

## ***The Future Is Ours – Part 13***

### **“A Vessel of Diplomacy”**

By Dawn

Rating: PG

Summary – At work again throughout the Quadrant

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“Goodnight,” Kathryn said to Harry just before she entered her quarters. They’d finished a long day of research and study on Romulan politics, and her mind was mush. All she wanted to do was to take a nice, long bath, call Chakotay, and go to bed.

She took her coat off and laid it on the back of a chair, and was pulling off her turtleneck when a voice said, “By all means, Kathy, continue disrobing.”

Kathryn jumped. “Q,” she said as she turned around. “I was wondering when you’d show up again.”

“You were expecting me?” he asked with faked surprise, his hand over his heart. “I’m honored.”

She went to the replicator to get a cup of coffee, but before she got there, one magically appeared in her hand. “Thank you,” she acknowledged as she took a sip. “Nice blend.”

“Aren’t you going to ask me what I’m doing here?” he asked with barely contained excitement.

Kathryn clicked her tongue. “Something about this mission you’re sending me on?”

“That *I’m* sending you on? The Q don’t send humans on missions. How preposterous!”

She sat in the chair across from him and neatly crossed her legs. “Why else would a Romulan Senator ask to speak to me personally?”

“Because, dear Kathy, you’re the Mother of Peace! That’s old news.” He waved it away.

“No, that was one of the benefits of mating with you.”

“Don’t go crying about that now,” he mocked.

She rolled her eyes. “What is it that you want me to do, Q?”

“Talk to him. Is that so hard?”

“That’s it? Just talk? That was worth changing history?”

“No, no, no. You have it all wrong. I didn’t change history for Federation/Romulan peace. I changed history so that humanity would survive. For reasons unbeknownst to me, I find you interesting. I would hate to see all of you perish.”

“Then why have you asked me to talk to them?”

He waved her question away. “Surely you’ve heard of the ‘I’ll scratch your back, now you scratch mine’ phrase before?”

Sighing, she said, “Yes.”

“I’ve saved humanity, now I want you to return the favor by talking to a Romulan.”

“Okay.” She was growing impatient with the circular conversation. “Then what is talking to the Romulans going to accomplish?”

“Q, Jr. wants to see his godmother in action, of course! He’s heard so much about your legendary diplomacy tactics that he wants to watch you win over the most hard-headed, xenophobic race in this quadrant.”

“I don’t buy it. Are the Romulans a danger to humanity?”

“Work, work, work. Is that all you think about? Don’t you and Chuckles have a romance going on? Tell me all about it, and I want details!”

“I’m sure you already know. After all, you’re omnipotent.”

“Were you really going to throw it all away because I asked you to do something? When have you ever listened to me before?”

Kathryn sighed. “Not everything is about you, Q. The temporal board gave me an assignment as well.”

“As I recall, they also told you to mother a little brood.”

“Yes, but the future of Starfleet is significantly more important.”

He waved her off. “Kathy, my dear, you’re not listening to a word I say.”

“Then enlighten me.”

“As you so aptly put it years ago, the Q are the self-appointed guardians of the universe, but even they have made mistakes.”

“The Vulcan-Romulan war, for example.”

“Now you’re getting it! I firmly believe that the Q still need a messiah of human consciousness. You have the Q’s attention, Madame Admiral, and if you can prove that humanity is up to the task of surviving despite its lack of good judgment, it’ll just prove that I’m right.”

Kathryn narrowed her eyes, and raised her index finger. “Let me get this straight. You’re suggesting that talking to Romulans will prove that humanity will survive, which in turn, gives you the right to say ‘I told you so’ to the continuum?”

“Bravo! I knew you’d get it!”

“But I don’t, Q. What does Romulus have to do with our survival?”

“You’re looking for a correlation where none exists.”

“But you just said…” Kathryn groaned in frustration. “Just tell me what I’m supposed to accomplish.”

“Absolutely nothing. You’re merely a vessel of diplomacy. Someone to open the door. No one will walk through it for some time.”

“Just talk,” she stated again. “What about? The weather?”

“Wasn’t it you who said the key to diplomacy is listening?”

“Yes.”

“So, answer his questions. After all, he invited you.” He snapped his fingers and was gone.

Kathryn yelled at the empty air, “My life would’ve been so much easier if you’d told me that six months ago!”

Q popped his head through the bulkhead just long enough to say, “Now, what would have been the fun in that?”

She would have thrown something at the bulkhead if it would’ve done any good, but instead, she decided to have her shower, put on her pajamas, and contact Chakotay.

“Hi, Beautiful,” he said as soon as his image appeared.

A smile tugged at her lips. “You say that as if you mean it.”

“And you say that as if you doubt it,” he said with a wink. “How was your day?”

“Boring until Q showed up.”

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On the bridge of the Pioneer, Kathryn stood behind the command center as they waited to receive a communication that would give them their next heading. They'd arrived at the pre-designated coordinates several hours earlier, after a three week trip to the Neutral Zone. It took that long because Pioneer's maximum cruising speed was warp six.

Captain Young slowly paced across the command center. He stopped and looked at Kathryn. “Admiral, do you at least know what type of ship we're looking for?”

“No.” She had not confided in him any specific details about the mission. “I know who wants to meet with me, but not how he will arrive.”

“How do we know this isn't a trap?”

Kathryn was annoyed with his impatience, but she didn't show it. “We don't.” If it were her bridge, she'd silence chatter like this. This conversation would be more appropriate in private, but she wasn't interested in getting into a debate with him about protocol. She genuinely liked him and considered him a friend, but if he continued, she'd have to remind him who the ranking officer was.

To redirect his attention, she said, “Captain, I suggest a scan for tachyons and anti-protons.”

Bernie looked at her briefly before nodding to Ensign Igre to go ahead. They all waited quietly for the report.

“I'm detecting faint tachyon emissions ten thousand kilometers to port.”

“Admiral?” Bernie asked, “What do you suggest?”

“Hold position and wait.”

He nodded and returned to his chair, but thankfully, they didn't have to wait long.

Commander Moore, the Pioneer's chief of security, said, “I'm receiving an encoded transmission for Admiral Janeway. It's marked confidential.”

“May I take it in the briefing room, Captain?”

“By all means,” Bernie replied, a little irked about being kept in the dark.

Kathryn understood his frustration. She'd be frustrated, too, but she didn't have the luxury of confiding in him. Sitting at the head of the briefing table, she opened the computer terminal and typed in the access code she'd been given. A Romulan officer appeared.

"Admiral Janeway, I presume?"

"Yes, and to whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?"

"I am Commander Morat, communicating on behalf of an interested third party. Have you informed anyone onboard your ship about the nature of this meeting or that Romulans are involved?"

"No, I haven't."

"Prepare for transport."

"Wait!" Kathryn held up a hand, and was relieved to see that Morat stopped to listen. "I need assurance that this isn't a trap."

Morat looked to the side, and then responded, "What would give you that assurance, Admiral?"

"A goodwill gesture, Commander. I want you to come to this ship while I go to yours."

"Your crew would detect that I'm Romulan, and that is unacceptable."

"I can order that no scans be taken of this room and put one of my most trusted officers in here with you. Once you're here, I will initiate a security lockout with my command authorization level. Not even the captain of this ship can override it."

Again, Morat looked to the side before asking, "Who is the officer?"

"Lieutenant Commander Harry Kim."

"Was he with you on Voyager?"

"Yes, he was my operations officer."

He glanced away before saying, "That is acceptable. How much time do you need to put these safeguards in place?"

"Ten minutes, and I require that my senior security officer, Lieutenant Justin Jarvin, also a former member of Voyager's crew, join me on your ship."

"You're asking a lot, Admiral."

“I'm willing to call this off if your ‘interested third party’ believes I'm being too careful. I'm here at his request, and I need to take precautions for my safety. I'm sure you both understand.”

He checked before replying, “Very well. I will contact you again in ten of your minutes. Inform Commander Kim that I will not discuss anything with him.”

The connection terminated before she responded, “Very well.” She tapped her commbadge. “Janeway to Kim and Jarvin, please report to the briefing room. Mr. Kim, bring a good book. Mr. Jarvin, bring three pulse communicators.” Then she tapped it again, “Janeway to Captain Young, could I speak with you in private?”

“On my way,” he said eagerly and arrived seconds later. “What did you learn?”

“In ten minutes, I will be transported to the vessel that is waiting out there.” She pointed to the viewport.

“Admiral?”

“Surely you realize that there's a cloaked ship there?”

“Yes, of course, but are you sure this is a wise decision?”

Kathryn was expecting that question. “One officer from their ship will be transporting to this room, and Commander Kim will remain with him at all times, and I am taking a security officer with me. I must have your assurance that you will not scan this room in any way, because no one, including you, are to know the species of the officer.”

“You don't trust me.”

“Captain,” she used his rank purposely. “I trust you without question, but I'm following orders. I expect you to do the same. Do nothing that will reveal who I'm meeting with.”

“Aye, Admiral. Who are you taking with you?”

“Lieutenant Jarvin. He's the most skilled officer we have at hand-to-hand combat, should the need arise.”

