

Summary: Kathryn lets Seven stay with her in Indiana, and the former Borg, with help from Kathryn's family, sets about proving her love, and commitment to Voyager's former captain.

SEVEN WAYS TO WOO A CAPTAIN

by Lara Zielinsky

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Continued from "The Birthday Wish"

The two women stood together for a long moment after Seven's kiss, until reluctantly Kathryn moved gradually out of the contact.

"I... Seven..."

"Do not send me away," Seven pleaded.

Kathryn looked at her mother, easily seeing the signs of a more restful sleep. "I guess you could look in the empty bedrooms up here, and pick one."

"I will comply." Seven's gaze lingered in a loving way completely at odds, Kathryn thought, with the very Borg-like statement. Then, perhaps realizing that Kathryn needed space after her declaration, Seven excused herself downstairs.

Now that she was alone, that bit of Traditionalist hospitality scared the bejeebers out of Kathryn Janeway. Seven was actually going to be living with her.

"Oh my God, Mother, what have I done?" she murmured to the sleeping woman.

She had a hard enough time keeping her thoughts from straying to Seven as she had recounted Voyager's travels. Now, with the woman just down the hall, could Kathryn keep to the resolve she had aboard Voyager? Should she stay away from Seven romantically?

Aboard Voyager, lost in the Delta Quadrant, Kathryn had her duty which excluded a relationship with any crewmember. Once back on Earth, Kathryn had honored Seven's new relationship with Chakotay and kept her distance, allowing her former First Officer to shepherd Seven through the debriefings.

Now Seven told her that relationship had ended.

Yet set apart from Starfleet, from her commission, what really could Kathryn offer Seven now?

At first glance it seemed so simple to accept Seven's declaration of love, to accept that which she had denied herself aboard *Voyager*, but there was so much unshared experience between them now. Kathryn felt locked in here, and yet Seven was growing so much, so fast. Kathryn's imagination, so fruitful where Seven was concerned, wondered at the intimacy of Seven's relationship with Chakotay. Kathryn hadn't made love it seemed in forever. If she opened herself to Seven's love, would she be found wanting? Kathryn sat forlornly at her mother's bedside, envisioning a miserable future reality.

Then there was Seven's immense astrometric and engineering talents. The simple life of a Traditionalist homesteader was far beneath her skills. Seven would no doubt bore quickly, and leave in search of more challenges. As a young woman herself, hadn't Janeway done the same?

Kathryn admitted to herself she was scared. Without knowing the love possible, there was

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pain, but it was distant. What if she opened herself, and Seven found her, or their life, lacking, and left?

She did not think she could survive that loss.

"Captain?" Seven's voice from the doorway interrupted Kathryn's pain-filled silence.

"Please, Seven. Just Kathryn," she said, not looking over her shoulder to the blond.

"You are a captain," Seven insisted. "Starfleet will reinstate you."

"No, because I won't ask."

"Kathryn, you should. Being a captain is as much a part of you as being Borg will always be a part of me. I cannot end that association, and neither can you. Nor should we want to."

Kathryn turned in her chair, eyes flashing an angry gray. "Why are you here, Seven?"

"To inform you that dinner is ready."

"Dinner?" Seven's calm reply, and steady gaze effectively dammed the torrent of Kathryn's anger. She slumped in her chair. "Oh."

"Come eat."

Resigned, Kathryn stood and followed Seven downstairs to where a light meal of salad greens and a fruit compote had been set on the table in the kitchen's nook. Stopping in the doorway, Kathryn marveled at the sight. "I didn't know we had this much food in the house."

"I found these foods in the food pantry over there." With a nod Seven indicated a small door just past the last cabinet. Kathryn had not even considered looking outside the kitchen for foods. The noise of Seven pulling out a chair at the table drew her gaze back. "Sit. Eat. There is more."

Stunned Kathryn sat, letting Seven help her push in the chair. "More?"

Seven did not answer. Kathryn turned to see the blonde had already left her alone and moved to the stove. Inhaling she caught the warm scent of lentil soup.

"Why are you cooking? I had a replicator installed."

Gaze remaining focused on her task, Seven answered somewhat absently. "Because I can."

Kathryn pushed out her chair, standing once again, and drifted over to stand beside Seven at the stove. "I know you started cooking aboard *Voyager*, but," she fished for the right way to ask. "What I don't understand is why? The replicators were working well enough, and after the first couple of years, we'd found enough energy sources to keep them powered..."

"I found it an acceptable creative endeavor," Seven said. "Useful in ways I find satisfying."

"So you like being creative with a purpose?"

"It is efficient." Seven canted her head slightly and paused in stirring the soup. "Would you like a taste of the soup?"

Kathryn, who had been studying Seven's expression with curiosity, looked down at the spoon. "I... it does smell wonderful."

Seven lifted the spoon out of the soup pot at a careful angle, having captured both broth and lentils in the bowl of it. With her other hand, the left one with the Borg mesh, underneath, Seven moved the sample level with the captain's mouth. The liquid steamed briefly.

Kathryn obediently opened her mouth, and cautiously sipped at the contents. The warm broth slid down her throat gently, and the lentils tickled her taste buds. She "oohed" in surprise.

"Is the soup too hot?"

