

The Future is Ours

Part 1 - "Are You With Me?"

By Dawn

Rated PG

Summary: Missing scenes and additional thoughts from Endgame that include more conversations between Janeway and Chakotay, and between Captain Janeway and Admiral Janeway.

As Chakotay entered her ready room, Kathryn asked, "Any false alarms with B'Elanna last night?"

"No, Tom told me at breakfast that they managed to sleep completely through the night. Well, at least he did." He sat down in front of her desk.

Amused, she speculated, "I wonder if a Klingon's redundant organs include two bladders."

He laughed quietly and then became serious. "Kathryn, I have a confession."

"Oh?"

"Well, not really a confession, per se. But I'd like your advice."

She stopped shifting through the PADDs on her desk to give him her full attention. "Both a confession and advice? Is there a shady secret in your past that you haven't told me about?"

He chuckled softly. "Many, but we're not dredging those up today."

Relaxing in her chair, she said, "Darn. And here I was, hoping to learn something dark and mysterious about you." She'd missed their flirting over the last few weeks since he and Seven returned from being trapped under the Ledosian barrier. He had been brooding and even though she missed him, she was willing to give him the space. God knew she needed it sometimes too.

"Perhaps someday, but that's not what I need your help with. Yesterday, when you asked me to join you for lunch, I should've been straightforward with you."

She tried to remember what he'd said. "You had plans, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"There's no harm in that."

He pinched his thumb and forefinger together. “Maybe just a little.”

“What? Did you plan a mutiny during your lunch break? Reprogram some command codes or something?”

“No, of course not.” He smiled. “I had a lunch date... I think.”

“A date?” That was definitely not what she was expecting to hear.

“Well, I’m not entirely sure.” He laughed nervously. “It was a picnic, but I thought we were just going to talk over lunch in the mess hall.”

“A picnic?” Kathryn felt her stomach tense up. He’d never dated a member of the crew before, and while she wouldn’t say anything against it, she didn’t love the idea either.

“Complete with a blanket and basket. The setting made it a little more intimate than I expected it to be.”

She absently sorted through the PADDs on her desk. He certainly had every right to date someone. He deserved some personal happiness since she couldn’t show her love for him. “So, what is it that you want to confess? Were you making out in a Jeffries tube or something?” Heaven forbid.

“Of course not. I just think I should’ve told you that I was going on a date. I don’t like keeping anything from you.”

Her countenance softened, even though a knot in her belly remained firm. “Well, I appreciate that, but this sounds like a rather private matter.”

“Yes, but you’re my closest friend, and now I want to ask for your advice. It seemed uncouth to ask when I omitted that I was getting involved in the first place.”

“Involved?” She raised an eyebrow and shifted in her chair.

“Well, sort of involved.” He tugged at his ear. “It’s too soon to tell, and I haven’t decided yet if I should pursue it. She’s attractive, pleasant, and very intelligent, but I’m not entirely sure.”

“Who is she?”

He waved a finger. “I’m not ready to divulge that.”

“It’s a simple matter of me checking where you were at lunch yesterday and who was in the same room with you.”

“Yes, but I know you’re not going to do that because I’m going to ask you to respect my privacy. I’m not ready for you to know.”

His lack of candor was annoying. “All right, fine. What sort of advice can I give you?”

“Well, I’ve not dated anyone on Voyager before, and it feels a little... awkward. I’m afraid the scuttlebutt will run rampant as soon as we make it public.” He stood and took a couple of steps toward the stairs to look out the viewport. “I don’t want to sneak around, but I also don’t want anyone to know until I’m ready.”

“Why wouldn’t you want people to know? If you’re falling for this woman, why keep it a secret? Everyone on this ship cares about you and respects you.”

He nodded in appreciation. “The challenge is that I’m not exactly young, and she is.”

“Ah.” The knot in her stomach doubled. “You think we won’t accept the relationship because you’re ‘robbing the cradle,’ so to speak.”

He looked back at her, slightly annoyed. “It’s exactly that kind of disparaging remark that I’d like to avoid.”

She leaned forward, resting her elbows on her desk. “Chakotay, I’m sorry. Please accept my apology.”

“Of course, but that’s why I wanted to talk to you. Your opinion matters a lot to me and as the leader of this community, the crew will follow your lead.”

“So are you asking for my approval to date this young lady, or do you just want me to openly support you?” Either way, the thought of it made her nauseous.

“Both, actually.” He turned to her. “Kathryn, you are the closest friend that I’ve ever had. I hope you’ll be happy for me.”

She swallowed hard. “I’ll do what I can. However, as your friend, I would like to offer some of that advice you asked for... please be sure that you’ve fallen in love with her before you make it public. That way, when you do, I’ll know that I have reason to wish you happiness. I don’t want to openly accept you dating a young crewmember if it’s just a passing fancy.”

“Astrometrics to Captain Janeway.”

Without losing eye contact with him, Kathryn touched her commbadge. “Go ahead, Seven.” She watched Chakotay blush slightly and look away, which confused her. She wondered if he was embarrassed to be interrupted having this conversation.

“Long range sensors are detecting a nebula with extremely high neutrino emissions accompanied by intermittent graviton flux approximately three light-years away.”

Kathryn’s heart fluttered. “A wormhole?”

“Inconclusive. I’d suggest closer investigation.”

Kathryn stood. “Agreed. Send the coordinates to the helm.”

When the channel closed, Chakotay said, “And I thought today wasn’t going to be interesting.”

She smiled and nodded towards the door. “Ready for an adventure?”

“Always.” He put his hand on her lower back as they entered the bridge.

Later in the briefing room, the senior staff gathered to discuss the nebula and the large number of Borg cubes that were hiding inside it. Voyager failed to detect one of the cubes until it was right on top of it, and only Tom’s intuitive piloting skills got them out of the encounter alive.

Kathryn studied the readings and listened to her staff debate, as she weighed the risks of the options. Everything was always a gamble. Take road A or road B, each having a different outcome. Where would they be safer? Continuing in the Delta Quadrant, or taking the risk to get home?

Tuvok said, “There’s no evidence that the cube detected us.”

Chakotay asked, “Where is it now?”

Checking her readings, Seven answered, “Approximately three light-years away.”

Tom asked, “How can they not have seen us? We came within ten meters of their hull.”

“The Borg wouldn’t knowingly risk a collision. The radiation must have interfered with their sensors as well as ours,” Tuvok answered.

Harry said, “If they can’t detect us, we should go back.”

“I wouldn’t recommend it,” Seven replied. “My analysis of the tritanium signatures suggests there were at least forty-seven Borg vessels inside the nebula.”

“We can’t just give up on those wormholes!” Harry’s tension was tangible.

Kathryn hated saying it to him, but she had to. “Oh yes, we can.”

Harry suggested, “What if we tried to modify the...”

“Sorry, Mr. Kim. You may be the captain someday, but not today.” It was her choice. She had to make it. Forty-seven or more Borg ships that they couldn’t detect didn’t give them very good odds. She had been assimilated before, and she wasn’t inclined to experience it again.

It had been a quiet day, and since she had nothing else to do, Kathryn decided to spend the evening on the bridge. It gave her time to compose a letter to her mother, although because of the nebula they had encountered, their long-range communications were blocked until they could clear the sector. It also gave her time with the beta shift officers, who never seemed at ease working with her.

“Captain, ma’am?” asked Ensign Jurot from ops.

“Just Captain is fine. Yes, Ensign?”

“Sensors are picking up tachyon emissions, about one light year off starboard.”

“Source?”

“Unknown, Captain. I’m sorry.”

“All stop.” Kathryn pulled up her screen and studied the readings. “No need to apologize, Ensign, the source is not always identifiable.”

“Yes, Captain. Thank you, Captain.”

She wished they would relax. They’d been serving together for over seven years and she’d never bit anyone’s head off. Well, not completely. “Helm, bring us about and take us within range of emissions.”

“Aye, Captain. Speed?”

“Full Impulse.” Tom wouldn’t have asked that question, she thought. Just for good measure, she added, “Bring us to a distance of approximately three thousand kilometers, and Ensign Jurot, please put it up on the viewscreen.”

“Aye, Captain.”

They studied the readings for awhile longer, but it became clear that she was doing all of the thinking. She needed her senior staff. “Senior officers, report to the Bridge.”

Tom, Harry, and Tuvok were the first to arrive and take their places. She filled them in quickly, and they all began working rapidly at their consoles. It was a welcome sound compared to the last twenty minutes of silence.

A few minutes later, Chakotay and Seven arrived on the bridge. As he walked down to the command level, he asked, "What is it?"

Kathryn answered, "Judging from the tachyon emissions, some sort of temporal rift."

Seven took her place and asked, "How's it being generated?"

"That's what we're trying to figure out."

Although her senior staff hadn't come to any conclusions, she at least felt that they were thinking with her. After several minutes, Tuvok reported, "I'm detecting nadiion discharges on the other side of the rift."

"Weapons fire?" Chakotay asked.

Tuvok answered, "It's possible. The signature appears to be Klingon."

Kathryn stood up and concentrated on the viewscreen. "Red alert." She didn't know who the Klingons would be firing at, but she wasn't interested in getting caught in the middle.

Tuvok said, "There's a vessel coming through the rift."

