

## ***The Future is Ours – Part 11***

### **“A Lost Spark”**

By Dawn

Rated NC-17

Summary: Kathryn dealing with the ramifications of their argument

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Kathryn felt adrift as she stared out her office window at the rebuilt Golden Gate Bridge. The Pioneer had arrived in orbit only an hour before, and she had a press conference scheduled for eleven. It was a little after ten on a Monday morning, and Sue had just informed her that Chakotay had an appointment to see her. She wanted to cancel it, but she didn't have the energy to explain why. Besides, Sue was bubbling with happiness about getting the two of them a few minutes together.

It had been three weeks since their horrible fight, and two weeks since she'd heard from him. He'd been right. She'd needed time and space to cool down, but once her anger faded, a fog of depression had settled over her. She'd tried to focus on work, but couldn't concentrate and, instead, wanted to sleep as much as possible. Sleeping made the days go by faster and kept her from having to socialize or stare at nothing in her quarters.

Sue beeped her and said, “Captain Chakotay is here to see you.”

“Send him in.” She took a deep breath before she turned to face the door. When he walked through, she felt the air leave her lungs and had to steady herself by gripping the windowsill.

He waited until the door closed behind him. “I wasn't sure you'd agree to see me.”

“I didn't have the energy to explain why not to Sue, but I can't have this conversation right now. I have to face the press in less than an hour.”

Walking towards her, he said, “I know, but now that we're on the same planet, I wanted to see you as soon as possible.”

She was already leaning against the window and felt trapped as he came close enough to hold her hand. She looked down at their joined fingers. It felt like a dream, strange and surreal, to be touching him. Their fingers blurred together and it was only when she felt the warm splash on her hand that she realized she was crying.

Lifting her chin with a finger, he said, “I've missed you.”

She wanted to scream and yell and pummel his chest, but felt dazed as his lips descended to hers. Once she realized he was kissing her, she pushed against his shoulders to get him to stop.

He whispered, "Let it go."

"I can't." She pushed against him again, but he wouldn't budge.

"Yes, you can." He kissed her softly, in stark contrast to how tightly he was holding her.

Feeling overwhelmed, she pulled her head back. "No. Please," she begged as she wiped away her tears.

"Shhhhhh." He stopped kissing her, but he didn't let go. "We can fix this if you'll let me in."

"How can I?" She trembled, unable to think clearly because of the ever-present foggiess in her mind.

His lips brushed against her forehead. "We've been apart for too long, and I know that once our spark is rekindled, we'll be able to put this behind us."

Sadly, she asked, "You think it's that simple?"

"With us, nothing is ever simple." He lifted her chin again. "Let me kiss you."

She clamped her eyes shut and realized too late that he took her silence as permission. When his lips touched hers again, she felt a surge of arousal course through her. It was the first strong feeling she'd felt in weeks, and she latched on to it.

She knew that she was kissing him for the wrong reason, but she loved him and, for three months, she'd been starved for physical touch. Her defenses dropped and she went from pushing him away to holding on for dear life.

When he felt her response change, he relaxed his grip and began to rub her back gently. The kiss faded and their foreheads touched. He said, "I know you're angry, but what we have is special enough that I'm not letting you go."

"I'm not thinking straight right now."

"Then don't think, just feel."

"No, it's not the kiss. In general, I'm in a..."

"Shhhh," he said as he pulled her into his arms. "We'll be okay."

“It’s not that easy.” She wiped her eyes.

“Nothing worth having ever is.”

Ducking out from under his arms, she said, “I need to pull myself together. The press conference begins in twenty minutes.” Now that she was away from him, she could begin to push down her turbulent emotions and replace them with the forced confidence she needed for her public image.

“And you don’t want them to see your tears.”

She ignored his comment and stepped into the washroom to touch up her makeup. “Do you have to get back to work?”

“I have a faculty meeting at fourteen hundred, but I’m all yours until then.”

As she studied herself in the mirror, she felt utterly confused about him. There were so many conflicting emotions in her mind that she felt off-balance and hazy, and unfortunately, he’d been the only person in the last eight years who’d helped her regain stability when she felt that way. In a moment of weakness, she asked, “Would you come with me? After the briefing, we can have lunch.”

“I’d like that.”

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Kathryn walked into the press briefing room and all eyes immediately fell upon her. She had the uncomfortable impression that she was about to face the Spanish Inquisition. For the first time since she’d started this job, she wasn’t telling people about what she was going to do. She was here to report on what she had done.

“Are you nervous?” he asked.

As she answered, she surveyed the room. “There’s a lot riding on this. I’m grateful that my speech was written ahead of time.”

“I doubt you’ll have a problem. After all, there are at least 146 people who would follow you to the far edge of the galaxy and back.”

“Now I just need to expand that number to a few hundred billion.” She was relieved to have his support again.

Admiral Khurma came up to greet her, and Kathryn walked with him to the podium. She glanced back and saw that Chakotay was leaning up against the wall, looking with boredom at the gathering of reporters and photographers. She put him out of her mind and focused on the job at hand.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, and thank you for coming today. I have a short statement before I open the floor to questions.

“During the last two months, I had the opportunity to visit with eight planetary leaders who are unhappy with the current state of the Federation. I also met everyday people who are struggling to make ends meet. I met some who are angry enough to use violence as a means for getting their point across. I also met a great number of people who hold a spark of hope that circumstances will be improving soon.

“The war has been over for two and a half years, long enough to put aside the disagreements that divided us. Most of San Francisco and the capital city on Betazed have been rebuilt. The damaged space stations are well on their way to becoming fully functional again, Starfleet has begun replacing the lost ships, and Starfleet Academy enrollment is higher this coming semester than it has been for the last nine years.

“I found that the one thing that unites every individual in this quadrant is a desire for peace. To achieve that, everyone is going to have to work towards improving each other’s quality of life. Feelings of hatred and intolerance have to be resolved, because they are counter-productive. If we can find common ground between us, the hurdles that we’re facing can be crossed.

“I will be discussing the issues that were brought to my attention with members of the Federation Council. The concerns of those I visited with have been heard, and although it may take time to bring about positive change, we’ll work through it together.”

She looked around for reactions and wasn’t entirely confident that they understood. “Now, I’ll open the floor up for questions.”

A reporter asked, “What was your initial reaction to the bombing on Sirius IX?”

“My first concern in a crisis situation is always the welfare of the victims. Following that, I was concerned that yet another act of violence would be demoralizing for the citizens of that world.”

Chakotay watched Kathryn as she answered questions from the reporters and recognized that she was in her element. He didn’t relish the publicity that came with being both a Voyager and being in a relationship with her, but he understood the need for it. The media was a powerful tool for what she was trying to accomplish, and she wielded it like she commanded a starship – with poise, intelligence, and unbelievable courage.

Although he admired her tremendously, he wished that the fame didn’t inflate her ego quite so much. When she was on top of the world, she tended to be reckless and arrogant. Now that she was home, he planned to calm her anger and bring her metaphorically back down to Earth.

When the conference was over, Kathryn shook hands with a great number of people. Both reporters and Starfleet officers wanted to meet her and offer support, congratulate her and express concern about her welfare on Sirius. She thanked them graciously and offered them bits of encouragement in return.

When she was finally able to break away, Kathryn returned to Chakotay and said, "Shall we make a run for it before anyone else wants to talk to me?"

"Really?" he asked with disbelief. "Looks to me like you love the attention."

Not sure how to take that, she answered, "I have to be outgoing so they feel at ease approaching me." She took his arm to walk out with him, but felt a sense of emptiness by his response to the press conference. Glancing back to make sure the two security officers were following them, she led him outside. "Where would you like to go?"

"Oh, doesn't matter to me. How about Billy's uncle's place?"

"That'd be fine." Before they began to walk, she paused to tell the security detail where they were going. The walk was only two blocks, but they were stopped four times by civilians who wanted her autograph on the way. She took it in stride, but could tell that Chakotay was becoming a little impatient.