Kathryn swallowed and leaned away from the spoon as Seven lowered it back to the pot. "Oh no, it's wonderful. Really."

"As good as your mother used to make?"

Kathryn startled at the voice from behind her. Spinning around, with Seven's left hand

quickly on her shoulder to steady her, Kathryn found her mother leaning against the entry to the kitchen, clutching a blue dressing gown closed around her frail body. "Mother, what are you doing out of bed?"

"I thought I smelled something cooking," the older woman said with some hesitancy. "And I thought I'd better assure myself that the farmhouse didn't burn down if it was you."

Kathryn groaned. Her mother took an unsteady step away from the wall. Quickly the daughter moved to her mother's side. "You shouldn't be out of bed."

"I have been in bed for the better part of several months, Kathryn. I feel surprisingly better today." The older woman bearing a thinner version of Kathryn's face, looked up to Seven. "Who is our guest?"

Kathryn smiled at Seven. "This is Seven of Nine, one of my former crew. Seven, this is Gretchen Janeway, my mother."

"I was not a part of Captain Janeway's crew," Seven corrected. "I am a former Borg drone whom the captain saw fit to sever from the Collective."

Kathryn sighed. Seven had returned again to her being captain, even prosaically. The former Borg was obviously not going to give up that tactic easily.

"And you're cooking for Kathryn?" Gretchen asked.

"She would not have cooked for herself," Seven remarked.

"I was taking care of you," Kathryn explained to her mother as Gretchen turned a saucy eye on her.

"Well, now that I'm feeling better, that won't be necessary any longer."

"You still require more rest than the norm," Seven pointed out.

"Right," echoed Kathryn.

"The treatment I applied only eradicated the bacteria. Your immune system is still in need of regeneration."

"You applied?" Gretchen frowned.

"Yes, Seven knew what was wrong with you and worked a little Borg ingenuity."

"But Doctor..."

"Your family physician was unaware of this condition as it originated with the Borg's brief incursion in an attempt to end Earth's entering interstellar space 400 years ago. There are no records among Terran medical databases because of Starfleet's block of the Enterprise-E's journey back in time to make the timeline remain intact."

"Time travel?" Kathryn's face took on a sick expression. "Please, no more details. I'll live without them."

"And so will I," Gretchen echoed.

"Will you sit with us and consume some soup?" Seven inquired.

"I'd like that," Gretchen replied. Kathryn helped her mother to the table, and lowered her into a chair. Seven watched the reverent way Kathryn interacted with Gretchen, and found herself thinking about her own family reluctantly. Fear surfaced, and she pushed it aside, knowing for the moment, she had no desire to be elsewhere.

Locating bowls in one of the many cabinets, Seven ladled three of them full of soup, and taking the tray still on the counter from ferrying food up to Gretchen's bedroom, she bore them to the small table.

"Seven, the soup smells lovely," Gretchen remarked, inhaling over the steam as Seven placed the bowl before her. Her hand shook a little but she slowly bore the spoon to her lips, and sipped at

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the liquid. "Very nice."

"I am pleased you are enjoying it."

Kathryn did not immediately eat her own portion, instead watching her mother with concern as she ate. "Don't you like it, Kathryn?" Gretchen asked pointedly.

"Seven gave me a taste while it was still heating."

"Then stop staring, and start eating," her mother chided.

Kathryn swallowed, choked by emotion as she felt her mother's personality reasserting itself so spontaneously. Lowering her eyes so neither Seven nor Gretchen could see her emotional response, she devoted the next several minutes to consuming her soup.

"Will you have some compote?" Seven asked as the last of the soup disappeared.

"I haven't had a fresh compote in years," Kathryn remarked. "I'm almost afraid my taste buds have forgotten."

"Then you should indulge," Seven said.

"Will you have some, Mother?" Kathryn asked.

Finishing the last of her soup, Gretchen was shaky from the effort. "No. I think I will go sit in the living room."

"I can assist you," Kathryn said, pushing her chair back and standing.

"No, you should eat. Seven, would you help an old woman?"

Seven surprised Kathryn with a quip. "I do not see one," the blonde said.

Gretchen offered a weak laugh. "Oh, dear you are a handful."

Seven smiled. The expression on her face took Kathryn completely by surprise, and the redhead continued to contemplate the revelation of Seven's humor long after Seven had escorted Gretchen to the living room, leaving Kathryn alone at the table to continue with her lunch.

She could hear the quiet sounds of Seven settling Gretchen on the sofa, insisting on a blanket over the woman's legs, and offering to bring her reading material.

"No, you should return to Kathryn's side," Gretchen remarked.

"It is uncertain she will welcome me," Seven admitted.

"Oh Seven, don't count yourself out just yet."

Kathryn blushed. *So now her mother was playing matchmaker?*

Seven once again prepared dinner, and as the late afternoon sun glowed through the living room windows, Kathryn, Seven and Gretchen enjoyed the meal as Gretchen peppered Seven with questions about life aboard Voyager.

Kathryn tried to remind herself that though she had been pouring out her own story for the last couple of weeks, her mother had been unconscious. It had made her feel safe enough to reveal so much private hell.

Gretchen was eager to learn more from Seven who was generous with the details as she told about the last four years from her perspective. Kathryn was struck with silent awe as Seven's stories revealed just how observant, and insightful, the former Borg had been about their predicament, and the people, including herself.