Chakotay asked, "Klingon?"

"No, Federation."

Kathryn quickly looked at Tuvok in surprise, and then back at the viewscreen, trying to figure out what this could mean. Why would Klingons be firing at a Federation Ship and how did they get here?

Harry said, "We're being hailed."

Kathryn ordered, "On screen." What she saw made her do a triple-take and she still felt shocked.

An image of a much older Kathryn Janeway appeared, wearing admiral's pips. She ordered, "Recalibrate your deflector to emit an anti-tachyon pulse. You have to seal that rift."

Tom turned around to look at Kathryn, obviously in as much disbelief as she.

Kathryn spoke to the older version of herself, "It's usually considered polite to introduce yourself before you start giving orders."

Tuvok said, "Captain, a Klingon vessel is coming through."

The Admiral said, "Close the rift. In case you didn't notice, I outrank you, Captain. Now do it!"

Kathryn nodded to Harry, giving him the unspoken order to proceed. Voyager fired the pulse as ordered and closed the rift. She turned her attention back to Admiral Janeway and said, "I did what you asked. Now tell me what the hell is going on."

"I've come to bring Voyager home."

It took Kathryn a moment to absorb what she was saying. "Forgive me for my hesitation, but... this is a little hard to believe."

"Beam me aboard and we'll talk. Transporter room one?"

"By all means." Kathryn held up a hand towards the turbolift. "We'll see you in a moment." When the communication link terminated, she turned to look at Chakotay, still a little stunned. "What do you make of this?"

He cocked his head to the side. "Well, she certainly looks and sounds like you."

"It's uncanny, Captain," Tom added.

Kathryn frowned slightly at Tom and then turned back again. "Chakotay and Tuvok, you're with me." As she walked up the stairs to the upper level, she said, "Harry, Seven, I want a full spectrum analysis of the rift, the weapons signatures, and that shuttle."

"Already on it, Captain," Harry answered.

She shook her head in amusement as she stepped into the turbolift. "Do you think she's for real?"

Tuvok said, "It appears that she does have similar reckless tendencies."

Chakotay stifled a laugh, earning a glare from her. She said, "I am not reckless. Well... there was that one time that I flew us through the binary stars."

"Of course, Captain," Tuvok replied. "Only that one time."

They stepped out of the lift and began walking down the corridor. Chakotay said, "Tuvok, your sense of humor is as enjoyable as always."

"Thank you, Commander."

"What do you think?" Kathryn asked. "Twenty years older?"

"It's hard to say," Chakotay answered. "But you do age beautifully."

"I'm a little relieved to see that I'm still alive."

Tuvok said, “Remember the temporal prime directive, Captain. The less you know, the better.”

Kathryn took a deep breath as they stepped into the transporter room. She felt a small degree of comfort as Chakotay squeezed her shoulder as he passed.

Crewman Jones at the transporter controls asked, “Ready, Captain?”

Kathryn glanced at Chakotay and then nodded. “As I’ll ever be.” When the blue shimmer of the transporter beam faded away to reveal Admiral Janeway, Kathryn said, “Welcome aboard.”

“It’s good to be back.” The Admiral nodded at Kathryn, but her eyes quickly averted to Tuvok and Chakotay. She slowly stepped down and stretched out her hands to take one of each of theirs. “So good to be back.”

Kathryn watched Chakotay’s reaction. He seemed totally captivated by the Admiral. It had been a long time since she’d seen that look in his eyes, but then again, it had been a long time since she’d really looked him in the eye and showed him how she felt.

Both Kathryn Janeways were accompanied to the bridge by Chakotay and Tuvok. On the way, the Admiral described how she had obtained the temporal device from the Klingons, and how they had changed the deal at the very end. She, of course, couldn’t abide by their new price, so she stole it. Kathryn observed how she was constantly touching one of the men throughout the conversation.

When they walked into the ready room alone, Admiral Janeway nodded to the thermos flask on the desk. “Fresh coffee.”

“Would you like a cup?”

“No, I gave it up years ago. I only drink tea.” The Admiral stepped up to the upper deck and looked out the viewport. “I told the curator at the museum that if he wanted to make the Ready Room more authentic, he should always keep a steaming pot of coffee on the desk.”

“Voyager’s in a museum?” Kathryn wondered about the size of the building that could have contained it.

“Voyager *is* a museum, on the grounds of the Presidio. On a clear morning, you can see Alcatraz from here.”

Her suspicions were confirmed. “You made it back to Earth.”

The Admiral nodded to Kathryn’s coffee. “Unfortunately, our favorite cup took a bit of a beating along the way. It was damaged during a battle with the Fen Domar.”

“Who?”

“You’ll run into them in a few years.”

“You know what? I shouldn’t be listening to details about the future.” Kathryn held up a hand to stop the topic.

“The almighty Temporal Prime Directive. Take my advice. It’s less of a headache if you just ignore it.”

“You’ve obviously decided to or you wouldn’t be here.” This bantering with herself was going to be harder on her than she suspected.

The Admiral dipped her chin. “A lot’s happened to me since I was you.”

“Well, I’m still me and this is still my ship. So no more talk about what’s going to happen until I decide otherwise. Understood?”

“All right. Let’s talk about the past. Three days ago you detected elevated neutrino emissions in a nebula in grid nine-eight-six. You thought it might be a way home. You were right. I’ve come to tell you to take Voyager back to that nebula.”

Kathryn exclaimed, “It was crawling with Borg!”

“I’ve brought technology that will get us past them. I don’t blame you for being skeptical. But if you can’t trust yourself who can you trust?”

Good point, Kathryn thought. “For the sake of argument, let’s say I believe everything you’re telling me. The future you come from sounds pretty good. Voyager’s home, I’m an admiral, there are ways to defend against the Borg, my Ready Room even gets preserved for posterity.”

“So why would you want to tamper with such a rosy time line? To answer that, I’d have to tell you more than you want to know. But suffice it to say, if you don’t do what I’m suggesting, it’s going to take you another sixteen years to get this ship home and there are going to be casualties along the way. I know exactly what you’re thinking.”

“You’ve also become a telepath?”

“I used to be you, remember? You’re asking yourself, is she really who she says she is or is this some sort of deception? For all you know, I could be a member of Species 8472 in disguise. Have your people examine my shuttle. Tell them to take a close look at the weapons systems and the armor technology. In the meantime, the Doctor can confirm my identity.”

Later in sickbay, Kathryn couldn't help but notice how her older self responded to Seven when she delivered the report on the shuttle scans. The look on the Admiral's face was almost identical to the way she looked when she saw Chakotay and Tuvok. Kathryn, of course, wasn't familiar with her own expressions and body language, but it seemed to her that the Admiral was totally engrossed in their presence. Kathryn presumed that something had happened to all three, because it was clear that the Admiral hadn't seen them for awhile. That thought made it a little difficult to hold a steady breath.

After learning that the Admiral was exactly who she said she was; Kathryn gave the order to have the stealth technology from the shuttle installed on Voyager. She hadn't decided whether she was going to follow the Admiral into the nebula yet, but it would be nice, at least, to make enhancements to Voyager while she contemplated the options.

Two days later, Kathryn decided to go ahead with the Admiral's plans. It had been a very busy two days, with every crew member available working on the modifications. The ship's weapons systems needed to be completely overhauled, and the battle armor would require a considerable amount of work to be installed on the ship's outer hull.

She made a note in her personal log that although she'd had some strange experiences in her career, nothing had quite compared to the sight of her future self briefing her officers on technology that hadn't been invented yet.

What she didn't say in her personal log was how uncomfortable the situation made her. She tried to keep her distance because it was just too odd. It reminded her of something Harry had said early on in their journey, about an experience being weird. She'd told him that weird was part of the job, and this certainly qualified.

One didn't often have a chance to watch themselves, their little gestures, expressions, and movements. Was she imagining it when she saw a little sway in the Admiral's hips? Surely she didn't do that. She also made a mental note to avoid that hairstyle. It made her look like a grandma. But what struck her most was the Admiral's outward affection towards Chakotay and Tuvok. She didn't think she had ever touched either of them that much in the last seven years total.

Her introspection was interrupted by a call from sickbay. Seven had been found unconscious in the cargo bay. By the time she and the Admiral arrived, the Doctor had already treated Seven and told them that her cortical node had been exposed to a low-energy EM surge.

Seven reported that she had received a warning from the Borg Queen that they'd be assimilated if they re-entered the nebula. Kathryn had been about to reply that the Queen must be nervous if she's giving out warnings, but the Admiral put her off by waving off any concern. The Admiral was confident that their superior technology would defeat them, as it had before in her experiences. Kathryn wasn't reassured, but decided to allow the mission to proceed as planned as long as they maintained a red alert. Her skin crawled with the realization that the Borg Queen was watching them.

Kathryn felt a deep sense of anxiety about what they were preparing to do. She could be seeing Earth in a matter of minutes, depending on the location of the wormhole's exit.

Her older self stood near the engineering station on the bridge and observed quietly. Kathryn did her best to ignore her as they neared the nebula. "Bridge to Engineering."

B'Elanna answered, "Go ahead, Captain."

"Deploy armor."

"Yes, ma'am."

