

## ***The Future Is Ours – Part 23***

### **“Demons, Dresses, and Desires”**

By Dawn

Summary:

Rated NC-17

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Fully dressed in her admiral’s uniform, Kathryn stepped out of her bedroom and into her mother’s living room. Anxiety about the day ahead had been with her since she’d woken up that morning. Her new heart, in tune with her emotions, hammered away in her chest. The sensation was surprisingly comforting and gave her the feeling that life was moving forward.

“Kathryn?” Chakotay asked.

She had stopped in the doorway to feel the rhythm of her heart. Lifting her eyes slowly to his, she said quietly, “Come here.”

“You okay?”

When he came close enough, she put his hand on her chest and said, “Feel this.”

“Your heart?” he asked with concern.

“It’s thumping hard. I’ve been worried that I’d never feel that again.”

He put his other hand on her back and closed his eyes in concentration. “I feel a strong pulse.”

“I thought it would be all computerized, but it feels like there’s movement.” She put her hand over his. “It’s comforting. I was concerned about how it would affect my intuition.”

“What does your intuition tell you about today?”

She squeezed his hand and stepped away to pick up her lukewarm coffee. After drinking the last swig, she drew in a deep breath and let the confidence of the uniform give her strength. When her features were schooled, she looked up at him to respond. “It tells me that we’d better get going.”

“Kathryn?”

“I wonder if my security entourage is meeting us here or there.”

Chakotay recovered the distance she'd put between them and gently held her arms. "Kathryn, I want to help you through this. Please don't shut me out."

Looking him straight in the eye, she answered simply, "I'm not, but I need my shields up to face this. Doesn't matter how much I want to stay here in your arms and avoid this right now, I'm a Starfleet admiral and I've got a job to do."

He dropped his hands and nodded succinctly. "Okay, but I'll be waiting to hold you as soon as this is over."

"I'm counting on it." She rose up on her toes and kissed his cheek. "Thank you for understanding. I love you."

"I love you, too." Holding her hand, he added, "And I did promise that I'd help you rebuild your strength, so let's go face this metaphorical demon."

They beamed to Starfleet Headquarters where Justin and another officer were waiting for them. He said, "Please follow me, Admiral, Captain. We're escorting you directly to an examination room in the detention center's holding facility."

"Lead the way." Kathryn looped her arm through Chakotay's to bolster her strength. On the walk through the complex, they passed a lot of people who looked surprised to see her. She nodded politely, but her determined pace made it clear that she was headed somewhere important. The security entourage also made that obvious, but she was so used to having them with her that they didn't seem out of place.

Admiral Khurma was waiting for them inside the holding facility. "Good morning."

"Good morning, Admiral." Kathryn let go of Chakotay's arm to accept Khurma's handshake.

"Are you up to this?" he asked.

She took a deep breath and said, "Yes, but let's get on with it before I lose my nerve. Is he ready?"

"He is, but he doesn't know who is coming to talk to him."

That surprised her. "Why not?"

"I believe the anticipation of having to confront you would cause him undue stress."

"Let's hope he doesn't clam up in shock, then. Will you be monitoring?"

"Yes, and we're recording the conversation. Do you want Captain Chakotay to listen?"

“Please.” She looked at her future husband and felt reassured by his presence. Straightening her tunic, she asked him, “You’ll know if I need or request assistance?”

He nodded. “I’ll watch for it.”

She was grateful for his presence, even though she knew she would find a way to deal with whatever happened during the interview. Nodding at him in thanks, she said, “Let’s do it.”

Justin escorted her into the examination room. It was a small, well-lit room with one wall completely covered by a mirror. She knew that a couple of lawyers, security, Khurma, and Chakotay were on the other side, and that gave her the confidence to slip into her command role.

A young man dressed in a grey jumpsuit was sitting at the table. He looked up and his eyes widened into large, brown saucers. Kathryn turned to Justin and asked, “Would you wait outside, Lieutenant?”

He eyed the young man warily. “I’ll stay close, Admiral.”

When he was gone, she returned her attention to the young man, who had backed into the far corner of the room. She spoke as neutrally as she could. “They tell me your name is Jared Norvellen.”

“I... I...” He wrung his hands and glanced repeatedly at the mirrored wall.

“Jared,” she motioned towards the seat he had vacated. “Please, sit down with me.”

“I... No. I...” He looked like a frightened animal and his hands were shaking. “No.”

Kathryn’s anxiety had lessened considerably upon seeing how intimidated he was. She’d been nervous that he’d be disrespectful and demeaning, but it was clear that the exact opposite was true. What he needed most was compassion and understanding. “Jared, I’m not here to confront you. I merely want to learn how you got involved and to see if there’s a way we can help each other.”

He made no movement and just stared at her with widened, frightened eyes.

“I believe that you were the one who shared your dinner with me?”

“How?” He looked at the mirror again and then quickly back at her. “How do you know?”

“Voice recognition. I overheard conversations that you had with some of the others and they used your name.” She sat down and crossed her hands neatly in front of her. “I heard someone say that Pratin found you in a bar. Is that true?”

“You... you... you heard that?” He looked sideways at her.

“Yes. My ears hadn’t been plugged. It was towards the end, I think.” She repressed a shiver as she remembered the excruciating pain she’d been in.

“I... I wanted... them to stop. They were killing you.”

Her eyes softened with understanding. “I know.”

“Benjolen.” He tentatively took a step closer. “That’s who I was talking to.”

“Tell me about him.” She forced herself not to show any outward sign of her discomfort.

“He’s...” Jared cringed. “I hate him.”

“I’m not a fan, myself.” Kathryn nodded towards the chair across from her. “Please, sit down.”

Jared took one step towards the table, paused to look at her, and then moved quickly to sit. The table was fairly wide, so they weren’t that close. He struggled as he said, “You’re Admiral Janeway.”

