

The Future Is Ours – Part 37

“Benched”

By Dawn

Summary: An invitation from Romulus brings Kathryn back to the table.

Rated: PG

Outside the door to a conference room in Paris, Khurma extended his hand and said, “Kathryn, thank you for coming. It’s so good to see you.”

“My pleasure, Admiral. What’s the situation?”

He ushered her inside. “I’ll let President Truov explain the details. She’s eager to have you involved in this situation, but I want you to let me know if we’re asking too much.”

“I’ll be fine,” she said with a wave of dismissal.

Isela Truov looked up from the table and was all business. “Kathryn, thank you for coming on such short notice.”

“I’m happy to help. May I assume this has something to do with Romulus?”

She nodded. “Yes. We’re waiting for just a couple other people to join us.”

Kathryn took the seat that Khurma held out for her, just two spots to the left of Isela. When an aide poured her some water, Kathryn smiled her thanks.

Two council-members whom Kathryn recognized, but didn’t know came in and promptly took their seats, looking surprised to see her.

Isela said, “Thank you all for coming today. We’ve received an invitation from the new Romulan Praetor. His name is Shinzon. Does that name ring a bell with anyone?”

Kathryn took a slow breath to avoid showing her disappointment, but spoke up when Isela looked directly at her. “In my travels last year, I met a couple of Romulans, but that’s not a name I recognize.”

Nodding her understanding, Isela said, “The only intelligence that we have on him is that he was a distinguished military officer from Remus.”

“Remus!” one of the council members yelled out.

Another council member nodded. “The sister planet to Romulus. It is rich in dilithium, but its orbit is locked and one side stays permanently in the sun while the other is always in the dark.”

Khurma asked, “Admiral Janeway, could you tell us what you learned from the Romulan you met with almost a year ago?”

Someone asked, “You went to Romulus?”

“No, a Romulan named Rabom requested the meeting which took place on the edge of the neutral zone. At the time, he had political aspirations and an interest in establishing a relationship with the Federation should he be elected. He also gave me a warning that should he not be elected, we should be on guard.”

“Did he tell you about Shinzon, specifically?” asked Isela.

“No, but he hinted heavily that another candidate for Praetor wasn’t loyal to Romulus. Now that you’ve said he’s Reman, it makes sense.” Kathryn tapped her fingertip on the table as she thought. “He believed that should the Romulans choose this other candidate, that they’d be making a grave mistake.”

A council-member said, “Any candidate running for office would say that, especially when the opposition is a member of an enslaved portion of the population.”

“Yes, that is true,” Kathryn nodded thoughtfully. “But he wasn’t boasting or mud-slinging. It was a genuine, albeit veiled, warning.”

Khurma spoke again. “I have met with Mr. Rabom as well, and he is remarkable in that he truly believes in the possibility of a Federation/Romulan Empire peace agreement.”

“But this Praetor is Reman,” someone said. “They may not hold the same disdain for the Federation that the Romulans do.”

“That’s an optimistic point of view,” another noted. “But the fact is that we know little to nothing about Remans.”

A young lieutenant at the far end of the table asked, “True, but can we turn down an invitation?”

Khurma replied, “I don’t believe we’re considering turning it down, but we do need to know what we’re walking into.”

Isela asked Kathryn and Khurma, “Any chance that either of you could make contact with Robam again?”

“Not unless he initiates it,” Khurma replied.

Kathryn added, "And if he opposes this Shinzon, it may be dangerous for him to make any contact with us right now."

Khurma said, "What is also troubling is that we haven't heard anything from our usual contacts in the Romulan Senate."

"We have contacts in the Senate?" someone asked.

"Yes," Khurma replied. "There are two who keep us apprised of the latest political developments in an effort to break down some of the barriers. We've heard nothing, and that's highly unusual."

Isela rubbed her chin in thought for a moment and then asked, "How many ships do we have within a day's travel to Romulus?"

"Three," Khurma replied. "Two small science vessels and the Enterprise which is en route to Betazed from Kolarus III."

"If we could have our choice of anyone to send as a diplomatic envoy, who would we send?"

One of the council members suggested, "Admiral Janeway?"

Kathryn shook her head, but Khurma replied before she got a chance. "She's on leave. I think our first choice would be Picard, especially since he's already out there. However," he said as he turned to Kathryn. "If you're up to it, I'd like you and Jean-Luc to put your heads together on this."

"I'd like to help as much as I am physically able."

Isela said, "All right, then. Kathryn, you'll contact Picard. Everyone else, let's see if we can gather some intelligence on this Shinzon and the Remans. We'll reconvene if we find anything pertinent. Thank you."

Picard's image appeared on Kathryn's comm station. "Admiral Janeway, how good to see you again. It's been what, a week?"

"Just about. I think we're going to have put that book on hold because I have something else for you to do."

"Oh? What's that?"

"How would you like a trip to Romulus?"

He dipped his chin. "With or without the rest of the fleet?"

“A diplomatic mission. We’ve been invited, believe it or not. Seems there’s been some kind of internal political shakeup. The new Praetor, someone called Shinzon, has requested a Federation envoy.”

“New Praetor?”

“There’s more. He’s Reman.”

Jean-Luc did a double take. “How can that be?”

She held up a hand. “Believe me, we don’t understand it either. Our contacts in the Romulan senate have been unusually silent, which alarms us further.”

“I can see why.”

“You’re the closest ship, so I want you to go and hear what he has to say. Get the lay of the land. If the Star Empire becomes unstable, it could mean trouble for the entire Quadrant.”

“Understood.”

“We’re sending you all the intelligence we have, but it’s not much. I don’t need to tell you to watch your back, Jean-Luc.”

“Hardly. This has the marks of a rather thorny situation.”

“Will and Deanna aren’t going to be happy about missing their honeymoon,” she said sympathetically.

“No, but I’ll tell them it’s your fault,” he said with a wink.

“Thanks,” she replied with a laugh. “Give Deanna my apologies, would you?”

“Of course.”

“Save travels, Jean-Luc. Contact me if I can help with anything. Janeway out.”

After the comm closed, Kathryn sat back in her chair and closed her eyes. She was fighting with her conscience about where her proper place was. There was no question that she needed to keep herself safe because of the baby, but a part of her wanted to be in the middle of the action, not watching the game from the bench. Perhaps it was just her spirit of adventure or a hangover from so many years as a captain, but she felt guilty sending someone else into a dangerous situation rather than going herself.

