

## ***The Future is Ours – Part 10***

### **“No Unnecessary Risks”**

By Dawn

Rated PG

Summary: Getting down to business.

\*\*\*\*\*

The next day, Kathryn stopped by the hospital as promised, assuring Sekaya that the baby would be fine, that labor would be manageable, and that they'd keep in regular contact. She treasured the friendship that they'd begun and vowed to keep it going.

After she said goodbye to Sekaya, Kathryn pulled Chakotay into an unoccupied room at the hospital. She rose up on her toes and kissed him. “I miss you already.”

He cradled her face in his hands, looking at her as if he was memorizing every freckle. “Take care of yourself.”

“I will. I have an entire starship looking out for me, you know.”

Shaking his head, he said, “That hasn't exactly kept you safe in the past.”

“I'll be careful.”

“No unnecessary risks.”

She crooked a smile and assured him, “I promise that all risks will be completely necessary.”

“Why doesn't that make me feel better?”

“Because you know me too well.” She kissed him again. “I'll call you every evening so you can sleep at night.”

“I'll count on it.” He hugged her tightly to his chest. “I love you, Kathryn.”

“I love you, too.”

“Kathryn, I wanted to ask...” He swallowed hard.

His hesitation prompted her to look up, and what she saw was a very intense expression. “What is it?”

“When I come home in August...”

“Yes?” She had a feeling that he was about to propose again. Her insides knotted nervously.

He dismissed what he was going to say. “This isn’t the right time or place. We can talk about it later.”

“Are you sure?” She caressed his cheek with her thumb to encourage him. “If there’s something you want to talk about, I can take a little more time here.”

“It’s nothing,” he admitted. “I was just thinking that maybe we should move in together, but it’s probably premature to be talking about that when we don’t know what your life will be like in two months.”

She hid her disappointment. Living together wasn’t exactly the romantic invitation she was hoping for, although with their recent argument, she wasn’t sure it was the right time to be thinking about any kind of permanence. They had a lot to work out before making a binding, long-term commitment. “We can talk about it when you get back.” She kissed him lightly again.

“I’d like that.”

She stood back and straightened her blouse in preparation for leaving. “I should’ve put my uniform on before beaming back.”

“You don’t need it. You radiate a command presence regardless of what you’re wearing.”

“I’ll call you tonight.”

Just as she was about to call the Pioneer, he stopped her hand from touching her communicator and pulled her against him. One hand was on her back, pressing her firmly against him. The other hand cradled the side of her neck, his thumb gently caressing her jaw.

She closed her eyes in anticipation, feeling a flutter of arousal at the intimate touch. As his warm lips closed over hers and his tongue swept unhurried through her mouth, she moaned and her body came alive with their deeply passionate kiss. Her face warmed as the spiral of heat rose from her core, making her tremble with need. Their bodies were pressed so tightly together that she had no doubts that he was just as affected by the kiss as she was.

With his lips barely touching hers, he said, “I’ll be dreaming about reuniting with you in August, and looking forward to the day when we won’t have to say goodbye to each other for more than a few hours at a time.”

The conviction in his voice gave her pause, making her realize that he needed reassurance. She delicately kissed his sensuous lips. "Once I do what I need to do, I'm all yours."

He pressed his hand firmer against her back. "I want you to be mine while you're doing what you need to do."

She looked into his deep brown eyes and said, "I'll try."

"Thank you." He released her so he could hold her face with both hands. Kissing her forehead, he whispered, "Take care of yourself. I love you, Kathryn."

"I love you, too." She stepped back and tapped her communicator. "Janeway to the Pioneer. One to beam up."

When she materialized on the ship, she saw Bernie waiting for her. "I hope you haven't been waiting in the transporter room for me all morning, Captain."

He extended a gentlemanly hand to help her step off the transporter pad. "No, I just happened to be near when you called. How was your vacation?"

"Banora is a beautiful colony. I enjoyed myself immensely."

"I'm glad, although I was hoping Captain Chakotay would change his mind about returning with us."

As they walked out into the corridor, Kathryn said, "He was torn, but since his sister is expecting a baby any day, he made the right choice to stay with her for awhile longer."

"Of course." Bernie directed her to turn left to get to the turbolift.

"I should study the schematics of this ship. I have no idea where I'm going."

"You'll get used to her in no time. I assume you want to go to your quarters first?"

"Yes, to change into uniform. If you have time in about an hour, I'd like to talk."

"I'm all yours, Admiral, as is this ship."

She smiled. "Then I'll give the same order I've given for the last seven and a half years. Set a course for home."

"Aye, Admiral." He said happily.

\*\*\*\*\*

Once dressed, she studied her reflection in the mirror, tugging down on the bulky jacket in an attempt to make it fit better. It was the first time she'd worn the admiral's uniform, and she wasn't sure how she felt about it. The double-set of pips on gold bars was flashy and the decorative details made her feel like she was in a dress uniform. However, she had to admit that she liked the longer jacket. She'd had to work very hard to keep her belly flat for the old one, but this one was a little more forgiving. She supposed that the reason admiral uniforms were cut this way was because most of them had grown soft in the middle. She put on the finishing touch, the belt, and immediately decided that the accessory was the worst part of the whole ensemble. She said to her reflection, "It looks like a big bull's eye, for crying out loud."

She quickly scanned her messages, checked in with her staff on Earth, and dug into work. During the two-day trip back, she met with most of the Pioneer crew and directed Bernie to have all available officers working on confidential research. Sciences were to evaluate the sources, availability, and cost of material needs for the post-war rebuilding efforts. Security was to research all of the distress calls and Starfleet's responses during the past two years. Meanwhile, she and Bernie had long conversations that mirrored what Governor Cameron had alluded to – a conspiracy of exploitation that didn't sit well with her at all. She could easily see why Owen Paris and Matt Patterson were eager to take action, but hesitant to do so without proof.

Back on Earth, her staff had already furnished and supplied her offices at San Francisco's Federation office building. Within a day of arriving, she was completely booked with meetings, including several with Admiral Khurma to catch her up to speed on the President's agenda.

With the promotion to Admiral, her life changed significantly. She now had at least one security officer with her at all times because of her fame and high profile job. While she was on Banora, Starfleet had reconfigured the security protection at her San Francisco home. She had energy barriers on all her windows and an impenetrable locking system on all the doors. When she told Chakotay about it, he was pleased, but commented that it might make living together difficult to conceal. She had to agree.

Khurma asked her and Harry to travel with him to Paris for a week. She appreciated that her new commanding officer insisted on attending all meetings that included President Zife, yet he gave her the freedom to establish her own working relationships with key members of the Security Council.

The meetings were to inform her of past resolutions and to catch her up to speed on current debates and policies for diplomatic relations. Most of the information shared was public knowledge and not as useful as her conversations with Captain Young and Governor Cameron. There was hardly a minute when she wasn't in a meeting or at a social function during that week. She was exhausted, but she was establishing good working relationships.

Gretchen, Phoebe, and Katie came to Paris to celebrate Kathryn's 43<sup>rd</sup> birthday. She was glad to see them because she was feeling depressed at the notion of spending her first birthday back on Earth without her family. The four of them, plus Harry and her bodyguard Scott Doyle, had a lovely dinner at a French bistro and then climbed the Eiffel tower together.

She called Chakotay every night and filled him in as best she could, and in return, he kept her apprised of events on Banora. Sekaya gave birth to Kolopak on May 23<sup>rd</sup> and was a happy, healthy baby boy with dark brown eyes and a head full of black hair. Kathryn made a mental note to visit her favorite yarn shop in Bloomington at her first opportunity so she could knit him a blanket.

Upon returning to San Francisco, she gave an official press conference to assure the Federation citizens that she'd begun work and to give them the satisfaction of knowing she was studiously absorbing as much information as possible. She conveyed that she was equipping herself with knowledge before setting out into space to open diplomatic dialogues.

She and Harry were exchanging notes to wrap up the week when Sue buzzed her. "Admiral, I apologize for the interruption."

"That's all right," she said as she smiled apologetically to Harry. "What can I do for you?"

"Dr. Zimmerman is on hold and doesn't want to bother you if you're busy, but he wants to know if you have any social plans for the weekend."

Kathryn was amused. "Send him through." She said to Harry, "I'll just give him a minute."

"Take your time, Admiral," Harry said with a chuckle.

When the doctor's image came up on her monitor, she asked, "What do you have in mind?"

"I'm sorry to interrupt you, Admiral."

"It's quite all right, Joe. Harry and I are just comparing notes."

He said with excitement, "The New York City Opera is premiering a new opera tomorrow evening, and I think it's one you would really enjoy. Would you like to accompany me?"

She frowned. "Opera?"

“Not a traditional one. It’s a love story and all the music is inspired by Twentieth Century American jazz. I know you love that genre, and even though it’s been months since you said it, you did promise me that we’d socialize more.”

“That was almost six months ago, and I was thinking we’d play some golf on the holodeck or I’d show you my DaVinci program.”

“Yes, but since Chakotay isn’t here, I thought you might need encouragement to let your hair down, so to speak. Call it a birthday celebration. I’ll even bring a gift.”

“Well, how can I resist that?” She winked at him. “I assume this is a formal occasion?”

“All debuts are, but I don’t believe you need a ball gown.”

“I’m sure I can drum something up. May I reconnect you with Sue so that she can make travel arrangements?”

“Of course, Admiral, and thank you. You’re going to love this performance, I’m sure.”

“I’m looking forward to it.” She quickly added, “Oh, and Joe, I have a security escort everywhere I go. I’m sure he or she can stand in the back, but they’ll have to be with me.”