“Yes,” she said slowly. “Did you not know that?”

“Not until after you were rescued. I knew you were Starfleet and Terran, but I didn’t know who you were.”

She was really surprised. “Then did I imagine you telling me that you tried to inform a Starfleet officer that I was on your ship?”

“No!” He stiffened in his chair. “I tried to tell him, but he wouldn’t listen. I said that there was a woman, a human, held captive on my ship. He laughed at me! Then he asked if I was holding you, I mean, he asked if I was holding Admiral Janeway hostage. He walked away laughing!”

Kathryn blinked slowly. She couldn’t believe a Starfleet officer would be so rude. “Any information you can give us about your location at the time, and a description of that officer would be appreciated. Regardless, I want to apologize for not introducing myself. I assumed you knew who I was.”

“No. I had no idea.” He looked very afraid.

“Did the others know my identity?”

“I don’t know. Maybe, but they didn’t include me in their meetings.”

Kathryn studied him for a moment and then pointed to the mirrored wall behind him. “This conversation is being recorded, so don’t say anything to me that you don’t want known by the Starfleet judicial board. You may request a lawyer to be in here at any time.”

He glanced worriedly behind him, but turned back to her. “Okay.” He didn’t maintain eye contact, but he looked at her often as if trying to decide what her motives were or if she was going to unexpectedly lash out at him.

“How did you get involved with this group?”

“I was in a bar on Telvitus. I’d just lost my job... a lot of jobs, actually. I... I’m not good with people, and I have trouble.”

Glad that he was talking, she nodded with understanding. “Go ahead.”

“I’d just been kicked out of the bar because I didn’t have any credits to pay my tab. I was in an alley, trying to figure out what to do. Pratin and Judnat found me and asked if I wanted a job. How could I say no? I had nothing – nowhere to sleep, no credits for food.”

“And you didn’t question his motives?”

“I was a little drunk, and they took me back into the bar, paid my tab, and offered me another drink. I must have passed out at some point because the next thing I remember, I woke up on the freighter. Benjolen and Judnat were in charge of me. I was scared of Pratin. He was horrible and...” Jared grimaced. “What he did to you, how he treated you... I can’t believe anybody could be capable of such cruelty. Pratin is sick.”

“Yes, he was,” she said as she clenched her fists, doing her best not to show any signs of the nausea that threatened to bubble up from her stomach. Taking a deep breath, she pressed onward because she was getting a bad feeling that Jared had been drugged and coerced, and he needed her help. “What was your job on the freighter?”

“I worked in the engine room. Only one of them, Judnat, knew anything about engineering. I didn’t know much, but they needed someone to crawl through the ship and make repairs. Judnat barely fit inside the access hatches.”

She asked him questions about the ship’s engines, to see if he was telling the truth about his knowledge. He was opening up to her more, happy to be talking about something he was comfortable with. He surprised her when he expressed frustration in his lack of

ability to correctly align the manifold system, the very thing that had made her realize she'd been onboard a poorly functioning ship.

“Does it upset you to know that the misalignment is how the Starfleet ships were able to easily break through the freighter's shields?”

“No,” he said quickly. “I'm glad they found us before it was too late. I wanted to help you. If I'd known they were so close, I would've done something to disable the ship sooner.”

“What would you have done?”

“Caused a leak in something? I don't know. If I'd known when we left Joria that you were on the ship, I would've done something that would've left a trail. I didn't know until after we left our next stop at Boliyas that you were in the cargo bay.”

“Boliyas?” Kathryn was surprised and glanced at the mirror. “The first stop after my abduction was in the Bolian system?”

“Yes,” he stated, curious by her question. “Why?”

Kathryn touched her lips to signal Chakotay that he needed to listen closely. “Do you know why Pratin stopped there?”

“No.” He furrowed his brow as he thought. “A Bolian came onboard and stayed for about an hour. I only caught a glimpse of him.”

“Did you remember what he looked like?”

“Blue?” he said hesitantly, obviously knowing that it was a sarcastic answer.

Kathryn pursed her lips and sighed. “Give it some thought and if you think of any specific features, let us know.”

“I'm trying to remember. He was heavy. A very large man.”

“Do you know if he saw me?”

“Probably. He and Pratin came from that direction. The Bolian looked very professional and probably wealthy. He was wearing a dark brown suit with a big silver thing on the lapel. I don't know what it was. A communicator, maybe?”

Kathryn nodded, knowing exactly what the silver item was and what the brown suit represented. It made her blood run cold. “Did you hear any of their conversation?”

Jared chewed on his upper lip before saying, “Pratin said something about it working as expected. I didn’t know what he was talking about. At the time, I didn’t realize you were onboard. Oh... the Bolian had a smirk on his face when he said that someone would be pleased to receive the images and that Pratin could expect to be rewarded generously once the terms of the contract were complete.”

Kathryn asked with a deadly serious tone, “Who?”

Jared shook his head. “I didn’t hear any specific names, I don’t think. Bolians use strange pronouns.”

“Do you understand the importance of this observation?”

He looked at her blankly for a moment and then a light came on. He almost shouted, “Someone paid Pratin to take you!”

Kathryn nodded. “We need to find out whom.”

“Can you ask Pratin?”

She clicked her tongue. “He’s dead.”

Jared’s eyes widened again. “He... he...” His breathing quickened. “Who did it?”

“Why do you ask?”

“If... if someone killed him, they might want all of us.”

“Do you know of anyone who might want him dead?”

Jared groaned. “Only every person in the whole quadrant who’s angry about what we did to you.”

Kathryn closed her eyes for a brief second. “Jared...”

“I didn’t know!” he said with a gasp. “I’m so sorry.” His bottom lip shook and his hands tightened into fists.

“What didn’t you know?”

“Who you were! I would’ve done more, risked more! I could have saved you and I didn’t.”

