

Summary: Seven and Janeway had a falling out about giving up the children, and it's time for the rift to mend when a holodeck malfunction brings Janeway and Seven together.
Content Disclaimers: Takes place after the episode "Imperfection."

FRIENDS AND LOVERS

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"Seven?"

Icheb approached the woman who had helped him find his individuality when the Borg had left him, and four others, as defective. Though the others had left the ship to return to their lives among their kind, he had decided to remain aboard this ship of his rescue, the *USS Voyager*.

In his reawakened emotions he found he had become attached to the striking blonde, who served as *Voyager's* Astrometrics chief. She too, had been released from the Borg. He knew she struggled more, on occasion, than he did, with her emotions. Her eighteen years was a far cry from the eighteen months he'd spent in the Collective (most of that spent in a maturation chamber).

Seven of Nine, former Tertiary Adjunct to Unimatrix Zero-One, turned from the Astrometrics lab's horseshoe-shaped console, to note his presence. "Icheb."

Adapting a mimic of her formal posture, he too dropped his hands behind his back before making his proposal. "I have completed my assigned tasks and will be going to the holodeck for the night."

"You will not be regenerating?" she inquired. Their regeneration alcoves, necessary for the maintenance of their remaining Borg systems, were in the same location: Cargo Bay 2.

Icheb shook his head. "Commander Chakotay has helped me program a simulation of Earth's southwest North American continent region."

"The region of his ancestry," Seven accessed the relevant connection.

"Yes. I thought I would attempt what humans call 'a vacation.' A matter of research," he quickly added.

"An exemplary goal. Why have you come to inform me of this?"

Icheb fidgeted, wondering what she would think. "Would you join me on this 'camping trip'?"

"Camping?"

His face warmed with expectant pleasure and his voice was excited. "Oh yes. It's great fun! We'll get 'away from it all'. Build a campfire. Hike. Smell the fresh air! See wild animals."

In the face of Icheb's enthusiasm, Seven remained impassive, making the young man considerably more uncertain about his plans, which had sound so perfect earlier when he was discussing it with the ship's first officer.

"Why not ask Commander Chakotay to join you?" Seven asked. "He worked with you on the project. He should enjoy the results of his work."

"I asked," Icheb replied. "He said something about personnel reports and declined. Besides, he does this all the time. I want to share it with you."

Seven felt reservations fill her chest. It would only take her another 2.6 hours to complete the data on her department's efficiency. Icheb however was her responsibility, as the captain had established that early in the recovery of the young Borgs from the disabled cube. He looked rather

expectant, and she had not spent much time with him outside of their duties.

Captain Janeway would expect her to maintain her relationship with the youth, though she was uncertain she was really necessary. He seemed to have surpassed her development very quickly, outgrowing his need to seek her advice. But she wouldn't disappoint the captain if she could help it. Seven felt she had done that quite enough lately.

She turned back to the console. "I must inform the captain that I will be taking this 'vacation' with you."

"Yes! Come on, Seven. Let's get you some gear." Eager, he very nearly dragged the blonde from the Astrometrics lab.

* * *

Captain Kathryn Janeway sat in her ready room, reading and rereading the message from Seven, surprised and unexplainably disturbed by the contents. Chakotay sat with her completing the personnel reports for the next upload to Starfleet. The beep indicating a message had drawn her from their conversation as she keyed it up.

"Seven." She said to his inquisitive look. "She and Icheb are going into the holodeck. Camping."

"Sounds like fun," Chakotay said idly, still scanning one of the personnel datapadds.

"Camping and Seven?"

"I suggested it to Icheb as a way to explore what life is like on Earth."

"But Seven --"

"... is spending time with her protégé," he supplied, a suggested note of reproof in his voice.

Janeway sighed. She looked back at the note. "I wonder if she has any idea what camping is all about?"

"She'll find out." Chakotay stood, and took up the PADD they had completed. "Well, I'll go take these revisions to the various departments. And then down to the comm room for the next transmission."

"Thank you," Janeway said, watching him walk out.

Alone, she returned to the message. *So, Seven's going camping with Icheb*, her inner voice summarized. *Why do I feel left out?*

Admittedly she had not had much time lately to share with Seven. Their weekly Velocity matches had been, at one time, a very pertinent part of their time together, preceded and followed by wonderfully wide-ranging discussions on all sorts of topics.

Then the ship had run into repeated trouble with the Borg, and in its resolution, they had argued over the dispensation of the immature Borg the ship had recovered. Icheb remained because his natural family hadn't wanted him back, their plan having been to infect the Borg with a genetic virus that the young man carried. Seven and Janeway had fought over the initial issue, but when it came down to the boy's safety, they'd agreed.

Then against Seven's protests, Janeway had delivered three of the four back into the civilizations that had been their homes prior to assimilation. Including the infant.