With her ability for detailed recall, Seven was a gifted storyteller, evoking time, place, and emotions within Kathryn. It was as if she was back in the thick of it all once again. More than once she caught herself turning her eyes downward, to cover the sheen of tears, or the aches, and smiles the scenes caused within her.

Kathryn also learned about a few events at which she had not been present, getting a glimpse of their impact on Seven.

After dinner, when I was returned to the area of confinement, Harry recognized that I was acting oddly. I had poor coordination, and it was difficult to focus, and he was quite concerned. Harry asked what had occurred, and the Doctor related that he, well, I... that we had shared dinner with Captain Dirk.

Harry was indignant that the Doctor had apparently engaged in a "date" with Captain Dirk, and seemed quite defensive on my behalf. The Doctor's response was to defend his actions, and display the holoemitter that he... we had appropriated.

Harry was gratified we had obtained the holoemitter but remained suspicious of the Doctor's actions in acquiring it.

Gretchen interrupted, "That does sound risky. What had you actually done?"

Seven shook her head. "The Doctor had offered his... our services, as the ship's medic, since they had lost theirs in a fight."

"That still doesn't give him the right.." Kathryn vehemently began.

Seven shook her head at Kathryn. "In Lokirrim society, the Doctor had no rights. Harry and I eventually realized that our ruse would have to continue if we were all to get out safely."

"He got you drunk." Kathryn's face reddened. She'd had no idea, when she had seen Seven on the viewscreen and assumed that her odd behavior had to do with her captors, that it had actually been the Doctor "performing" in the blonde's body.

"Once we were separated," Seven elaborated, "I confronted the Doctor with my realization that he had abused my body while I was submerged. While he was defensive, it became clear that he had indulged in certain behaviors that were detrimental to my functioning without thought to my well being."

Gretchen asked, "What had he actually done? Except steal back the holoemitter, which I presume is some device he requires?"

"Yes, the holoemitter is necessary for the Doctor to materialize. In his guise to make the Lokirrim captain let down his guard around... us, the Doctor began 'demonstrating' the powers of the replicator. He ordered a dozen types of food and drink, offering samples, and sampling a great deal of it himself."

"I never knew," Kathryn whispered, shocked by Seven's revelation of the Doctor's improprieties. She was dismayed that she had failed to keep Seven safe, and she found her appetite for dinner diminished.

"Kathryn, it was not pertinent to the mission report, and the Doctor and I reached an understanding on our own."

"Well, I'm glad about that," Kathryn said, "But I am sorry about the situation just the same."

"Kathryn, there were other things I observed while submerged, and I will never regret the knowledge the experience granted me."

"About?"

"About my preferences for food and ... other things," Seven said.

Gretchen smiled. "Emotions?"

"From the first moment I was severed from the Collective emotions were a never-ending source of difficulty. The Doctor's embrace of them, while excessive, did open my eyes to the fact that in moderation emotions are at the core of what it means to be human."

"A human guinea pig," Kathryn grumbled.

Seven shook her head. "I began examining my emotions and reactions to everything, trying

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to decipher what it was about Voyager that made the experience pleasurable." She looked over her fork to Kathryn. "I was occasionally wrong about the sources of my emotions. That misunderstanding allowed me to believe I should pursue a relationship with Commander Chakotay."

"Wasn't he your first officer, Kathryn?" Gretchen clarified.

"Yes, he was," Kathryn replied, keeping her voice even, but the resentment she felt unwilling to voice could not be completely contained. "Excuse me," she said abruptly, rising and leaving her mother and Seven alone in the dining nook.

A moment later both women heard the front door open and close.

Seven returned her gaze to her plate. In only a few hours Gretchen had learned a great deal about Seven of Nine. Under the facade of pinched lips and downcast eyes was a very giving, and very fragile heart cracking.

"Seven, dear, would you assist me?" Gretchen pushed back from the table. "I should probably call Phoebe."

Seven instantly moved to Gretchen side, aiding the woman in rising. "Kathryn's sister?"

"Yes."

"To what purpose?"

"Now that I am well, I'd like to see my daughter, son-in-law, and grandson."

"You still require much rest," Seven admonished gently.

"Spending time with family is not a chore, my dear. Kathryn knows that too. It was the same when she was in school then the academy. She was always working on her school papers -- engineering, mathematics, history, languages." Gretchen tapped in several keys in succession on the vid-phone. "But she made time for things that were important."

As Phoebe's face -- an attractive brunette version of Kathryn with a plumper face -- appeared on the vid-phone, Seven considered Gretchen's words.

She made time for things that were important.

Hope warmed the former drone. Kathryn Janeway -- no matter what crisis, nor what she was doing with her few leisure hours had always made time when Seven requested it. Even sometimes when she hadn't requested, but nevertheless required it.

Seven was therefore important to Kathryn. In turn, Seven decided she would demonstrate the captain's importance to her as well.

"Seven?"

Seven emerged from her thoughts at Gretchen's query. "Yes?"

"Would you please find Kathryn and let her know that her sister, brother-in-law, and nephew will be here for the morning's breakfast?"

Seven's ocular implant lifted. "She clearly wished to be alone."

"Go find her." When Seven's expression remained skeptical, Gretchen pressed her, "Trust me?"