Her heart sank. “Jared, why does my name make a difference? What if I’d been a civilian?”

“Don’t you understand? You’re Admiral Janeway!”

“Yes, I’m aware of that.”

“But you’re going to fix everything! Make life better for all of us! I thought you were a Starfleet lowlife and had done something to cross Pratin, that you owed someone for a gambling debt or something. I figured he was trying to sell you as a prostitute or a slave to teach you a lesson.”

Kathryn held up a hand for him to stop. “Don’t say any more about that without a lawyer present.” Her stomach felt like it was full of lead.

“But he had all these buyers coming to see you. He wanted your spirit broken and ordered us to make you miserable. That’s what Benjolen said. None of them like humans and they hate Starfleet. I hated Starfleet, too, so at first, I didn’t say anything. But it got too bad and I couldn’t stand it.”

She knew that her face had paled because she felt extremely dizzy and chilled. Tugging on her ear to inform Chakotay that she was managing, she asked, “Why do you dislike Starfleet?”

“Because they weren’t there to help when my colony was attacked. My entire family was killed and they did nothing! You weren’t here! You have no idea!”

Taking a steadying breath, she attempted to console him. “Jared, I understand more than you realize, and I am very sad that this happened. What colony was your family on?”

“Trideris. It was at the very end of the war, and Starfleet forgot all about us. It was after the important planets were attacked so we were forgotten.”

“Your colony was attacked by the Breen, right after they left Earth. It was a senseless act of malice. With so many casualties here and throughout the Federation, it was impossible to reach everyone.”

“But Starfleet didn’t even try,” he accused. “I’ve been listening to the news, watching you. If I’d known it was you on the freighter, I would have died trying to protect you. Don’t you understand how much hope you give to people like me? People who’ve lost everything?”

“Jared, what I’m trying to do isn’t going to restore the lost colonies.”

“But you’ll be able to protect the ones that still exist, give them a reason to rebuild and keep growing. No one is helping them. All these terrorist bombings and everything, they’re not local insurgents like the news is reporting. They’re demonstrations to show the quadrant how little Starfleet cares about the colonies, especially the ones who are struggling.”



“How do you know this?”

“I can figure it out. I hear people talking.”

“Do you know who’s behind those bombings?”

He shook his head profusely. “No. I don’t know anything.”

“Jared? You told Captain Young that you had information to exchange for a plea bargain. What do you know?”

“Nothing about the bombings,” he said quickly.

Kathryn didn’t believe him. “Are they friends of yours?”

“I don’t have friends.”

“How do you know them?”

He looked away in refusal.

“Jared, if we’re going to bring peace to this quadrant, we have to put all the pieces together. I believe there are many groups involved,” she offered. “I need your help because I can’t do this alone.”

“Just...” he hesitated. “Just some people I used to work with on Sarcusian Mining colony.”

“Do you have names?”

“Can you protect me from them?”

“Yes,” she assured him. “We can do a lot to protect you.”

“By sending me to prison?”

“That’s for the judge to decide. I can’t predict what will happen.”

His voice shook as he said, “I don’t know what it’ll be like.”

Sympathetically, she said, “There are far worse things than being in a high-security Starfleet facility where you get three good meals everyday.”

“You’d know.” He looked at her sadly. “You’ve had to endure terrible things.”

“Prison would’ve been a blessing compared to that.”

Jared closed his eyes and nodded. His hands shook as he looked back up at her. “Can you forgive me?”

As memories of what she’d endured surfaced, Kathryn looked down at her hands and saw her engagement ring sparkling in the lights. She covered it with her right fingers and drew strength from its symbolic presence, knowing that the source of her emotional stability was watching over her. “Would you like to know what I remember?”

He started to shake his head, but paused. “I’m not sure.”

She swallowed, pushing down the heightened blood pressure that always arrived with the memories. “In my delirium, there was one man who was gentle as he gave me water and shared his dinner with me. One man who pushed my hair out of my face and tried to relieve the pressure on my shoulders. One person wiped my mouth after I’d been sick.” She paused to gauge his reaction. He was looking less scared and more hopeful. “Only one man who, when it was his turn to clean me, did it with a flow of warm water instead of a harsh, stinging spray of cold. I remember asking someone for help and he responded earnestly, ‘I wish I could.’ Was that person you?”

“Yes. No one deserved the way they treated you.”

“Then you don’t need my forgiveness, Jared. I want to thank you for doing what was in your power to offer me kindness.”

He pushed tears out of his eyes. “Admiral... I... I don’t know what to say.”

“You can help me now by telling us everything you know. More than anything, I want to bring closure to this so we can all move on.”

He nodded shakily. “Will you tell me how Pratin was killed?”

“He was sick. He had a bacterial infection that attacked his organs, and he died from it.”

“That’s it?” His eyes were wide again.

Kathryn cringed at the way Jared belittled that manner of death. “You and the others have been checked to see if you carry the bacteria and you do not.”

“It was contagious?”

“Somewhat.” She decided not to go into details. Her strength was waning and the conversation had been taxing. “Jared, what is the information that you wanted to give us in exchange for leniency?”

“I don’t think it’s that important,” he admitted.

“Even the smallest detail could give us a lead. Is it about the terrorist bombings or my abduction?”

“I’ll give you the names of the terrorists, and I think I’ve already told you and the others all that I know about Pratin and who he was talking to.”

“If there are any other details that you can recall from overhearing conversations on the freighter, they could be vitally important.”

He nodded solemnly. “The information that I wanted to bargain with doesn’t have to do with either of those. It has to do with some records I kept while working at the mining colony.”

“What kind of records?”

“Prices paid for ore, and the promises made in exchange. Promises that were broken by the Federation. Those bombings proved it.”

Kathryn leaned forward. “How did you come by these records?”