“Admiral, I will follow orders, but I urge you to reconsider this exchange.”

“Bernie, I'm sure you can piece together who is out there from the information you have. Where there is a lot at risk, there's also a lot to gain. Admiral Khurma sent me on this assignment with full knowledge of what I'm doing.”

“Does the rest of your staff know who you're meeting with?”

“No, they do not. Kim and Jarvin will be hearing it for the first time momentarily.” As if on cue, the two officers entered the room. “Please take a seat, gentlemen. I’ll be with you in a moment.”

“Any further orders?” Bernie asked.

“Yes, keep an eye on those tachyon emissions. If they move, follow them.” She turned to Justin. “Did you bring the communicators?”

“Yes, Admiral.” He opened his palm to show three small disks.

She picked one up and gave it to Bernie. “This is a technology that we developed on Voyager. The pulses travel at a low frequency that is virtually undetectable by sensors, and it will enable us to keep a pulse on each other, so to speak. You’ll have one on the bridge, Kim will have the other in here, and Jarvin will have the third. Kim and Jarvin will send a pulse every five minutes to assure you that all is well. Kim will send a double tap and Jarvin will send a single tap. As soon as our guest arrives, I will activate a force field around this room. He will think that you can’t penetrate it. I expect you to make him believe that.”

“All right,” Bernie said. “We’ll do whatever we can.”

“I appreciate it.” As Bernie left the room, she turned to the other two who were waiting patiently for their assignments. “Gentlemen, you’re about to meet some Romulans.”

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A Romulan centurion led Kathryn and Justin to an empty conference room onboard the cloaked Romulan vessel. Justin discreetly touched her back to get her to turn around and face him. She looked at him in question, and he moved his eyes up to a corner of the room and then back to her.

Kathryn nodded and then turned to look out a viewport at the Pioneer in the distance. As she turned back, she glanced up and saw what Justin had seen – an image recording lens. She didn’t think it was anything to worry about, but was glad he had pointed it out, nonetheless.

The door opened and a Romulan civilian came into the room. “Admiral Janeway, Lieutenant Jarvin,” he extended a hand. “A pleasure to welcome you both. I am Rabom, senior advisor to Praetor Hiren and member of the Continuing Committee.”

Kathryn accepted the handshake graciously. “It’s a pleasure to meet you as well, Senator. I’m sure you understand the need for my security precautions?”

“Yes, yes, of course. You are a valuable commodity in the Federation, I'm sure. Please have a seat, and just call me Rabom. I am not a senator.” He directed her towards a chair, and then nodded at Justin to take another, farther away from them. “I'm a civilian, but with a certain amount of influence and benefits due to my large business holdings. Can I get you anything?”

“Do you have the ability to replicate a Terran drink called coffee?”

“Hmmm... I don't know, but I'll find out.” He went over to the replicator and asked for it. “What do you know? I do!” Happily placing the steaming mug in front of her, he said, “I promise that it's not poisoned.”

“Thank you, but I hope you don't mind if Lieutenant Jarvin takes a quick scan?”

“By all means,” he said as Justin made the scan.

“It's safe, Admiral.”

She nodded her thanks to Justin and said to Rabom, “We're in the habit of taking certain safety measures. I hope you don't take offense.” She inhaled the soothing aroma before taking a sip.

“A wise precaution, Admiral,” he said as he sat down with his own drink. “Now, I'm sure you want to know why I asked you to meet with me.”

“I must say that my curiosity is piqued.”

“Well, as you know, the Romulans and the Terrans have had a turbulent history, but two years ago, we put aside those differences and worked together to defeat the Dominion, Cardassians, Breen, and so on.”

“Yes, I understand that the Romulan alliance was the turning point of the war.”

“It was, and although the Senate was divided on the issue, I believe it was a necessity, but that's old news.” He put his elbows on the table and said, “What I want to talk to you about is how to usher in an era of peace between us. I'll be up front and tell you that this is a political move on my part.”

“Are you running for office?”

“Yes, Admiral. The time is coming soon for a new Praetor, and I want the job. My instinct tells me that there's a younger individual, who was vital in the war effort, who will also be vying for the position. I don't want him to get it, and believe me, you don't want him to be appointed either.”

“Why is that?”

“I can’t give you that information. I’d like to, but I can’t.”

She understood and turned the conversation in a different direction. “A political move you say. Do you want it known on Romulus that we’ve had this conversation?”

“Not right now,” he held up a hand. “But when the time comes, I would.”

She nodded. “Will you notify me before that happens so that I may be equally prepared on my end?”

“Of course.”

“Why do you want to speak with me? I’m merely a Starfleet officer on a diplomatic tour.”

“You think so?” He smirked. “If my research is correct, you’re a very powerful woman, Admiral.”

“My influence may have been exaggerated in the media, Mr. Rabom.”

“Ah,” he held up a finger. “But isn’t the media where the real power over the people begins?”

She chose her words carefully. “If that influence is used judiciously, yes, I do believe that with enough popularity, one can sway public opinion.”

“This is exactly what I’m talking about. I asked to speak to you because I believe in you. You weren’t involved in the war, and from what I’ve seen so far, you operate with indisputable moral principles. In addition, you have the attention of just about everyone in our two quadrants. I don’t trust others within your government, nor does our Senate or our citizens, but I do trust you.”

Kathryn sipped her coffee. “I can’t affect change within my government unilaterally.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Yes, Admiral, I believe you can, but I don’t need to ask you to do that. I’m sure it will happen without my influence. What I want is an honest answer from you.”

“To what question?”

“Will the Federation Council stand by its promises once they’re made? Do you think peaceful coexistence and open exchange of scientific knowledge between us is possible?”

“Honestly, I think it depends on many factors, and it’s not something I can predict. The Council is under a lot of pressure from disparate constituencies right now.”

“Go on,” he encouraged.

“How would the Romulan citizens respond to this proposal?”

“They are, in general, quite sure of their superiority, and would see it as an opportunity to either offer aid to those less fortunate or exploit them.”

“That’s honest, at least.”

“However, there’s another, much larger issue that will complicate matters.”

“And that is?”

“I’m sure you’ve heard about the underground movement to reunite with Vulcan, and that movement is gaining influence. I don’t think we can permanently ally with the Federation without acknowledging that.”

“Vulcan is a highly respected member of the Federation.”

He nodded. “What about your citizens? What’s the general feeling about Romulans?”

“We represent so many worlds that I can’t possibly give you a general opinion. However, I’d say that, with our history, mere mention of your people generates anxiety.”

“Fair enough. What about you? What do you think?”

Kathryn gave it some thought and said, “I’m a lover of science, Mr. Rabom, and the more that scientists share their knowledge, the more progress can be made. Who knows what possibilities this could launch?”

“I like the way you think. Have you ever considered running for office, Admiral? You have a gift for evasive answers.”

Kathryn smiled. “I’m not trying to evade your questions.”

“I know, but you are and you’re doing it so wonderfully that I feel like we’re accomplishing something here.”

She had to laugh since that is exactly what Matt Patterson had told her. “You aren’t like any Romulan I’ve ever met.”

“Ah, then you haven’t met a Romulan politician.”

“That’s quite true. I have a question for you, if I may?”

“Of course.”

“If you aren’t the next Praetor, is this conversation null?”

He gave that careful thought before replying. “Yes and no. I have to proceed delicately to avoid inciting contempt from this other individual. He’s out for fame and glory, I’m afraid.”

“Not good qualities in a leader.”

“No, they aren’t. But for now, I believe that I’m not on his radar screen, so to speak. I suspect that if he does rise to power, it will be short lived and I’ll be waiting to clean up the mess.”

“I’ll watch for your name, then. How long will it be before a change happens, do you think?”

“Within a year, if things proceed according to established protocol.”

“Understood,” she tapped her fingers on the table. “Is this meeting to warn me about that?”

“I am loyal to the Romulan people, Admiral. When and if you learn more about this other individual, I would like you to remember that.”

Kathryn furrowed her eyebrows. “I don’t quite understand.”

“The *Romulan* people, Admiral. My loyalty is to Romulans. I can’t say more than that right now.”

“All right. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“I asked to meet with you because I merely wanted to get to know the human who I believe will be rising to power soon, as well.”

She had to smile at that, because it wasn’t the first time she’d heard it. “If I move from Starfleet to politics, it will not be happening any time soon.”

“Perhaps, but that doesn’t mean you won’t continue to be influential. Not all power comes from the head of the government. Nor should it be assumed that an elected leader reflects the opinions of all. Do you agree?”

“It’s impossible for one person to reflect the opinions of all, Mr. Rabom.”

He nodded. "I believe this to be true for the Federation. On the same token, I hope that you will be reminded of this conversation if the citizens of Romulus make a mistake regarding their choice for a future leader. One man does not speak for all."

They continued to talk for well over an hour, but both decided that they should not dally out of concern that they might be discovered.

As Kathryn and Justin rematerialized in Pioneer's briefing room, Harry looked up from his book as if this was a completely normal event.

Kathryn said, "Commander Morat, thank you for your time today."

