

The Future is Ours – part 33

“A Pain in the Neck”

By Dawn

Summary: Trouble

Rated PG-13

Kathryn had planned to sleep in on Saturday, but when she woke, it was still dark out and her clock indicated that it was five in the morning. With a groan, she pulled herself out of bed, threw on a robe, and went downstairs. The sight that greeted her made her smile... Justin and Sue sitting at her kitchen table having breakfast.

“Weren’t we going to try to catch up on our rest?”

Sue shrugged. “It’s almost noon in Europe.”

“Have a seat, Admiral. Would you like coffee?”

“Have I ever turned down coffee?” she said as she eased into a chair and took the PADD that Sue offered. “What’s this?”

“Judy sent a report. On the flight out to DS9, she and Lydia had time to finish their analysis of the voting records of the council.”

“Hmmm,” Kathryn said as she read the summary. “This identifies practically everyone as having changed their votes immediately after the war.”

“That it does.”

Justin set coffee and toast in front of Kathryn. “Would you like some eggs and sausage?”

“Thank you, but you should finish your breakfast before it gets cold.”

“All right, but then I’m cooking for you. No arguing,” he said with a wink.

Kathryn started to say something about his tone, but then thought better of it. Chakotay was right when he said that she needed to let them be relaxed around her at her home.

“Thank you, Justin.”

Sue asked, “Would I be right assuming that this data actually helps us less?”

“What it tells us is that the influence on the council was wide-spread. It lets most council-members off the hook, and points to a larger problem than changing a few key votes.”

Justin commented, “The President.”

“Most likely, but how do we prove it?”

“Is it up to us to prove it?” Sue asked. “I mean, you said it yesterday in the interview... it’s up to an oversight committee, not a Starfleet officer.”

Kathryn set down the PADD. “I think I need to talk to my commanding officer to figure out what happens next. I can gather all the evidence I want, but I don’t know what to do with it, or who to trust with it.”

“Speaking of that,” Justin said hesitantly. “I’ve got something to tell you, but I didn’t want to hit you with it first thing in the morning.”

“Well, let me have it.”

“Your mother contacted me last night after you fell asleep. She didn’t want me to wake you.”

“Let me guess... she received a threat?”

“Yes, and her home was already secured. We did it at the same time as we did the Richard’s home.”

“What did the note say?”

“Teach your daughter to know her place.”

Kathryn rolled her eyes as took a sip of her coffee.

“Your mother asked me to convey a lesson to you.”

“A lesson?”

Sue was trying not to smile.

Justin said, “She was following instructions – teaching you to know your place.”

“Okay, what does she want me to learn?”

“She said that your job is to *place* your heel on the terrorists and squash them like a bug.”

Kathryn couldn't help but laugh. "Lesson learned. Thank you."

"You're welcome."

More serious now, Kathryn asked, "Did they send her pictures?"

"Yes, of her and her undercover security officer at the market. She also got the same ones that were sent to your sister."

"Does she want me to call?"

"No, I don't believe so. She was insistent that she didn't want to add to your burdens."

"Well, I'll talk to her later today. Let's just hope these guys don't start following my Aunt Martha around. She'd bore them to death with stories of her life."

"Not a bad idea, actually," Sue commented.

Justin asked, "Would you like additional security for your extended family as well?"

"No, I think that just might alert someone to their existence. Besides, the terrorists seem to want me to know about the threats. They're trying to scare me into being quiet."

"You're not easily scared," Sue topped off everyone's coffee.

Justin added, "And the more they push, the more desperate they sound."

Kathryn nodded slowly. "What kind of security do we have on Chakotay?"

"The ship that took him has been instructed to be on special alert, and he has security checks that he does himself on his hotel room and communication equipment."

A chill spread through her. "I want it boosted. He's too exposed."

"I'll see to it, ma'am. Immediately," he said as he stood up to go into Kathryn's study.

Kathryn rubbed her forehead and could tell that her heart rate had just spiked. "Sue?"

"Yes?"

Her eyes were closed and she was concentrating on taking deep breaths. "Stay with me for a moment, would you?"

"I'm right here," Sue said as she took Kathryn's hand. "Chakotay is fine. We talked to him just nine hours ago."

“I know. My heart rate just went up – I’ve got to learn to control this better.”

“What helps?”

Kathryn opened her eyes and took a steadying breath. “It only seems to be a problem when I’m at rest. If I’ve got an adrenaline rush at the same time, my body knows what to do with it.”

“It’s a miscommunication between your new heart and your brain?”

“That’s precisely it.” Kathryn squeezed her hand and then released it. “Better now.”

“How about if I fix you that breakfast Justin promised?”

“I can cook, you know.”

Sue got up and said, “I know, but let me. I like it.”

“Thank you.”

“Also, about Chakotay – he’s already on his way home. So, he’s safe on a starship.”

“Good point.”

“Justin cooks your eggs over easy, but I can’t do that. Scrambled okay?”

“Sounds wonderful. Thank you, Sue.”

Kathryn spent the rest of her weekend catching up on reports, watching the Fednews, and adjusting back to the Pacific time-zone. She went to work on Monday and immediately started checking things off of her to-do list.

Around noon, her new receptionist, Crewman Foster came into her office and said, “Admiral, you’re needed in the briefing room.”

“For what?”

“An impromptu meeting.”

“With whom?” she asked, slightly annoyed.

“Your staff.”

“The four of you called a meeting?”

“And some others.”

Kathryn stood up and straightened her tunic. “I’d appreciate more notice next time, Crewman.”

“Yes, Admiral.”

They walked out of her office and into the room she used for meetings. Kathryn froze just inside the doorway. Putting her hands on her hips, she gave a mock glare to the twenty or so people gathered there. “This doesn’t look like a staff meeting.”

“You don’t think?” Tom asked as he handed her a bouquet of daisies and placed a kiss on her cheek. “Happy Birthday, Kathryn.”

“Thank you, Tom.” She smelled the flowers and smiled at the group. “Thank you, everyone. Who organized this?”

“Your favorite party planner, of course,” Tom said with a bow. “We know this has to be quick, but thought you might enjoy a little celebration. How many years is this?”

Kathryn wagged a finger at him. “That’s not a polite question to ask a lady. You should know better.”

He joked, “It’s not as if I don’t already know.”

Sue took her flowers and put them in a vase. “Sit and enjoy, Admiral. We brought in lunch from that little café around the corner.”

“Thank you,” she said with a chuckle. “This is wonderful, and thank you, everyone. Last year, I was in Paris for my birthday and I must say that being home is much better.”

Matt said, “I have a report that the Excelsior is in the solar system. Chakotay will be home in just a few hours.”

“I can’t think of a better gift.”

Celes asked, “Are you doing anything special for your birthday tonight, Admiral?”

“We are going to dinner at a Mexican restaurant in Los Angeles that Harry raves about.”

“Out in public?” B’Elanna asked. “Ready for another interview?”

She laughed as she dove into her salad. “No, I’m hoping we won’t run into any reporters. We’ll have a partially secluded table that looks out over the ocean.”

Joe asked, "Have you spoken to Harry? How's he doing?"

"Talked to him just this morning, actually. I caught him up to speed on my adventures last week, and he reported that he has two planets ready to rejoin the Federation in the next few months."

"That's great news!" Owen said. "Which ones?"

"Sirius IX and Kzinti. They're just waiting for things to settle out with the Council because they don't want their announcement to overshadow what we tried to do last week."

"Their idea or Harry's?" Justin asked.

"Theirs, believe it or not, but Harry is doing some great work. The Sirius Cybernetics Corporation is ready to re-engage business dealings with the Federation and were thrilled to have the Enterprise bring our delegation."

Foster asked, "Because of Commander Data?"

"That's right," Kathryn nodded. "They forged a strong relationship out there this week. I'm thrilled."

"What's next on your agenda?" Celes asked. "Are you going back into space?"

"No, not for awhile." Kathryn smiled and changed the subject, "Tell me what's going on in your life, Celes. Are you enjoying your job at the Academy?"

"Yes! It's busy right now with next year's freshman class coming in for tours, but I love it."

Kathryn continued to ask everyone questions about their lives as they ate their lunch. She enjoyed the opportunity to catch up with some of the Voyagers that she didn't see very often.

Once lunch was over, she said good bye to everyone and went back to her office to take a call from the Pioneer.

She activated the comm-terminal to see Captain Young. "Hello Bernie. How are things in the DMZ today?"

"Pretty quiet overall. Yesterday, we visited Volan III for you. Judy has a report."

The monitor switched to Judy's image and Kathryn said, "Thank you, by the way, for that statistical report you sent this weekend. Good work."