The former Borg recalled hearing the same words from Kathryn nearly two years ago. Then, as now, she found herself unable to deny that she wanted to believe.

After escorting Gretchen to rest further on the living room couch, Seven went in search of Kathryn to inform her of the family's plans.

From her perch in the old oak tree at the edge of the deep front yard, Kathryn watched the Janeway house, aware of the shadows veiling the front door. Seven emerged into the Indiana sunlight and Kathryn recalled her promise to the young woman to someday bring her here and show her around.

So much has happened since then, she lamented, and she swallowed against the sudden, painful knot in her throat. Still she drank in the sight like a woman parched.

The tall blonde lifted a hand to shade her eyes, and turned slowly left to right, clearly searching the landscape.

For me, Kathryn acknowledged. She felt a twinge of guilt, but remained hidden. She did not want Seven to see her until she had her emotions under control.

Jealousy was extremely unbecoming and yet Kathryn could not deny that was exactly what she felt. Voyager had been back on Earth for five months. Chakotay and Seven had begun dating a month before that. There was no way Chakotay had kept physical intimacy out of the relationship that long.

If I hadn't been so wrapped up in duty, ignoring what I felt then maybe I would have been Seven's first.

Exhaling, Janeway curled herself into the crook of the tree, aligning her back against the trunk, and balancing her legs atop the broad branch on which she sat. Her gaze anchored on the horizon, her mind sailed back to another time... to another plane of existence.

She had to reach out and feel the bark on the tree she saw. It felt so real, she realized, aware of the roughness abrading her palms. She turned, and her breath caught at the sight of her companion. "Seven?"

The former Borg drone stood before her attired in soft pink and purple. She dipped her head, showing Janeway blonde hair caught in a single clip. Seven's raised her unadorned left hand to her own cheek, and she seemed to be relieved. Janeway was surprised at the complete absence of implants as Seven's eyes rose to meet hers once again. "It... I'm called Annika here."

Seven was the most beautiful person Kathryn had ever seen. Tears sprang to her eyes as Sev... Annika smiled shyly at her, and took a step forward before speaking again. "I'll take you to Axum."

I'll take you... God, how Kathryn's body had hummed, and shuddered with imaginings at those words. Annika's voice was Seven's, and yet it wasn't.

The former Borg's manner and her movements were still economical, but possessed a fluidity and grace that had only been hinted at with her dexterity on the Velocity court.

A million previous moments between them, Kathryn had been able to ignore the siren's call. At that time, in that ephemeral place where their minds met and she aided in the creation, and eventual destruction of that world, Kathryn fell irrevocably in love.

She resolved to tell Seven, to say something when it was all over. However, her tongue fell heavy and silent when that moment came.

Seven had come to see Janeway as she recovered in sickbay from the assimilation extraction. She could feel the moment coming, just the right moment... Then Seven began tentatively expressing the hesitant recognition of her emotional connection... with Axum. She never said the words...

"What are you doing?"

Kathryn jerked in surprise, jolted back to the present. She steadied herself in the tree, and looked down to see Seven standing beneath her. The young woman bore a puzzled expression crinkling her perfect features. Her right palm moved against the tree trunk.

"Surveying the property," Kathryn quipped, hoping the forced laughter covered the rawness of tears tightening her throat.

"You are not already aware of the boundaries of your family property?"

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"Things change," Kathryn replied, looking away at the landscape. "Then perhaps you would like a tricorder to record them." With a stretch, the young woman held aloft the tricorder in her left hand.

"Is that how you found me?" Kathryn asked dryly, beginning the process of climbing down. She lowered herself hand over hand down the tree, facing the trunk as she moved from foothold to foothold.

Without warning, Seven's left and right hands closed around Kathryn's waist. The sensation startled her, and she released the branch onto which she held. Seven's sure grip prevented a tumble and Kathryn was lowered slowly to stand on the ground.

Inhaling, she was exquisitely aware of body heat from the woman at her back, and the strength in the hands remaining on her waist. She was also conscious of how much thinner her cotton t-shirt was than her old Starfleet uniform, transmitting to her skin every stroke of Seven's fingers.

When Seven neither moved away nor spoke, Kathryn risked a glance over her shoulder and up slightly to find dilated pupils swimming in sky blue and the tip of a tongue wetting full lips.

Kathryn felt a shiver of excitement down her spine and center in her groin. Clearing her throat she croaked, "Thank you for your assistance."

Seven nodded slowly. "You are welcome."

Kathryn extricated herself from between Seven and the tree, though a hot vision of Seven pushing her up against the tree and claiming a kiss seared through her mind. "It'll be dark soon. Time to get back inside I suppose."

"I was sent to inform you that your sister will arrive in the morning."

"What?"

"Your mother contacted your sister, Phoebe, and arranged for her to visit tomorrow."

Kathryn groaned.

"Is that a problem?"

"Oh no," she murmured. "Phoebe is a perfectly lovely person, when she isn't managing your love life."

"Is that your sister's habit?"

"I know that's mother's purpose."

"I will tell her to desist should the topic arise," Seven stated definitively.

"Why? She'd be aiding your cause."

"Kathryn, I do not require assistance."

That made Kathryn blink. "You don't?"

"I am here, with you. That is all I require."