He bowed his head in response. "Safe travels, Admiral."

"To you, as well." After he dematerialized, she said, "Well, that was interesting."

Justin said, "To say the least."

"What happened over there?" Harry asked.

She felt she could confide in him since he was now aware of the situation. "A conversation with an influential Romulan civilian. We will definitely be watching his career."

"Admiral," Justin said. "I love watching you work, but today takes the prize. He told you a hell of a lot more than you told him."

Amused, she responded, "Thank you. Would you do some discrete research on our new friend and see what you can find out about the other man he mentioned?"

"I'd love to, Admiral. I'm eager to find out who he might be."

"As am I. Enlist Harry's help if you need him."

Harry said, "I'd love to help, and I'm very curious."

"May I tell him, Admiral?" Justin asked.

She nodded, "But I trust that you will both keep this in the strictest of confidences?"

"Absolutely," they both responded.

"Not even a word to your closest and most trusted friends."

"You have our word," Harry answered.

Justin said, "Not even a log entry."

"Thank you." She took a cleansing breath. "I feel like a weight has been lifted to have this over with. Shall we?" she asked as she gestured towards the bridge door.

When they walked in, Bernie stood up immediately. "You're back."

"Yes, and there is no cause for concern. We're finished here."

Bernie relaxed. "Very well. Shall we proceed to the Algeron system?"

"Yes, please." Kathryn, Harry, and Justin headed towards the turbolift doors, but she paused to address the bridge crew. "I trust that all of you will keep any assumptions about what transpired today to yourself and that your logs will represent the duller of ship's operations today. What happens on the bridge, stays on the bridge."

A chorus of, "Aye, Admirals," was given to her in response.

When she got back to her quarters, she took her hair down and shook it out, toed off her boots, and got out of her tunic. What had started out as a very tense day had turned into a memorable experience and a remarkable boost to her confidence. Still, she couldn't help but worry about the other individual that Rabom had referred to. She hoped Justin and Harry would find some useful information.

She replicated her dinner, and as she sat down to eat, a flash of light startled her. Her surprise turned to joy as she saw a huge bouquet of white roses on the table in front of her. "Thank you," she called out, knowing Q was listening. Evidently, she had accomplished exactly what he'd wanted.

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A month went by before the Pioneer was close enough to communicate directly with Earth by subspace. She and Chakotay had sent pre-recorded messages in the meantime, but it wasn't the same as talking directly. The morning they were close enough, Kathryn got up early, checked their coordinates, and quickly hopped onto the comm terminal. Butterflies were flitting around her belly as she keyed in the security code to establish the encoded subspace link.

It took several minutes to connect, and then she was put in standby until he accepted the comm on the other end. As she waited, she wondered if she'd keyed in the wrong location, and then she looked at the time. Laughing to herself, she realized it was just shy of five in the morning. He was likely fast asleep.

She let the standby continue while she got a cup of coffee to drink and a report to read. He'd see his message light blinking when he woke up.

Her anticipation made it difficult to concentrate, but staring at the report was as good as any way to pass the time.

“Kathryn?” he asked in surprise.

She happily put the PADD down. “Hi there, sleepyhead.”

“You’re okay.” He visibly relaxed.

“I’m fine. Were you concerned?”

“I was worried when the comm said it had been on standby for almost an hour.”

“Sorry about that. I was anxious to talk to you as soon as we were in range, but I didn’t check the time.”

He chuckled. “How long have you been up?”

“I placed the call as soon as I crawled out of bed. You know, it’s been over six weeks since we’ve talked.”

“Yes, six very long weeks, but I’ve saved every single one of your messages and played them over and over again, just to hear your voice.”

“You have not.” She laughed.

He held up a hand in protest. “I wouldn’t lie to you. You plan to marry a pathetic man who pines for you.”

Shaking her head in amusement, she said, “From your messages, it sounds like Tom and Lanna have kept you busy.”

“They’ve certainly tried, as have others. I told you that I started our Delta Quadrant textbook, didn’t I?”

“Yes, you did,” she smiled. “How’s it coming?”

“Slowly. I’m still trying to get the Caretaker incident written with just the right tone.”

“It’s a text book, not poetry.”

He blushed a little. “Yes, well, I wanted to capture the true feeling of what it was like when I first stepped foot on your bridge.” He changed the subject. “Enough about that... I’ve been very curious about your success out there, but didn’t want to ask. Are we on a secure line?”

“I didn’t mention anything because I couldn’t be sure of the security of the pre-recorded transmissions, but yes, this is as secure as I can make it.”

“And? Last I heard about it, Q had come to see you.”

“The planned meeting went extremely well, a very surprising conversation. You didn’t hear about it in the media, I hope?”

“No, not a thing.”

“Good. The party involved just wanted to meet me.”

“That’s all? Was it the person at the top?” He followed her lead in speaking without using specifics.

“No, but not far removed. There is no agenda at this time, just an interest in establishing the ground work of a relationship. Depending on how things work out politically for both worlds over the next year, we’re considering a scientific partnership as a first step.”

“That’s fantastic, but... all that worry.” He sighed.

“I know.” She pursed her lips. “I could throttle Q.”

“Watch out. Saying his name might summon him.”

“I wish. He could come in very handy sometimes.” She quirked a smile. “He sent me roses.”

“He did?”

“Three dozen white ones, as soon as I got back to my quarters.”

He narrowed his eyes playfully. “I’m the only person who is supposed to give you roses, love.”

“You give me peace roses, and I’ve treasured every one of them.”

“That’s what I should have brought you the night I gave you the massage. I’ve always given you one when you’ve been hurt.”

“I never really thanked you for that massage and for pulling me out of my mood.”

“You’re welcome. I will always be there for you, as I’m sure you’ll be there for me.”

“Always.” She wanted to reach out and touch him. “Oh, Chakotay. I miss you.”

“I miss you, too, but this won’t last forever.”

“Is that what you’ve been telling yourself?”

“Hourly.”

She rested her chin in her hands. “Tell me what we’re going to do as soon as I get home.”

“Ah, I have many plans. Most of them take place in the bedroom.” He winked.

Laughing, she said, “Thank you for cheering me up.”

“Were you blue?”

“Lonely. It’s rather boring out here between systems, although I’ve been socializing with the crew a lot more than I ever did on Voyager.”

“Good,” he smiled. “How are the discussions going? I’ve read the news reports, but it’s hard to tell how accurate it is.”

“We’ve visited only the three systems that have been publicized, and the media coverage is pretty accurate.”

“Then they’re all considering rejoining?”

“Yes, but with trepidation and misgivings. I think everyone is waiting to see what everyone else is going to do. No one wants to be the first to swallow their pride, and unofficially, they’re all waiting for a change in our government.”

“Makes sense. I wonder what it would take to bring them back, outside of an election.”

“Don’t know, but I’m looking for opportunities to show unexpected acts of kindness.”

“Just so you don’t leave yourself exposed,” he warned.

She bit back a smile. “You’d be impressed with the security precautions I’ve been taking. Bernie’s protective streak is almost as strong as yours.”

“I’m glad to hear it. What have you changed?”

“Various safeties, depending on the situation. We’ve decided to use the pulse communicators every time, and so far, they haven’t been detected.”

“B’Elanna did well with that invention. Have you had to adjust the frequency on them?”

“No, it’s been low enough to go completely unnoticed.” She remembered something she was supposed to do. “Oh, would you ask Lanna if she has time for a little project for me?”

“Sure, what is it?”

“I want to know if it’s possible to enhance commbadge technology with an undetectable scanner, similar in frequency to the pulses.”

“What do you want to scan for and how would you read the results?”

“We would have to download results by interfacing with a computer, and we’d be doing a basic security sweep when a tri-corder can’t be used.”

He furrowed his brow. “Have you run into that kind of situation?”

“No,” she said nonchalantly, “Just an idea I had.”

Giving her an odd look, he said, “All right, but I know you’re not telling me something.”

“How can you tell?” she asked with a grimace. “I’ve got a better poker face than that.”

“I know your mannerisms inside and out.”

She sighed and decided to confide in him so that he wouldn’t think she was hiding something significant. “There are certain advances that I’d like our former crew to make, despite being back in the alpha quadrant.”

“Sounds like an assignment from your little excursion last March.”

“A hope.” She smiled softly, “As there really is no way to check to see if I’ve followed through or not.”

“What will be, will be, regardless of what would have been.”

She laughed again. “If anyone is listening to this conversation, they would find that impossible to decipher.”

“I’ll ask her. She’d probably love to do something that would help you.” He shrugged, “And it would be a great tactical advantage, too. Right up my alley.”

“Yes, it would. And they’d be very useful for over-protective ship captains.”

Chakotay smiled. “He’s still giving you a hard time?”

“I believe he’s figured out what crosses the line, but it’s hard for him. He’s used to being the diplomat, not ferrying one around.”

“From what you’ve described, you’re becoming good friends.”

“Yes, we are. He, Judy, and I have meals together often. They’re both very good at debating the most innocuous issues. It has turned into a little game and keeps us from getting too bogged down with the more serious problems.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“It is. Oh... meant to tell you about a message mom sent.”

