

The Future is Ours – Part 4

“Hero For Hire”

By Dawn

Rated PG-13

Summary: A continuation of Part 3 – Conversations about what happens next for the Voyager crew

“Hi there, come on in,” Chakotay said when Kathryn showed up at the door to his apartment.

“I know we didn’t have plans for tonight, but I felt like talking to you in person, if that’s okay?”

“Of course, you’re always welcome.” Chakotay took her raincoat and hung it on the coat rack to drip dry. “You’re drenched.”

“I know,” she smiled. “Isn’t it wonderful? I love rain.”

Chakotay laughed. “Has anyone told you that your love for all things natural is infectious?”

“It’s a new love.” She ran her fingers through her hair to shake out the water droplets. “May I take off my boots?”

“Of course,” he said as he went back into the kitchen. “If you’ll excuse me, I have dinner on the stove.”

“Sure,” she said as she toed them off. She left her uniform jacket on because she was a little cold. Walking into his kitchen, she said, “I apologize for coming by unexpectedly.”

“No need. Are you hungry?”

Looking at the vegetables and chicken sizzling in the skillet, she asked, “Were you expecting someone else? That’s a lot of food.” She hugged herself to try to get warm.

“I tend to make too much when I cook from scratch. I’m attempting chicken fajitas. Care to join me?”

“Sounds wonderful. I remember that time Neelix tried to make fajitas.”

“And he couldn’t pronounce the Spanish words at all. Ja-lap-i-nose,” Chakotay laughed.

“At least you didn’t have to eat his chicken substitute. I’m amazed that you kept him convinced that you were a vegetarian all those years.”

“All because of that one time when I couldn’t stomach something he’d prepared, and he assumed I was a vegetarian. I didn’t have the heart to tell him that it looked disgusting, so I let him believe that.” He dumped the contents of the skillet onto a plate and stuck it in the oven to keep warm. “How did the meeting go?”

“Eh, it was... not what I expected. We didn’t talk about the crew. It was all about me.”

“Oh?” He stopped what he was doing to look at her and his eyes widened with worry. “What happened?”

“We can talk about it later,” she dismissed his question because her emotions were too close to the surface and she wanted time to compose herself.

He studied her carefully before leading her into the living room. “Come on. Dinner will keep for a few minutes.” They sat down on the front edge of the couch and he took her hands. “You’re freezing.”

“It’s cold and damp outside.”

He rubbed her hands briskly to warm them. “So, what did they say? Was it about the interview last night?”

“I’m not sure how to take it.” Without looking at him, she continued, “The short version is that you were right. There are a few admirals who weren’t at all happy with my very public approval of the Maquis, nor my views of the current political climate. I was told that I need to consult Starfleet’s approved public relations messages on all matters before making any statements to the press.”

“Bureaucracy,” he sighed. “Did they come down hard on you?”

“Two admirals on my review board were really angry, but they slapped my wrist more than anything else. There were two, Paris and Patterson, who told me privately that I have their full support. However, those two have known me since I was a little girl and both feel like I’m a daughter to them.”

“Well, that’s something. There’s no issue that everyone’s going to agree on.”

“No, but it’s hard to adjust to having to answer to someone.” She shrugged guiltily, “As hard as it probably was for you to take orders from me in the beginning.”

“Ah, but the difference was that I actually agreed with your orders... most of them, at least.” Her hands were finally warm, but he didn’t let go. “So, what else?”

“They don’t want me back in command. I’m too unpredictable.”

“But you don’t want to go back to space.”

“No, but I’d like to at least be offered another ship, or even to keep the one I’ve got. I wanted the chance to turn them down. Honestly, I’m not sure I want Voyager to go back into space either. I can’t imagine anyone else commanding her.”

“There’s no pleasing you,” he chuckled as he shook his head. “So, what did they offer you?”

“A promotion.”

“That’s great!”

“No, it’s not. The promotion would be to Commodore.”

“Commodore? I didn’t realize that position still existed.”

She rubbed her forehead. “It’s a rank usually reserved for old captains who don’t want to retire. Their typical assignment is to shepherd ambassadors.”

He nodded in understanding. “Was that the only option they gave you?”

“Yes, but most of the afternoon was spent discussing my performance and the overall findings from the debriefings.”

“How’d that go?”

“A lot of accolades mixed with a few criticisms. It was about what I should’ve expected. The review board wasn’t quite as complimentary as Gayle was. Maybe they thought my ego needed to be knocked down a notch or two.”

“But it sounds like they were positive over all, weren’t they? I can’t imagine that they’d be otherwise.”

“Overall, yes,” she shrugged. “It’s hard to bask in the praise of my accomplishments when it’s immediately followed by an offensive proposition.”

“Did they give you a specific offer?”

“No, it was pretty late in the day. We’ll be discussing it in the morning.”

He sighed heavily and rubbed her back. “I’m sorry, Kathryn.”

“I’ve never turned down a promotion before.”

“Could you oversee the analysis of Voyager?”

“I’m not really interested in picking her apart. It would be too painful to watch. My older self said they turned her into a museum, but her Voyager had sixteen more years of space under her belt.”

“You were expecting to be promoted to admiral,” he guessed.

“I guess my ego is just too damn big.” She pinched the bridge of her nose. “Retirement might come sooner than I expected.”

He thought for a moment. “Give it some time. Let them know you aren’t interested in a posting off-planet, and see what happens. Just because you don’t want to accept an offer doesn’t mean that you’re announcing your retirement.”

