

The Future is Ours – Part 20

“Don’t Let Me Go”

By Dawn

Summary: Recovery

Rated PG-13

Soon after Kathryn had fallen asleep, Dr. Joe and three nurses came into the room.

Joe asked, “Captain, would you stand up please?”

“She just fell asleep. Do we have to wake her already?”

“You won’t wake her up. She’s unconscious.”

“Unconscious?” Chakotay carefully laid Kathryn onto the bed, suddenly worried that it might be their last moment together. “Then is it too risky to do the transplant now?”

“There are more risks associated with not doing it.” Joe said as they watched the nurses fold up the sides of the bed and wheel their patient out of the room.

“Joe,” he gasped, unable to breathe.

“Captain, I think the best thing for you to do right now is to get some fresh air. This is going to take several hours.”

With barely a whisper, he said, “I feel so helpless.”

“You know that I’ll do everything in my power to save her, don’t you?”

Chakotay nodded, but couldn’t find his voice to respond otherwise.

Joe gave him a reassuring pat before leaving the room. Now alone, he stared at the tile floor where the bed had just been. The emptiness filled him, into the very core of his being. Unimaginable grief was lingering nearby, lying in wait to take over should the worst happen.

He didn’t want to feel those emotions, didn’t want to allow them inside his heart. He had to get out of the hospital, away from the anguish that threatened to overwhelm him. He ran out of the room, down the hall to the lift, and as soon as he pressed his palm on the down arrow, he heard B’Elanna calling his name. He froze in place, his head bowed against the wall.

“Chakotay?” The sound of her shoes clicking on the floor accompanied her concerned voice. “Are you okay?”

He didn’t want to look up for fear that he’d lose his tenuous control over his emotions. “I need to get out of here.”

“I understand, but we’re all here to be with you.”

The empty lift opened and he forced himself not to step inside. A sickening sensation rose from deep in his belly, and he had to swallow hard to force it back down. “I can’t, B’Elanna. Not right now.”

She was all but hugging him. “Be around people? You don’t have to talk. We just don’t want you to be alone.”

“But I want to be alone. I keep thinking about what it’s going to feel like if she doesn’t survive this, and I…”

“If it happens, it’s going to hurt like hell, but your friends are going to see you through it.” She forcibly turned him around so that he was facing her. “Listen to me, Chakotay.”

“B’Elanna…,” he begged. For what, he wasn’t sure.

“Kathryn Janeway is the heroine in the story that is our lives, and the heroine doesn’t die in the middle of it. Now, come on. I know exactly what you need.”

“Besides Kathryn?”

“Come on.” She looped her arm through his and encouraged him to move back up the hallway a short distance. They entered a meeting room where at least a dozen of their closest friends were waiting expectantly.

Chakotay froze in the doorway, and would have backed out if not for the lock B’Elanna had on his arm. “I can’t.”

She either didn’t hear him or chose to ignore him. “All right, everyone. Kathryn is in surgery and will be for awhile. What we need is some food, some poker, and some distracting conversation.”

All of their friends started moving at once. Tables were rearranged, take-out was ordered, and a forced liveliness permeated the atmosphere. Not one person told him that everything would be okay, and there was absolutely no mention of Kathryn’s recent experiences.

As the day progressed, the group’s size grew until there were almost thirty people. Given Kathryn’s celebrity status, the hospital administration permitted them to have their

impromptu reunion and even provided them with board games and access to a music database.

Late that afternoon, Chakotay's anxiety continued to grow with each passing moment. The medical staff hadn't said how long the surgery was supposed to take, but it had been over six hours since she'd fallen asleep in his arms. The urge to find her and protect her was growing ever stronger; even though the logical part of his brain told him that she was in good hands.

Tom cleared his throat and asked, "Chakotay? Need any cards?"

He stared blankly at the younger man for just a moment before he realized that he'd been asked a question. "Sorry. My mind is elsewhere."

"That's all right. Would you like us to keep avoiding the elephant or should we join you in watching the clock?"

Harry commented, "That has got to be the slowest clock I've ever seen. Something must be wrong with its ticker."

Chakotay replied absently, "The elephant needs a new ticker."

It took a moment, but everyone at the table started laughing. B'Elanna came over and asked, "What's so funny?"

"Oh, nothing," Harry said. "We're just a little punched."

"Punched?"

Tom corrected, "The term is punch-drunk, Harry."

"Oh. Yeah, that." He tossed his cards onto the table and leaned back to stretch. "This wait is maddening."

B'Elanna elbowed Harry in the side and then scowled at him.

Tom said, "It's all right, B'E. We're not completely ignoring the situation anymore."

Chakotay rattled the ice around in his glass. "Just don't ask why the surgery is taking so long. I don't think I could handle any speculation about what could be going wrong."

"Nothing is going wrong," B'Elanna insisted. "You want to hear my theory?"

All the men looked at her and said unanimously, "No."

“Too bad. I’m going to tell you anyway.” She pinched the side of Tom’s neck as she walked past him to sit in the empty chair. “Kathryn is an extremely complicated woman.”

When nothing more was forthcoming, Harry asked, “What does that have to do with anything?”

Rolling her eyes, B’Elanna replied, “Well, the way I see it, her heart is what makes her so complicated, and since that’s what they’re messing with, I’m sure they’re finding more neural thingies connected to it than they expected.”

“Thingies?” Chakotay asked.

She shrugged. “A technical term.”

Tom shook his head in amazement. “How is it that you can piece together a slipstream drive out of spare parts, but you can’t remember a simple term like neural pathways?”

“Because slipstreams have nothing to do with medical science, that’s why.”

Harry asked Chakotay, “Should I mention the biological properties of gel packs?”

“I wouldn’t,” Tom mumbled.

The door opened and everyone’s attention was immediately drawn to who had just walked through. Dr. Joe’s expression did not contain any trace of the smugness that would’ve instantly set them at ease.

Joe immediately found Chakotay. Placing a caring hand on his back, he whispered, “Captain, may I speak with you alone?”

Chakotay was frozen to the spot as a wave of grief nearly crushed him. His voice trembled as he asked, “Doctor?”

Recognizing the fear in the room, Joe quickly held up his hands to placate everyone. “She’s still with us.”

Chakotay took a sip of water in an effort to wash away the acrid taste of bile that had suddenly jumped to the back of his throat. “If you’ll tell us all at once, it’ll save me from having to repeat it.”

“Are you sure?”

Chakotay nodded, his eyes closed to brace for the anticipated bad news. When Harry and B’Elanna took hold of his hands, he felt bolstered by their support.

Joe spoke louder so that everyone in the room could hear him. “We finished the transplant, but because of Admiral Janeway’s weakened condition, her body isn’t accepting the new heart. Her vital organs are being externally sustained while we prepare to perform a second procedure in the next twenty-four hours with a different type of heart.”

Tom asked, “Why would a different type of heart make a difference?”

“The artificial heart relies on the body’s electrical impulses to keep it going. The one that we just placed in her is an extremely complicated piece of technology. If she were healthier, it would work perfectly, but at the moment, it’s not sustaining itself.”

“So...” Harry urged Joe to continue.

“So we’re giving her body time to rest before we place a simpler piece of technology in her that will sustain her until she’s strong enough to handle the heart that was designed for her.”

They all looked at Chakotay, waiting for him to say something. When he didn’t, Tom asked the difficult question, “What’s the chance that she won’t be strong enough to make it through a second procedure?”

Joe said, “I can’t answer that, but suffice it to say, we’re determined to keep her alive.”

Total silence gripped the entire room until Chakotay shakily stated, “I want to see her.”

“She’s not conscious, Captain.”

“I don’t care. I need to be with her.”

Joe nodded and began to escort Chakotay out of the room until B’Elanna stopped them.

“Chakotay? Do you want one of us to go with you?”

“No, I’d like to be alone with her. She...” He held his fist against his mouth to fight back the tears that threatened to overwhelm him.

Joe said, “Let’s go see her, Captain.”

Chakotay held up his hand to forestall Joe, while he spoke to the group. “She told me this morning that if she didn’t survive, she wanted to die in my arms. So, if you’ll excuse me, I need to make sure I’m there for her.”

After he left the room, B’Elanna looked around and there wasn’t a single dry eye amongst them. She stood abruptly and opened her mouth to say something, but no words came out. Finally, she shook her head and admitted, “I don’t know what to do.”

