

The Future is Ours – Part 6

“Holding the Cards”

By Dawn

Rated PG-13 to NC-17

Summary: The plot thickens and Kathryn has to make a decision.

Kathryn waited in Patterson’s private dining room for him to arrive for their lunch appointment. She noticed that a third place had been set at the table, but decided that she would find out who it was for soon enough. In the meantime, she took advantage of the quiet time to read over the report he had sent, because she hadn’t felt like reading it the night before.

She soon came to the conclusion that although there was a vast amount of information, the report was basically an outline of the formations and dissolutions of Federation members and alliances during and since the war. It was all a bit dry.

Admirals Patterson and Paris walked in together. “Hello, Katie. I didn’t think you’d mind if I invited Owen?”

“Of course not,” Kathryn smiled at her two favorite admirals, both old friends of her father’s. “Saves me from listening to each of you prattle on separately,” she joked.

“Come now, Katie,” Paris said as he took a chair. “We can’t be as bad as some we know, can we?”

They unfolded their napkins as Kathryn said, “Not quite at the windbag stage, no.”

After the meal was served and they were alone, Patterson asked, “Did you have a chance to read the report?”

“I skimmed through it.” She held up the PADD. “There are a lot of details here.”

“What’s your take on it?” he asked.

Kathryn gathered her thoughts. “Without studying each set of circumstances, it seems like it’s a considerable amount of activity for just four years. However, I assume that would be the norm in the midst of a war when fear is a controlling factor.”

Patterson commented, “I won’t deny that fear has a lot to do with it, but in my opinion, it’s an exorbitant amount of activity.”

“Is that Starfleet’s take on it, as well?” She was afraid she might say something that would tip her hand about her knowledge of the future.

Paris said, “Not exactly. Starfleet is being passive about all the changes in Federation membership. They’re leaving it to the ambassadors and Federation council rather than taking any initiative to let our captains be proactive. Things have been changing so fast that we’re handing out orders that make it appear that our right hand doesn’t know what our left hand is doing.”

Patterson added, “From day to day, we can’t be certain who is in and who is out.”

Kathryn asked, “You must suspect a cause?”

“Of course we do,” Paris said, “But it’s not something we can bring to the table without stirring up a heap of trouble.”

“And since I seem to be good at trouble?” Kathryn guessed.

“Of course not,” Patterson interrupted. “However, you’re an unbiased party because you haven’t been involved in the politics of the war.”

“I have been a little, by supporting the Maquis.”

“That’s small potatoes compared to what we’re dealing with now. Entire systems left the Federation during the war because they didn’t support our wartime policies and because being a member meant your home world might’ve been vulnerable to attack.”

“It’s natural to feel vulnerable.”

Patterson put down his fork to say, “In the last two years, most of those former members have discussed rejoining the Federation now that the war has ended. Some have followed through, some haven’t. We don’t have a definitive reason why, except for public statements that usually spout isolationism and non-interference. I’d say that the general feeling in the Federation is that President Zife has something to do with it, but that’s not confirmed.”

Paris said, “The Maquis have been heralded by a few delegates as having been on the right track about the war, which absolutely infuriated others. I’d say that public opinion was split until your interview, and now the public seems to be coming out in full support of what the Maquis did.”

Patterson waved the comment away. “That’s neither here nor there at this point, but Katie, your public views have aroused some interest amongst the Federation Council. They’re hearing comments from some of the more disagreeable members that you’re someone in Starfleet who knows what they’re talking about and has the fortitude to do something about it.”

“Surely that must be a small minority?” Even though her future descendent, Admiral Murphy, had told her as much yesterday, she still found it surprising that she could have stirred up this much of a public uproar.

“A minority that has a lot of supporters on the council and from past members,” Paris said. “Not to mention the public opinion that seems to back it up.”

“This minority is quickly growing,” Patterson said. “And they don’t like Zife, which doesn’t bode well for him.”

Paris added, “He’s quickly losing political ground, and he wants to use you to help him win favor and boost his ratings.”

Kathryn frowned. “Sounds like a political hotbed.”

“It is,” Patterson stated. “As Zife’s chief security advisor, Admiral Khurma is trying to find a way to help him before this gets out of control, and things are escalating quickly. We believe that this was inevitable, but your arrival on the scene has been the catalyst.”

Kathryn sighed deeply. Their take on the situation seemed to mirror what the board had said the day before. “I certainly didn’t intend cause a political upheaval.”

“You aren’t the cause,” Paris responded. “But you’re the answer.”

“For whom?” she challenged.

“For everyone,” Patterson said. “Or rather, every party seems to believe that you’re the one to make things right.”

“But I can’t be everyone’s advocate.”

“No, but they can think you are, and you can discretely work for more than one boss and pass information to us.”

“You want me to be a double agent?” She had a sick feeling. “I don’t like where this is headed.”

“Do you trust us, Katie?”

She sighed. “Of course I trust you, but how else would I answer that question?”

“I want you to answer it honestly. Do you absolutely, without any doubts, trust Owen and me?”

“Yes,” she could answer it honestly. “I don’t believe either of you would lie to me, but I can’t say that I’m entirely confident that you know what you’re getting yourselves and me into.”

Paris looked at Patterson and said, “She has a point, Matt.”

Patterson said, “Okay, help us think through this, then. President Zife wants to appease the Federation council, bring members back into the Federation, and increase his ratings.”

“And how am I supposed to help him do that?”

“By working for him as a diplomat. He needs someone with a fresh outlook to initiate new conversations with the wavering members. You’re very adept at that.”

Paris added, “Fleet Admiral Khurma wants to prevent a military incident by appeasing the divergent members until the next election.”

“No one wants another war, but doesn’t that seem spineless?” she asked.

Patterson gave her a look, but didn’t answer. “These divergent members think you’re their answer because you embody the strength that they think we’ve lost because of Zife’s actions. It’s likely that he is the very reason they’re pulling out, and because you’ve been gone, it’s clear that you’ve had nothing to do with him.”

“How do you know all of this?” Kathryn was dubious.

“Khurma asked me to talk to you,” Patterson said.

“And we have friends on the council,” Paris said secretly. “Your name has come up in the security sub-council meetings a lot in the last two weeks.”

