

The Future is Ours – Part 14

“A Missing Piece”

By Dawn

Rated R

Summary: Something Goes Wrong

On the bridge of the Pioneer, Ensign Igre announced, “Captain, we’ve lost contact with the away team. I’m not reading any comm signatures.”

Bernie stood, immediately on alert. “Were they still in the corridor?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Let’s not take any chances. Moore and Ral, take a team down there.”

“Aye, Sir.”

“Igre, scan for anything out of the ordinary.”

While Bernie waited for results, he tapped commands into his console to gain access to what Igre was looking at.

The ensign reported, “There’s a dampening field of some kind surrounding that part of the building.”

“Was it there before?”

“No, sir. It appears to be a malfunction of the security system.”

A com line opened automatically and they heard Kathryn yell, “Janeway to Pioneer!”

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

“GET US OUT... Aaaaaah!” Kathryn’s scream blared through the com system.

“ADMIRAL!” Sudden fear gripped his chest and he was on his feet. Not closing his com line with Kathryn, he called out, “Young to Moore! They’re under attack! The Admiral’s been hit!”

Moore replied urgently, “Beaming down now.”

They heard an unknown voice yell through Kathryn’s commbadge, “Got her!”

Bernie stared wide-eyed at his bridge crew, yelling, “Admiral! Do you read me? KATHRYN!” He tried using her given name to get a response.

The unknown voice instructed, “Destroy the badge.”

Another voice said, “She’s still conscious.”

Bernie yelled, “Stop! Whoever you are, don’t you dare hurt her! Hang on, Admiral!”

They heard a loud pop and Igre announced, “We’ve lost the signal.”

“Hail President Nakmyre. Now.”

When the commanders, Harry, and two additional security officers arrived outside the building, it was eerily quiet. The Jorian security officers that were normally stationed outside the conference center were lying on the ground, unconscious, and there was no one else around. Moore motioned for the team to draw phasers and to divide up on each side of the metal doors that Kathryn and her team were to have come through. They kicked the doors open.

They saw Doyle first, lying prone not thirty meters from the door. Ral kneeled down to check for his pulse and grimly stated, “He’s dead.”

The others moved fast as they advanced down the corridor. When they arrived near the turn in the corridor where the other three officers were lying, Moore kneeled down to check them. All three were twitching with slight seizures.

Harry had his tri-corder out, scanning for life signs. “Nothing,” he said with a slight panic. “She’s not here!” He quickly went around the bend, continuing to scan, hoping to find something.

Moore followed him. “Kim! Stop!”

“Here.” Harry stopped at a power junction box. “There’s an overload in the security system. It’s sending out an electro-magnetic field.”

“That’s what’s blocking the sensors?”

“If I can just...” He pried it open and studied the internal workings. Stepping back, he aimed his phaser and destroyed it. The lights flickered, but their scanners started working again.

“Good work,” Moore said.

They both ran back to the fallen security officers and scanned for any clue as to where Kathryn might be. Harry shook his head as he studied the readings, growing angrier every second. "She's not here." He ran back to where Doyle's body was and scanned again. "There's some human DNA residue here, but I'm not detecting her life sign. Nothing."

"Ral to Pioneer."

"Go ahead, Commander," Young responded anxiously.

"Janeway is missing. Her security and Jorian security are down. We need immediate medical assistance."

"Understood. Additional search teams are already on the way, as is Jorian security. Begin a detailed security sweep. We need a lead, and we need it now."

The teams searched for hours into the night, but there was no sign of her. Starfleet Command expanded the search by sending over a dozen starships to trace warp signatures, because no one wanted to consider the implications of Admiral Janeway being held hostage. Starfleet was never willing to negotiate with terrorists, and the consequences of losing Admiral Janeway because of that policy were unthinkable.

Chakotay sat on the edge of his couch, his elbows resting on his knees, and stared at the comm terminal. Kathryn had said she'd call him after dinner, and it was almost 10:00. He laced his fingers together to keep from wringing his hands. Normally, he'd think that she just got involved with some situation planet-side, but normally, they didn't set a specific time to talk.

She'd said that she would contact him every night, and except for when she was sick, she'd kept that promise. Even when she couldn't talk, she'd managed to send a quick text message telling him not to worry. Tonight, he'd received no such message.

He about jumped out of his skin when the terminal indicated an incoming call. He ran over and flipped it on, saying, "Kathryn, I was... B'Elanna." His shoulders dropped.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"I was expecting Kathryn to call. Sorry," he said distractedly. "Do you need something?"

"Just making sure you had the Fednews on. She got more press today."

Not shutting the comm off, he ran over to the viewing screen and flipped it on. "Is the broadcast live?"

“I don’t think so,” B’Elanna called after him.

The newscaster was talking about something irrelevant and Chakotay was growing impatient. “Did I miss it?” he yelled back at the comm unit.

“No, not yet.”

He stared intently at the screen, hoping to receive an explanation that would set his fears at ease.

The newscaster finally reported, “In other news today, Admiral Janeway finished her last conference in what has been a very busy sixteen week tour of the outlying systems in the quadrant. This is a recording of her statements earlier this afternoon.”

Chakotay listened carefully, reaching out to touch her image on the screen while she was talking. As always, she answered the questions with grace and composure. However, nothing she said gave him any clue as to why she hadn’t called. Not even a trace of the body language communication that they’d worked out over the years.

B’Elanna called out, “Chakotay? Are you there?”

Taking one last look at her image, he went back to the terminal and sat down. “Yeah, I’m here.”

“What’s wrong?”

“She was supposed to contact me hours ago.” He wrung his hands together and glanced back at the viewing screen. “I’m worried.”

“I’m sure she’s fine. Probably got invited to a state dinner to celebrate the end of the conference or something.”

“Maybe,” he said anxiously. “I should try to contact her. Talk to you tomorrow?”

“Sure. She’ll be fine, Chakotay.”

He nodded as he cut the link, and keyed in the commands to establish a new one. A minute later, he got a Federation emblem with a message, “Unable to connect.”

Staring at the message for a few minutes, he thought about the reasons he couldn’t connect, and hoped that was why she hadn’t contacted him. There was some kind of interference that was preventing it. He looked back at the news on the view screen and saw that they were still discussing her. “That came through,” he said aloud to himself about the video footage. It was unsettling, but being unable to connect to the Pioneer could be the result of any number of issues.