Matt Patterson said, "There's nothing you can do. It's not in our hands."

Owen added, "As much as we would all be devastated by her death, that man is going to need us to be strong for him."

Tom said, "They're engaged. Did you all know that?" Some nodded and all the others acted as if they weren't the least bit surprised.

"This..." Khurma shook his head. "I know the rest of you won't say this with me here, so I'm going to say it for you. What has happened to her is unforgivable."

"Keep going," B'Elanna demanded as anger boiled up inside of her. "Say the next part."

"Commander?"

"Say the part about how you're not going to rest until there's some justice."

The room was silent as Khurma looked intently at B'Elanna. "I'm not going to rest until there's justice. Unfortunately, that may take awhile."

Owen handed Khurma a cup of coffee. "You're going to need this."

"Thanks."

Tom took the cue from his dad and said, "I think we all need to get some rest."

B'Elanna shook her head. "We can't leave Chakotay right now."

Harry looked at Amy with an unspoken question. When she nodded in response, Harry said, "Amy and I will stay here. You all go home and we'll send an update as soon as we know something."

Most of the people stood and began to quietly tidy up the room and gather their coats. B'Elanna remained rooted to the spot, staring at the floor. Tom placed a kiss on her head and let her be alone with her thoughts for a few minutes while he said goodnight to those who had come.

When only four were left, B'Elanna said, "I need to check on Chakotay."

"Harry will take care of him," Tom said as he held her coat up.

She held up her hand and was about to snap at her husband, but stopped herself. Closing her fingers, she merely said, "I won't be long unless he needs me," as she walked out the door.

Not sure where to go, B'Elanna decided to go back to Kathryn's room and was glad to find the security guards still stationed outside of it. They started to stop her until she glared them into submission.

When she walked into the room, she found Chakotay sitting next to the bed with his head bowed. "I don't mean to interrupt," she said hesitantly.

"You're not." He picked up Kathryn's hand and brought it to his lips for a simple kiss. "She looks like she's just sleeping, doesn't she?"

"That's all she is doing." B'Elanna stood behind him and put her hands on his shoulders. "She's just patiently waiting for the doctors to get it right."

"Don't, B'Elanna."

"Don't what?"

"Don't make light of this. I know you're trying to help, but, not now."

Not sure what to say, she settled for hugging him from behind.

"This is it," he said.

"This is what?"

He took a shuddering breath before he managed, "I'm going to lose her."

"No..."

"The doctors are grasping at straws. Kathryn knew she wasn't strong enough to survive this."

"You can't give up."

"That's not what this is."

"Then what is it?" B'Elanna asked.

"I've got to say goodbye and let her go."

"No, Chakotay, you can't."

"But don't you see? My frame of mind has no bearing on the outcome. If I refuse to acknowledge that she's dying, I'll miss my opportunity to say goodbye."

“Chakotay...” She ran her fingers through her hair and let them sit, still entangled, at the back of her neck. “Did she say goodbye to you?”

“Yes. She made me promise that I’d be okay, and she told me where to take her ashes.”

“Oh, God.” B’Elanna couldn’t stop the tears from streaming down her face.

“So, I need your help.” He turned to look at her, and only then did he notice that she was crying. Standing up, he pulled her into his arms and hugged her close. “I was in your place just this morning when she was saying all of this to me.”

“I want to hit something.”

“Me, too.” Pulling back a little, he put a finger under her chin and lifted until she was looking at him. “I need you to do something.”

“What?”

“If we lose her, nothing is going to make this better, but she made me promise that I will surround myself with friends. I need you to make sure I keep that promise. Can you do that for Kathryn?”

“I could do anything for her.”

“Thank you.” His eyes filled with tears, but his smile was full of empathy.

“I want you to do something for her, too, Old Man.”

“What’s that?”

Poking him hard in the chest, she all but yelled, “Don’t. Give. Up!”

He had to laugh as he rubbed the sore spot she’d just made. “Not that it’ll do any good, but all right. I just promised her something to that affect anyway.”

“What was it?”

“The promise?” he asked as he looked back at his sleeping beauty.

“Yeah.”

“I told her that I’d be strong as long as she’d do the same.”

B’Elanna pulled him into another hug. “Sounds like a good deal to me.”

After they held each other for a long moment, Chakotay asked, "Will you tell everyone that I'm not going back in there tonight? They should go on home."

She stepped out of his arms and got a tissue to blow her nose. "They've all left already. Just Tom, Harry, and his girlfriend are left."

"Amy?"

"Yeah." B'Elanna rolled her eyes. "I don't know if I like her."

Chakotay motioned towards Kathryn. "She has taken Amy under her wing."

"Another daughter figure?"

"Pretty much."

"You two need to have kids, Chakotay, or you're going to end up parenting every lost soul she comes across."

With a pat on her cheek, he replied, "Amy is in good company."

"Thanks, I think," she said with a frown.

He took a drink of his water and said, "You all should go and get some rest. I'm fine."

"Fine?"

"I'll probably fall asleep soon, and even if I don't, I doubt I'll be very good company."

B'Elanna shrugged. "Good company or not, Harry and Amy are staying for awhile. They'll be in the lounge if you need to talk."

"Thanks." He escorted her towards the door, saying, "I'd like to promise that I'll call if anything changes, but I have a feeling I'll forget."

"Don't worry about it. We'll check in, first thing in the morning." She gave him a quick kiss and added, "You are loved by many, and you're not alone."

He groaned. "Oh, B'Elanna."

"What?"

"It's just that..." Shaking his head, he finished, "I've said that to her so many times that I can't even count them all."

She pulled him into a strong hug and said, "It goes for both of you."

After B'Elanna left, Chakotay stepped into Kathryn's bathroom and rinsed his face with cold water. He stared blankly at his reflection for a few minutes until he realized that he'd zoned out. Shaking it off, he dried his hands and went back and stood next to Kathryn's bed.

"All right, love. I have orders from your favorite engineer not to give up, and just so you know, that goes for you, too. We've been in tough situations before. This is no different. Are you with me?"

He stared at her as if expecting a reply. When nothing was forthcoming, he nodded smartly. "All right, then. I'll take your silence as agreement." He pulled up the chair and took her hand in his. "Want to know why?"

After a short moment, he answered the question. "Because when you don't agree with me, you tell me in no uncertain terms the way it's going to be. Since you're so quiet, you obviously have nothing to add. Either that, or I'm going a little crazy."

Chakotay studied her too-thin fingers and noticed how rough her fingernails were. He didn't recall having ever seen them in such bad shape. Although it was minor in the scheme of things, knowing that she hadn't been able to care for something so small caused grief to well up inside him once more.

"Kathryn," he whispered hoarsely. "What am I going to do without you? Don't you know that you're my life?"

He kissed each fingertip and said, "I wish I had a nail file... I tell you what, love, you just hang on and we'll make you better. Whatever it takes, no matter how long it takes. We're going to move mountains to make sure you get to do all those things you want to do. You and I are going to travel to beautiful places, we're going to make this galaxy a better place, and we're going to have babies – as many as you want."

"And if you don't..." He took a deep breath and pushed past his turbulent emotions. "If you don't make it, I'm going to do those things for you. I don't know how I'll have babies without you, but the rest... I'll finish your work for you. All right?" Tears were pouring down his cheeks. "This isn't the end of your story, but if you need to leave us, rest assured that I will..." He wiped his cheeks. "I will always love you and I will finish what you started."

"But you listen to me, Kathryn. You will be strong and you will survive this, because I'm not talking to any reporters until this is decided one way or another." He ran his fingers through his hair and bowed his head. "I'm sorry. I just don't know how I'm going to handle losing you. I just know that I have to find a way."

He continued talking to her all through the night to make sure that she knew he was there. Knowing how stubborn she could be, he figured at some point she was going to sit up and

start arguing with him. He tried saying things that he knew she'd disagree with, just to get her goat. He tried kissing her and talking about the family they'd have some day. While he hoped that he was getting through to her, he was afraid that he was making himself go mad in the process.

Just before dawn, Harry and Amy came into the room. "Chakotay, sorry for interrupting," Harry said. "We just wanted to see how you two were doing."

As Amy checked Kathryn's vitals, Chakotay said, "I'm great. Healthy as an ox. She, on the other hand..."

"...is stable," Amy finished. "So long as she's connected to all of this equipment."