She sighed. Seven had been upset at the departure of Mezoti, Azan and Rebi. But she had been positively livid at the return of the baby girl to her home. Their weekly velocity matches had stopped after that; Seven consistently declining repeated invitations. Janeway was certain the blonde's reason was that she didn't care to associate with the captain any longer.

They had not talked about it, or anything else, since. Kathryn, even though she knew her decision had been the correct one, still hurt enough that she had not tried to approach Seven for fear of breaking what little relationship they had left.

Seven probably did need the vacation, as Chakotay suggested. Kathryn Janeway however readily admitted that she wished the young woman had thought to invite her along.

Disturbed by the direction of her thoughts, Janeway stood and left the ready room, informing Chakotay that she would be in the Mess Hall.

"Enjoy lunch," the first officer said.

She dipped her head in rueful acknowledgment. The ship's cook, a Talaxian named Neelix, was not known for making appetizing meals though the nutrition had been verified on several occasions by the ship's Chief Medical Officer, the EMH.

* * *

The mountain pass was rocky, but traversable. When the sensation of rocks slipping under her feet occurred for the forty-eighth time, Seven silently appreciated Icheb's insistence that they change from shipboard attire to this more rugged wear. Her "hiking boots" were the only thing that kept her foothold somewhat sure.

The sun was warm enough, even though night was rapidly approaching, that Seven appreciated the pair of knee-length khaki shorts, and the loose cotton shirt which let the faint breeze circulate, keeping her cool. The only irritant was the heavy pack strapped over her shoulders, its weight continually shifting. She was also certain that the sharp edge of a utensil continually jabbed into her upper back.

Ahead of her on the path, Icheb walked confidently, dressed similarly and carrying an identical pack.

"Will we be stopping shortly?" she asked.

The young man looked toward the sun's position then scanned the horizon with a shielding hand over his eyes. "We should find a good spot to make camp soon." He paused, obviously considering something then inquired, "How are you doing, Seven?"

"I will be fine as soon as we 'make camp'." She offered him one of her oft-practiced smiles.

He almost immediately scrambled away, a small shower of rocks pelting her ankles as she followed more cautiously. "I just know you'll love this place, Seven. Come on." He led the way over the ridge.

Catching herself as she stumbled, Seven for a moment looked up and saw the western sky ablaze with color. Orange and crimson seemed to flicker against the deepening blue of the sky. "Is there a fire, Icheb?"

He looked where she pointed. "No. That's a planetary 'sunset'. Isn't it incredible?" He inhaled and began to jog down the slope.

Seven studied the sky for a long moment, finding a disturbing sensation in her chest as she realized the captain's eyes were the same blue as the sky and the highlights in her hair the same fire as the sunset. *What an odd comparison to make*, she thought, shaking her head and looking down to watch her feet as she followed Icheb's path down.

Icheb had already cleared a space, and moved a fallen log next to a ring of stones he was assembling when Seven arrived. "What are you making?" she inquired, removing her pack. Uncertain that it was for that purpose, she nevertheless gingerly sat on the log, sighing audibly as she

settled. She set the pack next to her and rubbed her shoulders.

"I'm making a fire pit." Once encircled, he began scooping a bit of the dirt out, making an indentation in the ground. "You can put your sleeping bag over there," he said, pointing to an area near the log, on the other side of the fire pit from where he was working. "Just spread it out."

Seven looked at the ties connecting what Icheb had identified as her "sleeping bag" earlier and separated it from the pack. After a moment's examination of the catches holding the bundle together, she unrolled it... right over the fire pit.

Laughing, Icheb helped her lay the cushiony rectangular sleep surface over the open ground. Then he returned to the fire preparations, taking a small bit of metal and a stone up in his hands over the assembly of moss and sticks. "The Commander showed me how to do this," he said, striking the one against the other. It took several attempts, but at last sparks jumped from the contact point and fell into the moss and sticks. Blowing judiciously, Icheb soon had a small fire consuming the moss and sticks.

"I'm going to cook some vegetables from my pack," Icheb announced.

"Cook?" Seven seemed surprised. "Did you not replicate meals to bring?"

"That's not nearly as fun, Seven. I brought supplies. But I thought we'd heat the meals the way Chakotay's people do."

"You have enjoyed your time with the commander?" Seven asked, rubbing her shoulders as the cooler night air made its presence felt.

"Yes," Icheb said simply though his gaze lit up with what Seven could only describe as excitement. He settled back after placing a small tripod over the flames with a pot he began filling with water from their canteens and vegetable bits he had collected from Neelix in the Mess Hall.

Seven sighed. "I am glad that you have found someone to spend time with you," she said quietly. "I know that my duties have kept us much apart. I am sorry for that."

