

The Future is Ours – Part 15

“Impressive, Commander Kim”

By Dawn

Rated R

Summary: Where is she?

Fourteen days had passed since Kathryn’s abduction, and tensions on the Pioneer were running at an all time high.

Commander Moore said, “Captain, we’re receiving a transmission from an unidentified source.”

“What type of transmission?”

“Standard subspace visual transmission on an insecure frequency.”

Bernie had a feeling that this could be an important lead. “Commander Ral, get a secure message to the Enterprise to start tracking it with their enhanced sensors. Commander Kim,” he turned to Harry who was at the secondary ops station. “Work your magic.”

“Aye, Captain,” Harry nodded intently, already analyzing the carrier wave.

“On Screen,” Bernie said. When the image came up, they all squinted to try to make out details in the darkness. Bernie ordered, “Lower bridge lights to thirty percent.”

“Is that a child?” Moore asked about the small, huddled creature they were seeing. The top of its head was visible, as was its upper body, but the face was hidden.

Bernie walked towards the viewscreen. Not taking his eyes from it, he asked, “Igre, can you increase the volume?”

Over the hum of the alien ship’s background engine noise, they heard the creature breathing – a wheeze accompanied every intake, and a rattled, labored cough came out with every exhalation. As the camera zoomed in closer, they could see that it was definitely a humanoid.

Ral said, “That’s a Starfleet tank. Could that be...?”

Moore interrupted, sounding horrified. “No, it can’t be.”

Harry glanced up from where he’d been concentrating on the sensor readings. He had to fight down the bile that rose in his throat at the site before him. A small, female body

was mottled with deep, purple bruises and dried, crusted blood. Oozing from multiple places was fresh blood, so dark it appeared black as it reflected the camera light. He looked back at his sensor panel, unwilling to miss his opportunity to help her.

The female began coughing harder and they all stared as she heaved painfully and vomited. As horrible as the sight was, few could tear their eyes away. Seconds later, a figure disguised completely in black yanked on the bound arms of the woman, pulling her up to her knees as she screamed in pain. A bright light was turned on and the woman's blindfold torn off.

A distorted voice mocked, "Smile for the camera, Admiral."

Everyone on the bridge gasped in shock at Kathryn's condition. Dark red blood seeped from her mouth, and her head lolled on her shoulders until it was yanked into position. Her entire body was covered in bruises, and it was clear that she was completely helpless to stop the assault with her arms and legs bound tightly.

The bridge instantly became a flurry of activity with orders being shouted in all directions. Harry forced himself to concentrate on the data in front of him, trying to block the sound of her severely congested coughing and cries of pain. He couldn't help her if he got emotional. She was alive, there was a carrier wave to analyze, and that's all that mattered at the moment.

The same distorted voice said, "If Admiral Janeway's life is important to you, cease your search. Any attempts to rescue her will result in her immediate death." With that, she was dropped mercilessly to the deck and the transmission ended.

Bernie asked gravely, "What do we know?"

Harry continued to force down his emotions. "It was sent on a subspace carrier wave originating in Sector 032, but I'll need more time for analysis it to pinpoint it beyond that."

"Good work, Commander."

Ral said, "The inside of that ship looked like a Kressari freighter."

"How can you tell?" Bernie asked.

"I was detained in one, and I wasn't blindfolded," she said morosely. "The Cardassians used them for smuggling."

"That's right." Justin had arrived on the bridge halfway through the transmission. "Our Maquis cell encountered one full of Starfleet weapons when the Cardassians were trying to frame the Federation."

Bernie asked, "Can we analyze that voice. Is it Cardassian?"

"If it is Cardassian," Justin said, "Whoever has taken her has a personal vendetta against Chakotay. Maybe they were waiting for him to get involved before they made a move."

Bernie said, "Then they've just tipped their hand, but before we jump to that conclusion, let's find out what we can about that voice. Moore, open a channel to the Enterprise."

Picard's image appeared on the screen, and he was immediately all business. "We're still analyzing it, Captain Young, but it's clear that something we've done has struck a nerve. Now we need to figure out what that was."

"Were you able to get a visual?" Bernie asked.

"Yes," Picard said grimly, "and we need to work fast. I've got my entire senior staff studying it, but it was well concealed. It's going to take them awhile."

"In the meantime, I suggest we cover some of the distance towards that sector."

"What sector, Captain? It was untraceable."

Bernie turned around in surprise. "Commander Kim?"

Harry answered confidently, "It originated from Sector 032 on a subspace carrier wave, frequency modulation of 626.4 decibels."

Picard's eyes widened appreciatively. "I'm impressed, Commander. You did that more efficiently than Commander Data."

"Thank you, sir." Harry wished he could feel better, but the affects of what they'd just witnessed were starting to seep in, leaving him feeling shaken.

Bernie said, "And based on a visual observation, Commander Ral believes we're looking for a Kressari Freighter."

"Outstanding work," Picard replied. "I agree, Captain, let's cover some of that distance since it'll take three hours at your warp six. I suggest a slightly circuitous route until we know more." Picard looked away and then back at the screen. "There's a class nine nebula in sector 030 that could cover our tracks."

"Agreed. Shall we convene on the Enterprise for a joint briefing in one hour?"

"Yes, I assume you'll alert Starfleet Command?"

Bernie closed his eyes in anguish. "Yes, Captain."

When the transmission ended, Bernie said, “Good work, Commanders. I’d say that it must take a lot to impress Jean-Luc Picard, and you two certainly did it today. Keep working on the analysis and let me know if you uncover anything. I’ll be in the ready room.”

Once behind closed doors, Bernie took a moment to compose himself. Violence had always been difficult for him, which is why he’d chosen the diplomatic track in his career. His tenure in Starfleet had exposed him to more brutality than he cared to recall, and although he hadn’t grown immune to it, he’d certainly become desensitized over the years. However, seeing a woman bound and suffering from such cruel treatment, a woman he considered a dear friend, was gut-wrenching.

He sat down at his desk and initiated a com-link with Admiral Khurma to deliver the news.

Khurma’s secretary, a woman who annoyed him a great deal, intercepted. “Captain Young, the Fleet Admiral is in a meeting. Perhaps you should consider sending him a pre-recorded message. As you know, Admiral Khurma has a very busy schedule.”

Young took a deep breath and plastered on his best diplomatic face. “Yes, Ms. Randolph. I realize that he’s a very busy man, and I wouldn’t have set this transmission as priority one unless I meant it. I’m quite confident that he will want to speak with me. Now.”

“Please hold,” she snooted condescendingly.

Bernie sighed deeply as her image was replaced with the Starfleet insignia. He didn’t have to wait long.

Khurma asked urgently, “Bernie, you have something for us?”

“I’m sending you a transmission we just received from Janeway’s captors.”

“Another party claiming that they have her?”

Bernie paused before delivering the solemn news. “It contains a visual recording of her and a threat to stop our search. She’s been brutally assaulted, Admiral.”

Khurma’s jaw set in controlled anger. “Assaulted how?”

“Beaten. Her torso and legs are mottled with bruises and blood. She’s bound, appears malnourished, and by the sound of her labored breathing, I believe that she’s extremely ill.”

Khurma looked away for a moment in grief. “What do we know?”

Bernie quickly relayed a summary of the onboard follow-up conversation. "We're proceeding to that sector and will continue analyzing en route."

"Do you have anything to back up the implications of the Cardassians or the Kressari?"

"Not at this time. I think it's premature to start making any accusations. It could merely be a coincidence or a stolen freighter."

"Agreed, but if your assessment leans in that direction, please let me know immediately. If that's who we're dealing with, then we've got a much different problem on our hands than we've been led to believe."