Hopefully, Chakotay asked, "What do you know about the two hearts?"

"Not enough." Amy placed her hand on Kathryn's sternum. "I keep thinking that if I'd known more..."

"No," Harry stopped her. "You had Dr. Crusher advising you every step of the way. What's going on now is not your fault."

"Still..."

"Stop," Chakotay interrupted. "Dr. Murphy..."

"Please, call me Amy."

"All right, Amy. I want you to listen to me carefully."

"Yes, sir?"

"Kathryn has taken an interest in you, as she has many young officers." He nodded at Harry. "Him included."

Hesitantly she said, "I'm honored to know that, sir."

"If she were able to talk to you right now, she'd tell you that it does no good to second guess yourself. The more doubts you let affect you, the slower your response is in critical situations. Know that you did the best you could with the resources and information that were available to you at the time."

Harry added, "And really, Amy, Dr. Crusher was with you every step of the way. You are not solely responsible for this."

"I let her go home instead of to the hospital where she belonged."

Chakotay pointed out, "Dr. Zimmerman let her stay at home."

"Did she give the Doctor a choice?" Harry asked.

"Yes, she did. After a close call, she was ready to come here, but Joe assured her there was nothing that could be done here until they had more information." Chakotay noticed that the young doctor had stopped listening to them. "Amy?"

"Shhh," she said quickly as she re-opened her medical tri-corder. "I felt a change."

"A good one?"

Intent on her readings, she barely shook her head. "Call her doctor. There's a fluctuation in her breathing pattern."

Chakotay slapped the call button on the panel beside the bed. "We need Zimmerman! NOW!"

Amy threw open the medical supply cabinet and pulled out a bag valve mask. "Captain, secure the mask over her mouth and nose. Get an air-tight seal."

Chakotay did as instructed; holding Kathryn's face firmly in his hands while whispering, "Stay with us, love."

Amy pumped air with one hand while holding the tri-corder with the other.

Joe ran into the room with two nurses hot on his tail. "Report!"

"Agonal respiration, Doctor. She needs a ventilator."

"That can't be." Joe took his own set of scans.

Anxiously, Chakotay asked, "What does that mean?"

Joe shook his head in dismay as he studied the readings. "It would indicate that she's already past cardiac arrest, but the heart is still functioning."

Amy pointed out, "But not optimally. Could her brain think she's in cardiac arrest?"

"I suppose, if the heart isn't sending the right impulses back to the brain, but if it's functioning, it should be processing impulses correctly."

Chakotay shouted, "Who's the expert on this heart? Get them in here, now!"

"I am, Captain," Joe informed him. "Nurses, get me the following..."

As Joe shouted commands, Chakotay bent over so that his lips were resting against Kathryn's forehead. He whispered, "Hang on, my love. Don't let go."

After the medical team left, Chakotay felt completely numb from head to toe. Harry and Amy were still with him, as were Gretchen and Phoebe. He was standing away from the bed, near the window, watching Kathryn from across the room.

Gretchen asked, "Chakotay? Are you all right?"

His face slowly turned to look at her. "No, I'm not all right."

Amy offered, "This ventilator will keep her alive."

He clamped his eyes shut and said, "I feel like I'm going to be sick."

Harry quickly crossed the room, grabbed the trash can, and guided Chakotay to a chair. "Sit down. Maybe it'll pass."

"This is not something that's going to pass," he shouted. "Look at her!"

"Chakotay," Gretchen said softly. "Maybe you should get away from here. You've..."

"I can't leave her."

"I know how you feel."

"Damn it! How could you possibly know how I feel?" As soon as he'd shouted at her, he felt guilty. "I'm sorry, Gretchen."

She came over and took his hand. "You don't need to apologize. As I said, I know how you feel. I lost Kathryn's father because of his involvement with Starfleet."

"I know."

"And while the circumstances are different, I know the unbearable feelings of loss, emptiness, and loneliness that you're feeling. It was the second most horrible thing I've ever experienced."

"I'm afraid to ask what the first is."

She motioned towards her daughter. "Losing my Katie, but she's been given back to me over and over again."

"Thought so," he said with an exhausted sigh.

Everyone in the room was silent for a moment as they watched Kathryn sleep. The ventilator mask covered most of her face as it supplied the life-giving oxygen that she needed.

Harry asked, "Chakotay, did you sleep at all last night?"

"No."

"And the night before?"

"A few hours."

"I figured as much. You look awful."

Unemotionally, he replied, "Thanks."

"All right," Harry said as he rubbed his hands together. "Here's what we're going to do. I'm going to organize a rotation of her family and friends to sit with her so that you don't have to worry about her being alone. You're going to go home and sleep. Can you handle that?"

"I can't go." Chakotay clutched at his chest. "If she starts to die, I need to be here."

Amy said, "She's not going to die while she's on that ventilator and these other machines. They will sustain her life indefinitely."

"But there's a chance she may never wake up," he pointed out.

Amy asked everyone in the room, "Who is designated as her power of attorney?"

Chakotay replied, "I am. She did that last August."

"All right, then. The only way she's going to die now is for you to take her off the machines."

"Amy," Harry warned.

"Hear me out. All I'm trying to say is that you, Chakotay, can go home and sleep because she will not die while you're away. She can only get better at this point, and you being here is not going to impact that one way or the other."

Chakotay shook his head sadly. "I understand what you're saying, but I can't leave her. What if she wakes up while I'm gone? Last two times, I wasn't here. I don't want that to happen again."

Amy said, "She's in a coma. There will be clear signs for at least an hour that she'll be coming out of it. Possibly an entire day or two."

Phoebe said, "Trust us to watch over her, Chakotay. Go home and sleep for awhile. Your head will be clearer."

Rubbing his face, he admitted, "I am exhausted."

"Come on," Gretchen said as she tugged on his arm. "Let's put you to bed."

"Just a moment." He went to Kathryn's side and stroked her hair back from her face. Placing a kiss on her forehead, he whispered, "I love you."

Once they were gone, Amy said, "He's really in sad shape."

"No, he's not," Harry replied. "He's exhausted, but I think he's doing remarkably well, considering."

"He's afraid that she'll die while he's not looking," she pointed out.

"That's a very legitimate fear for him because she's come really close far too many times. I'm a little apprehensive about leaving her, too."

"Well," Amy said with a sigh. "There's nothing else really that can be done at this point. She'll either come out of this or she won't."

Phoebe butted in. "How can you say that?"

Amy motioned towards the bed. "She's on life-support."

"I'm aware of that, but how can you be so flippant about her condition?"

"I'm sorry if I offended you."

"Look, I know that you're a new doctor and all, but you've got to work on your bedside manner, hon." Phoebe shook her head in dismay. "Or is this your way of coping? This 'it is what it is' attitude."

"Well, it is how I cope. We're taught in medical school to separate our personal feelings from our job as physician."

Harry turned Amy towards him and gently held her arms. "Although you just saved her life, you're not here as her physician. You're here as her friend."

"I'm both."

He nodded. "I know, but a heavy dose of optimism will help regardless."

"Weren't we trying to get him to leave, though?"

"Yes, and while he's very understanding, I don't believe that this was the best time to broach the topic of his power to terminate her life support."

Phoebe didn't say anything, but she closed her eyes and clasped her hands together in front of her mouth.

"I was just trying to help ease his worries."

He nodded and then turned to Phoebe. "Can you stay with her for awhile?"

"Absolutely, but I have to pick up my daughter at noon. Mom might be back by then."

"Okay, when she gets back, have her contact me about how long she can stay, then I'll find someone else to be here. I'm sure that Tom or B'Elanna would come right away."

"Sure, Harry," Phoebe went over to her sister's bedside and picked up Kathryn's hand. Looking down, she said, "Maybe I'll work on her nails or something."

"We've been here for about twenty-four hours and I think we could use some rest, too." He stood on the other side of the bed and leaned over just as Chakotay had. While gently rubbing Kathryn's shoulder, he whispered, "Don't stay away too long. We miss you."

Harry and Amy walked back to his apartment in near silence. Once they got inside, he asked, "Hungry?"

"Not really." She hesitated before asking, "Should I beam back up to the Pioneer?"

"What for? Do you need something?" he asked absently as he took off his shoes.

"No, I just think perhaps I've overstayed my welcome here."

Harry stopped and looked up at her. "Did I say something that made you feel that way?"