“My pleasure, Admiral. I noted that the voting changes all happened within two months of each other. It definitely had marks of the domino affect.”

“I noticed. It’s good information to have.” Kathryn raised her chin. “So, Volan III? Were they surprised by your visit?”

“Not really. I don’t think they were impressed by us either. I think that one of the former Maquis might’ve been better suited to talk to them.”

“What was the outcome?”

“They’ll consider joining the Federation when you’re running it.”

“That’s not going to happen.”

Bernie chimed in. “I think any change in leadership will be welcomed.”

“So do I, but it’s not going to be me. Not only do I want to focus on my family, it just wouldn’t be good timing. I need to distance myself from all the upheaval I’m causing once it all comes to fruition.”

“I can understand that,” Bernie replied.

“Have you been to DS9 yet?”

“Yes, Lieutenant Dalby spent the weekend there. He wants to give you a report privately.”

Kathryn’s eyebrows rose. “He hasn’t given you one?”

Bernie said, “I suspect he doesn’t know who to trust.”

“Well, I suppose it’s good that he’s being careful. Just in case he has something that he wants to keep close to his chest, I’ll speak with him alone.”

“When is a good time for you?” Judy asked.

“Now, if he’s available. I’m leaving in an hour and won’t be available again until tomorrow morning.”

Young tapped his combadge. “Young to Dalby.”

“Dalby here, Captain.”

“Admiral Janeway is on the con and would like a report. Is this a good time?”

“Sure,” he said hesitantly.

“Report to the briefing room.”

“On my way.”

While they were waiting, Kathryn asked, “Have you watched the Fednews reports from the weekend?”

“We have,” Bernie said. “We were thinking it would be fun to get into a debate with you about the best way to impeach a president, because I have a feeling you’re about to.”

“Can’t be me, but I need to find out how it works.”

The door swooshed open and Dalby entered. “Sir, Ma’am.”

Bernie rose and directed Dalby to take his seat. “We’ll leave you to it.”

Judy said, “Happy Birthday, Admiral.”

“Yes, Happy Birthday,” Bernie echoed. “We’ll talk tomorrow.”

Dalby sat down and took a deep breath. “I was afraid they were going to stay.”

“You can trust them, Lieutenant. I wouldn’t have sent you with them if I didn’t believe that.”

“I appreciate that, but I didn’t want to open a can of worms that didn’t need to be opened.” Dalby took a deep breath. “Oh, and Happy Birthday. I didn’t realize, although I should have.”

She waved away his concern. “Thank you, but I can promise you that it’s not anyone’s responsibility to remember their former C.O.’s birthday.”

“Except perhaps your former first officer.”

Kathryn laughed. “Yes, quite true. So, what did you learn?”

“Not much,” he said carefully. “Quark wouldn’t talk until I confided in him that you sent me.”

“And when you did?”

“The Bolian Bank is well known by the Ferengi. Quark was rather concerned that you were going to bring it down. He wants to pull his money out.”

“I’m not interested in collapsing a bank. That helps no one. What I am interested in is the integrity and business dealings of its officers.”

“Quark said you should be very suspicious of the blues in brown. Do you know what he means by that?”

Kathryn nodded. “Blue Bolians wearing brown suits. They are officers of the bank.”

“Ah,” Dalby said. “Well, he, uh, said that the ‘blues in brown’ don’t know the first thing about making a profit. The only thing they are good at is making colossal mistakes.”

“I agree, but what I need is a lead or some evidence. Anything?”

“No, I’m sorry, Admiral. He kept emphasizing that the officers are bad with business, though. He said that someone else is pulling the strings, and that if you can find who those people are, then you’ve got the people who are causing all the trouble.”

“The mysterious investors, whom we think are the primary shareholders in the mining companies that are getting paid handsomely for the materials used in rebuilding Betazed and Earth.”

“Is that who they are?” Dalby asked.

“That’s my guess, but we’re looking into it.”

“As good a place to start as any.” Dalby rubbed his chin in thought. “Mind if I do some digging?”

“Where?”

“I have no idea, but I feel the need to dig.”

Kathryn smiled. “You can if you’d like, but we’re doing a lot of that here, too.”

He shrugged. “I’ve got nothing else to do in the next couple of days. What would you like me to tell Captain Young?”

“He can know all of it. As can Commanders Moore and Young. Thank you for your discretion, though.”

“You’re welcome. Anything else you need from me?”

“Not at the moment. Good work, Lieutenant.”

“Thanks, and enjoy your evening.”

“I will,” she said with a grin as she closed the terminal.

Kathryn and her four-man security detail entered the transporter station just down the street from her office building. She'd enjoyed the walk in the open air and was pleasantly surprised that she received smiles, but no one stopped to ask for an autograph or pointed a camera at her. Perhaps it was obvious that she was off-duty since she was wearing a dress and her hair was down.

Once Chakotay transported down from his ship, they would be transporting directly to Los Angeles for a short walk on the beach before dinner. He'd arranged all of this, knowing how much she craved being able to walk down the street. It made her security officers nervous, but they were handling it well.

When she entered the transporter room, the operator glanced at her nervously. She was surprised that one of the familiar operators wasn't on duty, but she dismissed the thought as unimportant.

Chakotay's form materialized and Kathryn stepped up to welcome him. “I missed you.”

“I...” Another transporter beam took hold of him and he disappeared.

Kathryn swirled around and yelled, “What happened?”

“I don't know, sir.” The technician was tapping at the controls, appearing determined but unhurried.

Justin alerted Starfleet Security as Kathryn jumped up to the console to address the situation herself. “Didn't you engage the transport inhibitor as soon as he materialized?” This was no time to empower a green officer. When she saw what he was doing, she pushed him out of the way and yelled, “Stop! You're erasing the logs!”

Kathryn worked frantically to recapture the data and try to figure out what had happened. When the ensign tried to help, she ordered, “Restrain him!”

Mark reported, “Admiral, Security registered the transport and has logs, but the beam-out site is inconclusive. There's no way to trace it. All transport activity has been suspended.”

“There's always a way!” she yelled. “Tell them to track the dilithium power fluctuation!”

Justin called out, “Is it possible that the transport didn't originate here?”

Mark reopened the comm channel with Security. “Block all interstellar traffic – anything with a transporter strong enough to get through the Terran Shield Grid.”

Kathryn rounded on the technician. “What do you know?”

“Sir, I'm new.”

“Bullshit. You wouldn't be assigned here without some level of competency. WHO. HAS. MY. HUSBAND?”

His eyes turned to slits and he sneered. “You can't tell me that you know more about transporters than I do. Let me look at the data, Admiral, and maybe I can find out.”

“Like hell I will.” That being a dead-end, she slammed the console in anger. She slapped her commbadge. “Janeway to the Excelsior.”

Captain Viri replied, “Admiral Janeway, a surprise.”

“Scan the ships in orbit for recent transporter activity.”

“Aye, Admiral, but we've just received notice to freeze...”

Kathryn didn't let her finish. “I know. Chakotay has been transported somewhere and we need to find him.”

She and Viri worked in concert, trying all avenues of scans, but they turned up nothing.

Another comm interrupted their work. “Khurma to Janeway.”

“Go ahead, Admiral.”

“An additional security team is on its way to you now. We need to move you to a secure location.”

Seething, she stated, “I'm not leaving here until he's back.” She was still calculating variables and didn't want to stop until she was out of options.

“This isn't a request. Until we know something more, you're at risk.”

“I can still...” She saw the blue light out of the corner of her eye and looked up to see Chakotay rematerializing on his knees with his arms outstretched. “He's back!”

As soon as his form took solid shape, his hands went to his neck and he fell sideways, collapsing to the deck.

Kathryn's eyes widened in horror as she saw blood pouring down his front. "Oh my God!" She skirted around the railing and was at his side in a flash.

Justin took her place at the transporter console while alerting Starfleet Medical.

Khurma yelled, "What's going on?!"

Blood was everywhere. All over his hands, coming out of his mouth, all down his arm, his chest. His eyes matched hers in horror. She pulled his hands away and yelled, "His throat's been slit! GET US TO MEDICAL! NOW!" She used her own hands to try to compress the wound.

"Ka..."

"Shhh, don't try to talk." She was shaking as she looked into his tear-filled eyes. "Hang on, Chakotay. Oh, God."

His hands covered hers. "Lo... ve."

Tears fell down her cheeks, but she couldn't wipe them away. "I love you, too." His blood seeped out between her fingers. "Stay with me," she implored.

Justin yelled, "I can't get the transporter functioning!"