“About?”

Kathryn felt chagrined. “I forgot to tell her about giving you power of attorney.”

“Ah, yes, I know about that.”

“You do?” she asked with amused interest.

“She came by my apartment unexpectedly a few weeks ago and asked what my intentions were towards you.”

Kathryn laughed. “She did? What did you say?”

“I confessed.” He looked down and tugged on his ear.

“You’re blushing.”

“Well, the cat’s out of the bag as far as your mom is concerned. She told me that she’d received a letter from the attorney and wanted to know what led us to make that decision.”

“That explains her message then. She said she’d be adopting you into the family.”

“And she has,” he said affirmatively. “I’ve been to Indiana several times and Katie and I are becoming pals.”

“That’s good. I’m glad you’re spending time with them. Maybe you can commiserate about my absence.”

He looked at her with undisguised love. “I’ve really missed talking to you.”

“Me, too.” She hoped her expression conveyed her love, as well. “Are you available to talk tonight?”

“It just so happens that my busy social calendar has an opening for you.”

She winked at him. “Today, Harry and I are going to lend a hand in sciences. We passed an anomaly yesterday that has them perplexed.”

Smiling, he said, “Right up your alley. Have fun.”

“Thanks.” She touched the screen. “I Love you.”

“I love you, too, Kathryn.”

She started her day with renewed energy.

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More than a week later, Chakotay answered the comm after the last student of the day left his office. Seeing that it was Tom calling from Utopia Planetia, Chakotay said, “Hi, what can I do for you?”

“Turn on the Fednews channel. Kathryn’s about to speak from Ktaris.”

He did as instructed, and the screen changed to a reporter talking in front of an empty outdoor stage, reducing Tom’s image to a box in the corner. “She’s doing a press conference today? She didn’t tell me that.”

“Patterson got a call about it and turned it on for all of us to watch. It’s a last minute thing.”

“What has the reporter said?”

Tom said, “Just that Kathryn and the Ktarian President have an announcement. Mostly, they’ve been rehashing what she’s been doing all year and what led to Ktaria’s dissolution of their membership. Do you think they’re rejoining?”

“That would be great, but I don’t know if they can officially do that without the Council approving.” They listened quietly for a few minutes while they waited.

The reporter said, “Security is taking position on the stage. President Sarkgret and Admiral Janeway should be speaking momentarily.”

Tom said, “There she is,” as the gathered crowd began applauding and the two leaders walked out of the capital building and stepped onto the stage. They were both smiling and waving to the Ktarians who had come to hear them speak.

Sarkgregt took the podium first. “Ktarian friends,” he said as he looked around. “Over the last three days, the Governance Committee has had extensive conferences with Admiral Kathryn Janeway and her exceptional team. We have debated the circumstances surrounding Ktaris’ withdrawal from the Federation, and it is clear to all of us that the concerns no longer exist or they include issues that are in the process of being resolved.” He turned to Kathryn in acknowledgement and the crowd cheered.

Tom said, “They’re giving her credit for the changes.”

“She’s accepting on behalf of the Council,” Chakotay noted.

After applauding her as well, Sarkgregt spoke again. “Today is an important day for Ktaris. Today, we put aside that which has divided us from our neighbors across the quadrant. Today, I am happy to announce that Ktaris is officially petitioning the Federation to reinstate our membership.”

The crowd cheered again, and Sarkgregt turned to shake Kathryn’s hand. She was beaming.

Chakotay said, “Fantastic. This is the turning point she was hoping for.”

Kathryn took his place at the podium, but had to wait until the applause died down. She turned to smile at Sarkgregt and said something in his ear that made him put his hand on her back and nod happily at her. Chakotay carefully took in every move she made, not wanting to miss a moment.

She held up her hands and the crowd quieted. “Friends of Ktaria, I am delighted with what we’ve accomplished together. The past is behind us, and it’s time to forge ahead with new initiatives and new relationships. By formally petitioning the Federation, you have been granted protectorate status, and may immediately re-open trade.” She smiled again as a chorus of applause erupted.

B’Elanna had joined Tom at the comm unit. She said, “Chakotay, she looks happy. Really, really happy again.”

“She is.” He wanted to hug Kathryn. “This is great news for her.”

Tom added, “For all of us.”

Kathryn started speaking again. “We haven’t crossed every hurdle, but I’m full of hope that we will very soon regain...”

Her words were cut off as a Ktarian security guard grabbed her from behind. Chakotay’s eyes were wide as he shouted, “Kathryn!” He watched intently, wondering what the guard was trying to shield her from.

“What the hell?” Tom asked. “He’s not protecting her!”

Within seconds, the guard had her on her knees with a phaser pointed at her head, holding her in place by her hair. Chakotay wanted to hit something, but all he could do was stare at the screen in fear.

The camera was shaky as it zoomed in on Kathryn and then zoomed back out to get everyone on the platform. All eight Starfleet officers had their phasers aimed at the Ktarian, and the President’s security was closing ranks. With all the noise of the crowd, it was impossible to hear what was being said.

The reporter said nothing and the entire crowd stopped speaking at once, wanting to know what was happening. President Sargregt was clearly negotiating for Kathryn’s release, and the Ktarian was yelling something about Starfleet at him, during which he angrily clocked Kathryn in the side of the head twice. Chakotay’s fists tightened so much that his fingernails dug into his palms.

The camera zoomed in on Kathryn again, and Chakotay could see that she was calm, despite the blood trickling down her cheek. She was attentively watching her security team – a good sign. While the Ktarian was completely focused on yelling at the President, they made their move. Justin held out three fingers flat in front of him, and then in perfect rhythm held out one, two, and on three, Kathryn threw herself on the floor and all the phasers on the stage fired at once.

Chakotay gasped along with Kathryn when the stunned Ktarian crashed on top of her. Doyle and Moore were at her side in seconds, pulling him off and helping her to her feet. The crowd started applauding the maneuver when three more Ktarians took them by surprise in a second attempt to take Kathryn.

“No!” Chakotay, Tom, and B’Elanna all yelled at once.

Doyle and Moore saw it instantly and began fighting two of the attackers. The third aimed a phaser at Kathryn and fired, but missed when Kathryn’s leg came up in a perfectly executed kick and hit his arm.

“Yes!” They yelled as they watched her, Doyle, and Moore continue to fight hand-to-hand. The other Starfleet officers were moving in to help or had their phasers aimed and were ready to fire as soon as they had a clear shot. Kathryn’s attacker somehow found another phaser and soon had her pinned against his front with the clear intention of using her as a shield.

“Come on, love, you can get out of this,” Chakotay urged.

“She’s not clear,” B’Elanna said. “She’d hit Doyle.”

“Then hit him!” Chakotay yelled.

Kathryn had evidently come to the same conclusion and made the move they all knew she was capable of. She dropped suddenly and used all her strength to toss the large Ktarian to the floor and then sunk her elbow into his shoulder, forcing him to drop the weapon. They barely missed hitting Doyle, but it surprised his opponent enough that Scott was able to take him down. Once she was free, the six remaining officers fired, stunning all three.

“Yes!” Chakotay yelled again as pride swelled in his chest. “That’s my Kathryn.”

Moore, Jarvin, Kim, and another officer immediately closed ranks around her and bent their knees in defensive postures, just in case anyone else tried to come at her. Sargregt had been put into a similar guarded position by his security team. When the crowd realized that no other attack was coming, they erupted in thunderous applause once again.

Kathryn put her hand on Moore’s back to signal him to stand down. As she came out from behind him, she extended a hand to Sargregt. He pushed through his security to gladly accept it. The President laid his hand on Kathryn’s shoulder in a caring gesture, probably asking if she was okay as he handed her a handkerchief. She nodded, but her left hand was on her lower back and she was walking with a slight limp.

As the crowd continuing cheering, Tom said, “I bet she pulled a muscle.”

“He was twice her weight, at least,” B’Elanna pointed out.

His arm protectively around Kathryn’s shoulders, Sargregt stepped up to the podium to address the crowd. Once they were quiet, he said, “I think we all just witnessed a testimony to the fact that Admiral Janeway can do just about anything when she sets her mind to it.”

Chakotay agreed and smiled broadly as Kathryn shook her head in amusement.

Sargregt continued, “I realize that you couldn’t hear what was being said up here. I’ll be up front with you. The attacker was upset about our decision to rejoin the Federation. He harbors great resentment over the past, and I know that some of you agree with him. I urge all Ktarians, in fact, I urge everyone throughout the entire quadrant, to accept the fact that it’s time to put what happened during the war behind us. Harboring hate and fear only holds us back and will eventually cause more devastation than the war itself.”

Chakotay watched Kathryn’s expression change and knew that she was relieved that someone else had finally realized what the temporal board had indicated would happen if the Federation fell apart.