"So you don't mean for me to fall madly in love with you?"

"Were you to go 'mad' that would be disturbing. I know that you love me..."

"You do?" Kathryn stared at her.

"Yes. I have known for some time. It is, however, not in your nature to move quickly with such things. You were engaged to Mark for three years, and before him to Justin Tighe for two years. You are cautious. I am consistent. You will be ready when you are ready, and I will be here."

Kathryn wasn't sure whether to be flattered or upset by Seven's analysis of her. She settled for switching topics. "Um. I did promise you a tour of an Indiana farm sometime, didn't I?"

Seven smiled, and the purity of it made Kathryn's heart skip a beat. Seven's head dipped in agreement. "You did."

"Will you accompany me on a sunset walk then?"

"Yes."

Not sure how to do this, whether she should take Seven's arm, or hand, or simply walk beside her, Kathryn hesitated as she studied Seven's near arm. Then she looked up at Seven's face and saw the quirked, questioning eyebrow. "I'm not sure where to start."

"Why do we not start out walking toward the sunset? The light will not last much longer and neither of us has a lamp."

"That would take us past the house," Kathryn mused. "I could retrieve one."

"As you wish."

As they began to walk, Kathryn found their shoulders sliding past one another as the two women remained close together to watch the ground in the fading light. The ground became uneven, as fields were wont to do out here in the natural world as opposed to the perfectly smooth deck plating of a starship. Seven's hand, the human one, curled around her elbow offering a pleasant, steady connection.

"May I ask you a question?" Seven's inquiry interrupted the silence as they neared the house.

"Personal?" Kathryn had been enjoying the undemanding quiet.

"Somewhat." Seven gestured back the direction they had come. "When did you learn to climb trees?"

"When I was a child," Kathryn answered.

"Is it a common skill children learn? I do not recall Naomi ever climbing a tree. Even in the Flotter simulations on the holodeck."

"She might have had she been born on a planet. I was always surrounded by trees. She was always surrounded by bulkheads."

"So no one set of childhood experiences is universal?"

"No."

"The Commander says I 'missed out' on childhood."

Kathryn winced a little at the mention of Chakotay but quickly offered, "You were only six when you were assimilated."

"It made me believe there was a singular experience I had no chance of ever comprehending." Seven turned away pensively.

"You shouldn't." Kathryn put her right hand over Seven's on her left arm.

"Do you believe there is something I 'missed'?"

Kathryn considered all the things which sprang to mind which defined 'childhood' to her... learning to talk, learning to listen, making friends, learning new skills, learning the rules, breaking them, making mistakes, learning to care for yourself, learning to care for others, playing, interacting with other children.

"Naomi was a great deal of help to you with a lot of childhood activities," Kathryn said with slow realization. Her voice soft and accepting of their path spreading out before them both, "But perhaps you still need a chance to do something without worrying about what is the right or wrong way to proceed. To just try something because you want to."

"Does that mean you will discuss a relationship with me?" Seven asked quietly.

Seven's leap of insight from talking about childhood growth to their relationship made Kathryn smile. Definitely not dealing with a little girl here, Kathryn, she thought. Prefacing her words, she slid her hand down Seven's forearm, interlacing their fingers. "I think it means I'll give myself a chance to do the same."

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Seven's smile was more dazzling than the fading sunset.

Seven retrieved the lamp, returning to where Janeway waited at the foot of the steps. She answered the look she had come to understand as "Report", with the only information she had acquired inside the home. "Your mother is comfortably resting, doing something she refers to as a 'cross word'."

"It's a puzzle, you fill in words from clues given." From where she leaned against the railing, Kathryn then pushed herself upright, smiled and held out a hand expectantly for the lamp.

Their hands touched as Seven relinquished the lamp. Her body reacted with a twitchy tingle, much as it had when she had grasped the captain's waist to assist her from her high perch in the tree. She found Kathryn's eyes in the growing darkness, mesmerized by the shadows and light from the porch playing across the smooth features.

Kathryn switched the lamp to her other hand and grasped Seven's nearest, which happened to be her left, the one with the Borg sensory mesh. The young woman felt her stomach shift in expectation as Kathryn stepped close, the smaller woman's breath caressing her throat. Involuntarily, to steady her suddenly spinning consciousness, Seven inhaled and caught a scent.

Her hand was squeezed by Kathryn. Knowing Kathryn had dictated they would only take a walk, Seven ignored her body's clamor for contact -- *at least a kiss!* it begged.

"Are you still interested in a walk?" Kathryn asked.

"Yes."

Kathryn kept hold of her hand, leading westward. The sun was gone now, only the faint orange and purple hues lit the horizon. From somewhere in her knowledge, Seven knew the time was referred to dusk. The plains displayed out before them were faintly golden -- wheat, Seven identified. Smaller patches of corn, tomatoes, and rolling hills of bean vines were pointed out by Janeway as they strolled. Even though she knew from her stores of knowledge that food grew naturally, Seven still found herself expressing awe and amazement at the vastness.

"There's so much," she said, her voice tiny.

Kathryn led Seven down toward the rows. She reached out, snapping a single plump pod from its tiny bough.

Seven watched as Kathryn gently pried open the pod with a fingernail. Inside lay two round peas.

