by the fireplace and reading the Christmas story. The story was outdated but Kathryn found it romantic and touching in a way she could not entirely explain. She found each year harder out here than the last as she missed the family celebration time and again.

Her blue eyes shaded to gray as she ached. Resolutely though she brushed lightly at her eyes before settling her face in the command mask. Straightening her uniform top she decided a quick jaunt down to the holodeck to load her program could be spared before Alpha shift commenced in earnest.

The captain stood at the holodeck operations panel, noticing a program in progress, and loaded her disc in a standby slot, keying in a half dozen commands for setting it up in the directory and the "new participant" entry parameters. Titling it, she started to back away, heading for duty.

The doors of the holodeck opened as someone triggered the entry and ducked. White, cold fluff smacked the auburn-haired woman in the face and the ducking crewmember staggered back to her feet, laughing.

"Missed me!" she yelled over her shoulder and then spun, running directly into the captain. "Cap--Captain! Oh Kahless! I'm sorry!" B'Elanna Torres, *Voyager's* chief engineer, brushed the wetness off the other woman's face, only to have Janeway grab her hands and still them.

"It's all right, B'Elanna." She smiled and leaned around the half-Klingon woman who was seriously considering the molecular dynamics of sinking through the deck from embarrassment. *Molecules expanded when heated right?*

Shaking her head, Janeway patted Torres's shoulder and inquired, "So who has the fabulous aim?" She looked out on a virtual snow-white landscape of high mountains, thin passes and gorgeous jagged cliffs. Obviously one of the Klingon homeworld's vistas, she thought, with all its dangerous, breathtaking beauty.

A sheepish voice, low alto and definitely male, responded. "Um, that would be me, Captain.

Sorry about this." Tom Paris, the ship's Alpha-shift helmsman, stepped out from behind a snow-covered boulder.

Brushing the slight dampness from her hair, Janeway shook her head. "Honestly, you'd think I'd melt from a little snow. I'm fine." She stepped between the two, unerringly drawing them back inside the recreation, as she backed up, looking around. "In fact," she prefaced, leaning down and experimentally drawing her fingers through the white precipitation. "I've never been better."

Abruptly she pulled up a fistful, molded it and threw it into Tom's face.

He looked utterly shocked with the wet stuff melting down into his shirt collar and then as B'Elanna laughed, fists on her hips, Janeway bolted out of the holodeck, calling over her shoulder, "I'll expect you on the bridge in five minutes, Ensign Paris!"

"I'll be up there in two!" He called back, kissed B'Elanna briskly and then bolted after his captain.

B'Elanna was still laughing in the open doorway when Seven of Nine passed the holodeck on her path to Astrometrics.

The Borg woman took one look at the half-Klingon woman's demeanor and interpreted the deep howls as indicators of pain. She inquired, "Lieutenant Torres, is something wrong?"

The engineer shook her head but could not stop laughing long enough to explain. Perplexed, Seven could only react stunned when the dark-skinned woman scooped up a handful of the white substance coating the ground of the holodeck, packed it and hit her in the back of the head with it. "Why did you do that?"

"Oh, lighten up, Seven. Get in the spirit of the season!"

"What season? The air aboard Voyager is artificially controlled. There are no weather patterns and no changes in temperature."

Behind B'Elanna another crewmember darted out flinging the white substance accurately at the chief engineer. She dodged it and looked back at Seven, her face pensive for a second. Deciding against speaking, she shrugged. Torres stepped out of the range of the door sensors, leaving Seven standing there confused for a very long time before the blonde young woman shrugged off the incident and reported to her duty station.

The door to the captain's Ready Room chimed once. "Come," Janeway said, distracted as she was studying the crew duty rosters and making alterations.

"Captain, I have another set of changes here."

"Put them on my desk." He started out but turned as she called out to him again.

"Commander, come look at this."

As he approached her desk, Kathryn looked up and turned her desktop unit toward him.

"What do you make of this?"

He scanned the listing. "She's working 37 hours. Seven hasn't put in hours like that since she first accepted the position in Astrometrics."