“Have any other names come up?”

“No.”

Kathryn stretched her neck, trying to absorb all of what they were saying. “All-right, so we have three parties, who all think I’d be working for them. Who would I really be working for?”

“Us,” Patterson answered.

“You?” She raised an eyebrow. “As in Starfleet?”

“No, as in Owen and me, in a matter of speaking.”

Kathryn rubbed her eyes and groaned. “Now I really don’t believe you two know what you’re getting into.”

“We’re thinking long-term, here, Katie,” Patterson said. “We’re part of a group of patriots determined to remove Zife from office, because we believe he’s the problem.”

“This is not reassuring me,” Kathryn said. She, too, believed that Zife was a problem, but he might not be worth all the effort when she had bigger fish to fry.

Patterson ignored her comment and continued, “We’d like you to gather proof and report back to us regarding what’s really going on with the vacillating members. We think they’ll talk to you, when they wouldn’t consider talking to anyone else.”

“And what would I tell Zife and Khurma?”

Paris said, “Khurma’s only interest at the moment is preventing a military incident. He’s willing to bide his time on the rest of the issues until Zife’s term ends. These patriots are not willing to wait that long.”

“I really hope, for your sake, that this room isn’t bugged,” Kathryn looked around suspiciously.

“We’ve taken safety precautions,” Patterson said. “Zife’s only interest is appeasing the Federation Council and increasing his ratings. As long as you’re publicly making progress, he will probably believe that your image is going to help his image.”

“Even if I don’t agree with him?” Kathryn asked. “Not that I know much about him, yet.”

“You don’t have to support him to work for him. Besides, you’ll still be in Starfleet and therefore, you report to Khurma, not him.”

“What rank?” she asked.

“Rear Admiral, likely.”

Kathryn pursed her lips in thought. If she were to take this on, here was her chance to push herself into a higher profile position. “If, and that’s a big if, I accept this challenge. I’ll need more clout than rear admiral.”

Patterson said, “I don’t think your rank is going to affect your influence, but Khurma will ultimately be the one to decide. I’m sure you can make some demands. You’ll need to in order to protect yourself.”

Paris added, “If you accept this, we need to put some safeties in place to protect you in the event of his demise.”

“You believe that I might be implicated if I were to help him?”

“Not if you keep your public image clean,” Patterson said. “Don’t forget that the Federation and United Earth citizens think you’re the cat’s meow. Your popularity is what’s going to make this all work. Zife will piggy-back onto it, the vacillating members will think you’re the one who can make a difference, the Federation Council will believe you’re making progress, and Khurma will be content if everyone else feels like things are going their way. But this all needs to be about you, and what you’re doing to help the Federation.”

“You want me to become a politician?” She found the suggestion incredulous.

“More like a statesman. You’re definitely someone who’s widely respected for integrity and impartial concern for the public good. I’d say that you have a knack for it, Katie.”

Paris leaned forward and looked at her pointedly. “In your interview you said that the Federation needs to believe in something. We think that something is you.”

Kathryn blinked slowly, having trouble accepting what they were suggesting. “I don’t know about this.”

Patterson glanced at the clock. “We’re running short on time. Khurma and Zife want to meet with you in Paris on Saturday. Will you consider it?”

“I’m willing to talk to them, but I’m not ready to make a decision about this.”

“Fair enough,” Patterson said. “My aide will make the arrangements for you.”

As they were standing up, Kathryn thought of something. “One more question, if I may?”

“Of course,” Patterson said.

“You mentioned yesterday that I need to keep my relationship with Chakotay quiet for now, but I’m not willing to continue that once my next assignment is determined. Will this be an issue for anyone? If it is, there’s no need for me to meet with the President.”

Paris and Patterson glanced at each other and then Patterson answered. “Admiral Khurma isn’t thrilled about it, but I’d say that you’re the one holding the cards. The other admirals who have taken issue with your friendship don’t have any say in this.”

“Very well,” Kathryn sighed. “I’ll be in touch after this weekend.”

Because the lunch ran long, Kathryn was late for the afternoon discussion. She was glad that Patterson wouldn't be attending, because if they had arrived together, it might have been obvious that they'd had lunch together.

The meeting was just beginning as she arrived. Its purpose was to discuss the placement options for Voyager's science team. She was more interested in protecting the futures of this group than any other. As a former science officer herself, she had a special place in her heart for the likes of Billy Telfer, Gerron Tem, Scott Murphy, and Samantha Wildman.

The only seat available in the room was two seats down from Chakotay, so she couldn't say anything to him about her lunch meeting without attracting attention. As she walked to her place, she used one of their old signals; she made eye contact and rubbed her ear to assure him that there was nothing to worry about at the moment. He nodded in return.

During the afternoon break, she still didn't have a chance to say anything to him because there were so many people in the room. Whenever she and Chakotay tried to get close enough to whisper, someone would interrupt them. This was the first time some of the Academy and Starfleet science officers had met the famous command team, and they all wanted to shake hands and ask about Voyager. She and Chakotay spent the entire break answering a lot of excited questions about Voyager's scientific discoveries.

As they were being called back to their seats, Chakotay whispered, "Can we talk over dinner?"

Kathryn asked, "My house?"

Chakotay nodded and smiled just enough to show his dimples.

The afternoon dragged by slowly because they kept getting off-topic. Admiral Johansen had a hard time keeping the group focused on the crew rather than on the discoveries that they made. To Kathryn's surprise, they managed to find at least two options to offer each of Voyager's scientists and still adjourn the meeting at a reasonable hour.

Because of their popularity, Kathryn and Chakotay were frequently detained on their way to the door. When they thought they had finally broken free, Captain Hernandez, chair of the Academy Sciences department stopped them. He extended them an invitation to join a large group for dinner so they could talk more about the Delta Quadrant, and he wouldn't take no for an answer.

Kathryn could see that Chakotay was trying to contain his amusement with the situation, and she answered for both of them. "Thank you, Captain, we'd be honored to join you. However, before we go, I'd like just a moment to speak with Commander Chakotay alone."

“Of course! Absolutely!” He ushered everyone quickly out of the room. “We’ll meet you in the atrium,” he said as he closed the door behind him.