"Get the Excelsior to do it!" Khurma yelled.

Chakotay's voice gurgled as he said, "So cold."

Leaning down so that their foreheads were touching, she whispered back, "I'm here, honey. I'll keep you warm."

Within seconds, they were rematerializing at Starfleet Medical. Joe and several other medical personnel were standing by and immediately went to work.

A nurse pulled her away and guided her to a nearby chair. "Admiral? Are you injured?"

Kathryn felt like she was about to faint. "Need..."

When alarms from his biobed went off, she jumped to her feet in a rush of panic. "Chakotay!"

The nurse held her shoulders and assured her, "He's going to be okay, Admiral."

"You don't know that!" she yelled as she reached the foot of his bed. Joe was performing surgery on his neck and another doctor was healing wounds on his arm. Chakotay's entire chest was covered with bright red blood.

Kathryn tried to keep down the bile that rose to her throat, but was unable to keep from bringing up the meager contents of her stomach. The nurse was right there with her and caught most of it in a container as they both sank to the floor.

“It’s okay, Admiral. This is perfectly normal in the first tri-mester.”

Kathryn rested her forehead on the footboard of Chakotay’s bed. “You weren’t supposed to scan me.”

“But that’s my job.”

“Just,” Kathryn fought to get the words out. “Don’t... tell anyone.”

The nurse held onto Kathryn and rubbed her back. “Shhhh, you can trust me. It’s all right.”

After a few minutes, Joe knelt down and scanned her with a tri-corder. “He’s going to be fine, Admiral. He put up a hell of a fight.”

Her voice cracked as she asked, “You almost lost him?”

“No, there are signs of a struggle. He fought valiantly with whoever did this to him.”

Kathryn nodded tiredly, pressing the back of her wrist against her eye since her palms were covered with his blood.

Joe pressed a hypo against Kathryn’s neck and said, “Nurse Mitchell, would you take her to get cleaned up?”

“Of course, Dr. Zimmerman.”

“And don’t leave her alone. If she gets lightheaded, help her to lie down.”

Joe and the nurse helped her to her feet, and once she was steady, she went to Chakotay’s bedside. A nurse was cleaning the blood off of him and the other doctor was healing abrasions on his face.

“He’s okay,” Kathryn said to herself.

Joe’s hand was on her back. “I gave him a pretty strong sedative. It’ll be a few hours before he regains consciousness.”

“How many wounds were there?” She rubbed the back of her hand along his temple, just above his right eye. His cheek was swelling as if he’d taken a punch.

“There were two major lacerations – one on his neck and the other on his right bicep. I suspect that they were aiming for his throat the first time and he deflected with his arm. The swelling and bruising indicate that he was involved in hand-to-hand combat.”

She picked up his hand and saw that his knuckles were swollen and bleeding. “Looks like he landed a few punches.”

Joe squeezed her shoulder. “Go get cleaned up, Admiral. We’ll move him to a room in just a little while so you can sit with him.”

It took a moment, but she nodded and stepped back. “Thank you, Joe.”

Nurse Mitchell led her to another room. “There’s a sink in the lavatory. I’ll get a change of clothes for you.”

Her whole body felt numb as she washed her hands. Even as the blood-stained water flowed down the drain, Kathryn kept washing.

The nurse turned off the water and handed Kathryn a towel. “Would you like to shower?”

Kathryn stared at her reflection in the mirror and saw that there was blood on her face and neck. “Probably should.”

“Let’s get your shoes off.” The nurse held Kathryn’s hands while she stepped out of her shoes. She then gathered Kathryn’s long hair to the side, unzipped the back of her dress, and unhooked her bra.

“Thanks,” Kathryn said as the nurse opened the shower door.

“There’s soap and shampoo in there. Hand me your dress over the top of the door and I’ll take care of it for you.”

“I don’t want to keep it.”

“It’s a beautiful dress, but I understand.”

At first, Kathryn let the water run over her and watched the shower floor as the water turned red and then a light orange, and finally ran clear. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and said, “Shake out of this, Katie.”

Now with a need to do something, she thoroughly washed both her body and her hair before turning off the water.

Nurse Mitchell said, “Step on out, I’ve got a big towel for you.”

Kathryn did as she was asked and the nurse quickly had her wrapped up tightly. The young woman grabbed a second towel and started working on Kathryn’s hair.

“Thank you. I’m... not myself.”

“Oh, don’t you worry about that. You’re doing remarkably well, I think.”

Kathryn nodded politely and took the comb that the nurse offered. “Thank you.”

They worked together to get her changed into a loose knit outfit and then they dried her hair. Once finished, the nurse said, “I don’t know if you remember me, but I was one of your nurses when you were here for your transplant.”

“Were you?” Kathryn smiled kindly at the young nurse. “I should remember you, but I’m afraid my memories from that time are a little fuzzy.”

“That’s normal. But I must say that you are looking terrific. You’ve really put on some weight.”

Chuckling, Kathryn said, “Funny how that’s a compliment.”

“I didn’t mean to offend.”

“You didn’t.” She rubbed her belly. “I need to gain weight for this little one.”

“How long have you known?”

“Two months.”

“Wow, you found out quickly. I guess because Dr. Zimmerman is taking care of you.”

“The baby is small, but doing well.”

“Doing quite well,” the nurse said reassuringly.

There was a chime at the door and Kathryn instinctively said, “Come.”

Justin came in and smiled warmly. “How are you doing, Admiral?”

She pulled together her strength and poise, commanding, “What do we know?”

“Your intuition was right about the ensign on duty. He’s an imposter. Security is searching for the ensign who was supposed to be on duty. An Ensign Young, but not related to Captain Young.”

“Oh, no.” She had a bad feeling about the young man who’d been so attentive about her privacy the summer before. “Any sign of where that transport originated?”

“No, ma’am, but it has only been thirty minutes.”

“That’s all?” she said with frustration. “What I wouldn’t give for Voyager’s scanners right now.”

“Hopefully, the enhanced system they just installed at Jupiter Station will find something.” He frowned at the PADD he held.

“What else?” She knew that look.

He handed it to her. “This is a copy of what was on a PADD around his neck, Admiral.”

“What is it?” Tapping the power key, she read, “Rescind your allegations or, next time, your husband will bleed to death before he makes it back to you.”

“I’m sorry, Admiral,” Justin said. “I’ve sent the original to the forensics lab.”

She was furious. Beyond furious.

Kathryn put aside her anger so that she could be at her husband’s bedside. The surgery hadn’t presented any complications and thankfully, there would be no lasting damage. He’d lost a considerable amount of blood, but they’d restored it soon enough that no brain damage had occurred.

As she alternated between pacing and sitting, she tried to put together the pieces of what she knew, but she wasn’t getting anywhere because her thoughts kept drifting to the man lying on the inclined hospital bed. Chakotay had begun to stir as the sedation wore off, having moments of near consciousness before drifting off again.

Tired of pacing, she sat down beside him. She caressed his arm, smoothed out the already smooth blankets, tucked the covers up around his chest, and brushed a stray tendril of hair off his forehead only to have it fall back again. Feeling satisfied that he was comfortable; she picked up his hand and held it against her cheek. As she looked over him, she felt a deep longing to feel the rumble of his voice and see the sparkle in his eyes. She’d really missed him the past week and had been looking forward to their evening together. This was a far cry from what she’d had planned, and certainly not how she wanted to spend her birthday.

She wondered if he’d been followed the entire time he was at the conference. The mere idea of it made the anger bubble up inside her again. The cruelty of these criminals was

beyond comprehension. Attacking her could be expected, but hurting her family was abhorrent.

His eyes fluttered briefly and the flow of her anger ebbed. She touched his face, whispering, "Chakotay, you're safe. I'm right here beside you."

He opened his eyes in response. "Kathryn?"

Warmed by the sight of his rich, brown eyes, she smiled. "Hey there."

He looked around, confused by his surroundings until realization dawned. Quickly touching his throat, he asked, "Okay?"

She nodded, crawling slowly up onto the bed. "You're okay." Her eyes burned with coming tears as she kneeled over him and kissed his lips.

Chakotay opened his arms to receive her, and what started as a hug, grew into an unquenchable craving for physical contact. Her tears began to fall in earnest as his hands rubbed up and down her trembling back, assuring her as best as he could. "I'm okay, my love. I'm okay."

After the surge of emotion subsided, she pulled back to wipe her face. "Are you in pain? Do you need anything?"

"A little groggy, but nothing hurts." He wiped away a newly fallen tear from her cheek. "Could I have a drink of water?"

"Of course." She jumped up and poured him a cup.