She sensed, in Kathryn's pause, a significance and raised her eyes to find Janeway's in the shadows.

"I used to help mother pick the peas when I was little. Until Phoebe came along it had been just her and I. Daddy was so frequently off on missions. She used to say we were 'two peas in a pod'," Kathryn explained.

"Peas make you think of your mother?" Seven asked.

"Not exactly," Kathryn chuckled. "They make me think of you... and me."

Seven nodded, careful not to assume something before Kathryn said anything.

"I... It's a silly dream I think sometimes to want to be that close to someone, that you do everything together, finish each other's thoughts, answer each other's questions before they're even asked..."

Seven nodded. Kathryn had glanced toward the porch, where she had just answered the unspoken question.

"I never expected to find it again with anyone," Kathryn exhaled. Seven questioned, "Do you want to?"

"Yes," Kathryn said. "I really do. But I don't know that I know how anymore."

Offering her own ruminations, Seven thought, might be appropriate now. "I realized several months ago that I was in love with you," she said. "Perhaps there is a benefit to your no longer being a captain."

"What's that?"

"Perhaps we can be friends," Seven concluded.

"When..." Kathryn seemed to be enacting a confession of sorts. Seven held quite still.

"When you reached out to help me in sickbay after the Doctor had removed the Borg components from B'Elanna, Tuvok, and myself..."

Seven instantly recalled the pain and discomfort she had seen in the captain's face, and responded to with a quick hand to the other woman's arm. "I wanted to help. You... had again risked your individuality to preserve mine. I... 'Thank you' seemed inadequate."

Kathryn started to toss away the broken pod. Seven rescued it from her fingers however and their other hands laced together. Seven continued their walk, this time leading Kathryn up a low hill. Kathryn drew to a stop at the top, looking up over her shoulder. Seven noted the moon in its waxing phase in the sky.

The other woman's lips pulled into a gentle curve, and then the fathomless eyes turned to Seven once again. "I should have told you then," Kathryn admitted. "But there was so much... going on." Kathryn paused, her throat moved as she swallowed. "Even when I was your captain, I couldn't stop myself from wanting to be your friend... desperately. I'd try. Loving you, as I felt it happening, wasn't wise. It wasn't right."

"I sensed you..." Seven now realized, and searched for words to explain. "Pulling away from me. I couldn't determine what I had done to earn your disapproval."

"And then the divide just seemed too wide to jump," Kathryn finished for her.

Yes, Seven thought, *that was what I felt*. Finally she was able to concretely describe those months of aching, the need welling up to touch, and be touched, for which she had sought contact, and fallen mistakenly for the Commander, who had been willing to give her that contact.

But, she realized now, if she had not had the experience with the Commander, she would not now know what Kathryn Janeway really meant to her life, to her happiness.

The expression on Kathryn's face however was clearly regret. "You should not regret your choices, Kathryn."

"They lost me Voyager, my career... You," Janeway said abruptly.

"They have lost you nothing. If you had not made the choices you did I would not be here."

"Admiral Janeway made the choice to go back in time to us," Kathryn denied. "Not me."

"However you agreed to her plan." Before Janeway could address that, no doubt planning to explain it away, Seven went on. "However, that is not the decision to which I was referring."

"It wasn't? Coming home early saved 22 lives." Janeway hugged herself. "Your life."

"You had already saved it," Seven said gently, grasping Kathryn's hand from her chest. "Four years ago. And three years before that when you arrived in the Delta Quadrant."

"We were pulled by the Caretaker's array," Kathryn pointed out. "No choice there."

"You destroyed the array."

"Not one of my finer moments," Kathryn mumbled.

"On the contrary," Seven countered. She posed a question to Janeway, "Had you not become stranded, forced to traverse the distance from that point to the Alpha Quadrant under normal propulsion... What would have happened to me?"

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Kathryn's eyes misted over with unshed tears as she looked up into Seven's face, willing herself to believe, yet scared to relinquish the familiar burden of personal responsibility which had weighted her down for so many years.

Seven pressed her case. "You once asked me if I would have changed what you did."

Nodding in memory, Kathryn could only hold her breath the same as she had that fateful night in the cargo bay.

"I gave it a great deal of thought before I said 'no'."

"I remember," Kathryn exhaled. "Your answer made my decision to let the Doctor experience the whole story of his breakdown, to grow from it if he could."

Seven nodded. "You decided you could not change his past." She returned to her point. "You should not desire to change your past either. It was not only your decision to sever me from the Collective that I would not change, Kathryn. I would not ask you to change any decision prior to that moment.

"Every one of them put you on the only path to lead to me, and... to now."

The tears were too much to contain then. Kathryn felt the first of them spill onto her cheeks as she held Seven's gaze, felt the sincerity of the words flow over her raw self-esteem, and saw the adoration looking back at her from steady pale blue eyes.

Her muscles crumpled on themselves and she felt Seven's touch as the blonde lowered them both to sit in the fragrant green grass. The person she had always thought in need of her support cradled her now.

Her back aligned to Seven's front and the ex-Borg's muscular arms wrapped securely around her shoulders. The dam burst inside her and years of tears rushed out.

"How did you become so insightful about humanity?" Kathryn asked when her raw voice could at last manage a whisper as Seven's forehead rested against her temple.