"Just... just the situation in the Admiral's room."

Realization dawned and he nodded with understanding. "If I hurt you, that certainly wasn't my intention, but we should probably talk about it."

"I should go."

“No.” He stood and drew her into a hug. “Don’t leave because of that. I love you, Amy, and the last thing I want to do is offend or upset you.”

“It’s...” She shook her head and looked away. “I want to say all the right things and be the best doctor I can be, but I’m far from perfect.”

“How boring would the universe be if we were all perfect?” Harry put his fingers under her chin and drew her face back towards his. “The good news is that Phoebe seems like a very easygoing woman, and I know by Chakotay’s reaction that he was either too tired to comprehend what you said or that it wasn’t anything he hadn’t already thought about.”

“Can I crawl under a rock and come back out when she’s the President of the Federation or something?”

He chuckled and gave her a soft kiss. “No, but you can crawl under the covers with me. Shall we go to bed?”

“I’d like that.”

“Come on, then. Let’s sleep until someone wakes us.”

“Why don’t you just make arrangements with Tom or B’Elanna now, then no one will call.”

“Good idea.” Harry tapped his commbadge while walking down the hall to the bedroom. “Kim to Paris, San Francisco 477.”

“Harry!” Tom sounded almost startled. “Any news?”

“Are you both there?”

B’Elanna replied, “What’s wrong?”

“We got Chakotay to go home and sleep, but I promised him that we’d make sure someone was with Kathryn.”

“I’ll head that way,” she said quickly.

“No, no, no,” Harry called out. “Phoebe is there now, and I think Mrs. Janeway will be back after she makes sure Chakotay gets to bed. Will you go whenever they have to leave?”

“Will do,” Tom said. “How is Kathryn doing?”

“They put her on a ventilator early this morning so she’s on full life support.”

“That doesn’t sound good,” B’Elanna said.

“What’s good is that she’s still with us. Now, we all need to pitch in to take care of both her and Chakotay.”

Tom said, “I’m not sure which of them needs more from us.”

“For now, it’s Chakotay.” Harry sighed heavily. “We’re headed to bed. Would you check in with Phoebe at the hospital?”

“Will do, Harry,” Tom said. “Get some rest.”

Once the connection was closed, B’Elanna shook her head in disgust. “Sounds like she’s worse.”

“Or that they’re making sure she doesn’t get worse.” He pulled her into his arms. “Let’s try not to get upset so we can be there for Chakotay when he needs to talk. All right?”

“Fine,” she said as she pulled out of his arms.

“B’Elanna…”

“I want to be upset, if that’s all right with you?”

“Okay,” he said with understanding.

“Can you deal with your daughter while I go pound on the shower wall or something equally as pointless?”

“Will do. I’ll replicate some new ceramic tiles while I’m in the kitchen.” He tried not to smile as she slammed the bathroom door. Walking into the kitchen, he asked, “How’s that applesauce? Yummy, yummy?”

“Up-py!” Miral yelled as she raised her arms and dropped her spoon on the floor.

“You want up?” he asked as he took a damp towel and washed the sticky mess off of his daughter’s face and hands.

“Up-py!”

“Up we go,” he sang as he picked her up. “Let’s call the hospital, shall we?”

“Da!”

He smiled as he tapped his commbadge. “Paris to Phoebe Richards at Starfleet Medical.”

“Richards, here,” she replied.

“Phoebe, this is Tom Paris. Harry Kim asked me to contact you.”

“Oh, hi Tom. Mom is back and can stay with Katie all day and night.”

“She doesn’t need to do that.”

Gretchen spoke up, “But I want to be with my daughter, Tom.”

“Can we make a deal?”

“What’s that?”

“You save your energy so you can spend every morning with her and let us cover the rest of the time.”

“You’re assuming that Chakotay will leave once he gets caught up on his sleep.”

“Let’s just say that we’ll strongly encourage him to do so and hope for the best.”

“All right, Tom. But only because you badgered me into it,” she joked. “Come by at two or so?”

“I’ll send B’Elanna, but call us if you need anything before then. Harry has gone to sleep.”

“Thanks, Tom. We’ll be in touch,” Gretchen said.

After the signal closed, Phoebe asked, “Do you get the feeling that everyone she knows wants to sit here twenty-four hours a day?”

Gretchen straightened her daughter’s blankets as she said, “It’s because she’s such a charming conversationalist in this state.”

Phoebe took a deep breath and then sighed as she continued to work on her sister’s fingernails. “Wow, her nails are in bad shape.”

“I heard about a new product that will regenerate broken fingernails. Should I pick one up?”

“I’m not sure it matters that they aren’t all the same length.”

Gretchen looked at what Phoebe was doing. “A couple of them are split down into the nail beds, though. Looks like it hurts.”

“I’m guessing it’s pretty minor compared to all her other aches and pains.”

As Joe came in, Gretchen said, “True, but if we can fix such a little problem as that, we might as well.”

“What problem?” he asked.

“Her fingernails are in bad shape.”

Joe examined them and said, “Hmm. I’ll send a nurse in to fix them. We’re also going to start therapy on her arms. We might as well get that done while we’re waiting for her to wake up.”

“Thanks,” Phoebe said. “How’s she doing?”

“As well as can be expected.” Joe studied the readings on the display at the end of the bed. “Her blood oxygen level is high which means the new heart is doing its job and her lungs are getting the oxygen they need. We should expect several days with no change, but don’t let that alarm you. No change indicates that she’s stable.”

Gretchen rubbed her eyes tiredly. “I don’t know whether to feel angry or sad or relieved.”

Phoebe replied, “All three, and I could add a few more to the list.”

Joe said, “Even though I’m only a hologram, I understand how you feel. There’s not an organic person that I care more about than the Admiral.”

Gretchen and Phoebe shared a look but didn’t say anything.

He asked, “Mrs. Janeway, if I have a nurse bring in some lotion, would you massage it into the Admiral’s arms?”

“I’d be happy to. What’s it for?”

“A protein infused formula that I developed. I’m hoping it will aid in the regeneration of her muscle mass.” He shrugged. “If it doesn’t work, the only side affect will be very healthy skin.”

“Not a bad side affect, Doctor.”

“I’ll check in a little later.”

“Bye,” they both said as he walked out. When he was gone, Phoebe said, “Have you also noticed how everyone seems to think they know how everyone else feels?”

Gretchen sighed but didn't comment because her personal communicator beeped. She pulled it out of her pocket and tapped the answer key. "This is Gretchen Janeway."

"Gretchen?" Chakotay asked anxiously.

"You're supposed to be asleep."

"I think I'm having a panic attack. Is Kathryn all right?"

"She's in the same condition that she was when you last saw her. I don't know that I'd classify that as 'all right.'"

"Maybe I was dreaming," he admitted.

"It wouldn't surprise me. Will you be okay or would you like us to send a friend to you?"

"I'll be okay."

"Yes, you will, but check in as often as you need to."

He yawned and said, "Thanks."

"Go back to sleep. We'll call you if there is any status change, although her doctor said not to expect one for a couple of days."

"M'kay." He yawned again. "Thank you."

Phoebe called out, "Have sweet dreams this time. Okay?"

"'kay. Night."

When he didn't cut the comm line, Gretchen did it for him. "Poor dear."

"He's coping as best he can, I guess."

Nodding, Gretchen said, "I think I would've had a nervous breakdown long before now if it weren't for him. At some point, he's bound to crash."

"We'll help him through," Phoebe replied. "We're his family now."

Gretchen picked up Kathryn's arm and started caressing it. "Whether she makes it or not, we've got to keep Chakotay close. For Katie."

Phoebe's jaw trembled as she said, "It's what she'd want."

The next morning as Chakotay made his way from Kathryn's house in San Francisco to Starfleet Medical Center, he felt renewed. He always felt better after a good night's sleep, but it always seemed that when he needed it most, he forgot that small truth.

He'd been to the hospital the evening before to check on her, but there'd been no change in her condition. B'Elanna was there, and since Harry had arrived to spend the night, Chakotay had decided to take them up on their offer to watch over his sleeping beauty. Although now that he felt better, he planned to stay for the long haul.

Chakotay exited the transporter station near the medical center and was walking up the sidewalk when he noticed a huddle of suspicious looking bystanders up ahead. "Reporters," he grumbled. He'd run into more than he'd ever wanted to see while Kathryn had been missing, his last interaction being on Christmas Day less than a month before.