Voyager slowly entered the nebula, taking care to avoid collisions with anything Borg as they scanned for the worm holes. If sensor readings were correct, there were dozens of them in there. The ship shook under weapons fire.

Tuvok reported, "Armor integrity at 97%."

When another volley hit them, Kathryn asked, "Tuvok?"

"Integrity holding at 90%."

"Maintain course."

The Admiral pointed out, "They're looking for ways to adapt."

Another stronger volley hit, and Tuvok reported, "Port armor integrity down to 50%."

Kathryn decided it was time to fight back. "Mr. Paris, attack pattern alpha-one. Target the lead cube and fire transphasic torpedoes." She wanted to shout, "Yes!" when the cube exploded after one shot, but she refrained and kept her eyes on the situation. She told Tuvok, "Target the second cube."

When the second cube exploded, the nebula became eerily void of any cubes. She hoped that meant a momentary retreat, and chanced a glance at the Admiral, only to see a smug smile on her face.

Chakotay asked, "Distance to the center?"

Seven answered, "Less than one hundred thousand kilometers."

As they approached, the image on the viewscreen cleared to reveal an enormous Borg structure, unlike anything she'd ever seen. Wide-eyed, Kathryn asked, "What the hell is it?"

The Admiral said, "Mr. Paris, alter course to enter the aperture at co-ordinates three-four-six by four-two."

"Belay that!" Kathryn jumped up. "Admiral? I asked you a question. What is it?"

"The road home!"

Seven said, "It's more than that. It's a transwarp hub."

Kathryn turned to the young woman and said, "You once told me that there were only six of them in the galaxy."

"That's correct," Seven replied.

Kathryn glared at the admiral. "You knew this was here but you didn't tell me about it. Why?"

"I'll answer all your questions once we're back in the Alpha Quadrant."

Furious, she ordered, "Tom, take us out of the nebula."

Tom asked, "Captain?"

"You heard me."

The Admiral tried to intervene. "I gave you an order, Lieutenant. Proceed to the aperture."

Kathryn was pissed. "This is my bridge, Admiral, and I'll have you removed if necessary. Tom, take us out!"

"Aye, Captain."

Kathryn concentrated on getting Voyager to a safe distance, and then was ready to pounce on the Admiral. "How could you even think..."

"Captain?" Chakotay interrupted.

She rounded back to him. "What is it?"

"May I speak with you in your ready room?"

Her anger was about to boil over, but she could see by the intensity on Chakotay's face that he was going to haul her in there whether she liked it or not. Damn, she loved that look. Without a word, she turned on her heel and glared at the Admiral as she passed. She assumed that he followed.

In her ready room, she paced back and forth in front of her desk, muttering to herself about the Admiral's deceit. Sarcasically, she said to herself, "By the way, there's a gigantic Borg hub in there that could mean the alpha quadrant's certain annihilation is only minutes away! Didn't think of that, did you? Damn, self-righteous, stubborn, pig-headed..."

"You do know that you're talking about yourself, don't you?" Chakotay was leaning against her desk with his arms folded across his chest, watching her walk around and grumble.

"That is not the point!" Kathryn glared at him for a moment and then threw her hands up in the air. "What gives her the right to make these decisions..." She stopped and glared at him again. "Don't answer that."

"Wouldn't think of it."

She tried to stay angry, but she couldn't help but fight a tug of a smile at his comment.

"Are you finished?" he asked.

She exhaled forcefully. "Fine, go ahead."

"I thought you needed a moment to cool down before you threw yourself out an airlock."

Kathryn gestured toward the bridge. "She could have said something... anything... about what we'd find. She obviously knew that was in there."

"Yes, she should have. But, if I may speak candidly, Kathryn Janeway has a tendency to tell people only what they need to know in order to achieve a specific outcome."

"I do not..." she paused, "do that... all the time."

He looked pointedly at her. "You do when you don't think people will cooperate otherwise."

"You know, this is worse than when the prime directive comes back to bite me. This time, it's myself!"

"Kathryn, you know that this crew would do anything you ask, follow you anywhere. And I mean you, not the Admiral. What was clear on their faces just now is the question of why you wouldn't go through with it. This has been your utmost priority."

She stared at him as if he had two heads. "Don't you understand what that hub indicates? The Borg queen has made it clear to us on more than one occasion that she's planning a second invasion of Earth, and this is a door to the alpha quadrant."

"I understand that. But it's likely that this isn't the only transwarp hub."

"I believe Seven said there are six."

“Exactly. There could be a ‘door to the alpha quadrant’ at all six of them.”

“But we’ve found this one. What if we could find a way to use this one to destroy all of them? They must be connected.”

“That’s true.” He looked out the view port and then back at her again. “But, surely we could mount a defense from the alpha quadrant. We’ll know the location of the exit aperture once we’ve gone through it.”

“Chakotay, we make it back eventually. If we have the ability to destroy this thing, we have to try. We might even be able to bring the Borg queen down with it.”

“We’re one ship against fifty cubes attempting to destroy a mammoth piece of technology that we know nothing about. I don’t know, Kathryn…”

“What? Am I being too reckless?”

“Always.” He looked intently at her as if he was trying to decide whether to ask her something.

“What is it?”

“Are you feeling okay?”

She shrugged. “Other than being really ticked off?”

“You’ve been avoiding the crew since she arrived. And you’ve been avoiding me.”

“It’s hard to explain.”

“Try, please.”

“Seeing myself interact with my crew… it’s like an out-of-body experience. And she obviously hasn’t seen some of them in a long time. I feel the need to distance myself from her.”

He stepped closer, a sympathetic smile making his eyes shine. “This must be overwhelming.”

“Yes and no. It’s a relief to know a little about the future, even though with that knowledge, I could make a different decision and change it all.”

He took her hands in his. “Like taking a risk with your life because you’re sure you’ll survive?”

“Exactly.” She studied their joined hands, wishing she could be brutally honest with him about everything she was feeling. “I’ve been uncomfortable watching her. It makes me see things about myself that I don’t like, and I even feel a degree of jealousy seeing her interact with the people that I care about.”

“Well, I do know this... We’ve got the upper hand just having one Kathryn Janeway on the Bridge. But with two, our odds are increased exponentially.”

“I wish I felt as confident.”

He drew her into a hug and said, “It’s not your confidence that makes you exceptional, it’s your intelligence, your intuition, and your bravery.”

She closed her eyes and enjoyed the feel of his solid, warm body for just a moment before forcing herself to let go. She looked up at him. “Thank you.”

“Come on, let’s study the readings and see what our options are. We’ll figure this out.”

Feeling bolstered by his faith and support, she let her Captain’s façade drop back in place as they walked back onto the bridge. She took a deep breath when she looked at the Admiral. Speaking to the entire bridge, she said, “All right, here’s the plan. Gather as much information as you can about the nebula and that hub. I want a senior staff meeting in astrometrics in one hour. I’ll be in engineering. Commander Chakotay, you have the bridge.”

A chorus of “Aye, Captains” came in response.

Seven described the hub as a connection point for thousands of transwarp conduits with apertures in all four quadrants that allowed the Collective to deploy vessels almost anywhere within minutes. They all agreed that it was a major tactical advantage for the Borg and understood why the Queen didn’t want Voyager to see it.

The Admiral was frustrated with their desire to destroy the hub and thought they were wasting time, giving the Borg time to counter their advanced technology. She made it clear that she didn’t think there was anything Voyager could do that would destroy it.

Kathryn told her senior staff to find a way to destroy it and asked the Admiral to take a walk with her. When they were by themselves in the corridor, she was ready to confront the issue. “I want to know why you didn’t tell me about this.”

“Because I remember how stubborn and self-righteous I used to be. I figured you might try to do something stupid.”

Kathryn was incensed. “We have an opportunity to deal a crippling blow to the Borg. It could save millions of lives!”

The Admiral’s intense glare bore down on Kathryn as she spoke. “I didn’t spend the last ten years looking for a way to get this crew home earlier so you could throw it all away on some intergalactic goodwill mission.”

“Maybe we should go back to Sickbay.”

“Why, so you can have me sedated?” The Admiral threw a hand up.

“No, so I can have the Doctor reconfirm your identity. I refuse to believe I’ll ever become as cynical as you.”

The Admiral took a step away to gather her thoughts. “Am I the only one experiencing déjà vu here?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Seven years ago, you had the chance to use the Caretaker’s Array to get Voyager home. Instead you destroyed it.”

“I did what I knew was right, and you know it!”

“You chose to put the lives of strangers ahead of the lives of your crew. You can’t make the same mistake again.”

“That’s what being a Starfleet Captain entails! You got Voyager home, which means I will too. If it takes a few more years...”

“Seven of Nine is going to die,” the Admiral interrupted.

“What?”

“Three years from now. She’ll be injured on an away mission. She’ll make it back to Voyager, and die in the arms of her husband.”

“Husband?” This was too much.

“Chakotay. He’ll never be the same after Seven’s death. And neither will you.”

Her mind was reeling... how could she have lost Chakotay to Seven? Seven? She felt her stomach lurch at the realization that Chakotay was dating Seven. “If I know what’s going to happen, I can avoid it.”

“Seven isn’t the only one. Before I got Voyager home, I lost twenty-two more crewmembers. And then of course, there’s Tuvok.”

