

Summary: Janeway doesn't like the Doctor's diagnosis of Seven's headaches as an explanation for the problems of Seven missing duty in "Human Error"

Content Disclaimers: This story takes place on the heels of the episode Human Error (season 7).

HEADACHES

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Chapter One

"A headache?" Captain Kathryn Janeway paused in her reading, frowning over the Doctor's report. "He treated her for headaches?"

Putting aside the fact that headaches were so minor most people treated them without the Doctor's assistance, Janeway could not believe that *Voyager's* EMH would dismiss headaches in this particular individual with a terse single line in his report.

She scanned the entry again and shook her head: *At 1100 hours, Seven of Nine reported with a headache. I treated it and released her to duties.* She noted the stardate next to the hours and considered Seven's movements through that time.

"This was when she was in the holodeck so much," Janeway thought abruptly.

She recalled her own conversation with the former Borg following Seven's lapse in duties which endangered the ship. Janeway had investigated Seven's whereabouts when she wasn't at her post, then called the young woman into her office:

Hands tucked behind her back, head down, Seven shifted from foot to foot on the lower deck of the captain's Ready Room. On the upper deck, leaning on the railing Janeway tapped the small PADD in her hands against her thigh, trying to figure out what to say. "49 hours in the last 4 days? Seven, is there something you need to tell me?"

"I have been conducting research," she said, glancing up at Janeway standing on the risen portion of the deck, then quickly looking away. "On a new gravimetric array. I believe it will get Voyager home."

My God, Janeway thought, she's lying to me. With absolute clarity, Janeway knew it was true. But Seven had never lied to her. Ever. What the hell is going on here? She decided to put the young woman to a test. "It doesn't excuse you from duty, Seven. But... the research sounds interesting. Perhaps you'll share it with me?"

Seven balked, as Janeway had guessed she would. "I... Some other time perhaps." Janeway held Seven's gaze for a longer moment, silently pleading with her to come clean. Seven finally shook her head, breaking the contact and turned on her heel, leaving the room.

Her breath whooshed out as Janeway leaned forward slapping her hands on the railing. Tuvok's appearance with the security report following their emergence from the alien artillery field, preventing her further investigation of the situation with the young woman.

What happened in that damned holodeck program? Was the headache the Doctor treated related? Seven wasn't behaving as Janeway had become accustomed. Her instinct, the one thing in the Delta Quadrant the last seven years that Kathryn had learned never to ignore, screamed

that she had to find out what was wrong.

"Doctor?" Janeway frowned when she did not immediately locate the Doctor, *Voyager's* Emergency Medical Hologram that had been serving as Chief Medical Officer for the last seven years since the death of the humanoid complement she had originally signed aboard.

There have been a lot of adjustments on this trip, she thought. Nearly three years ago, she finally had come to realize that the Doctor was probably as sentient as anyone else aboard, having surpassed his original programming due to circumstances beyond any of their control. He had changed as much, or perhaps more, than anyone else aboard, because of their predicament.

And apparently he had decided to take a nap. Hands on her hips she angled her head up. "Computer, activate EMH."

The Doctor shimmered into existence about a meter from her position in the middle of sickbay. "Please state the nature of the medical emergency."

She sighed. Then again, some things never change. "I have a few questions about the report you filed this morning."

"Of course, captain. Ensign Hickman's broken leg was routine. Just a few passes with the bone knitter..."

"I'm not here about Ensign Hickman, though I'm glad she'll be fine." She gestured him toward his office. "I'd prefer to talk about your entry regarding Seven of Nine." He paused in following her. *Something's up*, she thought, looking back at him. "Doctor?"

"Pardon me. Just thinking. Of course. What would you like to ask?"

"Tell me about Seven's visit. What did she come in for?"

"A headache."

"That's what you treated her for. But why did she come here? What were her initial complaints?"

He didn't answer right away. She pressed again. "Doctor, I just called her on the carpet for not being at her post when she should have been. Instead she spent 49 hours of the last four days in holodeck 2. I want to know... when she came here... what symptoms she was complaining of."

"Isn't the situation resolved? She hasn't been late for any shifts since has she?"

"No, Doctor, and I'm going to assure myself it won't happen again. Just tell me what happened."

"I don't see how it would affect her performance. She came in complaining of pain in her head. Classic stress reaction. You've suffered it yourself."

"Had she just come from the holodeck?"

The Doctor shrugged. "I have no idea."

"I checked. According to the time of your report, she showed up here less than 3 minutes after leaving Holodeck 2."

"I see. And you think somehow the two are connected? Tell me, captain, how often are your headaches directly related to what you were just doing? That's the funny thing with them you know."

Doctor," she interrupted his slowly brightening reply with a sharp, dark look. "I could dig through your program myself, but I'd rather not. I'm ordering you to tell me exactly what ailment Seven came here complaining of."

"She won't like it. She requested doctor-patient confidentiality."

"Seven is my responsibility, Doctor. If she's doing herself harm, I have to know about it now. Show me her scans."

The Doctor looked absolutely morbid, his eyes narrowing and his lips turning down. Janeway's heartbeat thrummed strongly in her throat and she swallowed back the discomfort. *I have to know*, she bolstered herself and nodded tightly at him. "You can sit at my desk," he said, pulling out the chair.

Gripping the arms she lowered herself down as he swiveled the deskPADD toward her. He tapped a series of keys, disengaging the lock he had established, and brought up the entire file. "You know almost as much about Seven's physiology as I do," he predicated. "Her cortical node suffered another partial cascade failure."

Janeway pointed at where she was currently was reading. "But this first visit suggests she was fine... at least mostly. The readings on the node straightened out quickly enough after your injection." She tapped the screen over the time index. "This was only the first of her visits. What else happened?"

"Keep reading." She turned away and did as requested while the Doctor stood behind her arms crossed over his chest.

The scan results painted an innocuous picture at first. Seven's heart rate was up. Then her adrenal system was up. By the second day, when she reported to the Doctor complaining of "muscular discomfort", her immune system was clearly depressed after two days not regenerating. Lactic acid had built up in Seven's muscles more quickly than Janeway would have expected, but a treatment to reduce the condition was successful.

On the desk, next to the PADD, Janeway's hands slowly tightened into a fist, frustration that Seven would hide all this from her growing by the minute. Then she came across the second time period when Seven should have been at her post but was instead in the holodeck. It was a very long stretch of time... and ended with the Doctor being summoned to the holodeck by Seven's fading voice.

"Medical... emergency. Holodeck... two."