He keyed in a text message, knowing it would go through more easily than a video transmission. “Kathryn, please contact me tonight, no matter how late. I’ll stay by the comm. All my love, Chakotay.”

After he hit send, he stared at the screen for a few minutes, willing some kind of response. “What is it you say?” he asked as if talking to her. “A watched pot never boils?” He got up to make a cup of tea.

Hours later, he woke up suddenly from where he’d fallen asleep on the couch. He checked the time and found that it was after two in the morning. He jumped up and went to the comm to check for messages. His heart sank when he found none.

Chakotay looked up when he saw movement at the back of the classroom. His last class was taking their final exam, and he found it hard to believe that someone had finished this early. What he saw filled him with sudden foreboding. It was Admiral Paris and another member of the tactics teaching faculty.

When he arrived at the desk, Paris spoke quietly. “Captain Chakotay, we need to talk. Commander Peterson will remain with your students until they finish their exams.”

Something had happened to Kathryn. His gut told him that something was very wrong, especially because she hadn’t called this morning, either. He was shaking slightly as he gathered his things and left with Paris.

Chakotay asked nothing and Paris said nothing as they walked to Chakotay’s private office. When the door was closed, Paris took out a tri-corder and erected a dampening field around the room. He held a finger to his lips as he scanned the office for listening devices, something that Chakotay did on a regular basis because of the need to protect Kathryn’s security. Satisfied that they were free to speak, Paris said, “We’ve got a problem.”

“How big?” Chakotay’s heart was in his throat.

“She’s missing, Lieutenant Doyle is dead, and we have no idea who has her.”

Chakotay felt the floor start to move, but he managed to sit down in one of the chairs behind him. He leaned forward to rest his elbows on knees and clasped his hands to keep them from shaking as a feeling of dread washed over him. Paris took a seat next to him and extended his hand to Chakotay’s shoulder in a vain attempt at comfort. Chakotay’s military training kicked in and he got himself together. “What’s the situation?”

“I’m going to be as straightforward with you as I can, because I know if I were in your shoes I’d want all the specifics. As a Captain, your clearance allows you access to the confidential information, but you must not share the details with anyone.”

Chakotay nodded his understanding. His heart was thumping heavily as Paris explained the situation. His heart froze upon hearing that she’d been so close to freedom when she was stunned, and he was doing his best to concentrate on the facts. “Could she still be on the planet? Was there another ship in orbit? Anything?”

“It’s a very busy planet with a lot of interstellar traffic. She could’ve been on any of more than a dozen ships, and we have as many of our own tracking their movements. The government of Joria is working with us in full cooperation. They respect and admire Katie, and do not want the blame for this.”

“I assume this happened yesterday?”

“Yes, at about fifteen hundred hours. I would’ve come to you sooner, but I wanted to know more, just in case there was no need to be concerned. I’d rather you not have to go through this.”

“We’d planned to talk last night and I didn’t hear from her. I was afraid something had…” He couldn’t finish the sentence.

“So you would’ve been calling me today, I’m sure. She was due back here within the week. She wanted to be back for Voyager’s reunion and Miral’s party next Wednesday.”

Chakotay closed his eyes and tried to take deep, steadying breaths. “Is there anything I can do to help? I could take another ship out there to search.”

“We’ve got every available ship, fifteen of them, working on it. There are twelve following warp trails, the Pioneer is still in orbit, and two, including the Enterprise, are scouting the nearby systems. I wish I could send you. From what I understand, your intuition is spot-on, but you’re too emotionally attached. If it were my wife, I’d go in guns blazing and ask questions later.”

Surprised that Owen used the term wife, he said, “That’s exactly what I feel like doing. Logically, I know you’re right; it wouldn’t be a tactically sound move, but I’ve got to do something. I can’t just sit here and wait.”

“You can do your best to mollify her family and friends, and I’ll give you as much information as I can.”

“I have to be honest with them, and I’m not willing to be placated.”

“I know, but at this point, I don’t know what you can do that we’re not already doing. I’ll send you the reports as I get them, and if you have any ideas, I’m all ears. I’m not asking

you to lie to her family. Katie's status will be announced at sixteen hundred during a press conference. I suggest that you not attend because the press would swamp you."

"Agreed," He said with frustration. "But I would like to see it."

"It'll be a live broadcast on the Fednews. Try to keep the Voyagers, my daughter-in-law specifically, from panicking and stirring up more trouble. Everybody in Starfleet and the Federation is doing everything they can to find Katie. Even the governments in the surrounding areas that aren't Federation members are searching for her, too. I don't have to tell you how valuable she is and what's at stake."

Chakotay's heart constricted at the thought. "Is there a chance that someone just wanted a private conversation with her?"

"It's possible, and I hope that's all it is."

"But your instinct tells you otherwise?"

"I'm not sure. The lack of communication indicates that someone has a need for her specifically, rather than to make demands for a hostage exchange, but we can't think of any of the governments she's been meeting with who would need to go to that extreme. It's more likely that it's someone she hasn't talked to before." Paris got up to leave. "If you need to talk, please call me."

Chakotay nodded uncomfortably.

"Would you like me to call on Gretchen?"

"No, I'll call her," he said grimly.

When he was alone, he took a moment to absorb what he'd just been told. Kathryn was missing, and there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it. He angrily fisted his hands, trying to get control over his emotions.

He pictured Kathryn standing on the bridge of Voyager, confident, powerful, and her eyes flashing with determination. That's the woman he wanted her to be right now, confidently facing her adversary, either demanding release or calmly listening to a troubled soul who needed her help. Those two scenarios were the only ones he would consider.

When he felt as determined as he hoped she did, he walked around his desk to place the most difficult call he'd ever had to make, to tell Kathryn's mother that she'd disappeared without a trace, for a second time.

On board the Pioneer, the entire crew was at red alert. No one had left their posts, no one was sleeping, and no one was smiling. Everyone was focused on analyzing sensor readings, formulating strategic analysis, going over forensic reports, and combing through past mission logs looking for any clue that would tell them where to look.

As the three security officers returned to consciousness, they were immediately on alert and waved off Dr. Murphy's recommendation that they rest. Every one of them felt personally responsible for her abduction and jumped back on duty. They couldn't remember anything specific except that the phaser fire had come out of nowhere and that they'd covered her so that she and Doyle could try to make an escape.

After completing scans of the nearby systems, the Enterprise returned to be the wingman for the Pioneer and to continue to aid in the rescue and recovery operation. Every lead was turning up empty, and the warp trails had all run dry. Besides re-examining what they'd already done, there wasn't much they could do except wait.