He took it gratefully and smiled. "You loved these bendy straws when you were in here."

"Convenient when bed-ridden." She sat next to him and attempted to tuck the stray tendril of hair away once more. "Better?" she asked when he set down the cup.

"Yes," he said as he closed his eyes to rest them. "Are you okay?"

"I've been better," she said with a sad smile.

He looked at her with slight alarm. "What's wrong? Is the baby okay?"

"We're fine," she assured him as she placed his hand on the slight bump. "Joe checked us out. There was a temporary increase in my blood pressure, but no reason to be alarmed. I just meant that I'm not doing so well right now because of what happened to you."

"Let me hold you."

As she settled in next to him, she said, "I'm so sorry."

"What do you have to be sorry about?"

"I shouldn't have taken the risk to meet you in a public transport station."

"There's no way you could've known. I'm sure Justin did everything he could have. Is the rest of the family okay?"

She nodded shakily and then joked to lighten the mood, "Security is the entire family's new best friend." Serious again, she added, "Everyone's fine, it's just..." She shuddered with the thought of what could've happened to him.

He closed his eyes again tiredly. "They sent a PADD back with me, didn't they?"

"Yes. Cease and desist or else."

Chakotay mumbled, "I materialized in a dark room and couldn't see. Two people grabbed my arms and then they shined a spotlight on me. I fought against them, but there were too many."

She wasn't sure she wanted to hear this, but knew she must. "Did you see anyone?"

"I could tell that they were Moroppian because of the distinctive ridges on their hands and faces." He shook his head without opening his eyes. "I might be able to pick the leader out of a picture, but I'm not sure. He said he had a message for you and put the PADD around my neck. I asked who they were and didn't get a response."

"Did they say anything else?"

"Waited for a couple minutes, and then said it had been long enough. I could see what they were about to do and managed to protect myself the first time, but then they held me tight."

"Oh, Chakotay," she caressed his chest to offer comfort.

"I'm okay." He yawned as he added, "Sounds like we're backing them into a corner."

"They want me to publicly confess that I provided false data to the council."

He covered her hand. "That just makes them look even more dishonest."

"Mmm hmm."

"You can't do that."

“I’d lose all my credibility.”

“That’s what they want.”

“I know,” she sighed as she kissed the back of his hand lovingly. “I need to find out who is holding the strings – who these investors are.”

“So, what are you doing here?”

“Is that a serious question?” She frowned.

“Usually when your family is threatened, all hell breaks loose.”

Crooking a smile, she said, “It’s about to.”

“Do you have any ideas?”

“Owen is looking into it,” she said tiredly. “I want to stay with you tonight. It’ll give forensics time for analysis, and I doubt they want me looking over their shoulders.”

“I’m glad you’re here, but I’ll understand if you need to go.”

She waved it away. “It’s almost midnight and there’s not much I can do. Besides, I haven’t seen you all week.”

“Then climb under the covers and turn out the lights.”

Not having to be asked twice, she kicked off her shoes and cozied up with him. “By the way,” she said.

“Yes?”

“Next time anyone comes anywhere near your throat, they’re dead.”

“Noted,” he said clearly.

She put a finger under his chin and placed tender kisses along the recently healed skin.

“Much better.” He took her hand and kissed the pads of her fingertips. “I love you, and Happy Birthday.”

Snuggling in, she murmured, “Love you, too.”

She woke up a few hours later with an aching neck because of the awkward way she was lying on Chakotay's shoulder. After scooting out of the bed quietly, she used the facilities and got a drink of water. As she drank, she realized that she was also feeling lightheaded and a little queasy, so she stepped out to the nurse's station and was pleasantly surprised to see Nurse Mitchell there. "Would you replicate me some peanut butter toast, please?"

"Of course, Admiral."

As she waited, she spoke to Mark who had taken the security post outside her door. "Shouldn't you be getting some rest, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, but so should you, Admiral."

"Point taken." She received the toast from the nurse and was amused when she saw that the plate also included a banana and some cheese. "Thank you."

Mark asked, "How is Chakotay?"

She could tell by the worry in his voice that he must not have been briefed on his status. "He'll be fine. There's no lasting damage and Dr. Joe should release him sometime tomorrow."

"That's a relief." He visibly relaxed.

Patting the young man on the shoulder, she said, "Now that you can sleep, get someone to relieve you. I might need you later."

"Aye, Admiral."

She took her snack back into the room and curled up in the chair to eat it. Her thoughts wandered to the data she'd provided to the council and wondered if Jorl and Liyal were behind the attacks.

"You okay?" Chakotay's voice was scratchy.

"Hmm?" she stood up. "I didn't realize you were awake."

"I was getting cold."

"Sorry to abandon you, but my neck was hurting."

"What time is it?"

She glanced at the clock. "A little after four. How are you feeling?"

“Throat’s a little sore, but okay.”

Concerned about him describing chills and a sore throat, she laid a hand on his forehead. “Are you getting sick?”

His smile showed slight amusement. “No. Not that kind of sore. It’s on the outside.”

“Ah,” her hand slid down to cup his cheek. “Do you want some pain meds?”

“Not yet. I might if it gets worse.” He folded back the covers. “However, I think I’ll use the facilities while I’m awake.”

“Sure,” she said as she got out of his way and held her arm out so he could take it for leverage.

He merely squeezed her hand and stood up under his own strength. “I suspect that if I let you support any of my weight, you’d topple over.”

Putting her hands on her hips, she stated, “I’m stronger than I look.”

“Without a doubt.” He kissed her quickly and, as he tottered off to the bathroom, said, “You smell like peanut butter.”

Smiling guiltily, she finished off the banana.

When he returned, he grabbed a second pillow, climbed back into the bed, and scooted on his side to the far edge. “This should make it more comfortable.” He patted the bed in front of him. “I’ll spoon you.”

She gave him a sly grin and followed his instructions. “If you insist.” She felt comforted as he curled his arm around her middle and pulled her back to snuggle against him.

“Better?”

“Mmmhmm,” she said sleepily, enjoying the warmth that he wrapped her in.

Moments later, his hand wandered up to the underside of her breast. She asked, “You’re getting fresh? Here?”

A low, rumbling chuckle vibrated against her back. “I can’t help it. They’re like magnets.”

She rolled her eyes and pushed his hand down to her waist. “Try to restrain yourself, Captain.”

“Pulling rank?” He kissed the back of her neck, right on the spot that made her shiver.

“You’re supposed to be resting.”

He sighed dramatically and resorted to tucking his wandering hand inside the front of her waistband to caress the slight bump. “Maybe he won’t mind a little loving.”

“She’d love some.” At least this told her that he was feeling better.

His chuckle vibrated against her back again. “We should just get the doctor in here to settle this for us.”

“Where’s the fun in that?”

“I love you, Kathryn.”

“Love you, too.”

A few minutes later, when she shifted slightly to get more comfortable, he said, “Whatever you do tomorrow, please keep yourself safe.”

“I will.” She put her hand over his. “I’ve got a lot to protect here.”

He kissed the back of her neck again, and this time, the shivers were from more than just the physical contact. The emotional intensity of the moment affected her deeply.

The next morning, Kathryn left Chakotay while he was still asleep, but she knew he’d understand. She transported home to eat breakfast, shower, and change, and was at her office by 8:30. After stopping by the replicator for a cup of coffee, she sat down to face the day.

There was a single PADD sitting on top of her closed computer that she hadn’t put there. She feared that whoever had threatened her family had now managed to break into her office. Glancing around the room with trepidation, she clicked it on. Her anxiety quickly turned to anger. “Nooooooooo.... No, No....” She smacked her commbadge as she stood up. “Starfleet Command, what is Admiral Khurma’s location?”

“Fleet Admiral’s Office, Starfleet Headquarters.”

Kathryn flew out of her office at a fast clip.

Justin stood up from his desk as he watched her fly by. “Admiral, where are you going?”

She held the PADD up over her shoulder as she walked away. “To get some answers.”

“But we haven’t secured your movement!”

“I don’t give a damn,” she said as she pushed the double doors open.

“Admiral, your safety!”

Holding the door open, she stopped mid-stride and looked back. “Are you coming or not?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

She waited impatiently as he let Starfleet security know she was on the move.

“What is our destination, Admiral?”

Smacking the PADD against her palm, she answered with a clenched jaw, “Headquarters. Ninth floor.”

When she got to Khurma’s office, she told Ms. Randolph, “I need to see Admiral Khurma.”

The patronizing woman said, “That won’t be possible today. Admiral Khurma’s schedule is full.”

“This is not a request, Ms. Randolph.”

She looked down her nose at Kathryn. “I only take orders from Admiral Khurma.”