Janeway felt her body tighten, hearing the call for help as if it was just happening. She looked up at the Doctor. "You found her in the holodeck?"

"Unconscious. And the cortical node was in the midst of a cascade failure."

"Why didn't you call me?"

"I was busy. It took almost an hour to stabilize her higher brain functions and when she came to, she requested confidentiality."

"What was she doing in the holodeck? What did you find, Doctor?"

"She was exploring the emotional contexts of several social situations," he said without elaboration.

"What sort of situations? There are dozens available on *Voyager* every day."

"She chose to practice first."

"And it blew out her cortical node? What sort of experiences can do that, Doctor? Seven's been through dozens of trying situations..."

"Not like these."

"Explain." He remained silent. She challenged, "Am I going to have to go to the holodeck myself?"

"I can't... You'll have to ask Seven, Captain. It isn't my place."

"Where is she?"

"In her alcove regenerating. I ordered her there at the close of her last shift."

She looked askance at him. Another thing he had neglected to tell her. He shook his head.

"All right, Doctor. I'll talk to Seven."

"Please, be careful, Captain. She... refused to allow me to try fixing the malfunction. So... she's... she could be hurt."

"I would never harm Seven."

"It appears to be a Borg failsafe, Captain. Strong emotions will cause a fatal cascade and her higher brain functions will shut down. A 'restraining' leash on Borg who might otherwise try to leave the Collective."

"Absurd. Axum, and the rest had no such failsafe."

"We don't know that," the Doctor pointed out. "They were protected in the virtual reality of Unimatrix Zero."

"But Seven..." Janeway felt her throat tighten. She remembered Seven's obvious pleasure, and her own, in the meal the former Borg had taken pains to prepare and serve to herself, Chakotay, B'Elanna and Tom. For the young woman to be denied all that for all of her future... "She's experienced emotions before."

"Apparently nothing this intensely."

She remembered Seven's fear in facing her assimilation memories when *Voyager* flew close by the final resting place of her parents' ship the *Raven*. "There has to be more to it. Another vinculum in the proximity or an interference ..."

He held up his hands. "Talk to Seven, Captain. I cannot help you any further."

Chapter Two

The cargo bay was dark, uninviting. Since his act of giving up his cortical implant to save Seven when her own failed a few months earlier, Icheb had been able to spend nearly no time at all in the "Borg" home. The captain had assigned him quarters on deck 8, where he bunked with two of the younger male astrometrics crewmembers. A way to grant him companionship, she thought, knowing how hard it was on Seven to be alone all the time.

The captain's entry went unremarked by the cargo bay's remaining occupant. Seven of Nine stood, appearing inanimate under the swirling greenish lighting of the monitoring equipment. Janeway had been here before many times over the years, to ponder the actions that had brought Seven aboard the ship, to encourage the Borg to accept yet another aspect of her humanity, and to address questions Seven's limited experience could not answer. Janeway thought solemnly about the punishments she had meted here too.

Despite all that, Seven was still struggling. Still alone. Janeway reached out, checking her need to touch the Borg's shoulder in reassurance. *I thought I was doing the right thing*, Kathryn thought. *You have to be one of the few things that wasn't a mistake.*

She thought of the Borg Queen and had a focus for her anger. *You're not going to win*, Kathryn thought, tossing down the imaginary gauntlet. *I got her back from you once, and I intend to keep her safe from you.*

Unlike a kidnapping however bizarrely compelled, Kathryn acknowledged this failsafe was more insidious. Without being permitted to indulge in her emotions, Seven would remain an outcast among humans.

Then she looked up at Seven as a connection forming in her thoughts. *Compelled?* The Doctor said that Seven had refused to permit him to treat her. Granted the procedure probably

would have been highly experimental, but Seven's flat refusal smacked of fear. The same fear Janeway had encouraged Seven to conquer when they encountered Arturis and the ship that would take them home. Scared to face millions of individuals Seven had stubbornly requested to be left behind. She'd

challenged Seven about that in the Astrometrics lab, but Seven had flatly denied it.

Until, trapped on Arturis' ship, the way home revealed to be a lie, and assimilation by the Borg looming in their immediate future...

"We'd better think of something. We come face-to-face with your former family in less than an hour and that's one reunion I'd like to miss--unless you're looking forward to rejoining the Collective," Janeway said, praying Seven wanted what she did.

There was a long pause, and Janeway stopped moving. "I do not believe I am." Seven's voice was half-hesitation, half-surprised.

Janeway couldn't contain the smirk as she walked toward the forcefield again. "Not the ringing opposition I was hoping for, but I'll take it." She considered the barrier.

Seven had accepted the task, and allowed Janeway to adjust her bioelectric field. Kathryn remembered the feel of that shoulder under her palm now. The strength, the tautness from fear, and as the procedure had continued, Seven's gradual relaxation, until, when she finally pulled away, task complete, she was assured Seven's fears were gone.

She looked up at Seven's face, a mask now even more than it had been then, for the young woman's thoughts and feelings. "Are you afraid again?" she whispered, not sure how to help this time.

If anything, Janeway had encountered Seven of Nine's fear most often. In the aftermath of her severance from the Collective, that, above all other emotions, had manifested itself and most violently...

Janeway had entered the brig, to try and communicate once again bearing new information. The dataPADD in her hand felt fragile and she only hoped she was doing the right thing. Seeing Seven's head swivel toward her once then turn away and practically huddle against the back wall of the cell, Janeway felt her own spine straighten a bit. She started toward the forcefield when Seven's voice, hollow and pained, stopped her.

"My designation is Seven of Nine--but the others are gone. Designations are no longer relevant. I am...one."

"Yes, you are."

"But I cannot function this way. Alone." Seven's shoulders huddled further, and Kathryn felt the urge to comfort the dangerous woman.

"You're not alone; I'm here to help you."

"If that's true, you won't do this to me. Take me back to my own kind."

"You are with your own kind--humans."

"I don't remember being human. I don't know what it is to be human!" Seven's body racked with the force of tears she could not shed. Janeway's throat choked up in empathy.

Janeway flipped the data padd around in her hand and walked to the brig controls.

"What are you doing?" Seven asked, her body stiffening as if she was being attacked. Janeway felt a smirk try to make it on her face and held it at bay. Seven's reaction, though unnecessary, was purely... human.

"I'm coming in." Janeway tapped at the controls and received answering chirps.

"I'll kill you," Seven hissed.