“I’m pleased that you’re taking your personal safety seriously, Admiral.” His smile was genuine. “I’ll work out the details with Lieutenant Brooks. Thank you again, and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Kathryn shook her head in amusement after she closed the comm link. She asked Harry, “Would you like to be my security? Sounds like this would be right up your alley.”

“I’d love to see it, but I already have a date.”

“Oh? Do I know her?” Kathryn rested her chin on her hand, eager to hear all about it.

“Her name is Michelle Hurst, a civilian,” he added. “She works downstairs in the press office.”

“First date?”

“Second, if coffee counts.”

“Coffee always counts in my book. Where’s the second date?”

Harry blushed and looked down at his hands. “I’m taking her out to dinner and then I thought we’d walk along the beach. It might be corny, but I think she’ll like it.”

“Sounds very romantic.” She loved the close friendship that she was developing with all the members of her staff. There was something to be said for only having five people to look after. “One suggestion, if I may?”

“Of course,” he said eagerly.

“Wear slacks that you can roll up in case you want to walk in the water. There’s nothing quite like a nice kiss when your toes are squishing in the sand.”

He laughed. “I’ll remember that.”

“You’ll have to tell me all about her on Sunday at Captain Young’s wedding.”

“I’ll give you a full report.”

Kathryn laughed and held up a hand, “Oh, I don’t need to know everything.” She winked at him and said, “Let’s finish this up so we can get out of here early. I don’t know about you, but my brain has absorbed about all it can for one week.”

“Mine too, but I think we’ve made progress. I’ll work on this more tomorrow to come up with a reference system for all of this information.”

“No, no, no... don’t work tomorrow. With the wedding, it’s going to be a busy weekend. This can definitely wait until Monday.”

“Yes, but I want to get on top of it while it’s all fresh.”

“I know this is the pot calling the kettle black, but don’t forget to take some time off while you can. Once we head out into space, we’ll wish we could.”

“I will, Admiral.”

They quickly finished and got out of the office by 3:30. Kathryn went straight home and happily took a long, hot bubble bath. Later that evening, she called Chakotay.

“Hi there, handsome,” Kathryn smiled brightly when Chakotay’s image came up on the screen. He was holding Kolopak.

“Handsome? You’ve never called me that before.”

“I wasn’t talking to you.” She leaned forward and touched the screen, wishing she could touch the baby. Newborns were her weakness.

“Oh, thanks,” he said with a laugh. “How was your day? I see you’re ready for bed, and it’s not even dark there, yet.”

“I’m wiped out from the week and the time zone difference. In Paris, it’s almost midnight.”

“I saw your press conference this morning.”

“Was it too vague?” Kathryn frowned. “I wanted to give them more, but there’s nothing to report.”

“I think it was fine. It’s only been three weeks since the public has heard from you, and I doubt anyone thinks you could have solved anything since then.”

“I’m thinking about doing these every Friday morning, if I’m on Earth.”

“That would be a good way to stay in the public eye, although if I may make a suggestion?”

“Sure.”

“Only do them when you have something for them. Otherwise, they might not keep listening.”

“Good point.” She thought for a short moment before adding, “I doubt I’ll have a problem staying in the spotlight.”

“Speaking of that, Steven had a suggestion that you keep a low profile when you head out.”

“Why?” Kathryn furrowed her eyebrows. “We want the publicity.”

“Yes, but not at the risk of attracting unwanted attention. Especially on those planets that I told you about last week – the ones with terrorist activities.”

She nodded in thought. “Could you forward me your research on those? I’d like to look at it and send it to Commander Ral. She has a team looking at something similar.”

“Sure, but I suspect she already knows. It’s all public news reports.”

“Still, it would be good to cross reference the research,” she said in conclusion before changing the subject. “Oh, I won’t be available to call you tomorrow evening.”

“Oh?” He adjusted the now-sleeping infant in his arms.

“I have a date,” she said with a little smirk, and then laughed at his double take.

“A date?” he asked with surprise.



“Dr. Joe has invited me to attend an opera premiere in New York – some jazz thing.” Kathryn smiled to reassure him. “I thought it might be fun, and a good way to keep me from working all weekend.”

He grimaced. “Opera?”

“He assures me that I’ll love it.”

“If you say so,” he looked at her askance. “But don’t forget to take your security with you.”

She held up a hand in surrender. “Not to worry, Sue has already made arrangements.”

“I have plenty to worry about with you. Do you also have security lined up for the wedding?”

“Yes, it’s all set.” Changing the subject again, she asked, “Are you doing okay there?”

“Just fine. I think I’m getting the hang of this baby-thing. He’s got a good pattern of sleep established and I sleep right through his cries at night. Tomorrow, Steven and I are going to start work on a playhouse for him.”

“A playhouse? He’s only two days old!”

Chakotay laughed. “Yes, but I want to build him something, and that’s what Sekaya and Steven could agree on. They’ll keep it in storage for a couple years, but it’ll be built and ready for him when he wants it.”

“Sounds like fun,” Kathryn smiled genuinely, wishing she were there, too, but duty called. She sighed tiredly. “Well, if it’s okay with you, I’m going to turn in. I’m looking forward to sleeping in tomorrow, and I want to take full advantage of that by going to bed nice and early.”

“I can see you already, lazing around like a soft, lazy cat.”

“That’s me.” She winked and then said with sincere affection, “I love you.”

He touched the screen. “I love you, too. Have fun at the opera.”

“I will.” She touched his fingers in return. “Goodnight, Chakotay.”

“Goodnight.”

\*\*\*\*\*

By the middle of the next week, she was getting used to the rhythm of working regular hours. She and B'Elanna exercised together in the mornings, and the Voyagers kept her busy by inviting her to dinner often. By the second week, she wondered if there was a conspiracy afoot, because she received casual invitations at least every other night, and not all came from her former senior staff. She didn't mind one bit and was enjoying developing more relaxed friendships with her former crew.

After a month in San Francisco, Kathryn's team headed into space for their first round of diplomatic conferences. Over the course of two-weeks, she met with the dignitaries of four planets that were clearly favored on President Zife's agenda. Two had left the Federation during the war, and the other two indicated that they'd suffered great economic losses during that dark period, although Kathryn didn't see any indicators of hard times on any of the worlds.

She learned that, due to their involvement in the rebuilding efforts, the economies on all four planets had thrived since the war. The planets were all heralded as success stories, and all the well-publicized speeches given by the local government officials were full of tedious accolades for the Federation and its President. Kathryn's diplomatic skills weren't required, and she said as little as possible to avoid aligning herself with all the brown-nosers.

Kathryn went back to Earth for a week to assess what they'd learned and make plans for their next excursion. At a meeting with Admiral Khurma, she boldly asked, "Was there a point to those conferences?"

He chuckled. "No, not really, except to showcase all of the successful connections that the Federation has molded during the last two years."

Trying hard not to roll her eyes, Kathryn said, "I see."

"Go ahead, Kathryn. I don't mind one bit if you express your irritation."

She smirked. "It was all a bit much. I hope we haven't lost ground."

"Have you listened to the media response?" he asked.

"One of my aides is reviewing the news reports for me."

As he poured her a cup of coffee, Khurma said, "I'm never sure whether it's helpful when the media freely expresses their take on political situations, especially when they interview the so-called experts for their opinions. However, in this case, it's going to work in your favor."

"What do they say?"

“That it was clear by your lack of comments during the last two weeks that there was nothing of importance going on. They surmised that these outings were nothing more than President Zife using your fame for a publicity tour.”

“They’re right.” Kathryn scratched her chin. “How is the President taking it?”

“He told me that your presence was a positive step in the right direction. He’s thrilled with all the publicity from the events, and as far as I know, hasn’t paid attention to the Fednews. I’m guessing that he really doesn’t take much interest in what the so-called experts have to say.”

“Intriguing observation,” she nodded appreciatively, thinking that if Zife didn’t pay attention to the news, then she could work that angle.

Khurma handed her a PADD and said, “Now, the real work begins.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Kathryn briefed her staff on Khurma’s agenda, which was to appease the governments of the Federation members who had expressed ardent dissatisfaction with recent council decisions. Her assignment for the next five conferences was to listen and placate.

On all five planets, Kathryn felt their frustration with the Federation Council. They believed the Council lacked any true authority and that the President had far too much influence. In addition, she learned that Federation-wide resources had been cut for scientific and medical research, assistance with space exploration was no longer available, and the sponsorship program for students to attend Starfleet Academy had diminished almost completely.

There were numerous concerns about why their planets were asked to cut back while others, like the President’s home planet of Bolius, were profiting. Kathryn assured all that she heard their concerns clearly, and although it might take time to forge change, she hoped that they would bear with her.

Overall, the coverage in the media was positive, and the journalists who pontificated on her every comment were correct when they said it was too early to expect results. She was, however, amused by all the discussion around how she should proceed. None of it was very useful, but it served a good purpose in that it got people talking about how to reunite the Federation. It was a far cry from all the finger pointing that had been taking place just two months previous, around the time of the awards banquet.

Still aboard the Pioneer, Kathryn was struggling with how to proceed and decided to seek out her favorite sounding board. She placed a call to Chakotay.

He smiled as he said, “You’re calling early today.”

“I just finished a dinner meeting to engage in yet another debate with my staff,” she sighed, feeling a little gloomy.

“Are they not living up to expectations?”

“Quite the opposite. They’re very good at debate, all of them. Problem is we agree on the issues.”

“That’s not exactly a reason to be concerned,” he pointed out.

“No, it’s not.” She smiled half-heartedly. “They’re a good group, and they’ve finally relaxed around me, which I really appreciate.”

“That must mean you’re relaxed. A happy Kathryn equals a happy crew.” He studied her face with concern. “Problem is, you don’t look it, and you’re still in uniform.”