"So, why now?"

He tapped a few keys. "Looks like she's filling in for a few others who wanted time off." He pointed at three places. "See here, here, and this one here."

"I know she only needs to regenerate once every 48 hours, but... this is too much. She's pulling two 34 hours and one 24-hour shift in the next five days."

He looked up at her. Raising his eyebrows so his tribal tattoo crinkled, he asked, "You want me to talk to her?"

Janeway considered that. "Seven's been unpredictable lately." She shook her head. "I'll talk to

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her if I don't see the second shift changed by tomorrow. Certainly she'll take the time off for the party at the mess hall." She scanned the roster. The schedule showed the young ex-Borg scheduled in Engineering right through the Christmas party. She frowned. In a way, she wanted to share her gift to the crew with the young ex-Borg most of all.

"You just let me know," Chakotay said. "I'll have B'Elanna rearrange the schedule and put Vorik or Mulcahey in instead."

"All right." Janeway turned the screen back in her direction and pondered it for another long quiet moment. "Do you suppose Seven remembers anything about Christmas time parties as a girl, Chakotay?"

"She's said before she remembers very little, only snapshots really, of her time before being assimilated."

"I think she could use the socializing," the captain added in a distracted voice. "Schedule Mulcahey and Vorik, but still give them a couple hours each to swing through the party, all right?" She stood up and switched off her monitor. "I'm going to have a talk with Seven."

"All right." Together they walked out of the Ready Room. Janeway headed for the turbolift as Chakotay settled into the command chair at the center of the bridge stations.

The door to Astrometrics slid open. Seven finished her immediate calculation, signaled the viewscreen to bring up the next set of star charts, then glanced toward the doors admitting her visitor. "Captain?" She turned back to the console, inputting several equations.

"Hello, Seven. I was wondering if I could talk with you for a moment."

"You are the captain," Seven offered by way of reply, permission and in a tone that suggested nothing but factual respect.

Janeway looked from the console up at the displayed star charts. "What are you working on?"

"The next area of space has been extensively mapped by the Borg. It is... was the domain of Species 873. They called themselves the Vreldt."

"Sounds intriguing."

"Highly intelligent species. Lightweight bone structure, capable of short-range self-propelled flight," Seven ticked off the avian-like qualities. "However they also had little strength to bear assimilation. There are very few Vreldt which survive initial contact to become drones."

"I can imagine," Janeway remarked, leaning on the console and studying the very bird-like image depicted on one small screen. "Hardly look stronger than their Earth counterparts."

"There are intelligent bird species on Earth?" Seven shook her head. "I have no data regarding that."

"Well, Molly used to think so. She scuffled after them so often, you'd think she'd catch one once in a while. But she never did. Missed every single time."

"Molly?"

Janeway shrugged and looked up at the taller woman. "Never mind, just living with a few memories. Molly Malone was... is... my dog back on Earth. Mark took her in when Voyager was shipped out."

"Oh." Seven made a motion with her head that suggested she was filing the information away and turned back to the console. "So the birds are not actually intelligent?"

"No, just... elusive."

Seven nodded. "I believe I understand, Captain."

Janeway leaned on the console and turned, resting her weight on her elbows. "I just finished

with the week's duty roster."

"Yes, Captain." Seven interjected out of politeness.

"You're scheduled to work here and in Engineering for all but a total of 8 hours over the next four days."

"I have accepted extra shifts so that others in the crew may 'shop'," she responded. There was a long silence as Janeway considered what to say next. Seven however interjected her thoughts, realizing she would have little better opportunity to have some questions answered. "This holiday... Christmas. And the gift giving involved. What purpose does giving a gift serve?"

"It's a chance to offer someone a token of your affection or association," Janeway explained easily.

"But why? Lieutenant Torres told me to get into the spirit of the season."

"It's a saying. Christmas, on Earth, happens in the winter, when the world is filled with expectant promise... everything waiting for spring." Janeway's voice took on a hushed quality as she reminisced, trying to explain with words something she hoped someday Seven would see.