“No, but it might lead to a resignation. Maybe that’s what they’re hoping for.” She leaned back and crossed her legs, folding her hands in her lap.

“Don’t forget how many cards you’re holding. If what the media says about you mirrors the opinions of the general public, you’re more important for Starfleet’s image than this review board realizes. With the decline in public opinion, you could be a real boon to them. My take on the situation is that the citizens of the Federation need to regain their faith in Starfleet’s ability to keep them safe. From the news articles I read this morning, I’d say their hope lies in you, because they see you as an undefeatable leader who can beat all odds.”

She started to reply, but he held up a hand to stop her. “Kathryn, before you deny it, remember that you have managed the impossible. I know just as well as you do that it wasn’t you, all by yourself, but the Federation needs a little magic, and they need a hero.”

He continued, “You had nothing to do with the war, and because you come from a long line of Starfleet brass, I think people could see you as one of the old, surefire leaders who made the Federation great. If this is spun the right way, you could really sway public opinion.”

She lifted her chin and looked at him sincerely. “You’re good for me, you know?”

“I try... I’ve been trying since the day I met you. When I realized that there were more ethics in your left pinky than I’d ever encountered from the ‘fleet as a whole, I’ve been trying my best to support and encourage you.”

“Is that so?” She rested her chin on her hand, finding him delightful to listen to.

“Yes. Why do you think I agreed to be your first officer?”

“It was better than sitting in the brig?” she joked.

“Well, yes, that too, but I'm serious about this. You were faced with unbeatable odds. I wanted to help you.”

She grimaced. “Help me? I looked like I needed help?”

“Far from helpless, but yes, you did. Don't you think you were in a bit of a predicament?”

“Just a little,” she agreed, holding her thumb and forefinger slightly apart. Memories of the previous night surfaced and she blushed. “About last night... we didn't get a chance to talk much this morning, but I wanted to let you know that I'm deeply embarrassed about my behavior. I'm sorry.”

“Why?” he asked in surprise.

“I feel a little foolish for coming on to you.”

“If you recall, I was the one who kissed you.”

“Yes, but that was just for fun. Later, before we went to bed... I was a little too...”

“You were a little drunk.” He patted her arm. “I didn't reciprocate because I didn't think it would be appropriate in the hallway outside your mother's bedroom.”

“Probably not.” Kathryn didn't know what to think about what had happened. Had they both been a little drunk? Did it mean anything? She glanced at the kitchen and said, “I don't want to delay your dinner.”

“Well, come on then.” He stood and said, “You can set the table while I make the pico.”

She knew she was too quiet while they ate, but between the review board, the interview, and her behavior the night before, she had a lot on her mind. He seemed to understand, because he didn't try to distract her with small talk. She wondered if he was just as distracted and perhaps didn't even realize that they weren't saying much.

After eating two fajitas, she was stuffed. She sipped at her coffee and wondered if she should put them out of their misery and go home. Sulking would be more comfortable alone and she could call her mom to commiserate. As she was about to mention it, his comm sounded an incoming call.

“I wonder who that is,” he said as he got up.

He punched the code to answer the call and said, “Good evening, Admiral.”

Kathryn's stomach clenched, wondering which admiral it could be. She didn't relax much when she heard Owen Paris' voice. It meant her sulking would be delayed a little while longer.

"Good evening, Commander. Forgive the intrusion, but I'm looking for Captain Janeway. Have you seen her this evening, by any chance?"

Chakotay looked at her and asked, "Kathryn, do you want to be found?"

"Not really, no." She sighed and walked over to the comm where Chakotay had pulled out a chair for her.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Katie, but I wanted to talk without anyone overhearing. Your commbadge is set to do-not-disturb. I wasn't about to initiate an emergency and alert anyone that I'm looking for you."

"Do I need to go home and call you or is it okay if Chakotay hears us?"

Chakotay interrupted and said, "I'll go to another room."

Paris said, "No, Commander, don't. Perhaps you can help me talk some sense into her."

Kathryn sighed. "You want me to accept the promotion."

"On the contrary, Katie, I think it would be a colossal mistake."

Crossly, she said, "You're sitting on the board that offered it!"

"Yes, but the board is not in full agreement. This business about offering you commodore just came up this morning in a closed meeting with Hayes and Wilson. They're angry about that interview and think you should suffer the consequences for going off half-cocked."

"I wasn't half-cocked, but I'm about to be!" Her ire was simmering hot.

"Now, Katie."

"Don't 'Now, Katie' me. If they have an issue with my statements, then they need to deal with that straight on. It's deplorable to offer me a career-ending position just because I happen to support an organization that one, no longer exists, and two, was right about the damn Cardassians from the very beginning."

"I understand why you're angry, but we've got to be smart about this."

“Damn right, I’m angry. What in the hell was all that about me being unpredictable? I’ve done nothing but follow Starfleet rules and Starfleet procedures for my entire career. I’ve suffered, damn it, both personally and professionally, in order to uphold their almighty principles when it almost killed me to do so.”

“You know perfectly well why they said that. You can’t threaten a crewman’s life and not expect to face the music. Any other captain would’ve been court-martialed and you’re damn-lucky that Chakotay was there to keep it from getting out of control.”

Kathryn was furious. She looked at Chakotay who was sitting nearby watching intently. He looked down as soon as she made eye contact. She rubbed her face, still shaking with anger. “You have no clue how hard it was out there.”

“I know. It’s inconceivable to all of us.”