Kathryn picked up her coffee mug and stared at nothing as she thought about the situation. A Reman Praetor on Romulus wasn’t just unusual, it was extremely unlikely. It meant that they’d

elected a slave as their leader and that just didn't compute with what they knew about the Romulans. Combine that with silence from their usual contacts, and all signs indicated that those people might be in trouble. Was there a hostage situation? A civil war? An uprising of the slaves?

She had an urge to board the Pioneer and get a little closer to the situation, but she kept herself in check because she knew it would be a bad idea. Regardless of her pregnancy, her health issues, and her promise to her husband, she'd realized during her counseling sessions with Deanna that when the time came for her to venture back out into space, she'd need to proceed carefully. Heading into Romulan territory during a volatile situation would be jumping into the deep end.

While Kathryn was reading about the history of Remus and Romulus, she had the uncanny sensation that she was being watched. Forcing her eyes away from the computer screen, she looked up to see her husband leaning against the door jamb.

"How long have you been standing there?"

"About half a minute."

She nodded towards her screen. "For a Reman to become Praetor, he must have overthrown the senate. There's no other way around it."

"Mmmhmm," Chakotay replied as he nodded slowly. "That's what you said this morning."

"That was just supposition, but now I'm reading the Romulan constitution and I can tell you for a fact that it's not possible."

"How did you get that?"

"Intelligence." She winked and then added, "It's good to be Admiral."

He tried not to smile as he asked, "And you find it enjoyable to read an alien constitution?"

"Well, not enjoyable. This isn't exactly on par with Jane Austen, but it is fascinating." She sat back in her chair and continued. "They don't designate the Remans as slaves like we assumed, but rather a second class of citizens. They are part of the Romulan Star Empire, but they don't have the right to vote. The fact that this Shinzon was commander of a contingent during the war is unheard of because they don't allow Remans in the military."

"How did that happen, then?"

Kathryn shrugged. "Beats me. He's either got friends in high places or he's holding a phaser to someone's head."

“What does your intuition say?”

“Both. I get the feeling that he’s a very dangerous man with an agenda, and whatever he’s doing right now by inviting us to Romulus is a ploy.”

“But to what end? Is he trying to make peace with us to show up the Romulans or is he luring us into a trap?”

“I fear that it’s more likely to be a trap.”

“Have you shared your thoughts with Picard?”

“Yes.” She rubbed her neck and sighed. “We’ve been sending text messages back and forth as he and I gather facts. Commander Data is also finding information – more quickly than I can, of course.”

“But he doesn’t have access to the constitution.”

“No, and I’m not sure it’s entirely useful except to know that major upheaval has to have taken place. We still don’t know what has transpired.” She closed her hands together and pressed her knuckles against her mouth. “It is so hard to sit here knowing that I’ve sent a ship into a dangerous situation.”

“You’ve gotten used to being the one in the line of fire.”

“Mhmm,” she nodded without saying anything more.

He tilted his head. “You want to go, don’t you?”

“Can’t.”

“But you want to.”

“Chakotay, don’t.”

He gave her an understanding smile. “Love, just because you made a promise to keep yourself safe doesn’t mean that you don’t have the desire to be in the thick of things. I know you, and I know this can’t be easy.”

“Promises aside, I’m six months pregnant and not cleared for active duty.”

“That just means there’s more than one thing holding you back.”

Rubbing her face, she said, “I don’t know if I feel so helpless because I’m not out there or because this Shinzon character has the Enterprise twiddling their thumbs while he waits to make

an appearance. And maybe it's because I've sent over a thousand people, including children, into what could be a deadly situation."

Chakotay nodded thoughtfully, and then narrowed his eyes. "You know..."

"What?"

"Hypothetically speaking, if this is a trap, and we lose the Enterprise..."

"Don't say that."

"Hear me out," he said softly.

She sighed and indicated that he should continue.

"What happens next? Do the Remans celebrate their little victory and then go on about their isolated lives?"

"I highly doubt that."

"Me, too. So, then it becomes a matter of security for the entire Federation. You, Khurma, and Picard are the three best diplomats in the Federation."

"This is not the time for flattery."

"I know," he said seriously. "I've met the other admirals, and I'm saying this as a fact. My guess is that if we lose the Enterprise, Picard will take Shinzon out with him. Then we're going to need both you and Khurma to pick up the pieces."

She looked at him blankly for a moment and then noted, "So you're saying that only one of us can be on the front line."

"That's exactly what I'm saying."

"And I'm going to have to get used to being in this role unless I am downgraded to a captain."

"That's right."

"So... why did I accept this promotion?"

Hesitantly, he asked, "You don't remember?"

"Remind me," she demanded.

"Kathryn..."

Getting angrier, she asked, “Why am I not in command of a starship right now?”

He gave her a moment before he said, “Because you were needed in a different role.”

“Bull shit.”

“Kathryn...” he pleaded.

“I’m not on the front lines because they don’t think I can handle it.”

“No, I don’t believe they think that at all. You’re much too valuable to send out there.”

“And Picard isn’t?”

“Don’t.”

She looked away and closed her eyes. “We’ve got to stop this. My blood pressure is rising.”

Kneeling down in front of her, he said, “Kathryn, you just have to accept that your role is not on the bridge right now. I’m not saying that it never can be again, but it can’t be right now.”

“This is so damned hard.”

“I know.” He picked up her hand and kissed her knuckles. “I won’t offer you any platitudes, but I will say that you are very gifted at seeing the bigger picture. If you’ll take my advice, I suggest that you focus on doing whatever you can to help Picard. He has to focus on anticipating Shinzon’s actions while keeping the people on his ship safe, and doesn’t have time to research Romulan election laws or the history of Remus.”

She opened her eyes and looked down at him. “Thank you for understanding.”

“I know you and how hard it is for you to be laid up.”

Kathryn leaned forward and kissed his head. “Even if I was healthy enough to be on active duty, they wouldn’t let an Admiral go out there. I’m just frustrated to be sitting on the side-lines.”

“I know that, too.” He squeezed her hand and gave her a smile. “I came in here to let you know that lunch is ready.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Her shoulders dropped. “And I’ve been going on and on...”

He held a finger against her mouth. “Shhhhhh. It’s just sandwiches.”