“What about him?” Surely not him too, she thought.

“You’re forgetting the Temporal Prime Directive, Captain.”

“The hell with it!” She had to know.

“Fine,” the Admiral shouted. “Tuvok has a degenerative neurological condition that he hasn’t told you about. There’s a cure in the Alpha Quadrant, but if he doesn’t get it in time...” She faltered before continuing. “Even if you alter Voyager’s route, limit your contact with alien species, you’re going to lose people. But I’m offering you a chance to get them all home safe and sound... Today! Are you really going to walk away from that?”

The knot in Kathryn’s stomach was back. She’d been walking around the ship for two hours, trying to focus her thoughts and now she found herself standing outside Chakotay’s quarters. She’d checked the sensors and knew he was in there. While she was anxious about the opportunity to cripple the Borg and protect the Alpha Quadrant from a possible invasion, she was overwhelmed by the personal losses that would come as a result.

The pressure she was feeling was borderline intolerable, and she needed to talk to Chakotay, now more than ever. Unfortunately, she was so furious with him that she couldn’t see straight. Before she rang his chime, she knew she needed to calm down and focus her energy on the important matter at hand, the Borg hub. The door to his quarters opened suddenly, startling her.

“Good evening, Kathryn,” Chakotay said. “What can I do for you?”

To hell with the hub. Fixing a glare on him, she yelled, “Seven?!?!?”

He pulled her inside. “Not in the corridor.”

“You’re dating Seven?!” She turned to him, her fists balled at her sides.

He took a deep breath. “She told you?”

“No.” She stabbed the air in the direction of the corridor. “The Admiral just told me. What are you thinking?”

“Full support, Kathryn, remember? That’s all I asked for.”

“You say that like it’s nothing! How the hell can I support you when you’re dating someone I consider my daughter?”

“Your daughter?”

“As infuriating as she can be, yes, I do feel that way about her. Surely you realize that?”

“So why not let your best friend date her? You know me, trust me...”

“You’re old enough to be her father!”

“I told you days ago that I was dating someone much younger and it didn’t seem to bother you then. Now it does? Because it’s Seven?”

“I was biting my tongue because I trusted you. I thought there might be some chance that you wouldn’t see it through because your better judgment would surface. But Seven? Please tell me you haven’t slept with her.”

“That’s none of your business.”

“She’s so young, Chakotay. So inexperienced. She’s never been with a man before... Chakotay, you’re her first crush.”

“Second, actually. You’re forgetting Axum.” He turned away from her. “Kathryn, you have no clue what you’re talking about. You don’t know how she feels.”

“No, but I can guess. You’re a father-figure to her. It would be like a student dating her professor. She looks up to you because you’re in a position of power. You’re safe, you’re in control. She knows you won’t hurt her.”

“Of course I wouldn’t. Well not the woman she’s become. She did say that she’s forgiven me for trying to kill her when she was fully Borg.”

“How comforting.” Frustrated, she ran her fingers through her hair. “This couldn’t be happening at a worse time.” She felt so overwhelmed.

“Actually, I think it’s a great time. She’s really making progress with socializing.”

“I mean with the Borg and the Admiral here.” She rubbed her neck.

“I know you’re under a lot of strain, but this is not a problem that you have to solve.”

“Isn’t it?” She desperately wanted to tell him how she felt, but wouldn’t. It never seemed to be the right time for them, and now the fact that he was looking elsewhere for a relationship meant that he obviously had gotten over her, regardless of how he seemed to be doting on the Admiral. She sighed. “Look, Chakotay, just be damn sure about this before anyone else finds out. And please, tread carefully with her.” She turned to go, a sadness enveloping her heart. There was so much she needed to talk to him about, but couldn’t. Not now.

“Kathryn...”

Without turning to look back, she stopped. “Yes?”

“I don’t want to lose your friendship over this.”

She swallowed hard and closed her eyes, thinking if he only knew how she felt. How difficult a position he was putting her in. “You mean a lot to me, Chakotay, and I don’t say that lightly. If you’re in love with her, you will have my support.”

“Thank you.”

She left before he could see the tear that escaped.

Kathryn’s heart ached over what she had learned, and then it worsened after she talked to Tuvok about his disease. The decision about what to do with the hub became ten times more difficult because now it was personal. If she kept Voyager in the Delta Quadrant, she risked losing her two closest friends and confidants.

Later in the briefing room, the senior staff gathered to decide, as a group, how they would go forward. She felt this decision was one they should all make together because it tore at her heart and she didn’t think she could make it on her own.

While everyone was in discussion, she kept one eye on the Admiral and the other eye on Chakotay and Seven. The Admiral was looking particularly exasperated at their conversation, while the other two weren’t showing any outward emotions whatsoever toward each other. Kathryn couldn’t help but wonder about how much chemistry could exist between them.

The final decision to destroy the hub and continue their journey felt like both a relief and a burden, although she supposed that either choice would have felt that way. Kathryn was worried that she had influenced their decision because she knew they’d follow her to hell and back if she asked them to.

If only there was a way to achieve both outcomes. After shift change, Kathryn retired to her quarters to give it more thought. Hours later, she still hadn’t come up with anything and couldn’t sleep, so she took her thoughts to the messhall. She sat quietly in the dark, wondering if she could still change their future.

The Admiral came in and ordered, “Coffee, black.”

Kathryn turned at the sound of her own voice. “I thought you gave it up.”

Admiral Janeway sipped at the coffee with pure joy on her face. “I’ve decided to revive a few of my old habits.”

“Oh? What else, besides the coffee?”

She looked out at the stars. “Oh well, I used to be much more idealistic. I took a lot of risks. I’ve been so determined to get this crew home for so many years, I forgot how much they loved being together, and how loyal they were to you. It’s taken me a few days to realize it, but this is

your ship, your crew. Not mine. I was wrong to lie to you, to think I could talk you out of something you'd set your mind to."

"You were only doing what you thought was right for all of us."

Admiral Janeway said, "Well, you've changed my mind about that. And I'd like to help you carry out your mission. Maybe together we can increase our odds."

Excited now, Kathryn said, "Maybe we can do more than that. There's got to be a way to have our cake and eat it too."

"We can't destroy the hub and get Voyager home."

"Are you absolutely sure about that?"

The Admiral lingered a moment, obviously enjoying the scent of the coffee. "There might be a way. I considered it once, but it seemed too risky."

"That was before you decided to revive your old habits." Charged excitement bubbled up inside her again.

She hummed in pleasure after taking a drink. "I don't know why I ever gave this up."

"What will it take?"

"Well, as I see it, there's really not enough room in this galaxy for two of us."

Kathryn couldn't respond to that, but waited and listened while the Admiral looked out on the stars.

"When I decided to come back here to bring you home, I knew that if the Starship Relatively didn't intervene, we might very well end up with two of us. I figured I'd go off somewhere and be a hermit. Let you live your life without me overshadowing it."

"I'd be okay with having two mothers."

Admiral Janeway turned back to her and smiled. "But I doubt you'd be okay with a mother who had all the same friends, loved all the same people. And my heart might break seeing you get to enjoy a life that I never had the opportunity to live."

Kathryn fidgeted for just a moment, trying to decide whether to broach another topic.

"What do you want to ask me?"

Kathryn smiled. "You know me so well."

“Well...” Admiral Janeway motioned between them.

“It’s Chakotay...”

“And Seven.”

“Yes.” Kathryn sighed. “I suppose you told him, too, that you’d support him.”

“And be happy for him, yes. Biggest mistake I ever made.”

“Biggest?” She found that hard to believe.

“Okay, second biggest. The first was keeping him at arm’s length all those years.”

“Is that how you remember it?”

“Well, I wish after that one kiss on New Earth, that I’d never let us take a step backwards.”

“I’m with you there. Especially in light of this thing with Seven.”

The Admiral looked at her coffee. “Old habits are hard to let go. It became too comfortable for us to not cross that line.”

“Amazing how reckless we are, yet we won’t risk our heart, isn’t it?”

The Admiral was silent for a moment. “I’ve spent a lot of time with counselors over the last ten years.”

“And I assume that you talked about Justin?” Kathryn knew the root of her inability to risk her heart was because she lost her first fiancée.

“Some.” She looked down at her younger self. “It seems that the counselors believe that most of my pain is derived from the fact that I’ve lost just about everyone that I’ve ever loved.”

Kathryn took a steadying breath. “Everyone?”

“Well, not Harry, Tom, B’Elanna, and their children. The Doctor is still with us, as is Naomi.”

“But Justin, Daddy, Mark, Kes, Chakotay, Seven, Tuvok...”

“And Mom...” She smiled kindly. “Will you do us a favor? Make sure she sees a Doctor when her legs start bothering her. You know how she waves off aches and pains.”

“Okay.” Kathryn felt like the air had become stifling.

The Admiral nodded gently. “So, it’s really difficult for us to open our heart up to that kind of vulnerability, and I think that’s the root cause of our failure to take him by the collar and kiss the living daylights out of him.”

Kathryn laughed quietly. “We have dreamt of that often, haven’t we?”

“Yes, we do.” The Admiral paused before saying. “Not many people, perhaps any, have had the opportunity to go back in time and try to fix their mistakes. You might wonder why I’ve chosen to return to this point, and not a month ago to save Mr. Carey.”