"And this particular day of the season is a holiday because...?"

"You haven't done any research on Christmas?" Janeway seemed startled. She put a hand on Seven's arm.

"I have not had either the inclination... or the time," the ex-Borg stated simply. "I will be working through the 'holiday' in any case."

Janeway shook her head. "I have asked Chakotay to arrange it so that you have time off to spend at Neelix's party."

"You did this without speaking with me?" Seven bristled. To her it seemed yet another example of how the captain was 'managing' her.

"I'm speaking with you now," the smaller woman replied sternly. "It isn't healthy to always work and have no down time, Seven."

Seven stepped away from the console and crossed her hands behind her back. "I am not very good at socializing. What if I do not wish to attend the party?"

Janeway frowned. "Please consider it," she said finally. "I... would like for you... to experience the festive atmosphere."

Seven's expression did not change, though she felt awkward for having refused the captain so directly. "Very well."

The captain leaned forward and brushed a light hand over the younger woman's shoulder.

"Thank you, Seven." Then she turned away. Seven did not see, as she also turned back to her console, the captain pause in the doorway and glance back with a melancholy expression on her face.

Part Two

Captain's Ready Room on Christmas Eve.

Captain to Seven of Nine." Janeway had one hand on her desk, next to the computer screen, the other fisted in her lap after slapping her communicator. Her voice was testy.

"Seven of Nine here, Captain."

Standing, Kathryn Janeway looked up at the ceiling. "Seven, I thought I told you to make sure you took some time off."

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"I did, Captain. I took two hours in which Ensign Mulcahey covered my duties and went to regenerate."

Janeway knew that, she could see the computer's movement reports right in front of her. "Damn it, Seven that is not what I meant. Log off duty right now."

There was a long moment of silence at the other end. "Yes, Captain."

"Then report with me to Holodeck One. I'm going to get you into the spirit of the season." She cut communication.

Briskly she left the Ready Room, crossed the bridge where Lieutenant Ayala held command. She accepted a smile from him and entered the turbolift. "Deck six," she commanded as the lift doors closed.

When she arrived on deck six, Janeway made her way over to the holodeck, keying in a historical database reference. "Computer, activate program."

Plainly, as Seven appeared from the other end of the corridor, the ship answered, "Program Activated, enter when ready."

She looked up at Seven, who stopped an arm's length away, crossing her hands behind her back. "All right, Seven. I'm going to explain a few things, all right?"

"Why the holodeck?"

"We're going to take a little trip back in time."

The ex-Borg lifted her brow in surprise. "Is this about the 'spirit of the season'?" she inquired.

"Yes. Now mind you, the society we're entering was rife with superstitions, turmoil and deeply religious beliefs."

"So this Christmas is a religious holiday? I did not notice you were particularly religious, Captain."

Janeway nodded, conceding the point. "It's also a holiday about the promise of hope and new life, Seven." She stepped into the sensor, activating the doors and gestured back to the blonde. "Come on."

The two women stepped through, to discover themselves on a quiet desert road, the high bluffs of mountains surrounded them and a small town teeming with activity lay behind the protection of a high wall further down in the valley. It was dusk and the starlight just beginning to appear on the horizon. Janeway captured Seven's elbow and pointed up.

When the young woman followed her gaze, the captain explained. "To many ancient civilizations of Earth, the appearances and formations in the stars indicated incredible things," she said. "They made stories up about the patterns in them, believed certain arrangements heralded great disaster, or great wonder."

"A very unenlightened perspective," Seven commented dryly. Janeway squeezed her arm. Behind both women came the sound of footsteps on the road. They turned to see a small caravan of weary travelers. Covered from head to foot in caftans and long robes tied off with cloth belts and heads covered in the protective cover of desert nomads, they were walking beside horses, that huffed and snorted with effort under the burden of their saddlebags.

They too were occasionally looking up at the sky. When one dropped his head and caught sight of the two women, he lifted up a hand and called, "Hold" to his companions. "Do you require escort to the city, ladies? My people and I are journeying on this road and would be happy to aid you."