Chakotay had made contact with Gretchen, but found it impossible to tell her the bad news over the comm. She'd immediately sensed that he was upset about something and invited him over, saying that a good meal and some family time would give him a new perspective.

He slowly ascended the steps to the porch of the Janeway home, his longing for Kathryn overwhelming him. It was all he could do not to break down as he forced his feet to move towards the door.

"Chakotay!" Gretchen said as she opened the door and pulled him inside. As she wrapped him in a warm hug, she said, "Whatever is troubling you, it'll be okay. Come on in."

He shook his head as he looked down at the woman who looked so much like her daughter. "We have to talk."

"For heaven's sakes, son, what is it?"

"It's Kathryn," he managed to say past the lump in his throat.

"What's happened?" Her eyes were wide with fear.

"She's been abducted." It was all he could say before he had to find a place to sit down.

"Abducted? By whom? How?" She sat next to him and let him hold her hand.

“They don’t know.” He shook his head. “Owen had just told me when I called you. There’s a press conference at four. She was leaving a building to go back to the ship and her team was attacked. One man is dead and the others are still unconscious.”

“And she’s gone?”

Chakotay concentrated again on the image of his brave Kathryn in order to get through this conversation. “We have to remember that she can handle a lot, and maybe someone just wanted to talk to her.”

“Oh, Chakotay.” She covered her mouth, forcing back a sob.

“Gretchen,” he put his arm around her and held her close. Rubbing her back, he said, “We have to focus on her strength and her resilience. She’s stronger than anyone who would stoop to such a level, and she’s survived when the odds were a lot worse than they are right now. At some point, her captors will make their demands known, and Starfleet will be ready.”

As Kathryn returned to consciousness, she stamped out the burgeoning fear that crept into her mind. She couldn’t see anything, couldn’t hear anything, and she couldn’t move. Her arms were tied behind her back from elbow to wrist and her legs were bound from her knees to her ankles. The pain in her shoulders was severe from being pulled back so tightly. She feared that the ligaments had been stretched beyond their limits.

Every nerve in her body felt like it was over-stimulated, causing pain with every sensation. She was freezing cold and realized that she was wearing only her tank and underwear. Her hands and feet were completely numb, but she didn’t know if it was from cold or lack of circulation or a combination of both.

She struggled against the bonds, but the thin chains wouldn’t budge. She relaxed in order to take an inventory of what she knew. There was something in her ears preventing her from hearing. She was wearing a blindfold. The smell around her was slightly foul, but she couldn’t place it. The floor was cold, probably metal. It was damp, which she assumed was condensation because of the chill in the air. She could feel low, steady vibrations in the floor, so she could assume that she was on a ship. An uneven surge in the vibrations every few seconds told her that the engines were misaligned, and because it was so obvious and regular, the ship must not be in good condition.

Trying to remember the details of her abduction, she concentrated on whether she had seen a face, but there was nothing. Doyle had protected her so well that she hadn’t had a chance to look. She took a deep breath, trying to calm herself. She thought about Chakotay and wondered how he would react to her missing. How would her mom react? She clamped down those thoughts because they would do her no good. Her hope was that she could negotiate with whoever these people were, or that they’d make demands in

exchange for her return and Starfleet would find a way to extract her. She just had to hold out for a little while, knowing that her discomfort would end, and she would be okay.

The good news was that her treatment was not characteristic of Cardassians, Romulans, or any other known enemy, so this was probably a much smaller operation. It wasn't likely a negotiating member of the Federation because none would treat her so poorly if they wanted her to do something for them. In all probability, they were rebels or a small group of terrorists.

She didn't know how long she'd been left alone, but it felt like hours. She was hungry, she had to use the facilities, and she was extremely cold. She called out, "Is anyone there? Hello?" Listening for vibrations that could have indicated footsteps was difficult with her ears plugged. She demanded, "There are standards for the treatment of prisoners." She waited. "I can't help you if you don't talk to me."

Nothing. She relaxed as best she could, but it was difficult when she was bound so tightly. At some point, she fell asleep, because she was awakened by something being pushed forcefully against her mouth. She lurched back hard to fight off the certain suffocation. Struggling to get away was pointless as her head was pushed forward harshly against the object. She gasped and turned her head when she realized it was dripping wet. It was shoved between her lips and she was unprepared for the water that suddenly filled her mouth. She choked and coughed on the liquid, some of it coming uncomfortably out of her nose.

The sponge was removed and she was hit across the jaw. She reeled from the pain and gasped again when the sponge was stuffed back in, resulting in another choking spell. This happened repeatedly until she got the rhythm and was able to block her airway in time to actually receive the water that was being poured down her throat. When they left her alone again, she struggled to catch her breath. The exertion left her exhausted and the impacts on her face made it feel huge and swollen. She'd been struck enough times in her life to know that the pain she felt wasn't severe, but it was disconcerting given her state of helplessness.

"They can't just expect us to sit here and do nothing!" B'Elanna slammed her fist into the hardest pillow within reach. It was Saturday, and Kathryn had been missing since Thursday night.

"Yes, they can," Chakotay said calmly as he took a long swig of his beer. It was late in the afternoon, and Tom and B'Elanna had come to Kathryn's house that morning and dragged him back to their house, knowing he needed to be with people.

"How can you take this sitting down?"

“Because I have to,” he said with controlled indignation. “What I’d like to do is to hijack a ship and turn over every damn rock in this quadrant until I find her, but that’s not feasible.”

“Let’s do it. We’ll get Voyager out of dry dock. She’s still space worthy. Then round up the crew that’s still in the sol system.”

Chakotay could tell that B’Elanna wasn’t serious, but pretending to make plans would give them something to do. They’d been sitting around all day feeling miserable. “We’d only have a quarter of the crew, but it might be enough.”

“Yeah. We could go to Joria first, search for clues...”

Tom came in with Miral and asked, “Go where?”

Chakotay took another drink. “We’re planning a mutiny against Starfleet to go look under rocks.”

“Sounds constructive.” He opened a new bottle and joined them. “The trick is to figure out what fifteen starships, nine planetary security forces, and the entirety of Starfleet command missed.”

B’Elanna concentrated in thought. “Something obvious, I’m sure. Something we’ll find just as soon as we beam down.”

“A clue,” Tom added.