“Open the damn door, NOW, or I’ll break it down.”

Ms. Randolph stood so that she was nearly nose-to-nose with Kathryn. “If you do not leave this office, NOW, I’ll call security. Your current status does not empower you to demand anything, Mrs. Janeway.”

Kathryn’s eyes flared. “Why you…”

At that moment, Khurma’s door opened and he stepped out. “Kathryn. Please come in.”

She turned her glare towards her C.O. as she stormed past him and into his office. As soon as the door closed, she held up the PADD and demanded, “What the hell is this?”

He calmly held out a cup of coffee for her, but when she didn’t take it, he set it on the front edge of his desk. “How is Chakotay?” he asked as he slowly walked around his desk and took his seat.

“He’ll recover.” Kathryn’s annoyance increased at the obvious delay tactic.

“I'm glad to hear it.”

She held the PADD up again. “Why didn't you talk to me before making this decision? Don't I have a right to make this choice for myself?”

“No.”

“What do you mean, ‘No!?’”

“As of today, you are on a temporary leave of absence.”

“But I...”

He continued as if she hadn't interrupted him. “You may choose what location we secure for you, but I already have a team bolstering security at your home in Oregon. With your permission, I'd like to move your extended family there as well.”

Refusing to sit down, she asked, “A few threats and you relieve me of duty?”

He laced his fingers together on his desk. “I'm doing what I can to protect you and your family, Kathryn. You are much more important to me than the pardoning of expired mining contracts.”

Emphasizing her point by stabbing a finger to the desk, she said, “Eliminating those contracts will enable us to regain the confidence of those planets and restore their federation membership.”

“Are you sure we aren't just buying them off?”

“What?! I thought we were in agreement regarding this situation.”

“We were, but I don't know what you've been discussing with the task forces. The president is livid with the outcomes of two of those meetings.”

“You know what we have to do here, damn it!”

“Kathryn,” he warned.

“Look, it was the council who came up with the idea of the amendment, not me. It's a real step in the right direction and I'm damned proud of them for their willingness to take it. I'm even more impressed with Dooha for publicizing it. If we annul those contracts, it'll allow for negotiation of new ones, and we'd stop feeding resources into the president's pet projects. You do realize, don't you, that Zife and his buddies are getting rich off of this?”

“That does seem to be the case, but I also answer to the President, and he believes those colonies have been compensated for the agreements they signed three years ago. I realize that he’s wrong, but I’m between a rock and a hard place. We don’t have the resources to...”

“Bullshit,” she interrupted.

“Excuse me, Admiral?”

“You know what has to be done.”

“Maybe so, but your attitude is bordering on insubordination.”

“What are you going to do?” She crossed her arms in front of her. “Relieve me of duty?”

“Watch yourself, Admiral, or you’ll be facing a permanent discharge.”

She leaned forward, resting her knuckles on the desk in front of her. “You... wouldn’t... dare.”

They stared at each other for a long moment until he broke eye contact and leaned back in his chair. “This is getting us nowhere.”

“Agreed.” Inwardly, she triumphed that she’d won the staring match, but it didn’t make her feel any better. She took a deep breath and began to pace. “What we need to do is figure out who, exactly, is behind these threats and arrest the individuals involved.” Turning to him, she said, “You know who it is, don’t you?”

“Not really. I have suspicions, of course. You must, too?”

“Liyal, Jorl, Zife, and his henchmen, but I need more condemning evidence. Chakotay identified his captors as Moroppian.”

“You’re obviously onto something, or they wouldn’t be threatening you.”

She shook a finger in the air. “What I don’t understand is why.”

“You don’t?” he asked with surprise.

“What I mean is that it doesn’t make sense. The council isn’t looking to find out who was behind the contracts, they’re just trying to annul them. Threatening me only makes us want to dig in to shed some light on the criminal activity.”

“Unless they don’t understand your desire to move ahead and not look back. That’s not a stance that many would take.”

“Possibly,” she said as she put her hands on her hips. “They have to realize, though, that the planetary governments aren’t asking for much. We can offer many things in trade that will make them feel valued and make amends.”

“Our duty is not to negotiate contracts. Our duty is to enforce them and protect the entities involved.”

“I disagree. It was Starfleet officers who were sent to negotiate them in the first place.”

“On behalf of the council, not under our own authority,” Khurma replied.

“That may be, but it is also every Starfleet officer’s responsibility to uphold the Articles of the Federation and to negotiate in good faith. In this case, they did not, and so I believe it is Starfleet’s prerogative to fix our past mistakes and put an end to criminal influence on our organization.”

“It’s not as simple as you make it sound.”

She frowned at him. “Regardless, we haven’t had the ability to enforce them or protect the entities involved because of lack of resources, and that’s a direct result of the president’s poor decisions. Because I’m caught in between, I’m trying to represent both points of view.”

Khurma said, “I’ve been clear from the beginning what the chain of command is.”

“You sound like Zife.”

“I remind you that it is *President* Zife.”

She took another deep breath. “May I ask you a question? Who wants me out of the picture with this so-called leave of absence? I really don’t think it’s you.”

“I don’t want you out of the picture. I want you to be safe.”

Rubbing her chin in thought, she said, “I’m going to wager a guess. President,” she paused to emphasize the title, “Zife is also overly concerned about my welfare and he ordered you to get me to back off.”

Khurma pursed his lips and finally admitted, “He says he wants you out of harm’s way.”

She tapped the desk with her PADD as she thought. “I also suspect that if anything more were to happen to me at this point, the public outcry would not be good for his image. With just a little research, I know we can find enough evidence to move forward. We’re so close to im...”

“Close to what?” His eyebrows were raised in expectation.

She realized immediately that she’d said too much and backpedaled. “So close to reuniting the Federation.”

“You’ve done excellent work, but that’s not what you’re talking about.”

“We’re at the crux of beginning to regain trust.”

He stared at her knowingly and sighed. “I’m on your side, Kathryn, but I can’t help you if you’re not straight with me.”

Quietly, she said, “You know everything that I do, Admiral.”

He stood up and leaned forward over her desk. “Now it’s my turn to say bullshit.”

Clenching her jaw, she asked, “To what are you referring?”

“You know exactly what I’m referring to. Do you really think I don’t know about the Patriot Taskforce that wants him removed from office?”

She read in his eyes no anger, only resolve. Quietly clicking her tongue, she replied, “I wasn’t aware they had an official title.”

“They don’t.” He relaxed back in his chair. “Sit down, Kathryn. We need to talk.”

The comm system interrupted, “Chakotay to Janeway.”

Khurma motioned for her to take it. They both needed a moment to calm down, anyway.

“Janeway here. I’m in Admiral Khurma’s office.”

“Ah, I don’t mean to interrupt, but I wanted to let you know that I’m being released and going home.”

“Do you need someone with you?” She sat down.

Chakotay replied, “I’ve got a whole security entourage to keep me company. My new best friends.”

She and Khurma exchanged glances as she said, “That’s not what I meant.”

“I know. I’m fine. Contact me when you’re free.”

“Will do. Janeway out.”

Khurma said, "He's a good man. The more I get to know him, the more I like him."

"He is," she agreed as she picked up her coffee. It had lost most of its heat, as had her temper.

"Here's what I know," Khurma said. "There are a handful of admirals who want to take immediate action to impeach the President, but they have insufficient proof of their allegations that he has used his power to make financial gains for himself and his business associates in the Bolius, Dolsian, and Moroppian systems."

"Who are all of the admirals involved?"

"The same ones who've brought this issue to the table repeatedly. Five of them, not including you."

Kathryn's jaw was tight as she asked, "Do you consider me to be a part of this group?"

"Yes and no. They recruited you, and I let it happen because I trusted you not to lead them astray or give them incomplete or faulty information. I suspect that you care enough about your two primary contacts that you wouldn't knowingly lead them into a dangerous situation."

"Do I still have your trust?"

"Yes, you do. And I don't say that lightly. So far, all of the intelligence exchanged has been clearly labeled as circumstantial evidence pending further research. You sent the Pioneer to retrieve the records kept by Jared Norvellen, but you haven't turned those over yet. I suspect that's because they contain incriminating evidence against someone other than President Zife."

"What makes you think I'm hiding information from you?"

"Just a hunch."

"Maybe I recognize your difficult position and am trying to protect you?"

He thought that over. "As I said, I trust you, as I do most of my admiralty staff. I've been letting you do your job in the hopes that you could find the information for me, because I'm under direct orders not to look for it. However, I can't let these five admirals, nor you, follow through on this unless we have a smoking gun."

"And when we do?"