“Ransom...” she shook her head and fought back the tears of anger. “...he was murdering innocent life-forms and his crew was helping him. At the time, I believed them to be just as guilty as he was.”

“That doesn’t mean your method for obtaining information was acceptable. We don’t torture prisoners, and you know that.”

She was shaking with anger. “Would it help if I admitted that I made a mistake? Is it completely inexplicable to the board that a captain can make one god-damned mistake under that kind of stress?”

“Of course not, Katie. We all recognize what you were up against, whether or not we can fully understand the pressure you were under. The good news is that this incident is being kept as confidential as your trip from the future is, but that doesn’t mean it’s acceptable under the code of ethics to offer you another captaincy.”

“Damn it, I don’t want another ship, but I sure as hell don’t want to be set out to pasture wiping the asses of a bunch of uptight ambassadors.”

“I’m glad to hear it, because no one else reasonable wants that for you, either.” Owen continued, “Don’t accept this position, but you’ve got to control your anger. If you want to prove that you’ll follow Starfleet protocol, then you’ve got to play the part.”

“You don’t think I can control my anger?”

“I think you have every right to be angry, but don’t get so comfortable with this review board that you feel free to express your opinion in the way that it, I daresay, deserves to be expressed.”

“I have nothing to prove to that board. If they can’t see me for who I am and what I’ve accomplished, then I have no intentions of subjecting myself to a job that’s meant as a slap on the wrist.”

“I know, Katie. I just don’t want you to get so outraged at the pathetic offer you’re going to receive tomorrow that you end your career. Between your accomplishments, your very public opinions, and the way the public and the media seem to love you, you’re in a powerful position to really affect some change.”

Kathryn sighed heavily and rubbed her forehead.

“Katie, you’ve got to understand that Starfleet has to be apprehensive about you. You embody unpredictability because no one understands how you could’ve pulled off this miracle.” He held up hands in surrender. “Don’t get me wrong... I’m thrilled that Voyager is home, but the extent of what you could accomplish seems limitless, and when you have that much power and don’t agree with Starfleet, they want to find a way to control you. You traveled back in time once, who’s to say you won’t do it again?”

Chakotay interrupted, “He’s exactly right, Kathryn.”

She glanced at Chakotay and then answered both of them. “I’m only human. I’ve only done what any Captain would do for her crew.”

“No, Katie,” Owen said quietly, “You’ve done a hell of a lot more... both you and the future you.”

“I don’t want to change the world. I just want a chance to live my life, here on Earth, and help the greater good. I only want what anyone wants – a home, a family, and to be surrounded by the people I love. Is that so much to ask for?”

“But you can do so much more.” Owen’s eyes were full of caring concern. “You said it last night, Katie... We can move mountains... but no one has ever done that by exploding in anger to a review board. There will come a time when you won’t need to toe the party line, but now is not that time.”

Kathryn closed her eyes and nodded in agreement. With resignation, she asked, “I assume that we never had this conversation?”

“It would be best.” Owen said, “Katie, you know I care about you as much as I care about my own children. I only want what’s best for you, but I also want you to realize your full potential.”

“Thank you, Owen.”

“And to answer the question from last night’s interview about if your father would be proud of you... the answer is ‘Hell, yes.’”

She couldn't help but smile. "Thanks."

"I'll see you in the morning. Get some sleep." He cut the communication.

Kathryn stared at the blank screen for a moment before looking at Chakotay who was still watching her closely. "So much for not having the weight of the world on my shoulders."

"I've said it before and I'll say it again... I'm behind you one hundred percent, and I want to do whatever I can to ease your burdens."

"Including keeping me from murdering someone?"

"Yes." His reply was almost inaudible.

"You don't have to be afraid to say it. I know what happened."

"Kathryn, it was a terrible situation that got completely out of control. I fault myself for not stepping in sooner."

"You don't think I wouldn't have relieved you of duty that much earlier?"

"I like to believe that if I'd acted when I first felt the inclination, you would've been more level-headed at the time."

She knew that he was right, but that didn't mean it didn't hurt to hear him say it. "I see."

"Don't you know how much I care about you?"

Closing her eyes against the onslaught of emotions, she nodded. "I hate myself for what I did to us."

"It's been over two years. We've recovered."

"By putting it behind us and pretending that it didn't happen." Her eyes were still closed.

With assurance, he said, "That's what we needed to do."

"Our friendship hasn't been the same since." She jumped when she felt his hand touch her shoulder. When he backed off, she reached for him. "You just startled me."

He moved behind her and his fingers found the knots in her neck. "Kathryn, you have absolutely nothing to worry about with me, and nothing to prove. Don't forget that I know exactly what you've been through. I've seen you at your worst, and I still think you're an extraordinary woman with an inner strength that defies human nature."

Shaking her head, she whispered, “I don’t deserve that kind of praise.”

“And your humility just makes you all the more endearing.” He moved her hair to the side, and gently rubbed the spot on her neck that made her head hurt worse than any other. “I’ve often thought that if I was going to be stranded on the other side of the galaxy with anyone, I’m so glad it was with a woman who is a top-level engineer, a gifted scientist, and a skilled soldier who also has a sincere compassion for humanity. You can’t deny even one of those attributes, can you?”

She swallowed hard. “No, I don’t suppose I can.”

He leaned down and whispered in her ear, “Then please, accept my compliments for what they are. I mean every word I say.”

Her voice was raspy as she replied. “Thank you. I wish you were on my review board.”

“Hmmm... An enormous conflict of interest, but I would be honored.”