Even as she said the words to Icheb, Seven realized she longed to have a similar conversation with the captain. But the older woman had not spoken to Seven since the departure of the other Borg children.

Icheb shrugged in a gesture of nonchalance. "I have missed our conversations too," he said. "But this is nice as well, don't you think?"

Seven considered that, taking in the surrounding sights and sounds. In the growing darkness identification was hard, so she turned to her other senses, finding the smells of the campfire, and the cooking food, and the heady scent of pine underlying it all surprisingly refreshing. "It is very pleasant here."

Icheb beamed at her.

Then her ears picked up sounds: chittering animals and the skitter of nails across rocks. "What is that?" she asked, looking anxiously over her shoulder.

"Probably a coyote," Icheb supplied casually. "Chakotay says the animals used to be very abundant. Now they are all but extinct."

"What are coyotes?" she asked, accepting a bowl of the soup he served and passed to her.

"They are carnivores," he said. "Eating the smaller animals that inhabit this region."

"I see." Seven smiled. Icheb truly was enjoying his time with the commander, and learning a lot of things he seemed to find interesting.

"In the morning I'll show you the plant life. And the insects, lizards and arachnids," he said enthusiastically. "The ecosystem here is fascinating."

"What of your genetic research, or Astrometrics?" Seven asked.

"This is so different from all of that," Icheb said. "It's a hobby."

"A 'hobby'?" Seven asked. "A hobby is something one does, or enjoys, in their spare time."

"Right." Icheb questioned. "Do you have any hobbies, Seven?"

"I enjoy singing with the Doctor," she said. After a moment, she added thoughtfully, "I used to enjoy Velocity with the captain."

"You haven't done those in a while, have you?" Icheb asked.

Having suddenly pictured the captain in her mind, a tightening in her chest kept Seven silent. Feeling self-conscious, she simply shook her head.

"You ought to ask the captain, or the Doctor, to share those things with you again." Icheb smiled. "Since spending time with Chakotay, I've felt more a part of the ship."

"Then," she told him. "You should continue."

Icheb smiled and both fell silent as they consumed their meal.

An ominous rumbling made him look to the sky. "Uh oh," he said, putting aside his bowl.

"What?" she asked, looking from his face to the sky and back again.

"Looks like we're in for a storm." As the clouds moved above, he added, "And probably thunder and lightning as well. We need to put up shelter." He began unpacking a collection of stakes, poles and waterproof fabric from his pack.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Erecting a cover," he said. "It's called a lean-to." He strung the tarpaulin among tree branches just at shoulder height. "Move the gear underneath while I finish the cover."

As she did, Seven felt the first raindrops strike her head and shoulders as the storm arrived. Moving more quickly she tugged her sleeping bag, and Icheb's, side by side under the covering. Then she grabbed their packs and sat beneath the cover as Icheb finished and joined her. They could not sit up fully as the covering was only a few feet off the ground, suspended from the branches. But underneath was dry.

"I'm sorry," Icheb said, resting his chin in his hands as they watched the rain.

"Why?"

"I should not have programmed the random weather."

"Is this what the weather would be like naturally?" she asked reasonably.

"Yes."

"Then do not apologize. I appreciate accuracy." She offered him an understanding smile. She felt a twinge as she realized the person who most frequently had offered *her* that smile was the captain, and again she acknowledged she missed the older woman's company.

Icheb accepted the reasoning and they sat together watching the rain. When it picked up, he suggested they just go to bed.

Seven removed her boots as Icheb demonstrated, then stretched out atop her sleeping bag at first, until Icheb showed her how to unzip it and slip inside.

"Good night, Seven."

"Good night, Icheb."

* * *

Voyager's helm beeped. The Gamma shift, commanded by Ensign Harry Kim, the Alpha shift's Ops officer, immediately went to work identifying the anomaly the sensors had detected. He was in the process of communicating with Chakotay when a wave front disrupted communications

and sent all of the Alpha shift immediate wake up calls.

Kim moved to the Ops station as soon as Tuvok, from the aft turbolift, and Chakotay from the stern turbolift, arrived on the bridge, nearly simultaneously. Only a handful of seconds passed and then Captain Janeway also appeared. Her compact vibrant presence sent energy through the rest of the early risers as she granted a quirky smile to every officer before descending into the command area and requesting: "Status report."

Kim started since his team had identified it first. "At oh-102 hours *Voyager's* sensors detected a wave front. While attempting to categorize it, the leading edge struck the forward shielding, disrupting systems."

"Which systems were hit?" she asked Chakotay, who was assessing that damage.

"Briefly communications, though that seems to be back online," the first officer responded. "Replicators were interrupted, but I think the only thing lost was an ensign's meal on deck 8."

Chakotay punched up a few more keys, but before he could report, Tuvok gave the security assessment. "Shields went down for approximately 1.5 seconds, but there was no loss of integrity on any deck."