"When something viable comes up, I can put things in motion."

"Even if we have to take action against the President?"

He sat down again and sipped his coffee. “Like you, Kathryn, I don’t have a problem with seeking justice where it’s needed.”

“I’m glad to hear it. So, what am I doing that has them spooked?”

“You’re closer to the truth than they realize, and that’s why I want you to take a leave of absence. I don’t want your name dragged down by this.”

“With all due respect, I’d like to make that decision myself.”

“Is this more important to you than your family?”

“No, but I’m not about to be bullied around.”

“I’ve heard you say that before.” He paused before continuing. “There is a Bolian Consortium that includes members from Dolsia and a handful of other systems. You visited them, amongst others, during your first diplomatic tour. When the President sent you there first, it was a huge public relations mistake for him, and it was a spotlight to me on where his friends are.”

“It was obvious that none of those diplomatic talks were warranted.”

He nodded in agreement. “This consortium funded the presidential campaign, was a major influence during the war, and has benefited financially from the rebuilding efforts. They are responsible for President Zife’s political and financial success, and he owes them a great deal. I also believe that his wife’s family is involved.”

“You know who the puppeteers are?”

“Yes, but I don’t have all the proof. I’m hoping that if all the parties investigating this situation work together, instead of separately, we can bring about some closure. Members of the Federation council, and you, have received threats against their families to force their votes and public statements. This has been going on for years, but there has been no way to prove it because too many people are involved and the corruption runs deep. As soon as we think we’ve got someone, the game is changed and we find ourselves back to square one.”

“Surely you could have told me that up front.”

He shook his head. “I needed you to play a part. I’ve told you that before.”

Anger simmering again, she changed the direction of the conversation. “Our study of the voting records indicates that almost the entire council changed their policies over a two month period, just after the war ended.”

“That’s right, they did. And I believe the council members are going along with these task forces now because they believe you’re about to expose the criminal activity and they’ll be free from the threats that have plagued them. I suspect that these threats have caused many of the federation members to drop out, claiming other reasons for their departure.”

“Then this is coming together.”

“Kathryn, I don’t want you to rescind anything because their influence stops now. The President wants me to be satisfied by his promise that no further harm will come to you and your husband. He thinks by pulling you out, the Council will not continue with these task forces.”

“That’s not how it works.”

“I know that, but the President doesn’t understand Starfleet – never has.”

“I won’t be bullied into withdrawing my allegations.”

“Your attitude this morning has proven that, and I thank you for rising to the bait. It was just what I was hoping would happen.”

She wanted to be angry at him. “You could have just asked me.”

“Yes, but I needed you to admit what you’ve been up to so that we can speak freely.”

“So, was that an empty threat? Are you really putting me on leave?”

“I think it’s for the best, although I understand your desire to see this through.”

“Is that the only reason you want me out of the picture? My safety?”

He took a moment to decide how to answer her. “First, I need the President to think he’s got me under his thumb. He feels that he made a huge mistake following the advice of his supporters when they advised him to hire you in the first place. Now he’s trying to prove that he can act without them, and this is his way of taking that step.”

“And if he makes them angry, they’ll focus their attention away from me?”

“That’s my hope. Second, what we’re about to expose will put a handful of very wealthy, very powerful people in prison, and I want you protected. I’d put you into hiding, but I can’t be confident that they wouldn’t find out where you are. Your house is a fortress and I can’t think of a safer place for you.”

“You can still keep me safe here at Headquarters. I’m going to receive that credit, or blame, whether or not I come to work.”

“True, but these people want to control you. If you’re not working here, they can’t possibly make that happen.”

“Do you know what they intend to use me for?”

“Yes.” He shifted in his chair. “They want to say that you’ve planted lies because you want the office of President for yourself. They want to discredit you and ruin your career.”

Kathryn rolled her eyes. “There will be a public outcry if you take me out of this position.”

“I’m citing safety concerns. You are so beloved that no one wants any more harm to come to you. When you’re ready, you can even add fuel to that fire by announcing your pregnancy. No one would put a pregnant woman in danger willingly, and that should soothe any anger towards Starfleet.”

Kathryn shook her head. “You’re using me, again.”

“I don’t think of it that way, but I understand how you feel.”

She took a long drink of coffee while thinking through what he was suggesting. There were numerous pros and cons, all of which needed to be sorted out, but she couldn’t deliberate while in the middle of this conversation. An idea occurred to her. “I’ll take the leave publicly, but I have some conditions.”

Biting back a smile, he said, “I would’ve been surprised if you didn’t.”

“I don’t want to stop working on this. I want my staff at my disposal, as well as the Pioneer and its crew. No one on that ship has to know where the orders originate, and I can even send them through you. I would appreciate being kept in the loop so that I may help bring closure to this situation.”

He asked, “Will you withdraw from all public attention until this is over?”

“Yes, unless we feel that an appearance would be beneficial. Besides, I won’t be able to hide my condition much longer, and I’d rather not have that become the focus of the media.”

“Agreed.” He nodded, adding, “I think that house of yours is an ideal location to work from.”

She exhaled shakily. “You’re sure this is a good idea?”

“I need you to trust me, Kathryn. I’ve been working with a detective from the IPC police – the Inter Planetary Criminal police division. I’m going to send her to talk to you.”

“How much authority do they have?”

“Enough to bring charges against everyone we have evidence on. In order to work together on this, I want you to give her your evidence and I want you to tell her who you believe is honorable.”

“How do we know we can trust her?”

“Meet with her. I trust your instincts, Kathryn.”

“Who would set an impeachment hearing in process?”

“The council. Dooha tells me that there are stirrings, so I think the best thing to do right now is to let things unfold.”

“All right,” she said hesitantly, “But I’m not accustomed to depending on anyone else to see things through.”

“Let it sink in for a few hours. I’ll plan to make the announcement at the end of the day. But for now, go home and check on your husband. I’ll send you the forensics report and some other information that I’d like your feedback on.”

“Would you send me everything you have? I love a good puzzle – helps me relax.”

He laughed. “Yes, but it’s all extremely confidential.”

“Understood. Completely.”

After she left and was on the lift, she contacted Sue to organize a staff meeting. When she got back to her office, she opened a comm channel to Owen. “Good morning.”

“Katie, how is Chakotay? I understand that there was a transporter accident?”

“There’s no permanent injury and he’s recovering at home, which is where I’m headed after a short briefing with my staff. I’m calling because I have a request.”

“Sure, anything for you.”

“I appreciate that, Owen. I know that Chakotay really enjoys your company, and I think it would do wonders for his spirits if you and your wife would join us for dinner this evening at our home.”

Owen picked up on the need for deception immediately. “We would love to, and I have no doubt that Marilyn would love to see your home again. Will anyone else be invited to this dinner party?”

“No, I think a small group would be best. He’s still recovering.”

“We’ll look forward to it. What time?”

“Nineteen hundred?”

“We’ll be there, and I hope he has a restful afternoon.”

As the comm closed, Kathryn sat back in her chair. She wasn’t sure what she’d tell him, but she needed to give him something to keep him from overreacting to this situation.

Kathryn closed the front door of her house and rested against it for a precious moment of quiet. She wondered if she’d done the right thing because her instincts were at war with her desire to trust Khurma. She’d known all along that the publicity was a tool, and she wondered if she’d lose that if she put it on hiatus. On the flip side, it was a relief to know that she wouldn’t have to hide her pregnancy any longer.

She set her bag down, took off her uniform tunic, and went into the great room. “Chakotay?” Surprised that she got no response, she stuck her head into the study and the living areas, and found no sign of him. Assuming he was upstairs, she decided to get a bite to eat and then seek him out.

While eating a piece of cheese, she looked out the window at the ocean, finding the rolling waves comforting. “No,” she said to herself. “This isn’t a bad place to be stuck for awhile.” Standing up on her toes, she looked down at the rocks – she loved watching the waves crash over them.

A piece of red fabric caught her eye. “There you are.” Taking her snack outside, she saw that he was in a vision quest, so she closed the French doors quietly. She sat down on a nearby chair and crossed her legs neatly. As she nibbled on her snack, she watched him, thinking how peaceful and serene he seemed. She’d never taken much stock in vision quests. After all, one was merely searching their own subconscious mind for answers and peace, although that didn’t sound so bad to her at the moment.

She closed her eyes and tried to find her own meditative state in the rhythm of the waves. She wondered if she already had the answers in her subconscious mind, blissfully tucked away amongst the horrors of her imprisonment. She’d tried hard to avoid thinking about it, but maybe there was a clue she’d been missing because of her fears. Even now, she could feel herself begin to tremble as she tried to remember. A flash of recalled pain brought her back to the present and as far away from that as she could get.