“And what position would you offer me?”

“Good question... maybe Commander-in-Chief of Peace and Goodwill.”

She laughed. “Sounds like a Christmas card.”

He loosened her jacket so he could massage more deeply into her shoulders. “If you want my advice?”

“I do.”

“Calmly turn down the offer tomorrow, stating that you’re not ready to make a decision about your career. One thing is very clear to me, and that’s you don’t want this.”

“That’s true.”

“It’s the only question on the table. You don’t have to decide anything else tomorrow, nor do you have to explain yourself. For all they know, you’re planning to extend your leave of absence so you can knit a sweater.”

She laughed. “Must be some kind of sweater.”

“They’ll read whatever they’re going to read into it, and there’s nothing you can say or do to change that. Meanwhile, someone is going to figure out what you’re worth, either before or after you explain it to them.”

“Thank you, Chakotay.” She breathed deeply, relaxing into the massage. Tired of thinking and talking, she did nothing except enjoy his ministrations.

When he stopped, he came around to kneel in front of her. “It’s after nine. May I walk you home?”

She furrowed her eyebrows. “You don’t think I can make it on my own?”

“I don’t think there’s anything you can’t do, but I thought you might like the company.”

Touching his sweet face, she said, “Thank you for asking, but I’ll be fine.” She leaned forward and softly kissed his forehead. “I’ve got a lot to think about. The walk might help clear my head so I can sleep.”

“All right.” He extended his hand to walk her to the door where she put her boots back on and he helped her with her coat. When she turned to face him, he absently started buttoning it.

She watched him, half-dazed, as he worked the large buttons. When he reached her chest, she inhaled slowly to fully enjoy the warmth that the innocent gesture stirred within her.

As he finished, he said, “Don’t want you to get cold again.”

“Chakotay…” Her throat seemed to close around his name.

“Don’t forget that I’ll be here thinking about you tomorrow.”

“I won’t.”

“If any of your worries are about me, or about us, let those go. You’re far from alone.”

Hoarsely, she replied, “I know.”

Their eyes met for a moment and then his gaze suddenly dropped to her lips. “Kathryn,” he whispered as he cradled her jaw in both hands, his fingers caressing the sides of her neck.

Her heart skipped a beat and she parted her lips in expectation, knowing she was about to be kissed. Time seemed to stand still as he brought their lips together, the sweet warmth almost more than she could bear as she realized that this was it. This was the moment when everything changed and she knew for certain that the man holding her would be with her for the rest of her life.

Joyously, she cried out in his mouth and wrapped her arms around his neck, tangled her fingers into his hair, and pulled him as close as possible. He held her against him, and quickly broke the kiss because he was smiling so brightly.

With solid, repetitive kisses, he repeated, “I love you. I love you. I love you.”

Laughing in pure joy, she moved her head to the side to hug him as tightly as she could. “I love you, too. I’ve loved for you so long – I just couldn’t tell you.”

Swaying, he confessed, “I know, my sweet Kathryn. I know, and I’m so sorry. You have no idea how sorry I am.”

“Shhhhh.” She squeezed him tighter. “It doesn’t matter. We’re okay.”

He moaned in gratitude, rubbing her back and kissing any part of her that his lips could reach from within the tight embrace. “I don’t want you to go home.”

“I know, but I need to go. We don’t want to ruin this by going too fast.”

“How could that possibly ruin it?”

She pulled out of the hug and held his face. With a huge smile, she said, “Trust me. This will be stronger if we take it slowly.”

“Okay,” he conceded, rubbing her arms as if he couldn’t get enough of her. “I’ll trust you, but promise me that I can see you tomorrow night.”

“And the night after that and the night after that. I promise you that not a day will go by that we aren’t together, and we’ll know when the time is right.”

“I want you so much it hurts.”

“I’m so glad you do.” She rose up on her toes and gave him a soft kiss. “Dinner tomorrow night?”

He forced himself to let go of her arms, but brought her hands to his lips for a kiss. “Come over after your meetings. I’ll cook for you. A candlelight dinner.”

“I’d like that,” she said with a smile. “Woo me, Chakotay. I want to be pursued.”

Kissing her forehead, he laughed. “All right. I can do that. I’m more than happy to court you, my love.”

“Good night.” She kissed his cheek and opened the door, leaving them both with silly grins and excited about things to come.

“Kathryn, I’d like to take you out to dinner,” Chakotay said as they were leaving Starfleet Headquarters the following Friday afternoon.

“In public?” She cringed. It had been a hell of a week and the press seemed to find her no matter where she went. The hounding had begun on Monday night when she had walked home by herself and a group of them had been waiting for her. The next day, she managed to secure a privacy order preventing the press from congregating around her house, but there was nothing she could do about transporter stations and coffee shops. When she met them in these other locations, she always stopped to talk to them, giving them as little information as possible while being as diplomatic and charming as she knew how to be.

“Your mom told me about a little restaurant in Florence that you adore. I’m counting on there not being any press waiting for us there.”

“Florence?” She was delighted. “But it’s close to midnight there now.”

“I called ahead. Their bar is open until 2:00, and they’re happy to keep the kitchen open for us. I did have to place our order in advance, so I hope you like what I chose.”

Kathryn hugged him and said, “Thank you, this will be wonderful.”

“I think so too, but we’d better get moving.”

“Of course! We need to change. Where should we meet?”

He held up a bag. “I brought a change of clothes. Let’s go to your house.”