“A calling card from her abductors would be nice,” Chakotay suggested.

“Yes, with spatial coordinates, shield harmonics, and the slogan, ‘Will negotiate peacefully for release of irate redheads,’” Tom said.

B’Elanna snorted. “I bet she’s pissed.”

“They had no idea what they were getting themselves into,” Tom concurred.

Rubbing at his face to allay the ever-present raw emotions, Chakotay said. “This is so damn hard.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” B’Elanna offered tentatively.

“Not really,” Chakotay answered. “I’m afraid that I’d turn into a blubbering mess if I did. Besides, at least we know that Harry and Justin are working on it.”

Tom said sadly, “And Scott did what he could.”

“We could go hit something,” she suggested. “The gym on campus should be empty because of the holidays.”

“While we’re half inebriated?” Hitting sounded like a good idea, but going there drunk was not. He sighed. “I might take you up on that tomorrow, though.”

“Good.”

Tom asked, “How is her mom doing?”

“She’s just like her daughter, keeping herself busy to avoid thinking about it. I was over there all evening, and the rest of Kathryn’s family came over after the press conference. With Christmas coming, Gretchen has gone into high speed getting the house ready, sure that Kathryn will be home in time. She refused to be consoled because she won’t accept anything but a positive outcome.”

“I hope she’s not disappointed.”

“Me too, but I know she understands on some level that this...” Chakotay couldn’t finish the sentence as his eyes filled with tears. He stood up quickly and went to stand outside in the cold.

B’Elanna frowned. “I don’t think that was the best thing to say.”

“His emotions are so close to the surface that anything could set him off. I’m not sure that drinking was the best idea.”

“Maybe, maybe not.” B’Elanna got up and went outside where the cold drizzle sobered her slightly. She put her hand on Chakotay’s back, letting him know she was there. He instantly pulled her into his arms, not saying a word. She held on as tight as she could, not sure what else she could do. Her own emotions were surging with anger and fear for her friend.

The complete isolation continued for some time. Kathryn had no idea how long. It could have been days. It could have been a week. She was experiencing sensory deprivation and having trouble keeping unwanted hallucinations at bay. At times, her hallucinations took her back to the Borg cube to be assimilated, at other times they took her to the physical endurance ritual to save Kes. She relived the battle that the crew had been forced to remember because of the failing memorial, and she re-experienced her death many times over at the hands of the alien who wanted to lure her into his matrix.

Each time her mind returned to reality, she found herself in a cold sweat, trying to rid herself of the horrible memories. Being completely alone with no other stimulation made that impossible. She’d always used distractions as a way to cope with tragedies, and

hadn't developed any other techniques that she could fall back on now. The fear, agony, and grief that she'd ignored throughout her entire life would not be subverted. She was left tormented and distraught, unable to escape the implications of her actions and it shook her to the core.

Her captors continued to give her water via the sponge, but there was no food and no relief for her needs. She had no choice but to lie in her own filth as she grew weaker and weaker from the lack of nutrition and warmth. Her arms and legs felt like lead and she hoped like hell that her hands were getting some kind of circulation.

She gasped in shock as she was doused suddenly by intense cold. It took her a minute to realize that they were hosing her off with water. She struggled in vain to try to deal with the deluge, but there was no way for her to do anything except bear it until it was over. When it ended, she shivered uncontrollably, her teeth chattering against each other. The sponge was given to her again, and she had no choice but to accept it. She couldn't survive without it, and she had to survive. She'd promised Chakotay that she would keep herself alive and she would not break her promise.

When she felt like she could drift off to sleep, she was suddenly and violently pulled to her knees. She yelped in pain as her malnourished and stiff muscles were forced to work. Unable to hold herself up, she had to rely on the hands of her captors, which were harsh and unforgiving in their rough handling of her injured arms and shoulders. The pain was almost enough to make her pass out.

She could hear voices, but with her hearing muffled, she couldn't make out their words. Her blindfold was ripped off and a bright light shone on her face. She closed her eyes to protect them, but even her eyelids didn't filter out the intensity or the pain that it caused. When she turned her head to look away, it was turned back forcefully. One of her earplugs was pulled out roughly so someone could yell to open her eyes. The unexpected volume caused her to wince in pain. She was so disoriented and over-stimulated that she couldn't track anything that was happening.

She heard someone say, "Oh, how the mighty have fallen. I've seen enough," and the blindfold was harshly tied back on and the earplug shoved back in. She was dropped callously to the floor, the pain of the impact radiating throughout her back, shoulders, and neck. Left alone again, she tried to recover from the assault by breathing deeply and finding a comforting image to latch onto. Chakotay's arms... holding her, rocking her. It wasn't a memory, but a dream she clung to for sanity. Gone was her ability to repress her thoughts of him because he was her only source of relief. He would be there when this was over and she would accept every comfort that he offered.

"Uncle Kotay?" Katie asked as she climbed up onto his lap and faced him.

“Yes, sweetheart?” He tucked wayward strands of hair behind her ears, the action reminding him sadly of a different set of auburn locks.

Her eyebrows furrowed, she asked, “What day is today?”

“Tuesday.” He patted her ankle, wondering what she was thinking about so hard.

“The number day. What’s the number?”

“Twenty-one?” He wasn’t sure what she meant.

Katie’s blue-gray eyes were deep set in concentration. “You’re wrong. Twenty-one is when Aunt Katie is coming home, and she’s not here.”

Chakotay’s heart fell. He took Katie’s hands, and said, “She got lost.”

“Lost?” Katie frowned. “Then we should call her and tell her how to get here. All she has to do is go to a transport station. They’ll take care of her.”

Phoebe came into the room and smiled at the two of them. “She’s really taken a liking to you.”

Chakotay smiled sadly. “Amazing how much she looks like her aunt.”

“I know.” Phoebe came up and kissed the top of Katie’s head. “It’s a comfort, but also a reminder.”

Katie looked up at her mom. “Uncle Kotay said Aunt Katie is lost. We should call her.”

Phoebe looked at him in alarm. “She didn’t need to know!”

“She asked.” He looked at Katie. “Tell your mommy what you thought was supposed to happen today.”

“It’s twenty-one, Mommy. The number day when you said Aunt Katie promised to come home.”

Phoebe closed her eyes in anguish. “Yes, Katie. You have a good memory.”

Chakotay said, “Sweetheart, we can’t call Aunt Katie because we don’t know where she is and she doesn’t have her communicator.” He pointed to the badge on his shirt.