“I was wondering about that, yes.”

“I couldn’t go back and fix every death. It’s just not possible. But, in addition to your arrival at the hub, I also chose this time because of the status of Chakotay’s budding relationship. It’s not too late.” The Admiral took a sip of coffee. “I’m going to sacrifice my life.”

She gasped, but said nothing as the Admiral held up a hand.

“It’s the only way this can work. As you suspect, the Borg Queen is planning an invasion of Earth, and although she won’t be successful, it will cause a substantial loss of life. So... let me go to the uni-complex in Borg space. I’ve got a neurolytic pathogen that has been proven extremely effective in bringing chaos to order. If the Queen assimilates me directly, this pathogen should bring down the entire complex and all transwarp hubs connected to it. If you send a couple of torpedoes behind you, this hub should be decimated.”

“Let you be assimilated? How can you ask me to do that?”

“Who’s to say that once we do change the future, I won’t cease to exist anyway? Besides, you’re going to promise me that you won’t be afraid to live your life as fully as possible. Take a chance on love. In the end, we will lose everyone that we out-live, but they tell me that love makes life worth living. Chakotay hasn’t yet committed to Seven. Take this opportunity to rekindle the spark between you and don’t let him go.”

“Did he love her?”

“No, I don’t think he did, but he never admitted it.” The Admiral looked away. “As you suspect, it was more the love of a parent, and that really confused matters when they tried to consummate the marriage.”

“I don’t want to hear this.”

The Admiral continued despite her protest. “It never worked. They’d only been married a few months when she died. She wasn’t able to feel those emotions and didn’t have the physical desire to have sex. Chakotay wouldn’t make her.”

Kathryn let that knowledge sit quietly in the air between them. “Did you ever tell him how you felt?”

“Yes. A few years after she died, but because of circumstances and my inability to risk my heart, we never saw that love fulfilled. He was the last of the twenty-two. Sacrificed his life to save mine as we arrived in the alpha quadrant.”

Kathryn’s voice shook as she stated, “Exactly what I’d... what we’d always feared.”

“I held him in my arms as he died. We were both...” Admiral Janeway rubbed her fingers across her palms. “I’ve never been able to shake the image of his blood on my hands.”

Kathryn wanted to turn away, but couldn’t. She whispered, “Did he ever admit to loving you?”

Admiral Janeway nodded. “With his last breath.”

“Oh, God.” Kathryn’s eyes filled with tears and vowed. “I’ll do what I can.”

Kathryn told the senior staff about the revised plan, and they weren’t at all happy with the idea of sacrificing the Admiral. Especially Chakotay... he had been seething that she would allow the Admiral to face assimilation. Kathryn took comfort that he was so worried because he had helped her through the difficult time after she’d been assimilated the first time. He knew that if Kathryn was terrified of it, the Admiral likely was too.

She reassured him that the neurolitic pathogen would work quickly and she wouldn’t suffer long. He wasn’t happy, but he understood why they were doing this. Well, he understood part of the reasons, at least.

Kathryn took a moment to compose herself before entering the Admiral’s shuttle. She found her sitting in the pilot’s seat.

“It’s about time. I’m not getting any younger, you know.”

Kathryn readied the hypospray. “You’re sure you want to do this?”

“Nooo, but Voyager isn’t big enough for both of us.”

She emptied the pathogen into the Admiral’s neck. “You know, I’m surprised that the Timeship Relativity hasn’t intervened yet. This seems like it would be a huge disruption to the space/time continuum.”

“Oh, I’m sure they have a reason. Maybe this will all make the galaxy a better place.”

“The whole galaxy?” She winked. “Just by changing the fates of a half billion Borg and a few humanoids?”

“You never know.”

Kathryn put her hand on a very familiar shoulder. “Well, good luck, Admiral.”

“You too.” As Kathryn started to leave, the Admiral added, “Captain, I’m glad I got to know you again.”

Kathryn smiled brightly and headed back to the bridge.

When she arrived on deck one, the entire senior staff was in place except for Tom and B’Elanna. Chakotay said, “B’Elanna’s just gone into labor.”

Kathryn raised an eyebrow. “Is it another false alarm?”

“I’m afraid not,” Chakotay replied.

“That baby has got some kind of timing.” She stepped up to the helm and put her hand on the young woman’s shoulder. “Are you up to this, Ensign Jenkins?”

“Ma’am, I’m not sure.” Jenkins looked up at her Captain. “Do you think I am?”

Kathryn wanted to tell her yes. “In the past when Lieutenant Paris has been unavailable, you’ve done very well.”

Ensign Jenkins nodded and said, “Thank you, Captain, but I’m not sure that I’ll be able to hold her while riding the shockwave of the torpedoes, if it comes to that. We need our best pilot, and Lieutenant Paris even has experience piloting her through a transwarp corridor. I’m not sure that I even understand the physics behind it.”

“This could be your chance to shine, Ensign.”

“Thank you, Captain, but I think we’d all feel better if Lieutenant Paris could take the helm. I know it’s his baby, but I think B’Elanna would understand.”

“I think she would too.” Kathryn squeezed the young woman’s shoulder and tapped her commbadge. “Bridge to Lieutenant Paris. We’re about to get under way.”

“Captain,” Tom responded. “I’m afraid we’re...”

They heard B’Elanna’s voice say, “Go,” before the communication terminated.

Kathryn turned to Chakotay. She felt bad calling him away from his daughter's birth. Chakotay nodded, giving her the reassurance that she had to do what was necessary. She tapped her commbadge again and asked, "Is there a problem, Mr. Paris?"

"On my way, Captain."

When he arrived, Kathryn could see Ensign Jenkins' shoulders relax. As Tom crossed the bridge, Kathryn said, "I'm sorry to pull you away, Mr. Paris."

"We understand, Captain. She's in good hands."

Tuvok reported, "The Admiral's shuttle has entered a transwarp conduit, Captain."

Kathryn gripped her armrests, feeling anxious about what her counterpart was about to endure. Chakotay squeezed her arm in reassurance. She ordered, "All right, Tom, let's get this show on the road. Warp two until we reach the nebula."

"Aye, Captain."

She felt the hum of the warp engines come online. "When we're in range, Mr. Kim, put the nebula on screen."

"Aye, Captain."

She didn't have to wait long. "Slow to full impulse. Adjust speed as necessary." She tapped her commbadge. "Bridge to Engineering, deploy the armor."

"Armor deployed, Captain," Ensign Vorik responded.

They entered the nebula and Kathryn was surprised to find the path to the hub clear. Not one cube attacked them. When they were in range of the conduit, Kathryn said, "Take us in."

Tom responded, "Aye, Captain."

They weren't inside the corridor for more than thirty seconds when Seven reported, "The Admiral's succeeded, Captain. Conduit shielding is destabilizing."

"Now, Mr. Tuvok!" Voyager fired a spread of three transphasic torpedoes behind them.

Kathryn watched over the readings intently; making sure that they managed to stay completely ahead of the shockwave.

Tuvok said, "Captain, a Borg sphere is approaching from behind. They're charging weapons."

Without hesitation, Kathryn ordered, "Fire!"

“Firing phasers.” Voyager rocked under weapons fire. Kathryn nodded at Chakotay and he jumped up to help Tuvok.

“Aft armor is down to 6%.”

Seven reported, “An aperture is opening in the Borg sphere. They’re planning to assimilate us.”

“Not today,” Kathryn stated. There was no way in hell that she was letting them get their hands on this technology.

“Hull breaches on decks six through twelve!” Harry announced.

Tom said, “I can’t stay ahead of them, Captain!”

“The armor is failing,” Tuvok warned.

“Where’s the nearest aperture?” Chakotay asked.

Seven responded, “Approximately thirty seconds ahead, but it leads back to the Delta Quadrant.”

Kathryn decided on a course of action. “Mr. Paris, prepare to adjust your heading.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Captain?” Chakotay asked. “You’re not thinking...”

She cut him off with a wave of her hand. She didn’t have time to explain. “Bring us into alignment with the aperture of that sphere. Allow it to take us inside.”

“Aye, Captain,” Paris said with uncertainty.

“Seven, when the Borg assimilate a ship from inside a sphere, how do they do it?”

“They use large tubules to tap into the computer core first, and then transport drones onboard.”

Kathryn scratched her chin. “I’m banking on them not being able to get through the armor in time.”

“Agreed, Captain,” Seven replied.

As the ship was swallowed by the sphere, she commanded, “Mr. Paris, ease off our speed as we enter the sphere’s gravity.”

“Aye, Captain. We’re just about there.”

A moment later, Harry announced, “The aperture is closing.”

“Tuvok, ready the remaining transphasic torpedoes. One should do it.”

They all waited in silence until the sensors indicated that they were no longer moving. They could hear clanking on the hull, but couldn't be sure what it was. Kathryn asked, “Mr. Paris, what's our position?”

“Right where we expected to be.”

Seven said, “The transwarp network has been obliterated.”

“We'll celebrate later.” Kathryn gripped her armrests. “Paris, as soon as you're able, get us out of here. All hands, brace for impact. Tuvok, target the central plexus and fire.” The ship rocked under the explosions. She held her breath as the ship's impulse engines surged them forward at full speed.

