

The Future is Ours – Part 22

“Sorting Through the Issues”

By Dawn

Summary: Figuring out what happens next

Rated PG

When Kathryn heard someone open the front door, she looked up from where she was sitting on her mother’s living room floor, surrounded by a large array of fabric samples, pamphlets, lists, drawings, magazines, and PADDs. She’d only been home from the hospital for five days, but she’d received mountains of things to look at and think about.

Phoebe asked, “What are you doing, Katie?”

“Resting?” she suggested, since those were the instructions received from her mother a couple hours earlier.

“Looks like it.” Phoebe cleared a small area and plopped down in the midst of the piles.

Kathryn turned to the nurse that was with her. “Ensign Walters...”

The young woman hopped up. “Unless there’s anything you need, I’ll let you visit with your sister.”

With a chuckle, Kathryn said, “You read my mind. I’ll call you if I need you.”

After Walters left the room, Phoebe asked, “What happened to the nurse that was here before?”

“Patty? She’s only here at night. I thought it too much for her to be here twenty-four hours a day.”

“Ah,” Phoebe nodded. “Well, Mom asked me to stop by and check on you since it’s her first day back to work.”

“I’m sorting all of this stuff and making lists of what needs to be done.”

Phoebe picked up a pile of pamphlets and asked, “What are these?”

“Honeymoon destinations, but they’re all touristy. They aren’t safe for me – too high a chance I’ll be recognized.”

“Want to go back to Aspen?”

“Maybe. Or I was thinking Tuscany, but I don’t think April is a good time to go there.”

“Ooooh... some friends of ours went to this great little island in the Mediterranean. Want me to look into it for you? They say it has some terrific secluded villas.”

“I’d love it. Would you send the information to Chakotay, too? He’s coordinating with ‘fleet security because they have to approve.”

“Sure. They’re really treating you like a VIP with all this security, aren’t they?” Phoebe nodded towards the officers on duty outside.

“Normally, I would hate it, but right now, I find it reassuring.”

“Is there still a threat?” Phoebe asked.

Kathryn shifted one of the piles around. She didn’t want to tell her sister that if someone had hired her abductors, that person was still at large. “There could be, if someone wants to take advantage of my vulnerability.”

“We have to go through a full identity check every time we see you.”

“Sorry about that,” Kathryn frowned and then brightened up. “I guess you’ll have to visit more often so the entire rotation of personnel gets to know you.”

“I’ll do that, and it’s no trouble. You’re worth it.” Phoebe bit back a smile as she added, “Or so they say.”

Kathryn glanced at her sideways. “Then I’ve successfully pulled the wool over everyone’s eyes. Any day now they’re going to discover my secret.”

“And what’s that?”

Kathryn whispered, “That I have no idea what I’m doing.”

Smiling, Phoebe replied, “If that’s true, then you’re an expert at blowing smoke, because it sure sounds like you’re on top of things.”

“Oh, I know how to be a diplomat, and I know how to deliver motivating speeches, but the situation in the Federation is so complicated and full of hidden agendas that I’m not entirely sure where all of this is headed. I’m sort of figuring it out as I go, I guess you could say.”

“I think that’s to be expected. After all, these problems weren’t created overnight.”

Kathryn leaned back against the front of the couch and crossed her hands in her lap. “Would you tell me something, honestly?”

“Sure.”

“In all the interviews and speeches, do I appear arrogant or patronizing?”

“No.” Phoebe questioned, “Why do you ask?”

She picked at a piece of lint on her pants. “After my last press conference, the one at the hospital, I started wondering if I’m becoming too political. Or if I’m carrying it too far because of my fame.”

“I won’t deny that you’re turning into a politician, but I think that’s what we need. I wasn’t joking when I suggested that you run for office some day.”

“I don’t know about that.” Kathryn looked outside the window to see a patrol officer walk by. “The price of fame is high.”

“Can I ask you what might be a difficult question, Katie?”

“Sure,” she replied, guarded.

“When you were abducted, was there any way they could have anticipated that?”

“You want to know if it could’ve been prevented?”

“Yes, if it’s not too hard to talk about.”

Kathryn crossed her arms. “Hindsight is always 20/20, but we had no reason to think there was a threat of that significance. We all assumed that if someone wanted me, it would’ve been a hostage situation and that would’ve been resolved more quickly.”

“How was this different?”

“There were no demands and therefore, no transmissions that Starfleet could track. It’s a pretty resourceful organization, and from what I understand, every possible resource was focused on finding me. When my captors finally communicated with Starfleet, I was extracted within twenty-four hours.” Kathryn felt a chill course through her.

“But I’m talking about when they actually grabbed you and Doyle died. They say he was trying to save your life.”

Kathryn had tried not to think about Scott too much because it was painful, remembering the way he’d told her to keep going, no matter what. “He was a good man, and protected me fiercely time and time again.” She wiped away tears that were forming. “I had four

guards that afternoon, and they all would've died to protect me. While the other three were covering us, Scott and I took off running, trying to escape. Needless to say, all five of us were phasered."

"I'm sorry, Katie. I didn't mean to make you feel sad."

"It's all right," Kathryn shook her head. "I don't believe they intended to kill anyone that day, but even phaser stuns can be deadly in some circumstances. To answer your question, yes, we could have taken more precautions." She nodded out the window.

"Which is what they're doing now. They're on constant alert, and they secure every step I take before I take it. If I remain a public figure, it's likely that this amount of security will continue indefinitely." She watched another patrol officer walk by and a recollection about her exit plan on Joria struck her.

"Are you thinking about changing jobs?"

"Hmmm?" she asked, now distracted.

Phoebe followed her sightline. "What are you looking at?"

"The patrol officer. Something just occurred to me." Feeling unsettled, Kathryn tapped her commbadge. "Janeway to the Pioneer, do you read me?"

Ral answered with concerned surprise. "Yes, Admiral. Do you require assistance?"

"I'm fine, Commander, thank you. I'm calling to find out if you're in orbit and if Captain Young is available to make a social call later today."

"We're docked at McKinley Station until we receive further orders. Captain Young is planet-side, at his home. I can relay the message, if you'd like."

Kathryn thought for just a moment before replying, "Yes, please, if you don't mind. He needn't rush over. I just have a thought that I want to run by him regarding a personal matter."

"I'll let him know. Do you have a time preference, ma'am?"

"Late this afternoon if he's free, but I'll contact him in a little while to arrange details. Thank you, Commander."

"You're more than welcome, Admiral. If there's anything else I can do, please don't hesitate to ask. We're not busy."

Kathryn took advantage of the offer to disguise a request. "You always do a great job keeping an eye on me, and I will definitely let you know if I need you."

Ral hesitated only a second, but caught on immediately. “Aye, Admiral. Keep your commbadge close, then, just in case you think of something. Unfortunately, it would take an effort to get through security to see you in person, but you can always call us.”

“I will, thank you. Janeway out.” She looked apologetically at Phoebe. “I apologize for interrupting.”

“Don’t be,” she said with a smile. “I love watching you work. I had just asked if you were thinking about changing jobs.”

“Not exactly. Just about whether I should tone it down or go into seclusion so that I’m not in the spotlight quite so much.”

“Have you talked to Chakotay?”

“Yes and no,” Kathryn sighed. “It’s complicated.”

“I’m sure.” Phoebe got up on her knees and reached over to hug her sister. “I love you, Katie, and I’m very proud of you.” She pulled back to look at her. “What you did with Voyager is unbelievable, and what you’re doing for the Federation is so important. I know it’s difficult, but if you can bear with having all this security and try to stay on Earth more, I don’t think you should stop.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.” She wiped at her eyes again. “I’m just a little shaken after all this.”

“Understandably.” Phoebe looked down at the largest pile of stuff. “So, what’s all this fabric for?”

Glad for the change in conversation, Kathryn said, “Upholstery samples. They go with these.” She handed her some books on interior design.

“For the new house?” Phoebe sat back and leafed through a book.

“I’m starting from scratch because I’m leaving my townhouse furnished. I’m going to lease it to a couple from Voyager.”

“Not entirely from scratch. You have some beautiful artwork to focus the design.”

Kathryn smiled lovingly at her sister. “Yes, but I can’t decide which pieces to put where, and how formal to make the rooms. I’m torn because I want everything to be comfortable, but if I want to entertain, I should lean towards formal.”

“I don’t agree. A good hostess offers a relaxed atmosphere.” Phoebe showed her a page out of the book. “Look at this collection, for example. It looks really comfortable, but

that's really classy. I bet that in a soft green would accentuate your collection of vases. Throw in some blue accents, and it'd be striking."

"And those colors would be a nice compliment to the ocean."

"There you go. Have you thought about hiring a designer?"

"No. I'd like to make it my own, and since I'm not doing much right now, I think I can manage it." Kathryn had an inspiration. "Would you like to help me?"

"I would LOVE to help you. That house is incredible and it would be a dream to design an interior for it. Maybe I'll even paint you a piece for one of the rooms. Oooh... a little bit of Indiana would make the dining room feel like home."

"That would make me very happy, Phoebes."