Janeway's heart had stopped for a telling beat. She could you know, her inner voice told her. She locked her gaze on Seven of Nine and found more fear than defiance. "I don't think you will," she predicted finally, then completed the unlock code as Seven stared at her.

Ayala drew his weapon and advanced, but Janeway raised a hand to stop his intervention. Ayala stopped. Janeway passed through the entryway, slowly, keeping a wide berth between herself and the young Borg. She presented the padd at arm's length, for Seven to see.

"Do you remember her?" Kathryn had asked, displaying the image of a smiling blonde girl about five years old. "Her name was Annika Hansen. She was born on stardate 25479 at the Tendara colony."

Seven of Nine stared at the picture. Kathryn begged she was getting through to that little girl inside. Judiciously she checked Seven's body language and found it stiff, but not threatening. She went on.

"There's still a lot we don't know about her. Did she have any siblings? Who were her friends? Where did she go to school? What was her favorite color?" By now, Janeway was almost shoulder to shoulder with Seven, who stared at the picture, clearly lost in thought.

She should have caught the movement. Seven had been so still, but she hadn't. Instead she had been caught off guard, disarmed by the pain she could see in the depths of frightened, and frightening, blue eyes. A low growl reached a crescendo as Seven shouted, "Irrelevant!" She backhanded the padd out of Janeway's grasp.

The captain took a few quick steps backward. Ayala, outside the cell, aimed his phaser. "Take me back to the Borg." Seven's demand came out as a sharp plea.

"I can't do that."

"So...quiet! One voice..." Seven hunched over grabbing her head.

"One voice can be stronger than a thousand voices. Your mind is independent now with its own unique identity."

"You are forcing that identity upon me; it's not mine!"

"Oh yes it is!" Janeway says with quiet force. "I'm just giving you back what was stolen from you. The existence you were denied; the child who never had a chance. That life is yours to live now!" Janeway loomed over Seven.

"I don't want that life!"

"It's what you are," Janeway rasped. "Don't resist it!"

"No!!!" Seven argued, and with one move focused all her anger on Janeway, rising fast and slamming hard into her, driving them both into the wall, stealing Janeway's breath. Janeway felt shock and pain, and remained still for several seconds.

But the fight has now utterly fled from Seven of Nine, who staggered away to her knees. Janeway caught her up, and bore her to the brig's bed

"No," Seven gasped in anguish, as Janeway held her tightly by the waist and shoulder, giving her all the support she dared as the fury and frustration of the Borg's dashed existence emptied out in a torrent of grief.

Kathryn had seen that fear give into anger at other times too. So, why is she just accepting this now, Janeway pondered. Why just give up?

Unable to find an answer in Seven's regenerative pose, Janeway sank to the dais, to await the end of the cycle, determined to ask. And to offer her help once again.

* * *

"Regeneration cycle complete." The computer's low voice filtered into Seven's consciousness which was at one moment inactive and in the next instant, fully engaged. Her foot slid forward, hitting something blocking the dais.

Looking down she saw the captain deeply asleep, half-curved into the structure, unmoved by Seven's foot impacting her thigh. Wondering if the captain had been damaged in some way, Seven crouched and reached for the woman's shoulder to move her head for examination.

Bzzt. Seven froze, looked at her hand on the captain's shoulder then her arm as if she had never seen them before. Then she happened to look back at the captain's face, noting the pale cheeks and relaxed features.

Bzzt.

What the doctor had termed a 'headache' throbbed distressingly over her right ear; her cortical node. She started to rise to obtain a tricorder as well as backing away from the other woman's proximity, afraid her malfunction would cause her to harm the captain. The combination of motions in her discomfort proved considerably more difficult than normal. She stumbled, hitting her back and rear on the dais and supports with resounding thumps.

Why on earth was she having a reaction to seeing the captain? Feeling as though her limbs were frozen in place, Seven watched Janeway, awakened by the Borg's clumsiness, blink, sit up and stretch.

Her eyes went wide at meeting Janeway's gaze. She swallowed wishing the incessant buzzing would stop. She saw Janeway's mouth move and fought against her disability to determine what was being said.

"Seven? Are you all right?" Janeway scrambled to her feet, offering a hand out.

"You... I... tripped..." Seven's cortical node sent a shock of electrical current through her brain stem. She grasped her head and took several slow deep breaths to edge her way around the pain.

"I apologize. I wanted to be here when you awakened. I didn't think I'd fall asleep." After brushing at her hair with her fingers, Janeway once again reached out for Seven's hand.

Gasping for breath, and afraid of blacking out from the node's failsafe, Seven carefully shook her head, put Janeway's presence carefully from her mind for the moment, and got to her feet on her own. "I... am... fine," she bit out each word caustically.

"The Doctor says you're not fine. But that you won't let him treat you. Why not?" Janeway's hand was suddenly on Seven's left shoulder and the Borg felt the heat of it like a brand. "Why didn't you tell me something was wrong?"

"Captain, it is... personal," Seven ground out. "I have promised that my duty will not be affected. That should be enough."

"It isn't."

Seven felt the hand on her shoulder squeeze. *Hadn't she shaken it off already? Sensation burned into her stomach from her shoulder.* She moved against the touch now, but Janeway would not let go. "Let go."

"No."

"I have made my decision."

"Out of fear."

"No." Seven tried desperately to keep her voice even but could only restrain the urge to yell over the buzzing in her head. "A logical concern for the Doctor's inexperience."

"You can't go on without access to your emotions, Seven!"

"I will adapt." Janeway stepped back, and Seven recognized shock clearly on the smaller woman's face. "It is what you would want me to do, is it not?"

"So... our friendship doesn't matter to you any more?"

An image of Janeway standing before her, the two of them conversing quietly, touched Seven's mind. She uttered the same words as in the holodeck. "I am grateful for your guidance."

"But you don't want it any more?" Janeway looked stricken. "What else can I offer? I can't stand by and watch you do this to yourself."

Seven winced, but was uncertain whether it was from the pain generated by her cortical node, or the clearly pained look on the captain's face. She rested her left hand against her alcove then noted she was doing so and pulled her hand off quickly. "I cannot survive without the node."

"So let the Doctor find a way to remove the rest of the implants that utilize it."

Recalling the holographic Chakotay's words of admonition, she utilized them now in her response. "You believe that I am hiding behind the order. Borg order."

"Aren't you?"

"The failsafe was designed to cause drones to self-destruct, Captain."

"You're not going to die."

"You don't know that!" Janeway's hands were on her shoulders as Seven felt her own collapse begin. The final stage was apparently beginning. She dragged them down together where Seven crouched in the captain's hold.