On the walk from the transporter station, she said, “I think I know just which restaurant it is, too. Phoebe and I took mom there several times. They have the most wonderful coffee.”

“Why am I not surprised?”

They walked fast and managed to avoid any reporters, most likely because of the time of day. When they got back to her house, Kathryn changed quickly, added a little makeup, and brushed out her hair. It had grown past her shoulders and she was looking forward to having it long again.

“Is that the red jacket your sister was talking about?” Chakotay asked.

“Yes, do you like it?” She modeled it for him.

“It’s striking.”

“Thanks, I like it too.”

“Of course, you’d look beautiful in anything.” He kissed her lightly on the cheek. “Shall we go?”

“Andiamo!”

The transporter station in Florence was a short walk from the piazza where the restaurant was located. Because it was so late at night, they found the city quiet and peaceful. A few cafés and a handful of street musicians were the only signs of life. Kathryn was thrilled that Chakotay had gone to the effort of planning this little trip and happily walked with him hand-in-hand along the River Arno.

When they arrived, Chakotay asked, “Is this the one you were thinking of?”

“Yes!” Kathryn beamed. “Thank you so much for arranging this.”

“You’re welcome.” He put his hand on the small of her back and let her walk ahead of him through the outdoor seating area. The patrons were enjoying wine and cocktails, and were blissfully unaware of the celebrities that were in their midst.

When they reached the entrance into the restaurant, a charming gentleman stepped out to open the door for them. “Signora Janeway, Monsignor Chakotay... It is a pleasure to welcome you to our ristorante. Per favore, I will show you to your tabella.”

Kathryn held Chakotay’s hand as they walked through the near-empty restaurant to a secluded table near the back. She gasped quietly when she saw it. It was a private booth surrounded by candlelight, and with an enormous bouquet of the most exquisite red roses in the center of the table. Each flower was fully opened and breathtaking. “Oh, Chakotay! How beautiful.”

“You deserve a special evening, Kathryn.”

She felt delighted as she slid into the booth. Reaching out to touch a rose, she said, “These are absolutely gorgeous.”

As he slid in next to her, he said, “I merely requested a bouquet of red roses. I had no idea they’d be so pretty.”

She touched his arm. “Tell me something. Are you always this romantic?”

He chuckled. “Hard to say. I haven’t dated anyone who would’ve appreciated it before, but when you mentioned last weekend that you hadn’t been anywhere that you could dress up, I decided that I needed to take matters into my own hands.”

The waiter poured them each a glass of wine and presented a plate of antipasti.
“Complimenti del chef.”

“Grazie,” Kathryn replied and eagerly took a bite of the crostini. “Mmmm...delicious!”

As they enjoyed their antipasti, Chakotay said, “I can see why you like this restaurant.”

“I do... I can’t tell you how much I appreciate all of this.”

He cradled her cheek and said, “I can see it in your eyes.”

“Thank you.” Leaning into him, she gave him a soft kiss.

“You’re very welcome.”

“I hate to talk about work, but I’m dying to know what happened when you left with Admiral Patterson.”

He pulled on his ear, a little embarrassed. “I was going to tell you over dessert. He took me to meet with Admiral Thompson who is head of the Academy. They want me to re-assume my teaching position.”

“Really? That’s wonderful!”

“I think so too, although I was surprised that I wasn’t stripped of rank and escorted right out the building.”

“They wouldn’t do that... not now.”

He shrugged. “I wouldn’t put it past them, depending on who’s calling the shots. When I left, it wasn’t under the best circumstances, and my record for those five years wasn’t exactly stellar.”

“A lot has happened since then.”

“Do I need to remind you that they sent their best captain to bring me in?” He raised his eyebrows.

“I don’t know about ‘best,’ but I was sent to make sure Tuvok was okay. Capturing you was just a bonus.”

“You really would’ve arrested me?” he asked, amused.

“I did have my orders,” she sipped her wine. “Knowing how history worked out, though, I would’ve gladly done it to keep you and your crew out of harm’s way.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard anyone refer to prison as ‘out of harm’s way.’”

“I’ve wondered about that – why they sent me out there with a brand new ship. I think it wasn’t just because Tuvok was a member of my crew. It was because they wanted both me and Voyager to have a test run.”

“Probably. I’m glad they did. There’s no way I would’ve endured seventy years with any other captain... and it would have been seventy years because no one else would’ve managed any of those shortcuts successfully.”

She shook her head and smiled. “You underestimate the rest of the fleet.”

“No, I don’t think so. I think you overestimate them. Remember, I taught a good number of them – either as academy students or at tactical seminars. While I loved encouraging the students to think about using more than just shields and weapons, I was amazed at how slow-on-the-uptake some of those on the command track were.”

“Good thing they had you as a teacher, then. I’m thrilled you got this job. It’s just what you wanted,” she beamed.

“Yes, it is. Far better than teaching about the Delta Quadrant, although I certainly would have done that, too.”

“It’d be nice to have a book before a class is offered, though.”

“True. Maybe I’ll work on that on the side. We could have a variety of contributors.” He held her hand as they waited for the next course. “I didn’t receive a promotion, but they did accept my field commission and will reinstate me as full commander.”

“Well, that’s something.” She couldn’t tell if he was happy or not.

“I’m fine with it, just happy that I’ll be doing something that I enjoy.”

“So am I.” She sighed. “At least one of us has something to look forward to.”

“The perfect job will come through for you.”