When they were alone, Chakotay laughed and said, “I’m sorry, Kathryn.”

She found it amusing, too. “It’s fine. After all, we should start socializing with new people at some point. Why not now?”

Chakotay put his hands on her hips and brought them together. “We’ve just been alone for so long that it seems strange, doesn’t it?”

“A little, but this group seems nice. Some of them will be your colleagues at the Academy, and I do like to spend time with fellow scientists. Helps me get back to my roots.”

“So, how did your lunch go? You indicated that there was nothing to worry about?”

“Nothing to worry about this afternoon, but it was daunting. I think that’s a good description.” It had been the same word she’d used to describe her visit to the Timeship Relatively the day before, but it was equally as appropriate.

“Oh?” He looked worried.

“President Zife wants to meet with me about opening a dialogue with the wavering Federation members, disillusioned past-members, and nervous allies.”

Chakotay furrowed his brow. “I have no doubt that you’re perfect for the job, but it doesn’t sound like you’d be on Earth much.”

“Perhaps, perhaps not. I might be able to work around that depending on who I’d be talking to.” Looking around, she tried to decide whether this room was secure or not. Unsure, she stood on her toes to get as close to his ear as possible and tried to make it appear like she was kissing his neck. She whispered, “There’s a group that wants me to report back to them without certain parties knowing.”

He turned his head to look her in the eye, his face showing anxiety. “Double agent?” he whispered.

She nodded discreetly, hoping he could read in her face how uncertain she was about it.

“I have a bad feeling about this, Kathryn.”

“I share your concerns, but I’d like to keep an open mind until I return from Paris this weekend.”

“This weekend?”

“Yes, I think I’ll learn a lot by talking to Zife, and I need to do some reading. Then we can talk about it.”

His face showed disappointment. “I was orchestrating a plan for taking a weekend trip alone without the press getting wind of it. I wanted to surprise you.”

She touched his face, smiling. “Thank you, I would love that. I’ll let Patterson’s aide know that I’ll go to Paris next week. I’m sure you can handle the crew’s conferences without me.”

“No, you can’t put this off,” he said with understanding.

She laid a hand on his chest and fingered his zipper. “I don’t want to put us off, either.”

“We’ll have some time next week.”

“Maybe we can get away for a couple of days after the celebration,” she suggested.

“Tom is planning a big picnic for the Voyagers on that Sunday, and then I’m leaving the next day.”

“You are? So soon?”

“I didn’t tell you?”

She felt sad. “You said it’d be a couple of weeks. I just didn’t expect the time to fly by so fast.”

“Sekaya invited me to attend a harvest festival next Wednesday and it’s a two-day trip.”

She thought for a moment and asked, “Is the invitation still open for me to join you?”

“Of course, but can you?”

“Well, people keep telling me I’m holding the cards here, so why not? I don’t know how long I can stay, but I’d love to meet your sister.”

“It would mean so much to me.”

“We can take a private transport and have some time alone on the trip.”

“I don’t know. That could be costly.”

“Don’t worry; I’ll take care of it. It’ll be nice to have the privacy.”

“If you’re sure?”

“I am.” She stretched up and kissed him. “We’d better go, they’re waiting on us.”

Kathryn got back to her hotel room in Paris, took her boots off, and lay down on the bed. She felt exhausted, both physically and mentally. The time change had disrupted her sleep schedule, and all of her waking hours during the last two days had been spent reading, listening, or talking about politics.

“Computer, play a recording of Tchaikovsky’s Symphony No. 4.” She let her breathing deepen in hopes that she’d fall asleep, but after fifteen minutes, she decided it was a hopeless cause. It was early evening in Paris, so that meant it was still Saturday morning in San Francisco.

She sat at the comm terminal and called Chakotay, not sure if he’d be at home. Smiling in relief when he answered the call, she merely said, “Hi.”

“Hey there. You look exhausted.”

“I am,” she groaned.

“Are you on a break? How’s it going?”

She rubbed her eyes and said, “I’m done. He wants a decision by Tuesday morning.”

“You’re already done?”

“Mmm hmmm... I’ve met with Zife, Khurma, and two Federation sub-councils. There was so much information that my head is spinning, but thankfully, they appointed an ensign to be with me to take notes for most of it. I wish Harry could’ve been the one. He got so good at knowing exactly what I wanted written down.”

“What was it like?”

“Intense.” She tilted her head and looked at him with longing. “Have you made plans for the rest of the weekend?”

“I’m having dinner with Captain Hernandez and his wife tonight, and B’Elanna invited me over tomorrow afternoon.”

“B’Elanna...” Kathryn slapped her forehead. “I completely forgot that I was supposed to talk to her.”

“About what?”

“What she wants to do next. I’ve been so preoccupied.”

“It’s understandable. There’s still time before her conference on Monday.”

Kathryn felt terrible about it. “To be honest, I’m not sure I have the mental energy to help her think through it.”

“You’ve got your own future to mull over.” He was very sympathetic. “I’ll talk to her. What does she need to know?”

“Just ask her to give some thought about what she wants to do next before her conference on Monday. Does she want to stay with Voyager’s analysis, do ship design at Utopia Planetia, or go back into space as a chief engineer? All I know is that she’s in high demand, and Patterson said he’d find something exciting for Tom to do wherever she ends up.”

“Okay, I’ll call her as soon as we’re done. Are you coming home?”

“Actually...” she felt sneaky. “If you didn’t have plans, I was going to ask you to meet me somewhere.”

“Oh? Well, I can postpone my dinner plans, and if you let me tell B’Elanna why I’m cancelling on her, I don’t think she’d mind one bit.”

Kathryn chuckled at that. B’Elanna had been trying to get them to date for two months. She sighed. “I don’t want you to drop your plans at the last minute just because I happen to become available.”

“And you know I made those plans so I wouldn’t miss you while you were gone, don’t you?”

She laughed again. “How are you going to manage the whole summer without me?”

“I hope Sekaya has enough work to keep me busy.”

“And what about me? I’ll miss you!”

“If you take this job, I suspect you’ll be so busy that it wouldn’t matter if I was here or not.”