"What brings you out here?" Janeway asked. She could feel Seven watch her as she relaxed

into the simulation.

"My astronomers indicated the appearance of a magnificent star in the western heavens," he replied. "It heralds the annointment of a great king of peace." He gestured to his group. "I have come with gifts to offer my allegiance to him."

"We will travel with you, if that's all right," Kathryn replied.

Seven followed Janeway into the thick of the caravan and the group continued walking. "Why did we do this?" she asked the captain, as she observed the people surrounding them.

"Because they're headed exactly where I intend to take you," Janeway replied reasonably. "And a person doesn't travel the desert at night alone."

The group soon reached the city gates and were told that there were no lodgings available within for the night. "There are caves in the hills," explained one of the gate guards. "Shepherds secure their flocks there. Perhaps there is space for you."

"Thank you," replied the caravan leader. Turning to his people he reported the news. "We will have to seek the new king in the morning," he said. "For now we will find rest and respite in the caves outside the city."

The group made their way into the hills, following the glow of firelight until they reached a low cave. Several shepherds reclined outside and stood upon their arrival.

"Fair greeting to you, travelers," one said.

"We are hoping for a place to sleep," the leader replied.

Seven fidgeted, tired of the lengthy quiet she felt. "I wish it would get to the point," she murmured to the captain who just smiled and shook her head.

The shepherd motioned them inside. "There is space within. Be careful of the Nazarite couple. The wife is near time."

Seven followed Janeway's gaze to where a darkly bearded young man sat quietly patting his wife's face with a wet cloth as she labored, obviously delivering the child swelling her stomach. Seven felt something squeeze inside her and turned to Janeway. "She looks uncomfortable. Perhaps we can assist."

Kathryn smiled again. Seven was finally beginning to forget this was a simulation. The moonlight shined through an opening in the cave roof, highlighting the air with dust motes and a soft glow.

The travelers cast a glance upward at the change in lighting and one pointed emphatically, nudging his neighbor in excitement. The shepherds, too, gathered around the cave opening. The Nazarene couple was too busy to notice the activities of the others suddenly. The woman went into hard labor and very quickly delivered her child. Her husband cleaned the boy, Seven noted clinically. Then he swaddled the infant and handed him into his mother's arms.

Janeway pressed close to Seven's side. From the intensity on the soft face, Seven realized this is what she had intended to show the ex-Borg. "It is childbirth," Seven concluded. "A dangerous prospect in this time period for all the unsanitary conditions, but frequent."

Kathryn shook her head. "Seven, just look at him."

"He is well-formed," she admitted.

The moon slipped from behind the cloud that had mostly blocked its light and the cavern was bathed in moonglow. The travelers Seven and Janeway had met on the road gasped and fell on their faces before the new family.

"He is the king we have sought," praised one. "The Prince of Peace has come."

Murmurs filled the air and Seven backed up amid the cacophony. She studied the young

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couple and child and noticed their intimacy. Father brushing the forehead of his new son. Mother kissing the child's head as she gripped her husband's hand.

"This is a king?" she questioned Janeway who also had stepped back allowing the scene to unfold without their immediate presence.

"To them he was. The land is occupied by a non-native force. They have been hoping for a strong leader to lead them out from under the occupation."

"Then why not turn to a military leader?" she questioned, clearly confused. "This child must grow before he can be useful to them."

"They don't see him as a king in that sense, Seven. Well, some expected him to be," she added thoughtfully. "Do you remember what they just called him? The Prince of Peace. They believe he is their god's messenger that peace will be here very soon."

"So that is the meaning of 'Christmas'?" she concluded. "This historical account of one child's birth."

Yes, Seven."

"And why today should Humans celebrate this? Your history did not abruptly turn peaceful following this time period."

"Because we always need a reminder of hope, Seven."