Sargregt invited Kathryn to say something, and she agreed. “Please forgive the interruption earlier.” She paused while the crowd chuckled quietly. “I was saying – although we have hurdles to cross, it is my hope that we can work together for a peaceful

future that will both ensure everyone's safety while also reigniting our passion for exploration and scientific discovery. Violence," she gestured to where she had been on her knees, "is not the answer. Open dialogue is. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to return to my ship for an ice pack." She winced and the crowd laughed quietly again and gradually another round of applause swelled loudly.

She shook Sargregt's hand and then took Harry's arm to be escorted off the stage to an area not blocked from transport. The camera stayed with them until the Pioneer's transporter beamed them away.

Tom said, "Damn, that was impressive."

"It was only two months ago when she flipped Chakotay like that," B'Elanna said.

"Yeah, but no one was pointing a phaser at her in front of a crowd of thousands."

Chakotay said, "We know what she's capable of. I'm thankful she had the ability to fight back."

B'Elanna asked, "So, old man, you want to come over for dinner? We'll watch the press eat this up."

"Sure," he said with a smile. "I'll meet you at your house within the hour."

After the comm closed, Chakotay leaned back in his chair with a sigh of relief. He rubbed his face and took a deep breath. Kathryn had handled the entire situation by the book, ensuring the best outcome, but he couldn't help the niggling fear that he could've lost her today. He pushed that fear down and concentrated on the pride he felt.

As he opened a message interface to key in a note for her, he had to smile as he recalled the shocked look on that Ktarian's face when she kicked him. It was priceless.

He typed, "Kathryn, I saw the whole thing, and I am so incredibly proud of you right now that I want to burst. Not just for taking that Ktarian down, but also for talking that world into following you. This is exactly what you were hoping for and I believe others will soon be following in their footsteps. If anything, your attackers ensured that this event will get significantly more press than it would have if they hadn't shown up. I'll be at the Paris' this evening if you want to contact me. All my love, Chakotay."

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When Kathryn and her team rematerialized in the Pioneer's transporter room, she was finally able to give in to the pain in her back. She groaned and leaned against Harry.

"Admiral!" he said as he supported her.

“Damn that hurts.” She clamped her eyelids shut.

Cooper said, “He was twice your size.”

“Yeah, noticed that.” She let them help her down the step as her eyes watered.

“Admiral,” Justin said. “We would have gotten to you.”

Turning to look at him, she quirked a smile. “No doubt, but I saw an opportunity and took it. I hope you don’t mind.” With the arm on her uninjured side, she squeezed Justin’s shoulder and looked around at the eight men who were with her. “Thank you all for your work today. Your cool heads and quick thinking kept that from being a really unpleasant hostage situation.”

Scott said, “Thank you, but why is that you’re the only one who has come back injured?”

Bernie had walked in just as Scott spoke. “Yes, why is that?”

Kathryn turned to him. “Because, Captain, I just kicked ass, that’s why.”

“Yes, I saw that.” He smiled in amusement as all of the men tried to keep from laughing. “Is everyone, besides her, all right?”

Cooper reported, “Yes, Sir.”

“Good work today. We were preparing a second team to surprise him, but you were so quick that we didn’t need to.” Bernie nodded his thanks. “Commander Kim, would you see that she gets to sickbay?”

“Yes, Sir.” He was already supporting her, but tightened his hold and ushered her out the door.

As they walked down the corridor to the turbolift, she asked, “What did you think about this week?”

“I think they were probably ready to rejoin the Federation already, but if they want to give you credit for changing their minds, then I’m all for it.”

“You’re exactly right. Sargregt pulled me aside Tuesday to tell me that is precisely what he intended. He could see that none of the other worlds were willing to take the first step, and although he knew there was disagreement among the Ktarian civilians, the Governance Committee had made the unanimous decision to rejoin before we arrived. They were behind his idea to lead the way for all the other hesitant worlds.”

As they got off the turbolift, Harry said, “Politics really are about couching the message in just the right way to win the public over.”

“That’s right,” she smiled. “Diplomacy on a grand scale.”

When they walked into sickbay, Dr. Murphy was ready for her. “Admiral, please lie down on a biobed.”

Kathryn frowned at the young doctor. “I’m not sure I can even get up on one.”

“Oh, just a moment.” Dr. Murphy ran the tri-corder over Kathryn’s back. “You’ve pulled several muscles and your vertebrae are out of alignment.”

Fighting the urge to roll her eyes, Kathryn merely nodded. “I thought that might be the case.”

Harry offered, “Let’s take off your tunic and have you lean against a bed so she can heal the muscles.”

Dr. Murphy picked up the deep tissue regenerator and said, “Oh, yes, good.”

Kathryn had to smile at Harry’s smooth way of giving the young doctor guidance. She glanced at Harry and noticed that his cheeks were slightly pinker than usual, and that he was casting furtive glances at the doctor. She looked down and bit her lips to avoid laughing. It seemed that the doctor’s muddled behavior might be due to a budding romance with Harry.

Dr. Murphy was able to quickly heal her back. “How does that feel, Admiral?”

Tentatively flexing, she said, “Better, thank you.”

“Can you lie down on your stomach?”

“I believe so,” Kathryn said, more tolerant of the doctor’s fumbling in light of her discovery. She let Harry help her up, and as soon as Kathryn was prone, Dr. Murphy immediately went to work on her head and spine. Kathryn wondered what sort of flirtatious glances were going on above her, but decided to let them have this moment and not indulge her curiosity.

When she got back to her quarters, she saw that Chakotay had sent a text message to her. Her first instinct was to be wary of what he might say since this was the first time she’d been in clear danger since Sirius, but she reminded herself, “You’re trusting him to keep his word.”

It only took her a moment to read it, and in response, she touched his picture and whispered, “Thank you.” She’d call him just as soon as she had a nice, long soak in her bathtub.

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The next month was eventful enough to keep them busy as they traveled to a handful of systems within close proximity of each other. One was still a member of the Federation, two were former Federation worlds, another was a protectorate that had never moved past that status, and the last was a world that had always been independent and wished to remain that way.

Kathryn's relationships with the Pioneer crew continued to develop throughout the fall. Many of the science and engineering personnel approached her daily with questions that ranged from asking her advice on an engine issue, to wanting her opinion on the latest astronomical survey. She suspected they were looking for ways to strike up a conversation, and she had to admit that it was flattering. It was enjoyable to interact with a crew that wasn't her responsibility. She felt free to develop friendships and be social without the constraints of command.

She played poker regularly with a group of men from security. She learned at the first game that one of them had dared another to invite her, and they were shocked when she accepted. Since then, they made sure she was available before scheduling subsequent games, and they never failed to make her laugh. As she grew closer to them, it was also easier to communicate non-verbally with them while they were on away missions.

She also spent many evenings with Sue. The young lieutenant had seen the blanket that Kathryn was making for Kolopak and asked for help learning how to knit. Once she got the hang of it, they often sat together in Kathryn's quarters knitting, talking, and listening to music. Kathryn loved the friendship they were developing and found that they had a lot of interests in common.

Friendships with her own staff extended beyond just Sue. One evening when she and Harry were going over notes, Harry asked, "Admiral, do you have any objections to me pursuing a relationship with a member of the Pioneer crew?"

Kathryn quirked a smile. "You don't need my permission to date."

Blushing, he said, "Well, yes, but I was worried about it being inappropriate because we're visitors here."

She sighed. "Visitors, yes, but since we took on this job, we've spent a lot more time on this ship than we have at home."

"That's true."

"And remember, when we're at home, so is this ship, for the most part." She glanced at him. "Who is the lucky young lady?"

"Amy Murphy."

“The doctor,” Kathryn said knowingly. “I thought so.”

“Really? Why?”

“The looks you give each other.”

“She’s giving me looks?”

Kathryn laughed. “Ask her out, Harry.”

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In early December, they were on their way to the last conference on their itinerary when Kathryn came down with stomach flu. After coming back from sickbay, she called Chakotay to let him know that she was going to bed and wouldn’t be able to talk.

“You look terrible,” Chakotay said as soon as the connection was made.

“I feel it.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nausea, stomach cramps, fever, and you don’t want to know what else.” Kathryn held her arms protectively around her middle.

“Have you been to sickbay?”

“Yes, it’s a virus and she can’t do anything.”

“I’m sorry. I wish I could be there to take care of you.”

She groaned. “I’m gonna lay down.”

“Okay, call me when you feel up to it.”

“Mhmm,” she said as she turned off the computer without bothering to disconnect the comm-link first.

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The next morning, Kathryn was on her way to her office when Bernie stopped her in the corridor. “Kathryn, shouldn’t you be in bed?”

She groaned slightly, wishing that she could be. “We need to prepare for the next conference.”

“It’ll wait while you recover. If what you’re feeling is anything like what Judy is feeling, I can’t believe you’re even up and around.”

“She has it, too?”

“You didn’t know? Kim, Jarvin, Doyle, and Moore are all sick.”

Her shoulders sagged. “I have no staff.”

“You have Brooks, but you don’t want to infect her with this.”

“I’ll send her away, but I’ve got to get out of my quarters for awhile.”

Bernie sympathized, “I understand. Let me know if there’s anything I can do to help.”