"Of course, Admiral." Bernie had an idea. "Would you be willing to convince Starfleet Medical to release Admiral Janeway's medical files for evaluation?"

"For what purpose?"

"I'd like to know if there's anything physiologically unique about her that could help us distinguish her bio-pattern from other humanoids. I understand she was assimilated at one time. Perhaps there are some traces of Borg technology in her body?"

Khurma nodded. "An excellent idea. I'll contact Dr. Zimmerman, Voyager's EMH, to do the analysis. He'll know immediately, and I'd rather not invade her privacy any more than absolutely necessary."

"Thank you. I'll report back to you in two hours, and Admiral, it might be best not to show the video feed to Captain Chakotay unless we uncover a personal vendetta. This is more than a man in love could take."

"Agreed. We'll begin an analysis, as well. Khurma out."

Harry joined the briefing on the Enterprise while it was already in progress. He tried not to flinch under Captain Picard's questioning stare, assuming that he was receiving 'the look' for being late. Commander Data was going over his analysis of the carrier wave, adding further details that Harry hadn't had time to extrapolate.

He listened carefully to the conversations and mentally gathered the list of facts. They only had the visual supposition that she was on a Kressari freighter. The analysis of the voice pattern did not reflect any known Cardassian markers, and was more likely human or a genetically similar species. The search was narrowed slightly within the sector Harry had determined, but they still had almost sixteen parsecs to cover.

Captain Picard said, "Commander Kim, your original analysis was remarkable. Do you have anything to add after studying it further?"

Harry cleared his throat slightly. "I didn't have a chance to do more analysis because I received a priority communication from Dr. Zimmerman, Voyager's former EMH. I've learned about something that I think will help us. I apologize for being late."

"No need to apologize, Commander," Bernie said. "What do you have?"

Harry looked around the table nervously because of what he was about to reveal, even though he'd been given permission to do so. "The Doctor revealed that Admiral Janeway has a unique implant at the base of her skull that we'll be able to distinguish with our scanners."

"Implant?" Riker asked. "What kind of implant?"

"Because of the Admiral's repeated experiences with time travel, the 29th century ship that polices temporal incursions implanted a device that will prevent her from experiencing further temporal breaches."

Data asked, "Do we have access to previous scans of this device?"

"No, they're part of her confidential medical records." Harry held up a PADD. "Dr. Zimmerman made the only existing scan. It's virtually undetectable because it's out of phase, but he's given me the exact phase variance, and indicated that it's made from the same poly-deutonic alloy as his portable holographic emitter. That alloy doesn't exist outside of these two devices, so if we reconfigure the scanners on both ships and account for possible dampening fields, it could give us a signal as clear as if she was wearing her commbadge."

Dr. Crusher said, "I can access her medical files, if needed."

"As can I," Dr. Murphy added. "What do we need to know?"

Harry said, "Not this part of her files. Anything related to her time travel is sealed, but I've been assured that we have what we need."

"If that fails," Bernie asked, "Do you know if there are any Borg implants in her?"

"No, I'm sure that all of it was removed. Her partial assimilation was over two years ago, so if there were any traces of Borg components in her afterwards, I'm sure I would have detected them at some point." He looked at the doctors. "Although I presume that part of her medical records is accessible."

"Very well," Picard said. "This implant may be just what we need. I only hope it's large enough to detect."

Harry said, "It's less than a gram, but it should light up our sensor grid as soon as we find it."

"I wish we'd had this information as soon as she was abducted," Dr. Crusher said. "We could've saved her a lot of pain."

Harry nodded. "I didn't realize that the implant existed until today, and Dr. Zimmerman didn't realize that it could be detected from a distance."

"Let's get to work, then," Picard said. "Engineering and Ops – begin making adjustments to the scanners of both ships. Commanders Riker and Ral – coordinate a search pattern strategy. Security – begin coordinating tactical plans, because I suspect one or both ships will come under fire before this over. I don't have to tell you that our most important priority is extracting the Admiral, and time is of the essence."

Bernie nodded in closing, "Let's get her back, people."

As they began to leave, Picard came over to Harry and shook his hand. "Excellent work, Commander. I'm truly impressed."

"Thank you, sir." Harry tried to smile despite his unease. "I'm just anxious to rescue her."

"I understand, and it appears that you're holding up quite well under the emotional stress. It's commendable considering how close your Voyager crew is to each other."

"It's not easy, sir."

"I know it's not. I know it all too well." Picard hesitated and then said, "If I may make a suggestion?"

"Of course, sir."

"Once this is over, allow yourself time to grieve for what's happening now. I've learned the hard way that it's a vital part of coping with the long term stress of situations like these."

Harry took a deep breath, afraid that if he acknowledged the emotional strain, the floodgates would open. "I'll keep that in mind, sir."

Kathryn felt like a herd of elephants had stomped across her midsection. The pain of fractured ribs cut through her like a knife, and nothing could ease her pain. The energy had faded from her body to such an extent that she couldn't manage anything but moving

her lips. Her breaths were shallow and difficult, and her heart pounded with slow, irregular thuds that shook her chest.

She didn't feel the vibrations of her visitors' approach this time, but she could hear their voices. They mustn't have replaced her earplugs after the last assault.

Whoever was in the room nudged her body with their foot, but she was unable to respond. She expected to feel more pain with the movement, but with the amount of pain that was her constant companion, a little more was hardly noticeable.

She heard her friend say, "We've got to stop him from treating her this way, or she's not going to be alive when we get there. All those buyers are going to be furious."

"He wants her defenseless, Norval. She's still alive. Don't worry."

"Barely alive. She hasn't eaten in weeks and she's lost a lot of blood. I don't think she'll last for three more days. He's drawn this out too long, and if we get caught, we'll be hung out to dry for the way she's been treated."

"You forget. We're holding the cards here. Starfleet won't negotiate for hostages, and we've just sent them a message saying that we'll kill her if they try anything."

"You're as insane as Pratin – going up against Starfleet. We're going to get caught."

"You're paranoid and you're forgetting how much latinum we're going to earn for this."

"I'll be surprised if Pratin doesn't kill us, first."

"He took you under his wing, protected you. Don't forget that he saved your life in that backwater bar. Why would he kill you now?"

"Because he's been planning this all along, and I think he recruited us just for manpower. He demanded our loyalty and then he's going to drop us out the main airlock. He doesn't care about us."

"You're delusional, Norval. And you worry too much. Come on, we've got to go let him know that she's still alive." He nudged her hard. "Stupid bitch."

Kathryn was wrong. She could do more than move her lips. She could lift an eyebrow. If she got out of this alive, she just learned the name of her ally, and he was their weak spot.

After thirty hours of searching the sector without any results, the crews of both ships were exhausted and on edge. Four other ships had been ordered to the sector, but were

concentrating their efforts in concentric circles outside the Enterprise and Pioneer search patterns. The Pioneer was in the middle of one last scan before heading off to rendezvous with the Enterprise. Picard had suggested that they compare and analyze before reinitiating the search.

Harry poured over the sensor grid. He hadn't been able to sleep since he saw the video transmission, and the only thing that got his mind off of Janeway's condition was calculating trajectories, carrier wave frequencies, and phase variances.

Bernie put his hand on Harry's shoulder. "Commander, you've got to get some rest."

"Can't sleep." He didn't look away from the console.

"Then see Dr. Murphy for a sedative. You're exhausted, Harry."

"I know, but I can't stop until we find her, or until I pass out."

"And you think that's healthy?" Bernie asked.

"No, but it's what I..." Harry's eyes widened as he saw a ship moving into the long-range sensor grid. "Look there! It matches the specs of a Kressari freighter!"