Kathryn took his face between both of her hands and brought their lips together for a kiss. After she pulled back, she said, “For future reference, the preferable method of shushing me is with a kiss. Next time you put your finger on my lips, I’m going to bite it off.”

Chakotay laughed. "I don't doubt it." Standing up, he extended his hand and said, "Come on, love. Let's get you some food."

"Kathryn?" Chakotay called from the study.

She sighed in frustration because she'd just distracted herself from endless pacing by sitting down with a Jane Austen novel. "Yes?"

"You have an incoming transmission from the Enterprise."

Tossing the book away, she jumped up quickly and then cringed as a pain tore through her side. She ignored it best she could as she went to her comm terminal. "I hope Picard has something."

Chakotay noticed where she was rubbing her belly. "Hurts again?"

"Not now." She tapped the keys on her screen and was surprised to see Riker. "Commander?"

"Yes, Admiral. Captain Picard asked me to update you on the situation."

"Did Shinzon make contact with you, yet?"

"Yes." Will's jaw was set firm. "He's human, not Reman."

"Human!?"

"To be more precise, a clone of Picard."

"What?" she asked in disbelief.

"We were just as shocked as you are." Will was clearly angry as he explained, "Seems that the Romulans had a plot to replace Picard with an imposter. At some point, they abandoned that plan and sent the clone to die as a slave in the Reman dilithium mines."

"But he survived," she noted.

"And now he wants to build some kind of peaceful cooperation between the Empire and the Federation. I tell you what, Admiral – I don't buy it, not for an instant."

"I tend to agree with you. Any communication from the Senate?"

"Not a peep from anyone except Shinzon and the Remans on his ship. We have neither seen nor heard from even one Romulan."

“That’s... odd, considering you’re in orbit of their planet.”

“It’s more than odd. It’s disturbing.”

Kathryn nodded. “Agreed. What’s the next step?”

“Picard wants you to do some research – find out anything you can. I’ll send you the stardates that Shinzon gave us, although I don’t expect you to have much luck. Oh, and I’ll have Dr. Crusher send you the blood test results.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“Meanwhile, Picard plans to meet with Shinzon again for dinner.” Will shook his head. “I know he has to go, but I don’t trust this guy. Not one bit.”

“I’m sure that I don’t have to tell you to keep a transporter lock on him.”

“No, you don’t.” He rubbed his chin. “I think it might be a good idea to send some backup our way. I just don’t know how this is going to play out.”

“We can definitely do that. As you learn any more details about this clone, send them to me. We’ll get to work on finding whatever information we can.”

“Yes, ma’am. Riker out.”

Kathryn ran her fingers through her hair and made a comm call to Khurma to fill him in. The conversation didn’t take long, she forwarded him the data, and then she stood up to go into the great room to find Chakotay. The pain in her side intensified and she suddenly felt dizzy.

“Honey?” she called out in alarm.

He came immediately. “Are you in pain?”

Kathryn nodded and felt his arms go around her. She heard a medical tri-corder beeping and opened her eyes to see Joe. “When did you get here?”

“He called me about five minutes ago. We’ve been waiting for you to finish.” Joe closed the tri-corder and said, “She needs to lie down. The sofa will suffice.”

“I feel like I’m going to faint,” she mumbled.

“You might,” Joe replied.

Chakotay picked her up and carried her across the room to gently lay her down.

As Joe began to treat her, he said, “The tear in your placenta is back. What were you doing when it happened?”

“Got up too quick,” she managed to say.

“Kathryn?” Chakotay asked. “Is there anything I need to know or do for you?”

“Already informed Khurma.”

“Good,” Joe said as he pressed a hypo against her neck. “For now, I want you to rest.”

She thought about protesting, but was asleep before she got the chance.

Kathryn’s eyes felt sticky and heavy as she forced them open. It took a long moment for her to register where she was and then to remember what had transpired to bring about a nap on the sofa. Raising her head, Kathryn’s gaze swept the room until it landed on her husband who was sitting on the other sofa reading a PADD.

He looked up and smiled. “Hello there. Feel better?”

She blinked out the grit and then laid her head back down. “He sedated me.”

“He did surgery on you.”

“Mmmmmmm,” she moaned groggily. “Was it a bad tear?”

“Pretty severe, yes. He said to expect some spotting over the next day or two.”

“That’s nothing new.”

“No, but it might be heavier than usual.” Chakotay got up and kneeled next to her. Stroking her hair, he asked, “Prefer to be harangued by him or by me?”

“Neither. You need to be more careful about alarming me so I don’t jump up.”

“Oh, so this is my fault?” he asked with amusement.

“Sure.” Smiling sleepily, she asked, “Anything pertinent I should know?”

“Yes.” Chakotay reached behind him and held up a light brown piece of stretchy fabric. “You get to wear this. It’s called a maternity belt.”

“Charming.” She took it out of his hands and turned it around in her hands. “I meant anything about Shinzon and his merry band.”

“Khurma called, and he wants you to call him back when you’re awake.” Chakotay placed his hand on her hip. “Take it slowly if you’re getting up.”

“Too sleepy, still.”

He leaned forward and placed a kiss on her cheek. “Then sleep a little longer.”

“M’kay.” Kathryn reached out for him as he stood up, and added, “Love you.”

“I love you, too.”

“Chakotay...,” she said as she came out of the study, both hands covering her mouth.

One look at her and he came right over. “Are you sick?”

“No, yes, not sick, but... Picard has uncovered Shinzon’s plot.”

“What is it?”

“Ever heard of thalargon radiation?”

“Thalargon?” he asked quizzically. “No, is that ionizing or non-ionizing?”

She reached for the back of a chair to steady herself. “Oh, it’s definitely ionizing.”

“I thought there were only three types? Alpha, beta, and gamma, right?”

“For years, thalargon was thought to be theoretical, but it was banned years ago due to its possible use as a weapon.”

“And let me guess... The Romulans have figured out how to do just that?”

“Not the Romulans. Shinzon.” Kathryn looked up at the ceiling and sighed. “This type of radiation petrifies living tissue almost instantly, consuming organic material at the subatomic level causing complete cell necrosis.”

“A deadly radiation.”

Kathryn nodded. “Extremely. Its properties allow its range and area of affect to be precisely controlled, and that ship that Shinzon and his Reman friends have created is one giant thalargon generator. The Scimitar is a biogenic weapon of mass destruction that has a perfect cloak, seemingly impenetrable shields, and it’s as fast as Voyager.”