“I don’t want to be that busy,” she said sadly. “I really need to talk through this with you, probably after I’ve had some sleep.”

“Let’s go somewhere, then. Where would you like to meet?”

“Hmmm... it’s late March. How about Colorado? We could get in a little skiing tomorrow. I feel like I’ve been sitting in a meeting room for a month.”

“Hard to believe it’s only been two weeks. Colorado sounds perfect, but I’ve never been there. Where should we go?”

“Aspen, I think. I’ll call Phoebe. She and Mike go there a couple times a year.”

“I’ve only seen holodeck re-creations, so whatever you think is fine with me.”

She started feeling a little more energetic. “Okay, I’ll call you back. Go ahead and call B’Elanna. And yes, tell her what you’re up to. I’m done hiding this.”

He was beaming as they said goodbye, and for the first time all week, a sense of peace washed over her.

She immediately put in a call to Phoebe, and when she saw her sister’s face on the screen, her heart felt at home. “Hi. Are you busy?”

“Not too busy for you. What’s up? Mom said you went to Paris for the weekend about a job?”

“Yes, a really big job, but I haven’t decided if I’m going to take it.”

“It’s probably too much work.”

Kathryn laughed. “It is definitely too much work, but you never know, I could change the world.”

“Knowing you, it wouldn’t surprise me in the least if that’s exactly what you’d do. However, if you want my advice?”

“I know what you’re going to say.”

“And what’s that?” Phoebe asked with amusement.

“That I work too much and that I shouldn’t take the job.”

Phoebe laughed. “Almost. I was going to say that unless your job in Paris is to get rid of that good-for-nothing President and re-unite the Federation, you shouldn’t take it. Anything else would just be a waste of time.”

Kathryn shook her head in amazement. “Did Mom put you up to saying that?”

“No, but Mike and I were talking about it. Why?”

“It’s just... never mind. We can talk about it later.”

Phoebe’s eyes widened and Kathryn quickly added, “And don’t try to guess either. This isn’t a secure line.”

“Okay,” she said uncertainly.

“I’m calling because I need some advice.”

“From me?”

Kathryn smiled, “Not career advice. Vacation advice. Chakotay and I want to spend the rest of the weekend in Colorado, but we have no idea where to go.”

“You’ve come to the right place. Do you want to ski or just stay in bed?”

Kathryn’s eyes widened as she answered, “Both.”

“That’s great news! Let me make a couple of calls and get it arranged for you. Do you want one or two nights?”

“We need to be in San Francisco Monday morning at 8:00, but we can transport from Colorado as easily as we can transport from our houses.”

“That’s true. Do you need to go home to pack?”

Kathryn thought about what she brought with her and then answered, “Yes, probably so.”

“Okay, go home, and call me when you get there. I’ll get you all set up.”

“Thanks so much, Phoebe.”

“You’re welcome. I’m so excited about this!”

Kathryn laughed, “I didn’t say you were invited.”

“Even better!” Phoebe looked knowingly at her sister. “Tell me, honestly. How long has it been since you’ve had sex?”

“Phoebe!” Kathryn said in shock, but not at all surprised that her sister would ask.

“Don’t look at me like that. I’m serious about this... how long?”

Kathryn rolled her eyes and mumbled, “I spent the weekend with Mark before I took command of Voyager.”

“Good lord, Katie.” Phoebe was exasperated. “Don’t make any decisions about this job until Monday. I think you’ll have a whole new perspective.”

“I wonder if I remember how.”

“Riding a man is just like riding a bicycle. You don’t forget.”

Kathryn said suddenly, “Good bye, Phoebe.”

Phoebe laughed as she cut the link.

The press was waiting for Kathryn as she arrived at the transporter station near her home. Ensign Young was apologetic, but Kathryn assured him that it was fine. She took a deep breath before stepping outside. Thankfully, there were only a handful of reporters lingering.

She asked with sincerity, “Do you have nothing else to do but wait around for me all day?”

They all stood up at the same time, seemingly surprised that they actually encountered her. One of the reporters that Kathryn had taken a liking to answered, “You’re the hot topic right now, Captain, and my only assignment.” The others nodded in agreement.

Kathryn sighed, thinking how this was as good an opportunity as any to continue boosting that positive public image that everyone thought was so important. “Very well. What can I do for you today?”

The cameras started rolling as the first reporter asked, “Captain Janeway, we have reports that you’ve been to Paris to meet with the Federation President and Council. Can you confirm them?”

“The schedule and proceedings of the Council are available to the public,” Kathryn answered.

The reporter asked again, “Yes, but did you meet with the President?”

“I did. President Zife and I had a long conversation about whether I could do anything to further the goals of the Federation.”

“What goals, specifically, did you discuss, Captain?”

Kathryn gave her standard Delta Quadrant reply that described the Federation, “Bringing together planetary governments to work in peaceful cooperation through the sharing of knowledge, resources, and the desire to explore.”

“Is there anything you can do, Captain?” another reported asked with a sense of expectation in her voice.

Kathryn was touched by the reporter’s expression and the look of hope in her eyes. She recognized that this wasn’t just a reporter, but also a citizen of the Federation... one of the many who needed something to believe in. Answering carefully, Kathryn said, “President Zife, the Federation Council, and I discussed some options today, but I haven’t yet decided how I want to serve the Federation.”

Another reported asked, “What can the citizens do to convince you that we want your help?”

The tone of this interview had become a lot different than any before it, and it struck her that this was probably the most meaningful conversation she’d had with the press, except for the interview that started it all. “That’s an interesting question. First of all, I’d like to remind every Federation citizen that the Council is a remarkable group of representatives who have made it their life’s work to achieve the peaceful co-existence that we have enjoyed for most of the last several hundred years. That’s a monumental achievement, and I want each of you to have faith in your Council that they will continue to look out for your needs.”

A reporter asked, “There are many citizens who would love to see you in a leadership position within the Council. Have you considered running for office?”

Kathryn was slightly taken aback by this question. “That idea hadn’t occurred to me.”

The same reporter asked, “Is it an idea that interests you?”

“I don’t know,” she answered honestly.