“She’ll know what to do. Don’t worry.”

He bit his lip and nodded. “If she finds a transporter, I’m sure she’ll ask for help.”

“She better ask quick! Gramma said dinner is almost ready.”

Chakotay said sadly, “Katie, she won’t be home today. We don’t know when she’ll be home.”

The little girl scowled at her uncle. “You’re wrong! She is coming today because she promised!”

Phoebe said, “Honey, when someone is lost, they can’t always keep their promises.” She kneeled down next to Chakotay to look her daughter in the eye. “Someone bad might have her. Do you remember when we talked about stranger danger?”

Katie’s mouth dropped open in shock. “A bad person took her? But she’s a grown-up!”

Chakotay said, “Sometimes bad people can take grown-ups, too.”

“No!” Katie turned to face her uncle. “She’s just lost and she’ll be back. I know it!”

He gently held Katie’s head and gave her a kiss on the forehead. “I think so, too. Not today, but hopefully soon.”

Kathryn woke slowly and listened carefully to her surroundings. After the most recent assault, her earplugs hadn’t been put back in, and she wanted to take advantage of that to try to gain her bearings and keep unwanted hallucinations at bay.

After a few minutes of listening to nothing, she was able to pick out a new sound, and immediately froze. Someone was there with her, and he or she was breathing slowly and evenly. Because she hadn’t heard or felt any footsteps, the person had to have been with her when she woke up. Weakly, she asked, “Who’s there?”

With a small gasp, the breathing stopped. A moment later, a voice asked, “How’d you know I was here?”

Kathryn moved her head slightly towards the voice. “You’re breathing.”

“Shhh,” the voice said as it crept closer to her. “They don’t know I’m in here.”

“Who?”

“The others, on this ship.”

Despite her powerless state, Kathryn knew this was an opportunity not to miss. “What ship?”

“I don’t know if it has a name.”

“Species?”

“A mix,” he said nervously. “I saved...”

“Yes?” She flinched when she felt him touch her face.

“I won’t hurt you. It’s not much, but I saved my meal for you.” He touched her lips.
“You should eat.”

Her hunger pains had long since passed, but she knew not to look a gift horse in the mouth, so she opened hers to accept whatever he offered. It tasted like stale, salted crackers, but her stomach rumbled in response. After having trouble swallowing the first bite, she asked, “Water?”

“Oh, okay.” He scrambled away and returned. “I saw them give it to you with a sponge, but I’d like to try using a cup.”

“Mmmhmm.”

He attempted to pour the liquid into her mouth sideways. “Some might spill, but I think this must be more pleasant for you.”

When they were done, she asked, “Loosen the bindings?”

“Oh... oh... no... I’d get in trouble. No, I can’t. Here, another bite.”

Kathryn ate it, but was afraid she’d pushed him too far because he’d grown quiet. “Does this ship stop anywhere?”

“I can’t tell you that.” He gave her another bite and then hesitated before admitting, “We stop, but that’s when it gets bad for you. I’ve watched them.”

“I need your help.”

“No... no... I... I... I... can’t. What could I do? There’s nothing. They’d kill me!”

“If you see anyone from Starfleet, let them know I’m here. They’ll come if they know.”

Surprised, he asked, “They’re looking for you?”

“Yes.”

“Starfleet doesn’t care about people.”

The anger in his voice gave her pause. "It may seem that way."

"They don't care."

"Yes, they do. Please help me," she begged.

"I'll try."

"Chakotay, I'm sorry I don't have more to give you," Owen said. "As you'll see by the list I've forwarded, we've received hundreds of tips."

He downloaded the data into a PADD and scanned it. "These are from all over the quadrant."

"Yes, and we don't want to discredit any of them, but there are too many. We're starting with the ones that have come directly from Starfleet personnel in the sectors surrounding Joria first, but since it has been six days, she could be anywhere."

Chakotay rubbed his forehead. "I'll look through it, but I don't know that I'll be able to come up with anything new."

"I realize, but I want you to have all the information I can give you."

"Thank you, Admiral."

Owen sighed. "I don't deserve your thanks. I'm sure you know that I encouraged her to take this job in the first place."

Chakotay looked back at the screen, seeing the pain in the older man's expression. "You're not the only one. I did, too, because it's a perfect fit for her abilities."

"If it weren't so dangerous."

"You sound like Mrs. Janeway."

With appreciation, Owen said, "Gretchen and I have too much in common. How is she holding up?"

"As well as can be expected, I suppose. She's making herself very busy with Christmas, since the holiday is only three days away, but I'm afraid that it's starting to sink in that Kathryn won't be home in time."

"She's done the same thing for many years." Owen looked down and then back up. "Would you do something for me?"

“I can try.”

“I know it might be difficult, but would you spend time with Gretchen?”

Chakotay nodded. “I’ve been there at least every other day. Kathryn’s family is my family, too.”

“I hate for her to go through this alone. Nor you, for that matter.”

Blinking back the burning in his eyes, Chakotay said, “I won’t let anyone who Kathryn loves go through this alone. She’d want all of us to support each other.”

After a quiet moment, Owen said, “Well, son, I’m still holding out for a Christmas miracle.”

“We need one.”

“When Katie gets home, make her happy, would you? Do anything you can for her.”

Chakotay had to close his eyes to control the emotions. His voice cracked when he replied, “That’s all I’ve ever wanted to do.”

Owen cleared his throat slightly. “All right. Well, I’ll see you in a few hours at Miral’s party, won’t I?”

“I’ll be there.” When the conversation ended, Chakotay took the list over to Kathryn’s couch to read through it. It was an arduous task, but he gave it his best shot. The only thing he saw was a pattern of locations, and the analysis Owen had attached noted the same.

One thing that he was confident about was that if anyone had actually seen Kathryn, then she would’ve been in a position to get out of trouble. He didn’t think her captors would be stupid enough to show their hand by letting her be seen by hundreds of people.

With a sigh, he tossed the PADD aside and picked up a framed picture that he’d put on the coffee table several weeks earlier. At the time, it had helped him feel like she was there with him, but in the last week, it had served as a lifeline. The image was a copy of the one he’d tossed into Kathryn’s trunk the night before she’d left. It was a picture of them taken at the awards banquet last May.