“I don’t feel it.” She rested her chin in her hand. “I know how much you’ve enjoyed me calling while wearing my nightgown, but I really need to talk to you.”

“Oh?”

“I’ve initiated this as a secure transmission, but we still need to be careful.”

“I understand.” He sat up a little straighter. “Is anything wrong?”

She gave him a look. “Yes, the Federation is falling apart.”

“Other than that?” he asked with a smirk.

Laughing at his humor, she said with sincerity, “Thank you. I needed that.”

“Tough day?”

“Perplexing day.” She held up a PADD and then set it down. “We compared your research on reported terrorist activities with the planets that were contracted to provide raw materials for the rebuilding effort, and there is a well defined correlation.”

“Someone is trying to get the Federation’s attention.”

“Exactly.” She laced her fingers together and rested her chin on them. “My instincts are telling me to pursue this, but I’m not sure that’s the wisest thing to do right now.”

“Are you worried that you’ll be adding fuel to the fire? Giving publicity where it’s not needed?”

She nodded. “Most are no longer Federation members. All have suffered significant economic depressions because of the situation.”

“Have you spoken to Admiral Khurma about it, yet?”

“No. My concern is that I'm opening a can of worms, and I don't know if I'm prepared for this, yet.”

“Oh, I'd say that you can handle just about anything thrown at you from the concerned governments. All you need to do at this point is to listen.”

“Yes, but how do I convince my C.O. that I want to pursue this without letting him know what I know?”

“I see your dilemma,” he said as he scratched his chin in thought. “Well, seems to me that in your conversations with the governments over the last two weeks, it has been suggested that there has been a severe lack of egalitarianism under Federation law.”

“And that is a true statement. There is a significant lack of equality when it comes to economic opportunities.”

“I'd also tell him that your staff has been doing research on allegations regarding Starfleet's lack of response to distress calls. See what his reaction is.”

She chewed on her lip as she thought about it. “He might want to know why I pursued that research, and it's possible that he knows the reasons already.”

“I would hope he knows, since he's the commander in chief of the fleet. I take it that those allegations are not in your reports?”

“No.”

“Tell him that they were off-the-record comments because they didn't directly affect the planets you were meeting with, and because you heard the same thing from several sources, it seemed prudent to do some research.”

She mulled it over for a moment. “Yes, I see what you're saying. If I base my reasoning on situations he knows I'm aware of, he won't be suspicious. And I could ask to start meeting with those that have withdrawn. I've learned one thing for sure from the last five conferences – we're on the verge of losing a lot more members unless we make some changes.”

“You need to conduct exit interviews, so to speak. It's a valid next step for your agenda. First, you met with those who are happy and profitable, then those who are middle of the road.”

“And now, I should meet with those who are royally ticked.”

“You’ll get to use those marvelous diplomatic skills everyone says you have.”

She laughed. “Little do they know it’s just my feminine charms.”

“Use what you’ve got. That’s what I plan to teach my students this fall.”

She rubbed her face tiredly and changed the subject. “How many more days till I see you?”

“Sixteen.”

“If I stay out here, I’ll miss your homecoming.”

“Are you coming this way? Maybe you can give me a ride.”

Winking at him, she asked, “Want to make out on the way home?”

“You read my mind. See, it’s very easy to do,” he joked.

“When you’re flirting, sure.” She felt a deep longing to see him in person.

“Unfortunately, Banora is nowhere near the systems I want to visit.”

With a serious tone, he suggested, “Call Khurma in the morning so you can make a decision, and we’ll make plans accordingly. If you need to stay out there, I completely understand.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.” His smile was very convincing. “These planets are at the root of the discontent and I suspect you’ll learn a lot.”

“If they’re willing to talk, and that’s a big if.”

“I have no doubts that they’ll talk to you. People like to complain so I’m sure you’ll get an earful from everyone you meet.”

She sighed. “You’re probably right, and I’m the one who said we need to start listening to each other, right?”

He chuckled. “Yes, in one of your more inspiring speeches.”

“Remind me to keep my mouth shut, would you?” she asked sarcastically.

“Hmmm.” He widened his eyes appreciatively. “I kind of like you with your mouth open.”

“Chakotay!” she exclaimed with her mouth wide open, and then she quickly shut it. “I hope your sister didn’t hear you say that!”

Laughing, he said, “No, I’m alone in here.”

She rubbed her cheeks, knowing she must be flushing a bright shade of pink. “You’re incorrigible.”

“Nah, just missing you.”

“Awe,” she dropped her shoulders. “I should postpone this trip.”

“No, get it over with. Maybe you’ll be done soon after I get back. How many systems do you need to visit?”

“Oh heavens, there are at least half a dozen that fall into this situation. Possibly more.”

“Well, you visited these last five in two weeks,” he pointed out.

“Yes, but they weren’t as disgruntled.”

“So maybe it’ll take three weeks, or a month. It’ll be fine.”

She still felt like she was disappointing him, but she had no choice. “We’ll keep talking every evening.”

“Yes, absolutely. It’s something I look forward to. If you have time, I wouldn’t mind a good morning call, too.”

“As long as I’m not planetside, I’d love that. They’d have to be quick, though.”

“Or I could just watch you get dressed. It’s one of my favorite ways to pass time.”

She crooked a smile. “And here I was thinking you preferred watching me get undressed.”

“Either one is preferable, because at some point in the process, you’re not wearing anything.”

“Oh, I see,” she laughed. “Can I see Kolopak? I need a baby fix.”

“Sure, let me see if he’s awake. I’ll be back in a minute.”

While he was gone, she took off her coat and pulled the pins out of her hair. It had grown long enough that she could put it up in a bun again. Her sister had told her that it made her look old, but Kathryn thought it afforded her a more professional appearance.

“Look what I found,” Chakotay said as he sat down with a gurgling two-month old.

“Awe,” Kathryn said as she crossed her arms to hug herself, wishing she could be hugging him. Kolopak was bright-eyed and looking right at her. “He’s precious.”

“Do you see that smile you put on Aunt Kathryn’s face?” Chakotay asked the baby. “That smile is reserved for just you and me, kid.”

She laughed, realizing just how big her smile must be. “Yes, it is, but Miral and Katie probably get it, too.”

“I’m not complaining. I love your smile, and the more I see it, the happier I am.” He winked at her and then kissed Kolopak’s head.

“How are you ever going to tear yourself away from him?” Kathryn waved her fingers and made silly faces at the baby.

“It won’t be easy, but Miral is on Earth and I miss her, too.”

“Lanna said she’s crawling all over the place now.”

“I bet she’s a mover.” Chakotay smiled. “Oh, I was supposed to tell you – Steven and Sekaya have asked you and me to be Kolopak’s godparents. Are you interested?”

“Oh,” Kathryn’s heart melted. “I would be honored.”

“I’ll tell her,” he said happily. “Now you have two.”

“Three. I’ve also got Katie.”

Kolopak snuggled up under Chakotay’s chin. “I love this best. He fits right in there.”

Kathryn was beaming. She wanted so much to tell him that she looked forward to having babies of her own, but thought it would rush their relationship too much. They talked for a little while longer and finally decided to say goodnight. Kathryn settled into bed early, taking a lot of reading material with her, but feeling a lot more centered than she had all day.

\*\*\*\*\*

First thing the next morning, she called Admiral Khurma. She had all her notes prepared to argue her case, but didn’t need any of it. He agreed immediately, indicating that her



plans mirrored his own. He'd intended to send her after she'd had time to get up to speed, but since she'd already done that, there was no reason to delay. He had only three systems in mind to start with, and she readily accepted his recommendations.

Kathryn made a quick call to Chakotay. "Good morning."

"Hi," he said with a big grin.

"Sorry to wake you. I didn't even think about the two-hour time difference." She loved the way his hair stuck up in all directions first thing in the morning.

"That's all right. I asked you to call me in the mornings." He smiled affectionately. "Do you need a pep talk before calling your C.O.?"

She shook her head, smiling. "No, I've already talked to him. I just wanted to let you know that he's on board and that we'll soon be setting a course to the first system. He had three in mind for me."

"Was it a difficult conversation?"

"Not at all. I was worried about nothing."

"I'm glad," he said with a yawn. "Sorry."

"Quite all right. I need to run. Some nutty old Admiral scheduled a briefing that starts in fifteen minutes."

His eyes twinkled. "You'd better get going, then. I know she doesn't have much patience for tardiness."

"I'll call you tonight."

"Looking forward to it already. Oh, and do me a favor, would you?"

"Sure, what is it?"

"Increase your security as you go to these systems."

She tilted her head to the side. "Consider it done."

"Thank you," he said quietly. "You'd better go. Love you."

"Love you, too."

When she arrived at the staff briefing, she poured a cup of coffee and then called the meeting to order. “Good morning, everyone. I’ve invited Captain Young and Commander Ral to join us today because we have a new assignment.

“After this briefing, Captain, I’d like you to set a course for Sirius IX.” When he nodded his confirmation, she continued. “As you may recall from our discussions earlier this week, Sirius is one of the planets that we’ve been concerned about. They dropped their Federation membership less than a year ago, and have suffered at least six terrorist attacks in the last sixteen months.”

Judy said, “Starfleet labeled them local insurgencies.”

“That’s correct,” Kathryn said. “We’re assuming that the insurgents are Sirians, but we can’t be certain. Sirius is the first of three planets that we’ll be visiting in the next couple of weeks, so I hope you don’t mind not returning to Earth right away.”

“Not when there’s work to do,” Harry said.

Kathryn agreed. “These are not pre-scheduled conferences, although I will make contact with the governmental authorities to let them know we’re coming.”