The visitors were now presenting the couple with gifts on behalf of the child. She heard reasons from "so that he may grow strong," or "that he may always possess wisdom" or "that he may be surrounded by the sweet scents of the angels." She took another look at the child, who seemed to observe this with a somewhat distracted attention, fidgeting slightly. Then his blurry infant gaze seemed to fall on her, there, across the room.

She had a brief flash of herself as a child, smiling, laughing, playing in the confines of the *Raven*, her parents' research ship. It abruptly changed to a view of herself, an adult as she now was but completely devoid of Borg implants. She realized she yearned for the vision to be true.

Janeway's hand slipped down her arm. "Are you all right, Seven?" The ex-Borg realized that she had started smiling, completely involuntarily. She glanced at the captain, catching her breath.

"Yes, I am fine, Captain." She felt the smaller woman's hands grasp her own. "To wish for a future different from the present, this is hope?"

"Yes, Seven. That's hope."

The former Borg looked back toward the new family and the child's attention had shifted to a sweet suck his mother offered. She felt instantly a part of the same bond between the mother and child and all the people in this cave. Conveying her understanding, Seven's voice was quiet, reverent. "Thank you, Captain."

"You're welcome. Will you please join the party tonight? I have something I'd like to announce to everyone there."

Seven nodded. "Yes, Captain, I will."

The two women parted outside the holodeck. Janeway returned to the bridge for the rest of her shift. Chastened, Seven slipped into the cargo bay to regenerate for a brief period. Keying in a series of commands, she had the ship's computer bring up, for her examination, various traditions of celebrating the holiday.

Part Three

When Seven and Janeway arrived from their separate duties, the party was already in full

swing, under Neelix's sure hand. If it was a party: Terran, Talaxian, or even Klingon, the Delta quadrant native went all out. The mess hall had been transformed with ribbons and bows draped everywhere, in green and red. There was a huge conifer, adorned with twinkling lights, and round bulbs in a rainbow of colors. Filling the space beneath the tree's boughs, the deck was covered with a profusion of wrapped boxes.

Naomi Wildman, the ship's only child, stepped out in a soft red hat, trimmed in a ruff of white. Janeway would swear the rest of her outfit, a very cute short dress in green and red, was that of an elf from the Santa stories that had grown up in the northern European regions migrating to the American continent with the explorers and pioneers of ancient Earth. Naomi's mother Ensign Samantha Wildman was from the mid-western American continent, like herself.

She caught Ensign Wildman's smile as Naomi hurried up on her curled toe shoes and embraced Seven, who lowered to one knee to greet the girl. In a quick switch, Naomi tugged Seven's hairpin free and settled her hat on the loosely flowing blonde hair.

Janeway considered the scene entirely too adorable as Seven warily pulled the hat off and examined it before placing it back on her head. "Part of the festivities, I assume?" Seven inquired of her, glancing up.

"Yes." As the captain looked down a flash went off somewhere nearby; no doubt the Doctor snapping his holopictures, Janeway thought. She would have to ask for a copy.

Seven had turned back to her gift-giver. "Then I thank you, Naomi Wildman. It is a most wonderful... hat."

"You're welcome," the girl replied, kissing Seven on the cheek before darting off again.

Kathryn watched as Seven straightened, the red hat resting easily against her white-gold hair. "What else should I expect?"

Janeway gestured toward B'Elanna and Tom, who stood off to one side, kissing between sips of a yellow frothy drink from the same cup. "Eggnog, mistletoe." She gestured toward where Naomi was ripping open a present while Neelix and her mother looked on. "Presents." She nodded toward a group of crewmembers, drinking and singing a disjointed rendition of 'Santa Claus is Coming to Town.' "And singing."

"Ho. Ho. Ho." Seven turned, not recognizing the deep voice immediately. The Doctor approached. Seven's eyes went wide. "Captain. Seven."

He jingled as he walked. Over his shoulder was a bulging pack. His usually thin figure was hidden behind a thickly padded red suit with white ruffs at the wrists, waist and ankles over dark black boots. Setting down the bag he rummaged for a moment then came up with a smile. He pressed a small box into each woman's hands and accepted a kiss on the cheek from Janeway. Seven awkwardly did the same and then he was gone.