“What is your opinion about the fact that so many Federation members have dropped their membership in the last five years?”

This was the question she had been expecting. “I’m saddened that these governments have lost faith in the Federation, but as every one of you knows all too well, war is a frightening concept. One of our most basic needs is safety, and I believe the need for protection is the primary reason why our worlds have united. But when our fears begin to outweigh our trust in each other, it’s only natural to lean towards isolationism.”

“Do you have a suggestion for rebuilding that trust?”

“We need to start listening to each other. Listening, not talking,” she emphasized.

“Do you have anything else you’d like to tell the citizens of the Federation today?”

“Yes,” she nodded. “I believe that we can all help strengthen the Federation by keeping an open mind and remembering that regardless of what planet, moon, colony, station, or ship you call home, we’re all interested in the same five basic needs – environmental resources, safety, belonging to something greater than ourselves, the search for knowledge, and personal fulfillment. It doesn’t matter what your station in life is, your thoughts and ideas can make an impact on the people around you. It doesn’t take long for that ripple effect to make a huge difference. I challenge everyone to focus their energy on what we can do to make this situation better and let go of what we think has gone wrong.”

“Thank you, Captain Janeway,” the hopeful reporter said earnestly.

Kathryn knew they weren’t just thanking her for the impromptu interview. “You’re welcome.” Once the cameras were off she said, “Now, go home and take the rest of the weekend off. I won’t be coming through here tomorrow.”

When she got to her house, Kathryn closed the door and breathed a sigh of relief. She went into the bathroom and looked at herself in the mirror asking, “Why didn’t you freshen up before you left Paris?” She took a quick shower, dressed in a pair of comfortable slacks and light sweater, and then repacked her bags for the next two days. When she was done, she called her sister.

Phoebe answered, “Katie Janeway. You are something else.”

“Why do you say that?” Kathryn was dumbfounded.

“You’re going to run for office, aren’t you?”

“Noooo.” Kathryn said slowly. “Don’t tell me that interview has already been broadcast?”

Phoebe emphasized every word, “On every single Fed News channel.”

She rubbed her eyes and said, “Did I look all right? I’m so tired.”

“You weren’t as immaculate as you usually are, but you looked like you’ve been working hard and that you’re energized.”

Kathryn shrugged, “That’s good, I suppose. I wasn’t prepared for that today. I hope I didn’t say anything that I shouldn’t have.”

“You’re going to change the world,” Phoebe said with assurance. “But first, you’re going to Aspen. I’ve sent you the coordinates and taken care of everything. Our ski gear has been sent to the house, and a delivery service should be stocking it with groceries and other essentials as we speak.”

“A house?”

“Yes, we own it with some other families. You’ll love it.”

“Thanks, Phoebe.”

“Any time, Sis. Oh, and Mike says to tell you that you’re too brilliant to work for Zife. He’s afraid that he’ll suck the intelligence right out of you.”

Kathryn laughed and said, “I’ll keep that in mind, and thank you. I’ll call you next week.”

Moments later, she called Chakotay. Without saying hello, he jumped right into the conversation. “I was talking to B’Elanna when that interview started broadcasting.”

“You saw it?”

“I did,” he gave her a meaningful look.

“What? Did I have food in my teeth or something?”

He laughed. “No, Kathryn, you looked fine. Your Mom was right when she said you should be an inspirational speaker. There’s a reason that the Voyagers would follow you to the end of the galaxy and back.”

“It sounded coherent?”

“Absolutely. You’re always articulate and graceful, even when you’re exhausted. Although, I think our title of Ambassador of Peace and Goodwill is fitting,” he joked.

She chuckled quietly. “That was Commander-in-Chief, thank you very much. I just hope my comments weren’t overstated. I got caught up in the moment.”

“Not at all, I think you said what people want to hear. A little beacon of hope. Maybe you should run for office.”

“I don’t know about that. It might be too much for me right now. Maybe in fifteen or twenty years.”

He said sarcastically, “And this job you’re considering would be just a breeze in the park in comparison?”

“Well, no, not exactly.”

“I think you’re going to have to accept this job or a similar one, though.”

She sighed. "Let's talk about it tomorrow. I'm ready to get out of town before more calls start coming in."

"Sounds wonderful."

"Although the very first thing I want to do is take a nap."

He agreed. "You have been up for a long time."

"Phoebe has everything set for us in Aspen. So that we don't attract attention, would you meet me there? I've had more than enough for one day."

"I'd love to."

"Great, I'll send you the coordinates. Bring your uniform for Monday. I've planned for two nights."

"Perfect. I'll see you there. Oh, and ah... bring that nightgown, would you?"

Kathryn smirked. "I hadn't planned on wearing one."

When she arrived at the house in Aspen, Kathryn immediately felt peaceful and relaxed. It was a large, spacious home overlooking a beautiful Rocky Mountain vista. There were large windows so that the view could be enjoyed from anywhere inside the house. The gas fireplace was already glowing and had filled the house with soothing warmth.

Kathryn looked around for a few minutes while she waited for Chakotay, but soon decided to kick off her shoes and relax in a super-sized leather recliner that was nestled in front of the fire. She pulled a soft throw over her and didn't last two minutes before she fell asleep.

She didn't know when Chakotay arrived, but when she woke up, he was sitting across from her on the enormous couch, completely immersed in something he was reading. Because he was unaware that she was awake, she had a long moment to do nothing but look at him. The newness of their romance and the public secrecy hadn't afforded her the opportunity to really take the liberty of simply admiring him.

She knew what he looked like, of course, but she hadn't really focused on all of the little details that were him. The way he nibbled on his lower lip while reading attracted her attention the most, but the strong line of his jaw was a close second. Her eyes traveled down his torso to the strong legs that were stretched out in front of him, and her imagination immediately sought what might lie between.

The mere thought filled her with fluid warmth so she quietly stood and dropped the blanket back onto the chair. He noticed the movement and looked up, his eyes bright in the glow of the fire, despite the low light of dusk coming through the windows.

“Hi there,” he said, with dimples blazing.

She said nothing, but smiled secretly as she took the PADD he held and tossed it aside. In one graceful movement, she sat astride his lap, close enough to him that her knees touched the back cushion of the couch. His hands grasped her hips and pulled her even closer.