“I really irked Wilson, though. At least they’ve let both of us attend these evaluation meetings for the crew. You’re so much more in-tune with the crew and better aware of what would encourage them to excel. This process has been a lot easier and a lot more fun than I expected.”

“Thank you, I’m happy with what we’ve accomplished, too... and we’re almost halfway through. I think in another week, we’ll be done with this part and we can start meeting with everyone individually. I’m looking forward to that.”

“Owen told me over lunch today that the public affairs office is planning an elaborate awards celebration at the end of the month. I hope I’ve got something in the works by then.”

“Maybe it’ll encourage the brass to get it together. Can you imagine if they handed out all the senior staff promotions and commendations, but gave you none? The press would have a field-day with that.”

“Hmmm... yeah.”

“You’d come out smelling like a rose.” He nodded towards the bouquet in front of them.

“Could be.” She brightened up when the waiter served their pasta. “No need to worry about it tonight, though.”

“Agreed. This marinara sauce looks wonderful.”

After lingering over dessert, they strolled hand-in-hand in the moonlight along the river. She casually twisted the stem of one large rose between her thumb and fingers, every so often holding it against her lips to enjoy the softness of the petals and Chakotay’s distracted eyes as he watched her.

When they arrived at a secluded spot under a large tree, she stopped to lean against a fence and looked out over the water. “It’s so peaceful here at night.”

“Is it not during the day?” He stood behind her and put his hands on her hips, gently pulling her back to rest against him.

“No,” she sighed. “It’s pretty touristy and this is a popular path for runners.”

“You love this city, don’t you?”

“Oh yes, there’s so much artwork here. It’s incredible. It reminds me of my Da Vinci holodeck program. Or, I should say that I created that to remind me of here. Tuscany is one of my favorite vacation spots. Just outside Florence, there are wonderful little villas available to rent for a month at a time.”

“We’ll have to do that sometime.” He wrapped his arms around her waist, holding her in a warm embrace.

Resting her arms on top of his, she nestled against him and whispered, “I’d like that.” Together, they swayed slightly, listening to the breeze move through the leaves and the water lapping against the side of the canal.

He asked quietly, "Can you believe we're here?"

"In Tuscany?"

"On Earth. How many times did we go for a walk on an alien beach and dream about the Pacific Ocean?"

"About a dozen, I think." She looked up at the familiar stars. "Although never holding each other quite like this."

"No, not quite," he said lovingly.

"Another trip I'd like to take is into the desert on a clear evening to look at the stars."

"I'll add it to the list. We've got a lot of destinations already, you know."

"You have Hawaii and the Rocky Mountains from earlier this week?"

"Got 'em. And to New England in the fall, too."

"Oh, yes. Ooo... we should go pick berries this summer."

He chuckled and squeezed her gently. "I love your spirit."

Sighing heavily, she relished the warmth of his body against hers. She had yearned for this so many times that she couldn't even begin to count them all. And now, here they were, safe and at home, and it was a glorious feeling.

They held each other in the quiet, watching the rippling water of the river softly lap against a buoy. Chakotay hugged her tighter, and one of his hands drew up to barely touch the underside of her breast. The contact made her jump slightly.

He froze and dropped his hands to tentatively hold her waist. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be." Turning around in his arms, she looked into his apologetic eyes. "Chakotay." She put a finger under his chin and kissed him softly.

Lips only centimeters from his, she whispered, "It has been over seven years since a man has touched my breast. I was unprepared for the little spark."

"That gave you a spark?" he smiled against her lips.

"Does that surprise you?"

"That was hardly anything."

“I know.” She smiled devilishly. “So you can imagine what your kisses have been doing to me this week.”

He returned the grin. “Well, I'm imagining it now.”

They kissed again, and this time, his touch was bolder as he stroked the side of her breast, his thumb barely grazing her nipple. The eroticism of the moment left her feeling a little dizzy and she had to hold onto him to keep herself steady. Foreheads touching, she whispered, “I love you.”

“I love you too, Kathryn. I have for a long time.”

“I wish I could've been more than your captain out there.”

“I know.” He hesitated before saying, “Kathryn, there's something I want to talk to you about tonight.”

She raised her head. “Oh?”

“With my new position, and all that's going to change in the fall, I've been thinking that we have the summer free of obligations, and I'd like to take advantage of that.”

“What would you like to do?” she asked, suddenly anxious that he might be about to propose.

“I know the timing of this isn't the best, considering what you're dealing with right now, with the press and Starfleet.”

“What is it?” It seemed, to her, that his timing wasn't quite right, although she wouldn't want to turn him down.

“After we're done with the crew's reassignments... I'm sorry, Kathryn. This is a lot to ask.”

“Just ask me,” she encouraged.

“Will you go to Banora with me?”

“What?” She did a double-take.

“Banora colony, to visit Sekaya. Her baby is due in May, and I'd like to spend some time with her.”

She looked away, trying to reign in her slight embarrassment for letting her thoughts get ahead of her. “For how long?”

“Until the end of the summer. I’ll need to be back in early August to prepare for the start of the fall semester.”

“Three months?” she asked in disbelief.

“I’d like to help her a little, do what I can. And I’d like to spend some time with my new niece or nephew.”

Kathryn knew how important his family was to him. “I understand. It’s the same way I feel about mom and Phoebe.”

“Spending time with your family last weekend made me want more time with mine.”

She nodded. “I think it’s something you should do, but I can’t leave for that long. Not while things are so unsettled.”

“I thought it might be good for you to get away.”

“But I don’t want to get away. This is where I want to be. With mom, here on Earth. I’d be happy to visit your sister for a week. Perhaps after the baby is born?”