"What is this?"

Janeway laughed. "It's a present, Seven. I hadn't expected The Doctor would be Santa. I thought that was more Chakotay's style." She looked around. "Speaking of which... where is he?"

Seven scanned the room's occupants quickly, able to see much further than the shorter woman. It took her a moment of mentally stripping away some of the costumes from various individuals, but she finally identified the burly figure of Voyager's first officer. "He is, I believe, over there." She pursed her lips.

Janeway finally caught a glimpse when Seven nodded in the appropriate direction. She laughed at the room's second Santa. Chakotay, with a deep green suit covered in hollyberries, sat in a chair handing out other presents to the rest of the crew. Occasionally a laughing crew woman

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would

settle into his lap and kiss him quickly before leaving. She pointed over the Commander's head.

"That's where the kisses are coming from." Seven glanced up and noticed a sprig of green attached to the ceiling over Chakotay's head. "Mistletoe."

"It is customary to kiss under a green plant?"

"I don't know where the custom started," Janeway admitted. "But yes, essentially." She accepted a mug containing a frothed yellow drink. Seven eyed it suspiciously. "Would you like some eggnog, Seven?"

"What is it?"

Neelix, who had given the captain hers, explained. "Eggs, spices, warm milk. This is the alcoholic version, containing a shot of rum. I could get you a plain cup."

Janeway brushed it off. "Just have a sip of mine before you decide." She passed the cup to Seven and watched as the young blonde sipped carefully at the drink.

After a moment the verdict was in. "This is acceptable."

"All right. Neelix, give the woman a drink." Janeway laughed and accepted her cup back.

Seven accepted a cup of her own and looked at the captain, who had been caught by a passing crewmember wishing her a 'Merry Christmas.' When the captain finished the exchange and turned back, Seven offered, "You are very happy, Captain. Is this a very special holiday for you?"

Janeway nodded. "I almost always managed to make it back to my mother's home for it. It isn't so much the religious origination of the holiday for me. It's just always meant 'family', I guess."

"You have not been able to be with your family for the last five years," Seven observed.

"Does this bother you?"

"Yes, it does..." Janeway realized this was as good a time as any to unveil her gift. "But I have discovered a new family." She patted the woman's arm and stepped away from her drawing attention to herself and gesturing everyone closer. She announced in a loud voice, "It's time for my gift to all of you."

All eyes settled on her and she swept the room with a warm gaze. "Christmas is a a time to gather close friends... and family."

A hush fell over the group. Seven glanced at the suddenly solemn faces.

Janeway went on; her face solemn but lit with what Seven recognized now, as hope. "I know that we're all quite far from our blood families. I'd like you all to know I consider every person on this ship closer than blood. On Holodeck 2, I have created a surprise. I hope, with it, we can form our own new traditions out of some old ones."

Excitement spread through the gathering and Seven, flanked by Chakotay and Neelix, followed the captain out first, as she led the group to the holodeck. Keying up her program, Captain Janeway stepped back and opened the doors, ushering people inside.

Seven stepped inside and looked around. It was a gently sloping valley, bathed in snow drifts, lit by sunlight. Naomi Wildman came up beside her and asked, "Where is this?"

Seven looked over her shoulder back at the captain, who smiled at everyone. "It's my family's hometown in Indiana." She looked to her first officer, standing off her right shoulder. "Chakotay, there's a beautiful game preserve through those trees." She cast a glance at her chief engineer, who had been caught up in a hug from Tom Paris. "B'Elanna, those hills have given me some of the best winter tobogganing anywhere. Tom, my mother kept a snow speeder in the barn behind the house. I bet if you look you'll find it still there." She turned to find her security chief's dark eyes studying her, perhaps even a faint note of approval in his features. "Tuvok, these cliffs are

where I first realized I wanted to meet people from other worlds." She gestured.

"To all of you, this... was my home."