"You are not going to die. I didn't march onto a cube three times to let her win now."

Seven blinked back the tears of pain and looked up at the captain in confusion. "Why do you care?" she whispered in sharp disbelief.

Janeway's fingers lifted Seven's chin. "Because I do."

Seven blinked. She grasped Janeway's fingers and noted the captain's surprise for a split second before another memory grabbed her.

"Do not move." She traced a light finger over the captain's cheekbone and temple, catching the soft fine strands. She met startled gray-blue eyes then closed her own, pressing in for a brief kiss, compelled to give of her emotion.

Her lips met resistance, but warmed quickly. Her eyes flew open and she gasped harshly at the knife-edge pain driving into her skull. "Captain!" she gasped again, and her only escape was unconsciousness as she crumpled to the deck across the deck and the captain's lap.

The captain slapped her comm badge and demanded, "Intraship transport! Authorization Janeway two-lambda-six! Beam two directly to Sickbay!" Still cradling the unconscious Borg, she felt the tingling grasp of the transporter beam and slammed her eyes shut against Seven's hair. "Hang on," she whispered, her voice whisked away in transport.

Chapter Three

"Captain! What happened?" The Doctor dropped to one knee beside them. A tricorder at the ready in his fist he moved it over Seven's head. "Her cortical node has begun decompiling." Between the two of them they lifted and settled Seven onto a biobed.

"We have to do something," Janeway finally found her tongue.

"I told you to go talk to her. What did you do?"

"We talked!" Anxiety darting her gaze between the doctor's face and his patient, Janeway helped lower the diagnostic arm over Seven's rapidly paling eerily still face. "She wasn't going to allow the procedures."

"As much as she told me."

"She's afraid, Doctor. I called her on it. She denied that. We argued..." Janeway trailed off, reliving the moments herself. "She asked me why I even... cared..." She grabbed the Doctor's wrist as he prepared to inject the contents of a hypospray. "What is that?"

He removed her hand and released the vial into Seven's jugular. "I hope it will stabilize her remaining systems long enough for me to begin."

"You said yourself that her systems were too interdependent on the remaining implants. Those implants need a node to regulate them." Janeway worked furiously over the problem, her hand unknowingly caressing Seven's left mesh-encased hand as she fretted.

"Going after another live node, Captain? Icheb doesn't have a spare one to transplant."

"No!" Janeway paced. "But... a transplant... Wait a minute..." She spun around and fixed him with a sharp look. "What is the medical procedure for a transplant, Doctor? Of a human organ."

"Human transplants have not been practiced in centuries, captain. A person donated a tissue sample and we cloned, and then when the technology was available, replicated an exact match organ for the patient. But Seven's node can't be replicated. We tried that."

"So we used Icheb's."

And it worked."

She gestured at Seven, the monitors on the biobed fluctuating rapidly though the woman herself remained unmoving, unconscious. "That is not what I would term 'working'."

"The Borg failsafe..."

Janeway felt very much like cursing. She cut off the Doctor with a mad cut of her hand. "No other Borg ever experienced something like this."

"It could be some sort of new node, Captain."

"Icheb was a child. He experienced intense emotions every day, even laughed and played with the other children. And what of them, Doctor? No. The failsafe... it doesn't exist. It can't. Evidence proves otherwise."

"Something in Seven herself?" The Doctor puzzled.

"Yes, something fighting the fact that the cortical node isn't hers. Some sort of immune antibody?"

The Doctor's face tightened into a puzzled frown. Then he looked toward Seven before turning back to the captain. "I... I'll look into it."

"And I'm going to make sure that there wasn't something in her program that affected it."

He postulated. "Some compound that caused... for lack of a better word: an allergic reaction?"

She shrugged at him but her face was alight with hope. "We've got to check everything, Doctor." She snatched up a tricorder as she passed a table. "Get to work."

"Computer, engage program Seven 2-6-S. Playback of last primary user's interactions. Viewing mode." Rather than get caught up 'playing' Seven in the holodeck program, Janeway had decided that the ship's standard process of recording the proceedings would be sufficient to allow her to stop it frequently and run diagnostics on the holodeck elements. Any foreign bodies would have been recorded, and she could run scans to determine how they might have affected Seven.

"Playback ready," came the computer response. Janeway ran a final check on the scanner's sensors then stepped through the open doors.

The entrance faded away behind her as Janeway took in a full turn the setting of the recreational hall. Tom Paris and B'Elanna Torres sat beside one another, surrounded by a profusion of opened and unopened gifts, colorful wrapping paper, ribbons and bows. The chatter was almost deafening, but she focused quickly on her objective, noticing a tall blonde figure by the refreshment table, her back toward the room.

Though atypically attired for her immaculate Astrometrics officer, Janeway knew instantly the woman in a gray close-fitting cotton top and dark blue, almost black, denim pants was Seven of Nine. Janeway noted that the young woman's hair was down around her face. When she turned around, Janeway saw Seven gripped a small wrapped box. She noted the absence of the mesh on Seven's left hand first, then looked up to view the face... also free of implants. Seven walked with a little more hesitation than Janeway was used to from the confident Borg, but she presented her gift, passing it over Lt. Torres's left shoulder.

Torres opened the present as Kathryn watched, then looked puzzled as she lifted out two small starfield-colored objects. "They're lovely. What are they?"

"Insulated footwear. They will protect your child in temperatures as low as -40C."

"Ah." Kathryn watched Seven's face go very still at Torres's less than inviting tone. "Well, thanks, Seven, I think." Seven stepped back and started to walk around the assembly, tucking her hands behind her back.

Kathryn turned to watch her progress, looking for signs of Seven's cortical node failure, but apparently the disappointment was not sharp enough. She had expected the cool response probably, Kathryn thought, recalling how little Seven and B'Elanna got along in the first place.

Kathryn caught another sight, stepping in alongside the circling Seven as the party continued. Herself. Dressed casually her alter ego spoke in a low voice to Seven. "Now that the Doctor's removed all your implants, maybe you ought to consider children of your own."

"Perhaps, Captain." Observer Janeway would recognize that tone anywhere. It was Seven's favorite when talking to the captain about future possibilities: restrained tolerance. The young woman obviously was not interested in children at the moment.

Apparently her alternate recognized the tone too and changed tacts. "Well, at least you don't have to regenerate any more. I could arrange quarters for you." Observer Janeway watched her alternate pause, step in front of Seven, impeding the taller woman's forward progress. "What do you think?"