“One of my jobs was to take notes for the executive of the mining company. He met a lot with Starfleet people right after the war was over, both for his operation and because he was representing other mines in nearby sectors. I hated Starfleet so much at the time that I thought I’d keep this information and use it against them someday. So, unless you want to use this against your own organization, it probably isn’t that useful,” he said dejectedly.

She glanced at the mirror, unable to stop herself. Jared had no idea what he was sitting on, and she needed to get that information before Khurma dismissed it as not-important. Kathryn asked, “Where are these records?”

“In my storage facility on Sarcusia. I haven’t been able to get back there for over a year.”

“Jared, this information could be very important. Thank you for trusting me with it.” She was starting to lose energy. “I’d like you to talk through more of your recollections with someone. Who are you most comfortable with?”

“You.”

She smiled kindly. “I’m glad you are, but I need to rest. Would you like to speak to Admiral Khurma?”

“No!” He shook his head adamantly. “Is Captain Young available? Or Commander Ral?”

“Yes, I’ll make arrangements.” Eager to go before she showed any more signs that she was weak, she stood to leave.

“Admiral?”

“Yes?”

“Thank you for talking to me. I’m relieved to see that you’ve recovered.”

Kathryn’s lungs shuddered as she breathed in. “You’re welcome. I believe that getting to know you has helped me, too. Jared, I won’t be at your trial, but you’re going to be fine. Whatever the outcome, you’ll be safe.” She smiled at him gently and left the room.

Once the door closed behind her, she closed her eyes and rested against the wall.

Justin held her elbow. “Admiral? Do you need to sit down?”

“Can we transport directly from here?”

“No, ma’am. We have to be in the main lobby of the headquarters building because of the reinforced security.”

Chakotay and Khurma came around the corner. “Kathryn?” Chakotay asked.

Khurma said, “That was impressive.”

She lifted her head and extended a hand for Chakotay to take as she spoke to Khurma.

“Can you have Bernie come talk to him?”

“He’s already on his way, and I’ll fill him in on your conversation. We need to keep this kid talking.”

“Make Mr. Norvellen comfortable, if you would. A bite to eat, perhaps?”

“We’ll take care of him. You really put him at ease, Kathryn. The change in his demeanor is remarkable.”

Feeling drained and slightly dizzy, she stepped closer to Chakotay so he could hold her more securely. “I want the Pioneer to go to Sarcusia. Ask Bernie to get those records before anyone else can get their hands on them. I don’t know what information he has, but his observations could give us some direction.”

“He already has.” Khurma stood aside and said, “I don’t want to keep you. Thank you for talking to him.”

She nodded and glanced at Chakotay who was watching her intently. “Shall we go?”

He offered his arm and she took it, glad to have his solid presence next to her. They didn’t talk as they walked back to the beam-out point, but he held her hand as it rested on his bent elbow. As they crossed from the detention center segment of the complex into the primary headquarters building, Justin received a communication. He wore an earpiece, so Kathryn and Chakotay couldn’t hear what was said.

Justin stopped unexpectedly at a lift. “Someone alerted the press and a handful of reporters are waiting downstairs. We’ve been instructed to detour through the admiralty transport room.”

Kathryn closed her eyes tiredly. “If they know I’m here, maybe I should talk to them.”

As they stepped onto the lift, Chakotay said, “You’re wearing out and you don’t need to give them something every time they find you. Besides, a missed Janeway-sighting might be kind of fun for them. Just think of all the buzz it’s going to generate.”

She crooked a tired smile after the lift closed behind them. “Exactly. If I just tell them why I’m here, they won’t have to speculate.”

Justin said, “I don’t think that’s wise, Admiral. Starfleet is doing its best to keep the trial quiet.”

“Not a bad idea.” Kathryn felt a wave of dizziness wash over her as they stepped off the lift. She stopped for a moment and held Chakotay’s arm tighter before taking another step. She whispered to him, “I need to lie down when we get to mom’s house.”

“All right.” He put his arm around her shoulders.

They walked pretty quickly through the nearly-empty hallway, for which Kathryn was thankful. As they reached the transporter room, she saw Owen standing outside. He smiled brightly and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. “Katie, how are you feeling today?”

“A little tired at the moment, but I’m okay.” She returned his gesture with a slight hug.

“Well, let’s get you home.” He ushered them inside and, as was procedure now, Justin transported first to make sure the arrival coordinates were clear. As they waited, Owen asked, “How did it go?”

“Very well, actually.” Kathryn took hold of Chakotay’s arm again. “I believe he’s made a turnaround.”

“Glad to hear it. I’ve watched some of the conversations with him, and I’ve been concerned that he was trapped in an impossible situation.”

Chakotay asked, "Do you know if his lawyer is pursuing coercion as a defense?"

"Not that I'm aware of, but Mr. Norvellen hasn't been forthcoming regarding his involvement."

"Today's conversation might change that."

Paris said, "I'll look into it."

"Thank you," Kathryn said. "Owen, if you have access, watch today's recording. I asked Admiral Khurma to send the Pioneer in pursuit of a lead that you'll be very interested in. Could you follow up on that as well?"

"Absolutely," he said with curiosity.

When the all-clear from Justin came in, Kathryn, Chakotay, and the other security officer took their places on the transporter pad. "Energize," she instructed.

The scene around them dissipated and reformed as the outside of her mother's home. Justin stepped up and said, "You're clear to enter, Admiral, Captain."

She found his detail to her security remarkably astute and slightly amusing. She knew that Justin felt personally responsible for her capture and Scott's death, so she let him do what he could. "Thanks, Justin." She touched his shoulder as she passed.

Once inside, she turned to Chakotay and relaxed her shoulders with a quiet groan. "Thank you for coming with me."

He opened his arms to draw her close. "You're welcome. I read your signals loud and clear. Khurma and the two lawyers wanted to stop it several times."