Her sister glanced up from the book and said, "Good. I want you to be happy. You deserve it."

Kathryn felt goosebumps from the intensity behind her sister's words. "Thank you."

"Let's plan a trip out there tomorrow to take some measurements. Are you up for it?"

"Definitely. I'll make arrangements. You take Katie to school at 8:30?"

"Yes, and I can be here at 9:00."

"This is exciting. We want to move there in early March to get settled in before the Voyager reunion and wedding."

"That gives us a little less than a month to plan, decorate, and furnish. No problem!"

Kathryn laughed. "Meanwhile, 'fleet security is already there, hard at work. Do you want to look through these books at home tonight?"

"Sure," Phoebe said. "What's the rest of this?"

"The wedding coordinator dropped these books off yesterday, but I haven't gone through them. I'm inclined to ask her to come up with a design to include peace roses, and leave all the little decisions to her."

"Oh!" Her eyes widened in excitement. "Did I tell you that B'Elanna and I talked?"

"About a bachelorette party?"

"That, and we want to ask you about having three attendants."

“Three? You, B’Elanna, and?”

“Sekaya.”

Kathryn’s mouth popped open in surprise. She hadn’t even considered that. “What a wonderful idea.”

“So you’re game?”

“I’m game. Add your Mike and Steven as groomsmen?”

“If that’s who Chakotay wants.”

“Maybe,” Kathryn said. “He might want to ask Mike Ayala. Regardless, it sounds like fun. I wish we could go shopping for a dress this weekend.”

“Can you?” Phoebe asked. “Get out and shop, I mean?”

Deflated, Kathryn admitted, “No, I shouldn’t because of the security needs and because it’s cold and flu season.”

“I bet that if we find an upscale bridal boutique, we could schedule a private fitting and transport you directly there, security and all.”

“I’d like that.” Kathryn picked up a bridal magazine and showed Phoebe a picture of a long sheath dress with a beaded jacket. “I was looking at this one.”

Phoebe raised an eyebrow. “No.”

“No?” Kathryn laughed. Rarely did anyone tell her ‘no.’

“It looks matronly. You should be daring. Go backless.”

“Backless?” Kathryn coughed. “But I’ll be standing up in front of everyone.”

“I know. Exciting, isn’t it?”

“It sounds rather audacious. I’m not that brazen.”

“You? Not brazen?” Phoebe rolled her eyes. “Maybe not with your clothing, but your very presence radiates bold confidence. I think that with this svelte figure you have right now, you might as well take advantage of it.”

“Svelte? More like bony.”

“It’s all in your perception. With your current size, you could get away with a dress that’s incredibly sexy.” Phoebe leafed through a bridal magazine and then handed it to Kathryn. “Like this.”

One look at it, and Kathryn said obstinately, “Oh... no, no, no, no, nooooo. I’m way too old to wear that! There’s no back at all and you can practically see the sides of her breasts, not to mention the top of her rear-end.”

Phoebe laughed. “Think about it.” Standing up, she said, “I need to go get Katie. Want us to come back here and look through magazines or do you need a nap?”

“If you have time, come eat lunch with me. We can talk more and I’d love to see her.”

“Will do. I’ll be back in about thirty minutes.” Phoebe hugged her before she left.

Looking around at the piles of stuff, Kathryn felt a renewed sense of energy. She glanced at the shameless wedding dress and smiled to herself. Chakotay’s eyes might not stay in their sockets if she wore something like that. She bit her lip nervously, just thinking about it.

Chakotay was angry and more than a little exasperated by the time he got to the front door of Gretchen’s house that evening. He went on an immediate search for Kathryn so he could find out what she was up to and put a stop to it. More importantly, he wanted to know why she was putting herself at risk again and why she hadn’t called him to discuss whatever she was planning.

He found her at the kitchen table, pouring over a civilian-style PADD, while Gretchen prepared dinner around her. Ready to lay into her, he opened his mouth to speak when she looked up and gave him one of the brightest, most loving smiles that he’d ever seen.

“Hi, honey.” She beamed as she picked up another PADD and handed it to him. “You’re going to love this!”

Biting his tongue, he took the PADD and saw that it was a possible honeymoon destination in the Mediterranean. “Looks nice.”

“Nice?” With excitement, she launched into details about the exclusivity of the island and all of its amenities.

His anger deflated considerably as he listened to her enthusiasm. While she was talking, he looked at the table to see what she was working on. He expected to see reports and her computer terminal, but there wasn’t a Starfleet-related item in sight. Instead, the table was covered with a dizzying array of books lying open to pictures of flower arrangements.

“You haven’t heard a word I’ve said.”

“Hmmm?” He looked up at her and then blinked. “Sorry. The island sounds great.”

She nodded to the pictures. “I’m trying to decide which of these arrangements might look best with peace roses, although I have a feeling that the florist will do whatever she thinks is best.”

“Peace roses? For our wedding?”

“Don’t you like the idea?”

He was taken aback. “I love it. Can’t think of a more perfect flower for us.”

Kathryn’s face instantly transformed into another bright smile. “Me, either.”

His irritation had all but melted away, but he wouldn’t be deterred from getting answers. Coming around the table, he leaned down to kiss her cheek and asked, “Could I have a word with you?”

She turned her head slowly to look at him, a knit in her brow. “Sure,” she said hesitantly. “Everything okay?”

“In private?”

Still a bit wobbly, she let him steady her as she stood up. “Mom, Patty, we’ll be back.”

“Take your time, lovebirds,” Gretchen winked at Patty as she happily chopped vegetables.

Once they were in the living room, Kathryn commented, “They think we’re off for a quick romp in the bedroom.”

“That’s where we’re headed, but a romp is not on my agenda.”

“You have an agenda?” She looked at him quizzically.

“Mmmhmmm, because you, my dear, have had a very busy day.” He ushered her inside and closed the door behind him. Sighing heavily, he handed her the bag he’d been carrying. “Please explain why Justin gave this to me?”

Slightly amused at his probing reaction to her security precautions, she took the bag and peeked inside. “He worked quickly.” She dumped the contents onto the bed and picked up the tri-corder that was in the mix. “I asked Bernie to get these, but I wasn’t expecting it to happen today.”

Chakotay sorted through the items. “Two of everything, I see. Tri-corders, security sweepers, hand held and mini phasers, dampening field generators, and transport inhibitors. Plus a site-to-site transporter and a med-kit.”

“You sound a little envious, honey, but I plan to share them with you.” She gave him a wink.

“Why do ‘we’ have them?” he asked as he sat down near the closet to take his shoes off.

“In case we get bored?” she suggested as she tossed him the tri-corder.

He easily caught it and, with a lowered voice, warned, “Kathryn.”

Resting her elbows on her knees, she fiddled with the settings on a sweeper. “I had a hunch today, and I felt the need to do something about it. All of these,” she gestured towards the articles on the bed, “are merely for my peace of mind.”

Crossing his arms, he demanded, “What are you planning?”

Kathryn’s eyebrow shot up in irritation, and then her expression immediately transformed into understanding. “Chakotay, I’m not planning anything. The last thing I would do right now is put myself at greater risk.” She held up the other tri-corder and said flirtatiously, “You know how much I like to scan. I wanted my toys.”

“I didn’t realize that phasers could be used as a scanner, or are you planning to develop some new technology during your time off?”

She eyed the items thoughtfully. “An all-in-one ‘scan and defend’ tool. Not a bad idea.”

Rolling his eyes, he began to change out of his uniform. He could tell by her mannerisms that she was being straight with him, so he relaxed a little. However, she hadn’t really explained and was avoiding his questions, so he knew something was wrong.

As he hung his jacket up, he said, “I ran into Bernie at Headquarters as I was leaving. He said that you were looking well, and that he was glad to see that you got a little of your spunk back. He also wanted me to know that the Pioneer had their eye on you, as you requested; and that he and Judy had come up with an approach that they want to run by you.”

“Already? He just left here two hours ago.”

Chakotay looked at her askance as he sat on a chair and took off his shoes. “An approach to what?”

“To getting some information that isn’t readily accessible.”

“Readily accessible?”

“Confidential.” She held up a hand. “Before you get worked up again, I have no intentions of directly involving myself in the follow-through. I just want to look at some records, and asked Bernie to think of a way to get our hands on them.”

Eyes narrowed, he asked, “What’s your hunch? You’re spooked and I want to know why.”

“You’re irritated that I didn’t call you before taking action.”

“Yes and no. You don’t need my approval, but if something was alarming enough for you to go to these lengths, I would’ve hoped that you’d have thought to contact me. What’s going on?”

She sat up straight and tossed the tri-corder onto the bed. “It occurred to me this morning that we had a security breach on December 16th.”

Scratching his neck, he asked, “That ‘just’ occurred to you this morning?”

Kathryn waved her hand in the air dismissively. “Of course we had a security problem, but I’m talking about a breach. My exit plan was to leave through the main lobby of the building, and both Starfleet and Jorian security teams were to have the path clear. That has been our standard operating procedure since day one. The only excuse for ‘fleet security not having done their jobs is if they didn’t receive word that I was on the move, or if they received alternative orders. That’s why I wanted to talk to Bernie.”