Kathryn waved and walked on. There was no doubt in her mind that they all picked up this virus on the last planet, a week ago. What she didn’t understand was why it took so long to incubate. She put it on her list to think about, but she had a dozen other things on her mind already. However, after the second time she’d fallen asleep at her desk, she decided that perhaps Bernie was right and she needed to go back to bed.

She was in the corridor when Bernie commed her. “Admiral, may I see you for a moment?”

“Mmm hmm. Where?”

“I’ll come to you.”

“’kay,” she said as she leaned against the wall. He probably thought she was still in her office, but she didn’t have the energy to walk back. She’d made it a good twenty meters, and that felt like an accomplishment.

“Kathryn?”

“Hmm?” she asked as she opened her eyes.

“I think you were asleep standing up.” He put his arm around her back and helped her start walking again. “You need to go back to bed.”

“’s where going.” She felt the ship lurch. “What was that?”

“What?”

“Inertial dampeners malfunction.”

“You’re just dizzy.”

They were almost to the turbolift when an ensign stepped in to help. “Shouldn’t we just transport her to where she’s going?”

Before Bernie could make the call, Kathryn slumped to the floor.

“Admiral!” the ensign yelled as he caught her head before it hit.

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Kathryn forced her dry, gritty eyelids to open. Her mouth tasted horrible and her abdomen felt like it had been hit by a shuttle. She took stock of her surroundings and realized that she was in the Pioneer’s sickbay.

“Admiral?” Dr. Murphy asked. “How are you feeling?”

She croaked, “Stomach hurts.”

“I know,” Amy said nervously. “It’s not a virus. I’m sorry.”

Kathryn blinked a few times to focus on the anxious young doctor. “Then what is it?”

“A parasite, but I’m still working on a treatment.”

Groaning, Kathryn pushed herself up to a sitting position. She cringed with pain. “What time is it?”

“Almost oh-nine-hundred. You fainted yesterday and have been here since.”

Kathryn let that sink in a moment, and then looked around. “Where are the others?”

“Everyone seems more comfortable in their quarters, and until I find a treatment, there’s nothing I can do. I’ve given you as much pain medication as I can, and you slept with a sedative, but I can’t give you more for awhile.”

“May I go? I prefer to be alone.”

“I’ll call for a transport.”

When Kathryn got to her quarters, she grabbed hold of the desk to stabilize herself. It hurt to stand up straight, but she knew she needed to call Chakotay or he’d worry. They had an understanding that she’d call every night.

When she made the connection, she just stared at his image, trying to decide if the transmission was blurry.

“Kathryn? Are you okay?”

She shook her head. “Mm mm. It’s a parasite... going back to bed.”

“Shouldn’t you be in sickbay?”

“Spent the night there.” She reached out to touch the screen, and a wave of nausea hit her. “Need to go.” Not bothering to end the call, she rushed for the bathroom and barely made it.

Chakotay cringed as he heard her retching. He closed the connection for her and immediately placed a call to Captain Young.

“Captain Chakotay, what can I do for you?”

“I’m calling to check on Kathryn’s condition, but you don’t look so good, either.”

“I’ve been up all night with Judy, but I’m not sick.” Bernie rubbed his forehead. “So, you’ve spoken to her?”

“Evening before last and just now. What’s going on?”

“Just now? Isn’t she sedated in sickbay?”

“Sedated? No, she just called me from her quarters, but couldn’t talk because she was sick to her stomach.”

Bernie sighed heavily. “The six officers that attended the last peace conference have all contracted a parasitic disease, and Dr. Murphy has been unable to find a cure. She just determined last night that it wasn’t a virus.”

“Is there a prognosis if she’s unable to find a cure?”

“It doesn’t look good. They’re all suffering from severe dehydration, and some internal bleeding because it’s attacking their gastro-intestinal tract. We think that’s the reason Kathryn fainted yesterday.”

“Fainted?” Chakotay asked worriedly.

“I assumed she told you.”

“She didn’t have a chance.” Chakotay tried to think of what he could do. Being so far away, he felt helpless when all he wanted to do was hold her. “Has your doctor contacted Starfleet Medical?”

“Not yet, but if she doesn’t figure out something soon, I’m bringing us back to Earth.”

“How soon? Surely if a team here was working on a cure while you’re en route, they might find something before you arrive.”

“Dr. Murphy is doing her best, but I don’t want to undermine her confidence.”

“Meanwhile, those six people are suffering?” Chakotay was getting angry. “Boost her confidence some other way.”

Bernie held up a hand to placate him. “I understand, my wife is suffering, too. I’ll go check on Murphy’s progress right now.”

“And why aren’t they in sickbay? You’ve been taking care of Judy, but who is taking care of the others?”

“We have a limited medical staff, Captain, and they’re doing the best that they can.”

Chakotay could tell that Bernie was losing patience with him. “All right, I’ll back off, but please, see what you can do.”

“I will, and I’ll contact you when I know something.”

“I would appreciate it.” He signed off and leaned back in his chair, trying to figure out what he could do. He wanted to call Dr. Joe, but that would be crossing the line, and he needed to let Bernie handle it. Meanwhile, he prayed that Kathryn wasn’t suffering too badly.

Chakotay didn’t hear from Kathryn over the next couple of days, but he did receive updates from Bernie. All six patients were moved back to sickbay so the two nurses could help all of them at the same time. Starfleet Medical began assisting with the research within two hours of Chakotay’s call, but it took them two full days to find a treatment.

“Kathryn!” Chakotay answered, excited to hear from her. “I’ve been thinking about you. How are you feeling?”

“I’ve been worse,” she said with a lack of energy, but with a pleasant smile. She was wearing her robe and had just woken up.

“Bernie said that you started receiving treatments yesterday morning.”

“That’s what I hear, but I wasn’t cognizant enough to know. Dr. Murphy said it will take a full ten days of treatments to rid our systems of these pesky little trojans.”

He smiled sympathetically. “I wish I could’ve been there.”

“No, you don’t. I think it would have disgusted you. It did me.”

“You were sick. I would’ve held you through all of it.”

She raised an eyebrow, not believing that he’d actually do that. “We haven’t even said the ‘in sickness and in health’ vows, yet.”

“I don’t need to say them to stand by them.”

Her smile was sincere. “You’re a good man, you know?”

“Thanks, I’m glad that I’ve redeemed myself in your eyes.”

Softly, she replied, “Several times over.”

Chakotay’s heart felt warmed by her love, and wanted nothing more than to take her into his arms. “How are you feeling, really?”

“Exhausted, weak, still a little queasy. I lost a little over five kilos.”

“Don’t worry, you’ll gain it back.”

Laughing a little, she said, “I thought you’d like my smaller figure. I’d already dropped a couple kilos since August.”

“I’ll take you however I can get you, but you don’t need to diet on my account.”

She shook her head in amusement.

“What’s next on your schedule, or have you thought that far?”

“We’re holding position outside the Jorian system until we’ve recovered. Then, we have four days of meetings planned.” She sighed. “However, since we’ve had to change the dates, I don’t know if our schedule will be as busy.”

“Then you’re coming home?” he asked hopefully.

“Yes, and even with this setback, we’ll still make it in time for the reunion. Can you believe only a year has gone by?”

“Most people say the exact opposite.”

“I’ve had a busy year,” she said with a smile.

“Yes, you have.” He gazed longingly at her. “I really wish I could hold you right now.”

Her voice wavered as she said, “Me, too. I hate to admit it, but I could use some TLC.”

“We’ve got all of my winter break to do nothing but burrow together under some warm blankets.”

“I’m looking forward to it.” She touched the screen, wishing she could touch his face. “I should go. I’d like to read a few reports before I fall asleep again.”

“All right, but don’t push yourself. Rest.”

“I’ll try... and I’ve got my pillow.” She said with a wink. “I love you.”

“Love you, too, and I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

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“Admiral Janeway, a pleasure to finally meet you in person,” President Nakmyre extended his hand in greeting as she and her escorts materialized in a courtyard outside the Jorian conference center.

“And you as well, President Nakmyre. I apologize for our delay.”

“No apology necessary. I trust you are feeling better?”

“Yes,” she smiled graciously as they entered a long, utilitarian corridor. “Were you able to reschedule all of the meetings?”

“Not all of them, but I believe we’ll still be able to cover everything we’d like.” He waved his hand toward their surroundings. “Please forgive the lack of grandeur with this entrance to the center, but the main foyer is crawling with far too many civilians and reporters to be considered safe for either of us.”

“I don’t mind. I actually prefer this over all the ceremony that usually goes along with these visits.”

“Yes, I know what you mean.” He gave her a knowing look. “It’s nice at first, but it gets tiring quite soon thereafter.”

It was a very long corridor with a couple of turns, but eventually, they passed through a second set of doors that led into an administrative office area. Nakmyre said, “There’s a conference room down here that will suit our needs for this morning. I’d like to speak to you alone before we start bringing in the committees, assemblages, and whatnot.”

She chuckled. “That will be fine. Perhaps you can brief me on the mind-set of those we will be meeting with.”

“That’s exactly what I plan to discuss.” He opened the door to the conference room and directed her inside.