"Did I cross a line? I was trying not to ask leading questions." She tried to think back to the conversation as she nuzzled against his chest.

"No, you were great with him. They were all worried about you." He rubbed her back and kissed her head. "But they don't know you. I could tell that you were working hard to hold it together, but you were also telling me that you were okay."

She moaned, "I'm exhausted."

"Come on, let's get out of these uniforms and see about a nice, long nap."

"Okay," she said with a yawn as they walked down the hall to their room. "I'm looking forward to those arms of yours."

He chuckled. "Where shall I put them? On our bed or out in the sun room?"

"Bed," she said as they began shedding their uniform jackets. It wasn't long before she was pulling on her favorite pair of sweats. "I shouldn't be this tired. It wasn't physically exerting."

"No, but it was mentally. And you had to maintain the appearance of confidence and strength."

She rubbed her eyes and climbed in between the sheets. "I'm supposed to call Deanna this afternoon. She wasn't at all thrilled about me doing this, but I'm glad I did."

Slipping into bed next to her, he replied, "I thought it would be too much, but once your conversation got started, I realized the importance of doing it before his arraignment Friday."

"Mmmhmmm." She snuggled up under his arm and enjoyed the solid warmth of his body. "You sleepy?"

"A little. I'll doze for a bit."

"Love you," she murmured.

He kissed her forehead. "I love you, too, Kathryn."

As she lay sleeping in his arms, he let silent tears fall at what he'd heard that morning. He'd been strong because she needed him to be, but the way she and Jared had described the situation on the freighter renewed his sorrow. He kissed her head again, and cradled her close in a vain attempt at warding off those who would cause her pain. If what Jared had alluded to regarding the mysterious Bolian was correct, then the very man she was working for was directly or indirectly responsible for hurting her. He hoped like hell that when Zife fell, he would fall hard.

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Phoebe bounced into the dining room the next morning. "You two just about ready?" she asked excitedly.

Kathryn was holding her coffee cup with both hands, her elbows resting on the table. "I'm not sure that shopping for a dress with you is a good idea."

Gretchen picked up the dirty breakfast dishes and said, "Not to worry, Katie. I'll balance out her more audacious tastes."

"How can a wedding dress be audacious?" Chakotay asked.

“You’d be surprised.” Kathryn sipped her coffee. “The one she has in mind shows more than it covers.”

He subconsciously licked his lips. “I see.”

“Yes, you definitely would,” Phoebe laughed. “See, Katie, he’s already excited and your honeymoon doesn’t start for a month.”

“I suspect that my dear future husband would rather that everyone at the wedding, and everyone who might come across a picture of that wedding, not see his new wife’s backside nearly naked.”

“She has a point,” Chakotay told Phoebe. “However, I have absolutely no qualms with you advising her on lingerie and swimsuits.”

Kathryn shook her head in amusement as she looked at him over the rim of her coffee cup. His eyes were sparkling and he looked happier than he had in a long time. “You’re going to enjoy our private beach, aren’t you?”

“Oh, yes.” He winked at her. “But first, I’ll have to check out the security situation to make sure they aren’t going to be watching us, as opposed to watching out for us.”

Gretchen said, “We need to get going. Chakotay, you need to get to class.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He stood and then leaned over to give Kathryn a lingering kiss. “Have fun today, and don’t forget to pick out a tuxedo style.”

“It’s on our list.” Kathryn felt warmed by his lips. She stopped him before he got away by touching his chin. “Do you remember our appointment this evening?”

“Nineteen-hundred.” He kissed her again and then said goodbye to everyone.

After he was gone, Phoebe asked, “What do you have going on tonight?”

“Oh, nothing important.”

Gretchen and Phoebe exchanged looks, not believing her.

Kathryn shifted in her chair as she set her coffee down. “If you must know, my counselor wants to speak with both of us, together. She hasn’t met him and just wants a short conversation before we get married.”

“Ah,” Phoebe waved it away. “She’ll love him. We all do.”

“Let’s go, then.” Gretchen said.



They gathered up their things and Justin did his usual high-security sweep of the bridal salon before letting them transport. It was closed for their private consultation, but he wanted to make sure. When they arrived, B'Elanna was already there and all three women set to work presenting Kathryn with dress after dress to try on.

About twenty dresses later, Kathryn was wearing out and sat down with a huff in one of the fitting room chairs.

Gretchen asked, "Tell us what you want, dear."

Susan, the salon owner, "I can have anything designed for you if you can give me an idea."

Phoebe and B'Elanna stopped what they were doing to listen.

"What I want is something simple. All of the sequins and lace on these dresses are too elaborate, and it seems like all the plain ones either don't have enough fabric to cover the important bits, or they look like a business suit."

Susan tapped her chin in thought. "Relax just a moment. I'll be right back." She stepped into the back room.

Kathryn said, "I'm really sorry to be so difficult. It wouldn't be so challenging if I believed that all pictures would be kept private, but there's a significant chance that the entire Federation might eventually see me."

"You should be picky. This is your wedding dress," B'Elanna said.

"Maybe I should just wear my uniform like you did, Lanna. It would be a lot simpler."

"No, you wanted a traditional wedding, you should have it. You should be able to have anything you want."

"That's right, Katie," Gretchen said. "Otherwise, you could have gotten married six months ago."

"Who's giving you away?" Phoebe asked.

Kathryn let her head fall back against the wall. "I completely forgot about that." She picked her communicator up off the table and opened a channel. "Janeway to Admiral Patterson, Utopia Planetia."

"Patterson here. What can I do for you, Admiral?"

"Are you in your office, free to talk?"

“I am, Katie. What are you up to today?” he asked, giving her the all-clear to speak privately.

“I’m trying on wedding dresses.”

“I see. No uniforms then?”

“You may wear either. I’m calling to ask if your offer still stands to walk me down the aisle.”