Harry asked, “Will the press be following us?”

“Admiral Khurma indicated that Starfleet won’t be issuing a press release, but we should plan for it just in case.”

Bernie said, “Sirius IX was a very active member of the Federation. Their council representative, Karnet, served on the Judiciary Council for many years.”

“Their withdrawal was highly publicized,” Judy noted. “Karnet was furious about the contract that they agreed to for titanium alloy. He was publicly scorned for going back on his word, and that’s when he convinced Sirius to cede from the Federation.”

Harry said, “Then he’s probably taken all of this personally.”

Bernie nodded. “Very much so. He lost his career and his homeworld was called ‘disloyal to the needs of the Federation.’ Because of the publicity behind it, the citizens of Sirius have become very hostile.”

“Towards Karnet?” Kathryn asked.

“No, towards the Federation and Starfleet.”

Ral said, “It appears that the insurgencies were made to look like attacks from off-worlders in an effort to prove that Starfleet wouldn’t come to their aid.”

Judy added, "Although they weren't Federation members at the time of these insurgencies, the citizens still expected Starfleet to show up."

Justin said, "It took a couple of days, but Starfleet eventually went at the request of another Councilman, a friend of Karnet's. When the 'fleet arrived, the local authorities had already proved that the explosion had not come from off-world. But by that time, the local press had blown the whole thing out of proportion." He shrugged, "Pardon the pun."

Kathryn glanced at Jarvin with slight amusement, but asked, "What do we know about the subsequent attacks?"

"More of the same, unfortunately," Ral said. "But from what I've read, the forensic reports indicate that a variety of methods were used for the explosions, and it's likely that there are numerous parties involved."

Kathryn asked, "What is Karnet's current status?"

Doyle said, "He's still holding public office. Evidently, the citizens don't blame him and have elected him as Chancellor."

Harry asked, "What do we know about the terms of the contract? We've covered so many planets that I don't recall the specifics about this one."

Picking up a PADD, Ral scrolled through the data. "Our research reports that the exchange rate was three quarters of market value, and it was for forty kilotons of titanium alloy."

Doyle whistled. "That's a hell of a lot of titanium."

"Yes, it is," Kathryn quickly processed all the information. "Okay, in summary, we have a contract that was as unreasonable as it was inequitable; we have hostile citizens who despise us; and we have a leader with a personal grudge who is extremely knowledgeable about our government's inadequacies."

Harry tugged at his collar. "And we're going here first, because?"

"It's the closest," Kathryn said. "Karnet is going to have in-depth knowledge of what happened on the Council when all these problems began. He's a valuable source of information to get at the heart of what will placate those who are disgruntled."

"Admiral," Bernie leaned forward to look directly at Kathryn. "I'm extremely concerned about our safety going into this situation. I think it would be wise to talk to Karnet onboard rather than sending you down to the planet."

“I appreciate your concern, but my goal is not just to get information from Karnet, it’s to let the people of Sirius see that we’ve come to them, to meet with several government officials, to listen to their concerns, and hopefully to earn their trust.”

Doyle said carefully, “I suggest sending a security team in advance to secure the transport site and meeting facility.”

“Agreed.” She could tell by the intense looks around the table that her normally relaxed team was on edge. “We all need to be on our toes for this next round of conferences. Jarvin and Doyle, I want you to work with Commander Moore to organize a comprehensive security detail for both Harry and me. Do what you can to anticipate any trouble. Judy and Sue, I want as much information about Karnet as you can drum up. Ral, would you consult with them?”

She nodded. “Of course, Admiral.”

Kathryn continued, “Captain Young, I’d appreciate any further insights that you have prior to our arrival.” She turned to the whole group. “It will take thirty hours to get to Sirius at warp six, so let’s use this time to our advantage. Dismissed.”

Bernie remained seated, giving Kathryn a clear signal that he wished to speak further. The action reminded her so much of Chakotay that she felt a sense of déjà vu. When the room was clear, she said, “Bernie, I know we’re heading into a dangerous situation.”

“Yes, we are. We’ll do our best, but this is a heated situation.”

“Don’t you think the citizens have had time to cool off in the last six months?”

“The insurgencies have lessened, yes, but the anger is still there, especially now that they’re cut off from the Federation. Sirius was dependent on off-world resources and is experiencing multiple economic dilemmas as a result. It’s as if we’ve placed an embargo on them to force them into surrender.”

“Which is exactly why we need to address this situation before it gets out of control.”

“It’s already out of control. They are extremely vulnerable right now, with no way to defend themselves. They no longer have the ability to fuel their spacecrafts, nor the facilities to build new ones.”

Kathryn clicked her tongue. “So you’re saying that they’re backed into a corner, ready to fight.”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

“Are they cut off from trade by their own choice or by our directives?”

“A little of both, most likely, but they probably blame the Federation. That’s something you can bring up in your discussions.”

“Well, I’m ready to fight for them. I’ll find a way to bring them back.” She stood up to indicate the conversation was over. There were things she needed to do.

\*\*\*\*\*

Kathryn stepped onto the bridge of the Pioneer. Although she hadn’t been there often, she felt right at home. They were moving into the Sirius system and she felt the need to watch the planet come into view.

Bernie greeted her with a nod. “Admiral.”

She responded in kind and stood behind the Captain’s chair at an empty console where she could monitor sensor readings. There was nothing unusual on the monitor, nor were there any spacecraft in range. That in itself was odd when approaching a warp-capable planet. Sirius had become so dependent on Starfleet that they had technically lost their warp capabilities for the immediate future.

Ensign Igre at ops reported, “We’re receiving a transmission from the planet.”

Young turned to her and she nodded. He said, “On screen.”

Karnet appeared. “I’d like to say welcome to Sirius, Captain Young, but in all honesty, I can’t.”

“I understand, Chancellor,” Bernie replied.

As they were talking, Kathryn walked around and joined Bernie. “Chancellor Karnet, thank you for agreeing to meet with me.”

He shrugged. “I’m not sure it’s a good idea, but if you’re willing to listen, I’ll tell you what I know.”

“I’m more than willing to listen.”

“I need to warn you that the news regarding your arrival has leaked out,” Karnet said. “If you’re out for publicity on this visit, you’re going to get it.”

She raised her hands in a gesture of acceptance. “I would’ve rather kept this quiet, but we’re prepared for that situation.”

“All right,” he said, as if he didn’t believe her. “Do you still want to send down a security team in advance or do you want to make a grand entrance?”

Kathryn was annoyed that he believed she was only interested in talking to him for the publicity. "I'd like to send down a security team, if that's acceptable to you?"

"Sure, but if you want to meet in the capitol building, which is secured against unwanted transports, you're going to have to beam down outside of it. There's quite a gathering waiting for your arrival. Contact me when you're in range." He cut the signal.

She pursed her lips. "Helpful, isn't he?"

Commander Moore, the Pioneer's security officer, pointed out, "He lacks respect for your rank, Admiral."

"Yes," she said absently and then turned to Moore. "He has no respect for Starfleet, and therefore my rank is of little consequence. My guess is that he's dealt with more than his fair share of admirals."

Bernie ordered Commander Moore to prepare his team for transport. "Leave your phasers holstered unless absolutely necessary. Do nothing to provoke the crowd."

"Aye, Captain."

Kathryn turned to Bernie. "You're expecting a riot?"

"Just taking precautions, Admiral."

"Let's try to keep a positive outlook, shall we?"

Bernie looked like he wanted to disagree. "Of course, Admiral. I'd also like to make sure we leave this planet having made a good impression and with you in one piece."

"My goal as well, Captain." She turned to leave. "I'll be waiting in my office." As she left, she thought about how similar Bernie and Chakotay were. Both had tendencies towards being over-protective, but, at the moment, she was missing Chakotay's composure in potentially volatile situations. He understood her motivations like no one else and let her do her job as long as she had backup.

It seemed that Bernie didn't understand how a heated situation like this could be beneficial in the long run. The people here needed help, and although they might outwardly reject her, she believed that each one harbored a spark of hope for a better tomorrow. A journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step.

Harry was waiting for her in their offices, and he looked tense. "Admiral, is it time?"

"Not yet." She gestured for him to sit with her in their briefing room. "Harry, sit and talk to me. I need you to relax."

“Relax?” he guffawed. “I was just watching the news broadcasts. Our visit is all over the Federation, and the people down there aren’t welcoming us with open arms.”

“No,” she said calmly. “They aren’t, but I need you to keep in mind that we’re here to help them. We need to earn their trust, and we can’t do that if we go down there looking like we’re about to jump ship.”

He took a deep breath. “I suppose you’re right, but aren’t you a little scared?”

“Me? Scared?”

“You never get scared?”

She shrugged nonchalantly. “Sometimes, but in situations like this, I feel more determined than anything. If something happens, we’ll deal with it, just like we always do.”

“Okay,” he said with forced enthusiasm. He swiped his hand to the side as he said, “We’re just going to transport down there, walk inside the building, and start listening.”

“It’s as simple as that.”

Bernie’s voice came over the comm system saying, “Admiral Janeway, Commander Kim, please report to the transporter room.”

When they arrived at the transporter room, four security guards were waiting for them, including Doyle and Jarvin who were acting as their personal bodyguards. As they stepped up on the transporter pad, Kathryn noticed that they all had their hands on their phasers.

She said, “At ease, gentlemen. We’ll trust that the area is secure until we know otherwise. You’re armed, and that satisfies the General Order to protect me.”

They all nodded and reluctantly put their hands to their sides. However, all four of them instinctively closed ranks a bit tighter around her and Harry. Kathryn didn’t mind, if it made them feel better.

“Let’s do it.” She nodded at the transporter operator. “Energize.”