Observer Janeway watched Seven's expression with interest. She was puzzled for a moment, then having considered her answer, presented it. "I will consider it." Alternate Janeway nodded and started away from Seven, sipping her drink.

Seven intercepted Janeway. "Captain?" Her body language was clearly petitioning. Observer Janeway remembered it from the time Seven tried to convince her that she could direct the ship through a poisonous nebula alone for a month. *I can do this, Captain*. So Janeway wondered what Seven was preparing to ask.

However it was not a question that formed, but a statement. One of the longest Janeway had ever heard from the former Borg, who typically suffered from a dearth of words. "Captain, I have... appreciated your guidance since severing me from the Collective. Your... mentoring... has shown me much about humanity. I... appreciate the time we have spent together... And... I thank you."

Alternate Janeway remained still following the Borg's words, saying nothing. Observer

Janeway felt the world crashing in. Seven had used very similar words with her only minutes ago in Cargo Bay 2. She leaned against the wall and closed her eyes. *Well, the Doctor did say she was practicing. But why would Seven practice an exchange that effectively severed their relationship? What had Seven expected her to say in response?*

Why hadn't her copy said something? Perhaps something here would give her the clue she needed to help Seven. Janeway called out, "Computer, freeze playback."

With the program frozen, Janeway inserted herself between the copies of Seven and herself and scanned the Janeway construct first. Nothing unusual appeared in the readings. The hologram was constructed of her physical and personality profiles. She even checked the drink idly, sticking her finger in and tasting it. "Well that's right," she remarked when she recognized whiskey and soda.

She turned to scan Seven.

Up close now to the 'new' Seven of Nine, Janeway found it difficult not to pause in ticking off the bio readouts and study Seven's face absent of implants. The only other time she had seen this side of the young woman was in Unimatrix Zero, when Tuvok enabled her to join Seven there through a unique type of mind meld. Then, as now, she was stunned by the smooth youthfulness staring back at her. Frozen in place was an expression that struck a chord in Janeway even as it puzzled her why Seven would be wearing it.

Captain Kathryn Janeway was very familiar with the emotion that meant a person had made a hard choice, considering many angles and discarding all options but one, which still was distasteful. She had seen the look on her own face more times in the last seven years than she cared to acknowledge right now: resignation.

Considerably more puzzled now, Janeway concluded her scans only noting elevated adrenaline and skin heat readings. She stepped back once more out of the scene and requested the program continue.

She watched her alternate walk off without further word to Seven, and then Seven paused in mid-stride. She spoke to the ceiling, answering a hail. "Understood. I am on my way."

The simulation stopped as the Seven-image faded out. Apparently this was one of the times Seven had been called out of the holodeck to deal with ship's business.

"Computer, report time index of the original activity," Janeway questioned. The computer did so, and Janeway's hunch was confirmed. Seven had been called away from the simulation. "All right. Computer, scan forward through records to the program's next change of scene. And begin playback once again."

The computer beeped. The entire scene faded out, replaced instantly with a barren room that Janeway quickly identified as crew quarters. Neelix and Seven of Nine stood in the middle of the mostly empty space, the Talaxian typically going on with a grin and enthusiasm about the decor.

"Some curtains would shape the place up," he said, walking over toward the transparent aluminum windows.

Seven in a blue sciences uniform, and still without her implants, seemed mildly amused by the Talaxian's banter. When he pointed out that she required something to dress up a wall, she suggested a starscape would suit. Janeway agreed, the image perfectly within character for the young

woman, who seemed completely enthralled with stars, charts and interplanetary existence. Neelix however disagreed. He suggested something abstract, bright, and colorful.

Seven did not dispute him, but Janeway could tell the woman planned to keep her own counsel on her room's decorations.

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All three occupants turned at the chime of the door. Janeway was surprised to see Chakotay step across the threshold in off-duty attire, in his hands he bore a crafted gift. "Something for your new place," he said to Seven, with a warm smile. Seven nodded and accepted it.

"Interesting," Neelix remarked, but Janeway noticed that Seven was studying the gift then the first officer quietly.

"Thank you, Commander," Seven said finally.

"It's a dreamcatcher. I thought since you were going to try sleeping it might help keep bad dreams away."

Janeway looked at Seven wondering what the young woman's response would be.

"An appropriate gift." Janeway grinned at that epitome of response from Seven.

"Might go nicely over the bed," Neelix interjected.

"It is a recreation of the Commander's Native American heritage," Seven explained.

Chakotay smiled. "You've been studying."

Neelix left, walking past Janeway still observing from near the doorway. She noticed Seven realizing that she and the commander were alone. Janeway began to get a nervous tingle in her head. What was going to happen now?

"I... am attempting a new recipe," Seven said, stepping close to Chakotay.

She's coming on to him? Janeway thought, recognizing the flirtations of a teen girl in the tall Borg's manner. Well, if she had to pick someone... *Voyager's* first officer was a fairly good choice.

The scene continued to play out, finally ending after Seven secured a promise from Chakotay to join her for dinner the next evening. When the first officer left Seven alone, Janeway found Seven remained in the program... She sat down on the bed after hanging up the dreamcatcher.

Having just acquired a date with one of the most eligible men aboard, Seven did not look nearly as happy as someone would expect. Sitting down on the bed next to the hunched over blonde, Janeway asked, "Why did you obtain the date if you don't want it? What sort of experiment are you conducting, Seven?"

Of course the Seven hologram did not respond, and Janeway sighed, rubbed her forehead briefly and stood. "Time for another scan I guess. Computer, freeze playback."

Focusing all her scans on the dejected Seven, Janeway found more high adrenaline levels. Seven was clearly uncomfortable, but determined to press on. The time index on the playback indicated this was less than halfway through Seven's 49 hours. Janeway puzzled over the situation, rubbing at the ache in her temple.

Something clearly escalated beyond this moment in time. While Seven's readings were showing clear agitation and anxiety, despite her outward demeanor, clearly they were not yet at the point of setting off the Borg's supposed 'failsafe'.

Damn. Janeway put down the scanner, taking a moment to rub insistently at her headache. She went back over the playback in her head, but couldn't get past the moment of Seven and Chakotay intimately close.

You're not jealous, are you, Kathryn?

Burying her face in her hands, Janeway wondered where the hell that thought came from.

You are jealous. The voice was almost a callow chortle.