When they arrived, they found a secluded table in the back. The security guards sat at opposite ends of the counter so they could watch both her and the entrance. She'd given Scott and Justin the day off, and these two had been randomly assigned by Starfleet.

"Is something wrong?" Chakotay asked.

"What?" She hadn't been paying attention to him, but then realized what he'd asked. "Oh, I was just checking on my security. They're new."

"Ah. I was hoping to run into Doyle."

"Why's that?" She was afraid that he wanted to give Scott the third degree for not protecting her well enough.

"To thank him, of course. For saving your life." Chakotay reached across the table and took her hand.

She smiled appropriately. "I'm sure he'd like to see you, too."

Billy's uncle happily greeted them and acted as their waiter. As they ate, they made small talk about the Voyagers he'd seen since arriving on Earth a week before.

Kathryn worked up the courage to ask, "So, what did you think of the press conference?"

“I think it was exactly what they wanted to hear.”

“I tried not to offer any specific promises.”

He shrugged. “Like quadrant-wide peace? You could give the politicians a run for their money with promises like that.”

She smiled a little in response, but her heart felt heavy. The way he kept alternating between affection and criticism made her unsure whether to keep trying to reconnect with him or walk out the door. Not wanting to make a scene, she decided to be patient for the moment.

Before going their separate ways for the afternoon, they made plans to meet at her house for dinner. She felt anxious, fearing that another argument loomed in the near future. However, if she could be brave in the face of terrorists, she could be brave in the face of the man she loved.

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When he arrived at her house, his attitude had changed for the better and she was relieved. After he greeted her with a simple kiss, he offered to help her cook. They didn't talk about much except the food they were preparing as they worked together in the kitchen.

Over dinner, Kathryn didn't feel much like talking, so she asked him questions and listened to his answers. He told her about the faculty members he'd met and about those who were still around from when they'd been in school. He was pleasant, and she was glad she didn't have to say much.

After they cleaned up the dinner dishes, they moved to the couch. Although she wanted to watch the Fednews reports to see what the response was from her press conference, she didn't suggest it. She was afraid that watching it might make him chide her again.

“Oh, meant to tell you,” Chakotay said. “B'Elanna and Tom have invited us to dinner Wednesday evening to catch up. I told them we'd love to.”

“Wednesday?” She just realized that she hadn't told him about her plans for the week. “Do you think they'd have us over tomorrow instead?”

“I don't know, why?”

“I'd like to see them, but I'm going to Paris Wednesday morning and won't be back until late on Saturday.”

“Paris? You're leaving again already?”

“Sorry, I forgot to tell you. This afternoon, Khurma, Harry, and I outlined a strategy to try to address some of the issues, and he wants to meet with the Council as soon as possible to get started.”

He frowned. “I’d planned to spend time with you this week since my classes begin next Monday.”

Feeling awful, she said, “I’m sorry, Chakotay. I didn’t think about your calendar or I would’ve told him that I needed a week in San Francisco first. I was in such a fog by the end of the day that I was accepting whatever he and Harry decided. I’ll call him now to see if we can postpone.” She rose from the couch.

“No,” he grabbed her hand to stop her. “It’s obviously important, and I don’t want to get in the way.”

She sat back down. “I keep making you angry, but I’m not trying to be inconsiderate.”

He rubbed his eyes tiredly. “We’ll figure it out, Kathryn. No relationships are without their problems.”

“I’m aware of that, but I can’t keep fighting with you.”

Picking up her hand, he asked, “Do you want to know what I think would help?”

“I’m not sure I do.”

“Come here.” He took her hand and drew her close. Lacing his fingers through her hair, he brought them together for a kiss.

The physical touch was a balm for her turbulent emotions. It gave her an outlet to release some of the frustration and anguish that she was trying so hard to control. Whatever their troubles might be, one thing was certain – there was a connection between them. Even now, in the midst of her despair, his mouth was so intoxicating that her thoughts faded into the background.

“Kathryn,” he said against her lips. “Let’s go upstairs.”

She knew that sex wasn’t the answer, but she wanted to feel good and it was easier to go along than to stop and deal with their problems. When they got to her bedroom, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her again, but for her, it was a kiss that didn’t fit the moment. He was pushing them into what could’ve been a passionate kiss, but all she wanted was to be held. They stopped to remove their clothing before he drew them together again, naked and exposed. He was eager and demanding as he kissed her lips, her jaw, and her neck.

The kisses were deep, but she didn't feel the usual heat surging through her. She didn't mind the aggression, but she wished that he was doing this because of love as opposed to whatever he was feeling towards her. She didn't know if he was hurt, irritated, or just plain angry, but because she felt lost and alone and because she loved him, she willingly opened herself to him.

When she'd had as much kissing as she could tolerate, she backed away, pulled down the covers, and sat on the bed. She began to feel unsure about what they'd started, but he was on her before she had a chance to complete that thought. She held his head as he took pleasure in her breasts, although she felt like she was watching him kiss someone else. Trying to ignore that, she focused on the way her fingers felt at home in his thick, black hair.

What he was doing was enough to arouse her body so that she was ready when he entered. She clung to him as he thrust within her, hoping that he didn't notice her lassitude. The sensation of being filled felt good and she tightened her muscles to bring him more pleasure. When he released his seed and collapsed on top of her, she let her hands glide over his muscled back, savoring the sensation of being held.

He whispered, "We need to take care of you."

"No," she said as she kissed the side of his head. "I don't think I can manage it right now."

"Kathryn?" He lifted himself off of her, pulling out in the process. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." She swallowed hard as she studied his arms. "I just want to be held as I fall asleep."

He looked devastated. "Oh, Kathryn. Did you not want this?"

She said carefully, "I needed to feel close to you."

Closing his eyes in sorrow, he drew her into his arms and pulled the sheets over them.

"I'm so sorry."

"Shhh," she said as she situated herself into her favorite spot in his arms. "I don't want to talk anymore. Just hold me."

Chakotay watched her as she drifted off to sleep. He felt terrible for making love to her. He closed his eyes in regret. It wasn't love. It was sex. Holding her even closer, he prayed that she wouldn't pull back again in the morning. As he thought about their encounter, he began to realize that he'd misread her signs. She'd been very quiet and accepting of whatever he'd done, but it was all at his insistence. With remorse, he bowed his head and kissed her temple.



He'd seen the confusion in her eyes after the press conference, but she'd been put on such a high pedestal by all the reporters, that he was sure she didn't need to hear more praise from him, too. If anything, he thought she needed normal conversation that had nothing to do with her job. That's what he'd been trying to do all day – bring some normalcy back to their lives, as if that was possible.

He was angry about her going to Paris, but he knew he had to accept it. The work that he'd planned for them to do on their relationship could wait a week. As he looked at her lying peacefully in his arms, he wondered how long it would take her to figure out that all he really wanted was for her to think about him before making decisions. That's what she'd promised months ago.

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She woke as the first light came filtering through her windows. Her head was resting on Chakotay's shoulder and she was snuggled against his side. Slowly, she pulled out of his arms and sat up.

He woke with her movement. “Kathryn? You okay?”

“Yes,” she said as she put her robe on. “I'll be back.” She went into the bathroom and looked at herself in the mirror. Her hair was a mess and there was makeup smeared under her eyes. She groaned and looked away, not wanting to face herself or the coming day. The last thing she felt like doing was sliding into the admiral persona. After using the toilet, she washed her face and brushed out her hair. It was still dirty, but at least it wasn't a tangled mess.

When she returned to bed she was disappointed to find him waiting for her. She was craving some time alone downstairs.

He held out his hand to her. “It's only five, come back.”

She reluctantly agreed, but laid on her side looking away from him. As he spooned up behind her, she clamped her eyes shut and tried not to make any moves to invite further intimacy. She was glad that she hadn't taken off her robe because it made her feel a little more concealed and protected.

She felt numb and couldn't stop the silent tears that fell from her eyes. It was time to let go of him so she could start functioning again. Although she'd learned from the temporal committee that she was to have children with him, she couldn't fathom how this relationship could work long enough to make that happen. Of course, no one had said anything about her having a happy life. Was she destined to stick with him just to preserve future generations, or would they be smarter to take their relationship back to only being friends? She didn't know if she could handle either situation, but she also didn't want to go on like this.