The deafening sound of thousands of voices greeted them on their arrival. Kathryn watched as her security guards tensed, but she was proud of them for not pulling weapons. She stepped forward and with an outstretched hand said, “Good morning, Chancellor Karnet.”

He accepted her handshake, but looked skeptical. “You are one brave woman.”

She raised an eyebrow, but didn't comment. "Shall we go inside?"

"You aren't going to make a statement?" He waved towards the reporters who were clamoring for her attention on the steps behind a line of security officers.

"I'm not here to talk to them, Chancellor. I'm here to talk to you." When he looked at her with disbelief, she added, "It's your planet. If you want them to know why I'm here, it's up to you to tell them."

"I have no idea why you're here, Admiral." He ushered her inside.

As she walked into the building, Kathryn took note of what the crowd was yelling. It was something about Starfleet, but she couldn't make it out, exactly. It wasn't too much of a stretch of the imagination to know that it was negative, which made her even more determined to affect positive change.

They were escorted into an elaborately decorated room that had a gorgeous marble floor and a high, domed, stained glass ceiling that was at least ten meters above their heads. The large, oval conference table had a beautiful, lustrous finish and would have easily accommodated twenty people. Kathryn commented, "This room is beautiful. What is its usual purpose?"

Karnet gave her a scowl as he answered her question without any further explanation of its history or meaning. "Cabinet meetings."

She looked around appreciatively despite his lack of enthusiasm, taking the opportunity to check her surroundings without appearing suspicious. She found all four exits and saw that each was guarded by both a Starfleet and a Sirian security officer. Commander Moore was among them.

"Will anyone else be joining us?" Kathryn asked, thinking it odd that they needed ten security officers for just Karnet, Harry, and herself.

"In a few minutes. I thought we'd be outside for awhile, yet."

"I see." She found his diplomatic skills severely lacking, but she knew that he didn't want her there. "Where would you like us to sit?"

"Wherever you want." He motioned towards the table and then said, "I'll be right back."

After he and the security guards left the room, Kathryn glanced at Harry. "What do you make of this?"

"They don't want us here," he whispered.

Doyle spoke discretely. "Admiral, it's unsettling that they left us in here alone."



“Yes,” she looked up at the ceiling. “I noticed that, too. Let’s go check out the artwork on the walls.” If something were to happen, she wanted to be near an exit or near a supporting wall of the building. Although she might be brave, she wasn’t stupid.

Harry played the part by saying, “I think this is my favorite piece, Admiral. It looks like a representation of the seasons.”

The four of them conferred on the painting at length before Karnet and his security returned with six other men who all looked at her suspiciously as they took seats around the table. It was obvious that they had specific chairs that they wished to sit in, so she and Harry took two of the seats that remained.

“Good morning, gentlemen. I’m Kathryn Janeway.” She noticed that she was the only female amongst all eighteen men in the room. One might think those were bad odds, but she believed it to be an advantage.

After they made their introductions, Kathryn realized that there were four main participants in the conversation; everyone else was someone’s aide.

Karnet asked, “Admiral, you indicated that you want to hear our concerns. Where would you like us to begin?”

“At the beginning, please. You were asked by whom, specifically, to provide tritanium alloy to the Federation at a price that was below market value?”

They all looked at each other and one of them said. “Interesting place to begin, Admiral. Is that why you’re here? To follow up on that contract?”

“Absolutely not.” She made eye contact with each and said, “I’m here to find out what went wrong and why. Your planet was a vital, thriving member of the Federation until this contract was signed, or so I’ve been led to believe. If the tensions preceded the contract, please tell me.”

“There was the war, of course,” another said. “That created plenty of tension on the Federation Council. Since you weren’t here, you wouldn’t know that.”

She nodded. “Tell me about it.”

They talked about the war for a short time, which led to a discussion of the attacks against Earth and Betazed and the draining of the Federation’s resources. All of them had theories about ways the war could have been better managed, but Kathryn didn’t feel the need to debate it with them because that wasn’t relevant to the problem at hand.

Conversation was flowing easily when they got around to discussing the contract, but Karnet remained silent unless there was a correction to be made. She learned who had

instigated the contract – a special ad-hoc committee appointed by the President and consisting of his most trusted advisors. None of them was an elected member of the Federation council, a fact that raised alarm bells for Kathryn.

Kathryn asked, “What was that final determining factor of your decision to withdraw your Federation membership?”

Karnet finally spoke up. “Our citizens demanded it. They were furious with Starfleet and the Federation. There were riots in the streets, protests on the front lawn of this building, and letters and calls pouring in from all over our world. We tried to convince them that it was a mistake, but they wouldn’t hear of it.”

“It wasn’t what you would have chosen?” she asked the gathered group with surprise.

“No, Admiral. We know how much our economy and well-being depended on other worlds, but the people wanted us to become independent again.”

“And does that determination still exist? Are they willing to put forth the effort to manufacture the products you need? Are they willing to negotiate for and purchase technology using resources available to you on this planet?”

Karnet said, “I find it very unusual for you to suggest that, Admiral.”

“Why’s that?” she asked.

“No one from outside our world has ever suggested that as an option. All we’ve heard is warnings that we’d rue the day we left because we couldn’t possibly survive on our own.”

“That’s unfortunate.” She frowned. “Then the question is, as I see it, whether you can survive on your own.”

None of them answered. They were either looking at the table, each other, or playing with the PADDs that were in front of them.

Kathryn looked beyond those at the table to the Sirian security officers. All four of them were looking hopefully at her, and she bit back a smile. There it was, the spark of hope she’d been looking for. “Gentlemen, I think we’ve just found our starting place.”

Karnet crossed his arms and studied her. “And how do you propose that we go from here? Keep in mind, Admiral, that the mob outside shouting insults at you mirrors the opinions of all four billion citizens of Sirius.”

“Can’t be done,” one of them said.

Another said, “Maybe...,” but stopped when they all heard breaking glass above them.

Doyle shouted, “UNDER THE TABLE! NOW!” He grabbed Kathryn and pushed her forcefully to the floor. Urgently, he rolled her underneath the table and covered her with his body, his arms folded over her head to protect her from the explosion.

\*\*\*\*\*

Chakotay sat in Sekaya’s living room, half watching the Fednews broadcast and half working on his lesson plans. The fact that Kathryn had gone to Sirius IX that day was all over the news. When he’d first seen the mob that awaited her arrival, he was sure that her plans would be aborted. No one in her right mind would have beamed down in the middle of all that. But then, as she materialized, he realized that his best friend and lover was not in her right mind.

At first, he was terrified for her safety, but that quickly changed as he became angry at her for putting herself in such a dangerous situation. There was not a single doubt in his mind that her actions were of her own choosing.

He’d watched her intently and had seen that she’d carried a look of composed resolve. In the midst of all the yelling and shouting of the crowd, she’d been completely relaxed. He’d seen that before. It was her game face, and he knew it meant trouble. She was prepared for a confrontation. He hadn’t been able to tell what she said to the Chancellor, but it had been short and to the point. They’d gone inside and there had been no news in the two hours since.

He had listened to two hours of endless debate about why she was there, discussion of all the problems that Sirius IX faced, and speculations about whether there was any way they could overcome them. It was tiresome to listen to, but he didn’t want to turn off the news for fear that he’d miss her exit. He had to know when she was safe again.

To keep his mind occupied and control his anger at her careless disregard of her own well-being, he was outlining his syllabus, trying to recall how he set up the class schedule when he’d taught it ten years previous. His attention was drawn to a sudden, complete silence on the broadcast, and he looked up just in time to see a reporter stare bravely into the camera in the midst of dust and floating debris.

She reported, “An explosion has just rocked the Sirius Capitol Building.”

Chakotay’s heart fell. He dropped his PADD and stared in disbelief at the screen. The reporter indicated that the camera was fixed on the building, but with all the dust in the air, he couldn’t tell if it was still standing. A cold dread filled his chest.

Sekaya walked into the room, “You’re still watching the Fednews, brother?”

He leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees, not taking his eyes off the screen. He swallowed hard in order to say, “Kathryn was in there.”

“What’s happened?” She watched for a moment and then gasped. “No! Are you sure?” She sat down and held his arm. He absently squeezed her hand, but didn’t reply.

The reporter said, “What we do know is that the capitol building is still standing. It looks like the explosion originated inside the building, coming through the domed glass ceiling. No news yet on whether those in the building are still alive. As you know, today...”

Chakotay closed his eyes and bowed his head. This couldn’t be happening. Not now. Not to her. He prayed for her life. For Harry’s life. For Scott and Justin, too. They were all in there. He prayed that they weren’t dead or in pain.

The reporter said, “A Starfleet rescue team has just arrived on the scene.”

Chakotay looked up. Ignoring the reporter’s words, he watched what the Starfleet personnel were doing. They were scanning the building, and he wished he was there helping them. He wished that more than anything.

Sekaya said, “They’ll rescue her. I know they will.”

The rescue team moved inside and Chakotay said, “That’s a good sign.”

“Why?”

“It means the building is sound and there are life signs in there. They wouldn’t go in otherwise.” His heart was beating heavily and he could barely breathe. All he could do was wait.

\*\*\*\*\*

Kathryn couldn’t breathe. Scott Doyle was on top of her, his arms pinning her head down. He had pushed her with such force that her face and hand had smashed against the floor. White, hot splinters of pain shot through her arm and head.

She’d known when the explosion hit because the shockwave moved through her like a force of nature. It had been accompanied by the sound of glass shattering, plaster ripping apart, and metal giving way under enormous pressure. Moments later, she’d become aware of the debris that was falling around their table.