Janeway rubbed her neck in irritation. *Jealous of what? Seven and a hologram?*

The voice was succinct. *Seven explores intimacy and she doesn't tell you anything about it.*

"I have to get out of here," she muttered, jolting upright fast and heading for the door,

unknowingly just as agitated as Seven had been when she left the same scene three days earlier.

Chapter Four

"Sickbay to Captain Janeway."

Janeway had only just crossed the threshold of the holodeck. Immediately questions about Seven's present condition clamored for answers. "Janeway here. Go ahead, Doctor."

"I've stabilized Seven for the moment. Any progress on your investigation?"

"No unusual contaminants were present, Doctor. What about the immunology research?"

"I'm not certain if it will even help. The only thing I've been able to do is depress her adrenal system. That seems to be holding things in check."

"I'm on my way. Janeway out." She stepped briskly into the turbolift and ordered, "Sickbay."

In the turbolift, Janeway received another hail. "Bridge to the captain."

"Go ahead, Chakotay."

"Taking up Seven's bad habits, Captain? You're late for duty."

Had that much time really passed? "Chakotay, I can't. Just keep on course. I'll explain later."

"Understood. Chakotay out."

How am I going to explain this? Janeway thought as soon as the channel closed. "Our Astrometrics officer has a crush on you, Commander. You're going to have to let her down easy. She could die from the shock otherwise." Her choice of words sarcastic, Janeway was far from lighthearted about the whole thing.

Hell, all I did was confront her about her condition and she nearly self-destructed.

How much worse would unrequited love be?

The 'lift stopped and the doors opened just as Janeway froze absolutely certain she had hit upon something vital.

The Doctor was waiting for her. "I may have come up with something, Captain."

"How is she?"

"Still out. Which is probably a good thing."

"So tell me what you've found."

"Do you recall the Viidians?"

Janeway shuddered at the mention of the organ thieving race that did so because their own organs were rapidly degenerating from a disease they called 'the Phage.' "Yes." *Voyager* had encountered them several times, none of which had gone exceptionally well. "We're thousands of light years out of their space."

"Well the last time we met any, I had a chance to work with a Viidian doctor, and gained a great deal of knowledge in a database about their medical techniques and their research into organ procurement, transplant, and rejection." He paused dramatically, a trait about him that irritated Janeway frequently. "Rejection," he explained, "is that body process that tries to eliminate from the body all foreign matter, including... incompatible organs."

"So we were right. Seven's node was different enough from Icheb's that her body is recognizing his as a foreign body and is now trying to get rid of it."

"Something like that. But, as we've also already ascertained, there's no removing it, and no replicating her original one. What we need is an immune suppressant. Since the component is mechanical, not biochemical, I'm still determining how to proceed."

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"What part of her is directing the rejection? And why now? Why not when we first put it in."

"She was in terrible shape when we did the swap. Probably has taken her body all this time to recover from that and notice that it has unfamiliar components. It does appear that her biological immune system is responsible for fighting this little war."

"Her heightened adrenal system. The vascular expansion. Her higher pituitary output."

"The pituitary output is the puzzle. She's completely beyond puberty and the gland had been inactive."

"Until something activated it."

"She's been experimenting with social interaction. It was bound to take on a sexual aspect at some point," the Doctor pointed out rather bluntly.

She looked toward the biobed where Seven slept. The behavior Janeway witnessed in the holodeck was making more sense. "So... do you have a plan of treatment?"

"Same one as before."

"And leave her a virtual emotionless shell? No. Can you disconnect the node from the pituitary gland?"

The Doctor frowned. "There are millions of microscopic connections."

She patted his shoulder. "I have every confidence in you." The two walked to Seven's biobed, and Janeway leaned over, close to Seven's head as the Doctor began inputting data into the overarching panel. Just a light caress against Seven's cheek brought home how fragile the skin was. It felt like paper against her fingertips. "You'll be all right soon," Janeway whispered.

Seven stirred at the sound of Janeway's voice and the captain leaned back a bit, watching the Borg's eyes open. Seven's hand came up, disoriented, and nudged at the diagnostic arm over her chest. "What?"

"You collapsed in the cargo bay," Janeway explained. "We may have an idea to help you."

"I have not given permission for any procedures."

"Seven, it's all right to be scared. But I promise..." Hoping to soothe the blonde, Janeway brushed her fingers through the loose hair at Seven's temple.

"No!" Seven's hand grabbed hers, holding it away from her face.

"Please, relax." Even Janeway could hear the slight buzz as the cortical node reacted, and Seven winced. Janeway smoothed away the creases. "Stay with me, Seven. Come on. Stay with me."

Seven grew confused. "I don't understand," she murmured clearly perplexed, now intently searching Janeway's face for something.

"Sh... You don't understand what?"

The Borg swallowed and grasped Janeway's hand tightly, bringing it to her face. "This is unfamiliar. I..." She was clearly trying to place her experience into any definition she could find. "I am feeling..."

"Of course you are..."

"But I am not..." The buzzing raised in tone, making Janeway as well as Seven wince. "I don't understand..." Suddenly Seven was crying, turning her face into Janeway's upper arm.

Placing her other hand on Seven's upturned shoulder, Janeway eased Seven onto her back again and brushed at the tears. Obviously Seven was in terrible pain. "Doctor." She rubbed at her own neck but did not move from Seven's bed.

There was a cool hiss against her throat.

"What was that for?"

He was pressing another dosage into Seven's jugular. "Your headache. I noticed how often

you were rubbing at it. Your stress over this situation is not going to help Seven, Captain. Perhaps you should let me deal with this."

"I'm staying here," Janeway insisted.

As if in reinforcement, Seven's grip on her arm tightened. "Captain!"

Ignoring the Doctor, who simply was forced to move to the other side to handle his medical treatment of Seven, Kathryn returned her attention to Seven. "I'm here, Seven."

"You can n..."

"Well, I am." Janeway's smile was forced bright, but Seven quieted, and let off holding her hand quite so desperately. The captain flexed the bones in her hand with relief.

"My responses... are... wrong. I am... malfunctioning..." Seven gasped between throbs of pain.

"What?"

"Captain... My... experiment... failed."

Janeway shook her head. "No... it... you may not have expected what happened... but... I'm certain it was just... too soon."

"I wanted..."

Knowing what it took for Seven to admit to wanting anything, Janeway shushed her. "I know. I saw part of it..."

"You... saw?"

"I wasn't sure it wasn't something in the holodeck that hurt you. So... I... took a walk through your program."

"I... Captain, I... And you still..?"

"Seven, I'm the last person to bother you about trying out a relationship in the holodeck."