“Okay, but wouldn’t they have gone over that within hours after your abduction?”

“Yes, but all five of us that were witness to the change in exit plans weren’t available. As a matter of fact, no other Starfleet personnel were even still on the planet besides us. Since the incident on Ktaria, we’ve consistently had a second team within fifty meters of my location. Bernie was mystified today when I asked for his assessment because they hadn’t addressed it. I put a call in to Khurma to ask if it was under investigation.”

“Is it?”

“It is now.” She pinched the bridge of her nose. “This part of the analysis fell through the cracks. Everyone assumed it had already been investigated.”

Disbelieving, he asked, “How is that possible? A miscommunication that caused you to divert from your secured path should’ve sent up multiple red flags and been dissected at length.”

“And my teams have always secured two paths. I haven’t spoken to Justin, yet, because I don’t want to upset him until I have more information, but he should’ve communicated with the forward team at each exit point before we started moving. He always has.”

“Why didn’t you go out the front?”

“I wanted to get off the planet. I’d already been detained for an hour by the Maoian delegates who brought up a last minute issue, and the entire lobby was congested with civilians and reporters. Was I on the news that night?”

“Yes.” He took a shaky breath. “I watched it over and over again, hoping I’d see a signal from you not to worry.”

She carefully stood up, walked over to where he was sitting, and ran her fingers through his hair. “I’m sorry, but I didn’t think I needed to give you one. I had thought that I’d be talking to you before that interview would’ve reached Earth’s broadcasts.”

“I know.” He put his arm around her legs and held her close. “So, you want evidence that we’ve got a security breach inside Starfleet?”

“I think the breach originates in the office of the President, so I want to learn as much as I can about the people who work for him and what connections they have.”

Chakotay looked up at her and shook his head. “Fleet security already investigated him and found nothing.”

“What?” Kathryn took a step back. “How recently?”

“While you were in the hospital.” Rubbing his eyes, he continued, “I meant to tell you about it, but I simply forgot.”

She sat down on the bed again. “That’s all right. Go on.”

“Picard dropped by to pay you a visit, and he filled me on what he could. This was before the transplant, and after Pratin died.”

“I thought that the Enterprise was going to Ktaria. That would’ve been an awfully short trip.”

“They went. Do you know why?”

“Picard was going in Khurma’s place to officially welcome Ktaria back into the Federation. What I didn’t understand was why President Zife wasn’t the one going. That would’ve been exactly the kind of press he would’ve wanted.”

“Harry thinks it’s because Zife doesn’t believe the membership will last. Evidently, Zife mentioned that Ktaria is a fickle friend in a closed meeting.”

Kathryn frowned. “Not a smart thing to say.”

“No, but Judy said there’s no love lost between Bolius and Ktaria. They’ve had a lot of trouble in recent years, especially because the two planets are in adjacent sectors. When Ktaria left the Federation, Bolius and its neighboring systems became more vulnerable to attack.”

“I suppose,” she said as she rubbed her chin. “Without Ktaria, Bolius would be on the edge of Federation space, but not in the line of fire from the Beta quadrant.”

“No, but there are many who want to play the part of the victim and few who will go to the effort of trying to be a hero.”

Kathryn shook her head. “I don’t agree. There are many who want to be heroes, they just need the confidence that they won’t be hung out to dry. Actually, I believe that most of the planets who left the Federation were extremely brave for doing so.”

“Most would say they left out of fear.”

“Maybe a couple, but to stand on your own... that takes guts.”

“Much like a brave woman I love.” He gave her a wink.

“Thank you,” she said with a chuckle. “So, what does this have to do with investigating the president?”

“It doesn’t, but on the way out to Ktaria, the Enterprise dropped Riker off to do some undercover reconnaissance, following a lead they got from one of your supposed buyers.”

“And?”

“I don’t have a name, but this buyer was planning to use you as a hostage to blackmail Zife.”

“To do what?”

“To include his planet in the illegal money-making operations that the entire quadrant suspects.”

“Did he have proof?”

“No, but it did launch an investigation into the Office of the President, and they found nothing.”

“Well, of course they wouldn’t find anything during an official investigation. What I want is a covert one, even if it has to be me pulling the strings to make it happen.”

“That’s dangerous.”

“I know, honey.” She motioned for him to join her on the bed. Once he sat down, she said, “We have to be smart about it. That’s why I’ve asked Bernie to come up with a plan.”

“I hope he has access to what Picard told me.”

“You know, I think I should give Bernie a call to thank him for my new toys.”

Chakotay drew her into his arms and place a kiss on her temple. “Since you’re bound to upset the same people who we already suspect are after you, I guess there’s no harm in seeing what we can find.”

“My thoughts, exactly.” She looked up into his eyes. “And I won’t be putting myself into the line of fire, not for this. Zife is going down eventually, and my involvement will only speed up the process or make the fall significantly harder.”

“You’ve already made a lot of progress towards both. Zife practically signed his impeachment papers when he hired you.”

She laughed. “What a sweet thing to say. That ranks right up there with telling me how beautiful I am.”

Chakotay brushed her lips with his own. “My beautiful, brazen, and brilliant...”

When he paused, she asked, “What?”

“I was about to say wife.”

“You could say that.”

“How about I just kiss you?”

Winding her fingers up into his hair, she whispered, “Is that a phaser in your pocket, Captain?”

He looked down and then laughed as he picked up the phaser that was poking her leg and tossed it aside. “So it seems.”

A few days later, Chakotay opened the front door of Gretchen's home to see Admiral Khurma waiting on the porch. "Good evening, Admiral."

"Good evening, Captain. May I come in?"

"Of course." He stood back and let the older gentlemen inside.

"I apologize for the late hour. Is Kathryn still available?"

"Yes, I'll let her know that you're here."

"Thank you, Captain."

Although Kathryn had established a good relationship with her C.O., Chakotay wasn't sure how he felt about the man, yet. This after-hours meeting gave him a strange feeling because Khurma had been vague when he'd called earlier to see if she was up to it.

Chakotay went into the sun room where she and her mother were pouring through catalogues of bedroom furniture. "Kathryn, Admiral Khurma is here."

"All right," she said as she stood.

Gretchen commented dryly, "Seems like he could've come at a more respectable hour."

"Did he mention why he's here?"

Chakotay replied, "No, but if you don't feel up to this..."

She touched his arm. "I'll be fine. Would you help me with the steps?"

Chakotay stabilized Kathryn as she walked up into the house. Her equilibrium was still not quite what it should be and she'd stumbled and fallen a few times since she'd been at home. She didn't let go of his hand as they walked through the kitchen, giving him a silent request to stay with her.

When Khurma was in sight, Kathryn asked, "Admiral, how are you this evening?"

"I'm well, Kathryn, it's good to see you."

She let go of Chakotay to accept a hug from the older gentleman.

"Tell me, honestly, how are you feeling?"

"Not as strong as I'd like to be, but I'm on the mend," she said as she smiled warmly. "Would you join us for coffee?"

“I’d love to.”

Kathryn took Chakotay’s arm again to walk into the living room. “Let’s sit in here. I’ve always loved this room.”

Khurma said, “I would like to offer my congratulations to both of you on your upcoming marriage, and thank you for the invitation to attend the wedding.”

“I hope you can join us,” Chakotay said.

“I would love to. My wife, Samia, will send our reply.”

Kathryn said, “Chakotay has already spoken to Owen about arranging security for the wedding and the honeymoon.”

“I received the notice. The Mediterranean location looks quite peaceful, and I’m glad to see that you’ll be taking a full month there. We’ll make the security as inconspicuous as possible.”

“We appreciate that.”

“Your popularity has only grown since your abduction, and my concern is not just about those who may wish to cause you harm. We continue to be challenged in our efforts to keep the media and your fans away from this house.”

“I didn’t realize,” Kathryn responded in sympathy.

“We think most are just trying to catch a glimpse of you, but it has kept the security teams on their toes. They’re not getting bored.”

Chakotay said, “I hope that doesn’t mean they’re getting lax.”

“On the contrary, I’ve never seen a more dedicated security team. They’re as vigilant as they’d be if they were protecting the President himself.”

“I really don’t understand why the public is so interested in me. Recognition is a useful tool, of course, but it’s not like I’m a famous actress.”

Chakotay shook his head in amusement. “Unlike with an actress, they adore you and celebrate your accomplishments, not a role you’ve played.”

Khurma unsuccessfully bit back a smile. “Everyone loves a hero, and one as charming and gracious as you engenders strong loyalty.”

“Well, thank you, gentlemen,” she said, blushing. “Although I wasn’t fishing for compliments.”

Chakotay asked, "How do you like your coffee, sir?"

"Black, please," Khurma said. "Thank you, Captain."

As Chakotay left to get the drinks, he heard Kathryn ask what brought the Admiral by. Before he was out of earshot, he heard Khurma say that he wanted to check in on her. Not wanting to miss any of the conversation, he hurried back in with the coffee service.

Khurma nodded his thanks and asked, "Care to join us, Captain?"

"If you'd like," he said, glancing at Kathryn to see her nod in approval.