“Kathryn?” Chakotay’s voice was a welcome interruption.

“Hi, I didn’t realize you’d finished.”

“Just now,” he said as he rolled up the medicine bundle. “I thought it might help with the residual anxiety.”

“Did it?”

“Perhaps. My animal guide told me that all things, both good and bad, fall within the circle of life.”

“Sounds like something my grandmother used to say – There is a season for all things under heaven.” She nodded to the akoonah. “May I try?”

“You want to?” he asked with surprise.

“My thoughts could use some ordering and I’m certainly feeling anxious.” She leaned forward in her chair. “Unless you think it’s a bad idea?”

“Come sit with me. It’s important to face east as we greet what the new day brings.”

“Seems like watching the ocean would be more therapeutic.”

“When your eyes are closed, it doesn’t matter,” he said with a wink.

Instead of sitting next to him, she surprised him by plunking down into his lap. “East you say?”

He chuckled as he helped her get situated. “Have you eaten anything? I don’t want your blood sugar to drop while you’re in the dream.”

“So far this morning, I’ve had a bowl of oatmeal, a banana, bagel, and just now... three cheddar slices and a handful of baby carrots.”

“You’ve got it covered, then.” He asked her seriously, “Are you nervous?”

“Only about what lies hidden in my subconscious, and what’ll happen if I can’t pull out of it.”

Rubbing her arms, he said, “If I see any signs of distress, I’ll stop it.”

“Okay,” she took a steadying breath and watched as his hands covered hers and placed her fingertips on the akoonah. Smiling, she said, “This reminds me of the first time we touched.”

“It does? How so?”

“When you showed me how to contact my animal guide. I got goose bumps from the way you touched my hand, just like you’re doing right now.”

He squeezed her fingers. “That’s sweet, but that wasn’t the first time we touched.”

“It wasn’t?”

“No, it was when I first came aboard Voyager.”

She frowned. “When we shook hands after you agreed to be my first officer?”

“No,” he said as he rubbed his thumb across the back of her hand. “Before that, when I first beamed onto the bridge pointing a phaser rifle at you. I thought you were either incredibly dumb or incredibly brave when you put yourself between me and Paris.”

She smiled at the memory. “Yeah. You were trying to look menacing, but I could tell from your eyes that you weren’t vicious.”

“Well, I had no intention of hurting you. I was merely making a show of strength.”

“I realized that.” She turned her head to look at him. “But I don’t remember touching you.”

“You got in my face – or as much as you could considering our height difference – and you placed your hand on my chest to indicate that I should stand down.”

“I did?”

“I remember it clearly – you left an imprint on my heart.”

“Awww,” she said with a tilt of her head. “That’s more than syrupy sweet.”

Nuzzling her cheek, he said, “You bring out the romantic in me. I decided at that moment that I wouldn’t blow up your ship when we got back home.”

“How thoughtful... as if you had a fighting chance against me.” She smirked and gave him a quick kiss. “If anyone calls while I’m in this trance, tell whoever it is that I’m on leave.”

“On leave?”

“Mmmhmm. I’ll tell you about it, later.” She flexed her neck to relax the muscles and then picked up the akoonah. “Remind me how to do this?”

He gave her shoulders a squeeze and said, “Repeat after me. Akoochemoya.”

When she opened her eyes inside the lucid dream, she was sitting further out along the edge of the high cliff that their house was built on. It was a place that couldn't be reached outside of using a transporter, and even then, it wouldn't be safe. Here in a dream, however, it was perfectly fine. There was no way she could fall.

She sat down, hoping her animal guide would announce its presence. She'd only done this once before and didn't have a chance to do much more than say hello to it.

“Nice place.”

Kathryn looked left and frowned when she saw her older self, the future Admiral Janeway. “I was expecting a lizard.”

The Admiral held out her hand where the tiny gecko lay curled up, happily sleeping. “Who, this? Nice pet.”

Kathryn rolled her eyes. “I think we're supposed to treat him, or her, with reverence.”

The Admiral sat down next to her. “Where is this place?”

“Our home. It's right back there,” she pointed behind her.

“You picked a good spot.”

“Chakotay found it.”

“So you finally got together with him? How is he in bed?”

Kathryn laughed. “You're part of my subconscious. You know all about it.”

“He's a damn good kisser.”

“Yes, he is.”

“But you fight too much. It's all rather tedious with all those emotions flying about.”

“Hey,” Kathryn said. “We haven't had a fight since August and that was ten months ago.”

“Yeah, but that's because you were traveling or you were needy. Just don't go shutting him out when you're strong again.”

“Words of wisdom from my spirit guide?”

The Admiral held up the gecko. “He appears to have fallen asleep on the job.”

“I don’t think he’s been sleeping well at night – too much to worry about with me.”

“You’ve really gotten yourself into a tricky situation, haven’t you?”

Kathryn asked, “Do you think this is what Admiral Jenkins from the future had in mind? Impeaching the President of the Federation?”

“I think it’s exactly what they were alluding to. This idiot in office has undermined the entire quadrant’s faith because of a selfish desire for power and wealth. It’s detestable.”

“I agree, but I’m not so sure that taking a leave of absence right now is the best thing.”

“You’re not taking leave. Not really. Khurma still wants your advice. You still have all those people working for you. And that gorgeous hunk of a husband is with you for the summer. Put him to work. Talk things through with him.”

Kathryn nodded. “He’s a good sounding board.”

The Admiral lifted her palm, the lizard curled up in it asleep. “Should we wake him and ask what you really want to know?”

“Think he’ll have the answer?”

“I have no idea.”

Kathryn asked, “Do you really think he can talk?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“Joe told me about the talking iguana in Dr. Zimmerman’s lab. I wonder if they’re related.”

The Admiral frowned. “I thought you said we should treat him with reverence.”

Kathryn laughed. “And comparing him to a holographic lizard is an insult?”

“I’d be insulted if I were he.”

“Dr. Zimmerman loves that Iguana.” Kathryn reached over and stroked her finger down the gecko’s back.

His little yellow eyes opened and then he spoke. “You are not alone.” That said, he curled back up and fell asleep.

Kathryn said, "A man of few words."

"Just like your husband."

"Same words, too. I guess he's telling me to talk to Chakotay about it."

"I'll hazard a guess and say that you have a lot more people around you than just Chakotay whom you can rely on."

"Many, but only he knows everything."

The Admiral said, "But that doesn't mean you can't lean on others, too. If you're worried about relying on him too much, you've also got your family, your friends, and even Admiral Khurma. He seems like a genuine soul."

"I think you're right, and he does appear to care about me a lot. He even came to the hospital when I was having the heart surgery."

"Yes, he did. All those people who were there for you then are still with you, surrounding you with their love and support. You really aren't alone."

"I am pretty lucky. Not many people would have twenty-two friends all willing to spend hours with a comatose former C.O."

The Admiral laughed. "They probably gave you an earful."

Kathryn joined in the laughter too. "Oh, to hear what they would want to say to me. Can you imagine?"

"I'm sure it's all good."

"Oh, I can imagine a few 'and another things' about something I did." Kathryn sighed and stared out at the ocean. "He didn't answer my question."

"Didn't he?"

"I wanted to know if, buried deep inside my memories, I have the knowledge that would provide proof against the criminal activity."

"Now, that's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard you say, and trust me when I say that, because I know everything you've ever said."

"Why is that ridiculous?"

“Your thoughts aren’t verifiable proof, especially anything you have to delve deep into your subconscious to find. Besides, you already know who is guilty. As you told Khurma, you love a good puzzle. Go read what he sent. Maybe the answer you’re looking for has been right in front of him the entire time, but he couldn’t see the forest for the trees.”

“Perhaps.” Kathryn smiled at her older self and felt nostalgic. She wished that she’d had more conversations with her when she was alive. “Are you proud of what I’ve accomplished?”

“Who wouldn’t be?” The Admiral laid her hand on Kathryn’s bump. “This, here, is one of your greatest accomplishments. What are you going to name him?”

“Him? You sound like Chakotay.”

“Hey, if I think it’s a boy, then so do you. I’m your subconscious, aren’t I?”

“I haven’t come up with any ideas for names yet. Maybe Chakotay will.”

The Admiral’s hand was still on the baby. “What do you think he’ll be when he grows up?”

“Hopefully not a politician.”

“I know what he’ll be.”

“Oh?” Kathryn asked.

“He’ll be proud of his mother.”

Kathryn covered the Admiral’s hand. “Thank you.”