“We're clear!” shouted Harry as the image on the viewscreen changed from a ball of fire to show that they were surrounded by more Starfleet ships than they could count.

“We made it.” She stood up suddenly, unable to believe it.

Harry announced, “We're being hailed.”

“On screen,” she said, almost breathless. Her eyes filled with moisture as she saw Admiral Paris, Lieutenant Barclay, and Admiral Sylvanus appear on the viewscreen. Her voice choked with emotion, she said, “Sorry to surprise you. Next time we'll call ahead.”

Admiral Paris glanced at his son in wonder and then back at Kathryn. “Welcome back.”

“It's good to be here.”

The Admiral asked, “How did you...?”

She interrupted, too overwhelmed to explain at the moment. “It'll all be in my report, sir.”

“I look forward to it. Is there anything you need?”

“I don't know yet, sir. I think we're still in shock.”

“As are we. Very well, I'll let you attend to your crew and meanwhile, I'll work on what to do with you. When you're ready, proceed to Earth's orbit. Paris out.”

Kathryn smiled and said quietly, “Thanks for your help, Admiral Janeway.”

The Doctor's voice called over the comm system. “Sickbay to Lieutenant Paris.” A baby's cry was heard as he added, “There's someone here who'd like to say hello.”

Thrilled with that wonderful sound, Kathryn said, “You’d better get down there, Tom.” After he left, she turned back to see Chakotay standing on the upper deck with Seven, and she felt the impulse to separate them. Since Jenkins had left the bridge, she ordered, “Mr. Chakotay, the helm.”

She retook her seat and said, “Set a course, for home.” Taking a calm, steadying breath, she marveled at what they’d accomplished. Pride filled her heart as she saw all the ships that had been waiting escort them home.

As the ship moved forward again, Kathryn wondered if the Admiral had felt this emotional when she saw Earth again. Then she remembered what the Admiral had said about Chakotay dying in her arms as they arrived in this quadrant, and Kathryn’s heart went out to her. This would have felt like such a hollow victory with so many losses.

She looked at Chakotay and wondered about what he must be feeling as he watched Earth grow larger on the viewscreen. She had some work to do to make good on her promise to the Admiral to rekindle the spark. She would give it her best shot, though. The Admiral had sacrificed so much to give Kathryn a second chance at love, and to give everyone on her crew a second chance at life. Kathryn would do everything in her power to make sure that sacrifice wasn’t in vain.

The senior staff members were the last to disembark from Voyager. The entire crew had walked down the gang plank, and they were waiting for the roar of the crowd to die down slightly before going themselves. Kathryn stood with Tuvok and watched with quiet interest as Chakotay spoke to Seven. She couldn’t hear what they were saying, but was surprised when Chakotay waved the Doctor over and encouraged Seven and the Doctor to be the next two to leave. Tom, B’Elanna, and Miral were next, and then Harry and Tuvok.

When it was just the two of them, Kathryn said quietly, “I’m surprised you didn’t walk down with her.”

He took her hand and placed it in the crook of his arm. “We’re not ready for this kind of publicity.”

She remembered her vow to the Admiral and decided not to say anything disparaging that could drive a wedge between them. “I’m glad you’re with me.”

“Always.” He leaned over placed a soft kiss on her temple. “How are you feeling?”

She blew out a breath. “Excited, nervous... I’m not sure I can adequately describe it.”

“I suspect we’re going to be asked that question a lot in the coming weeks.”

Smiling brightly, she said, “I suppose so. Overjoyed to finally be home would be a good stock answer.”

“Are you?”

She felt warmed by the kindness in his eyes as he looked at her. “Yes, I am... and the future is ours to be whatever we make of it.”

“That’s right.” His smile lit up his face. “Are you ready?”

“Absolutely.” They headed down the plank, arm in arm, into thunderous applause.

End of Part 1

Part 2 - “Defending Honor”

By Dawn

Rated PG-13

Summary: A continuation of Part 1 that includes crew debriefings and the creation and resolution of a personal conflict between Janeway and Chakotay.

The day that the Voyager crew disembarked was a whirlwind of activity. Kathryn was glad that Chakotay never left her side as they greeted the press and dignitaries who were given the opportunity to meet them. Despite all the cameras flashing and the dizzying noise, Kathryn couldn’t have been happier, even though she had to count on Chakotay’s reassuring arm to help her navigate through the throngs of people who wanted to see and talk to her. The press conference was a welcome relief to the crowds, but only because it meant that people weren’t pushing against her.

That evening, the staff at Pathfinder hosted an informal reception for Voyager and the family members who were able to attend. That group would have been more than enough, but it seemed that all of the dignitaries within transporter range wanted a chance to meet the famous crew, too. Kathryn spent the entire evening being introduced to people that she’d never be able to remember and, even with Chakotay at her side, she was slightly disconcerted. It had been a long time since she had been in a crowd that large.

Her mom had decided not to attend. She didn’t want to share her daughter and preferred to wait until they could be alone to be reunited, but as the party died down, Kathryn felt sad that her mom hadn’t come. As she bid farewell to the last of the VIP’s in attendance, Chakotay brought her a plate of food. “Thank you, I’m famished.”

“I thought you might be. Did you even eat lunch on the ship?”

“Was too nervous. Mmmmm... this cheese is so good. I forgot just how much I love real cheese.”

He chuckled. “You look like you’ve never tasted anything better.”

“I’m not sure I have.” She took another bite. “Mom’s going to have a blast cooking for me this week if I think this dried-out cheese is a delicacy. Oh... do you think the crew is taken care of for their leave? With Christmas this week...”

“Taken care of, including the Doctor.”

“Oh, thank you. That’s a relief.” She hadn’t had a moment to think about it. “Where’s the Doctor going?”

“Jupiter Station to be with Dr. Zimmerman. Lieutenant Barclay is taking him.”

“Is Seven going to her aunt’s?”

“Yes,” he said curtly. “And before you ask, no, I’m not going with her.”

“I wasn’t going to. She just happens to be one crewmember that I tend to worry about.”

“She has already left.” He looked away for a moment and then changed the subject. “Tuvok has been given an extended leave to Vulcan and won’t be back in time for debriefings, but I don’t know why.”

“Medical reasons.”

“Is his family okay?” Chakotay looked concerned.

“Yes, as far as I know. He... I shouldn’t be telling you. I don’t want to betray his confidence.” At his questioning look, she said softly, “He needs help with something that only a Vulcan healer can help with.”

“And if we were still out there, how would he have gotten that help?”

“He wouldn’t have. One of the many reasons the Admiral returned.”

“I see.” Chakotay studied her. “Sometime, you’re going to have to tell me all that the Admiral told you.”

“Perhaps,” she said casually. “So, where are you going?”

“There are quite a few crewmembers that don’t have family nearby, so I’m going to stay here with them for most of the week.”

“Don’t you have a cousin in Ohio?”

“Yes, but I barely know him. I might call on him for one day, but I don’t want to impose. I’ll wait until I have a longer leave to go visit my sister.”

“All right, but don’t spend the whole week worrying about the crew. Be sure to get some quiet time to yourself.”

“I will,” he smiled gently until something caught his attention. He took her plate and drink as he said, “I think there’s someone here to see you. She looks almost exactly like you.”

She turned to see her Mom coming into the room. When they made eye contact, Kathryn couldn’t stop the joyful tears from falling and ran into her Mother’s arms. “Mom! I thought you weren’t coming!”

“I couldn’t stay away when I saw you on the news.” Gretchen hugged her daughter tightly. “It’s taken me hours because of all the security and traffic.”

“Oh, Mom,” Kathryn pulled away to look at her. “You should’ve called Owen. He would have gotten you here.”

“Don’t you think I tried?” Gretchen touched Kathryn’s face. “You’re such a sight for sore eyes.”

Kathryn hugged her again, warmth and comfort filling her from head to toe. “I missed you so much.”

“Oh, Katie, you have no idea...” They hugged for a long minute until Gretchen said, “I think we’re being watched.”

Kathryn pulled back and looked around. Everyone in the room was quietly and happily watching them. She wiped her eyes and smiled back. Loudly, she said, “I’d like to introduce Gretchen Janeway, my mother. Mom, I’d you like you to meet some of my crew, and...” She looked around and laughed. “...and a lot of other people.”

Everyone laughed with her and went back to their conversations. Chakotay came over to greet them and held out a hand. “Mrs. Janeway, it’s an honor to meet you. My name is...”

“Chakotay,” she finished for him and pulled him into a hug. “Welcome home.”

When Gretchen finally released Chakotay, she held him at arm’s length. “She has told me so much about you. Thank you so much for bringing my darling Katie home safe.”

“I think you might have that backwards, Mrs. Janeway. It was she who brought us home safely.” Chakotay glanced at Kathryn and winked.

“I know how this all works, and I know it was your job to keep her safe.”

Chakotay laughed. “I did my best.”

Gretchen took one of Kathryn’s arms on one side of her, and Chakotay’s arm on the other side, and said, “Come on, you two. Introduce me to people and get me some champagne. Now that I’m here, I’m ready to celebrate.”