“So, how do we stop them?”

“Shinzon is after Jean-Luc. Something happened with the cloning process, and he requires a complete transfusion from the original source as soon as possible.”

“Is Enterprise still in orbit of Romulus?” Chakotay asked.

“No, they’re en route to rendezvous with the rest of the fleet in sector 1045, knowing that the Scimitar is hot on their tail.”

“Who is coordinating the attack?”

“Picard, once he arrives, but Nechayev is taking control of this situation. She was already onboard a nearby ship, and the President wants Khurma to stay here.”

“A smart choice,” said softly.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea to put our entire fleet on the front line against that ship. What if the radiation takes out all of them?”

“Did you convey your concerns to Khurma?”

“No, just to Nechayev. She wants to make sure that ship doesn’t reach any Federation planets.”

Chakotay rubbed her back. “Alyna Nechayev is one of our best strategists.”

“I know.” Kathryn swallowed hard and put her hand on her forehead. “This could get bad. Very, very bad.”

“How do we counteract this type of radiation?”

“We don’t.”

“That’s not like you, Kathryn.”

“It’s not possible. There’s nothing else to it.”

“I see,” he said as he began pacing in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows. “So, if we had encountered this biogenic weapon while on Voyager, you would have...”

“Turned tail and run.” When he didn’t respond, she turned her head to catch his eyes. “What? You don’t believe me?”

“No, I think, like with the Omega particle, you would have tried to rid the galaxy of the threat.”

“How... heroic,” she said with a roll of her eyes. “There are times when there is no solution, no way to get rid of the threat. The only way to address this one is to destroy that ship, and if the entire fleet can’t do it, I don’t know what can.”

“Perhaps, but if I may make a suggestion?”

She raised her chin. “What?”

“Go do some reading on it. Call B’Elanna and talk through it. See if there’s anything you can come up with.”

“I can assure you that Starfleet’s best scientific minds are already working on it.”

“Yours isn’t.”

“Flattery? At a time like this?”

“Just... go, Kathryn. Give it some thought. It’ll at least make you feel better.”

“Distraction by immersion.” She straightened her back and returned to the study, calling out, “Fine, you win.”

“I often do,” he mumbled.

“I heard that.”

Hours later, Chakotay turned the lights out in the kitchen and went outside onto the deck to check on Kathryn. “Any word, yet?”

She tapped her fingers on the table next to her com terminal and shook her head. “Nothing. Enterprise hasn’t shown up at the designated coordinates.”

“Scans of the region?”

“Inconclusive, and Nechayev is afraid to break up the fleet to search for them.”

Chakotay put his hands on his hips and thought about the situation. “Scans should give some indication. Is the Pioneer out there? It has enhanced scanners.”

“No, it’s still here.” Kathryn stood up and began to pace. “Remember, there are dense nebulas between Sector 1045 and Romulus that knock out subspace communications.”

He jerked his head towards her. “The Bassen Rift.”

“I believe that’s where they are.”

Chakotay dashed to her computer and said, “I used to hide in there.”

“What are you doing?”

“Sending a message to Nechayev. They’ve got to search for baryons.”

“From that distance?” She stood behind his shoulder and watched what he was typing.

“B’Elanna came up with it. She used deflector technology to pinpoint the location of other ships in the rift. Starfleet vessels have such a build-up of the baryonic particles that the nuclear hadrons stand out in contrast to the theta-xenon gases.”

She squeezed his shoulder. “Impressive, Captain.”

“Congratulate B’Elanna.”

“I will, but it’s fantastic that you remembered the science involved after all these years.”

“Yeah,” he laughed as he exchanged messages with the ship that Nechayev was on. “Usually, I just nod and trust the two of you to figure out that kind of thing.”

“You’re the one who was teaching creative tactics.”

Chakotay got quiet again and said, “They want to know how to configure the deflector. I think we need to bring B’Elanna in on this conversation.”

“Hang on.” Kathryn leaned forward and looked at the exchange on the screen. “Tell them to use a nucleonic beam charged with ferric ions. Start at four millicrons per nano-second and increase the field strength from there until they’ve got a stable magnetic field.”

He typed it in and got an immediate response indicating that they would proceed. “They sound desperate to try anything.”

“They’ve been sitting on their hands for hours, waiting for any word from Enterprise.” Kathryn walked over to the edge of the deck and braced her arms against the railing, carefully arching her back. “We’re all worried that she’s been destroyed and the Scimitar is on its way to its next target.”

“And what do your instincts tell you is the next target?” he asked as he came up behind her and started rubbing her lower back.

Arching further into his massage, she replied, “You’re standing on it.”

“That makes me want to jump on a starship.”

She turned and gave him a disparaging look. “To run away?”

“No!” he said defensively. “To defend Earth. Man, if this planet was destroyed, I’d want to be on it, not watching.”

“Mmmm... I don’t even want to consider it.”

Chakotay drew her back against him, one arm wrapped around her waist, the other hand holding the baby. His voice caught as he said, “Kathryn, when you were in the midst of your heart transplant, B’Elanna told me something that has stuck with me, something I will never forget.”

“What’s that?” she asked as she rested her head against him.

“Kathryn Janeway is the heroine in the story that is our lives, and the heroine doesn’t die in the middle of it.”

Turning her neck so she could see her husband’s face, Kathryn replied, “She was right, you know. I didn’t.”

“And you’re not going to now, either.”

“Is that foreshadowing or are you giving away the end?”

“Oh, definitely giving away the end. You and I... we’re going to die simultaneously when we’re a hundred and ten years old while making love.”

“I believe it.”

“We’ll be surrounded by our loved ones, our children, our grandchildren...”

“While making love?” She couldn’t help but be amused.

When he realized what he was saying, he smiled back. “Umm, sure. Why the hell not?”

Nestled in each other’s arms, they gazed out at the ocean and listened to the waves crash upon the shore below. Kathryn yawned and said, “If he’s going to destroy us, I wish he’d get on with it. I’m getting sleepy.”

“Why don’t you go to bed? I’ll keep watch on the comm.”

“Because if our lives are about to end, I don’t want to miss a moment of it.”

“Now, that’s logic I don’t think even Tuvok would argue with.” He unfolded his arms and took her hand. “Come on, let’s at least sit on a chaise.”