Once it was quiet again, she tried to lift her head, but Doyle wouldn’t let her. She groaned, “Scott.”

He urgently whispered, “Stay down, Admiral.” He adjusted his hold to relieve some of the pressure on her head and body, but he kept her covered.

Kathryn turned her head so that the injured side of her face wasn't against the floor. Unable to see because of his arms, she asked, "Did everyone make it?"

"No one's moving. Shhh."

She knew that he was worried about a second attack. A low-impact bomb like this could easily be followed by an assault force rushing into the building. She felt him pull his phaser out of its holster and heard him power it on. They remained completely still for several minutes, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

When he felt that they'd waited long enough, he slid off of her. She lifted her head and touched her face with her uninjured hand. Her fingertips came away covered with blood.

"You're hurt," Scott said. He helped her roll over so he could take a look.

"Not severely." She winced as he touched each side of the wound on her forehead.

"It's a pretty big bruise, and it's swelling up. Sorry about that." He touched his commbadge. "Doyle to Pioneer. Do you read me?" There was no response.

"Did security test the commbadges before we arrived?" she asked as she pushed herself up. The dizziness threatened to overwhelm her, but she kept it in check.

"I don't know, ma'am." He took his badge off to see if it was damaged.

She tried her own badge without any luck, so she took his. "I'll try amplifying the signal. Check on Justin and Harry."

While she worked, he went around to everyone who was nearby. Luckily, all of them had made it under the table, but only Kathryn and Scott had gotten to the center.

He came back to her. "Everyone's alive. Some are bleeding heavily from shrapnel, including Kim."

"Try it now," she handed the badge back to him, and scooted over to check on Harry. Her injured wrist made it difficult to maneuver along the floor.

"Doyle to Pioneer. Do you read me?"

"Lieutenant!" Bernie's voice answered immediately. "A rescue team is on its way. What's your status?"

"We've got eleven people under a large table in the conference room. Janeway and I are the only ones who are conscious. She has a head injury and several people are in need of immediate medical attention."

“How many of our people aren’t accounted for?”

“Four security officers, including Moore. I don’t know if they made it out of the room. With all the dust and debris in here, I can’t tell.”

Bernie replied, “Transporters still won’t break through their security barrier. We’ll have to get everyone out of the building before we can bring them up. Admiral, can you hear me?”

“Yes, Captain.” She was applying pressure to a gash in Harry’s leg as best she could.

“How severe is your injury?”

“It’s manageable. How close is that rescue team?”

“They’ve just transported down. Let’s keep this signal active until they get there. Is there any reason to suspect that this was an intentional act of war?”

“Not that I’m aware of, Captain. No one at the table harbored hatred towards Starfleet.”

“Understood. We’ll treat this as another insurgency.”

“Agreed.”

“Admiral, get out of there as soon as you can.” His voice sounded worried.

“Severe trauma patients first, Captain. But I’ll make sure my back is covered.”

“Just so you know, this incident is being broadcast live across the Federation.”

She took a steadying breath. “Understood.” That meant the people she loved were probably worrying themselves into a frenzy, but she couldn’t think about that right now. Harry was starting to come around. “Harry?” She patted his cheek. “Are you with me?”

His eyes fluttered open, and his first instinct was to call her by her former rank. “Captain?”

“You’re injured. Don’t try to move your right leg.”

Sucking air between his teeth, he said, “Damn, that hurts.”

She felt along his abdomen. “Any pain here?”

“No,” he grunted. Forcing his eyes open to look at her, he said, “You’re hurt, too.”

“Just a bump. Will you be okay for a minute? I need to check on the others.”

He closed his eyes against the pain. “Mmmhmm.”

While listening to Bernie and Scott discuss the rescue team’s movements into the building, Kathryn moved over to Karnet. He was starting to wake up. “Try not to move, Chancellor.”

“Was that a bomb?”

“Yes, I think it was. I’m guessing a weak one, though.” She saw that he, too, was bleeding heavily from a deep gash across the inside of his forearm. “Lieutenant, I need your help.”

Doyle came over. “What with?”

She opened her jacket and said, “We need to tear off a strip of fabric to use as a tourniquet, but my wrist is injured and I can’t do it.”

“Hold on.” He stopped her from tearing her shirt and turned around to grab something off the floor. “I already had to tear mine apart for Justin.”

Karnet asked, “Tearing your clothes off for me, Admiral?”

As Doyle tied the strip beneath Karnet’s elbow, Kathryn answered, “Glad to see you have a sense of humor under all that surliness.”

He winced as the fabric was tightened. “Yeah, well, I was annoyed.”

“Obviously.” She nodded to Doyle when he was finished to indicate that’s all she needed. “Are you in pain anywhere?”

“No. Help me sit up?”

She wasn’t sure that was a good idea, but if the situation were reversed, she knew she’d want to have a look around, so she used her good arm to give him leverage. The exertion made her head spin, and they both ended up resting against the table legs.

He said miserably, “This is a fine mess.”

“Got any ideas who might have done it?”

“A few.” Looking around, he said, “Are they dead?”

“Just unconscious.”

A voice from outside the room yelled, “Admiral!”

“In here,” she said weakly, the pressure in her head too painful to manage a loud yell. Doyle took over and helped the rescue team find them.

While the team was clearing a path through the heavy debris, Karnet said, “I’m really sorry about this.”

Kathryn crooked a half-hearted smile. “I am, too. This was a really nice room.”

He huffed a laugh. “That’s the least of my worries.”

One of the Pioneer’s security officers knelt in front of her. “Admiral, let’s get you out of here.”

She couldn’t remember his name. “No,” she waved towards the others. “They need medical attention more than I do. Kim, especially.”

“I’m under orders, Admiral. You first.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You really don’t want to argue with me right now, Ensign.”

“Aye, Admiral.” He hesitantly moved over to pull Harry out.

Karnet said, “He’s right. You need to get out of here.”

Kathryn rolled her eyes. “Don’t you start, too.”

“You’re not like any admiral I’ve ever met.”

“Good. I guess you’ve had some bad experiences with a few?”

“That’s putting it mildly. Hayes, Wilson, Nechayev. Do I need to say more?”

“I’ve got the picture. They’ve crossed my path a couple times, too.”

As he watched a second medical team come in and start pulling his cabinet members out on stretchers, he sighed deeply. “I am so tired of this.”

She heard the despair in his voice and knew it was an opening. “Let me help you.”

“Can you?” He looked at her. “That’s a serious question. Do you have any clout whatsoever?”

“All that publicity you think I’m after? It’s a very powerful tool, and I’ve got a hell of a lot of people standing behind me.”



He looked her in the eye as he considered what she'd said. With a shrug of acceptance, he said, "Go back to your ship, Admiral. We'll talk tomorrow."

"You'll be okay?"

"Eventually." He gestured towards the cleared path. "Go. Let the quadrant see that you're okay. I'm sure they're concerned about their favorite celebrity."

\*\*\*\*\*

Chakotay was thankful that the reporters kept a camera on the Sirian capitol building so he could watch as the team brought each injured person out on a stretcher. He'd turned the sound off, not wanting to hear any more of what the reporters had to say.

Sekaya said, "There's another. Do you recognize any of them?"

"The first was Harry Kim. The others, I can't tell. None of them look small enough to be her, though."

She rubbed his back to offer comfort. "At least none of them has come out with blankets over them."

He nodded slowly, but he also knew that they'd take the bodies last. His eyes were getting dry from staring so hard at the screen, so he had to take a break to close them.

"There!" Sekaya shouted.

Chakotay popped his eyes back open and blew out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. "Kathryn," he said with relief. She was walking out, no stretcher needed, and Scott Doyle was right there with her.

"She's okay, brother."

He moved closer to the screen to try to get a better look at her, but as soon as he did, the camera zoomed in. She was holding a compress against her forehead, but her expression showed no pain and no alarm. She was a skilled actress, and although he could usually read past that, he saw nothing to indicate she was in trouble. Her eyes were sharp and clear as if this incident hadn't affected her in the slightest.

She moved to stand in front of a cluster of microphones that were thrust towards her. She dropped the compress to reveal a large bruise on her temple. Seeing the injury made Chakotay flinch and touch his own head. He turned the volume back up so they could hear her.

"Admiral Janeway, can you tell us what happened?"

She was short and to the point. “An explosive device came through the domed glass ceiling.”

“Do you have any idea who did it?”

“No, I don’t.” She tugged on her earlobe.

Chakotay saw her signal for him and he whispered to the screen, “You’re okay.”

A reporter asked, “Are there any deaths?”

Kathryn said, “I only know the status of the people who were with me, and all were alive when we checked them before the rescue teams arrived.”

Another asked, “How did you manage to survive the explosion?”

She turned to Doyle and reached across with her good arm to lay it on his shoulder. She answered, “Thanks to some very quick thinking on the part of Lieutenant Scott Doyle.”

Chakotay noticed the move and told Sekaya, “Her arm is hurt.”

Sekaya replied, “She did just survive an explosion.”

A reporter asked, “Were you with Chancellor Karnet at the time of the explosion?”

“Yes, I was. He should be out soon.”

“Admiral, can you tell us anything about your conversation with the Chancellor?”

“Not today. Let’s focus on getting the injured to safety, and then we can discuss politics at a later time. If you’ll excuse me.” She bowed out gracefully and let Doyle call for transport.

Chakotay breathed a sigh of relief and rubbed his tired eyes.

Sekaya turned off the viewscreen. “Why don’t you go lie down?”

He smiled weakly. “Thank you, that’s a good idea.” He rose from the couch and stretched his tired muscles. When he got to the bedroom he had shared with Kathryn, he flopped down tiredly and hugged her pillow, just as he had every night since she’d left. It was silly, he knew, but comforting.