Looking down at him, she ran her fingers through his hair, enjoying the slightly longer length that he had grown since Voyager. She kissed his forehead, loving that he'd closed his eyes to enjoy the nearness of their bodies and her touch. Guiding him to relax his head back against the cushions of the sofa, she turned his face up to her.

While she touched his face, he massaged her thighs, stirring up the warmth within her. She fully explored the dark lines of the tattoo, each crease of his golden skin, and even the small crinkles at the corners of his eyes. She eventually worked down to touch his full, succulent lips which he parted ever so slightly to kiss the pads of her fingertips, pulling one inside to softly suckle. When she couldn't wait any longer, she cradled his strong jaw and she lowered her mouth to his.

The resulting kiss was full of passion, each of them knowing that they wouldn't have to hold back, but still taking the time to delve fully into each intimate step on the way to total bliss. As he kissed down her neck, Kathryn could feel her body craving that ultimate moment and moaned in anticipation.

His hands caressed her waist and then slipped up under her shirt as his lips nibbled along the edge of the low neckline. Needing more, she crossed her arms in front of her and pulled the shirt off over her head to reveal her ivory satin bra that thoroughly accentuated her modest bosom. His slight intake of breath accompanied a twitch between his legs. He whispered, “So beautiful.”

She held his shoulders as he touched her. His fingertips traced along the edge of each cup and down into the valley between. She gasped as his palms cupped each breast to feel their volume and weight. He said, “I've imagined this for so long, but nothing I've dreamed holds a candle to the real thing.”

Smiling, she reached behind her and unclasped the bra, opening herself up to his full adoration. “I usually try to conceal them with the clothes I wear.”

He glanced up at her and smiled guiltily. “That didn't keep me from looking for them, though.”

“I’d hoped it wouldn’t,” she admitted, gasping again as he rubbed his thumbs across her hardening nipples. Her breathing deepened as he brought her into a high arousal using only his fingers on her breasts. She took hold of his hands, saying, “It’s almost too much.”

He backed off by dropping his hands to her waist, but he didn’t let her recover for long before his mouth descended to kiss the swell of a breast, slowly working his way down to her areola before pulling the tip into his mouth. She held his head while his tongue swirled and flicked, making her forget all coherent thoughts. He released her nipple and leisurely kissed down into the valley between. His tongue licked sensuously up to the swell of her other breast and then around to her other nipple as if her breasts were ice cream and he was a very, very hungry man. Low, sensuous moans came from deep within her chest as she arched her back to offer him more.

She could feel how aroused he was and wanted nothing more than to undress him, but she didn’t want to end the sweet torture. Trying her best to concentrate, she pulled on his shirt until he had no choice but to release his kiss long enough to pull it over his head. Her fingers went immediately to explore his smooth, muscular chest and his pebbled nipples, trying to bring him as intense a feeling as he was giving her.

As he continued to love on her breasts, she traced the small line of fur down to his naval and beyond to where it disappeared under his waistband. Frustrated that she couldn’t get anywhere by merely unbuttoning his pants, she was thankful when he took mercy on her. He helped them stand up so they could both shed their remaining clothing. Picking up her discarded blanket, he laid it on the couch before retaking his seat and reaching for her.

Kathryn wouldn’t sit just yet. She wanted to look at him, and allow him an opportunity to look at her. His golden skin glowed in the firelight, his thighs were as strong and muscular as she’d imagined, and his thick erection caused her breath to catch and her legs to turn to gelatin.

He extended a hand and said, “Come here, love.” She let him guide her to sit astride him again, without quite joining them together.

He whispered, “I want to touch you.” Gently grasping her hips, he guided her pelvis forward to open her up to him. His fingers touched her inner thighs, making her gasp and tense slightly. He smiled lovingly up at her and asked, “Are you okay with this?”

It took her a moment to find her voice, but she answered with a deep, husky sound. “Very okay, but it’s been a long time.”

“Far too long. I should’ve seduced you years ago.”

Her quiet laughter broke the tension as she replied, “There were times when you wouldn’t have encountered much of a struggle.”

His fingertips caressed slowly up her thighs as he replied, "If only I'd known." Sliding a finger across the opening of her well of moisture, he added, "But I really don't mind making up for lost time."

She rocked her hips forward, her mouth opening with short gasps as he dipped, stroked, and caressed. Her hands held onto his arms, not quite sure what else to do with them as she felt like she was about to explode. When her body started to quiver, he backed off, leaving her in an intense state of arousal that had her humming all over.

He reached up to bring her face down for a deep kiss, giving her body a moment to come down from its near climax. While kissing her, he shifted her weight back on his legs, and then hooked his arms under her knees to pull her forward. She took the cue and lifted herself up as he scooted lower on the couch so that she hovered over him. He held her hips as she descended in one smooth, slow movement to join them together.

"Ahhh," she cried out, shaking with the powerful stretch and sensation of being completely filled. Her body was on fire, spirals of heat swirling up from her center to make her light-headed with pleasure.

"Shhh..." He caressed her arms softly, giving her a body a moment to adjust and come down from yet another almost-climax.

"I don't think I've ever felt this aroused," she said huskily.

"You feel wonderful," he groaned softly. "This is a dream come true." They began to move slowly, but couldn't quite find the right tempo. He hugged her close to his body and turned them together to lay her down. They lost contact in the transition, allowing for another full thrust of penetration. Once he was nestled into her warmth, they found a tender and sensuous rhythm together. He slowly moved within her, sliding his thick member in and out of her tight, wet channel, escalating sparks of desire as he maintained the unhurried motion. His loving caresses on her legs, stomach, and breasts were only a slight indication of how much he adored and cherished her. He ever-so-gradually brought her body up to the edge of another plateau just as he released his.

Realizing that she hadn't climaxed with him, he started to pull out, but she grabbed him and said, "Don't move. I love the way you feel inside."

He joined them again deeply and caressed her tight bud, bringing her back to a breathtaking high. She whimpered under the exquisite touch, panting and moaning as he swirled around her nub until she finally went over the edge into a sparkle of sensation. Her body shook uncontrollably for long moments afterwards as she enjoyed Chakotay's soothing caresses on her hips and legs.