The first officer concluded the report with the last systems. "Engineering reports only a 3.25% drop in engine efficiency. Torres reports that the holodeck systems saw a surge, but a preliminary scan reports all normal once more."

Janeway checked with Tom who had just slipped into the helm. "Any changes to our course or speed, Mr. Paris?"

"Already corrected, captain."

She settled into her chair and crossed her legs at the knees idly. "Well, it was a wake up call I'd have rather avoided," she commented to Chakotay with a low voice.

"But we're here. Might as well scan the area for interesting sights," he replied. "Maybe you can find a vacation spot," he added.

Janeway's face went still. *Seven and Icheb were in one of the holodecks.* She keyed a message to Torres's console down in Engineering.

"Check on Holodeck 1," was all it said.

* * *

Inside Holodeck One, a sharp bolt of lightning and the immediate crashing roll of thunder startled Seven out of a surprisingly sound sleep. The afternoon hike, and the anxieties of absorbing the new experience had left the blonde very exhausted. As she surged upright, she immediately assessed the conditions beyond the tarpaulin. Beside her, Icheb also awakened, a little less abruptly and a little less alarmed, but just as concerned when he saw the conditions.

"It's gotten worse," he said.

"I noticed," Seven replied dryly, just before a corner of their cover slipped from its knot and dumped a collection of water on her head. Brushing her wet hair from her face, she shifted away from the lost cover. "Perhaps we should conclude our adventure," she said.

Crestfallen, Icheb stood, careful to leave the cover over his companion. Walking toward a broad tree trunk, he called, "Computer, exit." There was no response, not even a beep acknowledged his request.

Trying again, he raised his voice, considering the noise of the storm might be causing problems with the audio pickups. "Computer, display exit."

Still nothing. "Seven!" he shouted back as a buffeting wind nearly took him off his feet. "Can you see the exit?" The former Borg's ocular enhancements were superior to his own, and he hoped she could see what he could not in the holomatrix.

Amid the windblown debris he saw Seven get to her feet. She was buffeted by the wind, but seemed steady. The instant she stepped outside the tarpaulin, her attire was soaked through to her skin. "There's something unusual about the grid," she remarked, scanning the scene with her enhanced sight. She walked straight toward a rock outcropping and reached through the image, her hand contacting likely a panel on the other side. The computer made a *fweet* of protest, and Seven stepped back, scanning as if studying the outline of a doorway. "The exit seems to be sealed shut." She reached inside her shirt, revealing the communicator still attached to her inner shirt. Icheb flushed in embarrassment, having forgotten his own.

However the communicator was not additionally helpful. Its response was hollow as it tried to connect to the holodeck's communications link into the ship-wide system. "I will have to attempt a bypass," she said.

Icheb nodded. "I'll cover you while you work."

She heard the disappointment in his voice and turned, even as she was settling to a crouch on the ground. "The malfunction is not your fault, Icheb."

He said nothing for a long moment, just retrieved the tarpaulin and shook it free of water before bracing himself over her and holding the cover out with spread arms. "Perhaps," he said noncommittally.

Finding the service panel, Seven pushed through it, only to pull back as electrical current arced from the junction. "This may be more difficult," she said.

"Are you all right?"

"I am fine," she replied, bracing herself with a cleansing breath and returning her attention to the panel.

* * *

Outside in the external entry panel, Lt. B'Elanna Torres and a team of three engineers had just removed the cover when an arc of energy fused two leads together, shocking the junior engineer who had reached for the clearly frayed junction. Backing up, holding his hand, Ensign Mitch Vero looked to Torres.

"Get to sickbay," his chief said, patting his yellow-banded shoulder. "We'll take it from here."

Nodding, his frustrated expression changed to a resigned one at Torres's reassuring smile, then he trotted toward the turbolift to sickbay.

"All right," B'Elanna said. "Let's get this thing under wraps." The female Bajoran to her left stepped forward opening the tool kit. Withdrawing a cylindrical tool with a laserpoint tip, Torres held the lamp in place as she began the process of sealing off the one conduit from the other.

* * *

Thunder and lightning continued flashing around them while Icheb's tarp managed to keep them dry. Suddenly there was a high pitched, throaty howl.

"There shouldn't be any coyotes out in this weather," Icheb said looking over his shoulder

toward the simulated ridge where the sound had originated. Another howl, this one seemed from the crest off to their right. The young Borg's head snapped in that direction, searching it quickly. His voice was shakier when he prompted, "Any progress, Seven?"

"No," she replied succinctly. She herself looked up when a deeper, darker howl sounded off to their left. "I cannot disengage the program, open the doors, nor bypass the communications link."

Grimly, Icheb nodded and his arms dropped a little as Seven came to her feet. "So what do we do?"