Kathryn nodded at Harry and Justin who had arrived with the initial security team. Turning to the president, she said, “I’d like to introduce my senior aide, Lieutenant Commander Harry Kim.”

He extended his hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. That’s a long title, how should I address you?”

Accepting the handshake, Harry said, “Commander Kim, Sir.”

“Very well, then.” Nakmyre indicated that they should be seated. “Can I get you anything to drink? I understand that you’re a lover of the Terran beverage called coffee?”

“Yes,” she smiled. “My reputation precedes me.”

“I have just the thing that I want you to try.” He turned to the table behind him and poured three hot beverages for them. “This is a similarly brewed drink, but not quite so bitter.” Setting them on the table, he said, “I do hope you like it.”

She glanced up at Justin and he gave her a discreet nod indicating that it had been scanned and was safe for her to drink.

Nakmyre noticed and jokingly said, “I assure you that I would not poison you, my dear Admiral.”

After a small sip she said, “Of course not, but out in the Delta Quadrant, it became a habit to check every food and beverage for compatibility with our human physiology. I’m afraid it’s a habit we haven’t broken.”

“That’s quite understandable, Admiral. I don’t take offense. How do you like it?”

She took another sip. “It tastes like a combination of our coffee and tea, with a little chocolate thrown in. What do you think, Commander?” she asked Harry.

“A good description, although I think it leans heavily towards black tea.”

“Then if it is to your liking, shall we get started?”

“Please,” Kathryn nodded.

“I would like to discuss a great deal with you this morning in preparation for a luncheon we’ll be attending with the leaders of a five-planet coalition that we’ve developed out here.”

“A Coalition? Really?” She leaned forward inquisitively. “I thought I would’ve heard about something like that.”

“No, you wouldn’t. I’d be concerned if you had, because it’s something we’ve chosen to keep very quiet.”

“What’s the nature of the coalition?”

“Our foremost reason for creating it was for protection. The planets include Joria, Catork, Jarmara, Maio, and Rewn.”

“All of which ceded their membership at the same time,” she noted. “Approximately one month before war was declared on Cardassia.”

“Correct, Admiral. We saw what was coming, and because our sector is halfway between Earth and the Bajoran wormhole, we were concerned about our vulnerability. We believed this might be the first point of attack on the Federation.”

Kathryn nodded slowly. “All of the planets between Maio and Deep Space Nine are either uninhabited or lie in the demilitarized zone.”

“Precisely. So you understand that our primary concern was our own safety. It may sound selfish, but it had been our belief for years that the Cardassian Treaty was a colossal mistake. Our neighbors in the demilitarized zone had already suffered because of it, and we did not want the Federation bartering away our planets as well.”

Kathryn let his statement sit for a moment so that he would feel confident that he had been heard. “I’d like to say that I can’t imagine that the Federation would do that, but after spending seven years with a ship full of Maquis, I know better.” She nodded towards Justin. “Lieutenant Jarvin is from the former colony on Ronus, for example.”

“My condolences, Lieutenant,” Nakmyre said solemnly.

Justin merely nodded and didn’t add to the conversation.

“President,” Kathryn said, “I’m not here to ask you to defend your reasons for leaving. I’m here to ask if you’d like to return.”

“That’s a very complicated question.”

“I know, but I want to hear everything you’d like to tell me.”

He raised an eyebrow. “And you only want to stay four days?”

“I’ll stay as long as necessary, but it’s my hope that I’ll be able to grasp the primary issues in that amount of time.”

“We can certainly touch on them.” He laid both of his hands on the table, palms down, and paused for just a moment before looking back at her intently. “Admiral, I hope you don’t take this the wrong way.”

“You can talk to me about anything.”

“I would like to know whether you are merely a messenger for President Zife, or if you have the power to truly affect change.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Also, a very complicated question.”

“I realize that, but I’m not willing to expend the energy to go through this process if your job is simply to find out why we’re unhappy and tell the Federation President, because I don’t think he gives a damn about any planet except those who are providing for his extravagance.”

“President Zife,” she said carefully, “has a vested interest in rebuilding the Federation.”

Nakmyre rolled his eyes and sat back in his chair. “The Federation that he’s responsible for tearing apart. He only wants to get re-elected, and I can tell you this – our coalition has a mind to rejoin the Federation just so we can have a say in electing the next President because it sure as hell better not be Zife.”

Speaking calmly to avoid agitating him, she said, “As you must know, I have no power to control who is nominated next.”

He squinted. “You’d have significant power, Admiral, if you decided to throw your name into the hat.”

Kathryn took a slow, deep breath and glanced at Harry who was trying really hard not to smile. ‘He’s no help,’ she thought casually. Turning back to Nakmyre, she said, “As I’ve told many individuals already, if I decide to go in to politics, it will not be this year.”

“My dear Admiral, you already are in politics. The question is, what are you going to do with the political power that you have?”

“I am going to continue my attempts to restore faith in the principles of the Federation. My goal is simply to bring us back together because we are stronger united, and with that strength comes peace, and with peace comes prosperity, and with prosperity comes advancements in knowledge.”

“High ideals, Admiral. Can you do it?”

She sat back. “I can sure as hell try.”

Nakmyre smirked and then turned to Harry. “Commander Kim, did she say that eight years ago? That she can sure as hell try to get you home?”

Harry said confidently, “That’s exactly what she said, more or less.”

“Exactly? More or less?”

Looking directly at her, Harry said, “She told us that we had no idea of the dangers we’d face, but that one thing was clear – that we would all, Starfleet and Maquis, have to work together if we were going to survive.”

Justin said, “If I may, I’d like to add that she said that she wouldn’t settle for taking seventy-five years to get home. She’d find a way back.”

Kathryn gave him a look. “We, Lieutenant. I said *we’d* find a way back.”

Justin bit back a smile. “Of course, Admiral.”

Nakmyre said, “As I suspected. So, can you do it again, Admiral? Can you unite a disparate people and beat the odds?”

She clicked her tongue. “I can’t do it alone.”

“Well, Admiral, I have to be honest with you. I don’t believe the Federation, as it currently exists, is capable of holding up its own principles. I have a lot of faith in the ideology, but I don’t have faith in the leadership. So, please, tell me what you plan to do with the information I give you.”

“I will take everything we’ve learned from every world we’ve been to, find the common denominators, and work with Starfleet and the Federation Council to address the issues.”

“Who do you report to?”

“Fleet Admiral Khurma,” she replied.

“Who reports to President Zife?”

“Yes, he does. However, I have the ear of the Council and its subcommittees, and more importantly, I have the ear of the Federation Citizens. I’ll bring the issues to the public if I have to.”

“Fair enough. Our concerns really shouldn’t be all that surprising. If the Federation wants our five planets back, then we have two specific demands.”

“Which are?”

“We want a specific plan for how to protect the Council from the influence of the President. They need to work as a checks and balances system, not as a royal court that bows to the President as if he’s some kind of monarch.”

Kathryn was doing her best not to smile, but she wasn’t entirely successful. “And?”

“We want an open acknowledgement that there have been unfair trade agreements for the rebuilding of San Francisco and Betazed. There is an enormous disparity between the value of the contracts for the raw materials and the value of the contracts with the privately held construction companies.”

She scratched her neck. “It’s going to take four days to tell me that?”

He shrugged. “After they get through criticizing past decisions and postulating on future ones, I believe that is exactly what they’re going to say. These are the issues we believe need the most attention and we’re willing to put the bargaining power of seven billion potential Federation citizens behind them.”

“If that’s so, then I suggest we let them speak their mind about the past and not get into any debates. Postulating is not very helpful, but if they need to tell me what they believe will happen if we continue in the direction we’re going, I’ll let them speak.”

Nakmyre asked, “Are you prepared to take the brunt of their anger?”

“Yes, as long as the conversations are productive. We don’t want this conference to escalate into a blame-session.”

“Agreed,” he said.

“Following that, I’m eager to hear ideas about how to accomplish these two issues that you’ve brought to the table.” She folded her hands neatly in her lap. “It will certainly be interesting to see how President Zife responds.”

Nakmyre shook his head in amusement. “Admiral, I can already tell that this is going to be an entertaining week.”

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“Good morning,” Kathryn called from across her quarters to the comm unit when she heard Chakotay complete the connection. She’d been on standby waiting for him to

connect for about fifteen minutes, but decided to finish getting ready in the meantime. "I'll be right there."

"Take your time," he called back.

She came back into the main room and stood in front of the desk to talk to him. "I can't seem to get these pants pinned right."

"What are you doing?"

Taking the pin out, she let him see what the problem was as they dropped low on her hips. "They're too big, and I tore the new ones I just replicated."

"So replicate another."

"Seems such a waste." She folded the waistband at her side and stuck the pin through. "These fit me two weeks ago."

He chuckled. "You're not on rations anymore, you know."

"Yes, I know." She managed to get the pin closed. "There. I don't think that bunches out too much."

"It'll be fine once you put your tunic on."

She smiled at him and walked away from the terminal again. "Keep talking while I grab my boots."

"Are you running late?"