Bernie turned to tactical. "How far away are they?"

"Three light years, sir."

"Kim, are you scanning for that alloy?"

"Yes, sir, but we're too far away. I need to be within 1.7 light years."

Bernie asked, "Where is the Enterprise now?"

"Half a lightyear, in the opposite direction," Ral answered.

"Alter course towards the freighter and hail the Enterprise."

When Picard's image came onscreen, he asked, "Yes, Captain?"

"We've located a ship that matches the specs and we're altering course."

"Understood. Send us the coordinates and we'll be right on your tail."

"Pioneer out." Bernie took his command chair, ready to get this over with. "Helm, engage at maximum warp."

Within an hour, they were close enough that the alloy should have appeared on their sensors. Harry checked and rechecked his calculations, and still, there was nothing. He cursed and muttered to himself. The Pioneer Ops officer, Ensign Igre, joined him at his station. "Captain Young suggested that I help you, sir."

Harry nodded, but didn't look at the younger officer. "He thinks I'm fatigued, and he's right. Could you recheck my calculations? I'm not finding what I want."

"Perhaps because it's not there," Igre said as he re-calculated. "Looks right, but did you account for a change in variance that a ship that size would need for a dampening field?"

Harry groaned. "No, damn it. I am exhausted. Start with the same frequencies of the one they used on Joria, and then let's rotate through the spectrum."

"Aye, sir." Igre input the data as Harry watched the screen.

Harry pleaded, "Come on... you know she's out there."

"Pardon, sir?" Igre responded.

Harry shook his head, not taking his eyes away from the screen. "I'm talking to the scanners, not you."

A few minutes went by without results and Igre said, "Nothing. I'll start the cycle through again. Perhaps they're using a variable amplitude."

"There's a strange power output on that freighter, don't you think?" Harry looked at the data. "It's an uneven pulse. That's it!" He typed in commands as quickly as his fingers would allow. The screen lit up like the star on top of a Christmas tree. "YES!" Harry shouted. "There she is!"

Young stood up quickly and turned around. "You're sure?"

"She's in the aft section, port side. Lifesigns are weak, but she's there." Harry felt tears prick at his eyes.

"Notify sickbay. Hail the Enterprise and adjust our heading for attack pattern beta." He touched his communicator, "All hands, battle stations."

Being a faster ship, the Enterprise had almost caught up with the Pioneer by the time they entered visual range. Their combined attack pattern would make it look like they were ignoring the freighter until they were right on top of them.

"Steady as she goes," Bernie said. "Standby weapons, standby shields. Be ready to drop them for transport as soon as their shields are disabled."

“Standing by,” Moore confirmed.

“Helm, prepare to adjust our heading. Kim, keep your finger on that transporter.”

“Ready, sir.”

The tension on the bridge was thick as they waited. At the last possible second, Bernie yelled, “Hard to starboard!”

The ship keeled to port and the crew almost lost their balance as the inertial dampeners struggled to compensate. Harry didn’t budge from his panel. It would’ve taken a Herculean effort to break his concentration.

“Power weapons, raise shields... and FIRE!”

It took almost no effort to subdue the bulky freighter. The surprise attack worked. Moore shouted, “Their shields are down!”

“Drop our shields. Kim, get her out of there!”

Only a flick of a button later, Harry pulled his fist back with a jubilant, “Yes! We’ve got her!”

On the viewscreen, they saw weapons fire come over their bow and knew the Enterprise was taking over. Bernie ordered, “Raise shields and retreat.”

“Sir?” Moore questioned.

“We’ve got our precious cargo. Let the Enterprise handle it from here.”

Through the daze of semi-consciousness, Kathryn heard the impact of weapon’s fire only seconds before she felt the tingle of a transporter beam. She felt relief as she rematerialized and heard Dr. Murphy gasp and then ask worriedly, “Admiral?”

She barely groaned in response, unable to do much else as she lay almost face down on a biobed.

Someone untied the blindfold and reassured her by touching her head. “Admiral, you’re safe. You’re aboard the Pioneer, and we’ll get these bindings off.”

The harsh surgical lights were painful, even though Kathryn was looking down and her eyes were closed. She heard the beep of a medical tri-corder and Dr. Murphy whisper, “Good God almighty.”

Someone said frantically, “I can’t get these bindings loose. The chains are imbedded into her skin!”

“I’ll get a laser scalpel to cut through them,” someone else answered with urgency.

Dr. Murphy said, “Sickbay to bridge.”

“Go ahead, Doctor.”

“Is the Enterprise within transporter range?”

“Yes, they’ve just taken the freighter into custody.”

“I need Dr. Crusher’s assistance,” she said shakily.

“Understood.”

Kathryn knew she was in bad shape, but as she heard the medical staff buzzing around her, she also knew that she was going to live and that everything would be okay. Her thoughts centered on Chakotay, and how warm and wonderful his smile would be when she woke up. He was always there when she woke up.

Beverly rushed down the corridor to the Pioneer’s sickbay. When the Enterprise had been assigned to be the Pioneer’s wingman, she’d received a message from the Director of Starfleet Medical to take command of Janeway’s treatment upon rescue. She’d hoped that the Enterprise would find the Admiral first, so that she wouldn’t have to undermine Dr. Murphy’s confidence, but the call for help was a good sign that her youthful pride wouldn’t get in the way of treating her patient.

She rushed into the room and was immediately accosted with the horrible smell of human stench. Knowing that it was an indicator of just how badly Kathryn had been treated, she ignored it and jumped in to help. “What’s her status?”

Dr. Murphy said shakily, “I don’t where to start. I’m sorry, Dr. Crusher.”

“It’s all right,” she laid a steady hand on Amy’s shoulder and began an initial scan as the nurses were finishing cutting through the bindings and turning Kathryn onto her back. Beverly had to steel her own emotions as she saw the extent of the emaciation and deep bruising that covered Kathryn’s body, not to mention the way she’d been bound. “Let’s take it one step at time.”

“She’s so important, and there’s so much…” Amy was starting to freeze up.

Beverly stated calmly, “Right now, she’s your patient and she needs your help. Don’t worry about who she is outside of this room. Has she been conscious?”

“She was semi-conscious when she arrived.”

“How responsive was she?” Beverly asked as she studied the readings.

“She groaned a little and clamped her eyelids when we took off the blindfold. That was it.”

Beverly reconfigured her tri-corder for a more intensive scan, seeing exactly what was going on with their patient, and it was not good. To help the young doctor learn and regain her confidence, she asked, “What’s the first step in trauma treatment?”

“Stabilize the heart and lung function.”

“Right,” Beverly said as she closed the biobed arch and activated the respirator. “And what do your scans show?”

“She has advanced pneumonia and is in acute respiratory distress. Septic shock and infection have compromised her heart. Her blood pressure is dangerously low.”

“Keep going,” Beverly encouraged as she began the procedure to drain the fluid from Kathryn’s lungs. Once that was started, she initiated a blood filter in an attempt to remove the microorganisms that were impairing the heart function.

Amy reported, “Her heart is stage three arrhythmic and the cardiac muscle has thickened to compensate. Other vital organs – she’s in renal failure and her liver and pancreas are infected.”

Beverly nodded. “I see both bacterial and viral infections throughout her body. What antibiotic treatment do you suggest?” She began surgery on Kathryn’s heart as Amy administered the needed medications. The young doctor had been sufficiently prodded into action and was treating the dehydration, fever, parasite infestation, vitamin deficiency, and anemia.

Amy said, “Computer, increase sickbay ventilation by twenty percent.” She glanced at her nurse who was standing by waiting for instructions. “Ensign, get started on cleaning her up. Use the sonic cleaner on her head and then start regenerating the damaged tissues on her neck and face. When you’re finished, work on her legs until we can get to her torso and arms.”