"Captain, I was just telling Kathryn that I came by to touch base with her. I hope you'll forgive the intrusion?"

"It's no intrusion," Chakotay said as he poured everyone coffee.

Kathryn took the drink gratefully. "To answer your question, Admiral, I haven't decided how long I'd like to remain on leave."

"I certainly don't expect you to return to active duty for a few months, but your statement to the press last week caused me to wonder if you have a plan in mind."

"Not exactly. I was attempting to reassure the public, but I apologize for not discussing it with you, first."

"Oh, no, no. Don't worry about that. I was pleasantly surprised that you'd want to come back at all." Khurma took a sip of coffee. "I certainly wouldn't blame you if you wanted to retire."

Kathryn tapped her coffee cup. "Are you asking me to?"

"No! Heavens no!" He leaned forward in his chair. "As a friend, I would like to see you leave all of this behind and enjoy a quiet, happy life. However, as your C.O, I have to tell you that, because of your popularity, we have a unique opportunity to positively affect the future of the Federation, and it won't work without you."

Chakotay asked, "Has anything been learned about a possible security breach?"

"Nothing conclusive. However, we've instituted checks and balances within the security team assigned to you. They are as tamper-resistant as we can make it."

Kathryn stated, "I'd like to familiarize myself with their procedures, and I want to meet the officers in command."

“Of course.” Khurma took another sip. “I have something that should renew your spirits a little.”

“Oh?”

“President Nakmyre of Joria feels terrible that the incident occurred right under his nose, and contacted me this afternoon to inquire about your health. He is quite captivated with you.”

Kathryn rolled her eyes. “Yes, I know. Quite the charmer.”

Chakotay remembered how Kathryn described the president’s attempts to find reasons to spend as much time with her as possible. “What did he have to say?”

“Your statements last week convinced him that you were someone worth believing in.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Because I said I wasn’t giving up?”

“That’s right. He’s been tracking all of your press coverage and has come to the conclusion that someone who is so beloved has to be one who keeps her promises. Because you’ve managed to beat the odds many times over, he thinks you can do it again.”

“No pressure,” Kathryn grimaced. “What does he want?”

“He wants you to keep your promise. What I want to know is what did you promise?”

She leaned back in her chair and chewed on her lip in thought. “Did you ask Commander Kim for the notes of the conference?”

“No, but I will.”

“You don’t remember?” Chakotay asked.

“I don’t remember saying anything out of the ordinary.”

“What do you ordinarily promise?” Khurma asked.

“Just the usual benefits of Federation membership. If I recall, he said he didn’t believe the Federation was capable of upholding those principles, but that’s not unusual.”

“Well, if that’s it, then I don’t foresee a problem. He’s planning to reinstate Joria’s membership, and he’s bringing his five-planet coalition with him.”

“And they’re all willing?”

“They seem to be. I'm sending the Enterprise to meet with them next week, but I'd like Jean-Luc to talk to you before he leaves, if you're agreeable.”

“I am, but I'd like to read a copy of the transcript first.”

Chakotay suggested, “Don't overdo it, Kathryn.”

“I won't,” she touched his arm reassuringly. “I've just put it so far out of my mind that I don't recall most of what we talked about. All the conferences are running together.”

Khurma said solemnly, “There is another issue that I'd like to talk to you both about. Are you up to it or should I come back tomorrow?”

Chakotay sat up a little straighter. “What kind of issue?”

Kathryn glanced at him with a mild warning to let her handle the conversation.

“The trial begins next week for the men who abducted you.”

With a controlled voice, she asked, “Do you need me to testify?”

“No,” Khurma said. “I wouldn't do that. The evidence is indisputable. However, you'd mentioned the possibility of immunity for the man you called Norval. We didn't promise it to him, but I would like you to reiterate why you thought he deserved it.”

“I see.” Kathryn pinched the bridge of her nose and then rubbed her thumb and forefinger across her closed eyelids. “I'm trying to recall what's in my report, but I honestly don't know.”

“Kathryn,” Chakotay said hesitantly. “Perhaps it would be better to think about it in the morning.”

Khurma placed his hand on his chest. “Please, accept my apology for bringing it up.”

“Gentlemen, I appreciate your concern for my welfare, but I can handle a brief conversation. Admiral, can we start with submitting my report as evidence?”

“It already is, but if there is anything you left out that could affect the outcome of his trial, now is the time to bring it forward.”

“I'm going to have to read the report. What did I say about him?”

“Nothing. I have a report from Bernie saying that you mentioned the young man, but that's it.”

Growing more reserved, she said, “My apologies, Admiral. I guess I wasn’t as thorough as I should’ve been.”

“Oh, that’s not what I’m asking, Kathryn. One could hardly expect absolute recall from a situation such as this. However, if you want to add an addendum, now would be a good time.”

“I…” Kathryn’s complexion blanched, but she tried to cover her reaction. “I’ll see what I can do. Tomorrow probably.”

“Kathryn?” Chakotay asked worriedly.

Khurma said quietly, “We’d like you to meet with him. He may have information.”

“No, absolutely not,” Chakotay said vehemently. “It’s out of the question. I don’t care what information he has.”

“Kathryn?” Khurma asked. “Are you okay?”

“Hmm?” She stared at him blankly for just a moment, and then blinked to shake it off. “I’m sorry, what did you say?”

Gently, he repeated, “I asked if you were feeling okay.”

“Oh. I’m fine,” she waved off his concern. “I’d like to give it some thought, Admiral. Can I let you know tomorrow?”

“Of course.” He stood, looking distressed at Kathryn’s reaction. “Please, accept my apology for having to bring up this unpleasant topic.”

“There’s no need to apologize. It’s a situation that needs to be addressed.”

“I’ll instruct Ms. Randolph to put you through as soon as you call tomorrow.”

Absently, she replied, “I’d appreciate that.”

Chakotay stood. “Admiral, I’ll see you out.” As he walked past Kathryn, he gave her arm a quick rub.

When he returned a few minutes later, she was sitting in the same position, staring at nothing. She looked small in the large arm chair with her head bowed and her mouth covered by her hand. He kneeled in front of her. “Kathryn, I’m worried about you.”

Her gaze found his eyes, but it was a moment before she spoke. “I suspect that I’m going to be difficult to be married to.”

“Why’s that?”

“It must be difficult to know when I need to be cosseted and when I need to rely on my own strength of will.”

“I’ll admit that right now, it’s not easy to know, nor is it easy to switch back and forth, but normally, the word cosseted wouldn’t be one I would ever connect with you.”

She took a deep breath and licked her lips. “That was my commanding officer, Chakotay.”

Gently, he replied, “Who knows that you’re not yourself.”

“How can I become myself again if you don’t let me speak?”

“Kathryn,” he said carefully. “This isn’t worth fighting over. If I’m still overprotective in six months, then I give you permission to deck me.”

Raising one eyebrow, she tried to keep her mouth from twitching. “You’ve been overprotective for the last eight years. What makes you think you can change in six months?”

He leaned in closer and gave her a simple kiss. “Permission to fuss over you for just a couple minutes?”

Impishly, she replied, “You’ll have to earn the right.”

“What must I do, ma’am?”

“Kiss me again... thoroughly this time.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He did as instructed and gave her a slow, leisurely kiss.

When he pulled away, she said, “I’m impressed, Chakotay.”

“With the kiss?”

“No,” she said and then quickly caught herself. With a slight blush, she corrected, “Yes, a very impressive kiss, but that’s not what I’m talking about. How difficult was it for you to avoid fighting just now?”

“Ah,” he said with understanding. “It wasn’t difficult at all, because keeping our relationship peaceful and you happy is much important than having the last word or being right.”

“You think you were in the right?”

He shook his head. "Try as you might, I'm not fighting with you."

Waving her hand, she said, "All right then, you have two minutes for mollycoddling."

"I'll take it." He cupped her jaw with his fingers. "You don't need to talk to this man."

"I might." Taking his hand to her mouth, she kissed his palm. "There will be personal ramifications to deal with. I'll probably backslide a little with the nightmares, but I know you'll be there to catch me. Are you okay with me depending on you like that?"

"Absolutely," he said with firm conviction.

"I'd like to work towards regaining my emotional equilibrium, so unless I'm in obvious distress, would you let me handle my affairs?"

"May I continue with my coddling for just another minute before I say yes?"

She smirked. "Carry on."

"Why do you need to talk to him?"

Shrugging, she looked out the darkened window, and said, "If there's something I can do to help him, I should try."

"Help him? Why?" he asked with disbelief.

"I didn't put it my report." She looked at him sadly. "I didn't tell you or Harry about this young man, and so it didn't make it in."

"What about him?"

She leaned forward and rested her chin on her hands. "He helped me. A couple times, he saved his dinner and fed it to me." She cringed. "Of course, I vomited it back up, but it was the thought that counts, right?"

"I guess," he said incredulously. "If he'd really wanted to help you, he would've made it possible for Starfleet to find you."

"He tried, or at least he said he did. He reported that he told a Starfleet officer that I was on his ship, but they didn't believe him. This had to have been within a week of me being there, because I was coherent enough to ask him to try."