"Yes, Nakmyre wants me to join him for a private breakfast since this is the last day of the conference. He wants to hear my reactions to what has happened during the visit."

"I hope the food is better than the dinner you told me about last night."

She made a face as she sat down in front of the computer again to pull her boots on. "Jorian cuisine leaves a lot to be desired. Maybe I should replicate something quick before I go." She looked at the clock. "But I don't have time."

"Go on," he urged. "We can talk this evening."

"You sure?" she asked as she slipped on her tunic. "We're finished on the planet at fourteen hundred, and then I'll want to debrief with my staff. Its Thursday there isn't it? Do you have plans tonight?"

"None, and I won't make any so we can talk."

She stopped what she was doing to focus on him. “I’d like that. Would you read me another chapter of that book?”

“You like my voice that much?”

“Yes, I do. I miss you tremendously.”

“Only five more days until you’re home,” he said with anticipation.

Grinning, she said, “I’m looking forward to that TLC you promised.”

“Me, too, and don’t worry about your pant size. I plan on spoiling you once you’re here to get your weight back up.” He winked at her. “I love you, Kathryn.”

She kissed her fingers and touched the screen with them. “I love you, too. Talk to you after dinner.”

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It was almost fifteen hundred by the time Kathryn was finished on Joria. She’d sent Harry and Judy back to the ship over an hour earlier thinking she’d be right behind them. However, a handful of Maioans cornered her to discuss an issue they didn’t believe got enough attention – the status of the planets in the dematerialized zone. President Nakmyre saw what was happening and gracefully extracted her from the aliens’ discussion.

Then, as they began to walk through the main foyer, a group of reporters pounced on them. She hid her frustration and put on her game face as they shouted questions.

“Admiral Janeway, do you believe this conference will result in Joria rejoining the Federation?”

She glanced at Nakmyre to see if he wanted to answer, but he declined. Kathryn responded, “It is my hope that all the conferences we’ve held during the past four months will result in many worlds rejoining the Federation. However, there are significant issues that need to be addressed in every case.”

“What are the primary issues for Joria?” another reporter asked.

“Equitable opportunities for all Federation worlds and they’d like the Federation Council to examine their decision making processes to ensure that all members’ opinions are weighed equally.” She watched Nakmyre for his response and wanted to smile when he nodded, but she kept her poker face.

“Is there anything you’d like to add, President?”

He said, “We appreciate Admiral Janeway’s time this week, and look forward to a continued relationship with her as we work through this difficult decision. The Admiral has been attentive and gracious, and I know that we can trust her to do all that is within her power to affect the changes that we’re requesting.”

“Admiral Janeway, where do you go next?”

“Home to the Terran system.”

“And what is first on your agenda when you return?”

She smiled and then looked into the camera that was taping the interview. “Voyager’s One-Year Reunion and celebrating Earth’s winter holidays. Following that, I’ll be meeting with the Federation Council to convey all of the information that my team has gathered during the past four months. Thank you for your questions.” She nodded graciously and turned around to give her security team the sign that she was ready for them to be aggressive about getting her out of the center.

The four men blocked the reporters and guided her towards the side entrance that she’d used every other time, as it would be much easier to leave.

President Nakmyre caught up with her. “Admiral, just a moment, if you please.”

She caught Scott’s eyes and secretly expressed her annoyance before turning on her smile. “Yes, President?”

“Thank you again, Admiral, for this week.” He shook her hand and then held it between both of his. “It has been a pleasure getting to know you, and I hope that we can talk again soon.”

“You’re welcome, President. I’ll be in touch as soon as I meet with the Council.” She didn’t know how to pull her hand back without seeming rude.

Justin said, “Admiral, we’re due to leave orbit soon.”

Nakmyre kissed the back of her hand and let go. “I mustn’t keep you any longer, then. Safe travels, Admiral.”

“Thank you.” She bowed her head slightly and then let her team escort her away. As they walked through the doors that led to the administrative offices she said, “Thank you, Lieutenant.”

“You’re welcome,” Justin replied. “Commander Moore wants to organize a rematch of the last poker game tonight, so I thought we should head back.”

“Don’t tell Nakmyre that,” she said with a smirk. “However, I won’t be able to join you this evening as I have plans to call Chakotay and I want to get back to a very good book.”

“Maybe tomorrow, then?”

“I’ll plan on it.”

As they walked, Kathryn thought about getting home for the Christmas holiday. She’d been on the diplomatic tour for sixteen weeks and was exhausted, both mentally and physically. She longed for the comforts of home, especially for the comforts that only Chakotay could provide. Smiling to herself, she wondered if he’d propose marriage again on Christmas. Maybe he’d even give her a ring as her Christmas present.

“Here, Admiral,” Ensign Jones directed her to the doors that led to the long corridor. He directed the group to stop once they were in the corridor, and tapped his commbadge. “Jones to Pioneer.”

“Go ahead,” replied Bernie.

“Do you have a fix on our location, sir?”

“Yes, Ensign, but we can’t initiate transport until you’ve cleared the building’s perimeter.”

“Aye, Sir. Proceeding to the exit.”

“We’ll see you soon. Pioneer out.”

“Let’s go,” Jones said and the group moved forward.

Kathryn asked, “So, why does Moore want a rematch? Did I miss something?”

“Because, he can’t believe that you actually beat him,” Justin said.

“Didn’t he invite himself to the game just so he could play against me?”

“Yes,” Jones said, “Because he didn’t believe us when we told him how good you are.”

Scott asked, “Why does this remind me of the night you hustled Paris at pool?”

“Because men can’t...” She stopped and looked around. “Did you feel something?”

“Feel what?” Jones pulled out his tri-corder.

The hair on the back of Kathryn’s neck stood on end. She moved to the wall and held her hands over it. “There’s a change in the electro-magnetic energy of the environment.”

“You can feel that?” Davis asked, his tri-corder was out, too. “I’m not picking up anything.”

“May I?” she asked, reaching for his tri-corder.

“Of course, Admiral.”

She changed the scan setting and waved it around. “Nothing. Not even our life-signs. Jones?”

He tried to scan Doyle. “Same result.”

“Something’s wrong,” Justin said as he tapped his commbadge. “Jarvin to the Pioneer.”

When he got no response, she tapped hers. “Janeway to the Pioneer.” She tapped it again, “Pioneer, do you read me?”

All four of her security guards pulled out their phasers. Jones said, “I suggest we move quickly, Admiral.”

Still looking at the tri-corder, she held up a finger. “Wait. I’ve got something.”

“Admiral?” Justin asked nervously.

She had moved a few meters back up the corridor and scanned a junction box. “Nothing to worry about. Just an overload in the building’s security system.”

“Regardless.” Justin was anxious. “I’d feel better if we got you out of here. Let’s move.”

“All right,” she said. “I’m more than ready to get back to the ship.”

They flanked her tightly as they walked quickly down the corridor. Although she didn’t think there was anything to worry about, she felt relief when they turned the corner and saw the exit doors.

She felt an energy burst fly past her head a split second before Scott yelled, “GET DOWN!” He pushed on her shoulders and turned her to face away from the weapon’s fire so he could place his body protectively in the path of the blasts.

The rest of the team returned fire as they closed ranks. Kathryn cursed herself for not realizing that the security system had been sabotaged. She couldn’t see what was happening behind her, but she heard a body fall, and prayed it wasn’t one of her people. She tried to look and Scott yelled, “NO!” as he closed his arms around the sides of her head.

Justin yelled, “DOYLE! GET HER OUT OF HERE! NOW!”

Without pause, Scott held her upper arms protectively to get her on her feet and pointed in the right direction. “RUN!” he yelled.

Knowing he was right behind her, she took off as fast as she could, refusing to look back. She heard a cry of pain and another body hit the floor, but she didn’t stop. Then another cry of pain. Scott yelled, “No matter what – keep running! I won’t let them get you!”

More footsteps were on their tail, and she knew it had to be her team catching up. They’d taken out the attackers and were following her out to safety. At least that’s what she thought until she heard a strange voice yell, “Get the woman!”

“Aaaaagh!” she heard Scott yell behind her and she knew he was down.

“Shit!” She hit her commbadge, hoping like hell she could get through. “Janeway to Pioneer!”

“Go ahead, Admiral,” Bernie replied. “We’ve...”

“GET US OUT... Aaaaaah!” she screamed as the phaser fire burned through her back.

“ADMIRAL!” Bernie yelled.

As she crashed to the floor, she knew that help would be on the way. She tried to move, but her body wouldn’t respond as it twitched from the neural damage the weapon had caused.

“Got her!” someone yelled triumphantly as the footsteps thundered close.

Bernie’s voice was still coming through the commbadge. “Do you read me?! KATHRYN!”

The strange voice instructed, “Destroy the badge.” Kathryn was rolled over onto her back and the badge was ripped off. “She’s still conscious.”

She couldn’t see, but she could still hear Bernie’s voice calling for her, sounding so much like Chakotay that she yearned to cry out to him. A phaser blast struck beside her head and her link was severed.

“Stun her again,” was the last thing she heard before she blacked out.

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