He reclined on the couch and called for the overhead lights to dim. The image was best when viewed in the soft yellow of the table lamp. Although they were both wearing the white dress uniforms, Kathryn was as beautiful as he could ever remember seeing her. She’d been in her element that night. This particular image had been captured when they’d been mingling before dinner. Her hair hadn’t grown long enough to pull up, yet.

She'd styled it with long, beautiful curls, looking so elegant that one could've mistaken her uniform for a ball gown.

He touched the image of her face. Her blue-grey eyes sparkled with amusement, and her mouth was half-crooked into one of his favorite smiles. He couldn't recall who they'd been talking to at the time. So many cameras had been clicking away at them all night that he'd begun ignoring them soon after walking into the room. However, he imagined that she'd been talking to one of the Voyagers, probably Harry.

He'd received a short text message from Harry two days ago. It hadn't said much except that they were doing everything in their power to find her and leaving no stone unturned. Harry had begged his forgiveness for not being with her at the time she was taken, and Chakotay could tell, by his words alone, that Harry was in an awful state. In reply, Chakotay had done his best to bolster Harry's confidence, realizing that Harry needed to know that Chakotay and all the Voyagers had faith that he was doing whatever he could.

Chakotay turned out the lamp and hugged the frame close to his chest. His thoughts returned to Kathryn, as flashes of countless memories played through his mind. He pictured her when she was most happy: playing pool in Sandrine's; interacting with Naomi in the messhall; and rocking the newborn Miral. He thought about the way her expression was rapturous at the mere scent of freshly brewed coffee, and the blissful respite that soon followed her first, long drink. He also recalled the way Kathryn would glance at him across their shared console and wink when she was teasing the bridge crew about something.

The emptiness he felt at her absence was like a gaping wound inside his chest. It had been one hundred and twenty-three days since he'd last held her in his arms, and exactly one year since Voyager had arrived on Earth's doorstep. The Voyager reunion had been scheduled for that day, but when she'd gone missing, they'd postponed it a week. Most of the Voyagers were returning to Earth for the holiday and would still be able to attend.

Chakotay had planned to propose to her in front of their Voyager family. He'd been looking forward to this day for months, expecting it to be one of the happiest days of his life. Instead, it had turned out to be one of the saddest. His face crumpled, finally giving heed to the tears that had been threatening since he'd woken that morning.

He looked at her picture again and touched the image of her cheek. His voice cracked as he said, "Oh, Kathryn. I miss you so much it hurts. Whatever you're going through, please be strong and know that you're loved."

The assault was just as painful psychologically as the first two had been physically. She'd been hosed off again, but this time, it had been with warm water and more care had been given not to exacerbate her injuries. Unfortunately, it had relaxed her so that she'd been unprepared for the physical assault when it came.

She was hauled painfully to her knees and her blindfold removed to allow the bright light to once again blind her. An unknown voice demanded, "Who did you meet with on Stardate 55725?"

The vertigo from being pulled upright made it difficult for her concentrate. "...have to contact... ship." Her reply earned a bone-jarring blow across the cheekbone. If not for the hands holding her up, she would've fallen over.

"Self-righteous Starfleet whore!" The interrogator grabbed her jaw painfully. "Who did you talk to? Are you planning a revolution?"

"No," was all she could manage to say. She felt like she was going to vomit.

"Cover her eyes."

The blindfold was tied back on, once again, too tight. It put uncomfortable pressure on her eyeballs and added to the always-present vice-like pain in her head. Unknown hands groped her painfully, forcing her to endure harsh squeezing and pinching of her breasts. She refused to react.

The unknown hand asserted itself over her pubis, the heel of the hand pressing painfully above her pubic bone. "Tell me what I want to know if you want this to stop here."

"Go to hell."

In response, the hand dug in even harder before changing tactics and delivering several painful blows to her lower abdomen. It wasn't long before blessed unconsciousness carried her away from the pain.

Picard rested his eyes on each of the officers in the crowded briefing room aboard the Enterprise. "While I understand everyone's desire to retrace our steps, it's not going to do us any good until we have some new data."

"Agreed," Bernie replied. "We've done as much analysis as we can with all the information we have. I suggest that we go back to Joria and look for more clues."

Riker said, "It's been seven days. What are you hoping to find?"

"I don't know, but I'm at a loss as to what else to try."

Troi suggested, "Have we examined the visual logs from the conference? Any chance that the Jorian President could identify persons who don't belong?"

“There were five different races represented,” Moore said. “Not to mention the reporters.”

“True,” Data said. “But perhaps I can assist by acquainting myself with all the individuals who were given clearance to attend.”

Troi said, “Then you can scan the images and make matches.”

“Yes, Counselor,” he responded.

Harry asked, “What about checking the staff of the conference center to see who had clearance to access the security system? Someone had to have inside information to sabotage it without alerting Jorian security to the problem. There might even be cell residue on the equipment itself.”

Picard nodded. “Excellent idea, Commander Kim. I suggest we set a course immediately.”

“Agreed,” Bernie replied, glad to have something to focus on.

Kathryn was in total darkness, enveloped by a complete lack of light and sound that she'd grown used to. It's not that she didn't crave the sunshine warming her face, but there, inside her mind, she could imagine anything she wanted. In her lucid moments, she escaped to her happy places. Places where she was content. Places where she was cared for. She was a child, swinging in the warm summer breeze, her Grandma pushing her higher and higher. She'd loved the sensation in her belly as she flew forward and back. Those wonderful hands were always there to catch her and propel her forward again.

Her memories of Grandma morphed into a warm house on a cold winter night. It was Christmas Eve and there were iced gingerbread cookies and warm apple cider. Phoebe was spinning in her new dress. Mommy and Daddy were sitting by the fire, snuggling close, watching their girls twirl like ballerinas as they listened to music from the Nutcracker. She was safe there. Nothing bad ever happened on Christmas.

She realized that she was humming “Silent Night” and let herself fall into the image of white snow falling in the darkness, blanketing the rolling hills of Indiana. The Earth was quiet, the snow muting the sounds of nature and the sounds of civilization. A silent night. She began humming the second verse, the words played through her mind. It didn't matter that the words weren't quite right. Each phrase of music was broken as she drew in shallow breaths to keep going.

She knew she was sick. Her throat was sore and her chest rattled. She shivered not just from cold, but also from fever. Falling back into her mind, she remembered being sick on Voyager. She'd been sitting with the Doctor in the holodeck, listening to him

contemplate the very existence of life, turning decisions over and over in his mind until he'd made himself mad with the variables and possibilities. She'd been reading "La Vita Nuova."