They set the computer on a side table before Chakotay made himself comfortable on the lounge chair. Once he was set, he held out his hand and drew her down between his legs.

She grabbed a throw from the next chair and joked, "Now this is how we should've handled the gamma shift on Voyager."

"I certainly wouldn't have minded." He helped her get situated with the blanket and then turned his attention toward the computer to see if they'd missed any messages.

"Anything?"

"Your instructions for the deflector worked. They're having every ship scan for the particles."

"How many ships?"

"Eleven."

She asked, "If Shinzon were hell bent on destroying humanity, I would think he would've taken out those ships along the way."

"Maybe."

"Oh?"

"It would certainly add to our fears which he might relish, but it would also take away the element of surprise."

"With his ship, doesn't sound like he'd need to worry about having that advantage."

"You're probably right."

When he typed more on the computer, she asked out of curiosity, "What are you doing?"

"Nechayev is sending us scans with the message that the more eyes on this situation, the better."

"That doesn't sound like her."

"There's really no need for secrecy. At least not with us." Chakotay rubbed Kathryn's arm as he continued, "She has a fantastic mind for tactics."

"She has the personality of a prune."

He chuckled and kissed the top of her head. "Charm while engaged in battle is your specialty."

Tiredly, she replied, "Just give me my Bessie."

“Janeway’s personal phaser rifle. At least when you’re carrying it around, no one messes with you.”

Kathryn felt the heaviness of sleep wash over her, and try as she might, she couldn’t fight it. The sounds of the ocean waves, the crickets chirping in the distance, the quiet tapping of Chakotay’s fingers, and the wind rustling in the trees were like a lullaby singing her to sleep.

She felt like she had just dozed off when he whispered, “Kathryn?”

“Hmmm?”

“Wake up, love.”

“Just fell asleep,” she mumbled.

“Over an hour ago.” He rubbed her arms. “Wake up, just for a moment.”

Still groggy, she looked up at him. “What?”

“They found the Enterprise. I thought you’d want to know.”

“And?” she said as she sat up, instantly awake.

“They took heavy damage, but destroyed the Scimitar. It’s over.”

“Casualties?”

“Doesn’t say. All I got was a rushed message from the first officer on Nechayev’s ship. We’ll know more tomorrow.”

Kathryn put her hand over her heart. “I hate not knowing.”

Leaning forward, he kissed her forehead. “Let’s go inside.”

She nodded and ran her fingers through her hair. “I was really out for an hour?”

“A little longer.”

“Hmmm.” She groaned as she carefully stood up, trying not to move quickly. “I’ve felt better.”

“Probably just tired. It’s after midnight and you’ve been going to bed by twenty-two hundred.”

She smiled despite how drained she felt. “You’re so sexy when you use military time, you know that?”

“Oh, am I?” he asked with a laugh as he led her inside and locked up behind them. “When you’re feeling better, I’ll have to dictate my entire schedule to you, then.”

Rolling her eyes, she replied, “Better than roses any day.”

Kathryn had read the report on the Enterprise’s damage, but nothing could’ve prepared her for the sight in front of her as her shuttle moved into visual range of Utopia Planetia. She had to remind herself to take a breath as her heart went out to the ship’s captain and crew. They’d lost over fifty officers and civilians in the battle with the Scimitar, including their second officer, Commander Data. It was a miracle that all of the children survived relatively unscathed, and that was due to the precautions they had taken to put them in a secure area of the ship.

As soon as the shuttle docked, Kathryn stepped out and was surprised to see Will and Deanna coming to greet her.

“Kathryn, it’s so good to see you,” Deanna said as the two women embraced.

“Forget me,” she said as she looked worriedly at her two friends. “How are you?”

“We’re...” Deanna looked at Will before replying. “We’re coping. Data was a good friend, but this could have turned out so much worse. We weren’t close to the others that were lost, but any loss of life is difficult to bear.”

Will added, “We’re trying to look on the bright side and remember that our mission was a success.”

“We could easily have lost all of you,” Kathryn said as she absently rubbed her pregnant belly. “I’m sorry about your honeymoon.”

“Don’t be,” Will replied. “We can reschedule the Betazed ceremony and take that trip later. We were where we needed to be.”

“That’s true. And now, you’re off to your new ship.”

“Yes,” he said proudly. “Taking her out for a test spin in the morning.”

“Don’t go too far,” Kathryn said with a smile. “We might need you for the next part of this.”

“I’m at your service, Admiral.”

She held out her hand. “Congratulations, Captain Riker.”

“Thank you.” He shared a look with his wife and then said, “Now, if you two will excuse me. I’m going to go check on a few things before we board our shuttle.”

“Of course.” Kathryn looked at Deanna. “Are you ready for the Titan?”

“I think I am,” she said, taking a deep breath. “It feels right to be making this change now that we’re married and starting our life together.”

“Not that you haven’t been together for quite some time.”

“True, but you’ve recently been through this. Didn’t you feel that your new life started after the honeymoon?”

“Yes, once we got settled back into our house.”

Deanna glanced at the security guards and then asked, “Could we have a word in private? On your shuttle, perhaps?”

“Sure.” Kathryn held out hand for Deanna to go in first and then waddled in after her. Once the ladies were seated in the ops and security stations, she rubbed her side and asked, “What can I do for you?”

“I want to know how you’re doing,” Deanna replied.

“Me? You’re the one who just went through a devastating battle.”

“Yes, that’s true, and I’m coping. But I’m asking as your counselor, not your friend.”

Kathryn waved off her concern. “I’m fine. Anything I’m dealing with is minor compared to the bigger picture.”

“That’s not true, Kathryn, and you know it. Correct me if I’m wrong, but wasn’t this your first time as an Admiral sending a ship out on a mission?”

“I’ve sent the Pioneer and the Enterprise both out.”

“On diplomatic missions, yes.”

“That’s what this was supposed to be, too. All missions start with diplomacy.”

Deanna gave her an incredulous look. “Stop avoiding this, because we haven’t got all day.”

“I’m not avoiding. I’m handling it. Seeing the damage to the Enterprise is sobering enough to put my worries into perspective.”

“What are your worries?”

“They’re minor.”

“Glad to hear it. What are your minor worries that are now in perspective?”

Kathryn frowned. “I wasn’t prepared for a counseling session today.”