He ran his fingers through his hair, took a steadying breath, and marched on with the hopes that they wouldn't notice him. Less than ten steps later, he realized that he'd had no such luck.

"Captain Chakotay!"

Holding up his hand to signal for them to stop, he said, "I have no comments."

Several reporters shouted questions at him. "Captain, can you confirm that Admiral Janeway is a patient here at Starfleet Medical?" "Is it true that she was attacked in her home?" "Captain, what is Admiral Janeway's current condition?" "Can you give us any updates on the investigation surrounding Admiral Janeway's abduction?"

As the reporters surrounded him, he was forced to stop walking. Balling his hands into fists at his sides, he raised his chin and glared at the ones blocking his path. "Excuse me, please."

They ignored his request and continued to shout questions at him. He closed his eyes and counted to ten, willing them to go away. When they didn't, he raised his voice and commanded, "Back off."

One got in his face and asked, "Who is taking Admiral Janeway's position with Starfleet?"

"I don't give a damn about Kathryn's job at the moment. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to get inside."

"Is Admiral Janeway a patient here?"

“What do you think?” He raised his eyebrows and gave the young reporter a look that clearly indicated Chakotay’s opinion regarding the stupidity of the question.

Another reporter asked, “Is the Admiral dying, Captain?”

Chakotay snapped, “Wouldn’t that please the sons-of-bitches that had her tortured for three weeks straight?”

“Do you have any evidence as to who they are?”

“Rest assured that if I knew, I’d be beating down their door and Voyager’s entire crew would be falling in behind me.”

“Can you tell us about the Admiral’s current condition, sir?”

“No. Some things are not for public consumption.”

“Captain, the people of the Federation want to know if she’s all right.”

“All right?” he boomed. “Are you kidding me? Did you not see her at last week’s press conference? You tell me if she’s ‘all right!’ Now, get out of my way or I’m going to take some of you out. Which will it be?”

Chakotay decided that the two reporters standing directly in front of him were smarter than they looked because they immediately backed away. Pushing his way through the rest, he got himself into the hospital only to be confronted with Kathryn’s C.O. “Admiral,” he gasped in surprise.

“At ease, Captain. Is there a problem?”

He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “Reporters, and I wasn’t in the mood. I don’t think I said anything too disparaging, but I did have to threaten them to get them to move out of my way.”

Khurma looked over Chakotay’s shoulder with a raised eyebrow. “I’m sure you did fine, Captain. Even when they don’t get their answers, they thrive on a little bit of drama.”

“I think I gave them more than just a little,” Chakotay said with exasperation. “Have you been upstairs?”

“Just came from there,” he said with a nod. “She’s looked better.”

“That’s putting it mildly.”

“And so have you. I’m ashamed to admit that I’ve been so worried about her that I’ve overlooked how much this has affected you. Is there anything I can do?”

“Can you get reporters off my back?”

“Unfortunately, no.”

“Only other thing I can think of is to find the people who did this to her. I’d go after them myself if I didn’t need to be here with her.”

Khurma put his hand on Chakotay’s shoulder to pull him to aside so they could speak privately. “Captain, I hope you know how much I respect and care for Kathryn. I’m doing everything I can, but this is a complex situation and it will take some time to bring it to a proper closure.”

“I realize that, but surely with the entirety of Starfleet at your beck and call, there must be some actions that you can take?”

“Captain...” he said patiently.

“My apologies, sir, I don’t mean to be insubordinate.”

“But all of this is getting to you. I understand.” Khurma looked at him for a moment and then stepped in closer. “I can tell you that one of Pratin’s men started talking yesterday, and not the one who had talked to us before. It seems that this one is afraid that we were the cause of his boss’s death.”

“Did you learn anything?”

“Enough to sentence the entire group to life, most likely. We also got a list of the places they stopped while they had Kathryn aboard. We’re looking into them.”

“But nothing that would tell us who hired them?”

“I’m afraid that information died with Pratin. He didn’t tell any of his people.”

Chakotay felt a surge of desperation wash over him. He looked up at the ceiling to try to hide his reaction. “I don’t know how we can cope with such an undefined and dangerous threat with no conclusion in sight.”

Khurma nodded with understanding. “It’s an agonizing situation, but I’m doing everything in my power to get the evidence we need.”

“I’d like to help. I need something else to think about other than her lying up there like she is.”

“Would it help to give you something to do? Not related to Kathryn’s work, but to yours?”

“I don’t think I could handle a class this semester.”

“What about a few short-term seminars? I understand that you’re a gifted teacher, and I can’t help but wonder if getting you in front of the cadets would restore some of your equilibrium.”

“I fear they’d spend the entire class wanting to discuss Kathryn just like those reporters do.”

“You could lay down the ground rules at the beginning of the session.” He patted Chakotay on the back and said, “Think about it. Not today, but when you’re ready.”

“It will depend on how long she’s in a coma, sir.”

“I know it will.” Khurma smiled kindly. “Come see me if you need anything, anything at all. Will you do that?”

Chakotay nodded. “Thank you, sir.”

The men parted ways and Chakotay made his way up to Kathryn’s room. He nodded to the security guards who stood on each side of her door, and then went inside.

Gretchen looked up from where she and Phoebe were sitting. Warmly, she said, “Good morning, Chakotay. How are you feeling?”

Before he found an answer, his eyes were drawn to Kathryn’s deathly-still form. A sudden, overwhelming fear welled up inside of him and he felt his heart start beating frantically. Immediately, he turned around and walked back out, shutting the door behind him.

One of the guards asked, “Sir?”

He tried to reply, but couldn’t get any words past the lump in his throat. His hands were trembling and he felt like he could barely breathe.

Gretchen came out and put her hand on his back. “Chakotay?”

Holding his hand up, he managed to communicate, “Minute.”

“Let’s take a walk,” she suggested as she guided him down the corridor. Once they arrived at the nourishment room, she ushered him inside. “Are you having a panic attack?”

He nodded as he sat down and attempted to calm himself.

Gretchen grabbed a towel and dampened it with cool water. She placed it on the back of his neck, and then started rubbing his back. “A friend of mine has these episodes, often. She finds that it helps to count slowly.”

After a moment, he replied, “What would help me is for Kathryn to sit up and start arguing about something. Call me crazy, but I’ve always found that calming after she’s been injured or sick.”

“No doubt. When she’s feisty, you know that she’s got some life in her.”

“Yes, and just so you know, I’m in love with that feisty daughter of yours.”

Gretchen chuckled and sat down across from him. “So I’ve noticed. Want something to eat?”

He shook his head. “I feel a little queasy.”

“Understandable.” Gretchen looked him over carefully and asked, “What set you off?”

“I shouldn’t be having panic attacks.”

“And I doubt that anyone who has one thinks they should.”

“Good point,” he said as he took the towel off of his neck and held it against his cheek. “However, I’m of the opinion that they’re for the faint of heart or for someone who’s been through a traumatic situation.”

“And you don’t think you fit that description?”

“No, not exactly. Kathryn has been through one trauma after another. Me? I’m just the one who is supposed to catch her when she falls apart.”

She shrugged. “Oh, I don’t know. I’d surmise that not many men would still be standing after watching their wives go through what yours has.”

“My wife?” he asked with a slight smile.

“As far as I’m concerned.”

“I like the sound of that.” He rubbed his eyes and took a deep breath.

“Your trauma may not have been as severe, but you have certain expectations for yourself about how you’re going to cope. After four months of not seeing her, she disappears without a trace, you get her back in almost unrecognizable condition, then you watch her go through three near-death episodes.”

“And then the doctors tell me that she may or may not survive.”

“Have they said that specifically?”

“Not in so many words. What they haven’t said is that she’ll be fine, and they haven’t argued with me when I’ve mentioned her impending death.”

Gretchen cringed. “Chakotay…”

“I’m just trying to prepare myself for the inevitable because I’m pretty sure I will break down.” He shook his head as his eyes filled with tears. “I don’t know that I’ll survive without her.”

“You will, because you’ll do it for her.” She reached over and held his hands. “I didn’t think I could live without my Edward. I felt like I’d been abandoned. I was even angry with him for awhile because he took himself, my daughter, and my future son-in-law into such a dangerous situation. I know you’ve felt the same way – angry with Katie for putting herself in danger?”