“Kathryn?”

She turned her face further into the pillow, afraid that he’d noticed her tears. “Yes?” she responded quietly.

“I can’t sleep, either. Are you hungry? I could make us breakfast,” he suggested hopefully.

“Can you hold me for awhile longer?”

“Of course,” he said as he snuggled around her more tightly.

As they lay there, she focused on hardening her heart. She forced herself to think about their arguments. He’d misinterpreted her, and he didn’t really understand the burden that she was bearing. He’d verbally attacked her and kicked her while she was down. On top of that, he’d been rude and pushy. She hoped all these thoughts could help her find stability that didn’t depend on anyone else. Whether or not they remained friends was still open, but her heart wasn’t.

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When she woke again, Chakotay wasn’t with her. She looked at the clock to see that it was a little before seven, her usual time to wake up. She closed her eyes again to enjoy the solitude that had been her safe haven for the last few weeks. That lasted for a good minute and a half before she heard footsteps coming up the stairs.

He stuck his head in the door as she sat up and tightened her robe. “Are you awake?”

“Just woke up a minute ago.” She forced a smile as he brought in a tray.

“I thought you might enjoy the luxury of breakfast in bed.” He set it down and took a seat at the foot of the bed.

“Thank you, this is very thoughtful.” She picked up the coffee and let the welcome scent wash over her. “You’re already dressed?”

“I need to get to the campus. New cadet orientation begins at eight, and they want the faculty there. I hope you don’t mind, but I borrowed the shower in the hallway.”

“Of course not.”

He looked down and then said, “Kathryn, I’m sorry about last night.”

She had taken a bite and couldn’t respond right away. “About the sex?”

“Yeah,” he cleared his throat, obviously not expecting her to be so abrupt. “I hope I didn’t hurt you.”

“The sex didn’t hurt.” She didn’t want to imply that she wasn’t hurt emotionally. His lack of regard affected her deeply.

He tried to read her expression. “You’re sure?”

“I wouldn’t have said it if I wasn’t.”

“All right.” He held up a hand to let her know that he was backing off that topic.

“The omelet is very good, thank you.”

“I’m glad you like it.” An awkward silence stretched between them until he said, “Well, I should go.”

Kathryn offered, “I’ll call Lanna about rescheduling for tonight.”

“Thanks, I might not get a chance today.” He smoothed out the bedspread where he’d been sitting.

“If they’re available, I’ll leave you a message.”

He added, “I could meet you there.”

“All right.”

“Well,” he said as stepped forward and gave her a kiss on the forehead. “Have a good day.”

She tried to smile appreciatively. “You too, and thanks for breakfast.”

“You’re welcome,” he said at the door. “Good bye.”

When he was gone, Kathryn rolled her eyes and sighed heavily.

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Later that morning, she was sitting at the conference table in her office, dully staring at the window in the exact spot where she’d let Chakotay kiss her the day before.

“Admiral?” Harry asked.

It took her a moment to bring her attention back to him. “I’m sorry, what were you saying?”

“Nothing yet, but I would like your opinion about prioritizing the issues. Should we decide that in advance or should we let the Council set the agenda?”

She blinked slowly and took a deep breath. “I'm not sure it matters. What do you think?”

“We could go in there knowing what we'd like to address first, but be open in case they want to make a change.”

“Sure,” she smiled weakly and rubbed her face. “Where's the master list?”

He pointed to the only PADD in front of her. “It's got what you need.”

“Thanks.” She forced her eyes to focus on the little screen. None of the issues felt stronger than any other, although impeachment of the president was sounding more and more like a good idea. A new leader would make the rest of this a hell of a lot easier.

“If I may make a suggestion?”

“Feel free.”

He said, “Let's start with revoking all unfulfilled and expired resource contracts. They're not going to be honored, so it shouldn't make much of a difference to the Council, and it's a positive step in the right direction.”

“Let's do that.”

He was quiet for a moment, and then asked, “Would be okay if we took a break for a moment? I'd like another cup of coffee.”

She smiled. “When did you start drinking so much coffee?”

“Working with you is rubbing off on me, I guess. May I get you one?”

“Thank you.” She stood up and stretched. “While you're doing that, I need to call B'Elanna.”

“I'll leave you alone, then.”

She waved him back to their conference table. “No, no. You're fine.” As she was keying in the connection to Utopia Planetia, she composed her mouth into a smile.

“Katie!” Patterson said as he answered the comm. “Glad to see that you're home. How were things out there?”

“As you’d likely expect, Matt, there were a lot of unresolved issues.”

“No doubt,” he smiled. “What can I do for you this morning?”

“I’d like to speak with Tom or B’Elanna for a moment, if they’re free.”

“Sure. Tom’s out flying, but my second favorite engineer is here.”

Kathryn chuckled slightly. “Who’s your first?”

“You, of course.” He winked. “I’ll go fetch her for you.”

She glanced at Harry and he smiled in return. Her attention was diverted back to the screen when B’Elanna answered.

“Admiral! Welcome home.”

Kathryn lifted an eyebrow. “I thought we agreed that you’d call me by my name?”

“Well, I didn’t know if this was a personal call, or not. How are you?”

She took a deep breath. “I’m glad to be home. Chakotay mentioned that you invited us to dinner tomorrow night, but I’ll be in Paris. I’m calling to see if you and Tom are free tonight instead. It doesn’t have to be anything special.”

“We invited Harry over tonight,” she said with a frown. “How long will you be in Paris?”

Harry came over to the desk. “Excuse my interruption.”

“Of course,” Kathryn said.

He smiled. “If it’s okay with both of you, we could all get together tonight. I was going to have to bow out early anyway because Michelle asked me out for a drink.”

“Ditching us for a girl?” B’Elanna asked.

“I hope you’ll forgive me.”

“I’ll try,” B’Elanna said in jest. “Then it’s settled. See you all at six?”

“Sounds good, thank you,” Kathryn smiled.

After Kathryn and Harry got back to the table, he asked, “How is Chakotay?”

“Hmm?”

“Chakotay? I assume you saw him yesterday?”

“Oh, he’s fine.” She glanced toward the windowsill again.

“I know I’ve offered too many times, but if you need to get something off your chest, I’d be happy to listen.”

She squeezed his forearm. “Thank you, but we should get back to work. Do you have the notes from the Cairn Homeworld?”

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Kathryn and Harry were a little late getting to Tom and B’Elanna’s house because she’d received a comm from the former Cairn Representative she’d met with the week before. She couldn’t exactly cut the conversation short because he was calling to congratulate her on a job well done with the press conference.

“Come on in!” Tom said as he pulled her into a quick hug, and then did the same with Harry. “Welcome home, weary travelers.”

“It’s good to be back,” she said happily.

“Kathryn,” Chakotay had risen to greet her. “How was your day?”

“Busy,” she replied. “But I doubt you want to hear all the boring details,” she said casually, but she noticed that Chakotay gave her an odd look.

“Are you kidding?” B’Elanna came in and hugged her, too. “I’m dying to hear what the reaction was to your speech yesterday. It was great!”

“Thank you, but you should be complimenting Harry.” She nodded towards him. “He wrote the speech.”

“You did?” B’Elanna asked with surprise. “Wow! That was really good.”

“Thanks,” Harry said. “She’s getting tired of saying the same old thing, so she let me give her some new words. I hope the bit about quadrant-wide peace wasn’t over the top, but I thought it sounded like a nice ideal.”

Kathryn caught Chakotay’s eyes and he was clearly dumbfounded with the realization that she hadn’t written the speech he’d admonished her for.

B’Elanna distracted her by ushering her into the kitchen. “There’s someone in here who wants to see you.”

Sitting in a highchair and covered in mashed peas, Miral was the most precious little klingon she'd ever seen. "Miral," Kathryn gushed. She quickly sat down next to the baby and wiped a smear of peas off the ridged forehead. "Are these yummy?"