“I wasn’t planning on it, either, but I seized the moment.” Deanna leaned forward and gently said, “I can sense that you are troubled, and I’d like to help.”

“Empaths,” Kathryn sighed. Deciding to lay her concerns out on the table, she said, “If you must know, Chakotay and I got into a very minor argument because I was stressed.”

“Very minor is good. How did you get out of it?”

“The argument?”

Deanna nodded. “You’ve told me that was your primary fear about marrying him. That you’d argue and not be able to recover from it.”

“I know, but he’s been great. True to his promise, he hasn’t blown anything out of proportion and he doesn’t rise to the bait I throw at him.”

“And you? Have you done what you promised yourself?”

Kathryn studied her well-manicured nails. “Not entirely. It’s hard not to get testy when I’m worried. It’s how I react to stress.”

“No, it’s how you used to react to stress.”

“But I can’t throw anything, hit anything, or exercise in my current condition.”

“Why not? Is everything okay with the baby?”

“My doctor is threatening bed rest if I don’t take it easy. The placenta has torn twice already.”

Deanna grimaced and then shook her head. “I have a feeling that you’re not going to be a very good patient if that’s the route you have to take.”

“I hope I don’t wear out Chakotay’s patience.” Kathryn rubbed the back of her neck.

“Have you told him that?”

“Haven’t felt it was necessary.”

“You should,” Deanna stated plainly. “Then when you get irritable, he’ll be prepared, and you won’t feel as guilty because you talked about it in advance.”

“I suppose.”

“Now, tell me more about this argument of yours. What was it about?”

Pinching her brow, she said, “Oh, it’s not even worth singling out. There have been minor disagreements every few days, but they don’t amount to anything. The man has grown a lot of tolerance over the last year.”

“Yes, but during that year, he’s also faced losing you several times. That can change a man.”

Kathryn looked out the front window of the shuttle to see the people bustling around the bay. “I was frustrated to be on the sidelines and not able to help.”

“But you were helping, were you not?”

“Yes, but knowing that I’ve been benched and not cleared for command is hard to get past.”

“You’re not cleared because of your health,” Deanna pointed out.

“Not just that. Over a year ago, before I was promoted, the review board wouldn’t give me a ship again because of some disputed command decisions. This was the first time since then that I felt the need to be in command of a vessel, and it hit me hard. I’ve told you about this before.”

Deanna asked, “Do I need to point out all the good you’ve done as an admiral?”

“No,” she replied softly. “But don’t worry. I’m dealing with it.”

“Remember what I told you. Your past does not decide your future, it only tells what happened in another time, another place. It’s a new day. Let it go, Kathryn.”

Clicking her tongue, she said, “That’s not as simple as it sounds.”

“No, it’s not. But you’ll be happier once you do.” Deanna took Kathryn’s hand. “The opinions of a few people on a review board do not matter. Kathryn Janeway knows what she is capable of. No one is going to knock her down.”

With a smirk, she replied, “You sound like my husband.”

“Good,” Deanna said with delight. “Then he’s saying the right things to you. Anything else you need to tell me?”

“I think we’ve covered just about as much as one can for a spur of the moment counseling session.”

Deanna stood up and helped Kathryn to her feet as well. “I’ll contact you next week to check on you.”

Arching her back to stretch the sore muscles, she replied, “With the sound advice you just gave me, I doubt I’ll need you again.”

Laughing, Deanna replied, “That assumes you actually take it.”

They walked out of the shuttle and then hugged again. Kathryn said, “I’m so glad you’re okay.”

“Me, too. I’ve crashed two Enterprises now.”

“You’ve survived two crashes.”

“Nope.” Deanna looked out the view port at the Enterprise’s shattered bow. “Captain Picard may have ordered it, but I was at the helm. Same thing with Enterprise D.”

Kathryn tried not to smile. “No wonder they’re putting you off the ship.”

“Thanks,” she replied with a wink, and then got serious. “Take care of yourself, Kathryn.”

“I will. And congratulations on your new husband and your new ship.”

“Thank you,” she said as she walked away.

Kathryn watched her go and then turned to Justin. “Ready to find our favorite engineer?”

“If you are, Admiral.” He looked closely at her. “Feeling all right?”

She looped her arm through his and said, “I’m managing. B’Elanna is on the team assigned to repair the Enterprise. I’d like to touch base with her, and then talk to Picard.”

“Harry should be there working on it, too,” Justin added.

“Mmmhmm. His transfer goes into effect tomorrow.”

“It’s going to be hard not having him around.”

Kathryn noted, “Will be hard not having you and Sue around either.”

“We’re just taking a little tour on the Pioneer. As soon as you’re ready, we’ll be right back where you want us.”

As they rounded a corner, she asked, “You okay with me sending you out and having Mark stay here?”

“I assume you did that for Sue and me.”

“Only part of the reason. You sat in on as many meetings as Harry did. I thought you might be an asset to Captain Young as he continues to build those relationships.”

“I’ll certainly try to be.”

She patted his hand. “I know you will.”

Jean-Luc handed Kathryn a cup of his favorite tea as they sat down together in his ready room. “Shinzon was a troubled man.”

“That’s putting it mildly,” she replied. “He murdered the entire Romulan Senate.”

“I was standing there, in the middle of the Senate chambers, and I had no idea.”

“You weren’t supposed to know.”

Shaking his head, he said, “There were clues. We just didn’t see them.”

“Twenty/twenty hindsight.” Kathryn took a sip of her tea. “President Truov has been in contact with the highest ranking Romulan, Commander Sulat. The Federation has offered aid, but of course, they’re not accepting it.”

“This situation is probably embarrassing for them.”

“Probably so.” She studied his face. “How are you handling it, from a personal perspective?”

“Is that an official question, Admiral?”

“No, I’m here as a friend. I’m not on active duty.”

He hummed a smile at her response. “Then as a friend, I’ll tell you that I feel just plain numb. Deanna tells me this is the fourth stage of grief and that it’s perfectly normal.”

“I’ve found that I’m perfectly happy remaining in the numb stage as long as possible.”

“Quite right. And when a counselor tells you what you’re feeling is normal, do you want to throttle them?”

“Usually,” Kathryn replied with a slow nod. “But if you were to carry through on that, you’d have to start the grief process all over again.”