When she settled down, he whispered, "I'll be right back."

She was completely and totally limp, but as her body began to cool off, a chill came over her and she wanted nothing more than to cuddle up close to his warmth. When he returned, he had a warm, damp cloth that he wiped gently on her thighs. She looked up at him and smiled. "Where did you learn to do that?"

"Make love?"

"No," she laughed quietly. "To bring a warm cloth afterwards."

"Ah, just something I felt the need to do since we're visitors here."

She took the cloth from him and finished, eliciting more aftershocks from her body. He slipped back into his boxers and sat at one end of the couch. Kathryn picked up a second large, fluffy afghan, settled back against him, and covered both of them up.

He held her as they watched the fire, his fingers making soft, slow circles around her naval. "I'm completely in love with you, Kathryn."

She stilled his hand by covering it with her own. "I know. I love you, too." Tilting her head back, she said, "Thank you for this. It felt wonderful."

"The pleasure was all mine, I assure you."

Laughing, she said, "No, it wasn't. I certainly had my share."

"Was it okay?" he asked with uncertainty. "I know it's been awhile for both of us."

With her back to him, she couldn't read the expression on his face, but she could tell by his voice that he was a little unsure. She picked up his hand and kissed his palm. "It was perfect."

His voice rumbled deep in his chest as he said, "Then we'll have to try for that every time."

"I'm already looking forward to it." She lifted up the blanket and laid his hand under her breast. His finger drew long, slow lines along the curve underneath. She thought about her conversation with Admiral Janeway and laughed quietly to herself.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Oh, just thinking about something I talked to Admiral Janeway about."

"Me?"

She laughed. "Yes, actually."

“Last week or back on Voyager?”

“Last week. She wanted to know if I’d been successful in seducing you, yet.”

“Oh, is that what you were doing?” His chest rumbled with quiet laughter.

“Back on Voyager, we talked about how I should try to win you back. I assured her last week that I had, and she wanted to know how good the sex was. She had some interesting assumptions about what you’d be like.”

He fondled her breast more brazenly. “How did I measure up?”

Kathryn leaned her head back, surprised that she was enjoying his fondling even though it was so soon after orgasm. “Pretty damn well.”

“Glad to hear it,” he chuckled lightly and tucked the blanket around them, hugging her tightly. Snuggled together, they dozed in front of the warm fire.

Over a dinner late that evening, Kathryn filled him in on the details of her conversation with Admirals Patterson and Paris, in addition to her meetings with the Federation Council, Admiral Khurma, and President Zife. Before she’d begun to talk, she used her tri-corder and a security scanner to make sure the house and their belongings weren’t bugged, and then she set up a mid-level dampening field just to be safe.

She described everything as best she could without looking at her notes, but there was so much to talk about that she wasn’t sure it was coherent. She knew she was jumping back and forth between conversations, but Chakotay listened quietly and only asked a few questions for clarification.

Kathryn said, “So now, we just need to make a decision on this.”

“Do you want to follow up with Paris and Patterson before deciding?”

“I think if I do, they’ll either boost my confidence so much that I’ll think I can do anything, or they’ll make me anxious about whether they know what they’re doing.”

“Is it possible that they don’t?”

“I don’t know. I trust them implicitly, and I know they’re both intelligent and very astute. I just wish I knew who the other ‘patriots’ were. I don’t have a feel for how well they can handle under-cover espionage.”

Chakotay's face was hard-set in deep thought. After a couple minutes, he said, "I think it would help us to get a better picture of how everyone relates to each other if we can make a diagram, of sorts."

"Okay," she said as she watched him get up and find paper and pencil.

He came back and drew a circle in the middle of the paper. "This is you," he said, pointing to the circle. Then he drew satellite circles orbiting around her. "The one at the top, your 'official' job and top priority, is to the Federation Security Council. You're certain about their desire to engage in open, honest communication with the vacillating members."

Kathryn nodded, "With the final goal to achieve complete re-unification. No one will ever be completely happy, and never has been, but they want everyone sitting at the table again."

"Is there any part of that specific piece of the puzzle that gives you concern?"

She wanted to tell him about her assignment from the temporal review board, but didn't want to complicate things more at this point. "I believe that whatever position I choose should be one that keeps me in the public eye, but I worry that this one might take me away from Earth for extended periods of time."

He wrote the word Earth between the Security Council satellite and her circle. "Okay, what's your second priority?" His pencil hovered over the next satellite to the right.

"Since I'd be a Starfleet officer, I'd say it's to my senior officer, Admiral Khurma."

He wrote Khurma's name in that circle. "And your concern there is that he's just putting you in this position to appease everyone else?"

"Yes and no. I don't think there's any reason not to accept the job based on him being my C.O., but put the words pacifist next to him. He has a different agenda than the Council in that he wants to appease governments as opposed to uniting them."

"All right, third priority. The President?"

"I suppose he has to be." She took a deep breath. "He's my least favorite part of this. I think the public's negative perception of him is right on track. He's not pleasant to be around, and I get the distinct impression that he's lecherous towards his subordinates."

Chakotay wrote Zife in the next circle and asked, "What shall we write next to him?"

"Idiot," she said flatly. When he started to write that, she stopped him, "Don't write that!"

“It’s the first thought that came to your mind, unless you want me to write lewd?”

“It’s not a reasonable concern. I’ve certainly dealt with worse individuals. He was gracious to me, but I didn’t like the way he treated others. Write fraudulent, I guess. That’s a huge concern about accepting this position to help him, because I don’t know if he’s honest. It will be hard to encourage worlds to trust us when he’s not trustworthy. I don’t really care about whether he wants to piggy-back onto my public image.”

“Everyone, except him, is smart enough to know that he’s not going to gain honor by association.” Chakotay pointed to the next one. “Fourth?”

“Can I go back and renumber them?”

“Why?”

“Because I want to put you in a circle, but you’re not my fourth priority.”

He tried to contain his smile as he said, “Thank you. Before I write my name down, do you have concerns in regards to me that make you not want to take this job?”

“Yes, absolutely,” she answered immediately.

“Really? What?”