"She really gets into her food," Tom commented.

"I can tell." Kathryn picked up the spoon and dipped it into the jar. "Would you like more?"

Miral opened her mouth wide and leaned forward to try to get the spoon.

Laughing, Kathryn said, "I'll take that as a yes."

"A glass of wine, Kathryn?" B'Elanna asked as she set the glass down out of the baby's reach.

"Would love it, thank you." Kathryn took a sip of the fruity white wine. "This is really good. Cool and crisp."

"We thought you'd like it," Tom replied.

"Delicious. I apologize for us being late. I got a call that I couldn't find a way to end graciously. You'd be surprised how talkative a telepath can be when you're too far away for them to read your mind."

"Twenty questions?" Chakotay asked.

"More like forty." She gave him a guarded smile.

Harry said, "That conference on the Cairn Homeworld was the easiest one we've had, though. They just read our minds, so we didn't have to convince them of our sincerity." He nodded towards Kathryn. "And it was incredible how the Representative took to our favorite admiral. He was like an over-protective grandfather with you."

"The trouble with mind-readers is that they have far too much insight." Kathryn smiled at Harry, but noticed that Chakotay was listening intently to every word that was said. She remembered how the kindly old man had taken her aside and told her that love has a way of healing itself, even when we don't think it's possible.

"Well, don't worry about being late. Dinner is just now ready anyway," B'Elanna responded as she set a platter of lasagna down in the center of the table.

"Looks good," Chakotay said.

As they ate, Tom asked, "So, Kathryn, tell us, did you get any feedback from the speech yesterday?"

“Some,” she said modestly. “Sue filled me in this morning, and it sounds like it got a positive response in the media.”

“I’d say,” B’Elanna remarked. “You didn’t watch yourself on the news last night?”

“No,” she waved the topic away. “I already knew what I had to say.”

Tom said, “When you first took on this job, I was really worried that it would be too huge, you know? But now that you’re doing it, I think this is the best thing ever for you.”

Kathryn raised an eyebrow. “And why is that, Tom?”

“Because anybody would follow you anywhere to do anything.” He pointed his fork at her. “You would make the best con artist.”

“You’re comparing me to a con artist?” She laughed, and it felt good.

“Well, yeah. You could say anything in front of the camera and the reporters would jump all over it and turn it into something huge. I mean, all you said yesterday was basically, the war is over, it’s time for peace, get behind me and we’ll work on it together.”

“That was the gist of it.” Kathryn was enjoying Tom’s analysis immensely. She glanced at Chakotay and saw that the muscles in his jaw were tense.

Tom said, “You didn’t promise anything, you didn’t report on anything, yet everyone is falling all over themselves to step in line. It’s really something.”

Humored, she said, “Well, thank you, I think.”

“He meant it as a compliment,” B’Elanna noted. “I mean, what is your job, really? To talk to people?”

“Pretty much, although I prefer to think of it as listening.” She took a sip of wine. “Listen to complaints, offer sympathy, and communicate those complaints back to the Council.”

“With a few of your and Harry’s kick-ass speeches sprinkled in here and there,” Tom added.

In a joking manner, Chakotay said, “You two are going to make her head explode if you keep it up.”

Kathryn was startled by the negativity of his comment, but replied coolly, “Don’t worry, Chakotay. My self-esteem has taken a few poundings recently. It’s a nice change to have some positive support from friends.”



His expression changed immediately from a joking smile to a look of alarmed concern. Kathryn looked away quickly.

The other three were taken aback, but Tom broke the tense moment by changing the subject. “So what really happened on that one planet?”

“Which?” Kathryn asked, relieved to move on. “I’ve been to twelve.”

“The one with the explosion, of course. That was really something how you two walked out of there with only a scratch.”

“Yeah,” B’Elanna said. “Do you have some kind of personal shield device? I can’t believe the number of times you’ve walked out of a bad situation unscathed.”

Harry said, “Well, that’s not entirely true. I had a huge, gaping wound on my leg and she had a severe concussion and broken wrist.”

“Still,” Tom said. “You survived an explosion.”

She glanced nervously at Chakotay before replying. “It was nothing more than what you heard on the news reports. The bomb was dropped through the stained glass ceiling above us.”

“You said Doyle saved your life. What did he do?” Tom asked.

Harry answered for her, and he did so with dramatic flair. “It’s amazing how quick that guy can move. As soon as we heard glass breaking, he had her on the floor and was shoving her under the enormous conference table that we were sitting at. Needless to say, the rest of us high tailed it under there, too.”

Kathryn added, “And thankfully, everyone who’d been at the table made it.”

“Come on,” Tom urged. “You’re not giving us enough details. We’re action deprived here!”

Kathryn glanced at Chakotay again saw that he was watching her carefully. She turned to Tom. “You didn’t get enough action in the Delta Quadrant?”

“Yeah, but it was like quitting cold turkey when we got home. I need to live vicariously through you and Harry.”

“You’ll like this one, Tom,” Harry said with excitement. “Moore, the Pioneer’s security chief, actually phasered the bomb so it exploded in mid-air.”

“Impressive,” B’Elanna remarked. “Kudos to him.”

“No kidding,” Kathryn remarked. “We wouldn’t be here right now if he hadn’t.”

Chakotay closed his eyes and laid his fork aside.

B’Elanna asked, “So you were there, under the table. Did you know what’d happened?”

Kathryn was nervous about telling much more. She could tell it was upsetting Chakotay, and despite her desire to be strong, she didn’t want to hurt him. “Yes, we knew, but Doyle had me completely covered.”

Tom smirked, “I bet Scott loved that. Full body contact with you.”

Kathryn rolled her eyes. “I’m sure that was the last thing on his mind.” She tried to reassure Chakotay with a smile, but he was looking down.

B’Elanna looked back and forth between Chakotay and Kathryn. “You’ve already heard all this, Chakotay?”

“Pretty much,” he responded.

Kathryn said, “I’m sorry.”

He shrugged. “They wanted to hear the story.”

“Sorry, we didn’t mean to...,” Harry said nervously.

Kathryn offered, “Maybe we should talk about something else.”

Tom took the hint and started telling everyone about an incident that happened at Utopia Planetia. Kathryn surreptitiously glanced at Chakotay and saw that his eyes were downcast and that he was pushing food around on his plate. She couldn’t tell if he was angry or sad.

They were both quiet during dessert, giving the others ample opportunity to talk about Miral’s latest accomplishments and discuss Harry’s impending date. Kathryn participated in the conversation, asking questions to keep them talking, but Chakotay remained silent. She didn’t want the conversation to turn back to her or her job, but unfortunately, it did.

B’Elanna asked, “So, what are you doing in Paris?”

She quietly said, “Just talking to the Council.”

“We’re going to try to address some of the concerns,” Harry added. “There are little things that can be done that will get us headed in the right direction.”

“Oh,” Tom said, “You’ve got to check out this one bar while you’re there.”

Kathryn grimaced. “I don’t really think a bar is the safest place for me to be. Wouldn’t do to have my security guards drinking, anyway.”

“Harry could go,” Tom said.

B’Elanna commented, “It must feel strange to walk around with security guards all the time.”

Kathryn shrugged. “It’s not so bad once you get used to it. I don’t have much privacy, but with the number of people who want to stop me on the street, it’s good that they’re there. I try to be as gracious as I can, but it’s difficult to keep up the act and be alert at the same time.”

“You can’t even walk to the grocery store alone, can you?”

“No,” she said with a sigh. “But without the recognition, it wouldn’t matter how motivating Harry’s speeches are. Nobody would be listening.”

Tom said, “I guess you are playing a part, aren’t you?”

Kathryn nodded towards Chakotay. “He’s often said that I’m a good actress.”

B’Elanna sensed the building tension and said, “Let’s get this cleaned up, shall we? Harry has a hot date, and you probably want to get home, Kathryn, if you have to be in Paris in the morning.”

“Don’t worry about that. Our meetings don’t start until late in their afternoon.” She took some of the dishes over to the counter.

Harry said, “If it’s all right with all of you, I’ll head out.”