"We must wait for the crew to effect repairs."

"What do you think caused the disruption with the holodeck?"

"Many scenarios come to mind," she replied. "I cannot be more precise without more evidence. Let's find better shelter."

Gathering up their materials, Seven and Icheb started toward the right ridge, following along the wall, headed, she could see, toward another entryway. But she also hoped the simulated terrain would provide caves or rock formations that would provide better cover from the storm.

As they started up the ridge, constantly brushing away the water cascading over their features, the wind's howls shrieked around them and the animal-like cries also filled the air. Thunder erupted, but there was no associated eruption of lightning. And it didn't cease. In fact it was getting louder... closer.

She turned, and realized that amid the rain there was a rapidly approaching cloud of dust swirling around something. It's approach felt primeval, ominous... menacing. Something in her collective memory sent a surge of primal fear through her body, adrenaline rising in a rush... *fight or flight?*

"Seven! Look out!" Icheb rushed Seven as she stood rooted to the spot, completely unaware of the drenching rain, eyes fixed on the approaching cloud.

As she went down in the dirt under Icheb's flying body weight, Seven looked up to see figures becoming identifiable in the swirling mass. Four riders on horseback, in grotesque attire, horns and sharply defined spikes springing from masks and armored bodies, surged across the terrain.

Various weapons were held at the ready in their iron-armored fists. Massive arms waved swords with viciously jagged edges, spiked pikes and javelins. Stuck in loops on each saddle flags swept out, symbols of the riders clear on each one.

Seven's memory called their meanings up from myth, and she scrambled to her feet, uncontrollable fear filling her veins with icy dread. *War, Famine, Pestilence and... Death.*

The horses and riders thundered nearer, their faces deadly and clear. Foam sprayed from the muzzles of some of the horses, and the demons' blood red eyes tracked her across the rocky ground. Blackness welled up from their hearts and souls, etched in their flayed features.

"No!" Terror filled her voice unwillingly and Seven screamed, covering instinctively as the horses' massive hooves, nearly the size of her head, pounded the rocks into dust around her. The foursome drew up, spinning as she and Icheb scrambled again to their feet.

Dropping everything, they tracked over the ground, hearts pounding in their ears nearly drowning out the hooves eating up the distance between them and their pursuers. Unholy screams filled the air around them.

Seven stumbled, then regained her footing. Beside her, Icheb reached out to help, only to fall himself. She reached out in reflex and dragged him along for several steps. "Run!" she ordered as a battle axe the size of her entire body cut horizontally through the air scant millimeters above

the top of her head.

He regained his footing and she let him go. Over the roar of the wind, their pursuers and the pelting blindness of the rain, both missed the swish of a door.

Blinding light forced her arms up in front of her eyes and she took a leap as she felt the hooves of Death's horse break the airflow behind her.

* * *

Captain Janeway received the word from Torres during the repairs that she had identified Seven and Icheb inside, bio-readings erratic. She was down in a flash, concern for her crewmembers easily readable when she came across the Doctor in the passageway leading to the holodeck entrance.

"I can't reach them inside," Torres said before Janeway could ask. "But we should have the doors open in another minute."

"Let's do it," the captain ordered. She stepped back from where she'd gotten a look at the readouts from inside the holodeck and crossed her arms in a move of reassurance over her own chest, grasping her forearms to hold herself back from the doors. *What the hell is going on in there?* She pinched her upper arms trying to keep her hand from slapping at her comm badge. *Seven! Are you all right?*

Torres and her engineer finally reached the troublesome circuit and shorted it to force the doors open. The massive portals swished aside and those in the corridor had only a split second to see the dark swirling storm inside before two figures were clear, running at them.

Janeway moved toward the door when she spotted Seven. Behind the young woman, she only vaguely identified a massive pursuer. As it hit the edge of the hologrid it vanished. Seven's leap took the captain off her feet. Both women hit the deck in the corridor and Icheb tripped at the holodeck entrance, collapsing into the surprised grasp of the Chief Engineer.

"Captain!" Icheb called out, breathless.

Seven burrowed into a soft shoulder and shook uncontrollably in her captain's grasp. Instinct more than anything brought Janeway's arms up and around the woman, whose weight still pinned her to the deck. She found her fingers stroking through the blonde's disarrayed hair as she felt tears wet her throat. Over the Borg's head, Janeway caught Torres' eye as the Chief Engineer bent down to offer help up for someone.

Not taking B'Elanna's hand immediately, Janeway pinned the half-Klingon with a grim look. "Lt. Torres." She spoke calmly though her heart was hammering in her chest.

The engineer swallowed but evenly responded, "Yes, ma'am?"

"I want the next packet to the Alpha quadrant to include a message to Dr. Brahms."