Beverly announced, “Her heart is stabilized for the moment, and I’m moving on to the thoracic fractures and hematomas. Dr. Murphy, when you’re finished, would you begin treating the abdominal injuries?”

“Yes, Dr. Crusher.” She stood on the other side of the biobed arch and studied the readings. “Those damn parasites have eaten away at her intestines.”

“We’ll have to do surgery later. Portions might need to be removed before we can re-introduce food.”

“Understood,” Amy said as they worked in concert. Because of the extent of the damage, it took both of them operating for well over four hours to get all of Kathryn’s bones and soft tissues healed, and to do what they could for her organs. Beverly had to return to the treatment of the heart and lungs twice as the changes in Kathryn’s body chemistry affected them.

When they were finished, they withdrew the arch in order to finish cleaning her. While one of the nurses cut away the sagging and soiled undergarments, Kathryn began to moan.

Beverly was reducing the swelling in Kathryn’s brain when she noticed her eyelids begin to flutter. “Admiral?”

“Cold,” she shivered.

“I know,” Beverly said sympathetically as she did the final touches on the skull repairs that the nurses had done before. “As soon as we get you cleaned up, we’ll get you into something warm and comfortable.”

“Where...?” Kathryn’s voice faded.

“You’re safe aboard the Pioneer, Admiral.”

“Mmmmm.” Kathryn tried to open her eyes. “Bright lights.”

While the nurses ran the sonic cleaner over Kathryn’s naked and gaunt torso, Beverly leaned so that she cast a shadow on her patient’s face. “Admiral? Are you in pain?”

“Arms horrible...Head... stomach.” Kathryn blinked rapidly, trying unsuccessfully to open her eyes. “Cha...kotay?”

Beverly glanced up at Amy for a hint on how to answer.

Amy said, “Captain Chakotay is on Earth.”

It looked as though Kathryn had fallen back to sleep except for the way she was trembling. Beverly administered pain medication and said softly, “This is a strong analgesic and contains a mild sedative, Admiral. We’ll get to work on your arms in a few minutes.”

“...long... gone?” Kathryn shuddered uncontrollably as a nurse began to place her fragile legs into a pair of loose pants.

“Seventeen days,” Amy answered.

“...he know?” Her voice was raw and shaky.

“That you’ve been rescued? Probably not, yet.” Amy helped the nurses pull the pants up Kathryn’s legs, causing their patient to cry out in pain as they lifted her hips.

“Careful!” Beverly said.

While she was being jostled around, Kathryn forced her bloodshot eyes open. “Please...,” she begged.

Beverly laid her hand on the top of Kathryn’s head. “I know it hurts, but you’ll be asleep soon.”

“Please...Ch...ko... worried.”

“We’ll get word to him as soon as possible, Admiral,” Beverly promised as they carefully laid her legs back down and covered her torso with a folded blanket for modesty. “Try to rest for now. Your body needs it.”

Kathryn accepted the promise and relaxed as the nurses worked on her arms and the doctors on her shoulders. “Burns,” she complained.

“The analgesic should be working,” Amy said with concern.

“Stop pulling on the embedded chains until the medication has time to reach the area. With her blood pressure being so low and the damage to the arteries in her arms so extensive, it will take longer.”

A few minutes later, Kathryn tried to speak again. “Need...”

“Need what?”

“Pee,” Kathryn’s closed eyes clamped tightly in slight embarrassment.

Beverly touched Kathryn’s newly healed shoulder with compassion and whispered, “You’ve got a catheter.”

After Amy finished repairing her other shoulder, they slipped a shirt over her lolling head. The nurses hadn’t done anything more to her arms, but began to slip them into the shirt causing Kathryn to scream in pain.

“Stop!” Beverly shouted in alarm. “It’s too much for her!”

The nurses backed off. “Sorry, we thought they’d be anesthetized by now.”

Beverly used a tissue to dab Kathryn’s tears. “Admiral? I’m going to give your arms a local anesthetic. Do you understand what that means?”

“Mmhhh,” she moaned, still recovering from the pain. “Numb.”

Beverly administered a hypospray into each shoulder. “Don’t worry when you can’t feel them. Tell us when.”

They all stopped working until Kathryn mumbled, “Okay.”

As carefully as they could, they slipped her injured and limp arms delicately into the sleeveless top and went back to repairing the damage caused by the bindings and lack of nutrition. Her arms were nothing more than bruised, bloodied skin and bone, with no muscle mass whatsoever.

Beverly gently lifted Kathryn’s head and removed the hard head rest. She replaced it with a large, soft pillow and brushed Kathryn’s wilted hair back from her neck and face. She whispered, “Are you still with us?”

“Mmmhmmm.”

“How is your pain now?”

“Dull. Sleepy.”

Beverly suggested to Amy, “Let’s put a bolster under her knees and get her covered with warming blankets. I’d like to make her as comfortable as possible while we finish her arms. After what she’s been through, she could use as much tender care as we can provide.”

As they were getting her situated, Kathryn mumbled, “Thank you.”

Beverly glanced up at Amy and smiled warmly before answering Kathryn. “You’re welcome, Admiral. We’re glad to have you back.”

“Me, too. Was awful.”

“We can tell,” Amy said with sorrow.

Beverly smoothed down Kathryn’s hair. “Rest now. We’ll be right here if you need anything, and we’ll make sure someone has contacted your captain friend.”

The two doctors left their patient and stepped into the small office. Amy said, "Thank you so much. I wouldn't have been able to manage it."

Beverly touched the young doctor's arm in reassurance. "You did very well once you got going."

"Yes, but... I'm sorry. I know you'll have to report this."

"No, Doctor. I only need to report that I assisted. Please don't feel bad for getting nervous. When I got my first posting out of medical school, I had the opportunity to work on a ship with a full staff of doctors, and had time to gradually work into handling traumas on my own. There is no reason to feel ashamed for needing help. It says a lot that you knew to ask for it, and I'm glad we were close enough that I could."

"I couldn't risk not asking for help. I wanted to impress you, but the Admiral's condition was overwhelming."

"Their treatment of her was appalling, and I have half a mind to go beat the crap out of them myself. It's probably good that her Captain friend isn't here right now."

Amy fisted her hands in frustration. "It doesn't look like they fed her at all! Her body weight is twenty-one kilograms less than it was nineteen days ago. Even then, she'd already lost about seven kilos because of that damned parasite that her team contracted."

"It's a miracle that she's still alive, even more so that she was conscious. And her arms? I have no idea how they still had any blood flow. By the way they were bound, I fully expected that we'd be replacing them with prosthetics." Shaking her head, Beverly said, "I can't imagine enduring that for seventeen days and being aware of it."

Rubbing her face, Amy said, "It makes me ill."

Beverly smiled warily at the uneasy young woman. "Me, too." She put her hand on Amy's shoulder. "And just so you know, you have impressed me, and you can continue doing so by working through a treatment plan for her. We've still got a lot of work to do on her heart, in addition to treating the malnourishment and intestinal damage. Before she can eat, we'll have to open her up to remove the damaged tissues, but that will be risky until her blood pressure stabilizes."

Amy said, "And her blood pressure might not stabilize until we can get some food in her."

Beverly nodded, "A no-win situation, but we'll do what we can intravenously. Let's give her a few hours before we decide how to proceed. Meanwhile, we should write our reports and study the scans of her organs."

"Okay."

“It’s going to take time, but we’ll get her back on her feet.”