“Don’t let us keep you,” Tom patted him on the back. “You’re going to have to introduce us to this girl sometime.”

Rolling his eyes, Harry said, “That’d be worse than introducing her to my parents, and I’m not sure it’s that serious.”

B’Elanna laughed. “We’re not that bad.”

Harry caught Kathryn alone when she went back to the table to get more dishes. “Admiral, are you set for tomorrow?”

“As much as I can be, but if they ask for details, I might need your help recalling information.”

“We could talk over breakfast if you need me to go over anything again.”

“We’ll be fine, but feel free to kick me under the table if I... well, you know.” She was embarrassed to admit that she’d been distracted easily, but she also knew that she could trust him.

“And load you with coffee, I know.” He smiled genuinely.

“Thank you, Harry, for all the work you’ve been doing. I couldn’t have done those last two planets without you.”

“I’m happy to help. Well, not happy, but thankful that I can. I think it’s actually made me feel more confident.” He unexpectedly hugged her. “I’ll keep you going, don’t worry.”

Overcome with emotion, she held him tighter. He obviously understood what was going on now with the tension between her and Chakotay being the reason for her depression, and for a reason that she couldn’t explain, he felt like a lifeline. “Thank you.”

Harry said his goodbyes to Tom and B’Elanna on the other side of the room, giving her a chance to compose herself. She looked up and saw that Chakotay was closer than she expected. He was looking down and bracing his arms on the back of a chair.

He looked up when he felt her eyes on him. “Kathryn?”

With resignation, she said, “I guess you heard all of that.”

Nodding, he asked, “What’s going on?”

With a hoarse whisper, she admitted, “Coping with... with just about everything during the last few weeks has been difficult for me. He’s been keeping me afloat.”

Chakotay closed his eyes and turned his head. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Do you really need to ask me that?”

Tom interrupted as Harry was walking out. “Ladies, why don’t you let Chakotay and me clean this up? Miral needs some time with her godmother.”

Kathryn was glad for the distraction and cheerfully lifted Miral out of the highchair while B’Elanna dusted the fallen crumbs off the baby’s diaper-covered bottom.

“Want to help me give her a bath?”

“I’d love to.”

Once they got the baby in the tub and occupied with toys, B’Elanna asked, “What’s going on with you two?”

“It’s not open for discussion.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that I don’t want to talk about it.” She used a plastic dolphin to squirt water on Miral’s tummy, making the baby squeal with glee.

“You’ve barely said anything to each other tonight. Something’s obviously wrong.”

Kathryn sighed. “Please, drop it.”

“What did you do?”

“What did I do?” She asked with shock. “You automatically assume that I’m the one to blame?”

“No!” She backpedaled. “Of course not, but something happened between you two and it’s obvious that you’re angry and he’s sad.”

Throwing the dolphin into the water, Kathryn said, “Quite the opposite, actually. Just forget it.”

“I want to help.”

Shaking her head, Kathryn replied coldly, “B’Elanna, there’s absolutely nothing you can do, and talking about it isn’t going to solve anything. The damage is done. End of story.”

“I don’t believe that. He loves you!”

“You don’t know that,” she said crossly and stood up.

“Yes, I do!”

Kathryn raised her voice. “How could you know more about his feelings than I do? I’m the one in the relationship, or lack thereof. I have first hand knowledge. You do not.”

“Don’t yell at me,” she said angrily. “I’m only trying to help and, in case you’ve forgotten, I’m your friend now.”

Fuming, she dried off her hands and rolled down her sleeves. “You’ve just crossed the line.”

“What line is that? You want me as a friend, but you refuse to talk to me like one. I know you, and you only get this cold and distant when something is really wrong. I won’t let you push me away.”

Kathryn felt like something snapped in her mind, and her fury instantly transformed into grief. She closed her eyes and turned away, whispering, “Don’t do this, Lanna. I can’t take anymore.”

“Then talk to me,” she implored.

“Not now. Not while he’s here.”

“Okay,” B’Elanna said with acceptance. “We can talk when you get home.” Turning towards the baby, she said, “Come on, let’s get her washed up.”

Kathryn turned back around and looked at her friend. She’d had so few girlfriends in her life that it was difficult to know how to relate. “Perhaps we could get into our morning exercise routine again?”

“I’d like that. Monday at the officer’s gym?”

“I’ll be there.”

After they got Miral put to bed, Kathryn told everyone, “I should go. I still have to pack and go over some notes.”

Chakotay joined her in the entryway and said, “I’ll walk you home.”

“I’m not walking. I have a ground car now.”

“You do? When did you get that?”

“In June,” she said quietly, surprised that she hadn’t told him.

Chakotay glanced back at Tom and B’Elanna, and then said very quietly, “I want to talk before you leave for Paris.”

B’Elanna grabbed Tom and said, “Come outside with me. I want to show you... a star or... whatever.”

Kathryn looked away dejectedly, not wanting to face him.

He reached for her hands. “Kathryn, I’m afraid that I’ve hurt your feelings.”

“You’ve just now figured that out?” She pulled her hands away. “I don’t want to talk about this right now. It’s too hard and I have to keep functioning for the rest of the week.”

“We can fix this if you’ll talk to me.”

“No, we can’t. We can try to maintain our friendship, but for now, I need some time by myself to regain my strength.”

He cradled her cheek in his hand. “Please, Kathryn, don’t shut me out.”

She snapped and swatted his hand away, unable to contain her anger. “Are you kidding me? Have you any idea how much you hurt me?”

“Oh, Kathryn. I wasn’t trying to hurt you.”

She looked at him in disbelief. “No? What did you think would happen?”

“I was hoping you’d act with a little more caution.”

She fisted her hands to keep from slapping him. “You’re saying that tirade of yours was some kind of disciplinary action?”

“No, that’s not what I was trying to do,” he said angrily. “Look, I don’t want to get into that conversation with you again, so let’s just drop it. I want to know what you meant when you said your self-esteem has taken a beating. What’s happened to you?”

“If you don’t know then I’m not about to tell you.” She turned away. “I’ve got to go.”

“Kathryn, stop.” He grabbed her hand as she reached for the doorknob. “Talk to me.”

“I can’t. Not here, not tonight, not when I’m feeling this way.”

“Please, let’s work through this together.”

She whispered, “I’m not strong enough for this. It’s too much.”

He wrapped his arms around her from behind. “You’re the strongest woman I know.”

Furious, she twisted abruptly away from him and yelled, “Is that why you keep shoveling more guilt on me?”

“I never meant to make you feel guilty.”

“Then what the hell did you intend to do? All I wanted that day was your support and someone to confide in, but you berated me, Chakotay! You dressed me down twice as hard as my C.O. and he’s the head of the entire fleet!”

Defending himself, he yelled, “I was angry! I’m sorry!”

“And your anger gives you the right to insult me? You called me a bloodthirsty murderer, Chakotay! In one brutal conversation, you discredited every ounce of support that you’ve ever given me! And you’re still trying to knock me down! I can’t take it!”

“Kathryn, I’m sorry. I thought…” He stopped mid-sentence.

More calm, she said, “Chakotay, I need some time to myself. I have no idea what to say to you that will fix this. Just give me four days in Paris, and we can talk when I get back.”

“Don’t you understand how scared I was that day?” he asked, completely ignoring her plea to go.

“Damn it, Chakotay. I never meant to scare you. How many times do I have to tell you that? We’ve been through enough volatile situations that I thought you would understand. I believed that if you had all the information I had, that you’d support what I was doing there.” She threw a hand up in the air. “You know, even without knowing, I thought you trusted my judgment. You know what it’s like to carry the responsibility of an entire ship, but you have absolutely no idea what it’s like to carry the responsibility of the entire Federation. You were supposed to be my support through this.”

He retaliated angrily. “What information did you have, Kathryn? What could have possibly kept you safe in a mob of people that were yelling how much they hated you? What about the people who would die for you? Are their lives mere pawns in this galaxy-wide chess match you’re playing?”