"About what?" Torres asked as Janeway finally grabbed her hand and the two women on the floor came up to a sitting position.

"I want the holodeck circuits isolated and set to *end program* in the event of any malfunction." The captain's voice could have cut through duranium. Subconsciously Seven surged closer to the reassuring presence.

"Yes, ma'am," Torres acknowledged formally.

"That will be all," Janeway commanded. The shortness of the tone ordered everyone gone but she added anyway, "You can repair this later. Dismissed."

The Doctor escorted Icheb to sickbay for a few scans. "Though it looks like all you received

was a good drenching," he said aloud to both Icheb and Seven, who looked up at him, shock still dimming her blue eyes.

The trio from Engineering departed, taking their toolkit with them, and soon Seven and Janeway were the only ones left in the corridor by the open doors where Torres had finally managed to pull the circuits, concluding the program within.

Seven felt the painful fear ease off the pressure on her chest and she pulled back from the captain's embrace. In place of the fear, she found embarrassment rising from her behavior. Ruefully, she recalled knocking the smaller woman to the deck. "My apologies, captain."

Brushing at her uniform's wrinkles, Janeway shrugged. "That's all right, Seven." She studied the young woman. "Are you all right? Do you need to see the Doctor?"

"I am functioning," the former Borg said with a deep breath. "Your arrival was most timely."

"What happened in there?" Janeway asked. "We had readings that the holodeck had been disrupted, but until Torres opened the doors we couldn't get any detail on what was going on inside."

"Icheb's 'camping trip' ran into a bit of... bad weather," Seven said simply.

"What were you running from?" Janeway asked.

Seven shivered as she recalled the Riders' faces. "I believe mythology referred to them as the Four Horsemen."

Janeway gave an involuntary shiver herself; it must be a biological memory because the concept of those mythological demons even gave her the willies, she realized. She took a cleansing breath and asked, "Did you enjoy your vacation at least up until that point?"

"The chance to spend time with a friend was rewarding," Seven acknowledged. She looked toward the captain. "I missed that."

Janeway realized that the subject had shifted to their estrangement. She acknowledged it with a rueful nod. She opened the connection with her own admission. "I've missed it too." She leaned back against the corridor wall and looked up into Seven's features. Noticing the wet shine to Seven's cheeks she added, "Perhaps we can talk after you've cleaned up?"

Seven's slow and relieved smile was a welcome sight to the captain. "I would like that," she said, sounding almost shy.

The captain pushed off the wall and brushed a hand across Seven's near elbow offering reassurance. "Come on." It wasn't until they were walking that she wondered where they ought to go. Seven's cargo bay had no facilities. Which only left one place.

"Where are we going?" Seven asked as she followed a step behind.

"I guess... my quarters," the captain said, stepping into the opening turbolift. Seven paused outside the turbolift and studied the other woman's expressive features. The wait was long enough that Janeway had to call, "Computer, halt 'lift.'" She met Seven's gaze unflinching, suddenly assured, by Seven's very uncertainty, that this was the right way to mend their rift. She flashed a brilliant smile showing her teeth. "Come on."

Seven shivered when their eyes met, and felt her heart rate pick up giving her skin a deep blush. When she stepped into the lift the confined space brought her the captain's scent. With insight she realized the older woman was just as keyed to their close proximity.

Their past differences of opinion slipped away as Seven stood next to Janeway. The captain resumed the turbolift with a husky, "Deck 3. Captain's quarters." Her chest hammered with unidentifiable emotions, somewhat like relief, anxiety, and happiness all rolled together. Her palms were warm, her heart racing, and her breathing deep.

The lift rose, filling every fiber of their bodies with a giddy lightness in their stomachs and

each dared no direct looks to the other. As the lift passed deck four, Seven was shocked almost breathless by the feel of Janeway's hand slipping into hers. She stole a glance at the older woman and admired the smooth profile. Then she caught the swallow rippling down the captain's throat. Feeling a surge in her self-assurance, Seven gave a gentle squeeze to the delicate fingers caught in her right hand.

Their hands parted as the turbolift doors opened, and Seven followed Janeway the short distance through the corridor to the captain's quarters.

Captain's Quarters...

Inside, Kathryn was uncertain exactly what to do, so she fell back on the manners drummed into her from very young. "What can I get you?"

"The sonic shower will be sufficient," Seven replied. The captain's quarters reflected the captain's personality, she thought, admiring the efficient minimalist elegance.

"You might prefer the hydro setting after your escapade." Janeway directed, "Right through there. Anything I can offer you to eat?"

Seven realized the time was still very early in the morning, but she was rather hungry. "You choose," she suggested.

Janeway's smile was a pleasure to see. "All right. Go on. I'll have it on the table when you come out."