"I have not deciphered all of humanity," Seven said gently. "I have always however worked hard at deciphering you. You who have always been at the center of my very unsure universe from the beginning.

"I not only looked into my answers for your questions that constantly challenged me, but also your reasons for asking them."

"So you're saying that you feel all of my decisions to date have been the correct ones?"

"With two exceptions," Seven replied. "That you did not speak to me about your feelings while we were aboard Voyager. Secondly, that you abandoned your position as Voyager's captain."

"I didn't abandon the post, Seven. I was removed."

"But it was your decision not to fight it."

With a new appreciation for Seven's insight, Kathryn looked off at the stars filling the night sky above them.

Did she really belong out there? Was it just what she had always known, or thought on some level that her father would want? Or was the search through the stars what she wanted?

Seven's hand slid to Kathryn's lap, covering her hand. Without looking back, Kathryn asked, "Would you come with me?"

"I would."

Now for the harder question. Kathryn turned and met Seven's eyes. "Would you stay with me if my bid to return to duty fails?"

"It will not."

"But if it did?" Kathryn spoke with measured honesty. "Seven, there really are a lot of

reasons, even if I couched all my decisions in the best terms possible, that Starfleet might be right that I'm not fit anymore." She exhaled. "So... If I came back to Indiana permanently, would you stay?"

Seven was quiet, and made aware by Seven's earlier words, that much more than the simple moment was being considered, Kathryn wondered what criteria the logically minded young woman was ticking through. She held her breath.

At last Seven's gaze returned to her own. "Yes."

Kathryn squeezed the hand in her own with joy. Seven squeezed back. She leaned in. "Thank you, Seven." She gently kissed the young woman's full lips.

When Kathryn began to draw away, to lean against a tree, Seven followed. She put her hands gently against Kathryn's shoulders.

Their bodies melded, their mouths caressed. Seven absorbed the silky feeling of the captain's hair tickling her cheeks and lifted a hand to run her fingers through it. She now recognized how inferior all previous human contact had been for her compared to this moment in time, to the feelings

evoked by contact with, and connecting with, this woman.

Arousal swamped her stomach, unchecked by any attempt at reason, and at least she understood what to do with it now. She grasped for a way to steady her suddenly weak legs.

The two fell, tumbling to the ground. Instinctively, Seven locked her larger frame around the captain's and was gradually able to stop their descent down the hillside. The pair finally came to rest with Seven on her back, with Kathryn sprawled across her chest.

"Are you all right?" Seven asked.

Kathryn groaned then lifted her head and smiled. "I believe the term you would use is 'functioning properly'." The captain's voice was light, airy, and then the woman chuckled, causing a sensation akin to electrical discharges down Seven's spine which ignited her groin. She shifted to relieve the discomfort. Kathryn's hips pushed back.

Seven realized that Kathryn was initiating copulation. Chakotay had often shifted against her body in a similar manner. However she felt none of the reluctance she had felt with the commander. Kathryn on the other hand had said she wanted to move slowly. "Have you changed your mind?" Seven asked aloud.

"What is it the Borg say?" Kathryn reflected. "Ah, yes. Resistance is futile."

"I do not wish to make you feel pressured," Seven backtracked with both her body and her words.

Kathryn's grip on her thigh stalled her retreat though. "We've just suffered through four years of nobility, Seven," she said carefully. "So, would you please kiss me?"

"Your sister will be disappointed she cannot persuade you."

Kathryn chuckled and dropped her face against the smooth pale shoulder. "Maybe we should let her get it out of her system."

"You will 'grin and bear it'?"

"Where did you hear that?"

"It is what Chakotay said to me when I wished him well, but that I intended to seek you out. I did not wish for him to feel hurt by my choice."

Kathryn nodded. "When did you say he was shipping out on Voyager?"

Seven's brows drew together. "Are you going to consider returning to Starfleet?"

"One thing at a time, Seven. Right now I want to make love to you properly in a bed."

"I find that... acceptable." Seven's gaze twinkled with amusement.

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Kathryn chuckled, rose and then helped Seven to her feet. In the quiet, they pulled on their clothing and plucked grass bits from one another's hair. Hand in hand they returned to the Janeway home.

Their lovemaking was a revelation, in so many ways. For Kathryn, to discover a woman's body. For Seven to discover her heart. Every touch seemed both feather-light and capturing as tightly as if silken ties were wrapping themselves around their bodies.

In the quiet aftermath, as their breathing returned to normal, Seven admitted with amazement she had enjoyed giving and receiving love. Not the act of sex but the act of uniting two people emotionally. She had never understood that about the concept of copulation until Kathryn.

"I'm glad you feel that way," Kathryn said, stroking Seven's back and hips and the plentiful breasts while they talked. As Seven began to arch to her touch, Kathryn awakened her own sexuality once again, a part of herself which had lain dormant, pitifully unused, until this drone captured her heart and made her want again...

The next morning...

At the kitchen counter Kathryn poured a cup of coffee from the pot on the stove. Seven stood beside her in customary observational stance, hands tucked behind her back. A Borg-augmented eyebrow arched as she studied Kathryn's reaction to her first sip. Apparently the consumption of coffee for the captain truly was a sensual experience, she decided, recognizing the satiated and languid look glowing in the blue eyes studying her over the rim of the mug.