Chakotay’s tears tumbled down his cheeks, but he didn’t need to answer.

She continued, “Eventually I came to realize that it was not Edward’s choice to leave me. It was a horrific loss, and I still get angry that I’ve been cheated out of all these years of happiness with my husband. But then I have to force myself to remember that I had almost twenty-five years with him. The time we spent together wasn’t always perfect, but there was love. That’s not something I want to forget.”

“And you had your daughters.”

“Yes, but I tried not to depend on them for my happiness. It’s a good thing I didn’t because when Voyager disappeared, I was beside myself with grief. If I’d been dependent on Katie, I don’t know what I would’ve done.”

“You’ve had friends to support you?”

“Boy, howdy, have I ever.” She squeezed his arm with reassurance. “If the unthinkable happens, you’ll realize that you’re going to be okay. People embrace a widow or a widower, and they’ll embrace you in ways you’d never expect. I know that nothing will ever replace her, and I hope, more than anything, that they’ll be no reason for it, but know that you’ll always be a part of our family, and your Voyager family as well.”

“Thank you, Gretchen, but how is it that you’re holding up so well?”

“I’m a good actress, and I like distracting myself with taking care of someone else. You, for example.” She gave him a loving smile and then patted her legs. “Now, I have it on

good authority that when men are presented with a problem, they like to fix it. So, how can we fix you?"

Chakotay couldn't help but be amused. "I don't think I'm fixable."

"How about we get you a good shrink?" she asked, half jokingly.

"Who needs one when a perfectly good mother-in-law is around?"

She winked at him. "That might work in the short-term, but don't disregard it completely."

"I'll take that under advisement."

"In all seriousness, what set you off?"

He stood and poured himself a cup of water. After taking a sip, he confessed, "I keep having memory flashes of her dying. Seeing her there in the hospital bed is too much."

"You need some time away."

"Yes and no. I don't want to be apart from her, but I'm dreading spending the foreseeable future looking at her comatose body."

"I can understand that. Phoebe and I are presently giving her a spa treatment to make her look more perky."

"A spa?" he asked, turning around to look at Gretchen inquisitively.

"Today, it's her nails. Tomorrow, we plan to color her hair and give her a facial. That's where we deep-clean her pores," she said as she pointed to her own face.

"How can I help?"

"Dr. Joe gave us some cream that he wants rubbed into her arms. I did it for her yesterday, but you could do it today, if you'd like?"

Chakotay thought for a moment and then nodded. "I think I would."

"And then, I think you should ask Harry Kim to keep finding people to sit with Katie if you don't want her to be alone. While she's asleep, you can catch up on your rest. Maybe even work on some of that sand art you do."

"You'd make a good therapist, Gretchen. Maybe you missed your calling."

She opened the door and motioned for him to walk out with her. “Oh, I don’t know. I think I would tire of other people’s problems. I much prefer math problems where the answers are black and white. All this ambiguity over love and loss can be exhausting.”

“Well, I’m glad you decided to solve my problems. I feel a lot better.”

“Good,” she said as she patted his back some. “I’ll save up my therapeutic energy for my family.”

Chakotay followed Gretchen’s recommendations and spent only short amounts of time in the hospital for the next two days. True to their word, Phoebe and Gretchen had Kathryn looking quite beautiful despite the tubes in her nose and mouth.

The press mostly left Chakotay alone, but they managed to trap other Voyagers into short interviews. All of Kathryn’s former crew told the press that Admiral Janeway merely needed their continued good thoughts for a speedy recovery and left it at that.

On the fifth morning after surgery, Chakotay was working with the physical therapist to exercise Kathryn’s legs when Joe came into the room, looking gloomy.

“Good morning, Captain.”

“Is it?” he asked, noticing that Joe’s mannerisms were more subdued than usual.

“Will the Admiral’s mother and sister be in this morning?”

“They’ve just gone downstairs for breakfast. They should be back, soon. Why?”

Joe nodded to the physical therapist. “Would you excuse us for a few minutes, please?”

She said, “Of course. Captain, continue what you’re doing for ten more reps. I’ll be back this afternoon.”

After she was gone, Joe sat down and said, “We need to talk.”

When he heard the door open, Chakotay didn’t look up from where he was sitting at Kathryn’s side. He was doing all he could to hold himself together.

Gretchen asked, “Chakotay? What’s wrong?”

He found his voice, but it was shaky. “Phoebe, do you remember when Dr. Murphy said that only I could decide to take Kathryn off of life support?”

“Oh, God,” Phoebe replied as she fell into a heap in the chair opposite Chakotay.

Gretchen said, “The doctors haven’t said anything about Katie getting worse.”

“Joe just gave me a status update. The problem isn’t that she’s getting worse; it’s that she isn’t getting better. He expected a modicum of improvement in four days, and there’s been none.”

“Surely, you’re not considering...” Phoebe trailed off, unable to finish.

“No! But...” He rubbed his face in frustration.

Gretchen sat down next to him and took his hand. She encouraged, “Tell us what he said.”

“He wants to try taking her off the ventilator. They’ll monitor her breathing very closely, but there’s a good chance it could fail again. If it does, we have to decide whether we want to sustain her life or let her go.”

“Sustain it!” Phoebe yelled. “You can’t possibly be considering anything else!”

“That’s what my heart is telling me, but am I being unrealistic?”

Phoebe closed her eyes and said, “It has only been four days.”

Gretchen asked, “Did the doctors have any suggestions for other treatment options? Things they haven’t tried?”

“No, and it’s not like our Dr. Joe to give up. That’s the only reason I’m considering it.”

“What did he say, exactly?”

He tapped his commbadge. “Chakotay to Zimmerman.”

“Go ahead, Captain.”

“When you have a moment, would you help me talk to her family?”

“I’ll be right there.”

Gretchen said, “We’re with you, Chakotay. You’re not alone in this decision.”

“I appreciate that.” He stood and leaned over Kathryn’s body, getting close to her face. Giving her a soft kiss on her forehead, he asked, “What would you do?”

Joe had arrived in time to hear the question. He said, “Knowing her as well as I do, I think in this situation, she’d keep going.”

Chakotay looked up. “Even though you told me there isn’t anything else you can do?”

“The Kathryn Janeway I know would hold out for a miracle if it were your life on the line. It’s my job to let you know that a miracle is what it’s going to take.”

“Then let’s...” He took a shuddering breath as he realized he was about to use her standard line. “Let’s do it, and be ready to put her back on the ventilator.”

Joe called in two nurses to assist him. As he worked, he explained to Phoebe and Gretchen, “My hope is that this will tell us if there has been any improvement. When we began artificially regulating her breathing, we couldn’t explain why it was needed. As far as all of our scans showed, she should’ve been fine breathing on her own.”

“And the readings are exactly the same?” Gretchen asked as she watched over her daughter from the foot of the bed.

Phoebe asked, “So what happens if she doesn’t breathe?”

Joe nodded towards Chakotay. “We put her back on the ventilator and keep searching for the source of the problem. I don’t know where to start, but maybe an option will present itself.”

Chakotay asked, “Will I be in the way if I stay up here and talk to her?”

Joe pulled the bed away from the wall and directed Chakotay to stand above Kathryn’s head. “The first thing we’ll do is turn the ventilator off. I won’t pull the tube out until we know if we’ll need it again or not.”

Phoebe asked, “Doctor, if we have to put her back on it, what’s the chance she’ll recover?”

He looked up at Chakotay and waited for him to nod before explaining, “Slim to none, because in her current condition, she won’t survive another surgery.”

“Why would she need surgery?”

Chakotay said, “Because the problem lies in the new heart, and it would need to be replaced.”

“What does that mean?” Phoebe’s voice rose. “If we hadn’t done the transplant, she’d be okay?”

“No,” Joe said. “If we hadn’t removed her heart, we’d be transplanting all of her organs by now.”

“Are we ready to try this?” Chakotay asked, trying not to show impatience. Now that he’d made a decision, he was ready to get on with it.

“Yes,” Joe replied as he opened a tri-corder. “I’ll be monitoring her respiration. Nurse Meed, discontinue the ventilator. Nurse Morgan, remove the pump from the endotracheal tube.”

As the medical team worked, Chakotay placed his hands on Kathryn’s head to stroke his fingers through her hair. He tuned out all the conversation that was happening in the room and concentrated on her physical appearance and involuntary movements.