The Admiral leaned over and gave her a hug. “Come see me any time. I’ll hang out right here – it’s a nice place.”

As Kathryn came out of the dream, she felt dizzy and faint, but Chakotay’s arms were around her and kept her from falling over.

“I’ve got you,” he said as he held her against his solid chest. “Are you okay?”

“Yes.” When the vertigo leveled out, she licked her lips and asked, “How long?”

“Little more than half an hour.”

“Seemed shorter.” Her eyes were closed as she savored his surrounding warmth.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“I don’t need to,” she said with a smile. “I had both my animal guide and an interpreter.”

“An interpreter?”

“Admiral Janeway, from the future. My animal guide only said one sentence, but she and I had a nice, long talk.”

“What did he say?”

Kathryn turned her head so she could look into Chakotay’s eyes. “He said, ‘You are not alone.’ Your words from so many years ago.”

“You aren’t alone.”

Smiling peacefully, she agreed. “She pointed out that I have dozens of people who would do just about anything for me.”

“That you do.” He kissed her forehead. “I’m glad you realize it.”

“Speaking of people,” she said as she unfolded herself and stood up. “We’re expecting Owen and Marilyn for dinner so I can brief him discreetly. And, if they’re willing, Admiral Khurma wants Mom, Phoebe, Mike, and Katie to come stay with us until the danger passes.”

“I hope they come. I’d love to have everyone where I can see that they are safe.”

She said, “Let’s fix some lunch, and I’ll tell you all about why I’m on leave, more or less.”

“More or less?” he asked as they walked back into the house.

“Officially and publicly on leave, but still working. Do you feel like reading? I’m hoping you’ll help me solve a puzzle.”

“I’d love to.”

That afternoon was a flurry of activity as Kathryn’s family arrived and got settled in. They chose to have everyone stay in the main house because it had more security in place than the guest house did. Katie was in heaven as she got settled into her ‘vacation room,’ as she called it. No one had told the little girl that the family had been threatened and let her believe that they were on extended vacation at her Aunt’s home.

Gretchen went straight to work preparing a meal for eight, since Owen and Marilyn would be joining them. Chakotay offered to help, but was swiftly excused from the kitchen to rest from his mishap the night before. None of them had been willing to go into isolation until Kathryn told them what'd happened to him. After that, they'd arrived on her doorstep within two hours.

Kathryn was in her room changing clothes for dinner when someone knocked on the door. She picked up a robe and tied it around herself. "Come in."

"It's just me," Phoebe said as she opened the door. "Do you have a moment?"

"Of course." She motioned to the sitting area. "What's up?"

"Are you doing okay, sis?"

"Well, that depends on what we're talking about."

"The threats and Chakotay getting attacked."

Kathryn sighed. "I'm coping. You?"

"I was okay ignoring them until..."

"I was, too."

"Katie, I have something to tell you."

Kathryn looked carefully at her sister because the serious tone of her voice was so unlike her. She knew instantly that something was wrong. "What is it?" she asked as she sat up a little straighter. "Has something happened?"

Phoebe held up her hands, "No, no... nothing's happened. Well, that's not entirely true. *Something* has happened. I'm pregnant."

"Pregnant?" Kathryn's mouth dropped open for a split second before she clamped it shut and smiled.

"Don't tell Mom. She doesn't know, and I didn't want to worry her with all this going on. She'd be an overprotective mother hen."

"I know exactly what you mean." Kathryn gave Phoebe a big hug. "Congratulations. Are you excited?"

"I am. We've been trying for over a year."

She struggled with whether to tell her sister, but she figured now was as good a time as any. "I've been keeping a secret myself."

"You have?"

Kathryn smiled. "The same exact one."

"No!" Phoebe's eyes widened in shock and she looked stricken. "You're not!"

"You're upset?"

"Of course I'm upset." She covered her mouth. "Oh, Katie. Is this a good idea?"

"A good idea?" Kathryn was shocked. "It's not an idea. It's a baby!"

"I know, but...", Phoebe touched Kathryn's leg. "How far along are you?"

"Almost four months."

Phoebe's shoulders sagged. "I wish you would've told me. I would have carried it for you."

"For me?" Kathryn couldn't believe it. "What makes you think...?" She was at a loss for words.

"I don't mean to offend you, but with your health and all, is the baby okay?"

"The baby is fine," she said emphatically. "And so am I."

"You're sure?"

"Yes," Kathryn was angry. "The Doctor checks on us twice a week. We're fine."

"Twice a week? I don't know if that's good or bad."

"It's what the Doctor believes is necessary."

Phoebe frowned. "Twice a week means something is wrong, and if something is wrong, you should be checked a lot more often than that."

"Just because I'm too thin doesn't mean that I can't do this."

"Yes, it does. Just two months ago, you passed out on your wedding day!"

Kathryn stood up. "I'm perfectly aware of that. No thanks to you and everyone else who ignored me all afternoon."

“Don’t do that, Katie. You assured me over and over that it wasn’t my fault. Don’t blame me now.”

Kathryn walked over to the window and looked out, trying to get her anger to cool down for the second time that day. “I’m sorry. I’m just stressed about all that’s going on, and yes, there are health concerns about me carrying this baby.”

“What is going on with your health? Why are you still so weak?”

Kathryn turned around and stared at her sister. “Heart replacement? Complete organ failure? Near starvation and loss of part of my digestive system? It takes awhile to recover from all that.”

“And so you decide to have a baby on top of all that? Are you nuts?”

“What do you want me to say? That this was a mistake? I will never call this baby a mistake! He’s a gift and rest assured, I will do nothing to jeopardize his health.”

“What about the health of his mother? What if you don’t survive this?”

Kathryn’s eyes narrowed. “I *will* survive this.”

“Don’t get angry. I’m just worried about you.”

“Well, stop. I’m perfectly capable of carrying this child.”

“Fine,” Phoebe stood up quickly. “Excuse me for caring about you.” She stormed out of the room and slammed the door.

Kathryn sat on the edge of the bed, her head resting in her hand. This was not at all how she expected her sister to react to the news. A little happiness would’ve been nice. She looked up as the door creaked open.

Chakotay peeked in and with one look at her, obviously knew that she was upset. “What is it?” he asked as he shut the door behind him. “Who slammed the door?”

“Phoebe.”

“Something wrong?”

Kathryn stood up and decided to get dressed. “We had a fight,” she said as she pulled a pair of slacks out of the closet.

“About her staying here?”

“No,” Kathryn said with a matter-of-fact tone in her voice. “She thinks I’m incapable of carrying this child.”

“You told her?”

“Seemed like a good time since she was telling me that she’s pregnant.”

“Phoebe, too?”

“Yes.”

“How far along?”

“You know, between all the shouting, I didn’t think to ask.”

Chakotay asked, “She was shouting at you?”

“Look, I don’t want to talk about this right now. I need to get ready and figure out what I’m going to tell Owen.”

“Kathryn, don’t…”

“Stop,” she held up a hand. “The last thing I need right now is more advice.”

He raised his chin. “I’m on your side, or have you forgotten?”

Her eyes burned with unshed tears that she refused to let fall. “Of course not,” she said with controlled emotion. “I just wanted her to be happy for me. Is that too much to ask?”

“No, it’s not. She will be, just give her some time.” He squeezed her shoulder and kissed the side of her head. “I’ll be downstairs.”

Kathryn’s throat felt tight. “Mom doesn’t know about either of us.”

“Mums the word,” he said as he left.

A sudden feeling of dread came over her as she realized that she’d hurt him. She opened the door quickly and called out, “Chakotay?”

He was halfway down the stairs. “Yes?”

“I…” If they’d been alone in the house, she wouldn’t have hesitated to talk to him out in the hallway, but she didn’t want to put her raw emotions on display.

He came back up and went with her back into their room. “What is it?”

“I’m sorry.” She wrapped her arms around him. “I love you, and I want your advice.”

“Thank you. I love you, too.” He kissed her softly. “Take some time to cool down and we’ll talk later.”

“We’re okay?” she asked.

“Always.” He pulled her into another hug. “When the whole world is against us, we’ll always have each other.”

“There goes the romantic in you again.”

He shrugged. “What can I say? I’m feeling sentimental.”

“I wish Phoebe had taken a page from your book.”

“She’ll come around.” He kissed her forehead. “I should go help your mom.”

“I’ll be down in a bit.”

“Take your time.”

Kathryn watched him go and felt better this time. She knew she had to be careful not to shut him out again, but every so often, that overly self-dependant streak of hers reared its ugly head. He seemed to understand, however, and openly accepted that she was at least acknowledging and apologizing for it. He had a good heart.