“You think this is a game?” she yelled. “This is no game, Chakotay. This is the future of our entire quadrant we’re talking about. I have to take risks to get people to stand up and notice that there’s someone who actually cares about them. I can’t show fear!” Her voice was growing hoarse, but she kept yelling. “Don’t you understand that I have to wear this larger than life persona when I’m out there, because if everyone knew how overwhelmed and vulnerable the real me is, they wouldn’t follow me to the next planet much less the other side of the galaxy.”

He looked at her in complete dismay. “Are you listening to yourself?”

“Chakotay,” she said sadly. “My question is, are you listening to me?”

“Yes, I’m listening to you,” he said softly. “But what I’m hearing is that you believe the entire fate of the Federation rests solely on your shoulders. It doesn’t, Kathryn. All you



were asked to do was to be a voice of hope, and if you should figure out how to remove the President from office, then you should.”

“You say that like it’s a simple matter of telling him to go home.”

“But don’t you see that he’s losing power more and more every day, just because people are starting to follow you? It’s you, they’re following, Kathryn. The you that’s scared, the you that’s vulnerable. That part of you is what makes you so compassionate. You’re inspiring to billions of people just by uttering a few words that are nothing more than a call for peace.”

“It takes a lot more than speeches to make people follow me.”

“Sure it does. It takes your intelligence and your compassion.” He stepped closer. “What it doesn’t take is you risking your life to make an impression. If one of these gambles didn’t come packaged with a miracle to save you, then what would those billions of people be left with? If you think they were despairing before you arrived on the scene, imagine what they’d be feeling after you died a pointless death.”

“If that happened, they’d find a way. I believe they’d do it for me.”

“I asked you to keep yourself safe for me because I can’t imagine living without you. But I also want you to be safe for them. I know what’s at stake here, but it can’t work without you. I bet that’s the exact same thing that your C.O. told you.”

Close enough to reach her hands, he said, “You, Kathryn, are the beacon of peace that you’re calling for. People stand up and notice you because you’re a gifted leader. I will support you, but I need you to understand that everything you do also affects me.”

She stared at him quietly for a long moment, tears falling unheeded. Once she noticed them, she wiped them away. “That’s not possible because I’m alone, Chakotay. Because of the way you’ve made me feel, I’m no good to anyone. If it weren’t for Harry...” She turned away and walked out the door. “I’ll call you on Sunday.”

“Kathryn, please!” He followed her out the door. “What do you mean by that? You’re not alone!”

She kept walking until her unknown security detail helped her into the car and drove her away.

Chakotay was left standing on the porch. He closed his eyes in despair, having no idea whether she’d comprehended what he’d said. He slowly turned and went back in to tell their friends that he was leaving, but he only got a few feet when he saw them in the kitchen, staring at him in shock. With disbelief, he accused, “You were eavesdropping?”

Tom found the words first. “When there was yelling, we came to check on you, but then we froze.”

Chakotay closed his eyes. “How much did you hear?”

B’Elanna asked, “Who asked her to remove the President from office?”

Dropping his head back, Chakotay groaned. “You don’t want to know.” Looking directly at them, he said, “You didn’t hear any of this. Is that understood?”

“All right, I didn’t hear that part,” B’Elanna said. “But I did hear the rest.” She pulled him over to her couch and made him sit down. Curling up next to him like any sister would, she said, “She may need to be alone, but I don’t think you should be.”

“You shouldn’t have been listening.” Chakotay looked at B’Elanna. “Did you talk to her? Did she say anything?”

“She said a lot more to you than she would admit to me. She’s really unhappy, Chakotay.”

“I thought she was just angry because I yelled at her.”

“She was trying to hide it,” Tom said. “But she was miserable at dinner. There was no enthusiasm about her job whatsoever. I didn’t mean to upset you by talking about the bombing. I was only trying to get her excited about what she’s doing. That’s what all three of us were doing. We weren’t trying to inflate her ego.”

“She was trying not to say too much in front of me.”

“It was more than that,” Tom said. “Even Harry has noticed. He called us this afternoon to ask for our help in trying to reach her. She’s depressed! Surely, you can see that?”

He buried his face in his hands. “I didn’t until tonight, and it’s my fault. I thought she’d gotten too overconfident and reckless and I called her on it.”

B’Elanna looked at him like he was cracked. “Overconfident? The woman was doing everything she could to avoid crying in my bathroom!”

Tom said, “What we saw tonight is not the fearless Captain Janeway that we all know and love. She’s struggling with something big.”

“I know exactly what she’s struggling with, and thanks to your eavesdropping, you do too. But I was trying to ground her. You two know what she’s capable of when she thinks she’s invincible.”

“Invincible?” Tom did a double take. “When has she ever felt invincible? I think that she was prepared to die every time she put her life at risk. I can’t even count the number of times she risked Voyager or herself just to make a difference or save somebody.”

B’Elanna sighed. “I can list quite a few if you want.”

“No, you’ve made your point.” Chakotay ran his hands through his hair. “She’s a risk taker. I know that.”

“Hell yeah,” Tom said. “And she always comes out on top. The woman knows how to push the envelope. That’s what makes her phenomenal. God, remember that time she took Voyager between the binary stars?”

B’Elanna tapped her finger on the coffee table. “You know, Chakotay, I bet that she realized that the crowd on Sirius was mostly interested in seeing if she had the guts to show up. That’s the situation she was facing, not the threat of the bombing. But even when that happened, she’d enabled her security team to save all of them.”

“Maybe, but she couldn’t have predicted that Moore was going to phaser the bomb. She had nothing to do with that.”

Tom shrugged, “She had enough sense to take that large of a security team down with her. And she was able to take them into that situation armed, without inciting the crowd. I doubt there’s any other ‘fleeter that could’ve pulled that off. If she got dressed down for it, I bet it’s because Khurma doesn’t really understand what she’s capable of.”

Chakotay felt sick to his stomach because of what he’d said to her. “I just wanted her to be careful.”

“That’s not who she is,” B’Elanna said. “She would sacrifice herself in a heartbeat to save one person, let alone the entire Federation.”

“What have I done?”

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When he got back to his apartment that night, Chakotay pre-recorded a message and sent it to Kathryn. He knew she wouldn’t want to talk to him, but he needed to apologize nonetheless.

“Kathryn, I am so sorry.” He closed his eyes. “What I’ve done didn’t hit me until you were walking out the door, and you were right. I wasn’t listening to you because I was so caught up in my own emotions over this situation that I wasn’t paying any attention to yours. You are the most important person in my life and my heart is breaking with the realization that I’ve hurt you. Please, I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me.” He ended the message and hit send, hoping she’d open it before she left.

Chakotay went through the motions of the next few days, but his heart wasn't in it. His heart was halfway across the planet, and she was miserable because of him. He wanted to call her, transport over to see her, anything to try to fix this. But she'd specifically asked to be alone, and the last thing he wanted to do was push her further away. He went on two vision quests to try to figure out what to do, but the only answer he received was to be patient.

Kathryn received his message as soon as he'd sent it, but his apology didn't make the things he'd said any less hurtful. No matter what he said now, Chakotay had been right. Her decisions affected him, making her yoke that much heavier. Regardless of how much she meant to him, she was sure that he didn't love her or trust her enough to give her the freedom to do her job.

Once she got to Paris, she suppressed the entire situation so she could exude the confidence that she needed to get her points across to the council members. As she lay alone in her hotel room each night, she tried to figure out if all the horrible things Chakotay said about her were true. How could he love her when she didn't love herself?

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On Sunday afternoon, Chakotay answered the knock at his door and found Justin in uniform. His first thought was that something had happened to Kathryn. "Jarvin? Is everything okay?"

"Just fine, Captain. The Admiral is coming here in a few minutes, so I need to do a security sweep. Do I have your permission?"

He sighed and stood out of Justin's way. "Of course." He thought this was overkill, but if that's what her team's method of operations was everywhere she went, then that was fine by him. At least it gave him advance warning of her arrival. He hadn't been sure when and if she was going to contact him.

Justin returned and contacted Doyle to give him the all clear.