Seven coughed and gasped, but, clearly puzzled, she studied Janeway's face as she said, "I was uncomfortable with the thought of you... discovering... I did not know how you would react."

"I would think Chakotay is going to have the harder time."

"No!" Seven shook her head hard. "Do not... It... I am no longer attracted to the commander. It... was wrong."

Janeway chuckled at the implied slight against her first officer then bit her lip and pleaded earnestly, "Don't give up, Seven."

"I..." The captain's stern look changed whatever she had been about to protest. "I will not."

"Good." Then because she was close, and the gesture came naturally, Janeway leaned the rest of the way in and kissed Seven's cheek with a kiss. "I'll just..."

Several alarms in the monitor across Seven's chest went off, scaring Janeway, who backed up. Seven's eyes were shut tight and she convulsed.

The Doctor was suddenly there. His dire words shot ice through Janeway's veins. "Cascade failure has begun, Captain."

He pushed her aside and began working methodically. She watched, until she could not any more and turned away.

"Captain, go. I'll call you when I have some word."

His tone was not very promising. Worriedly she took one last look at Seven and retreated, hoping that it would not be the last time she saw the Borg alive. On her way out she made one call she hoped would give the Doctor some useful assistance. "Captain to Mr. Paris."

"Yes, Captain?"

"Report to sickbay the Doctor requires your assistance with a procedure."

"Yes, ma'am."

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"Right away, Mr. Paris. Janeway out."

Unable to hover, Janeway walked. Her headache was back with enough of a vengeance to bring tears to her eyes. Thoughts of Seven dying filled her mind; she crowded them out with the positive moments. Back aboard *Voyager*, safe from Arturis' plans when they had enjoyed a game of Velocity in the holodeck and Seven's words promised she was planning to stay. More than that, she was hoping to speed *Voyager's* journey homeward.

"Go again?" Janeway asked, only a little winded from their previous match.

"I must report to the Astrometrics lab. There is work to be done."

"Work? I gave the crew strict orders to take some R&R over the next few days, and that includes you."

"There are more pressing needs. I am attempting to design another method of traveling at slipstream velocities without damaging Voyager."

Janeway stared at her. "I thought that was impossible."

"Impossible' is a word that humans use far too often." Seven had shifted on her boots, dropping her phaser hand as she spoke. "I wish to continue my efforts."

"A few days ago you were ready to abandon ship. And here you are, practically laying in a course to Earth." Janeway indulged in a moment of pride.

"As we approached Borg space I began to reevaluate my future. The prospect of becoming a drone...was unappealing," Seven admitted.

"Sometimes you've got to look back in order to move forward," Janeway whispered compassionately. "Sounds to me like you're starting to embrace your humanity."

"No." Seven's protest was just a little too abrupt. "but as I said, nothing is impossible." She smiled faintly.

Janeway was encouraged. "Computer," she called out, readying her stance, phaser at the ready, "One more game."

Seven accepted the challenge and they played on. For a while, life was light for Janeway. Seven's company proving fulfilling in a way Janeway had seldom considered possible.

Her path took her to Astrometrics where she found Icheb running scans. Flung back to the first time they had gone through trouble with Seven's cortical node, Janeway stepped in uneasily. "Icheb?" she prompted when the young man did not respond to her entrance.

"Captain? I do not know where Seven of Nine is."

"I... didn't come looking for Seven." She had not really come looking for him either, but the boy was someone very special to Seven so deserved word of her condition. "Seven's in sickbay. She's very ill."

"What happened?"

"Her body is trying to reject the node entirely. Like an organism repelling a virus."

"But without it she'll be unable to regulate her implants."

"The Doctor is going to try and isolate the node from her immune system's mechanisms."

"He'll need help." Icheb started past her, and only quick hands on his shoulders stopped him.

"I've already sent him the help. We have to wait."

"I can't wait, Captain."

Janeway shook her head and reflexively hugged him. "It's all we can do, Icheb."

"I don't want to lose her, captain. I love her."

Janeway hugged him more tightly. "I know. I love her too."

She froze, stilling her grip around Icheb. "Captain?"

"Icheb, I promise I'll contact you as soon as I hear anything." Janeway backed up, turning quickly toward the door. "For now... get back to work. I have to check something."

"Captain, wait."

"No. Stay here." In the doorway, Janeway looked both directions, trying to determine the fastest way to her destination then hurried toward the right.

She nearly fell out of the turbolift when it stopped near the holodeck. "Computer, run Seven 2-6-S. Forward to the time index 26.5 hours." That should put her in Seven's dinner date with Chakotay. She stepped inside to see Seven standing by the counter, idly working over a cutting board. The blonde was dressed to devastate, hair down around her face, a flattering red dress framing her figure from behind.

When she stepped through the doorway, the captain having forgotten to specify the playback viewing feature, the program inserted her into the program. She took Chakotay's place in the evening's events.

Seven turned as the doors closed behind Janeway and the captain was stunned by the low-cut front of Seven's gown. The flirtation had taken a very serious turn. "Good evening." Even Seven's voice was low, seductive as she reached for a bottle that was not present in Janeway's hands. "Thank you."

"I... excuse me." Janeway opened her mouth to call 'halt program', but Seven walked away and Janeway followed. "Is there something I can do?"

"You may cut up the vegetables in 2 centimeter bits."

Janeway found herself with a knife in her hand and Seven holding her hands about to demonstrate. "I can take care of this thanks." Janeway shrugged out of Seven's near embrace and the woman stepped back to her other tasks. "So what are we making?"

"Pasta."

Janeway smiled in bemusement. Maybe she could find out what happened anyway. "Would you like some wine?"

Seven went and retrieved a bottle. Janeway watched as Seven struggled with the cork and she offered to take it. Seven said nothing, only passing it over. Interesting. Janeway removed the cork and passed it back. Seven poured out and handed her one of the two glasses.

Seven was absolutely in her space when they drank, and Janeway lowered her glass.

"We should check the sauce," Seven said.

"All right." Janeway lifted the spoon from the stovetop pot and tasted it cautiously. "Needs something."

"It should be perfect," Seven countered.

"Taste for yourself." Janeway held up the spoon and watched Seven lean in to taste it. She watched Seven's pulse pick up in her throat. "Well?" she voiced when Seven's mouth left the spoon.

"More oregano," Seven declared, stepping away and applying more of the spice to the pot's contents and stirring them in. She offered a finger swiped through the pot to the captain, who paused but then, as apparently expected, tasted the sauce.