Chakotay bowed his head. "Even if he had, it would have been one of the hundreds of sightings that had been reported."

“When Owen spoke to me on Tuesday about the developments he’d alluded to last week, one of the issues was this young man. Norval had spoken with Bernie and offered to give him information as a plea bargain. At that time, Khurma had refused, but Bernie was planning to talk with Khurma about how I’d suggested offering him immunity. I only suggested it to get him to talk in the first place, and until tonight, it completely escaped me that his help didn’t make it into my report.”

“What kind of information does he have?”

“We have no idea. Owen said that Norval is very young and scared. We all suspect that he was working for Pratin under duress. The psychological assessment indicates that he may not be fit to stand trial, and it could be that Khurma is looking for a reason not to put him through it.”

“Do you have knowledge that could help?”

“Only my recollection of one conversation he had with another, and at the time, I was struggling with delirium. The other times we interacted, we were alone, and so my testimony might not make a difference.”

“But you want to meet him, don’t you?”

“I want to forget the whole thing, actually. But there’s a young man out there in an impossible situation, and I want to know his motives for getting involved with Pratin in the first place. I might not be able to keep him out of prison, but maybe I can help him find some peace.”

“I’m going with you.”

“Do you think that’s a good idea?”

“Not much better than you going, but I don’t want you to face this alone.”

She rubbed the back of his hands with her thumbs. “I would appreciate your support. Knowing you’ll be there to catch me if I fall apart does help.”

He stood and pulled her into his arms. “I’m really worried about how this will affect you.”

Still embracing him, she kissed his cheek. “As long as you’re with me, I’ll be okay.”

“So long as I let you do the talking. I understand.”

With a big squeeze, she said, “However, when we’re alone, I rather enjoy the way you pamper me. It makes me feel loved.”

“You are definitely loved.”

She tapped his chest. “And you, mister, are going to have to fight with me at some point so we can blow off steam.”

Chuckling, he replied, “I promised that I wouldn’t, but if you’d like to, let’s try fighting over something innocuous.”

“Like what?”

He shrugged. “Bedroom furniture. That’s what you were looking at, right?”

“Right,” she said hesitantly.

“Show me what you like and I promise that I’ll disagree at first. Eventually, you’ll talk me into it, because you are so good at swaying my opinion. I’ll love it because any bed is the perfect place to *really* blow off some steam, if you catch my drift?”

“You could trap Voyager in a drift that big.”

Kissing behind her ear, he whispered, “It’s not Voyager I want to trap. It’s her captain.”

When Gretchen showed him into the living room, Picard extended both of his hands towards Kathryn. “Admiral Janeway, it’s a pleasure to see you again, and looking so well.”

“Please, call me Kathryn,” she said as she accepted the kind, but reserved hug.

“No, no, I mustn’t. You’ve more than earned that title, and I intend to use it.”

Smiling graciously, she said, “Thank you, Captain. Please have a seat.”

“This is a lovely home, Admiral.”

“Thank you. I’ll accept your compliment on my mother’s behalf. She just left to go teach a class.”

He accepted a cup of tea. “Beverly tells me that you’re getting married soon, and that I am to escort her to your wedding.”

“Chakotay and I would be thrilled to have you. I would have addressed the invitation to you as well, but Beverly has never said for certain if you were the man she was involved with.”

“Ah, I see. That comes from years of self-enforced discretion, although I'm sure I don't need to explain that to you. After all, you're marrying your former first officer.”

“Yes,” Kathryn smiled. “But since we weren't a couple on the ship, discretion was less of an issue than was developing evasive maneuvers to avoid the need for it.”

He paused lifting his cup halfway to his mouth. “You weren't involved?”

“Not romantically. I had enough to worry about just staying alive and keeping the ship flying. More often than not, at the end of the day there wasn't enough time or energy to think about myself.”

“I see.” He followed through on the sip, but didn't look convinced. “How are you feeling, if I may ask?”

“Significantly better than last time we spoke.”

“I certainly hope so.” He wrinkled his forehead. “At that point, we'd only had you back for less than two days and you barely had the strength to keep your eyes open.”

“I must have looked like death warmed over.” She sighed. “I'd say that I'm doing quite well considering how many miracles it took to keep me alive.”

“Do you believe in miracles, Admiral?”

She pondered the question for a moment. “I didn't used to, but the last eight years have challenged my beliefs. I prefer to think that miracles have brought me to this point as opposed to just dumb luck, because I have no idea if I can call it good luck to have survived, or if it's really bad luck that I ended up in some of the situations to begin with.”

“Perhaps both, but don't discount hard work, intelligence, and perseverance. I have no doubt that all are key factors in your miracles.”

“Thank you. I like to believe that I empowered my crew with the freedom to think creatively out there. They are each a significant factor in our success.”

“Speaking of your crew, may I ask about one of them?”

“Of course. Which one?”

“Commander Kim. He's an impressive young man.”

“Yes, he is. It's hard to believe that he's only eight years out of the Academy, but he was thrown into the deep end on Voyager and came up swimming.”

“I hope I'm not being too forward, but how vital is he to your team?”

Kathryn raised her chin a little as she realized where Picard was leading. “He has been extremely vital, and while I'm on leave, he's taking the reigns.”

“The last thing I want to do is upset your staff, but I'm very interested in offering him a posting.”

“In what capacity?” She asked, anxious at the thought of losing him.

“Operations officer, bridge crew. I'll be losing Commander Riker later this year, and plan to promote Commander Data to first officer.”

“Wow.” Her eyes widened in surprised. “That would be quite an offer.”

“One that I'm hoping he wouldn't turn down, but I understand that he declined a similar offer to work for you.”

“That other offer didn't hold a candle to the Federation flagship, but he didn't turn it down because of the position itself. He wanted to work for me, and I have a strong feeling that he wouldn't want to leave right now, even if I urged him to.”

“I understand, considering the circumstances. What I'd like to have is some overlap during the next six months so that my bridge crew can train their replacements.” Picard dipped his chin. “Much less work for me, you see.”

“Oh, I know exactly what you mean.” Sighing, she said, “The truth is that I can't go back to work yet, and he's the only one who sat in on every meeting with me.”

“I'll hold off, but I'm not going to look any further. He did some very impressive work while we were searching for you. I haven't seen that kind of talent in a long time.”

She nodded. “I agree. He's quite gifted, and what he's doing for me doesn't even begin to use his best skills.”

“However,” Picard tapped a finger against his chin. “Since we're headed out to do some work on your behalf, maybe I should ask him to join us.”

“I was going to suggest that. Please tell him that I asked him to go.”

“All right. Is there anyone else from your team that should go?”

“No,” Kathryn thought about them. “I'd like to have Commander Young to stay on top of things at my office, and while Lieutenant Jarvin was also present at a lot of those meetings, he needs to be here monitoring my security.”

“Agreed. So, about President Nakmyre, I read the summary of your discussions. What else do I need to know?”

“You have the facts, but what isn’t in the official reports is what he wants in exchange for convincing his coalition to rejoin.”

“Must be something dubious for you to have omitted it.”

Kathryn took a sip of coffee as she formulated a way to respond. “What is your opinion of the efficacy of the Federation Council?”

“Hmmm.” He set down his teacup and crossed his arms in thought. “That issue is discussed at length among the media and bantered about in social settings, but never does it arise within conversations that are to be reported.”

“No, it doesn’t. I trust that you’ll keep what I’m going to say out of any reports?”

“Absolutely, as I’m sure you’ll return the gesture in kind?”

“Agreed.” Kathryn said. “Nakmyre, as well as most of the dignitaries I’ve spoken to this year, all want basically the same thing.”

“A new administration?”

“Yes. Nakmyre has a specific plan to protect the Council from the influence of the President, and he wants an open acknowledgement from the Federation that the Council has shown favoritism in regards to trade agreements.”

“That’s not going to happen any time soon.”

Kathryn said, “I believe it will take a new President and an official investigation into the Council’s business dealings.”

“An investigation that would likely ruin many careers and cause a different group of planets to cede membership.”

“That depends entirely how it’s handled. It’s my hope that we can pursue an investigation quietly so that we can protect innocent people from slander. I don’t want anyone pointing fingers until we’re sure where, exactly, the problem lies.”

“Admiral,” he shook his head. “You’re talking about a significant weeding out of corrupt politicians. I’m not sure that’s possible without a complete turnover.”

“That may be. For now, we cannot let Nakmyre push these agenda items yet.” She clasped her hands. “He indicated to Admiral Khurma that he has faith in my ability to beat the odds. Play that up when you meet with him.”

“That puts a lot of pressure on you to make something happen that is likely impossible.”

“Yes, but I’d much rather he pressure me than to start attacking the President. He’s not the only leader who wants to see me take over.” She clicked her tongue. “To clarify, I have no intention of running for office, but as long as they believe that I can make a change, they’re focusing on a positive outcome, giving us the freedom to pursue an investigation quietly. If the tide changes and people start demanding results, we lose that flexibility to maneuver discreetly. Those fingers will start pointing faster than we’ll be able to control.”