Her face was extremely pale, her freckles had faded to almost non-existence. The bright blue strap that held the tube to her mouth looked strange and surreal. He saw that the nurse’s actions with the ventilator had stirred up some drool, so he carefully wiped Kathryn’s lips clean with his thumb. “Stay with us, Kathryn. We’ll take care of you,” he whispered.

Joe reported, “Her respiration is very shallow, but that is a side affect of being on a respirator for an extended period of time.”

“Do we wait for it to deepen on its own?” Chakotay asked.

Nurse Morgan suggested, “A firm massage on her sternum might stimulate the lungs. Shall I try?”

Joe hesitated, but then nodded as he opened the neck of Kathryn’s shirt. “Be careful along the superior border. The bone isn’t as strong as I’d like.”

“I won’t use much pressure.”

Chakotay watched as Morgan rubbed briskly just beneath the clavicles, but he was startled when Kathryn took a sudden, deep breath. “Is she waking?”

“No,” Joe said. “That was just a response to the stimulus. Let’s see if it lasts.”

The nurse stopped and they all watched Kathryn’s chest rise and fall with each breath. Gradually, the motion decreased until she was barely moving.

Morgan asked, “Shall I try again?”

Joe tapped some keys on his tri-corder and then said, “Go ahead. I’m going to take a scan of her brain activity this time.”

In an effort to be doing something proactive, Chakotay massaged the muscles on the side of Kathryn's neck. Her eyelids fluttered and her arms jerked, startling everyone. "What caused that?"

"Nurse Meed, get me a neurogenic stimulator," Joe ordered. He set down his tri-corder and told Chakotay, "I'm going to hold her eyelids open, and I want you to gently turn her head to the side."

"Which side?"

"Doesn't matter. Towards me," he amended.

As Chakotay followed Joe's instructions, he asked, "You found something?"

"I think I did." He smiled at what he saw. "And this is good. This is very good."

Gretchen commented, "Her eyes didn't move."

"Precisely. Now," Joe said with a renewed energy. "Mrs. Janeway, pinch the nailbed on her big toe. Let's see if she has a reflex."

Gretchen peeled Kathryn's sock off and did as Joe asked. When nothing happened, Phoebe said, "When I was giving her a pedicure, her foot never moved at all."

Chakotay frowned. "I thought for sure she'd react."

Gretchen said, "That had to have hurt."

"Captain," Joe said. "Rub her neck just like you did a moment ago."

"Okay." Holding Kathryn's head steady, he massaged in circles the way it helped her sore neck most.

"Is that exactly what you were doing?" Joe asked.

"No, but she likes this best."

"I need you to make the exact same motion – lateral strokes near the basilar artery on the sides of her neck. While he's doing that, Mrs. Janeway, try pinching again."

Chakotay tried to mimic his motions as much as possible, and as soon as he got a good motion going, Kathryn made an incomprehensible sound, her eyelids fluttered, and she pulled her foot away. "What was that?"

“I would’ve never thought,” Joe said in dismay. “Captain, if you hadn’t decided to massage her neck, we wouldn’t have figured this out.” He looked up at Meed. “You have it?”

“Neurogenic stimulator,” she said as she handed it over.

Joe turned the device on and directed it at the side of Kathryn’s head. “What we’ve got is a communication breakdown between her medulla oblongata and the rest of her body. It’s not the new heart that’s malfunctioning.”

“A brain injury?” Chakotay asked in surprise.

“It most likely happened during surgery, and was minor enough that we didn’t detect it. Her comatose state and the respirator have camouflaged the symptoms, or rather, her lack of reflexes.”

Gretchen asked, “So the fact that she doesn’t have reflexes is a good thing?”

“It’s a consistency that points to a very specific answer. Excuse me, Captain,” he said as he nudged Chakotay’s hands out of the way. “The medulla controls all autonomic functions – respiration, blood pressure, circulation, muscle tone, swallowing, reflexes, urination, and so forth. Her new heart is forcing some of those to continue despite any brain damage. The ventilator was forcing the respiration. The catheter was forcing the urination.”

“Is it repairable?” Phoebe asked.

“That’s what I’m doing now.”

When Joe started humming, Chakotay nearly gasped in relief. “She’s going to be okay?”

“I believe so.” He stopped for just a moment and looked at Chakotay. “Now that I know what the problem is, I’ll make sure of it.”

Morgan said, “Her respiration rate is falling again.”

Joe asked, “Captain, would you massage her sternum?”

“Gladly.” He was doing his best not to cry with joy as he switched places with the nurse. “Tell me if I do this too hard.”

“You’ll be fine,” Morgan said. “Don’t press into the bone, just be vigorous with the soft tissues.”

As Chakotay worked, Gretchen moved up beside him and dotted his cheeks with a tissue. She whispered, “You take care of her, and I’ll get these runaway tears.”

“Thank you,” he said sincerely. “You’re doing better now, too?”

“Much better. Thank you for loving my daughter so much that you want to touch her all the time.”

Phoebe pointed out, “Not many future mother-in-laws would say that.”

“No, I suppose not,” Gretchen said with a grin. “But I have a very special future son-in-law.”

Nurse Morgan asked, “You’re getting married?” As soon as she said it, she clamped her mouth shut. “My apologies. I shouldn’t be asking that question.”

Chakotay winked at her. “I’ll trust you to keep our secret.”

Nurse Meed pointed out, “With the ring on the Admiral’s finger, I doubt it’s that much of a secret among the hospital staff.”

“I suppose not,” he said with a smile as he watched for Kathryn to respond to his massage. At first, nothing happened, but as his touch became firmer, her lungs inflated reflexively.

Joe spoke to the ceiling. “Zimmerman paging Orson to Room 547.”

“Who is Orson?” Chakotay asked.

“Chief of Neurology. I’d like her to take a look at this,” he said as he studied the scanner readout.

“Problem?” he asked worriedly.

“No, but I want to make sure I’m not missing something again.”

Phoebe’s personal communicator chimed. “Thornhill Elementary calling Phoebe Richards.”

Phoebe slammed her palm against her forehead. “Damn.” Tapping her communicator, she said, “Sorry, I’m on my way.”

“That’s all right, Mrs. Richards. Katie is happily looking at a book here with me.”

“Katie, honey, I’ll be right there,” Phoebe said as she gathered her things. “I’m with your Aunt.”

“Aunt Katie! Is she better?”

“A little, but she’s still sleeping. Would you like to visit her?”

“Yes! Yes! Yes!” Katie shouted excitedly.

“I’ll be there soon, honey. Richards out.” Phoebe looked apologetically at everyone.
“Sorry, but I need to go.”

Chakotay smiled at her. “We’ll look forward to seeing Katie in a little while.”

“After lunch,” Phoebe waved as she walked out the door.

Not five seconds later, a middle-aged woman with black eyes came into the room. “Dr. Zimmerman?”

“Yes, Dr. Orson,” Joe replied. “If you have a few minutes, I’d like to have your opinion.”

She looked around the room and nodded in recognition. “This must be Admiral Janeway. I asked the computer for this room’s patient information and received a response that indicated a computer error.”

“Ah,” Joe nodded. “Must be a security precaution. If the computer had her listed as classified, it might give someone a clue that we have a VIP in here.”

“What seems to be the problem?” she asked as she pulled out her scanner.

As Joe explained, Chakotay concentrated on Kathryn. Her respiration remained steady, but he couldn’t tell if it was normal or still shallow.

Gretchen took his hands and pulled him to the side. “She’s breathing okay now. Let’s give the doctors room to work.”

“Was I in the way?”

Dr. Orson spoke, “Not at all, Captain. However, I’m betazoid and one drawback of that is that I’m finely attuned to the emotions of everyone in the room. If you could think relaxing thoughts, you would help me concentrate.”

Chakotay rubbed his face, nodding with understanding. “I had a betazoid crew member that I had to do the same with.” He tried to clear his mind and focus on his own breathing instead of Kathryn’s.

Gretchen reached up and pulled him into a hug, whispering, “Relax, son. She’s going to be okay now.”

“I hope so. I'm on edge that he summoned this neurologist.”

She pulled back and looked him in the eye. “Have you been listening to their conversation?”

“No, I was focused on your daughter.”

“Listen,” she encouraged.

Joe was midsentence as he asked, “...anything abnormal in the adjoining lobes?”