“It would be an honor, my dear. An absolute honor.” The timbre of his voice indicated that he was as pleased as punch with the idea. “I’ve already replied that Martha and I will be attending, and I’ll wear a tuxedo. If there’s anything else I need to do, just let me know.”

“I will. Thank you, Matt.”

“You are most welcome. Pick out a good one. Patterson out.”

Kathryn told Phoebe, “Matthew Patterson will be walking me down the aisle.”

She laughed. “So it seems.”

Susan came back into the room carrying a garment bag. “See what you think about this.” As she unzipped it, she said, “It’ll be too large for you, but we have time to make one in your size. This dress was in a fashion show recently and it’s not available yet for sale. However, I’ve just called the designer to ask if I may show it to a VIP client, I didn’t say who, and he was delighted.”

Kathryn stood up to look at it more closely and liked what she saw. “May I try it on?”

“Of course. May I help you?” Susan asked.

“Sure,” Kathryn said as she followed the older woman into the fitting room. “I’ll need a little help stepping out of this other dress. My balance isn’t the best right now.”

“I understand, dear.” Susan helped her out of it and then said, “I can’t even begin to imagine what you’ve been through, but I’m tickled pink that you’re getting married.” She continued talking as she helped Kathryn. “Your fiancé seems like such a charming man. A little rugged, but in a good way. So dedicated to the important things, too.”

Kathryn was amused by her chatter because it was obvious that the woman was nervous and had been preparing all manner of things to say to her. When Susan slipped the dress over her, Kathryn looked at herself in the tri-fold mirror.

“Now, I’m sure it’s too large. It’s a size six.”

“That’s what I used to wear,” Kathryn said sadly as she looked at the way the dress practically hung off of her.

“Not to worry, dear. Not to worry.” Susan clasped the back of the dress and pulled it so it was snug across Kathryn’s chest. “We can make one so it fits you perfectly. What I love about it is that it seems a little daring, but it’s not.”

Kathryn studied the dress. It had long spaghetti straps that left her shoulders bare, and the bodice draped softly over her breasts. There were tiny pearl accents around the waist and the skirt flowed gracefully over her hips. Unlike in the other dresses, you couldn’t see her hipbones jutting out under the fabric. She turned and asked, “What does the back look like?”

Susan let go of it and did the same adjustment to the front to show Kathryn what the back would look like. “The shoulder straps cross your bare back, but you’ll see that the cut is high enough to be conservative. I think both your mother and sister will like aspects of it.”

Kathryn nodded and studied her reflection a little more, turning and cinching up the fabric herself. “It looks like the sides will provide ample coverage. Can it be made in ivory?”

“Oh yes. Do you like the fabric?”

She gathered the silky material in her hands and let it float back down. “I love it. Shall we show the others?”

“Of course!”

When she stepped into the room with the others, Phoebe whistled, “Now that is a gorgeous dress. What do you think, Katie?”

Kathryn had Susan cinch it up to show them what it would like in front. “Is it cut too low, Mom?”

Gretchen came up next to her and examined the bust. “It is low, but it covers. I think it will make you feel alluring.”

“Probably not a bad idea. I haven’t felt that way in awhile.” She turned around and showed them the back. “Do my shoulder blades protrude too much?”

“Not at all,” B’Elanna said. “Besides, you still have a few weeks to put on weight.”

Susan said, “If you’re worried about it, we can easily fashion a wrap out of the same fabric.”

Phoebe asked, "What about a chiffon wrap with edging in this fabric?"

"That would be lovely," Susan said.

"I like that idea," Kathryn said. "I might want it at the reception even if I don't wear it during the ceremony."

"So shall we go with this one?" Susan asked.

"Yes, in ivory."

Gretchen said, "It's beautiful, Katie. Chakotay will love it."

Kathryn looked at herself in the mirror one last time and agreed. "Now, shoes. Something with a low, wide heel so I don't fall over."

The ladies spent the next hour accessorizing Kathryn, but B'Elanna had instructions from Chakotay not to let her buy jewelry. He had something planned, but he hadn't given any details.

When they were finishing up, Justin came in and said, "A Christophe Alexandre has requested permission to enter and his security clearance checks out."

Susan said, "Oh! I didn't expect him to come. That's the designer of your dress, Admiral. He doesn't know who you are, but this might be a good opportunity to get your measurements exactly right. I don't know if you've heard of him, but he's one of the top designers in the industry! He must have transported here straight from Paris!"

Slightly amused, Kathryn waved her hand in agreement. "Send him in, Lieutenant."

He peeked wide-eyed around the corner and gasped. His French accent very thick, he practically bounced as he said, "Oh! Mademoiselle Janeway! I was so hoping it would be you!"

As he kissed the back of her hand, she said, "It's a pleasure to meet you, Monsieur Alexandre." Laying on her own charm, she complemented the gown by saying, "La robe est absolument ravissante!"

"Merci! Merci! I hope it is to your liking, mademoiselle. Would you model it for me so that I may fashion it to suit you, parfaitement?"

"Absolument, however, I shouldn't stay much longer. Madame Susan needs to open her boutique." Kathryn was glad that Susan didn't contradict her. She hated to admit to a stranger that her energy was waning.

B'Elanna helped Kathryn change clothes again. "Are you holding up, Kathryn?"

"I'll be fine for a little while longer." She held onto the wall as she stepped out of her slacks. "But I wouldn't mind a diversion if the Monsieur takes more than ten or fifteen minutes."

"We'll think of something." B'Elanna unhitched Kathryn's bra and slid the dress over her head in one swift movement. "This really is a gorgeous dress."

Looking at her reflection, she said, "Yes, it is. Can you believe this is the size I wore a year ago?"

"Don't worry, you're looking better every day. Besides, Tom was saying that we were all getting a little heavy out there."

Kathryn chuckled. "And what was your response?"