“Also true. And then the counselor’s new husband would probably want to throttle me. It would get messy around here.”

Kathryn sighed. "I'd say you've already got quite a mess."

They were quiet for a few minutes until Jean-Luc asked, "You lost a good portion of your bridge crew at the same time, did you not?"

"I did."

"How difficult, if I may ask, was it to be on the bridge without them?"

She blew out a slow breath. "Well, there was so much to deal with that I really didn't have time to grieve their loss."

"Understandable." He turned to face her. "May I bend your ear for a moment?"

"Of course."

He hesitated before he explained, "Data isn't the first of my officers to die saving my life. His efforts also saved this ship and ultimately Earth from a deadly threat. Any one of us would have sacrificed our lives to do the same."

Kathryn nodded, encouraging him to continue. "And although he was an android..."

"It doesn't make his friendship any less real. He's not any more replaceable in our hearts than if he were fully human. In fact, in his dying, I believe that he achieved his highest goal, which was to be human. He once said that he'd outlive all of his friends and that was his biggest concern about immortality."

"I feel the same about Voyager's holographic doctor."

"Oh, yes. I'd forgotten about him." Jean Luc turned the tea cup around in his hand, seemingly mesmerized by it. "I suddenly feel old. You see, I fully intended on being the one to die saving humanity."

"Mmmhmm. I once made the decision to sacrifice myself for my crew, but they didn't let me. I felt deflated afterwards – a strange reaction since I should've felt relieved and thankful to be alive."

"But one I can fully identify with. When someone takes your place in death, it's harder, don't you think? Have you encountered that?"

"I've had many people die to protect me. Survivor's guilt is a tough nut."

"Death," he said with a sigh. "In any relationship, I suppose that it's probably easier to be the one who dies, rather than to be the one left behind."

“In the long term, of course, but after you know the end is near, there’s an awful lot of pain knowing how much grief you’ll cause your loved ones.”

“But they’ll know you died to save them, and you can take solace in that.”

“Sure, so long as that’s the reason you’re dying. My recent near-death experiences were quite the opposite.”

“Oh, yes. You have an entirely different perspective on the matter.”

“Not a day goes by when I don’t think about the fact that I could just as easily be dead.” She patted the rounded swell of her belly. “Our lives are to be treasured, Jean-Luc. Carpe diem.”

“Seize the day,” he said with understanding. After a moment of silence, he announced, “I can’t propose to Beverly now. Not after all of this.”

“Sure you can. Perhaps right now is when you need each other most, when you need to gather your loved ones close. Data died so you could live, so don’t get so caught up in your grief that you don’t take his gift for what it is.”

He sighed. “I’ll give it some thought.”

Kathryn waited a moment to see if he’d say anything more before giving him an opportunity to end the conversation. “Is Beverly onboard? I’d like to see her.”

“She’s putting sickbay back together.” He recycled their cups and helped Kathryn stand. “Come on, I’ll take you.”

As they walked through the Enterprise, he stopped to greet crew members that were working on repairs, asked how they were doing, and introduced them to Kathryn.

She glanced back at Justin and then commented to Picard, “I miss this part of being a captain.”

“Repairing a damaged ship?”

“No, the sense of family and the closeness that is garnered after surviving a tragedy.”

“I’m sure you had your share.”

“I doubt I had more than you. We only had seven years together; you’ve had fifteen as captain of the Enterprise crew.”

“Yes, but except for my senior officers, the others have come and gone. I don’t know my crew as well as you knew yours.” They stepped into a turbolift and he called out, “Deck nine.”

“There are pros and cons to that, but the sense of family is strong.”

He sighed deeply. "Family is a good word for it."

Kathryn patted him on the back as they exited the turbolift. "Let's hope that Beverly will cheer you up."

"She usually does, Admiral. She usually does." He gave her an affirming nod just before the doors opened to sickbay.

There were a handful of people tending to various tasks, but overall, the atmosphere in the room was unhurried and peaceful. As soon as Beverly spotted them, she lit up with a beautiful smile, but signaled that she'd be with them in a moment.

Kathryn turned to Jean-Luc and said, "That smile was for you."

He chuckled and shook his head. "Not this time, my dear Admiral. But I love seeing it, just the same."

Beverly came over and opened her arms when she saw Kathryn. "Look at you! It's only been three weeks and look how you've grown!"

Begrudgingly, Kathryn gave her friend a hug and asked, "Is that supposed to be a compliment?"

"Of course it is," she said as she pulled back to get a better look.

Jean-Luc interrupted with, "I'll leave the two of you to catch up, shall I?"

Beverly squeezed his hand and said, "Thank you for walking her down."

"You're most welcome." He nodded towards Kathryn and said, "It was lovely chatting with you. Perhaps since I'll be around for awhile, we can do it again?"

"I'd love to. Thank you."

He inclined his head and bowed out of the medical bay.

Beverly said, "Either that baby has had a huge growth spurt or your dress at the wedding hid the baby bump a little too well."

"I think you're right about the growth spurt. He's been feeling heavier with each passing day."

"May I take a look?" Beverly asked hopefully.

"If you'd like, but I came for a visit, not an exam."

"We can do both," she said as she had Kathryn walk over to the main biobed.

“I hope you’re not expecting me to get up on that thing.”

“No, of course not,” Beverly said as she opened a tri-corder and started scanning.

Kathryn noted, “I’ve always had to jump a little to get on these beds, and as precarious as this baby’s placenta is, I don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

Beverly’s expression changed from joyful to serious as she continued to scan. “When did Dr. Zimmerman see you last?”

“Four days ago, but he’s making a call to my house tomorrow morning. Why?”

“You shouldn’t be on your feet, Kathryn.” Beverly looked up, worried. “Have you had any spotting today?”

“Yes, but I do every day.”

“And pain?”

Kathryn rubbed the ever-present soreness in her side. “It’s not sharp like when the placenta has torn.”

“Regardless, it has separated again.” Beverly motioned for a male nurse to come over. “Would you help me get the Admiral onto the bed, lying on her left?”

“Of course, doctor.”

Kathryn grimaced as Justin and the nurse gently lifted her up and helped her lie on her side. “A step-stool would have sufficed.”

Beverly nodded as she stood at a terminal at the end of the biobed. She was keying in a connection to Starfleet medical, and when Joe’s image appeared on the other end, she said, “Good afternoon, Dr. Zimmerman.”