"I felt a loving spirit suddenly, past a long slumber, in my heart arise; from far away then love I seemed to see, so glad, I could his face ill recognize." She knew Dante spoke of Godly love, but that night with the Doctor, as she lay feverish in the holographic chair, she thought of her love. The loving spirit that had risen in her heart was her Chakotay, her best friend who had a spirit so loving, it took her breath away.

He'd met her in the corridor that night and he'd known that she'd needed loving care as he'd guided her into her quarters and helped her get to bed. He'd given her a simple medication to break her fever, and then he'd sat with her until she'd fallen asleep. She imagined him doing that now as she lay in the darkness, watching over her as she fell asleep, sick with fever. She knew that he was thinking of her, loving her, and somewhere, he was crying for her.

Chakotay closed the door in relief. He'd just come back to San Francisco from a dismal day in Indiana where he'd spent Kathryn's Christmas holiday with her family. After leaving the transporter station, a reporter had provoked him into an angry eruption.

The press had been confronting him at every opportunity to get his reaction to Kathryn's disappearance, but he hadn't been able to pull together the emotional strength to face them calmly. Today's encounter had been different. He'd had enough and decided to say exactly what he'd thought. He hoped that the admiralty didn't come down on him for it, but nothing he said had been untrue.

Sitting on the couch, he clicked on the viewscreen and switched to the Fednews channel, even though he'd grown tired of watching the newsfeeds. However, it was in his best interest to listen to the reaction from his outburst.

The news channel was broadcasting recaps of debates on her disappearance. Everyone had a theory, but the primary ones were that she was part of a connived scheme with the President, that she disappeared to get away from the public eye, that she'd gone undercover to flesh out a spy, and more likely ones that included hostage scenarios. The one that made his blood run cold was that she was already dead, assassinated in anger. There was even speculation that Starfleet or the Federation had ordered the assassination to keep her from blowing the cover on an illegal conspiracy. The mystery and drama behind her disappearance was media fodder and every mention of her made him feel nauseous.

He sat and watched for an hour. At one moment, he was angry enough to throw a book at the screen. At another moment, he was wiping away his tears as he watched a segment of that first interview that marked the beginning of the media's infatuation with her. That

was also the night he'd kissed her. Looking back, he wished that they'd simply gone into hiding where they'd be safe from the galaxy. If only life were that easy.

An advertisement for the evening news caught his attention. A snippet of something he'd said foreshadowed an in-depth report that would be aired momentarily. He groaned and decided to get up and call B'Elanna.

Once she answered, Chakotay said, "Turn on the news. I need your advice."

"On what?" she asked.

"How to proceed with Starfleet after losing my temper with a reporter. Call me back when it's over, would you?"

"Will do. Try not to worry, though."

Chakotay closed the comm and resettled on the couch where he waited for the media to twist his words for their own amusement.

"Today, our own Maureen McDown had a chance encounter with Captain Chakotay, the beloved friend and companion of Admiral Kathryn Janeway, and gained a rare insight into his thoughts regarding the mystery behind her disappearance nine days ago."

Chakotay sighed. It figured that the introduction would be all about how great the reporter was for harassing him into talking.

"Tell us, Captain, how do you feel about the speculation surrounding Admiral Janeway's disappearance?"

"How do I feel?" Chakotay's eyes flashed with anger. "I feel like the media has turned this into a damn circus!"

"Where do you think she is, Captain?"

"Do you believe, for one second, that if I knew where she was that I'd be standing here talking to you? I'd be on my way to knock the living daylights out of whoever has taken her!"

"So you believe that she was abducted?"

"Hell, yes, she was abducted!" Chakotay stormed off and then returned with his fists balled in anger. "I have a message for everyone who's going to watch you twist and contort what I've said here. Kathryn Janeway is an extremely compassionate woman who loves this Federation enough to sacrifice her life for it. Please keep that in mind as you dissect everything she has ever said in a sordid attempt to uncover some kind of

Machiavellian plot of immoral political trickery. She would never... and I repeat NEVER... sacrifice honesty and integrity for her personal gain.”

The reporter was taken aback, but managed to say, “Sir, that’s just one opinion, and certainly not the majority.”

He took a step back to control himself and then said, “It’s deplorable that anyone would even suggest it.” He pointed forcefully to the sky, “Kathryn is out there somewhere, right now, doing whatever she can to get back to us. When she does, there’s going to be hell to pay for whoever has dared come between her and the people she loves, which is every damn person in this damn quadrant!”

Chakotay continued to watch the news as the media evaluated his words to come to the conclusion that he was in love with her and, because he knew her better than anyone else, they should all get behind him and give Kathryn their unconditional support. They deduced that she was trapped somewhere, suffering on their behalf, and that the entire Federation should unite to pray for her safe return.

He clicked off the broadcast when the comm unit announced an incoming message. He clicked it on to see B’Elanna. “Did you see it?” he asked uncertainly.

“Hell, yes! You have nothing to worry about, and you were well justified to say every bit of it. Tom’s parents are here and they agree.”

He took a deep breath. “Not that I really care what Starfleet thinks, but I should, for her sake.”

“You’re fine.” She looked at him sympathetically. “Try to get some rest. You look like you need it.”

Chakotay nodded and clicked off the comm. He stretched out on the couch and curled up with the afghan that Kathryn always wrapped around herself. She’d been gone so long that it didn’t smell like her anymore, but that didn’t detract from the memories of her warmth. He was so exhausted that he fell asleep within a few minutes.

Kathryn woke to gentle hands washing her legs with warm water, and she knew that it was the man she’d asked to help her. Afraid that the ‘bath’ meant another assault was coming, she murmured, “Help... please.”

The water stopped and he came around to her face. “You’re awake.”

“Pleeease,” she begged.

He placed a cracker in her mouth. “You need to eat.”

Chewing was painful, but she somehow managed to get the dry cracker down. “You ask... help?”

“I tried, but he didn’t believe me.”

“Tried?” she whimpered.

Putting another bite in her mouth, he explained, “I was sent to get supplies, and there was a man in a Starfleet uniform. I told him that I needed his help, and that a human woman was being held captive on my ship.”

After swallowing that bite, she asked, “ship near?”

“That was days ago.” He fed her again. “The man was really rude. He asked if I expected him to believe me and then asked if I was going to tell him that you were Admiral Janeway.”

“And?”