"Almost punched him in his big gut." As they laughed together, B'Elanna offered Kathryn her arm. "Come on, let's go see what he can do with this dress."

"Ooooh! You are a vision, mademoiselle. Let me see, let me see!" He walked around her, humming and cinching up the gown here and there. "Tell me, what are your concerns?"

"The dress is beautiful. If you can make a smaller version in ivory, it'll be perfect."

Gretchen said, "And a chiffon wrap."

"No, no, no, no, noooo... you mustn't hide under a wrap! This is your wedding day! You want to feel like a beautiful princess. I will make you a gown that you won't want to hide."

Since Christophe was behind her, Kathryn felt free to grimace. "Monsieur, I don't want you to go to all that trouble."

"It is no trouble. It is an honor. I will design the perfect gown as a gift to you at no cost. And if you feel like telling anyone who made it, I would be pleased."

Kathryn was getting the feeling like this was going to take awhile. "Perhaps we could schedule another appointment."

"This will only take a moment." He stood behind her and asked, "You want a wrap to cover your back, yet you like the backless gown?"

Susan answered for her, "She's anxious about her shoulder blades attracting attention. She's so thin right now."

Kathryn cringed as they continued to talk about her as if she wasn't there. Susan told him all about her likes and dislikes, what she wanted hidden and what she wanted to show. She looked at her mom, sister, and B'Elanna and they all just shrugged. Christophe was a large personality that wouldn't be deterred.

Luckily it wasn't long before he said, "Very well, Mademoiselle. I am finished with you for now. I will create a back so beautiful that you'll want to show all the guests how lovely you are. You'll wear your hair up, no?" He didn't give her time to answer as he plunged on, "The fabric will be different, heavier, so it will float around you rather than cling to you. The gown will give you grand elegance. Oh yes. C'est magnifique!"

As they transported home, Kathryn asked the others, "What did I just agree to?"

Phoebe said, "I don't know, but Monsieur Alexandre is going to love it."

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When Chakotay arrived home late that afternoon, Gretchen sent him to wake Kathryn for dinner. He found her sleeping peacefully, curled around a pillow in the middle of the bed and looking far too precious and fragile. He smiled to himself, imagining her defiant response to such a description.

He sat on the side of the bed and watched her sleep for a moment before he leaned down and kissed her soft, warm cheek. "Kathryn, love?"

"HmMMM?"

Sweeping her hair out of her face, he asked, "Are you hungry?"

"Mmmmm," was her only response.

He picked up her hand and caressed it softly until she pried her eyes open. "Hi."

"What time is it?" she asked as she squinted at the clock.

"A little after 4:30." He stretched out on his side next to her, his head propped up on his hand. "Did you find a dress?"

"Yes and no." She rubbed the sleepiness out of her eyes.

"Oh?"

"Monsieur Christophe Alexandre, a giant in the formal gown fashion industry, will be designing something magnifique, but I have no idea what that will be."

He frowned. "Are you okay with that?"

"I suspect that if I don't like whatever his creation may be, he'll keep designing until I'm happy."

"But the wedding is only a month away."

She sighed and snuggled against him. "Remind me again why I didn't want a Starfleet ceremony?"

Kissing her head, he said, "It'll be beautiful. Imagine walking out the front door of our new home to see rows and rows of all of our friends and family, everyone gasping in awe at your beauty. I'll be at the far end of the lawn at the edge of the forest looking devastatingly handsome..."

She punched his arm.

"Owe! What was that for?"

"For being cheeky."

"Oh yeah?" In one quick movement, he had her on her back and was lying on top of her. "You want cheeky?"

She licked her lips as she looked up at him. "If you're feeling playful, you might want to close the door."

"Your mom is very busy with dinner, and I've been imagining you in the most revealing bridal gowns all day." He lowered his lips to her inviting mouth, nibbling and suckling until she welcomed him inside. Her touch on his face and her quiet moans encouraged him to take it deeper. He coaxed her tongue into a sensual sparring match, gently tangling and savoring her silky, warm mouth.

Wanting to taste more of her, he kissed away from her lips, along her jaw, and found her earlobe to nibble on.

She sighed contently. "We haven't done this since I've been back."

He whispered, "Now that you're getting stronger, we'll have to correct that."

"Make up for lost..." she gasped as his tongue found that special spot behind her ear. She moaned as her body relaxed under his. "Maybe you'd better close the door."

"Are you sure?" He stopped to gauge her reaction, not wanting to push her.

Touching his lips with her fingertips, she said. “Let’s give it a try. It should add an interesting dynamic to our counseling session tonight.”

“Resolved sexual tension?”

She giggled – a sound very unusual, but also very wonderful from her. “Satisfied bliss.”

He went to the door and closed it quietly. He hoped that Gretchen would think they were merely talking when they didn’t come to the kitchen immediately. She’d been very accommodating and non-interfering in their relationship for which he was grateful.

Chakotay turned back around and the sight that greeted him made his eyes widen in surprise. Kathryn was lying naked on top of the bedcovers. She was propped up on her elbows and her legs were crossed provocatively at the ankles. “How did you manage that so fast?”

She winked. “My secret.”

Shaking his head, he sauntered back over to her. “Saucy little…”

“And you love it,” she said huskily.

“Yes, I do.” He slowly stripped off his uniform, taking off his jacket, shirt, and tank first, knowing how much she seemed to enjoy his bare chest. Looking at her naked body spread out so seductively before him was intoxicating and was doing wonderful things for his libido. He delighted in watching her pupils dilate as he slowly unbuttoned his pants.

“Tell me again why we haven’t done this in the last two weeks?” She licked her lips in anticipation as he revealed himself.

Trying to hide his grin, he answered, “Because I’m too much man for you to handle in your weakened condition.”

“Not to worry, honey, this heart can take anything you want to dish out.”