Chakotay asked, "What's her mood today? Do you know?" It was a question that many on Voyager had asked each other when she was in her more tumultuous phases.

"I haven't spoken to her today, sir."

"Drop the sir, Justin. It's just me."

"It's a habit," he said. "I'm getting the hang of this Starfleet life. It's much more formal."

"Yes, it is," Chakotay said absently.

Justin leaned towards him and said, “I can’t speak for the Admiral, but I can tell you what I’m feeling.”

“Please do.” Chakotay was very well aware that he was not about to get Justin’s feelings, but a masked way of telling him about Kathryn.

“I find it demanding to keep up the façade when we’re out there being diplomatic. At the end of the day, I feel like shutting down because I’m so drained. It’s good to be back among friends so we can rejuvenate a little.”

“Rejuvenate?”

“Yeah. An uplifting boost would help a lot. I’ve been feeling a little down, a little isolated.”

Chakotay closed his eyes and sighed. He’d really made a mess of things. “Thank you, Justin, for telling me how you feel.”

“Any time. We’re Voyagers, you know. We look after each other, and I know you’ll be able to help me.”

Another knock at the door kept them from saying anything else. Chakotay took a deep breath before opening it. “Kathryn.” He was genuinely happy to see her, although the anxious bats flying around in his belly gave him pause.

“May I come in?”

He shook the fog out of head. “Sorry, of course. Please come in.” Remembering that Justin was still there, he added, “We’re all scanned and secure.”

Kathryn raised an eyebrow at Justin. “Thank you, but I don’t think you needed to do that here.”

“I’ll note that for the future, Admiral. We’ll be down in the lobby if you need us.” Before he shut the door, Justin discreetly winked at Chakotay.

“May I hug you?” Kathryn asked.

“Of course,” he said apologetically. Folding her into his arms, he said, “I’m a little nervous and I’m not thinking straight.”

She relaxed more into the hug. “I don’t want you to be nervous around me, but if it helps, I’m not thinking straight, either.”

He tucked her in closer, knowing how much she liked to snuggle into his neck. Caressing her back, he quietly asked, “Are you okay, Kathryn?”

She didn’t answer right away. “No, but I’m working through it.”

“I want to help.” He kissed her head. “I want to fix what I’ve done.”

Kathryn turned her face toward his shoulder and hugged him tighter, but said nothing.

They held onto each other for several minutes, neither of them speaking, just needing to be in each other’s arms. Chakotay was uneasy about her silence, fearing that she was working up the courage to tell him something that he didn’t want to hear.

“Kathryn,” he whispered. “I’ve finally realized how much I hurt you. Please forgive me?”

She pulled back to look at him, but didn’t let go of him. “You were just responding to things that you don’t like about me. How can I fault you for being honest and telling me like it is?”

He lowered his head. “Because, I’m a prized idiot. I’ve been acting like I’m still your first officer, and I’m not. I’m your best friend, and I should’ve found a significantly different way to convey my concerns. I didn’t listen to you and I missed all the signs.”

She stepped out of his arms and walked towards his windows, putting one hand on her hip, the other massaging her forehead. Her posture lacked any of the confidence she usually carried. “We’ve lost something very special.”

“We’ll find it. We always do.”

Shaking her head, she whispered hoarsely, “It’s gone.”

He felt his heart breaking. “Kathryn, please give us another chance. We mean too much to each other to give this up without a fight.”

“Fight.” She dropped her head back. “Funny you should use that word. I am so tired of fighting.”

“We’re just having trouble adjusting, that’s all.” When she didn’t comment, he kept talking. “We’re stuck in our roles as the command team of Voyager. It was my job for seven years to watch your back, give you advice, and point out problems. I managed your staff, and I think I even did a pretty good job at managing you.”

“Managing me?” She turned to look at him.

He shrugged. “Making sure you took breaks, bringing you food, doing things that I knew would lift your spirits. I also guided you towards working on problems that would give you a mystery to solve. You’re energized by solving problems.”

Her bearing softened and her head tilted as she looked at him with gratitude. “I know. I just didn’t think of all that as managing me, but I appreciated it nonetheless.”

Smiling a little, he fidgeted with a potted plant.

She asked curiously, “Aren’t you going to explain how I’m still stuck in my role as your C.O.?”

“No,” he glanced at her with a slight smile. “I’ve done more than enough talking.”

“Have you?”

Turning to face her, he put his hands on his hips. “Yes, I have. And now, it’s time for me to start listening. I want to hear about everything you’re struggling with. Everything from temporal mechanics and political conspiracies down to...” He tried to think of an example. “Down to what color shoes you should wear.”

She leaned a hip against the side of his couch and absently picked at a ball of lint. “You’d be willing to listen to all of it?”

“Yes, although I might have an opinion every now and then.”

“I rather like your opinions when you’ve taken time to listen to mine and when you offer them in kindness,” she said quietly.

He took her positive spin on that criticism as a sign of encouragement. “And I want to hear about your joys, too. About how exciting it was to see the press corps hanging on your every word, because when you’ve got their attention, you have the power to affect their outlook. Exactly like you did a week ago.”

Her lips parted in surprise. “You saw that? I thought you didn’t approve of anything that I was trying to convey.”

“Yes, I did, and I would do anything right now to rewind back six days and change every word I’ve said. Even more than that, I’d like to rewind a month and take a lot of other things back as well.”

She looked out the window. “I need some time without you in my life.”

His heart fell. “Please, Kathryn, forgive me.”

“I already have. I wouldn’t be here otherwise.” She looked back at him. “But that doesn’t mean that the problems go away or that we can even maintain a friendship without fighting.”

“How can we work on the problems if we’re not together?”

“I don’t know,” she whispered. “But regardless of how strong you think I am, I don’t have the fortitude to keep struggling with this and do my job at the same time. I wish I could choose to salvage our friendship, but I’ve got to regain my confidence first.”

He realized that he needed to find a way to keep her from giving up. “May I offer a suggestion?”

“Yes.”

“Go out on a date with me. Tomorrow night.” He barreled on before she could protest. “You see, it’ll be my first day teaching in quite some time, and I’d like to go out to dinner to celebrate. I know this lovely little restaurant in Tuscany that has the best coffee. If we leave in the middle of the afternoon...”

“Chakotay,” she started to protest.

He began walking around a little. “At dinner, I’d like to tell you about my day. Perhaps I can think of a few anecdotes that’ll make you laugh. I’d also like to hear about your day. Actually, I would love to hear about your exciting trip to Paris. I hear it’s a wonderful city, and I’d love to visit there sometime with you as my tour guide.”

“That’s not, exactly, what I had in mind when I said I needed time.”

“I know, but I’m not going to let you go, Kathryn. If you’re feeling as disconnected and foggy as I think you are, then leaving you alone to cope with it is out of the question. Over the last four days, I’ve thought hard about every conversation we’ve had in the last month, and you were sending me clear signals for help. I was just too dim-witted to see them.”

She was about to comment when he plunged on. “If you’ll go out with me, I promise that I will not say anything that could possibly provoke an argument. If you were to tell me that you’re going to move to Paris, for example, I would simply ask if I could join you for dinner every now and then.”

“Chakotay, I don’t want to pretend to be something that we’re not. It’s not fair to either of us.”

“I’m not pretending. I never have.” He took a small step towards her, but was still on the other side of the room. “Kathryn, I know you’re hurting, and I want to help you get back on solid ground. Once you’re there, we can figure out where we stand, but I won’t let



you suffer through this alone. You have my word that I won't even try to kiss you until you ask me too."

She closed her eyes for a long moment as she weighed the choices. "Okay," she yielded. "I'll have dinner with you, but not in Tuscany. That's a memory that is very close to my heart, and I don't want to do anything that would tarnish it." Her eyes began to fill.

"Okay." His voice cracked with emotion. "I'll find a place, and I'll work it out with Justin."

"Okay." She closed the distance between them and placed a simple kiss on his cheek. "I wish you the best for tomorrow, and I'll see you after work."