“I see your point.” He nodded slowly as he pondered what she’d said. “So, I will convince Nakmyre that we need him to sing your praises as a distraction.”

“He strikes me as the type who would love to be part of a little conspiracy.”

“Should be an interesting conversation,” he said as he refreshed Kathryn’s coffee. When finished, he asked, “I understand that you’d like to speak to me about something personal?”

“Thank you,” she indicated the coffee. “Yes, about your heart transplant.”

“What would you like to know?”

“You were young when you received it, correct?”

“I was twenty, and I got stabbed in a bar fight.”

Cringing, she said, “Oooh.”

“Painful, yes, but at least it was quick. It distresses me that you suffered through that ghastly ordeal and then were faced with such a devastating illness.”

“I question the fairness of it myself. Given the choice, I would have declined both experiences.” Leaning towards the arm of her chair, she said, “In regards to the new heart, what I’m anxious about is the intuition that I associate with increased heart rate. With a computer pumping for me, I’m not entirely sure that I’m going to feel a physical response to anxiety.”

“Surely you’ve felt some fluctuations in your heart rate during the last few weeks?”

“Yes,” she nodded. “The doctors tell me that it responds to brain impulses. I just wonder how much of my intuition is in my brain, and how much is in my heart, so to speak. Do you feel your heart hammering in tense situations?”

“Not hammering, per se. I vaguely recall that sensation, but when my heart rate increases, I feel it as increased energy.”

“I see.” She was eager to learn as much as she could. “You probably don’t have a basis for comparison because your body was younger and healthier than mine at the time of your transplant, but I wonder if I’ll need to take things easier. Be more cautious with physical exertion and try to keep a lid on stress levels.”

“I wouldn’t think so. I haven’t exactly taken it easy on my heart during my adult life, and it’s even survived a short bout of Cardassian torture methods.”

She gasped in concern. “Oh, I didn’t know!”

“Not many do, and I’m telling you so that you’ll feel confident that your heart can likely handle a lot more than your body can. However, I suspect the doctors can do a controlled stress test with you.”

“That’s what I’ve been told. I suppose it doesn’t hurt to confide in you that I’m considering a family. The cardiac team wants to do a series of stress tests when I’m stronger to make sure it can cope, although I suspect they’re just offering the tests to appease me.”

“A family?” Picard smiled. “I’m delighted that you’re considering that, Admiral. I dare say that you deserve some personal happiness. In fact, this news gives me a bit of peace for I’ve been rather upset over all that’s happened to you.”

“Thank you.” She inhaled deeply. “I haven’t told anyone except Chakotay and the doctors about my hopes, and I have no idea why I told you, but I really appreciate your positive reaction.”

“Family is very important, and there are times when I wish I had made different choices in order to have children. But, as you know, things don’t always work out like you plan.”

“No, they don’t. They definitely don’t.”

“The more I learn about you, Admiral, the more surprised I am about how much we have in common.”

“Oh?” She smiled. “Such as?”

“I understand that we’ve both been partially assimilated.”

“Cheery topic, but yes. However, I didn’t ever become part of the hive mind.”

He took a cleansing breath. “But that is another conversation for another time, should we need it. In other matters, we both seem to be a subject of interest for Q, and have an unfortunate tendency to travel through time.”

“Time?” she asked in surprise.

“Although I don’t know the specifics about your experiences, Commander Kim told us that the implant we used to locate you was to prevent you from temporal incursions.”

Kathryn groaned. “Yes. Temporal paradoxes are their own sort of nightmare, aren’t they?”

“That they are.” Picard patted the arm of his chair. “I have taken enough of your time, dear Admiral, although if I may ask?”

“You needn’t hurry to leave, and yes, what would you like to know?”

He leaned closer to conspire. “I don’t want to presume to interfere with counselor/patient confidentiality, but I received a request from Counselor Troi to remain on Earth while we go on this little excursion. Now, don’t get me wrong, I adore the Counselor, but sometimes, I need a few weeks to process things on my own. As a friend, I want to ask you if I should give her permission to stay behind.”

Kathryn laughed. “I appreciate your consideration, but if you don’t need her and if she would like to stay, I wouldn’t mind continuing our in-person conversations. She’s remarkable, isn’t she?”

“Yes, she is. I’m not looking forward to losing either her or Will. They are my family, and Deanna is quite extraordinary. It took me years before I let her counsel me on personal matters because I had no interest in what I thought would be forming a dependent relationship with a psychologist, not to mention a member of my senior staff. I was strong enough to handle my own issues, thank you very much.” He winked. “But for me, she has a knack for making the conversations seem like a chat between friends, and I have never once felt ‘counseled.’”

Kathryn smiled. “I’m glad to hear that, because I sometimes wonder when we’re going to get to the ‘counseling’ part. Then later when I reflect on our conversations, I can feel a sense of resolve although I have no idea where it might have come from.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” he said with a chuckle. “Deanna will be thrilled about staying here. She wants to use the time to plan her wedding in Alaska, and since she’ll be here and I’ll have Commander Kim and Beverly, I have no choice but to return by late March to attend your wedding.”

“I hope this trip to Joria won’t take that long.”

“No, but you never know.” Picard stood up to go. “Beverly wants to see you before we leave tomorrow. Are you free?”

“If she brings the ice cream, absolutely,” Kathryn smiled. “I’ll contact her.”

“Good, please do. I think she wants your opinion on whether to bring the young doctor from the Pioneer onto her staff.”

“I’ll look forward to discussing it with her.” She stood to walk him out, but a wave of vertigo made her stumble back and she nearly fell over the chair she’d been sitting in.

“Admiral!” Picard grabbed her arms to keep her from falling and then put his arm around her shoulders to steady her. “Perhaps we should call Beverly right now.”

She tried to push away the lightheadedness. “I’m fine, although a little embarrassed.”

“There’s no need to feel embarrassed.”

“Unfortunately, vertigo is a common occurrence. Means that I need to eat and sleep.”

“And that is exactly the reason why I’m doing this errand to Joria for you.” He held her a little longer, closely watching her eyes until they cleared. “Okay, you seem to have regained stability now. Will you be okay if I let go?”

“Yes, thank you. I believe I can manage.”

“I’m a little anxious about leaving you alone.”

Squeezing his arm, she said, “I appreciate your concern, but I’ll be fine. It’s the sudden change from sitting to standing that gets me.”

“All right.” He stepped back a bit and watched her walk a few steps toward him before he was convinced that she was stable. Relaxing as they walked into the foyer, he said, “Tell me something, now that we’ve moved into what I think is the beginning of a lovely friendship…”

She smiled genuinely. “What’s that?”

“You’re marrying your former first officer and yet you don’t admit to being involved with him when you were thousands of light years away from Starfleet’s code of conduct? I really don’t believe you.”

One eyebrow lifted, she replied, “Engaging in a distracting love affair wasn’t exactly high on my priority list.”

He dropped his chin and stared at her. “That is the dumbest excuse I have ever heard for not seeking physical companionship. You were too busy?!?”

Laughing out loud, she said, “Thank you, Captain. In retrospect, I’ve wondered about that myself.”

“Please, call me Jean-Luc.”

“Are you going to call me Kathryn?”

Holding her shoulders, he placed a chaste kiss on her cheek. “Absolutely not, my dear Admiral. Now, go rest and I’ll see myself out.”

As she watched him leave, Kathryn reflected on how unexpected his friendship was. Unexpected, but definitely appreciated. They really did have a lot in common, and she hoped that her friendship with Beverly would provide frequent opportunities to speak with him as well.

After eating a snack, Kathryn decided to place a call to the Enterprise. She keyed up the connection and contacted Deanna first.

“Kathryn, I wasn’t expecting to hear from you this afternoon.”

“I know,” she smiled. “Captain Picard just left here. I assume that he probably hasn’t spoken to you yet?”

“No, what about?”

“You requested to stay on Earth?”

“Oh, yes. I should have asked you, first. I apologize.”

“Not necessary,” Kathryn said kindly. “Since the Enterprise is leaving tomorrow, I thought you might like to postpone our appointment this evening.”

“That’s very thoughtful, but I really think we should do a little preparation before you talk to Norval tomorrow morning.”

“I’ll be okay,” Kathryn said with assurance.

Deanna frowned. “He may be innocuous, but that doesn’t mean the situation is going to be un-stressful. I have no doubts that you will handle it just fine. It’s what happens after it’s over that I’m worried about.”

“By then, the Enterprise will be heading out, and you and I can talk until the cows come home.”

“Cows come home?”

Kathryn chuckled. “An expression. On a farm, cows are the last of the animals to ramble in at night.”

“All right,” Deanna acquiesced. “But you’ll make time tomorrow afternoon?”

“I promise. Now, while you’re spending time with Will, I’d like to ask Beverly to join me for dessert tonight.”

“Now we get to the bottom of it,” she said with exaggeration. “You’re standing me up for ice cream.”

“I’ll be more than happy to have some again tomorrow afternoon.” Kathryn grinned.

“If it’s chocolate, I’ll be there.” She laughed, too. “Stand by while I transfer you to Beverly. Good luck tomorrow, and call me at any time if you need me.”