Chakotay looked up from his book when he heard the door chime. He marked his place and went to the door, unsure who’d be visiting on such a cold, winter morning. When he opened the door to see Owen Paris and two security officers, his heart fell.

“Come in,” Chakotay said as he opened the door.

Owen nodded and instructed the security officers to remain in the living room. He asked, “Captain, could we step into another room please?”

Chakotay nodded solemnly and led the way up to Kathryn’s office room. He felt numb, afraid that Owen had come to give him the worst possible news.

Owen went about his usual routine, scanning for listening devices and setting up a dampening field while Chakotay used the time to bolster his strength.

When he was finished, Owen turned to Chakotay and triumphantly said, “We’ve got her.”

Chakotay gasped in relief, feeling the same intense surge of emotion that he did when he’d found out she’d been taken. He sat down and closed his eyes, taking a moment to compose himself. “Is she okay?”

“No,” he said quietly. “She’s in pretty bad shape.”

He felt sick to his stomach. “How bad? Is she on her way home?”

“I don’t know all the facts, but I wanted to get over here as soon as I found out that she’d been extracted. I apologize if my security detail alarmed you, but we’ve all been put on increased protection.”

“What do you know?”

“Dr. Zimmerman and Commander Kim had the idea to scan for her temporal implant. It took a couple days of searching, but they got her out of there. Her abductors appear to be mercenaries out for a profit.”

“So it was the Pioneer? When did they find her?”

“About four hours ago. The dolts were all asleep when the Pioneer attacked. We believe that there are more people involved than those whom we have in custody, so her status is classified level twelve. Not even my security detail knows that she’s been rescued.”

Chakotay nodded in relief. “Thank you for telling me.”

“You’ll need to keep up the act that you don’t know, and I think we can be compassionate enough to let Gretchen know as well. I trust that she can play the part, too. If anyone is watching you, they’ll expect you to go see Gretchen upon getting news from me, regardless if it’s good or bad.”

“She’ll be grateful. She’s not holding up well.” Chakotay looked out the window and braced himself for the answer to his next question. “Can you tell me anything about Kathryn’s condition?”

“A medical report hasn’t been released, yet, but I know that Dr. Crusher from the Enterprise is assisting the Pioneer’s medical team. Captain Young has told us that Katie is barely conscious and they’re working hard to stabilize her. He said that the way she has been treated was inhumane and outright appalling.”

Chakotay steeled himself. “Why wouldn’t the doctors have released a medical report yet?”

“I assume that it’s either because they’re still working on her or the injuries are such that her privacy needs to be protected.”

“If those bastards did anything to her...” Chakotay’s heart rate jumped at the thought that his Kathryn had been sexually violated.

“Captain,” Owen warned. “Don’t jump to conclusions. It’s only been a few hours.”

“Where is the Pioneer? I need to go.” He stood up anxiously.

“No, Chakotay. If you were to leave right now, it would be entirely too obvious that we have her, and you could lead someone right to her.”

He implored, “Admiral, if she’s hurt... if she was tortured... she needs me. She’s not always as strong as she seems.”

“I know how hard this is for you, Captain. I’ll do my best to update you on her condition as we learn more, and hopefully, they’ll bring her home very soon. I’m sure she’ll want to see you, too, but she’s got a whole ship full of people whose entire focus is helping her. No one will let her suffer any longer.”

Chakotay lowered his head into his hands to try to compose himself. He asked, “Would you have Bernie give her something for me?”

“I’ll try.”

“Ask him to replicate a single peace rose. It’s important that it’s a yellow/pink hybrid peace rose.”

“She’ll know who it’s from?”

“Yes.”

After Paris left, Chakotay commed Gretchen to say that he was coming to Indiana. He had just talked to her the day before on New Year’s Day, but Gretchen wasn’t looking well at all. Chakotay decided that he’d take a few changes of clothes, and do what he could to comfort Gretchen until Kathryn came home. Maybe they could help each other.

Harry entered the darkened sickbay wearing his night clothes to find Dr. Murphy sitting alone in her office. The treatment area was farther in the back of the room, so he couldn’t see Kathryn.

Amy looked up at him, her soft brown eyes tired, but brimming with warmth and kindness. “Commander Kim? You look exhausted.”

“I’m sure we all do, but I can’t sleep. I’m too keyed up from this morning.”

“And likely over-tired from all the tension of the last few days.” She came around her desk to scan him with her medical tri-corder.

He put his hand up to stop her. “I’m not here for treatment. I just want to check on the Admiral.”

“Ah,” she smiled sympathetically. “She’s resting comfortably. We gave her a strong sedative a few hours ago.”

“You had to sedate her?” Harry asked worriedly.

“To operate, and then she was having some troubled sleep. The sedative will quiet her mind so she can get some healing rest.”

“I guess she’s probably going to have bad dreams for awhile. I know I would.” Harry tried to look past the office to see her, but the sightline was obstructed by bulkheads. He wished for Voyager’s open sickbay, but he figured this ensured more privacy for the patients.

“Would you like to sit with her, Commander?”

“Could I?” he asked eagerly.

“Sure, although you shouldn’t stay too long,” Amy said as she walked him back. “You’ll want to get some rest before your next duty shift.”

“Don’t worry about that. I’m officially off-duty until the Admiral needs me again. I suspect that’ll be awhile.” He stopped in his tracks when he saw her, overcome with emotion.

Amy pulled up a stool and placed it next to Kathryn’s bed, and then noticed that Harry had frozen. She asked, “Are you okay?”

Harry nodded and finished walking over. He reached out to touch Kathryn’s head and stopped, alarmed at her overly-pronounced cheekbones and the tubes that were attached to her nose. “She’s so pale and thin.”

Amy touched his elbow to indicate that he should take a seat. “May I ask you a question, Commander?”

“Of course, and please, call me Harry.” He still hadn’t worked up the courage to ask her out.

“All right, Harry.” She blushed slightly. “How does the Admiral feel about touch? Do you know?”

“Touch?” He furrowed his eyebrows. “What do you mean?”

“Well, has she ever patted you on the back or something like that?”

“Oh, that kind of touch,” Harry chuckled. “Yes, she’s very fond of it. We used to count how many times in one shift she’d touch someone’s shoulder or arm. The record was something like thirty, but that was in a stressful situation. Oh... and we had a running tally of how many times we saw her touch Chakotay when someone else could see it. It was well over a thousand by the time we made it home. She’d be mortified if she knew we’d done that.”

Amy laughed quietly. “Good, then I think it’s safe for you to hold your commanding officer’s hand.” She tucked the blanket against Kathryn’s side to reveal her arm. “Touch has a healing affect, and I think it might be therapeutic for both of you.”

Harry gasped as he saw how bony and frail Kathryn’s arm was. He braced himself as he picked up her delicate hand and stroked his thumb across the back of it.

“She looks pretty fragile, doesn’t she?” Amy put her hand on Harry’s back.

“It’s shocking. She’s such a strong woman. You’d never know it by looking at her right now.” Harry looked up at Amy and noticed the pain in her eyes. “Are you okay?”

She looked away, trying to curb her emotions. “Today has been difficult.” She pushed the tears away annoyingly. “I shouldn’t be telling you this, but I’ve never seen someone in such an appalling state.”

“Hey, there...” Harry set Kathryn’s hand down and turned to the doctor with concern. “Maybe you’re the one who needs some therapeutic touch.”

Amy bit her lip and shook her head, but allowed Harry to take her hand. “This is my sickbay. I’m supposed to be the one doing the healing in here.”

Harry chuckled and said, “Doctor, heal thyself.”

She wrapped her arms around herself. “Harry, would you call me by my first name, too? It’s...”

“Amy, I know.” He felt a longing for this woman that he’d never felt for anyone else before. “I’d love to.”