The crew looked down at the farming community and followed their captain as she picked her way down the path. Faces of people she remembered from so many years ago peered out of houses at the huge influx of visitors to their tiny community. She led the way up to a simple house set back from the street. Seven and Naomi continued to follow as others peeled off to explore.

"This is a recreation of your house?" Naomi asked, before Seven could form the question.

"Yes, it is. I wanted to show you... both. I know neither of you has ever seen Earth. I'm hoping that this... takes away your fears... just a little. I'd like to show you the real thing someday. As I know your mother would, Naomi."

A woman older than Kathryn Janeway, but definitely with the same luminously blue gaze set in a face of similar features, stepped out onto the front porch as they approached. "I see you brought some friends home from the party, Katie."

Kathryn had wanted to program her mother into the simulation; considered it and deleted it twice in fact. The truth was, she knew, as she felt it now that her senses would be unable to take the shock. Tears gathered in her eyes, but she swallowed hard not wanting Seven or Naomi to see how much this had affected her. Far more than just sharing her hometown with the *Voyager* crew. *Far, far more...*

"This is Naomi Wildman, daughter of one of my science officers. This is Seven of Nine, *Voyager's* Astrometrics officer." She turned to the two. "This... is my mother, Gretchen Janeway."

"I'm so glad my daughter thought to bring you with her. Please come in." She glanced down at Naomi. "There is a plate of snacks in the kitchen. Have Phoebe give you something along with a cup of hot chocolate."

"Thank you!" The half-Katarian girl's smile transformed her entire face and she pelted inside calling, "Pheobe!"

Janeway laughed at the girl's complete acceptance of the recreation. She watched quietly as Seven absorbed everything. "Well?"

Seven noticed the sprig of green over the doorway where Kathryn stood. So many things had happened in the last few hours. She looked over at the captain's mother and saw the older woman gently nod toward the captain. "I find your home quite beautiful," she told Gretchen. She stepped forward.

"And, if being here makes you this happy, Captain, I can not imagine why you ever went into space." Remembering B'Elanna and Tom, and Commander Chakotay's behavior, she leaned forward and kissed Janeway gently on the mouth as they stood there under the mistletoe.

Janeway pulled back surprised at Seven's words and actions. The holo of her mother touched her shoulder and she glanced up, unable to take her hands off the taller ex-Borg's shoulders.

"Go," said Gretchen softly. "Share yourself with her, Kathryn. Share yourself with someone who'll make you happy."

She didn't remember putting together this part of the program, she thought. Not even experimentally and then deleting it. She looked askance at Seven, who raised an eyebrow in return. "Seven?"

"I found the program when I was researching Christmas traditions, Captain, as you suggested."

"But you said--"

"Yes, I know what I said. And I meant it. I did not see any religious connection between this

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fantasy celebration and the holiday you showed me. As you said, it is not about that so much as it is about family... being around those you love... and..." Here Seven paused, dropping her head a little. "Those who love you."

Kathryn studied Seven, her heart thudding so hard she was positive that Seven's enhanced hearing must detect it. "Do you?" she asked softly. The answer was there, in the young woman's uncertain gray eyes going sapphire with desire.

"Then kiss her," came a happy shout. Janeway felt a covering pulled down across her hair. *Phoebe*, she thought. Then her awareness was filled with only one thing: Seven's face lowering to hers.

A blur caught her attention to the side, and a large furry mass bolted through her feet, upsetting her balance. Only Seven's firm grip on her upper arms kept her upright. The captain's long-haired Irish Setter leaped up excitedly between them, her paws and nose batting at their legs.

The captain's eyebrow raised. "Your doing?"

"Think of the program's 'enhancements' as a gift," Seven explained. "My gift to you: Kathryn Janeway."

Then Kathryn could think no more. Her senses exploded with the gentle touch of their lips once again. Caught in the caress of Seven's azure gaze, Janeway accepted the touch of their bodies, feeling whole and complete, standing there in the midst of the recreation of her family... tentatively exploring the bonds of a new love.

THE END