“Our safety. With so many unknowns about the real problems going on, I think it’s a valid concern. Who knows what I’m likely to uncover and someone might not like it.”

“It is a valid concern.” He wrote his name in a circle and the word safety between her and him.

“In the next circle, write Patriots.”

“Paris and Patterson?”

“Mmm hmm,” she said. “And put the word espionage between us.”

“Okay,” he did as instructed. “Next one?”

“Federation Citizens.”

“A good one.” He nodded as he wrote. “Anything about them that worries you?”

“Yes, letting them down.”

“I’ll write it, but I don’t agree,” he said. “As long as you stick to your principles and don’t forget who you are, you needn’t worry. Just being in this position will give them the hope that they’re looking for.”

“I really hope so.”

“Do you remember a speech you gave to the senior staff after we tried to form an alliance with the Kazon and the Trabe?”

She thought back and asked, “Something about being alone, probably.”

He shook his head. “When it seems as if there are few rules that people live by, it’s more important than ever to hold fast to our own, and the principals and ideals of the Federation are the best allies we could have.”

“Wow,” she said as she absently scratched her cheek. “It’s rather unfortunate that the same speech applies to dealing with both the Kazon and the Federation President.”

“Yes it is. Next?”

“Divergent members. They’re asking for me because they think I’m the only person that can understand them.”

“I doubt you’re the only one, but if they believe that, it becomes true.”

“Go ahead and write ‘letting them down’ between us, too.”

Chakotay asked, “How should I write the one you’re avoiding?”

“Romulans?”

He nodded. “Or should it be Q?”

She said, “I briefly mentioned to each group today the idea of initiating diplomacy with the dropped alliances in addition to the dropped members, and was told by everyone that it wasn’t a priority. I’m not sure how I can work that into this.”

“The opportunity might present itself without you searching for it. I think if this is as important to Q as you believe, he’s going to make it happen. Not that I’m happy about that, but I also believe that Q doesn’t want harm to come to you.”

She nodded slowly, thinking hard about it. “Write the word Alliances, and list the concern as ‘a low-priority’.”

Chakotay did as instructed and asked, “Anyone else?”

“Voyagers,” she said. “Concerns are friendships and timeline.” She studied the chart and said, “Add one more – Family, with the concern being time and safety.”

“That’s ten constituencies.”

“It looks like I’m being pulled in ten directions at once.”

“Not really,” Chakotay studied the diagram with her. “I think that all ten really want the same thing.”

“What’s that? A piece of me?”

“Yes, but that’s not what I mean. Look at the first priority. It boils down to engaging in diplomatic communication with a group of unhappy people.”

“Right,” she said hesitantly, not sure where he was going.

“That’s what everyone else wants, too.”

“Not you and my family. I suspect that you’d all be thrilled if I just retired.”

“No, I wouldn’t.” He shook his head. “I think you’d get bored. You’re very goal oriented and need a goal to work towards. Honestly, I can’t think of anything that would do more good for the Federation than getting these people talking. Diplomacy is a gift you have in abundance, and I believe you’ll find it very fulfilling.”

“You’re serious?”

“I am,” he nodded. “If you’re clear with the divergent members that you are not the President’s emissary and can make them accept that you’re really looking out for their best interests, I believe that they’ll start talking to you. I suspect that you’ll get a feel for the over-arching problems very quickly, and even if you can’t solve them, you can acknowledge them. I would hazard a guess that these people have felt insulted by the current political climate, and as you said in that interview today, their fears are outweighing their trust. You’re in a unique situation to start earning that trust back, and by doing that, you could make this re-unification start happening as quickly and easily as possible. I’m not saying it couldn’t be done by others at some point, but it could take years.”

“Phoebe told me today that I shouldn’t accept any job unless it was to overthrow the President and re-unite the Federation, because anything else that I could possibly be considering in Paris would be a waste of my time.”

“I agree. I wish there was someone else who could do this because I’m worried about the strain it’s going to put on you, but I also realize that the Federation is headed for trouble

right now. Fortunately or unfortunately, you've been placed in the limelight, and there are many who have faith that you're their hero."

Kathryn clasped her hands together and rested her chin on them. His words were uncanny in their resemblance to those of the temporal review board. She studied the satellite circles on the chart, periodically glancing at him too. "I don't want to live halfway across the Earth from you."

"The Federation Council also has offices in San Francisco. And California is halfway across the world from Zife's lechery."

"Good point." She considered the obstacles for a moment before pointing out, "I'll have to travel a lot."

"I believe your desire to be Earth-bound right now is homesickness, and that's not such a bad thing as we begin our relationship. You still have some leave time, then you'll need to get your feet wet, and some of this can be done from Earth. Eventually, you'll travel and that's okay because you like being in space."

"But you're on Earth."

"Yes, and while I'm not thrilled with the idea of you being away, I understand that this is extremely important. Just think how great the sex will be when you come home."

She laughed and looked at him affectionately, her love for him making her feel both happy and anxious at the same time. She broke eye contact by stretching her arms over head and rotating her head to relax her neck muscles. She picked up the diagram he drew and studied each satellite in turn, giving the situation thought. When she got to the Patriots one, she asked, "What if the espionage blows up and I get caught in the middle?"

"I think that if anyone besides me is looking out for your best interests, it's those two Admirals."

She nodded. "I agree, but who is looking out for them?"

"I don't know, but you aren't obligated to tell them anything until you feel safe doing so."

"That's true. I can learn a lot more once I get into it. They only need me to gather evidence for an official action. If I don't find any evidence, there's nothing they can do."

"Right. As unpopular as Zife is, he's not going to be re-elected. The unpleasant part of this can only last another two years, regardless."

Kathryn noted, "It could take longer than that to establish an effective dialogue with all of the concerned governments."

“That’s true. There isn’t going to be any quick fix for this.” After a moment of quiet, he said, “You haven’t told me what your rank and title would be.”

“Khurma told me today. Vice Admiral and Envoy for the Federation Security Council.”

“Impressive,” he nodded appreciatively. “A lot better than Commodore and Chief Ambassadorial Ass-Wiper.”

She shouldn’t have taken that sip of water. It came shooting out her nose.