Tears pricked at his eyes, and he shivered with goose bumps as the gravity of what had happened began to sink in. She mentioned that Doyle had saved her life. Chakotay owed Scott an immense debt of gratitude.

He had just dozed off when Sekaya stuck her head in the door. “Chakotay? Kathryn’s on the comm.”

He jumped up. “So soon?”

“She hasn’t been treated yet.”

“What?” He ran into the next room and sat at the desk to see her waiting for him; her head was bowed and she was holding the compress against her injury. “Kathryn?”

She lifted her eyes and smiled tiredly. “Hi, I just wanted to let you know that I’m okay.”

“I saw. Oh, Kathryn.” Those hot tears were pricking at his eyes again.

“I didn’t know if you’d be watching.”

“I always am,” he said as he touched the screen. “Why aren’t you in sickbay?”

“I am, but we’ve only got one doctor and two nurses, and others are more critical. I’m using Dr. Murphy’s office to call you.”

Chakotay folded his fingers together and rested them against his chin. “Kathryn…”

“I know,” she said quietly. “This could have…”

“Yes, it could have.” He furrowed his eyebrows. “I’m still reeling from worrying that I’d lost you, but even before the explosion, I was more concerned about that mob than about any potential terrorist activities.”

“If the Starfleet uniform were going to incite riot, we would’ve known when the advance team went down.” She took the compress away from her head and set it down. “I think the ice is making it worse.”

“Looks pretty bad. What hit you?”

“The floor. Doyle was pushing me under the table before I knew what was happening.”

“Scott did that?”

“Against a marble floor, yes.”

He cringed. “Well, I’m still grateful to him, even if he did hurt you in the process.”

“So am I. Grateful for him and Commander Moore, both. Moore phasered the bomb in mid-air so it didn’t detonate on the table we were under.”

Feeling nauseated, Chakotay said, "My God, Kathryn."

She looked at him with intensity. "I really think I made a difference today."

"I sure as hell hope so," he said with reproach. "Although I can't imagine what would've been worth this amount of risk. Couldn't you have had that meeting on the ship?"

Frowning, she said, "It made a huge difference for me to go down there and show the people that Starfleet wasn't scared of them. I won't let a few insurgents control the situation with intimidation tactics."

"That mob was not a few insurgents."

"I realize that, but by the time I left there, the crowd was listening to me instead of yelling at me. That's a significant and very dynamic change."

"They were scared. Of course they were listening."

"I know, but we'll have a much better chance of softening their hearts if they're afraid and willing to accept help than if they're angry. It's the people on this planet that wanted to cede from the Federation, not the government. I got through to the Chancellor today, and it took that explosion to do it. He asked for my help."

"You're suggesting that the bomb was the catalyst for change that you needed?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I'm saying. It had the complete opposite affect that the insurgents wanted, and we couldn't have planned it better if we'd tried. You know as well as I do that miracles can happen in heated situations like this, when everything is on the line."

"Everything? Including your life?" He couldn't believe she was willing to risk it all for one planet, or if she just thought she was indestructible.

Someone caught her attention. "A nurse is waiting. I'll call you tonight?"

"Go do what you need to do." He wasn't sure he'd be in the best frame of mind in a few hours.

"I love you, Chakotay."

"Get some rest."

"I will," she gave him an odd look as she ended the transmission.

Chakotay felt the need to get out of the house and take a walk. He didn't know whether to be angry or relieved. There were so many emotions and thoughts going through his mind that he couldn't make heads or tails of how he felt.

He was angry at Kathryn for putting herself in the situation, angry with her staff and the Pioneer crew for letting her go, angry with the people who hurt her, and angry with the President for letting this whole mess happen in the first place. At the same time, he was relieved that she was okay and thankful for everyone who watched out for her. Losing her would be devastating.

That night, as he lay in bed, he relegated 'her' pillow to the chair beside the bed. He'd finally come to the conclusion that he was mostly angry with Kathryn, and it was clear by her recklessness that her ego needed to be taken down a notch. Staring harshly at the pillow, he hoped it would absorb some of his anger so he'd be cool when he talked to her the next day. She'd called again that evening, but he'd been out walking and decided not to call her back. She needed to rest and he was in no mood to talk civilly to her.

At some point, he fell asleep, but woke up later feeling bereft. He reluctantly reclaimed the pillow and curled up around it. No matter how angry he was, he still loved her and still needed her. He just wished that she could open her heart up enough to realize how deeply he felt, so she would act with a little more caution.

\*\*\*\*\*

Kathryn hadn't slept well and woke up early. She wanted to talk to Chakotay, but knew that it was too early on Banora Colony to call. She showered and dressed in everything except her coat. Her wrist was still tender, and she had a slight headache, but otherwise, she'd recovered from her previous day's injuries.

Admiral Khurma had called her the night before and told her no uncertain terms that he disapproved of her actions. His words stung, but she felt strong enough to take it and hoped that he was reacting more in fear than in disapproval.

She took the time to make notes and write her report from the conference and incident on Sirius. Her meetings weren't scheduled to begin until eleven, and the first one was a short briefing with Sue so that she could take Harry's place for the day. He didn't want the time off, but she'd insisted.

While she worked, her thoughts drifted too often to Chakotay. He hadn't returned her call the night before, and she didn't know what to make of it. He was usually so eager to talk to her that he wouldn't miss the opportunity.

At ten, she decided to make the call. Coffee in hand, she initiated the connection.

He answered, saying, "I was expecting your call an hour ago."

“I didn’t want to wake you,” she smiled apologetically.

“I was up.”

“Did Sekaya tell you I called last night?”

“Yes, I was out walking. Needed some fresh air after sitting in here watching the news most of the day. I didn’t want to wake you when I got back.”

She nodded. “I bet you were hoping I’d be asleep.”

“Were you?”

“No, I really didn’t sleep well all night. Too many things on my mind.”

“Such as?”

“For one, I wanted to talk to you because I needed a friend. Khurma gave me a rather brutal dressing down.” She frowned. “It’s been awhile since I’ve been through something like that.”

“You got one during debriefings, didn’t you?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Thanks for reminding me.”

“What did he say?”

“What I should’ve expected, I guess.” She pressed her palm against her forehead where it ached from the bruise. “I’m afraid that he’s lost some confidence in me because I couldn’t get him to understand my motivations yesterday, so I was awake for awhile trying to figure out how to make myself clear. I went through quite a few message drafts before I gave up and tried to sleep. Then, I kept thinking through the conversation I had with the Sirian Cabinet, trying to formulate a game-plan for how we should proceed.” She sipped her coffee. “We’re meeting at noon and my goal is to work through a tangible plan.”

“You’re going back?” he asked with disbelief.

She raised an eyebrow. “You thought I’d run away with my tail between my legs?”

“I’d hoped that you’d have a modicum of sanity.”

Doing a double take, she asked, “What did you say?”

“You heard me. Are you insane? You can’t go back down to the planet! People are trying to kill you or haven’t you noticed?”

“I'm not stupid!” She jutted out her chin and blinked slowly. “And I don't appreciate your tone.”

“My tone?” He said angrily. “When you tried to murder Lessing, you admitted it was a mistake, but I think the fact is that you'll do anything when you're out for blood. It's not Ransom this time, its Zife, and instead of Lessing, you're going to kill yourself and every officer you take with you.”

“That's uncalled for!”

“Well, someone has to make you face facts. If not me, who's going to stop you this time?”

She pushed back from the desk and turned away, reeling from his bitter words. Her eyes were burning, but she would not submit to tears.

Softer, he said, “Kathryn, you are not invincible.”

Still not looking at him, she said, “This is not up for debate. I have a job to do and there are risks involved.”

“What happened to including me on the decisions that will affect our life?”

She glared at him. “This has nothing to do with us. This is about billions of people who are hurting, and it's about setting an example for the rest of the damn quadrant!”

“You're turning this into a personal vendetta, assuming that only you can single-handedly save the future of the entire Federation. Let me make myself clear, Kathryn, you are only the messenger. You don't have to do this alone, nor do you have to lay your life on the line every single time.”

“I'm not trying to,” she yelled. “I'm trying to show these people that they haven't been forgotten and that the Federation cares about them.” She pounded her finger on the desk as she said, “But it starts here. It starts with me. If this is going to work, everyone has to follow my lead. That's not going to happen if I let a handful of terrorists control the situation. The fact that they are after me proves that I'm making a difference.”

He raised his voice in response. “Terrorists who haven't been caught and who would've killed you yesterday if not for the quick thinking of a few men. Men who, by the way, wouldn't even be there if I hadn't asked them to keep an eye on you.”

“Excuse me? You think Doyle and Jarvin are working for me because of you? Do you think you can control me that much or are you just that self-centered?”

“Ohhhhh, Kathryn. Don’t even go there. You don’t want to know what I have to say right now about your ego.”

“Why don’t you enlighten me, Captain?”

“You’re pulling rank?” he asked, fuming. “What are you going to do? Write me up for insubordination?”

“Don’t tempt me.”

“That’s low, Kathryn. That’s really low.”

She opened her hands. “I’m waiting. What about my ego?”

He shook his head, refusing to say anything.

“You’re in way over your head, Chakotay. You’ve made it quite clear what you think of me, and if you think you can fix this by merely refusing to tell me that I have an ego the size of planet Earth, you are sadly mistaken.”

Chakotay narrowed his eyes. “Do I need to remind you that your older self sacrificed everything for her career, and she was left bitter and alone in her old age?”

She shook her head. “Don’t. You have no idea what you’re talking about because you have no clue what she suffered through.”

“She risked everything to give you a better life and you’re throwing it away.”