Lowering the mug, Kathryn asked Seven, "Want some?"

Phoebe looked up from her reading. That was the first words spoken since the two had come into the kitchen almost five minutes ago. The smaller body turned openly to the taller, and the stubborn Janeway chin lifted and softened. Seven's voice in response was modulated, "No. Thank you." Phoebe had gathered from her mother that the former Borg drone did everything in a very measured 'collected' manner.

"Want some apple juice?" Phoebe inquired then, holding up the jug next to where she sat at the small kitchen table.

Every clue that Seven was in love with Kathryn and vice versa, was evident next as the two women could only slowly tear their gazes apart.

While Seven managed only to look mildly disconcerted, Kathryn's eyes had narrowed and her lips were drawn to a tight, thin line.

Ignoring her sister for the moment, Phoebe feasted her eyes on the tall blonde. Kathryn certainly had incredible taste. Also the hint of vulnerability her artist's eye now discovered in the side glance toward Kathryn no doubt appealed to her sister's instincts as well. Phoebe reiterated her question, "Would you prefer apple juice, Seven?"

Seven accepted a glass, holding it while Phoebe poured, and then the blonde sat in the chair next to her which Phoebe pulled out. "Thank you, Phoebe."

Kathryn's eyes darkened with jealousy. So she can be made jealous. All the better. Seven was beautiful and Phoebe turned on the charm granting Seven her full attention as Kathryn sat down opposite Seven. "Do you remember me?"

Phoebe asked Seven. "When Voyager first came home?"

"I possess an eidetic memory. However, as you are Captain Janeway's sibling I do not believe I could forget such an important person. You have a great deal to do with whom the captain

is as a person."

Oh, Phoebe thought, she even flirts well herself. How interesting... "How so?"

Seven's measured tone was almost hypnotic as Phoebe listened. "Sibling relationships are psychologically very important to the formation of an individual." Seven looked at Kathryn before continuing. "The first bonds of giving and receiving love are between a child and his or her parents. However the second bond forms between siblings as an outgrowth of the competition for parental love." Seven moved her shoulders deferentially. "It is likely that my lack of a sibling can account as much for my personal reserve as my eighteen years spent as a Borg drone."

"You sound as though you've given this a great deal of thought," Phoebe marveled.

"Discovering who I am as an individual has been encouraged since I was severed from the Collective." Again Seven glanced at Kathryn, whom Phoebe noticed now had a faint blush on her cheeks.

"Was Kathryn a good teacher?"

Phoebe was again startled by the deep insight revealed by Seven's reply, "She has been everything I required."

"Was she stubborn?"

"So was I."

"Pushy?"

"Frequently."

"But you pushed right back, right?"

Kathryn broke in. "Yes, she did, but that's in the past."

"Why? It does you good to argue, Kathryn. It keeps you honest," Phoebe reasoned. "Having everyone agreeing with you would make you ill."

Seven blinked as she recalled the captain saying something to that effect during her very first year on Voyager.

The woman reclined with envious ease despite Seven's bold disagreement about the recently completed mission.

"Good," Captain Janeway said, confidence brimming which Seven envied. "I regret the day everyone on this ship agrees with me."

Seven had experienced her first episode of pride in herself in the aftermath of that discussion, one of many firsts she would experience with the Voyager captain. Like last night, she thought dreamily.

Looking up from retrieving a muffin when her hand met Kathryn's in the basket, her eyes met Kathryn's across the table. Love, she marveled, was being lost and found in the same breath.

Phoebe cleared her throat. Seven broke her gaze from Kathryn's and focused on the airy physicality of the younger Janeway. Where Kathryn was compact and composed of fiery temperament, and high color, Phoebe Janeway was thin boned, tall, with light skin and deep brown hair which curled wildly around her features. She smiled.

"Okay," demanded Phoebe. "When's the wedding already?"

Kathryn opened her mouth to speak.

"And don't tell me you haven't done anything about how deeply this woman is in love with you, Kathryn. That would be cruel."

Kathryn withdrew her hand from covering Seven's and exhaled. "It isn't your business."

"Maybe not. But she loves you. You love her. What's the wait?"

"I have a few meetings to attend to first," Kathryn said, looking over to Seven.

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Seven dipped her chin and the sparkle of her eyes warmed Kathryn immensely. "You will succeed in regaining your captaincy."

"Hot damn, Seven!" Phoebe slapped the table. Both other women looked at her in alarm. Her sister had been rudderless since the hearings, unwilling or unable to face her failure, or her perceived failure. "Finally someone else who can drag you from your self-pity, Kathryn. I've been waiting months for this. You'd let yourself act like a whipped dog."

"Phoebe!"

The three women at the table looked up to see Gretchen Janeway leaning on the doorway.

"Apologize to your sister."

"Mother, it's all right. Phoebe's right. I'd given up." Kathryn looked to Seven. "Now that there's someone I can share it with, I find I do want my life back."

"So I'll ask again," Phoebe said. "When's the wedding?"

"I believe human protocol dictates that Kathryn should meet my family first," Seven said with a smile. "I have send a message to my aunt that I would like to visit."

Kathryn smiled. "Willing to meet some of your family now?"

Seven echoed Kathryn's sentiments, "Now that I have someone to share it with."

THE END