She looked away shyly and went to pick up a container of lotion. “Would you like to help me rub some of this into her arms? It should soothe the newly repaired skin.”

“Sure,” he smiled, suddenly very interested in spending as much time with Amy as possible.

They sat across from each other, each tending to one of Kathryn’s arms. Amy said, “Tell me about her.”

“About the Admiral?”

“I know her from the time you two have spent on the Pioneer, and from all the press and publicity, but tell me how she really is. You’re closer to her than anyone else on this ship.”

Harry smiled as he carefully rubbed the lotion into the thin, hairless skin. “Well, she’s extraordinary, really. I’ve tried to figure out if she feels like a parent to me, but when I compare her with my parents, the relationship is a lot different.”

“She’s your mentor,” Amy offered.

“Yes,” Harry agreed. “But there’s more to it than that. I consider her a good friend and would do anything for her. But as a commanding officer, she’s got to be best. One time she came down hard on me because of something I did wrong, and she told me that even though what I’d done meant I wasn’t the perfect officer anymore, it also meant that I was a better man.” He decided to skip over the details about his illegal love affair. “She draws the best out of people, and over the last eight years, I’ve tried to do whatever I could to make her proud of me.”

Amy asked, “She seems like she’s very forgiving and compassionate.”

“Oh, yes, definitely. Especially when it comes to her crew.”

“I wish I knew her better.”

Harry smiled. “I have an idea.”

“What’s that?”

“Voyager’s welcome-home anniversary party will be rescheduled when she’s able to attend. Would you like to go with me?”

Amy took a moment to think about it before she nodded. “I’d love to, if I can. What kind of party will it be?”

“I’m not sure, but others will be bringing a date, too, so you wouldn’t feel out of place.” He threw that in to see if she picked up on the word date.

She blushed again and said, “I hope that we’ll be in orbit.”

“I suspect that you will be, since she’ll be there.” He indicated Kathryn.

They heard someone enter sickbay, so she stood and said, “I’ll be back.”

After she was gone, Harry whispered, “Well, Admiral, looks like you just got me a date. I’m sure you’ll be thrilled to know that you were so helpful while sedated.” He finished applying the lotion and took a minute to examine her arm. Her skin had a yellow hue and was nearly translucent with dark pink lines of newly regenerated tissue crossing her entire forearm at irregular intervals. He fought down his revulsion as he realized that they indicated where she’d been bound.

He tenderly ran his fingers up and down her whole arm, trying to transfer some kind of invisible healing power that would speed up the process. Her hands had always been slender, but he could clearly see every bone in her fingers and each tendon in the back of her hand. Afraid to massage deeply, he softly caressed her skin to instill some warmth and comfort.

He was startled when she moaned and flexed her fingers. “Admiral,” he whispered, not wanting to frighten her. He held her hand carefully and touched her shoulder to see if she was waking up.

She murmured hoarsely, “... knew you’d come.”

“I’m here,” he replied, not sure if she was lucid.

“Love you,” she said softly as her fingers squeezed his.

He bit back a smile when he realized that she mistook him for Chakotay. Attempting to give her some comfort, he said, “I love you, too.” It wasn’t a lie, and he knew that Chakotay would want her comforted in whatever way she needed. He wondered if someone had told Chakotay that she’d been rescued. He certainly hoped so, but he’d check on it when he returned to his quarters, just to make sure.

Kathryn felt the pull of consciousness creeping back to her. She was happy where she was. While asleep, there was no pain, no fear. She felt strange. Something was different. Instead of the hard floor, she felt like she was floating. Instead of the acrid smell, she sensed the familiar scent of a starship. Something was holding her down, though. Her arms felt like lead, and whatever was on top of her kept her from drifting away.

Kathryn forced her right arm up, but it was blocked. She groaned in frustration, trying to force it away, but it was too strong. Someone was talking to her, someone was touching her shoulder. Adrenaline rushed through her and she cringed and pulled away. Someone was going to hurt her again and she had to fight back. Her heart was beating fast, pumping hard as she struggled against the aggressor.

The voice continued speaking and Kathryn began to notice that the touch was gentle and soothing. The fear began to fade as she realized that whoever was with her wasn’t trying to hurt her. Was it Chakotay? The soft voice became clearer and Kathryn had to force her eyes open to see who it was.

“Admiral?” A beautiful, red-haired woman looked down on her with kind, but concerned eyes. “You’re safe. You’re okay.”

Kathryn stared at the woman for a long moment until she realized that something was on her face. Her arm was easier to move this time and she managed to pull it up, although the movement was jerky and filled with pain. She touched the soft tubes that were connected to her nose and looked up at the woman for an answer.

“It’s to help your lungs. You needed more oxygen.” Beverly took it off. “We’ll see how you do without it.”

“Where am I?” she croaked.

“You’re on the Pioneer. Do you remember?”

Kathryn tried to think, but there was an itch on her cheek that was bothering her. She reached up to scratch it and encountered something stuck there. The woman redirected Kathryn's hand.

"It's a feeding tube. Better leave it alone for now."

"Feeding?"

Beverly nodded. "To help your stomach adjust to receiving food again."

Kathryn closed her eyes to try to remember, and she recalled something. "Chakotay? He was here?"

Beverly shook her head sadly. "No, he wasn't. Commander Kim said you thought he was Captain Chakotay."

"Oh," Kathryn said, deflated. She wanted Chakotay's touch desperately, and not having it left her feeling bereft.

"Are you in pain?"

Kathryn took a quick inventory and decided that she was mostly okay. "Headache. Sore. My arms hurt."

Beverly scanned her and said, "Let's see what we can do."

Kathryn studied the beautiful woman as she took readings, and finally realized who she was. "You're Dr. Crusher?"

"That's right." Her face lit up with a smile. "Do you remember meeting me?"

"From the Enterprise." Kathryn was starting to feel more aware and looked around. "What ship is this?"

"The Pioneer – your flagship."

Memories flooded back all at once, and Kathryn gasped in fear. "They... they..."

"Shhh..." Beverly touched her shoulder, "You're safe, Admiral."

"Bernie – I need to talk to him! Captain Young!" Her breathing was fast and hard from the energy surge that came with all the agonizing memories.

Beverly tapped her commbadge. "Sickbay to the bridge."

"Yes, Dr. Crusher," Bernie replied anxiously. "Is everything all right?"

“Yes, Captain. Admiral Janeway is awake and urgently wishes to speak with you.”

“On my way.”

When the communication ended, Beverly said, “Try to slow your breathing. I’ll be right back with an analgesic.”

Kathryn nodded and relaxed into the pillow, surprised that she was alive. Her alarm began to fade as she accepted that the danger had passed.

When Bernie arrived a few minutes later, Beverly intercepted him and whispered, “Captain, I’m afraid that she’s fallen asleep again.”

“In the three minutes it took me to get down here?” Bernie stepped over to Kathryn’s bed and looked down at her.

“Not asleep,” Kathryn said huskily without opening her eyes. The exertion of her panic attack had taxed her energy.

Bernie put a hand on her shoulder. “Welcome back, Kathryn.”

She looked up at him and saw that his eyes were surrounded by dark circles and he appeared exhausted. “You don’t look so good, Captain.”

He shook his head in amusement and closed his eyes for a brief moment. Pulling up a stool, he sat down and rested his elbows next to her shoulder. “I’ve been a little concerned about my favorite admiral.”

“Oh? Did she get into trouble?”

“A little.” He found her arm. “May I hold your hand?”

She nodded and moved her fingers slightly in response. His touch made her arms hurt more, but she welcomed it nonetheless.

“How are you feeling?”