“That’s it. One of the others from my ship was getting near and I couldn’t be seen talking to a ‘Fleeter.’”

She’d never felt so disheartened. “Please... anything... help.”

“I know, but I’m just as much a prisoner as you are.” He fed her again, and the bite got lodged in her dry throat causing her to start coughing painfully. That was all it took for her to vomit everything he’d just given her and then she passed out.

Unsubstantiated claims of sightings continued to pour in and it seemed as if the entire Federation was on the lookout for her, increasing the already impossible number of leads. There were a few allegations mixed with a handful of parties who claimed responsibility and who were making demands. The problem was that they couldn’t all have her so Starfleet didn’t know whom to believe. Chakotay feared that if the parties became aware of each other, whoever was right might consider doing something drastic to prove themselves.

Chakotay watched the rain outside the window of Headquarter’s largest meeting room, where the Voyagers had come together to celebrate their one-year homecoming anniversary. When it had been planned two months before, everyone had been excited, but without their former captain, the mood was somber and grim. They’d all hoped that by postponing it for a week that they’d be able to celebrate her safe return.

The Voyagers sat around tables, quietly chatting, each forming their own speculations on what had happened to her. Chakotay couldn't take it and had excused himself from the conversations. His plan to propose to her in front of their Voyager family made their presence hard to take.

Tom came over to look out the window with him. "The rain is fitting."

Chakotay nodded solemnly. "Yes, it is." He swallowed hard to try to contain his turbulent emotions.

"When she gets back, we'll plan another party, and we'll really have a reason to celebrate."

"She'll like that. I know she misses everyone."

Tom put a hand on Chakotay's back. "She's strong. I bet she'll have them looking down the business end of a phaser rifle before long."

"Yeah," he sniffed, trying to clear his head. "Hell hath no fury like Kathryn Janeway when she's pissed." It felt good to say, but after twelve days, it was difficult to keep believing that she would get herself out of trouble.

"No doubt. She's really something else, isn't she?" Tom said.

"Yes, she is." Chakotay pulled the diamond ring out of his pocket. "I don't know why I'm showing this to you, but I feel the need to tell someone what I was planning tonight."

Tom tried to lighten the mood by saying, "It's beautiful, but I'm already married."

Chakotay wanted to laugh, but wasn't able to manage it. He looked at the diamond glistening in comparison to the dull raindrops outside. "I think she'll like it."

"I'm sure she will." Tom was quiet while Chakotay put it back in his pocket. "Will it be a surprise?"

"No, not really. We talked about getting married before she left in September. She was finally feeling like herself again, and had decided it was time to break up with me."

"Break up?"

"Yeah, but then I proposed." Chakotay managed a smile. "She told me I was insane."

"So what changed her mind?"

With a shrug, he replied, "Somehow, I convinced her that she loved me despite my idiocy, and I vowed to spend the rest of my life protecting her heart as much as I tried to protect her life."

"You must've been very persuasive."

"I've never wanted anything so much in my life... until now." Chakotay quickly moved the topic along. "But she didn't want a rushed wedding done in your father's office. She wants the real thing with flowers and the whole works."

"And she'll get it. We'll plan a party to top 'em all."

"I'd like you to be my best man, Tom. Would you consider it?"

"I'd be honored," Tom said sincerely. "We've come a long way since that day on Ocampo, haven't we?"

"You know why, don't you?"

"Because a gutsy woman, who can't seem to stay out of trouble, told us to shape up or ship out?"

Chakotay managed a small smile. "That's exactly right."

Consciousness crept up on Kathryn as she slowly regained her bearings. She was extremely light-headed and the deck felt like it was rocking back and forth. Forcing herself to take inventory of her condition, she knew that it was getting pretty serious. Her mouth and throat burned so much that she couldn't swallow. Her chest rattled ominously and when she tried to take in more than a shallow breath, she ended up coughing up thick, foul tasting phlegm out of her lungs.

She had long since stopped feeling hungry, but she could tell by the feel of her legs that she'd lost a lot of weight. Her body was giving her all the warning signs of starvation, but she was helpless to do anything to prevent it. Sharp pains often shot through her abdomen, but she had no idea why.

Trying to piece together what she knew, she strained to remember details. She was still on the same rickety barge with the uneven engines. She'd been hosed off and hauled up for inspection four or five times, she couldn't remember for sure. Unfortunately, she also couldn't remember many details about any of the encounters. No species' names, sounds, or smells came to mind. Nothing that would identify anyone, but it was clear to her that her captors had her up for auction. At least when an exchange took place, things would change and she could watch for avenues of escape or communication. Not that she had the strength to punch her way out of here. She couldn't even lift her head.

It was time for her to come to terms with dying. She felt sad for her loved ones. They wouldn't be handling this well. Chakotay would be beside himself with grief and angry that he couldn't do anything to save her, but he'd promised her that he'd get through it. She knew he would. Her mom would be distraught, and then fall into a depression until Phoebe got her some help. Phoebe would have Mike to get her through it, and they'd help Katie. Sweet, precious Katie. Kathryn had so much wanted to see her grow up. And so much for those descendants she was supposed to create. She hoped the Kate from the future wouldn't mind not existing.

Her dear friends from Voyager, they'd be almost as upset as Chakotay. They were as close to her as her own family, perhaps closer in many ways because of what they'd survived together. They'd think it a horrible tragedy to lose her this way. She loved every single one of them and she hoped they'd bolster each other.

She was starting to fade as she thought about the way a martyr could initiate change. It was looking more probable, but now that she'd defeated depression, had a soon-to-be loving husband, and had made progress with her job, she wasn't the least bit interested in pursuing the death option. When she started drifting off to sleep again, she imagined herself in Chakotay's loving arms. That was where she wanted to die.

She'd just drifted off when she felt vibrations in the floor. She tried to shut down her mind in preparation for another assault. This one came hard and fast, and was more violent than any of the others had been. She was kicked repeatedly, beaten and bashed in the head, yanked up and thrown down, and she was completely defenseless to stop it.

As she lay on the floor attempting to recover from the brutal attack, her head spun and nausea overwhelmed her as she heaved the meager amount of liquid that had been in her stomach. She tasted blood, but she didn't know where it was coming from. Someone yanked her up again and said something, but she wasn't able to comprehend the words. Her blindfold was torn off and a bright light blinded her, but she was too weak to do anything about it. As she was dropped again to the deck, blessed unconsciousness asserted itself and gave her a much-needed escape from her misery.