With a nod, Seven disappeared into the ensuite. Kathryn moved to the replicator, considering the menu as she heard the shower start. Immediately a vision of Seven standing naked under the water flooded Janeway's mind. Shaking her head to clear it, she selected a fruit and vegetable plate, a small jug of tangelo juice, and a coffee for herself. She had a distinctly fuzzy feeling in her head and wanted her balance back.

When the requested food materialized, she carried it to the table and picked up her coffee mug, focusing on the full flavor sliding over her tongue and down her throat settling warmly in her stomach. She found a measure of calm as she strode to the windows and contemplated the streaking stars.

Footfalls behind her prompted her to turn and she saw Seven of Nine emerging from the ensuite with a towel in her hands, rubbing it through her tumble of damp white gold hair. When her head came up and their eyes met, Seven offered a shy look.

"How do you feel?" Janeway asked, directing Seven to sit opposite her at the table.

"Better. Thank you."

"You're welcome." She had to direct her eyes away from the opening of Seven's robe, disturbed by the glowing skin revealed by the loose attire. "A robe?"

"Your replicator did not have access to my biosuit's pattern," Seven said.

Uncertain what to say, Janeway occupied herself with consuming several pieces of fruit.

Seven watched her for a moment, then reached out and snagged a strawberry, enjoying the sweet flavor bursting on her tongue. Chewing quietly, she felt the silence between them like a balm, healing their relationship in unspoken ways.

When Janeway finally spoke, Seven realized she had made the connection with Kathryn Janeway rather than the captain. The older woman's voice was soft. "How's the food?"

"Very good."

"Good."

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Seven picked up a piece of cantaloupe and examined it briefly, putting her thoughts in order before speaking. "Captain, I have been giving some thought to the past several weeks."

After a moment, Janeway revealed, "So have I." She looked from the carrot she had been nibbling up to Seven. "I am sorry that we couldn't agree."

"Watching Icheb today," Seven said carefully. "I believe I understand what you hoped for the other children."

"Oh?"

"We could have raised the children, but the right partnership is more important to their well-being."

"How did you come to that conclusion?"

"Today with Icheb. I am no longer the most important person in his life."

"Does that bother you?"

"I thought it would, but now I find I am more relieved that he has someone he is close to. Whether it is me or another."

Janeway nodded. "That's a big realization."

"That made me realize something else," Seven went on. The quality of Seven's voice, breathy, almost non-existent in its uncertainties, brought Kathryn's eyes up to hers. "The relationship I consider most valuable... is the one I have... with you."

The captain's look softened incredibly, and her eyes shined with moisture. Miraculously for Janeway's composure no tears fell. The captain blinked and collected herself before speaking. "I..." she said haltingly. "I feel the same way."

Seven could see the statement was completely heartfelt on the older woman's behalf.

"I'm sorry that I didn't try to mend things sooner," Kathryn went on.

"I was very angry," Seven admitted.

"So was I."

The two women looked up from their food and shared rueful expressions. "Perhaps we should remember that in the future."

Kathryn's relief bubbled over into a soft chuckle. Their conflict was past. As she picked up and shifted her fork to her other hand, she changed the subject. "Will you tell me about your camping trip?"

Seven nibbled idly, only mildly hungry any longer. She realized her behavior was clearly indicative of nervousness, but she found the pleasure of being in Kathryn's presence again overriding that at the same time. "What...would you like to know?"

Kathryn was pleased she and Seven slipped back so easily into their conversations. *I really have missed these.* "I've never been to the area myself. Did you like it?"

"The storms are... daunting," Seven said. "But the scenery Icheb showed me beforehand was very beautiful." Seven realized that Janeway's eyes were once again the color of that deep blue sky, and the cabin lighting brought out the sunset colors in her hair. She surprised herself by voicing her thoughts aloud, "As are you."

The soft look was back in the captain's eyes surprising Seven even more. "Seven?" Janeway started to push back from the table.

Seven's hand reached quickly across the space separating them and grasped the other woman's wrist. "Captain, please. Don't go. I believe that I... am in love with you." As she said the words, she realized they were a true assessment of her feelings for the older woman. Furthermore she realized that she had felt this way for quite some time. The conflicting emotional responses

seemed to all make sense now. Where their hands touched, Seven felt their heartbeats echoing each other, the captain's as rapid as her own.

Janeway sipped in a startled gasp as the admission hung in the air between them. Seven tugged as the captain came shakily to her feet. Coming to her own feet, she closed the distance between them alongside the table. Focused on the blue eyes awash with emotion, Seven brought them together, bodies instantly melding as incomprehensible heat engulfed her stomach, and lower. Since she could no longer see the shorter woman's face, breathing instead the sweet scent of clean auburn hair, Seven for the first time in her life gambled and asked, "Please... say something... Kathryn?"