"Much better."

Seven's head tilted to the side a little and Janeway heard the faintest buzz begin. But Seven only paused a moment before lifting her fingers to Janeway's temple. "Do not move."

Oh God, Janeway's own nervous system sent up flares. *She kissed him*. When Seven started lowering her head, Janeway's inner voice woke up in surprise. *She's going to kiss me!*

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Seven's palms cupped her cheeks and the press of lips was incredibly soft. "Seven..." Janeway brought her hands up to Seven's elbows, but instead of pushing the woman away, she held her steady and found herself kissing back.

The kiss ended. As Janeway stepped back, she saw Seven's face shape into a deeply puzzled frown. "What happened to the buzzing?" she asked.

"Buzzing?"

"When I was uncertain how you would respond, I... felt... a buzz... in my systems." Then the blue eyes came back to hers. "But you responded as I hoped."

Janeway was absolutely willing to bet Chakotay hadn't. Wow. All the answers clicked into place. She slapped her comm badge, startling Seven so that she grasped the hologram's hands to calm her down. "Janeway to the Doctor! Stop the procedure!"

"What?"

"Just, whatever you're doing... stop! I'll be right there." Janeway let go of Seven, and raced out of the holodeck.

"It was in the program, Doctor!" Janeway burst through the doors of sickbay.

"What?"

"The answer was in the program. Seven's been suffering from unrequited feelings! She started a relationship that didn't work out. The Borg can't live *alone*."

"You got this from the program?" She had already scrambled to Seven's bedside. He darted around a stunned silent Tom Paris, who could only watch his captain become a whirlwind.

"Seven. Seven, wake up." Janeway brushed her fingers through Seven's loose hair. "

Janeway straightened and spotted a hypo on a nearby table. "Give me that," she ordered. "I need a stimulant."

"You need to slow down!" The Doctor replied.

"I don't have time to argue this, Doctor. Stimulant, now!"

Baffled, he grabbed the hyposprayer and slipped a vial of stimulant into the empty slot. "Here! You kill her it'll be on your head!"

"I won't let her die." She bent over Seven and whispered as she administered the chemical. "You hear me, Seven? That's a promise."

She waited, holding her breath, watching every sign of Seven's physiology reawakening.

"Seven, I'm here." She grasped Seven's hand which flailed out trying to block the sickbay lights from her eyes. Seven's fear resurfaced when she focused on Janeway's face. "Don't be afraid."

"I don't want to die," Seven pleaded softly, squeezing her eyes against the pain in her head.

Janeway brushed her fingers under Seven's chin. "Open your eyes, Seven... look at me."

"Why?" Petrified.

"Because I love you," Janeway breathed.

"What?" Incredulous. Panicked.

"Look at my face, Seven. I'm not a hologram."

"But..."

"He couldn't love you back."

"I don't..."

"I know you don't understand. But that's what your body was telling you, Seven." Janeway lowered her head, and brushed her lips against Seven's in a kiss of promise. She pulled back. "Can you feel it?"

Seven's hand touched her face with curiosity. "You..."

"Yes. I do."

"But you have said..." The buzzing returned sharply, making Seven interrupt her thought with a groan.

"I was wrong."

"You are... never... wrong. You... are... the captain." Seven bit out the defense of her, but Janeway's grasp of her hands never wavered, though pain filled their joined grip.

"Hang on, Seven. Look at me." Janeway coaxed Seven's chin over to meet her gaze again with soft strokes on her cheek. "Believe me."

Seven's defenses broke down then, tears coursed down her cheeks. Surprising both the Doctor and Tom who had come up to listen to the very animated exchange with their terminal patient, Janeway kissed Seven, offering solace, and healing through their connection.

Her own head throbbed sharply and she just kissed Seven harder pushing past her own doubts about duty and what this might all mean in the future. Only here and now and Seven's life mattered. She heard the buzzing in Seven's head change in tone. "I promised you, Seven. I never break my promises."

Abruptly Janeway tasted tears, not quite as salty as she might have expected had she ever tasted anyone else's tears but the buzzing stopped, dying on a fizzled note. Seven surged up, and Janeway dimly felt Seven's freed right arm slip around her shoulders.

The captain paused for breath and breathed her relief. "Yes..." Then Seven was pulling her down once again, initiating another intoxicating, healing kiss.

"Ahem."

Janeway broke off their kiss at the Doctor's interruption. "Would one of you please explain?"

Seven closed her eyes, getting her breathing under control. She became keenly aware of her physical condition. The sharp pain in her head, suddenly absent had left her feeling disconnected. Reassuring pressure enclosed her left hand. She could feel the minute movements of fingers. *Janeway's fingers*. She turned her head to watch Janeway, who was studying two figures Seven could just identify on the edges of her awareness.

She focused on the captain's mouth, her own lips still tingling where they had been pressed to the other woman's. Now Janeway was speaking, explaining the discordant evidence that led to her conclusions.

"Surrounded by unfeeling drones, a drone that felt would starve... dying inside from emotional starvation. When Seven took up with someone in the holodeck it wasn't going to feel in return. Her body realized this, shocking her system and sending her into trauma."

"So where do you fit into all this, Captain?"

Janeway straightened, but kept her hand in Seven's offering the Borg a reassuring smile. "The unrequited emotion... isn't anymore, Tom." He still looked baffled. "With feedback on the emotions she was feeling, her systems stopped on their self-destructive path." Janeway looked back down at Seven and smiled gently. "We all have to love... and be loved in return." She blushed a little as Seven lifted their joined hands to her lips and kissed her knuckles.

"Seven?" The Doctor looked to his patient. "Is this explanation working for you?"

"Doctor, if you scan my node you will find it is once again operating properly."

Never taking anything at face value, the Doctor presented his tricorder and scanned Seven's various systems, not just the node. He was shaking his head in disbelief when he finished.

"Doc?" Tom asked, still eying Janeway and Seven, who had taken the silent moment to turn

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to one another and looked remarkably like him and B'Elanna. The concept of the captain in love gave him the shivers.

"It seems the captain's rather unorthodox methods have indeed cured Seven." When the women met his gaze, the Doctor cautioned, "I have no idea if this whole thing is just coincidence or not, but I would advise the two of you to be very careful. And take it slow."

"Incredible." Tom Paris backed up and sat down hard on a nearby chair. He rubbed his forehead and squinted, clearly experiencing pain. "Damn."

Janeway's brow creased in curiosity. "What's wrong, Tom?"

"Headache."

THE END