“Is that so?” he said as he kneeled onto the bed.

“Mmm hmmm. I read it in the owner’s manual.” She opened her legs in invitation.

“Want to test that theory?” He placed his hands on either side of her, hovering over her body.

She drew a line down his chest to his navel and then pressed her fingertips over his nipples. “I wouldn’t be a good engineer if I didn’t put it through its paces.”



Shuddering under her touch, he closed his eyes to enjoy the sensations she was bringing to his body. All of the tingling she was eliciting from his nipples seemed to coalesce in his groin, making him feel hard and ready to imbed himself within her. He had to maintain focus, though, and make sure she was ready for him. Holding his weight off of her with his arms, he dipped down to capture her lips again. As he plundered her mouth, her hands roamed over his body, leaving a warm trail wherever they touched.

“Relax,” she whispered.

“I don’t want to hurt you.” He left a trail of wet kisses down her throat.

She pressed along the curve of his bottom, urging him to rest on top of her. “My bones are as strong as they’ve ever been. I may not have my muscle strength back, but I have no intentions of trying to throw you off of me.”

He lowered his pelvis, but didn’t completely lie on top of her. After kissing her lips again, he said, “Tell me if you get winded or if anything hurts.”

Cradling his face in her hands, she said, “I will. Please, make me feel beautiful again.”

A chill spread through him from the intensity of her plea. Looking down at her, he saw nothing but beauty. “Oh, my love. You are beautiful. The most stunning and arousing woman I’ve ever seen.”

She watched him intently as he spoke. “If not for the love I see in your eyes, I wouldn’t believe a word of it.”

“Let me show you,” he whispered against her lips and then kissed her sensually. Dropping to rest on his elbows, he pressed her further into the bed, carefully watching for any hint of discomfort from her. There wasn’t a trace of anything except unbridled passion in the way her mouth responded beneath his.

He withdrew and shifted lower to taste her breasts. Her weight loss had made them smaller, but they were still full and luscious. The charming freckles that dotted them made him smile, but knowing she didn’t like them, he hid his delight with kisses along the inside curve of her breasts. The soft little curves were his favorite part of her body and he secretly hoped that her wedding gown was fashioned so he could see them.

Licking his way up to her nipple, he drew another moan from her. As he reached the summit and took the pebbled tip into his mouth, she arched under him. The strength behind her movement surprised him and contradicted her weakened state. He wanted to meet her with equal force, but remembered her saying that she’d been painfully groped, and he didn’t want anything about this to remind her of that horrible experience.

He covered as much of her breast with his mouth as he could, and lovingly stroked his tongue across her sumptuous breasts, rejoicing in the way she shuddered under his

ministrations. His hands slipped under her back to lift her to him, the slightness of her body making it easy to hold her close.

“Cha...koooo...tay,” she begged as she opened her legs and bent her knees. “Please...”

He needed no further invitation. “Shhhh... be patient, love.” He rose up slightly so that he could get a hand between them to touch her. Opening her folds, he drew one finger through her abundant moisture. He exhaled lightly to give himself restraint as he found her more than ready for him. She was dripping wet with sticky, white tinged fluid, wetter than he’d ever seen her. As he inserted a finger, she lifted her pelvis and her breathing quickened.

“Pleeeeee... ohhhhh...”

Her wanton reaction made him stiffen, but he didn’t relent on his touch. She deserved this to be as arousing as he could make it, so he withdrew and entered with two fingers. When he stroked the front wall of her vagina, her immediate response was to arch her chest off the bed and clench the sheets. He continued stroking her for almost a minute, causing her to moan and tremble, her fingers curling and uncurling as often as she tossed her head from side to side.

If he could choose one thing that he dearly loved about making love to his future wife, it was causing her to writhe uncontrollably while he forced her to wait. Very pleased with her response, he bit back a smile and withdrew his fingers again to trace up her folds to the apex. It only took one swirl around the hardened nub to bring about a hard and sudden orgasm. She shook uncontrollably, tremors seizing her body as she opened her mouth in the most delicious way.

“Ohhhh!” She reached down and pushed his hand away. “Too much.”

He caught her hand and kissed her palm. “You’re beautiful, Kathryn.”

“I’m limp,” she said as her arms flopped out beside her. “Oh, my... that was...”

Centering himself over her, he delighted in her inability to finish a sentence. He lifted her limp legs and asked, “Are you ready for this?”

“Mmmm hmmm,” she said as she found the energy to grab hold of her thighs.

He nudged at her opening, fully aware that it had been almost six months since they’d done this. “I’ll go slowly.”

Before she registered what he’d said, he’d edged his way inside. The slow descent into her soft, wet, warmth was almost his undoing, and by the sound of her deep, throaty moan, it was just as intense for her. Sunk deep within her, he asked through clenched teeth, “Are you okay?”

Her affirmative response came out in a whimper. “Move, please. Oh...” She tightened her vaginal muscles and tried to move, but couldn’t manage much.

He took the cue and began a slow, sensual rhythm. It was hard to maintain control, but he gave it his best shot, pumping slowly and steadily in and out of her. He kept it up for several minutes, giving her body a chance to come down slightly from her high before changing the angle of his thrust to bring her back up again. As her body began to tremble, he quickened the pace and pressed his weight against her. The contact against her clitoris triggered another orgasm and the tightening of her muscles pushed him over the edge. As he spilled his seed within her, his body trembled right along with hers.

Careful not to collapse on top of her, he withdrew and stretched out along her body. She was still quivering as he pulled her into his arms, planting kisses on her warm, flushed face. “Kathryn, my love, you are an exceptionally beautiful and sensual woman. I adore the way you surrender to me.”

She crooked a smile under his light kisses, her eyes still closed. “I never surrender. I just let you think I do.”

“Is that so?” he replied with a deep, throaty chuckle. “We’ll just have to see about that.”

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