“Throwing it away?!” she yelled. “You think I want to sacrifice my dreams of having a family and a quiet life on Earth to be out here doing this? I don’t, Chakotay. I’m doing this because I have to. I’m doing this because I’m the only one who can.”

“Are you willing to die for it?”

“If that’s what I have to do, then yes, that’s exactly what I’m going to do.”

“Kathryn, the Federation can find itself another hero, but the people who love you can’t find another you.”

“No, Chakotay. I AM the hero, and you’ve made it perfectly clear that you can no longer speak for the people who love me. And just so you know, I had no intentions of going down to Sirius again, but...” she said with a shrug, “you didn’t even give me the benefit of the doubt before you called me insane, bloodthirsty, and homicidal.”

“If not there on Sirius, you’d risk your life somewhere else. And you’re mistaken. I’ve said all of this because I care about you, and I want to keep you alive.”



“Odd way to show you care – by refusing to support me and kicking me when I’m down.”

“Goodbye, Kathryn. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.” His eyes were intense as he closed the connection.

“Like hell you will.” As she stared at the dark screen with the Federation logo, she held her hand against her mouth, trying hard not to cry, but the tears would not be impeded as her heart shattered into a million pieces. An overwhelming grief settled over her, making her feel like she was suffocating as she tried to draw air into her aching chest.

\*\*\*\*\*

Late the next evening, Kathryn was reading through some data in her quarters when her comm unit signaled an incoming call. Still sitting in her favorite chair, she asked, “Computer, identify the caller.”

“Captain Chakotay,” was the computer’s response.

She clicked her tongue. “Then he can leave a message.”

“Please restate the question,” the computer asked.

“Disregard.”

Twenty minutes later, she couldn’t concentrate because she wanted to know what he’d said. She went over to the computer interface and played the message.

His image appeared. “I’m about to turn in and wanted to hear about your day. I suppose you’re probably at a reception or something tonight.” He looked down and then back at the screen. “I want to apologize for saying things last night that I shouldn’t have, and for jumping to conclusions. We could’ve had a much more reasonable discussion if I would’ve let you talk through your plans first. So, if I don’t talk to you tonight, I’ll see you on the Fednews tomorrow. I received Sue’s notice that you have a press conference scheduled. Good night, Kathryn.”

After the transmission ended, she stared blankly at nothing in particular, feeling completely numb. After a few minutes, she snapped out of it, and anger surfaced. Glaring at his now-still image, she asked, “Jumping to conclusions? Not keeping your mouth shut? That’s what you’re apologizing for? Not for discrediting every kind word you’ve ever said to me?” She angrily pushed the tears off her cheeks and then typed a two-word text message back to him. “Message Received.”

She was extremely grateful that she’d never opened her heart to him on Voyager, because if he’d attacked her like this out there, she didn’t think she would’ve been able to continue working with him.

\*\*\*\*\*

“Admiral?” Harry asked after the end-of-conference staff briefing.

“Yes?” she asked distractedly.

“May I speak with you for a moment?”

“Of course.” She sat back down and gave him her attention. “You have something else to add?”

“No, I think we covered everything.” Not meeting her eyes, he said, “If I’ve done something wrong, I would like to know what it is so that I can apologize and make amends.”

She closed her eyes briefly and softened her posture. “You haven’t done a thing wrong, and you’ve been an outstanding support since the day you asked for this job. I probably don’t say this enough, but you continually exceed my expectations and I’m delighted that you’re still working with me.”

Looking directly at her, he said, “Thank you, Admiral. I appreciate the compliments but I can tell that you’re upset about something. Was it the bombing or did something happen down there that I don’t know about? Are you upset with someone else?”

“No, Harry,” she said with a sigh. “I’m the one who owes you an apology if my disposition has led you to believe that I’m anything but thrilled with the work you’re doing. All of you.”

“Your disposition?”

She waved away his concern and stood up. “Thank you for reminding me that I need to leave my personal problems at the door.”

“Admiral?” He stood up with her. “Do you want to talk about it? I’ve got a pretty good ear.”

Quietly, she said, “No, but thank you for offering.”

“Are you sure? I consider us more than just co-workers. I consider us friends, and you look like you could really use one.”

She swallowed past the lump in her throat. A friend is exactly what she needed, but her one true friend had shown her that he was anything but. “Thank you, Harry.” She touched his arm. “That means a lot to me, but I’ll be fine. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

As she walked back to her quarters, she chastised herself for letting her bad mood show. It was unprofessional and certainly not befitting of an admiral.

When she was alone, she risked checking her messages and saw that there were two from Chakotay. She hadn't spoken to him for four days, and he still hadn't taken the hint that she wasn't interested in returning his call. His messages had been very brief and relatively harmless, so she decided it wouldn't hurt her to listen to them.

The first one said, "Good morning, Kathryn. I don't know if you received my message last night, so I wanted to make sure you knew that I'm leaving Banora Colony today and will be out of communication for a few days. Perhaps when I'm able to use a comm again, you'll have cooled off enough that you're willing to talk to me. I hope you're well."

"Not likely," she muttered as she played the next one.

"I'm on the transport vessel now and was surprised to learn that I do have access to a comm station. It's not secure, but I'm here if you want to talk."

"And I was looking forward to a few days' reprieve." She rolled her eyes and shut down the terminal.

\*\*\*\*\*

Several days later, she was sitting alone in her quarters staring out the viewport when her chime rang. "Computer, identify visitor."

"Captain Young."

She took a deep breath and straightened her shoulders. "Come."

"Am I interrupting anything?"

"Not a thing. Have a seat." When he settled across from her, she asked, "Can I get you a drink?"

"No thanks, I'm fine."

"What can I do for you?"

"I just wanted to check in because we haven't spoken in a few days. Are you happy with the way things resolved on Sirius?"

She wove her fingers together. "Happy is not quite the word I'd use, but I'm content to let things settle there for awhile. I suspect that until there's a significant change in Federation leadership, we won't see the fruit of our labor."

Nodding slowly, he said, "I agree, although I must congratulate you on turning Karnet around so quickly. The change in him is remarkable."

"Thank you, but I think he'd hit rock bottom and the timing was right for him to accept aid."

"Regardless, getting the Council and the Sirian Cabinet to both agree to change the planet's status to protectorate is extraordinary."

She smiled half-heartedly. "I appreciate the encouragement."

After a short pause, he asked, "Are you okay, Kathryn?"

"Why do you ask?" She tried not to sound defensive.

He leaned forward in his chair and clasped his hands. "I mean from your injuries. Any residual pain or concerns?"

"I'm fine. They were pretty minor."

"I know you're not part of my crew, but you're on my ship, and I like to make sure that anyone who has been injured is getting the care that they need."

"Your medical staff is young, but they are competent."

"Glad to hear it. Since we're merely a diplomatic vessel, we act as a training ground for recent medical school graduates who've shown potential." He looked at her nervously. "Anyway, I'm rambling. I'm really here because I want to apologize for questioning your orders on the bridge. I should've asked to speak with you privately, and I don't want my error in judgment to negatively affect our working relationship."

She furrowed her eyebrows. "From what I recall, we did discuss it privately after our first briefing regarding Sirius."

"Yes, we did."

"Your comments on the bridge weren't as positive as I would've liked, but you didn't say anything that warrants concern."

"Okay," he relaxed. "I just wanted to clear the air in case there was a problem. I want you to know that you can talk to me about anything."

She crooked a small smile. "I appreciate that, Bernie. Thank you."

As he got up he said, “While Chakotay was onboard, he told me that you’d be straightforward if I did anything that caused a problem for you. I should’ve taken his advice. Goodnight, Kathryn.”

“Goodnight,” she said absently as he left. Sighing deeply, she laid her head on the back of the chair and stared at the ceiling. Once again, she’d let her disposition affect her working relationships, but the truth was that she just didn’t care at the moment.

She thought about reading a report or maybe picking up a novel, but neither interested her. It was too early to go to bed and she wasn’t tired. These periods of inactivity between conferences were uninteresting at best.

She thought about what Bernie had said as he left – that Chakotay had told him she was straightforward when something was bothering her. While that was true when it came to fellow officers, she was exactly the opposite when it came to personal relationships. There’d been times in her relationship with Mark when she hadn’t talked to him for weeks because she’d been angry.

The comm signaled an incoming call and she groaned. “All right, time to be straightforward so he’ll stop calling.”

It had been a week since their argument and she felt that she could calmly deal with him. She braced herself and hit the receive button.

“Kathryn! I wasn’t expecting you to answer.”

“You caught me in a rare moment,” she said flatly.

“How are you?”

She shrugged. “Fine.”

“Good, glad to hear it. I’m back on Earth now, just wanted to let you know.”

“Thanks for keeping me updated. Now that you’re settled, there shouldn’t be a reason for you to keep leaving messages.”

He frowned. “I’ve been leaving messages so that we could try to work this out, but we can’t do that if you’re unwilling to talk.”

“I have nothing to say to you, Chakotay.”

Raising his eyebrows, he said, “That smoke coming out of your ears tells me otherwise.”

“What do you want me to say?”

He looked away and then back. "I want you to say that you're ready to put our argument behind us."

Shaking her head, she said, "I'm not, and I don't know that I'll ever be."

"You've got to meet me halfway, Kathryn."

"No, I don't. We're not on Voyager anymore and I have no motivation to be cordial."

"No motivation? Don't you have any feelings for me?"

"Yes, but I'm trying to get over them."

"All right. Message received, Kathryn. You're still angry, and I can live with that. I'll even give you the space you want, for now. Good night." He ended the transmission.

She ran her fingers furiously through her hair and then picked up a picture of them and threw it against the wall.

\*\*\*\*\*