A week into debriefings, Kathryn was in her temporary quarters at Starfleet Headquarters, going over some notes, when she thought she heard a noise in the corridor. She patiently waited for the chime to ring, but after a minute, curiosity got the better of her and she decided to see if someone was there. She opened the door and was surprised by who she found lingering outside. “Seven?”

“Annika, actually. My aunt suggested that I try using my given name now that we’re on Earth.”

“I think it’s a good idea.” She stood back from the doorway. “Won’t you come in?”

“Thank you, Captain.” Annika came in far enough to let the doors close behind her.

“Would you care for something to drink?”

“No, thank you.”

Kathryn nodded and sat down. Noticing Annika’s discomfort, she tried to ease her into conversation. “How are the debriefings going?”

“I find them uncomfortable.” Annika sat down on the edge of the chair across from her.

Smiling over her coffee mug, Kathryn agreed. “I do too, but they’re a necessity, unfortunately.”

“I suspect Starfleet is attempting to ascertain whether I can be trusted.”

“Why would you think that?”

“Everything they want to know is in the daily reports. I felt I was thorough.”

“Extremely thorough, but this is the nature of debriefings. They like to rehash everything to try to gain a broader understanding. I’ll admit that more than once, I’ve felt like telling them to just go read the damn report.”

“It seems like they’re trying to catch me in falsehood.”

“I doubt that, you’re eidetic memory would make that impossible. Debriefings are just redundant. I think I’ve discussed the last two weeks of our journey at least ten times with almost as many different people.”

“May I change the subject?”

“Of course.” Kathryn stifled a chuckle at the abruptness. “What’s on your mind?”

“Chakotay alluded that you are aware of our relationship.”

“Yes.” She instantly felt guarded, but was also very curious about Annika’s take on the situation. “I believe you had a picnic lunch?”

“That was date number three. Neelix told me it was an appropriate third date.”

“Neelix knows about you?” This was a surprise.

“Yes, well, he did know. Lieutenant Barclay said that he would assist me with setting up communications with the Talaxian colony.” Annika looked oddly uncertain. “But meanwhile, I’m pleased that Chakotay chose to confide in you. I was concerned about his wish to keep our relationship a secret.”

“He’s just trying to protect you from the publicity. The reporters would have a heyday if they caught wind of a relationship between you two.”

“Much like they’re having with the incorrect assumption that he’s in a relationship with you?”

“Yes, exactly.” Walking arm in arm down the gang plank had seemed platonic to her and Chakotay, but the press had eaten it up. Not that she minded it a bit.

“I have concerns, and I don’t know how to talk about them. I’ve thought about talking to the Doctor, but since he admitted having feelings for me, it doesn’t seem appropriate. I could ask B’Elanna, but Chakotay doesn’t want her to know about us. I don’t feel comfortable with the counselor they’ve assigned to me.”

“So you came to me. That’s fine. I want you to be able to talk to me about anything. I hope you know that.”

“I do, but I’ve also been listening to the crew discuss you and Chakotay.”

“Oh?” How interesting. “What do they say?”

“They’re responding to the press’s assumptions regarding your unrequited love. If there’s an element of truth to that, then I shouldn’t discuss this with you either.”

“That wouldn’t leave you with anyone to talk to. Don’t worry about the scuttlebutt, and just tell me about your concerns.” Kathryn wondered if Annika would notice that she didn’t deny the rumors.

“It’s about Chakotay, but I find this topic uncomfortable.”

Based on her conversation with her older self, Kathryn could guess easily what the topic might be, but she decided to let Seven find the words herself. “Is this something you can discuss with him?”

“No, I don’t want to admit that I don’t know what I’m doing.”

Kathryn had to fight not to react. “With what?”

“Intimacy. The biology of it is clear, but the relationship aspect of it is... perplexing. The Doctor tried to explain it to me a couple years ago, but I haven’t had an opportunity to engage in it with a real person.”

“A real person? Were you intimate with the Doctor?”

“No.” Annika absently clenched her fists. “I created holographic simulations to practice relationships. I thought I was prepared for the real thing, but Chakotay is not responding as I expected him to.”

“Well, every man will be different, holographic or real.”

“I realize that, but I was careful to program the hologram with Chakotay’s personality.”

Kathryn closed her eyes as a feeling of dread washed over her. “Please tell me that you didn’t create a hologram of Chakotay.”

Annika was silent for a moment. “I used the simulations that the Doctor created for practicing interactions with the crew, and isolated Chakotay’s pattern. He is attractive, intelligent, and has a strong character. I decided that he would be an ideal boyfriend.”

“Oh, Seven... Annika. Does he know about this?”

“No, I didn’t feel comfortable divulging that.”

She took a deep breath. “Annika, even though we’re not on Voyager, I’m still your Captain. I know you’ve told me this in confidence, but he has to know. It’s a violation of ethics to create a hologram based on a real person without his or her explicit agreement.”

“I don’t believe that he would have agreed if he knew about it.”

“No, he wouldn’t have. He would have suggested getting involved with real people and real situations instead.” Kathryn scratched her head, trying to figure out what to say. “What you’ve done can develop so easily into holo-addiction, where you start cutting yourself off from interacting with real people and instead, become dependent on a fantasy where you can control the characters.”

“Yes, I know. That’s why I stopped.”

“You have to tell him.” Kathryn felt bad for both Annika and Chakotay, because she didn’t think this would turn out well. He was very sensitive about being used by others for their personal benefit.

“I’ve learned that in some relationships, it’s better to live with a small lie than to disclose entire truths.”

“Not really.” Kathryn tried to think of a way to explain. “You can tell someone that their hair looks nice, even if you don’t think so, because it’s polite. That’s a falsehood in a relationship that’s okay. But creating a hologram of someone is a much bigger issue, and once you lie about one thing, it’s so easy to lie about more. Then the relationship can catapult into disaster because of a lack of trust.”

“Whether I lie about his hair or about the hologram, both are to protect the relationship.”

“No, Annika.” Kathryn sighed. “I’ll give you a choice. Either you tell him, or I will.”

“Captain, please don’t say anything. I’ll take care of it.”

“Okay, I’ll give you one week. Please let me know when you tell him.” Kathryn wanted to groan, but refrained. They still hadn’t addressed her real concern. “I think he’ll understand your motivation if you explain what happened and that you’d now like to learn how he really responds in intimate situations.” She paused, hoping Annika would say something more, but when she didn’t, Kathryn asked, “What’s got you troubled enough to want to talk to me?”

“Kissing. We’ve engaged in the activity on four occasions. I initiated the first two and found them enjoyable and unpressured. On the third kiss, he used his tongue, and it was distasteful. I read about it afterwards and learned that it’s common to use the tongue as a lead in to foreplay.”

Kathryn didn’t know if she was amused or repulsed by this conversation, but her ‘daughter’ needed to discuss this with her ‘mother.’ All mothers probably felt something akin to this when their teenage daughters had this conversation. She forced a smile and urged Annika to continue. “Yes, using the tongue while kissing is a very intimate gesture.”

She nodded. “He used his tongue again during our fourth kiss, yesterday evening. And in addition, he touched my breast. I didn’t find it acceptable.”

Trying not to show a reaction, Kathryn swallowed hard and asked, “How did it make you feel?”

“Uncomfortable. I do not like the tongue. It’s...” Annika wrinkled up her nose and shook her head. “And I feel that my breasts should not be touched so soon in the relationship. I’ve read that it’s proper etiquette to wait for marriage to initiate intercourse.”

“I don’t think etiquette is the right word, but it is suggested to young people to abstain from engaging in sexual activities until they’re more mature. One should definitely wait until in a committed relationship, and, even then, it needs to be something you want to do.”

“When the time comes, I realize that I will have to allow my body to be touched, but I don’t know how to tell him that it’s undesirable at this time. I’m not even sure if I want to continue this relationship that long.”

Kathryn was silently rejoicing at this revelation, but couldn’t show it. She took a sip of coffee to cover her smile.

“Have you ever engaged in intercourse, Captain?”

Trying not to spew coffee out her nose, Kathryn forced herself to swallow. Once she regained her composure, she answered, “Yes, Sev... Annika, I have. With both men that I’ve been engaged to.”

“Over time, did you find that you got used to being touched and eventually welcome it?”

Kathryn fought the urge to show a surprised reaction to that question. “Annika... when you’re more experienced with dating and with men, you might find that you’re more sexually attracted to some than others.” Remembering what the Admiral had told her about Seven’s aversions, she added, “It’s also possible that you just may not be inclined to experience intercourse. Every person is different.”

“Is it possible that I’m not as attracted to Chakotay as I think I am?”

“It’s possible. If I may ask, do you feel a tingle when he kisses you?”

“A tingle?” Annika looked uncertain. “Like an energy spark?”

“Yes, sort of, but it’s a pleasant feeling.”

“No, I don’t think so.” Annika furrowed her eyebrows, trying to recall. “Do you find Chakotay attractive, Captain?”

She could lie, but she wouldn’t. “Yes, I do.”

“Has he ever kissed you?”

“Once, five years ago.”

“And did you feel a... tingle?”

“Why do you ask?” Kathryn really did not want to answer that question.

“I’m curious to know if he is unable to illicit that response. Perhaps it’s his problem.”

“It’s chemistry, Annika. When two people are attracted to each other, there are physical and emotional responses to their presence and their touch.”