“I won’t be interrupting you tonight,” she replied as Deanna put the comm on hold.

Beverly’s image replaced the Federation logo within a minute. “Ice cream you say?”

“If you’re interested?”

“Sounds delicious, however, since Deanna just cancelled dinner plans with me, would you care to have more than ice cream? I’d be happy to bring something in.”

Kathryn laughed. “I’d love to have you join us. My mother is out for the evening, but Chakotay will be here.”

“Then I’d just love to treat you both to dinner from my favorite restaurant in San Francisco. I’ll pick it up and then be at your mother’s home in about an hour?”

“That sounds wonderful. Thank you.”

After they said their goodbyes, Kathryn decided that she ought to shower and change before dinner. The challenge was that she was spooked by the idea of being alone, especially without her commbadge. She had an idea, and stepped out on the front porch.

“Admiral!” The security officer patrolling the porch stopped and stood at attention. “May I help you with anything, ma’am?”

Waving her hand, she said, "At ease, Lieutenant. I was wondering if there is a female security officer on duty here right now?"

He thought for just a moment and then shook his head. "No ma'am. We can call for one immediately, however."

"No, no." She dismissed the idea. "That's too much trouble. Forget I asked."

"Are you sure, ma'am? It's no trouble and if you'd like someone inside with you, it can definitely be arranged."

Feeling silly, she said, "I'm sure I'll be fine. Captain Chakotay will be home within thirty minutes. Thank you, Lieutenant."

"You're welcome, Admiral."

She went back inside and sighed forcefully as she muttered to herself, "You're going nuts, Katie."

Stomping into the bedroom, she stripped off her clothes and tossed them onto the bed. "It's just a shower. One simple shower. You've taken thousands of them." She faced the shower stall with courage and determination, stepped inside, and turned on the water.

"Good evening, Captain," Lieutenant Moller said to Chakotay as he stepped up to Gretchen's porch.

"Lieutenant," he nodded, finding it unusual that the house patrol officer would stop to address him. "Everything in order tonight?"

"Yes, sir. Forgive me if I'm overstepping, but Admiral Janeway came out here about twenty-five minutes ago."

"For what?"

"She requested a female security officer, but there are none on duty. I would have called one, but the Admiral asked me not to pursue it."

Chakotay angled his head, wondering if he was hearing correctly. "Did she say what for?"

"No, sir, but I heard the water turn on inside the house five minutes later, and it's still running."

"Thank you," Chakotay said distractedly. "I'll go check on her."

“Aye, Captain.”

He dropped his things on a chair and made his way to their bedroom as quickly as he could. Her clothes were on the bed and the shower was running, so he relaxed. She was just taking a long shower, and wanted someone nearby because of her recent anxiety about being alone. He was relieved that she'd obviously gotten over that fear and was enjoying the water.

Toeing off his shoes, he decided that he'd join her, perhaps wash her back. After standing under the heat of the water for so long, she was probably very relaxed. He unzipped his jacket as he went to let her know that he was home.

The sight that greeted him when he stepped into the bathroom was the last thing he expected. “Kathryn!” She was curled up on the floor, outside of the shower stall with the door still open.

In a flash, he kneeled down next to her shivering, naked body. Her arms were wrapped tightly around her knees and she was leaning up against the cold, tiled wall. Her eyes were closed and her breathing was fast and shallow. “Kathryn?”

He pulled a towel off the rack and wrapped it around her shoulders, and grabbed a second one to dry her slightly damp hair. “Kathryn, love, are you okay?”

She shook her head. “Something's wrong with my heart.”

“It's going to be okay. Try to slow down your breathing and we'll check your pulse,” he said calmly as he placed his fingers around her wrist. “Can you let go of your leg?”

She loosened her grip and let him hold her arm. After fifteen seconds, he reported, “It's fast, but steady.”

Her breathing still rapid, she said, “My chest hurts.”

“Can you breathe with me?” He used his hand to make forward and back motions to follow his slow breathing pattern. When she began to work with him, he said, “Better, but you're freezing. Let's get you warmed up and see if that helps.”

“I fell in the shower and can't walk.” She closed her eyes and continued to concentrate on her breathing by blowing air through pursed lips.

“Okay, let me turn off the water and then we'll get you off this cold floor.” He rose up and reached for the handle, jerking his hand back when he encountered the icy cold spray. “Damn that's cold!”

“Scared me,” Kathryn said.

He gasped as he stuck his hand in and turned the water off as quickly as he could. After grabbing a towel to dry his hand, he kneeled back down. “What scared you?”

“The water,” she stuttered. “It was so cold. They cleaned me with cold water.”

“I remember you telling me about that.” He laid his hand on her back and asked, “Where are you hurt?”

“My leg.” Touching her right knee, she added, “There, and up here.” She motioned to her hip. “The water startled me and I fell. Adrenaline got me out here, but then it felt like I was having another heart attack.”

As he examined her knee and leg, he said, “Lieutenant Moller said the water has been running for about twenty minutes, so if it was similar to a heart attack, my guess is that the danger has passed.”

She winced under his touch. “I don’t think anything is broken.”

“Probably not fractured, but we’ll be careful.” Putting his arms under her knees and behind her back, he said, “Tell me if it hurts.”

As he lifted, she grimaced in pain. Through gritted teeth, she said, “It’s okay!”

“Why don’t I believe you?” he asked as he carried her into the bedroom and laid her on the bed.

“It’s not horrible,” she said, still shivering.

He made sure she was completely toweled off and then pulled the comforter around her. “Let’s call Joe.”

“What time is it?”

“Almost five. Why?”

“Beverly will be here soon. You don’t need to call Joe.”

“Dr. Crusher?”

“Yes, she’s bringing dinner over. I wanted to shower before she got here.”

“Is Troi coming too?”

“No, I cancelled the appointment so she could spend the time with her fiancé. Deanna is staying here while the Enterprise goes back to Joria.”

“All right.” He tapped his commbadge. “Captain Chakotay to Lieutenant Moller.”

“Moller here, Captain,” he replied urgently.

“Dr. Crusher will be arriving soon. Would you let her in and direct her to the Admiral’s bedroom?”

“Yes, sir. Is there anything else I can do, sir?”

“Not at the moment, but thank you for asking. Chakotay out.”

Kathryn closed her eyes and sighed. “I was hoping to spend the evening with Beverly as a friend, not as a patient.”

Placing a kiss on her forehead, he said, “Hopefully, she’ll fix you right up and you’ll get to do both.”

“Or she’s going to take one look at my heart and I’ll be checking in at Starfleet Medical.”

“If that’s the case, then we’ll take some cards and we can still have a nice evening.”

She smiled up at him. “You’re good for me, you know.”

“I try to be.” He caressed her cheek. “Let’s get you dressed.”

After gathering her undergarments and one of the outfits that Phoebe had given her, he returned to her side and lifted back the comforter over her legs. “I’m going to slide your panties up. I’ll be careful with your knee.”

“Mmm hmm.”

He was very gentle as he put them on her, doing a visual check of her leg as he did so. “I see a bruise forming on your hip, but your knee doesn’t appear to be swelling.”

“Feels like it should be.”

Re-covering her legs, he said, “I’ll leave your pants off for now so she can look at it.”

“kay.”

“Do you want to wear a bra?”

“Probably should.” She took the bra from him and pushed the comforter back. “Can you help me sit up?”

“Sure.” Leaning over her, he put his hands under her back and lifted her up to his chest, giving her enough space to put it on. As he watched her fasten it in back, he commented, “Your arms and shoulders are doing great now, aren’t they?”

“A little stiff and weak, but they don’t hurt. The shirt, please?”

He reached out and picked it up, intending to put it on her, but she snatched it away from him and did it herself. Biting back a smile, he said, “I think you’re doing better, now.”

“A little, but I still think something went wrong when I got scared. It shouldn’t hurt like that.” Once she pulled the shirt down over her waist, she snuggled up against him. “When the cold water hit me, I was terrified that someone was about to grab me, and then my arms got all tingly and I felt that awful clamping in my chest. That scared me even more.”

He tucked her hair behind her ear and smoothed out the long tresses. “Sounds like one of your nightmares.”

“Mmmhmm.” She tucked her hands in between them and sighed. “You’re warm.”

They heard the front door open and quick footsteps come down the hall. Beverly rushed in, asking, “Is she okay?”

Chakotay said, “Not sure. There’s a medkit on the dresser.”

Beverly grabbed it and popped it open. “What happened?”

“She twisted her knee, and I suspect she had a panic attack.”

Kathryn lifted her head and looked at him. “I don’t panic.”

Beverly smiled at her reassuringly as she turned on the medical tri-corder. “Of course not, Admiral. Perhaps you should tell me since he’s obviously mistaken.” She winked as she jerked her thumb at Chakotay.

Rolling her eyes, Kathryn explained the situation and then asked, “What do your scans show?”

“That your new heart is doing exactly what it should.” Beverly keyed something in and did a second scan. “All I see are the typical levels associated with the aftermath of fight-or-flight response.”