He took a chance by reaching for her hand as she turned away. She stopped but didn't turn back. Worried that even a kiss on her hand would be too much, he opted for caressing her fingers for a moment before letting her go.

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The next morning, B'Elanna kneeled next to the couch to try to wake Kathryn up. "Kathryn?" She laid a hand on her arm and rubbed it gently. "Kathryn?"

"Hmm?" Kathryn opened her eyes and then sat up quickly. "Lanna?"

"I just came here to check on you. I was worried."

Kathryn moistened her lips and looked around. "How did you get in?"

"Give me some credit." She shrugged, and stated, "I threatened Scott within an inch of his life."

"What time is it?" She rubbed her face to try to shake the sleep off.

"Almost eight. I got worried when you didn't show up at the gym."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Lanna." She wrapped her blanket around her. "I couldn't sleep last night, and I didn't even think about setting an alarm."

B'Elanna sat down next to her. "You're wearing sweats."

"I was cold," she said with a slight shiver.

"It's the middle of August," she said incredulously. "Are you sick?" She put her hand on Kathryn's forehead.

"I don't think so."

She touched Kathryn's cheeks, too. "You don't feel hot." B'Elanna regarded her quietly for a moment, and then looked around a little. It looked as if Kathryn had moved her bedroom downstairs and the place was a complete mess. "How come you're sleeping on your couch?"

She shrugged. "Just couldn't sleep upstairs."

"I've been thinking about you since last Tuesday."

Kathryn sighed. "Sorry that we kicked you out of your house."

"I have a confession."

"Oh?"

"Tom and I heard a lot of your fight. We didn't mean to eavesdrop."

"I see." Kathryn wrapped herself up further in her protective cocoon. "Well, we were in your entryway."

"Yes, that's true." B'Elanna looked around again. "Can I just acknowledge the elephant in the room?"

"Which one? There are so many to choose from." Kathryn gestured around her head.

B'Elanna smiled, glad to see her friend had at least a little sense of humor. "You're right about that."

"What do you want to know, Lanna?" Kathryn asked seriously.

"You're supposed to oust the President?" she asked in disbelief. "Who gave you that assignment?"

"You don't want to know." Kathryn tucked her knees up to her chest.

"Actually, I do, because I want to go kick the crap out them."

"It's very, very complicated."

"No doubt. Is it the fleet admiral? Did he ask you to?"

"Nope."

"The Council?"

Kathryn shook her head.

“My father-in-law? I know he wants him out.”

“Everybody wants him out, but no, my obligation is not to Owen.”

“My boss?”

“Not Matt, either.”

B’Elanna stared at her. “Did Section 31 recruit you?”

“They don’t exist.” When B’Elanna looked at her skeptically, Kathryn added, “Within official Starfleet channels.”

“Out with it,” B’Elanna said. “I’ll keep listing names until you tell me.”

Kathryn furrowed her eyebrows. “You just told your former Captain, ‘out with it?’”

“I’d like to emphasize the word ‘former,’ and you’re evading the question.”

“I really can’t tell you, and please don’t ask. I’m not trying to be difficult.”

“You’re always difficult.” B’Elanna sighed. “Fine, don’t tell me, but I still want to kick the crap out of them.”

Kathryn smiled. “Thank you for looking out for me.”

“That’s what friends are for, especially Klingon ones.”

“Aren’t you late for work?”

“Aren’t you?”

She rested her head on the back of the sofa. “I don’t want to be the admiral today. I’m tired of it.”

“Good excuse. I told Patterson that you needed my help and he said to take as much time as I needed.”

“He’s protective of me,” Kathryn said with a shrug.

“Many people are.”

Kathryn sighed. “I’m just so tired of all this.”

“And there’s the second elephant.”

“Where?”

“You’re depressed.”

She stared at the wall, not wanting to acknowledge it. “I don’t want to talk about that.”

“You’ve got to.”

“No, I don’t,” she said adamantly.

B’Elanna barreled on. “I’ve been there and if you recall, you’re the one who pulled me out of it. Do you want me to start pointing out the symptoms or can you just agree with me?”

“Fine,” Kathryn pulled her blankets around her tighter. “I’m depressed.”

“What was the catalyst?”

Kathryn mumbled, “I always get depressed when I lose someone I love.”

“But you haven’t lost him.”

“Haven’t I?”

“I don’t think so. Did you call him yesterday?”

“Went to see him.”

“Did you break up with him?”

“I tried, but I ended up accepting a date with him for tonight. But that’s it. Then it’s over.”

“You tried? The Janeway I know always succeeds when she puts her mind to something. I don’t think you tried very hard.”

Kathryn’s stomach began to tighten and the heat of tears pushed against her eyes. She hid her face behind her hands because she was afraid that this cry wouldn’t simply be a few tears that escaped.

B’Elanna wrapped her arms around Kathryn. “I know you must hate this, but you’ve got to just let it out.”

“It’s too much,” Kathryn trembled as the flood of tears came. “I can’t keep going.”

“You were serious when you said that you’re carrying the weight of the entire Federation on your shoulders, weren’t you?”

“He said he’d support me, Lanna. He was supposed to help me do this.”

“Instead, he read you the riot act because he was scared.”

“I was doing fine until then, but stupid me, every time I open my heart, it just gets broken. I love him so much, but all we ever do is fight. Six? Seven? Big, big arguments this year. Just when I think we’re on solid ground, it all falls apart.”

“Tom and I told him he was an idiot. Does that help?”

“I wish it did, but I’ve got to let him go.” Kathryn’s tears fell harder. “I can’t expect him to stick with me through this. It’s not his burden, it’s mine.”

B’Elanna held her close. “You know that no matter what happens, you have a whole slew of people who love you, don’t you?”

“Yes, but you’re not him.”

They were quiet for a long time while Kathryn calmed her tears. B’Elanna asked, “I need to ask you about one more thing.”

“Must you?”

“Something you said scared me, because I’ve been there, and I know you have, too.”

“What?”

“You told him that if you died, people would solve all these problems themselves. And a few minutes ago, you said that you can’t keep going. I just want to make sure. Have you thought about it?”

“Dying?” Kathryn sniffed and wiped her cheeks.

“Yeah.” B’Elanna let her head rest against Kathryn’s.

“I’ve faced it many times. So have you.”

“That’s not what I mean. You’re talking about martyrdom. Are you really thinking about that?”

“I can’t admit that and keep my job.”

B'Elanna took a deep breath and hugged her tighter. "I understand. We're going to fix this."

"It's not fixable."

"Yes, it is. Don't end it with him tonight. I'm not trying to prolong the inevitable, but I recommend that you give this some daylight, now that all the issues are out there on the table."

"Lanna..."

"I'm serious. Dead serious," she glared. "I've been there. I know what it's like."

"You didn't tell me that when I made your chief engineer."

"Well, you didn't tell me, either, so I'd say we're equal."

"That sounds dumb."

B'Elanna sighed. "Just promise me that you won't destroy the person you love the most today. You'll hurt worse."

"I'm not contemplating suicide, Lanna."

"I know. Can't be a martyr that way."

Kathryn looked at her second best friend and saw the worry in her eyes. "Okay, I won't make any drastic changes in my life today."

"Thank you." B'Elanna stood up and pulled the blankets off.

"Hey."

"You have two choices, Admiral. Either we're both taking the day off to eat chocolate and buy ridiculous outfits, or we're going to work. Which is it?"

Kathryn huffed, "Work," and then added, "But I wouldn't mind doing something with you tomorrow night. You know, just to keep me from thinking too much."

"You've got a deal. Let's go."

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"B'Elanna? You said to call ASAP?" Chakotay asked over the comm.

"I just spent the morning with Kathryn."

“And?”

“Whatever you do, do NOT let her break up with you.”

“I wasn’t going to.”

“Good.”

“What happened?”

“She is severely depressed, Chakotay, and you’re a p’tak for breaking her heart.”

“B’Elanna?”

“Severely,” she emphasized, “Depressed. You remember what happened in the Void when she decided to sacrifice herself?”

“Yes,” he said worriedly.

“She’s there. Don’t let her go.”

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