“Dr. Crusher, a pleasant surprise. To what do I owe the honor?”

“*Our* patient is visiting the Enterprise at Utopia Planetia, and she’s in need of medical attention.”

“Oh? I don’t recall having cleared her to travel off planet.”

Kathryn rolled her eyes.

“I’d be surprised if you had. The placenta shows a five percent perforation. Before I send her home, may I have your permission to do surgery?”

“You don’t need my permission, doctor. But perhaps if you tell her to stay off her feet, she’ll actually listen.”

“I’ll certainly try.” Beverly cast a glance over at Kathryn before turning back to the screen. “I’ll send you a report when I’m finished, and you may want to follow up with her this evening. I’m not sure this is going to hold.”

“Thank you. I’ll be sure to see her as soon as her shuttle arrives. Zimmerman out.”

Kathryn complained, “Now he’s going to be even more on my case, just because he knows I’m outnumbered.”

Beverly picked up a medical instrument and pointed it at the womb. “Why is it that people in high-ranking positions are the most difficult patients?”

“Simple. It’s because we’re impervious to anything that might weaken us.”

“Mhmm,” Beverly hummed as she fought a smile. “I’m not even going to dignify that with a response.”

Kathryn watched for a moment and then asked, “Why don’t you think it’ll hold? It has the last two times.”

“The uterus is so thin in this one area that it can’t handle the weight of the placenta. The best thing you can do for it is to take the strain off of it, and the only way to do that is to lie on your right side.”

“I’m wearing the maternity belt that Dr. Zimmerman suggested.”

“That helps with the weight of the baby on your ligaments and your back muscles, but not for the internal pull that’s causing this recurring tear.”

“We’d hoped that we could keep this pregnancy going for another month. Is that going to be possible?”

“If you stay in bed. Otherwise, the bleeding is going to put both you and the baby in jeopardy.” Beverly clicked off the tool and called out to the nurse, “We need to turn her over.”

As they moved her, Kathryn tried not to be petulant about it. “What else do you need to do?”

“You’re anemic and your blood sugar is low. Have you noticed a drop in energy?”

“My energy is down so much that I usually only notice a change when it’s up.”

Beverly shook her head. “Kathryn, this is not good.”

She glanced up at Justin who was watching her. “You can say it.”

“What’s that?” he asked.

“That you were right. Evidently, I did not look well.”

“No, you didn’t, but it wouldn’t have been the first time you’ve almost fainted on me. I was prepared to catch you.”

As Beverly administered a series of hyposprays and ran various medical instruments over her, Kathryn asked, “Find anything new?”

“I’m worried that it has only taken four days for your body chemistry to get into such a state.”

“So you’re saying I need to see Dr. Zimmerman more often?”

“If this is normal, then, yes.”

“Chakotay hasn’t been checking me as often lately because I’ve been doing better.”

Beverly frowned at her readings. “Dr. Zimmerman will be able to tell for sure, but I’m going to suggest he check on you daily for a week to chart the changes. If you were my patient, I’d ask you to wear a monitor.”

“He’s asked to put one on me, but... well, I’m married.”

Beverly froze and then asked Justin, “Would you excuse us for a moment, Lieutenant?”

“Of course, doctor,” he said as he went to another part of sickbay.

“Kathryn, when was the last time you had sexual relations?”

“That’s really none...”

“Just answer the question.”

“Yesterday.”

She sighed and rubbed her forehead. “That needs to stop. Now.”

“It hasn’t hurt anything before.”

“As the baby grows larger, the uterus is stretched, and yours is already weak on your right side. Plus, you’ve already lost your mucous plug and you’re dilated two centimeters.”

“Dilated?” she asked, completely surprised.

“Most women are during their last month of pregnancy, but you’re only seven months along.”

She took a sobering breath. “All right, no sex.”

“No matter how careful you are, the contractions and the physical motion involved are not good for your placenta.

“I’ve got it,” she replied, showing her irritation.

Beverly laid her hand on her patient’s hip. “Kathryn, I know this is hard to hear.”

“Don’t worry about it. I knew this was coming, but things were going so well that I hoped it would turn out to be a normal pregnancy after all.”

“I’m afraid not,” she said sympathetically. “My advice as both your friend and a doctor is that you need to go home, crawl in bed, and let that handsome husband of yours take care of you for the next month.”

“He’s been taking care of me for the better part of the last year.”

“From what I’ve seen, he’s very good at it.”

Kathryn sighed. “Some marriage.”

“If it’s too much for him, you can always request another home nurse.”

“He’d never admit that it was too much, and I don’t know that I’d like having someone around all the time.”

“Well, think about it. Dr. Zimmerman will give you instructions on what ‘bed rest’ entails, and I urge you to follow his instructions down to the letter. Within a month, I suspect that your uterus will show signs of rupturing and then it’ll be time to have this baby.”

Kathryn closed her eyes and nodded, fighting off the emotional weight she felt upon hearing this news.

Beverly took her hand and quietly asked, “Are you okay?”

“No... yes... I don’t know. I’m worried and excited and scared and...”

“And those are perfectly normal emotions for an expectant mother.”

Kathryn opened her eyes and gave Beverly an exasperated look.

“What?”

“I was just listening to Jean-Luc describe how annoying it is to be told that what we’re feeling is *normal*.”

“Oh, okay.” Beverly rolled her eyes. “Then let me assure you that you’re the only woman who has ever felt excited and worried about a new baby.”

Kathryn pushed herself up and said with sincerity, “Thanks for your help.”

“You’re welcome.” She helped Kathryn slide down off the bed. “I’m going to walk with you to the shuttle. Lieutenant?”

Justin came back and asked, “Ready to go?”

“Yeah,” she said tiredly. “We should get back.”

Beverly packed up a med-kit and tapped her combadge. “Crusher to Picard.”

Jean-Luc’s voice came over the com system. “Go ahead, Beverly.”

“Permission to leave the ship? I’m going to walk with the Admiral to her shuttle.”

“Granted. When you return, would you stop by my quarters for a moment?”

“Of course. Crusher out.”

Kathryn secretly hoped he’d talk to Beverly about marriage, but she also felt saddened that her impending bed rest would mean she wouldn’t be able to attend a wedding. However, the health and wellbeing of her child took precedence, and Kathryn knew she was blessed to have been able to do all that she had.