“But there was pain in my chest as if it were malfunctioning. Perhaps the bio-neural circuitry has a short in it from all the tweaking the doctors did to it.”

Beverly frowned. “Have you read about this new heart of yours yet?”

“I’m embarrassed to say that I haven’t taken the time.”

“Well, first of all, there’s nothing that could cause a short. And second, it’s supposed to mimic exactly what a real heart would do, including cause you pain when a real heart would.”

“Cause pain?”

“They were going for realistic.” Beverly chewed on her lip and cast a sideways look at Chakotay. Then she leaned close to Kathryn and whispered, “He was right.”

Chakotay stifled a laugh, causing it to sound like an undignified snort.

Kathryn threw him a mock glare and then asked Beverly, “When I spoke to your captain this afternoon, he implied that he doesn’t feel much of anything from the implant.”

“Jean-Luc’s heart is almost an antique as far as medical science goes. I think if he were to get one of these fancy new models like you’ve got, he wouldn’t know how to react. It’s been a long time since he felt the sensations of the real thing.”

She clicked her tongue. “Guess I ought to take a look at that manual.”

“It all checks out fine,” she said as she squeezed Kathryn’s hand.

Chakotay said, “Let me move out of the way so you can check her knee.”

“You said it twisted?” Beverly asked.

“Yes, and I landed on my hip.” Kathryn pulled back the comforter.

“Hmmm.” Beverly took a quick scan, and asked, “Captain, would you hand me the rest of the kit, please?”

“Sure, but please, call me Chakotay.”

“I’ve been looking forward to getting to know you.” Beverly took the regenerator out of the kit. “Except for that one time when I was at the hospital with Jean-Luc, you were always asleep when I saw you.”

Kathryn added, “When you came to visit me after the transplant, he was off buying a house.”

“That’s right,” Beverly said as she healed on the bruised hip. “I hope you have pictures to show me.”

“A few.” Kathryn watched Beverly work. “But you’ll see it when you come for the wedding.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

Chakotay asked, “How does her knee look?”

“The correct answer for you should always be that all parts of her legs look fantastic. However, to me, I see that she has an overstretched tendon and a contusion.” Beverly picked up another tool and directed it at her knee. “We’ll have it fixed in just a moment, and then we can dig into dinner.”

“Will you two be okay if I go set the table?”

Kathryn smiled at him. “I think we can manage. Thank you.”

After he left, Beverly picked up another tool and directed it at her hip. “He’s incredibly handsome up close, isn’t he?”

Laughing, Kathryn responded, “His pictures don’t even begin to do him justice.”

“That should do it.” She stood back and suggested, “Give it a flex and see.”

Kathryn tested her leg out and turned so she could set her feet on the floor. “Feels fine. Would you help me stand?”

“Sure.” Beverly put her arm around Kathryn and helped her up. “How’s that?”

After moving it around for a few seconds, she said, “Good as new. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now, do you need help with your pants?”

“I won’t turn it down.” Kathryn sat back down and let Beverly help slide them on. “I really had a panic attack?”

“That’s what it looks like. Do you want socks?”

“I’ve got slippers in the closet.”

As Beverly returned with the slippers, she asked, “Have you experienced post-traumatic stress before?”

Kathryn stared at her blankly for a moment and then pleaded with her friend. “Beverly, please don’t put that in my medical file.”

“I wasn’t going to, but it’s nothing to be ashamed of. Almost everyone who just lived through the war is experiencing it to some extent.”

“I just don’t want to be labeled as having a psychological illness.”

Beverly sat down and laid her hand on Kathryn’s back. “Your medical file is as confidential as they get. Only a doctor who has level ten clearance, or who is actively treating you, can access it. Not even the Fleet Admiral can look at it.”

“I trust that Deanna hasn’t discussed anything with you.”

“Absolutely not. I’ve asked her how you’re doing, and she gives me answers like ‘feeling stronger,’ and ‘busy planning her wedding.’ A psychological assessment of you has not shown up on your medical file, and since her services were not mandated, there’s no reason for her to write one.”

“Thank you. That makes me feel a little better, even though it would be expected that I’d need some time to heal psychologically after this.”

“Without a doubt. I hope that no one has made you feel like you should be able to let this roll off your back.”

“No,” Kathryn shook her head. “It has been quite the opposite, and there are only a handful of people who know just how bad it was. All of them, including you, haven’t made me feel the slightest bit uncomfortable, even when I had nightmares in front of them.”

“How many saw that?”

“You, Deanna, and Amy, of course. Captain Young, Harry Kim, and too many nurses to count.”

“And Chakotay.”

“Yes, both he and my mother, but they’re family. I’ve had terrible nightmares for years, but this panic attack tonight was caused by the first flashback I’ve had while awake. Post-traumatic stress disorder is something I’ve fought hard against since my father died. I’ve been determined to keep my sanity while awake, even though I can’t control it while asleep.”

Beverly said, “Well, you’ve certainly had more than your fair share of traumatic events, and I don’t even know the half of them, I’m sure. But flashbacks, nightmares, and panic attacks aren’t the only symptoms.”

“I know, but they’re the primary ones. One can’t be a Starfleet captain, or admiral, and be prone to panic attacks.”

“One can learn how to cope with them. Remember that tonight, after you had the initial rush of panic, you probably would’ve gotten past it if you hadn’t immediately felt like you were having a heart attack. Which, I might add, living through three of them would certainly trigger the disorder.”

“All right,” Kathryn agreed. “You’ve got me there.”

“The other symptoms can be just as debilitating if not addressed.” She held up a hand in protest. “Not that I’m suggesting you’ve had or will have any of these, but since the war we’ve seen some pretty major cases of survivor’s guilt. When linked with this disorder, it manifests either as irrational anger or looks exactly like classic depression.”

Kathryn sighed heavily and stretched her tense neck muscles. “Survivor’s guilt. Sounds like I have something to talk to Deanna about.”

Patting her on the back, Beverly said, “At least you don’t seem to be exhibiting any signs of depression or not being able to forge relationships with people. Not only are you getting married, but you seem to have developed quite a few new friendships. I, for one, am very happy about that.”

“Thank you.” Kathryn gave her friend a weak smile. “But Jean-Luc pointed out earlier today that he couldn’t believe that Chakotay and I weren’t involved in the delta quadrant. I think, perhaps, you just hit the nail on the head as to the reason why – guilt.”

Beverly shook her head. “I’m sure it’s a lot more complicated than that. I know from experience how difficult it is to get romantically involved with a commanding officer, so you don’t have to explain it to me.”

“Yes, but...,” Kathryn sighed. “You know what? Our dinner is getting cold.”

“And we’re not going to solve this tonight, so let’s go enjoy each other’s company and eat some of that ice cream you’re craving.” Beverly helped her stand up.

“I appreciate your insight and your medical assistance. You’ve given me something to think about.”

Beverly stopped in the hallway, and said, “I want to tell you one more thing, if I may?”

“Go ahead,” Kathryn nodded.

“Please contact me if you ever think you might be sinking into depression, no questions asked. I’ve seen it happen far too often recently, and because most of it is trauma-related, there are some very simple medications that can turn it around within a matter of days.”

Kathryn stared at her for a moment before she worked up the courage to ask, “Isn’t depression caused by a drop in neurotransmitter levels?”

“Yes, and that drop can be triggered by trauma. Or it may show up unexpectedly months or years later simply because someone becomes overwhelmed with guilt, or because they’ve had a falling out with a friend.”

After closing her eyes and taking a steadying breath, Kathryn managed to ask, “Just a falling out with a friend can trigger this?”

“Sure,” Beverly said softly. “Especially if that friend has been a confidant while dealing with the trauma. I’m sure you can imagine that it might feel like the proverbial rug has been pulled out from under your feet.”

“Sounds like I need to do some reading on this disorder.”

Laying a hand on Kathryn’s shoulder, Beverly said, “I just don’t want you to have to deal with some of these emotional problems when I, or any other doctor, can fix it. I’m not saying that you will have problems, but if you do, I’m only a comm call away. I bet your Dr. Zimmerman would help you, too.”

Pursing her lips to avoid getting overly emotional, Kathryn merely nodded.

“Come on, let’s go eat.”

When they walked into the kitchen, Chakotay was sitting at the table reading a PADD. He looked up and smiled. “The food is in the oven keeping warm.”

“Thank you,” Beverly said happily and took over the preparations.

Kathryn locked eyes with Chakotay, and she knew instantly that he could tell she was upset. With Beverly busy making noise in the cooking area, Kathryn felt comfortable saying, “There’s nothing to worry about. I’ve just learned something about myself that is both troubling and a relief.”

He moved closer and gently held her arm. “What’s that?”

Looking deep into his concerned eyes, she had no doubts that he’d help her figure this out, so she forced herself to admit, “Post-traumatic stress can cause debilitating episodes of depression that can be triggered by something as simple as a falling out with a close friend.”

His eyes widened slightly and then he composed himself because of their guest. “I see. Well…” He took a deep breath, rubbed her arm, and then nodded. “Okay. Now we know.”

She put her hand on his chest to draw strength from him. “Now we know.”