“Much better than...” Kathryn frowned. “How long have I been onboard?” She coughed some.

“About twelve hours.”

“Ah,” she closed her eyes to rest. “Better than I felt thirteen hours ago.”

“I’m so sorry, Kathryn.”

She would have shrugged if she'd had the energy. "It wasn't unexpected that someone might try something." Looking at him again, she asked, "Do you have them in custody?"

"They're in the Enterprise's brig. We didn't want them on the same ship as you."

Glancing at Beverly on the other side of the room, Kathryn asked, "Close by?"

"The Enterprise is our wingman until we've brought you safely home, but we're holding position in sector 032 until we receive further orders from Command. We aren't convinced that we have everyone involved, yet."

"You don't." Kathryn stated. "They were planning to meet with buyers in three days. I don't know how long ago that was."

"Buyers?"

"For me." She closed her eyes again, feeling the need to rest. "Have they been interrogated?"

"Yes, but no one is talking."

"Norval or something. Can't remember." She frowned. "He's the weak spot. Offer him immunity and protection."

"Immunity? After what they did to you?"

She squeezed his hand and looked at him again. "I doubt he helped, unless it was against his will. He's been coerced. Scared of the boss. Pratin, I think."

"All right. I'll talk it over with Picard."

"If it's not too late, we can set up a bust. Offer me up as bait."

"No, Kathryn. There is absolutely no way I'm sending you back in there."

"You have to," she insisted. "It won't work unless they see me."

"We can send Lieutenant Brooks in as your decoy."

"No! I won't let you put her in danger." She didn't want anyone else to experience that feeling of helplessness. Her adrenaline surged, causing her to start coughing uncontrollably. An alarm went off as she pulled her hand away to cover her mouth.

"Kathryn..." Bernie stood over her, helpless to do anything.

Beverly rushed over and injected a hypospray. "Try to take a deep breath, Admiral."

The coughing subsided, leaving her feeling wiped out. She looked up when she felt Beverly replace the oxygen tubing into her nose.

She scanned Kathryn and said, "You're recovering from a severe case of pneumonia. You've got to take it easy."

She nodded her understanding and then said hoarsely, "I don't like it, Bernie."

Beverly said, "Captain Young, we should let her rest."

He acknowledged Beverly and then said, "Kathryn, if I'm going to risk someone's life, it's certainly not going to be your's. Not in this condition. Starfleet is not in the habit of sending officers into undercover operations who aren't physically able to defend themselves." He touched her hand again. "I'll discuss a plan with Admiral Khurma and Captain Picard and get back to you."

She knew she would be easily outnumbered and there wasn't a thing she could do about it. Chakotay would be pleased. Chakotay. "Bernie?"

"Yes?"

"Does Chakotay know I'm here?"

"Admiral Khurma said he'd get word to him, but I haven't heard anything back, yet."

Kathryn closed her eyes in acceptance. She felt Bernie's hand move up to her shoulder. "I'm sure he told him as soon as he could. Chakotay's been kept in the loop the whole time, and he even helped with some of the data analysis."

"Thanks," she said as unwanted tears formed behind her eyelids.

When Bernie was gone, Beverly put a tissue in Kathryn's hand and commented, "Those emotions just surge right up when you don't want them, don't they?"

Kathryn wiped her eyes, cringing as the muscles in her arms and shoulders protested painfully. "Always when we're weakest."

"After what you've been through, they're perfectly natural."

"I'm worried about my family," she said tiredly. "Seventeen days is a long time."

"It was interminable," Beverly said. "But we'll get you home soon."

“It’s just that…” Kathryn couldn’t stop the tears that fell and she felt oddly comfortable confiding in Beverly. “I doubt you want to hear all this, but he and my family, I don’t know that they could bear it.”

“I want to hear whatever you’d like to tell me,” she said with compassion. “I’ve faced death a few times and I always worry about my family – my son and the man I love. But I also know that people are strong when they have to be. To quote you from one of your speeches, those of us in Starfleet have our own special families to pull each other through.”

Kathryn smiled a little through her tears. “Throwing my own words back at me?” She wiped her eyes and tried to fight a yawn.

“You were very inspiring, especially to those of us who live in a starship community.” Beverly touched her shoulder and said, “Try to get some sleep and let the captains worry about everything else. I suspect they’re more than eager to finish the job and see some justice.”

“Thank you, Doctor, for listening.”

“You’re welcome, and please, call me Beverly. If you need a friend to talk to, I can be here in minutes.”

“I appreciate the offer, although I’m not sure how much I could tell you.”

Straightening the blankets, Beverly said, “You can probably tell me just about anything. Aside from doctor/patient confidentiality, I carry the rank of captain so I have a pretty high security clearance.”

After another yawn, Kathryn closed her eyes. “Depending on how long we’re out here, I might take you up on that, Beverly.”

“I hope you do, Admiral.”

“Kathryn,” she said drowsily.

“Kathryn,” Beverly gathered up her patient’s hair and laid it gently on the pillow as she drifted off to sleep.

When Kathryn opened her eyes the next time, she felt more alert, although still very weak. Her arms were throbbing, but she assumed that was to be expected after they’d been bound for so long. Glancing around the darkened sickbay, she saw the young Dr. Murphy sitting in her office. Kathryn closed her eyes and snuggled into the pillow to try

to go back to sleep, but the pain was distracting and she was too weak to make herself comfortable.

“Admiral?” Amy whispered tentatively.

Kathryn looked up and said, “I’m awake, Doctor.”

“Computer, increase lighting slowly to twenty five percent.” Amy’s hand shook slightly as she scanned her patient with the tri-corder. “How are you feeling?”

“Uncomfortable and sore, but not too bad considering.”

Amy looked at her nervously and asked, “What can I do to help?”

Kathryn looked at the young woman with concern. “I was about to ask you that. Are you okay, Doctor?”

Amy nodded quickly with embarrassment. “Yes, I... I’m sorry, Admiral. I’m just a little nervous having you as a patient.”

Smiling with understanding, she said, “You have nothing to be nervous about. I’m pretty easy-going, especially in this state.”

“That’s what Harry... I mean, Commander Kim, said.” She blushed and set down her tri-corder.

Kathryn enjoyed seeing the little spark in the young woman’s eye. “You and Harry have become friends?”

“Yes,” Amy said quickly and then asked, “How can I make you more comfortable? Are you in pain?”

“My arms are throbbing. I think that’s what woke me up, and I still have a headache, but that’s typical for me. I’m thirsty, and I’d like to turn on my side.” She hated giving her such a long list of complaints, but she was the doctor and that’s what she was there for.

“All right,” Amy left to get a hypo.

Kathryn looked after her in amusement. Young officers were always nervous around her, and she had no idea why. It’s not like she was that scary. She looked up when she felt the hypo deliver medication into her neck. “What time is it?”

“Mid-morning – almost ten.” She went to the replicator and returned with a cup of water with a bendable straw. “Take small sips, Admiral. Your stomach can’t handle much.”

“Is that why I still have this tube in my nose?”

“Yes, it’ll be a couple of days before you can switch to clear liquids. We have to be careful not to disrupt your electrolyte balance.”

Kathryn knew what that meant and asked, “How are my kidneys?” as she tried to sip only enough to wet her mouth. Her hands were unsteady and Amy had to help her hold the cup.

“You’re in renal failure, but it should start improving soon.”

Kathryn indicated that she was finished drinking. “How long has it been since I was last awake?”

“Dr. Crusher said you spoke to Captain Young late yesterday evening.”

“So a little over twelve hours.” Kathryn closed her eyes, feeling exhausted.

“Would you like to lie on your right side or left?”