“I’d like that.” He hugged her. “Although I feel a little blue because I want to be with you, too.”

“We can still talk.”

“I know, and we will.” He looked at her sad eyes. “But, hey, that’s not for another few weeks, and I haven’t even talked to Sekaya about it yet.”

“Come on... let’s go back to my house so we can have a little privacy.”

They joined hands again and walked slowly back to the Italian transporter station. The Starfleet technician on duty said, “Captain, Commander, I have a message from the station you arrived from.”

“Is there a problem?” Chakotay asked the young lady.

“Yes, sir. There’s a gathering of reporters waiting for your return. Ensign Young suggests that you use an alternate station.”

“Ah,” Kathryn said. “Yes, the reporters have been following me all week. Go ahead and send us back there, Ensign. We’ll be fine.”

“Are you sure?” Chakotay asked.

“Yes, it’s just after ten o’clock there – still a respectable hour. Do I look presentable?” She ran her fingers through her hair.

Chakotay held her close and wiped his thumb under her lips. “Only slightly smudged.”

The technician offered, “I have a mirror in my bag, sir.”

Kathryn accepted the offered mirror with a smile. “Thank you. The press would have a field day if we returned from an evening out looking anything but immaculate.” Kathryn ran her fingers through her hair, rubbed the lipstick into submission, and called it good. “Better, I think. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, sir.”

Kathryn looked kindly at the young lady, “No need to call me sir, Captain will suffice.”

“Yes, Captain.” She reddened slightly. “It’s an honor to meet you, Captain and Commander. I hate to admit that I’ve been reading the news about you, and if I may say so, I’m personally thrilled that you came through my station tonight. You both are such an inspiration.”

“Thank you.” Kathryn was pleased that she could bring a little joy into this young lady’s evening. “What’s your name, Ensign?”

“Elizabeth Blair.”

Kathryn extended a hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, too, Ensign Blair.” She realized that she was still holding the rose and offered it to the young lady. “Would you take this for me?”

“Yes, thank you. It’s a beautiful.”

Chakotay asked, “I trust that you’ll keep our destination and any observations to yourself?”

“Of course, Commander,” she grinned broadly. “You can trust me, but I’m ecstatic that it appears that the romantic rumors just might be true about you.”

“Thank you,” Chakotay smiled warmly and he joined Kathryn on the transporter pad, standing a discreet distance apart. “Ensign Blair,” he nodded, “energize.”

When they arrived, the technician on duty spoke immediately. “Captain, Commander, I hope that you received my message?”

“Yes, Ensign Young, thank you. I appreciate the warning,” Kathryn responded and looked outside to the gathered press. “How long have they been waiting?”

Young had experienced her press entourage several times that week. “Since about nineteen-hundred. One of them tried to get information on your whereabouts, but I was discreet.”

“Thank you, Ensign. I appreciate it.” She and Chakotay exited the small station into a crowd of waiting journalists.

They immediately began shouting questions at her, so many at once that she couldn't decipher them. She held up a hand to stop them and then waited until they were quiet. “Ladies and Gentlemen, I recognize a few of you from earlier encounters this week, but some of you are new, so I'll restate my expectations of the press. I'm happy to speak to you, but I prefer to hear only one question at a time. Also, I hope that whoever pestered the station technician for our whereabouts will respect my privacy in the future.” She looked at the group, and found a reporter she had seen several times, but who had not yet asked her a direct question. “Now, the young man in the green tunic may ask me a question. What would you like to know?”

Chakotay stood at a discreet distance behind her as the young man tentatively asked, “Captain Janeway, I'm with the ‘Dine and Dash’ magazine, and would like to ask where you had dinner this evening and if you enjoyed it.”

She smiled softly. “You'd like me to endorse a restaurant for you?”

“Yes, ma'am.”

“The restaurant was delightful, but since none of you found me there, I'd like to keep the location private.”

He looked disappointed. “Yes, ma'am, of course.”

Kathryn couldn't help but smile at his nervousness. “However, next time you encounter me leaving a restaurant, I'll be happy to talk to you about it.” She asked another reporter, “Your question?”

“Is it true that you and Commander Chakotay are romantically involved?”

She glanced at Chakotay to read his expression. He was as poker-faced as ever so she felt free to answer as she chose. “Commander Chakotay and I are very good friends and had an enjoyable meal together this evening. We've had a busy week following up on Voyager's debriefings and took this evening to enjoy a wonderful meal. Next question?” she asked another.

“Can you confirm that you will be accepting an ambassadorial posting?”

“Ambassador?” Kathryn asked, finding the question hitting a little too close to home. “Where did you hear that?”

“A rumor that is circulating.”

“It’s a false rumor.”

Another reporter jumped in with a question. “Does that mean you might be continuing as Captain of Voyager?”

“My next position has not been determined yet, nor has the future of Voyager. She’s a fine ship and served us well.”

“Have you received any offers?” asked another.

Kathryn phrased her answer carefully, “My next position will be announced by Starfleet when the time is right.”

Another reporter asked, “Commander Chakotay, has Starfleet discussed any options with you yet? Will you be promoted to Captain?”

He stepped forward to join her. “As with the Captain’s next assignment, I’m confident that an announcement will be made once everyone’s future has been determined.”

Kathryn said, “Now, if you’ll excuse us, I think that’s enough for this evening. Thank you all for your continued interest in our wellbeing.”