There was an indrawn breath and then Kathryn Janeway ended speculation. "I love you too." The words were husky, breathed against the smooth skin of Seven's throat, almost sending the young woman's heart pounding out of her chest. But then the auburn head tipped back and instinct drew their mouths together for their first kiss.

Kathryn's head swam with the upswelling emotions of her heart as she relaxed into Seven's strong embrace. The words she had spoken were pure and true and the power of healing they granted flooded her with assurance. The pain of their separation had made her realize that she never wanted that to ever happen again.

Their bodies fell together on the couch cushions -- Seven surprisingly skillful in softening their landing. Kathryn inhaled, catching the younger woman's clean scent in her nostrils and felt the flame of passion scorch her chest from inside out. She nudged Seven away from nibbling on her throat. Pressing her hands to either side of Seven's face, she offered, "I think we should go into the bedroom."

Seven nodded, and backed up, scooping Janeway into her arms, lifting the compact woman easily. Janeway shivered at the uncontrollable sensation that she was about to fall. "Um, Seven... I don't know what you've been reading, but I'd rather walk."

Bemused, the captain found herself abruptly put on her feet. With a gentle touch on the blonde's arm and then slipping her fingers among Seven's, Kathryn led the way to the bedroom.

She stopped at the bed's side and turned to face the younger woman. With slow deliberate caresses, Kathryn memorized the blonde's porcelain features with her fingers, noting the expectation, and the fringe of uncertainty, and too, the glow of adoration beaming at her from cornflower blue eyes. Seven's hands moved in steady circles over her hips and stomach, making her muscles contract in pleasant response. Seven's fingers paused on the discovered zipper on the red-shouldered overtunic. "Go ahead," Kathryn granted permission. She let the fabric slide from her arms then brought her hands back to Seven's cheeks.

The Borg's long fingers, one hand cool, encased in a metal webbing, the other hot and human, slipped under the captain's waistband. "You feel... amazing," Seven marveled, tugging at the fabric as she caressed the woman's hips.

Soon they stood nude before one another. Touches followed gazes as they absorbed each other's appearance. Seven was certain she had never seen a form so delicate, yet innately strong, and Kathryn was positive she had never seen a form so powerful yet sleek. Each noted the mars of life etched in their skin, and kisses were used as balm over scars and Borg implants.

Kathryn tucked herself backward onto the bed, reaching out as Seven slid into her arms. Their mouths joined as their naked bodies touched for the first time. Heat erupted in Kathryn's stomach at the softness of Seven's breasts pressing against hers. She squirmed, determined to hold herself in check long enough to show Seven how much she was loved.

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The Borg was equally driven, and they separated only enough to look their fill of one another once more. Seven's hands and eyes were drawn to the dusting of freckles at Kathryn's shoulders, as Kathryn's hands moved over Seven's voluptuous curves.

Fingers gradually slipped lower, the two curling into one another intimately. Seven pulled Kathryn onto her lap as their fingers followed instinct to find one another's heated centers. Their eyes locked together -- the blue of ocean and the blue of sky, and their other hands joined in a mutually steadying grip. The women took possession of the sensations, giving and receiving in abundance.

The captain's response hit her hard, and first, probably because of her knowledge of the sensations and willingness to experience them, with Seven, at this time. Though her long period of celibacy made it harder, stronger, and more deeply affecting. But she remained tucked in Seven's embrace, her fingers deep in the younger woman's virgin passage marveling at the velvet flesh around her fingertips. She stroked, and wrapped her arm around Seven's neck as the taller woman's eyes closed.

Whispering words of devotion Kathryn felt the involuntary muscles inside Seven begin to squeeze rhythmically. "I love you," she said, steady but gentle in her strokes.

The blonde's head pushed into Janeway's shoulder and Kathryn felt the Borg's breathing hitch. She changed her motion, nudging the knot of flesh at the top of the young woman's crease. Seven crossed over into bliss, an almost pained groan escaping her full lips. The younger woman's inner muscles pulsated in increasingly faster rhythm until there was a bearing down that seemed to suck on her fingers.

"Kath-ryn!" Seven's voice broke in her passion and Kathryn wrapped her arm around the shaking young woman, pressing soothing kisses to her brow.

Between Seven's panting breaths, Kathryn withdrew tenderly from the young woman's passage. The throbbing sensation within Seven's channel had been unspeakably intimate, making her feel as if the young woman's fulfillment had been not only of her making, but shared as well. Her own inner walls continued to throb as they eased together, sweat-damp flesh melding as their bodies relaxed. Idle caresses followed them both into a half-sleep state.

Seven kissed Kathryn's forehead. "Can lovers still be friends," she asked quietly.

Kathryn stretched and settled even more close. "I wouldn't have it any other way," she replied tenderly, kissing the starburst shape of an implant cradled in the hollow of Seven's collarbone.

THE END