“Right, I suppose.” She chose that side so she’d be able to see people coming in and out of the room.

Amy pulled back the blankets and then put her hands under Kathryn’s legs and back.

“You’re not going to do this alone, are you?” Kathryn asked, alarmed.

“You only weigh about forty kilos, Admiral.” Amy easily picked her up and scooted her over to the edge of the bed.

“Forty?” Kathryn looked at her arms, realizing just how thin she was. “I lost that much weight so quickly?”

Amy came around the bed and helped her roll to her side. “The infections and that annoying parasite made it worse.”

Kathryn cringed in pain. “I don’t think this was a good idea – too much pressure on my shoulder.”

“I think I can help you with that.”

“How?” When Amy put a second pillow under her head, she realized sadly that she didn’t have the strength to lift it herself.

“Bolsters and pillows,” she said as she placed the supports behind Kathryn’s back and helped her roll back slightly. “Do you feel stable?”

“Not quite. It’s my arm,” Kathryn said with frustration. “I’m sorry.”

“Not at all, Admiral. I see the problem.” She adjusted Kathryn and then added a pillow between her knees and one to support her upper arm.

Kathryn said tiredly, “Now I feel all packed up and ready for shipment.”

“Is it too much?”

“No, it’s fine. Very cozy.” Kathryn sighed as Amy pulled the warm blankets back over her. “Before I drift off again, would you call the captain and ask if he has any news?”

“Sure.” She tapped her commbadge. “Murphy to Young.”

“Go ahead, Doctor.”

“Admiral Janeway is asking if you have any news, sir.”

“Can she hear me?”

Kathryn responded, “Yes, Captain.”

Amy stood by while they used her comm signal to converse.

“You were exactly right about the man you called Norval. After I promised him our complete protection, he went right to work advising our combined security teams.”

“Good. When will this happen?”

“Tonight, just before midnight. We’re preparing the freighter for launch now, and if you can manage to stay awake for another ten minutes, I have something to give you.”

“What’s that?”

“If I told you, it would ruin the surprise.” Bernie chuckled. “I’ll be there soon. Young out.”

Kathryn looked at Amy with a raised eyebrow. “What do you suppose he has?”

“I don’t know,” she said with curiosity. “But while we’re waiting, do you mind if I close the arch and initiate a treatment on your heart?”

“Will I fit under it with all these pillows?”

Amy laughed. “Yes, I’m sure you will.” She pushed a button to close the bed. “I should have done this before we turned you over, but it’ll still work.”

“Are you sure? What sort of treatment is it?” Kathryn looked at the arch nervously. The confined space made her feel anxious.

“Your heart is infected with a rather stubborn organism that we’re trying to filter out. It has hardened the cardiac muscle so we’re softening it by doing regeneration every four hours. Your body has so few proteins for regeneration that we’re focusing our efforts in the critical areas first, and then we’ll be able to rebuild some of your lost muscle mass.”

Kathryn sighed as the list of ailments continued to grow. “With all these problems, how was it that I was still alive when you found me?”

“I’m not entirely sure, Admiral, but I know that if we’d been delayed much longer, you wouldn’t have been.”

Kathryn closed her eyes and tried to ignore the worry she held for her mom and Chakotay. She felt the tears threaten again, but wiped them away. Amy noticed and handed her a tissue. She accepted it with a little embarrassment and broke the tension by saying, “I tried to convince Harry once that captains don’t cry, and that I just had something in my eye. He pretended to believe me.”

“Then I’ll pretend to believe that admirals don’t cry, either.” Amy said without looking at her so that she would have a little privacy. “That, and with all that’s going on with your body, your hormones are significantly out of balance, too. I could treat them, but it’s better to let them stabilize naturally.”

Kathryn yawned in agreement and blinked hard to try to stay awake. “When you’re finished, could I have another sip of water?”

“Sure,” Amy paused the treatment so she could hold the cup for her. “May I ask you a question about Harry? Woman to woman?”

Kathryn was amused. “Sure, although I’m surprised that you’re comfortable enough to ask me that.”

Amy pulled away quickly. “I apologize, Admiral. I didn’t…”

“No, no, Doctor, you’re fine,” Kathryn smiled to give her reassurance. “I’m glad that I was able to put you at ease so quickly.”

“Oh,” Amy went back to the arch. “I just wanted to ask if Harry dates a lot.”

“Are you interested in him?”

“I think so. He asked me on a date, I think.”

“Harry is genuine and very sincere. I'm sure you can trust his intentions to be honorable.” She yawned before she asked, “Does that answer your question?”

“I think so.” Amy blushed. “You’re right, I can’t believe I’m talking to you about this.”

Kathryn smiled and closed her eyes, unable to keep them open. “I don’t mind. Helps me keep my mind off my own romantic woes.”

“You have romantic woes? With Captain Chakotay?” Amy covered her mouth in embarrassment. “I'm sorry. That was crossing the line.”

She yawned again. “You didn’t say anything wrong. I'm worried about how difficult this must have been for him.”

“Especially with all the publicity you’ve been getting.”

“What? My disappearance is public knowledge?” Kathryn frowned.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have told you that,” she said worriedly. “I'm sticking my foot in my mouth right and left. I'm sorry, Admiral.”

“No, no... that’s fine.” Kathryn sighed tiredly. “I should’ve realized that it would be.”

The biobed arch opened. “All done,” Amy announced, but didn’t meet Kathryn’s eyes.

“Doctor,” Kathryn said as she reached for Amy’s hand. It sent a surge of pain into her shoulder, but she ignored it. “You haven’t said anything wrong. To answer your question about Harry, I'm sure that as soon as he finds the right young lady, he’ll be more than ready to commit to a long-term relationship.”

They were interrupted by the door to sickbay opening. When Captain Young came around the bulkhead carrying a bouquet of peace roses, Kathryn gasped and new tears filled her eyes.

“Kathryn, I was given a very specific message to give you one peace rose, but I trust that whoever sent it wouldn’t mind if I gave you two dozen.”

Her lower lip trembled as she reached out to touch them. “May I hold one?”

“Of course.” He took one out and gave it to her. “May I assume these are from Captain Chakotay?”

Kathryn nodded and wiped away at her tears as she held the soft flower against her lips. “He knows I'm okay.” She looked up to see that Amy was holding a cloth handkerchief over Kathryn’s head. “Thank you.” She dabbed at her tears with it.

“I’ll set these over here so you can enjoy them.” Bernie put them on a medical cart.
“I’ve got to get back to work, but I’m glad I got to see that joy on your face.”

“Thank you, Bernie.”

“You’re welcome,” he said as he walked away, waving behind him.

Amy instructed, “Computer, reduce lighting to ten percent and initiate privacy lock on sickbay.” She tucked Kathryn’s blankets around her shoulders and said, “Time for you to get some rest.”

“Would you write a letter to Chakotay for me? Let him know what my condition is?”

“Sure. Is it okay to release your medical information?”

“Be brief and generalize. I don’t want to alarm him unnecessarily, but he’ll want to know. And tell him I’m still looking forward to the TLC he promised and the rest of that novel. I’m guessing that the letter will have to go through the Fleet Admiral, but I don’t mind him knowing my condition, either.”

Amy smiled brightly, “I’d be happy to.”

“Thank you, Doctor.”

“Would you call me Amy?”

“Yes, I would.” Kathryn smiled. “I’m glad you got over your nervousness.”

Amy smiled and nodded towards the rose. “And I’m glad that you got the good news. He sounds like quite a romantic.”

Kathryn thought about that night in Tuscany. “Yes, he certainly can be.” She closed her eyes and dreamt about the way he’d held her close while they’d looked out over the River Arno.