“The cerebellum and thalamus regions look healthy, but just to be sure, I'd like to run a scan of her brain wave activity when her body is clear of neural stimulants.”

“Ah, yes. I administered that in an attempt to diagnose the problem.”

“A good call, but to get an accurate mapping of the neurons, we should wait for about eight hours.”

“I'll have that done this evening. Do you need to be present?”

She chuckled. “No, but I'd like to be. An opportunity to look at this woman's brain is an event not to be missed.”

“I assure you that while she is a remarkable woman, her brain waves are nothing out of the ordinary.”

“Still, I'd like to be there,” she said as she straightened up and looked at Chakotay and Gretchen. “I don't expect to find any problems, but I want to be sure.”

“We appreciate that.”

“Dr. Zimmerman, I'll check in with you this afternoon,” she said before leaving the room.

Once gone, Gretchen asked, “What did she mean by a moderate coma state?”

“The Admiral has been in a severe coma, but the procedure we just did on her brain has brought her status up to moderate. I believe we can expect to see continued improvement over the next day or two.”

She commented, “I didn't realize there were different levels.”

“Oh, yes,” Joe replied. “In response to painful stimuli, she is flexing muscles, opening her eyes, and making audible sounds. That shows significant improvement over where she was just an hour ago. As her strength improves, I hope to see more of that.”

Chakotay rubbed his neck as he watched Kathryn sleep. “So, now we wait?”

“Now we wait,” Joe confirmed. “I’ll be back a little later to check on her, but we’ve got her on monitors.”

After he left, Chakotay sat down in a chair, leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

“You okay?” Gretchen asked.

He hummed tiredly. “I’m not sure.”

“Why don’t you go home and rest?”

“I feel like I should be here.”

“In case she wakes?”

“Yeah. I promised her.”

She leaned down and squeezed his shoulders, placing a kiss on his head. “I’ll go get us some lunch.”

Chakotay opened his eyes and offered, “The gentlemanly thing to do would be for me to get that.”

“Stay here,” she said as she patted his arm. “Be back in a few minutes.”

Once alone, he got up to look at Kathryn again. The tube was out of her mouth now, but he thought her lips looked chapped, so he pulled a tube of lip balm out of his pocket and gently rubbed some into the dry, reddened skin. “Got to make sure you’re kissable when you wake up, right?”

Her eyelids fluttered and her mouth twitched as he worked the balm in.

“You can feel that, can’t you?” He tucked her hair in place before giving her forehead a kiss. “I hope that means you know I’m here.”

Noticing that her gown was still lying open, he fastened it together. “Let’s make you a little less exposed, shall we? Don’t want you to get cold,” he said as he straightened up the covers around her. He carefully situated her arms so that they were at her sides and then he began to do some of the physical therapy exercises with one. “I know you’ll push yourself to get stronger once you’re out of here, so how about if I do some of the work for you now? You don’t mind, do you?”

He held her hand open and placed a kiss on her palm. "Thank you for staying with us. I..." Clamping his eyes shut, he continued, "...don't think I could've made that decision."

Late the next afternoon, Chakotay was still sitting with Kathryn, having sent home several who had come to be with her. His chin was having trouble staying up as he kept nodding off. When he went to sleep, he had nightmares about her nightmares. While he was awake, he was constantly tuned in to all of the movements and sounds that she was making in response to noises in the room.

He practically jumped out of his chair when the door opened, letting in the sound of someone talking too loud in the hall. Kathryn had a similar startled reaction, although hers was muted by unconsciousness. Regardless of her state of awareness, Chakotay felt the need to reassure her. "Shhhhh," he whispered as he stroked her face.

"Sorry," B'Elanna whispered as she and Matt Patterson came into the room.

"I didn't realize she was awake," Matt commented as he studied Kathryn.

"She's not, Admiral," Chakotay said as he stepped away from the bed to compose himself. "Just in some kind of partial coma state."

B'Elanna looked at him strangely and then shook her head in dismay. "You look like hell, old man."

"Don't hold back, B'Elanna." He sighed tiredly. "I keep thinking she's going to wake up."

"What does Joe say?"

"That she could wake up any day now."

"Has he tried to send you away?"

"Mmm hmmm." Chakotay blinked slowly and then shook his head to clear it. "Sorry, what did you ask?"

She and Matt shared a look and then Matt said, "If you'll excuse me for a moment, I'll be right back."

Chakotay looked at the door closing, and then back at B'Elanna. "He okay?"

"Yeah, just wants to talk to someone."

“He could’ve said something.”

B’Elanna walked up and gave Chakotay a hug. “He did. You’re beyond exhausted.”

“Mmmhmmm.” His head dropped sleepily, his chin colliding with her forehead.

She stepped back, holding onto his arms. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were drunk. You have to get to bed, Chakotay.”

Matt and Joe came into the room and Joe said, “Captain, when I said she’d wake up any day, I didn’t mean today.”

“Today?” He rubbed the grittiness out of his eyes and tried to focus on the conversation.

“Not today,” he repeated, and then looked at Matt. “There’s nothing I can do except admit him.”

B’Elanna said, “I don’t think that’s necessary. I’ll get him home.”

“Home?” Chakotay asked.

“Yes, home. That’s where you need to go, right now.”

“I can’t leave her. She might wake up, and I’ve got to be here.”

“Captain, you’ve been awake for almost thirty-six hours. You need to sleep.”

He waved off the concern. “I had to stay awake longer than that on Voyager.”

“Yeah, but you had adrenaline to keep you going,” B’Elanna pointed out. “Here, you don’t.”

Joe said, “Captain, why don’t you try to sleep in the recliner? I’m sure that B’Elanna or the Admiral here will keep watch and wake you if needed.”

He shook his head. “I can’t sleep in this room. I’ve tried, but the memories of her last heart attack keep coming back to me.”

“Do they bother you at home?” Matt asked.

“No,” he said tiredly. “But I can hold out for a little longer. Maybe a little coffee would help. You said she should wake up today?”

“No, Captain, it won’t happen today. At the rate she’s coming out of this coma, it will be at least a day, if not two, before she enters a state where she’ll need you here.” He put his hand on Chakotay’s back. “That will happen, though. Before she comes out of this

completely, she'll get to a point where she's disoriented. She'll need you well rested to help her stay calm. Do you understand?"

"Will you be able to anticipate it?"

"Yes and no, but you're only a transporter call away, right?"

Chakotay looked at Kathryn. "Someone will be with her?"

Matt said, "Mr. Kim has a whole schedule worked out. I'm here until B'Elanna gets done with dinner, then your young Bajoran friend is going to spend the night."

"Celes?" the Doctor asked. When B'Elanna nodded, he said, "You know how attentive she is to the Admiral. I bet she'll stay wide awake listening to every sound all night long."

B'Elanna said, "And tomorrow morning, Mrs. Janeway is coming back. Tomorrow afternoon, Tom will be with her. Don't you have a project for your house or something you can do to keep yourself busy?"

"House," he whispered before looking at B'Elanna. "Yes, our house. I could do that."

"What about it?"

"I need to find a realtor – someone who can help me look at houses. Kathryn wants us to buy one out of town."

"I know just the woman for you," Matt said happily. "Go home, get some rest, and I'll leave a message on your comm. You can call her in the morning."

Chakotay looked back at Kathryn and then at the three who were waiting expectantly for him to make a move. "All right, but I'm trusting you to help me be here for her."

Joe nodded with understanding. "At her first intelligible sound, I will call you. Day or night."

"Thank you." He gave Joe a slight smile and then turned to Kathryn. Tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, he said out loud to the others, "Hold her hand, if you would. She responds to touch."

Matt patted his back firmly. "Go on, Captain. We'll take good care of her. After all, I am her godfather."

"You are?" Chakotay asked in surprise as he stepped out of Matt's way. "I didn't realize."

“I’m not entirely sure Katie knows it, either. Something Ed and I talked about when she was about four or five years old.”

B’Elanna smiled. “What was she like at that age?”

“Precocious. There’s no other word for it.”

“Just like her niece,” Chakotay said with amusement. “Thank you, Admiral.”

Matt picked up Kathryn’s hand and pointed to her engagement ring. “I think you’d better start calling me Matt if you’re going to marry this one.”

With a slight chuckle, he nodded. “Thank you, Matt.”

B’Elanna put her arm around Chakotay’s shoulders and said, “Let’s go. She’s in good hands.”