She smiled graciously and touched several shoulders as she stepped through the group of reporters. When they were out of earshot, Kathryn said, “I was going to ask you in for a nightcap, but if they’re watching us this closely, I’m not sure that’d be a good idea.”

He said, “We have nothing to hide.”

“No, but until everything settles a bit, I’d rather the media focus on us professionally, as opposed to romantic rumors. They could help me if I play it right.”

“Agreed.”

“That doesn’t mean you can’t come inside for a couple minutes though,” she said playfully.

After Chakotay left that evening, Kathryn sat down at her comm terminal to check her messages. She touched her tingling lips, an end result of a very long and very passionate kiss that left her body humming with arousal. He’d taken advantage of her invitation to

touch her body more intimately, and although he'd only gone so far as fondling her breasts, she'd loved every minute of it.

After skimming through various messages from her crew, she saw that her mom had left one earlier asking for a return call when Kathryn had a chance. She placed the call and when her mom answered wearing her robe, Kathryn said, "I hope I didn't wake you."

"Of course not. I asked you to call me, no matter what time it was."

"Is everything okay?"

"I was going to ask you that." Gretchen widened her eyes. "So?"

"What?" Kathryn wondered what she might be missing.

"Any news from tonight?"

"No, why do you ask?"

"A romantic dinner in Tuscany? I thought perhaps he might... well... propose!"

Kathryn sighed and looked wistfully at her mother. "You know, for a couple minutes, I thought he might."

"He didn't?" Gretchen looked shocked.

"No, but he asked me to go with him to visit his sister for three months." She held up a hand, "Before you worry, I said no."

"Three months? That's an awfully long visit."

"I think so too, but I can also understand that he wants to reconnect with his family, and his sister is expecting the baby soon."

Gretchen looked crestfallen. "I really thought he might propose."

"I know," Kathryn interrupted. "I did, too."

"I hope you don't mind me asking, but do you want to marry him?"

"This rekindled relationship is still pretty new."

"He's good for you."

“Yes, he is,” she remembered saying that exact thing to him just a few days ago. “Eventually, I hope we’ll arrive at the point of discussing marriage, but I’m relieved that he wasn’t thinking about it just yet. Things are too unsettled with our careers right now.”

“All right, although you’ve known him a long time. I don’t think anyone could say you two were ‘jumping’ into anything. When will he be leaving?”

“Not for a few weeks.”

“After he goes, we’ll have to take another spa trip. I imagine you’ll need it.”

“Sounds wonderful, Mom. Let’s plan it.” She fought a yawn. “For now, we need sleep. I’ll bet you’re even more tired than I.”

“Goodnight, dear. We’ll talk more tomorrow.”

Halfway through the following week, Kathryn and Chakotay were in the middle of a heated argument with the crew’s review board over the future of the former Equinox crew when Admiral Patterson said, “All right everyone, let’s try to focus on just the facts. Captain, your report of the incident with the Equinox indicates that you believed the entire crew to be guilty of these crimes, either directly or indirectly, because they followed immoral orders. Did you not?”

Kathryn was relieved that Patterson had taken over the lead of the discussion because Admiral Hayes was getting on her nerves. “At the time of the incident, yes, I did. However, I’ve already noted that we have several follow-up reports on each of the five individuals which state that they are capable officers who found themselves in an impossible situation. I believe that they were all in a no-win situation because of Ransom’s incomprehensible decisions and deficient leadership.”

“Yet you stripped them of rank and did not reinstate it. Why do you ask that we reinstate their rank now?” Patterson asked calmly.

“They have all proved themselves worthy. There has not been one incident that gave me concern about their ability to make sound ethical decisions.”

Captain Johnson remarked, “Except of course, killing countless life-forms to create fuel.”

Patterson said to Kathryn, “I appreciate that you earned their loyalty over time, but I have my doubts as to whether you or any other commanding officer would knowingly put them in a leadership position. Personally, I can’t imagine any starship captain would want them on their ship.”

Chakotay said, "They are hard workers and eager to make amends. It's quite possible that none of them will want to go into space again. They suffered through a very traumatic situation. The Equinox was nothing like Voyager. There was no community development, no desire to explore... only fear and isolation."

"All right," Patterson said. "If that's true, then I think we should recommend that each of them undergo further psychological evaluation before we can make a decision. Meanwhile, we need to decide what to offer them as enlisted personnel."

Kathryn said, "I'll agree to that on one condition: They should have the choice on whether or not they want to accept positions until those evaluations are complete. Regardless of their decision to remain on active duty, I want Starfleet counselors available to them for the rest of their lives, if needed. We will not simply cut them loose. They were in this situation because they were in Starfleet, and I won't stand for turning our backs on them."

"Of course, Captain." Patterson assured her. "I'd like to make that option available for everyone on Voyager."

Chakotay said, "I suggest a research position in engine design for Gilmore. Morrow and Sofin would enjoy biological or chemical research. Lessing and Tassoni would do well in security."

As Patterson was about to comment, Kathryn felt the tingle of a transporter beam grab hold of her. Before she was completely gone, she heard Chakotay yell, "Kathryn!" and Patterson shout, "Security!"

She re-materialized standing face to face with a disdainful Captain Braxton on the Timeship Relativity. With great contempt, he sneered, "Well, well, well... Janeway. We meet again."

Kathryn could feel a headache starting already. "Be sure that when you send me back, you put me right back where you found me. Chakotay is about to have a coronary."

"Who says you're going back?" Braxton looked far too smug for her liking.

END Part 4