“Like when Tom and B’Elanna are near each other. Their eyes dilate, their body temperatures increase, and B’Elanna’s scent changes.”

“Exactly.” Kathryn blinked rapidly to cover her slight discomfort with this newfound knowledge.

“I’ve studied their interactions. I’ll have to take note of how Chakotay reacts in my presence.”

“A good place to start.”

“Thank you, Captain. This conversation helped me a great deal.” Seven rose from her chair and Kathryn followed suit.

“If I may make one more suggestion.”

“Of course, Captain.”

“I realize that the Doctor created your clothing to simulate the protective dermal covering you had to wear as a Borg, but I think the time has come for you to find something more conservative to wear.”

“I think it would be nice to wear a uniform.”

“Well, technically, you’re a civilian, but you can wear slacks and a tunic that are similar to the uniforms. This outfit...” she motioned to Annika, “reveals your figure in detail, and most men would assume that you are craving attention and sexual interaction.”

Annika looked down at what she was wearing. “Perhaps that’s why most male’s eyes dilate and their body temperatures increase in my presence.”

“Yes, Annika.” She couldn’t believe that she hadn’t had this conversation with Seven earlier. “It may still happen with conservative clothing, but at least then you’ll know they’re looking at your beautiful face, and not...” Kathryn gestured to Annika’s body, “the rest of you.”

That evening after a long bath, Kathryn let the sounds of Brahms soothe her as she quietly enjoyed a warm cup of coffee. She wasn't far into the second movement when she heard another movement outside her door. She didn't have to wait more than a nanosecond before her chime rang. Not caring if her visitor saw her in her robe, she said, "Come." Her eyes widened as Chakotay came storming into her quarters and stood towering over her.

"What the hell did you say to her?"

Not moving an inch from her comfortable spot, she simply leaned her head back to look at him. She should have expected this. "Please have a seat, Chakotay."

He didn't. "This is my chance at happiness, Kathryn. I asked for your support and instead, you go behind my back and try to convince my girlfriend that she's not sexually attracted to me? After all we've been through? This is outrageous!"

Kathryn scratched her chin, trying to figure out what to say to him. "I know you're looking for a fight, but I'm not going to give you one."

"Dammit, Kathryn! I was just starting to get through to her and then..." He shook his head, fuming mad, and sat down hard on the chair across from her. "I can't believe you'd do this to me."

In her calmest voice, she said, "Chakotay, I think you're misinterpreting what Annika and I talked about."

"I sure as hell hope so, because if I'm not, then you and I have a serious problem."

The hairs on the back of her neck prickled under the intensity of his anger. Now would be a good time to use those diplomatic skills that everyone seemed to think she had in abundance. First rule of diplomacy – get the other party talking. "Tell me what she said."

"No, I want to know what you told her."

Damn, she thought. He was just as good a negotiator as she was. "All right, she was extremely nervous and didn't know who to talk to."

"So you used that to turn her against me?"

"Nooo," she said softly. "Will you allow me to relay at least a small part of the conversation before you throw accusations at me?"

He looked away in disgust. "You were saying?"

"Thank you." She found his anger annoying. "There's a large part of our conversation that I'm not going to tell you, because she asked me not to."

“What about?”

“I’m just telling you that I’m omitting something so that when you do find out, you won’t be angry at me again because I didn’t mention it.”

He glared at her. “What game are you playing?”

“I’m not playing any games. Seven... Annika... whatever... came to ask me questions about intimacy because she was uncomfortable talking to anyone else about it.”

“Intimacy? We haven’t even been intimate yet.”

“I gathered.”

“This is none of your business.”

“I certainly don’t want it to be, but you two are making it my business and putting me in the middle of it. I told you two weeks ago that she was an adolescent when it comes to relationships, and this is exactly what I was afraid would happen. She doesn’t understand the physical reactions that couples feel when engaged in sexual activities. Chakotay, I don’t think she can feel it because of the Borg implants.”

“So because she can’t feel everything a normal person can, you told her that she wasn’t attracted to me?”

“She said that she didn’t feel any sort of physical response when kissing you. Do I tell her that some men will trigger a stronger sexual response than others, or do I tell her that it’s unlikely that she’ll ever feel the most intense emotional and physical response that a human can experience?”

“But how do you know what she can feel? How do you know that I’ll never be able to gradually work her into it?”

She couldn’t tell him about her conversation with the Admiral. “I don’t know what, exactly, her limitations are, but she sat right here this afternoon and asked me if in my experience, did it ever become tolerable to have a man touch me. She doesn’t like the feel of your tongue in her mouth and she found your fondling inappropriate. I think if she was sexually attracted to you, she’d crave those things.”

“Dammit, Kathryn.”

She felt drained. “Chakotay, I care deeply about both of you, and I want you both to be happy. I’m just not sure that you can be happy with each other.”

“How dare you make that decision for us!” He shook his head angrily. “You want to know what I think?”

As angry as he was, she wasn't sure. "Please don't say anything that you'll regret."

"I think you've said enough today that it won't matter what I say. You have just destroyed this friendship."

The knot in her stomach was back tenfold. "I hope when this settles out, that you can find some way to accept what I've told her in the spirit that it was intended."

"I don't see how that's possible, Kathryn."

She shook her head as he left, letting her tears fall once again. This was definitely not what she had promised Admiral Janeway. Time... it's time that heals all wounds. She had to find some way to fix this before she ran out of time.

The next day, Annika stopped Kathryn in the corridor outside of the debriefing rooms. "Captain, I've made a mistake, and I want to apologize."

"It's not your fault, and by the way, you look very nice today." Annika had replicated new clothing that was much more tasteful.

"Thank you, Captain."

Kathryn continued, "Chakotay came to see me last night after talking with you."

"I know. He was very angry when I suggested that we might not be compatible. I didn't even consider your friendship with him when I told him that I got the idea from our conversation. I thought he respected your opinion so much that he would agree."

Kathryn thought about Chakotay, and how much she should continue to say to Annika. It had been a taxing day sitting with him in debriefings, having to present a unified team with his anger simmering the entire time. She tried to deflect Annika. "Have you considered talking to the Doctor about this?"

"No, I don't want to hurt him." Annika paused, "Although it seems that I've hurt you."

"Don't worry about me. It's not like it's the first time I've had a fight with Chakotay." She pulled Annika to a slightly more private room off the main corridor. "What I mean is that I think you should talk to the Doctor about determining whether your lack of... physical response... is inhibited by..."

"By the Borg implants?"

"Yes." She didn't know why she suddenly felt so uncomfortable talking about this.

“He hasn’t mentioned it before, but it’s worth looking into. I knew that it affected emotions, but I’m not sure about physical response.”

“There’s a possibility that it’s all tied together.”

“I’ll talk to him, and I’ll talk to Chakotay, too, about the hologram. I think it’ll make him angry with me, but he’s so angry with you right now that I don’t think it will matter.”

“You might be right.” Kathryn hugged her protégé and saw Chakotay look into the room from the main corridor. She released Annika saying, “He’s waiting for you.”

Kathryn heard Chakotay tell her that he’d be just a moment. She steeled herself as he came to speak to her.

“Kathryn.”

“If you’re going to curse at me again, I’d rather just skip it.”

He looked away from her and then back again, obviously annoyed. “What did you tell her this time? To put me out of my misery and break up with me?”

“Chakotay, I don’t appreciate your attitude, in the least. You are being inconsiderate and rude. I have neither done nor said anything with the intention of causing you pain. Whether or not you believe it, I do care about you and I thought you trusted me more than this.”

“I don’t know what to think.”

She looked into his eyes for a long moment, hoping to see the smallest bit of compassion, but she only saw anger. “Chakotay... today, I only just suggested that she talk to the Doctor about her physical response issues. If there’s a chance that implants could be the cause of her... problem, then she should find out.”

“I’ll take her right now.”

“Let her do this on her own, when she’s comfortable. This isn’t a fight to protect your ego.”

He glared at her and left the room.

The next two days of debriefings went by without any further conversations with either Chakotay or Annika, much to Kathryn’s relief. She was finding it preferable to debate the first contact situation on whatever-the-hell-that planet was named to sorting out Chakotay’s ego.

She spent some time doting on Miral, and talking with Naomi. Both girls soothed her nerves and made her feel like everything they'd been through had a purpose. While Kathryn was quietly rocking Miral, B'Elanna asked her, "Have you talked to Chakotay much this week?"

"A little."

"He's really been in a foul mood."

"Yes, he has."

"Do you know why?"

"Yes." Kathryn smiled at Miral's cute little rosebud mouth.

"Are you going to tell me?"

"Noooo." She didn't tear her eyes away from the adorable little forehead ridges. "He's just angry with me. Nothing to worry about."

"Is this about Seven?"

"She's trying to change her name to Annika." Kathryn looked up at B'Elanna. "What about her?"

"I think they're dating."

Kathryn forced her face not to respond and looked back at Miral. "Why do you say that?"

"They've been spending a lot of time together, and in the last few days, it seems to have gotten more intense. He seems very possessive of her. Maybe she's not putting out and that's why he's such a grump. He even told her to wear different clothes, and he's the reason why she's changing her name."

Kathryn leveled a glare at B'Elanna. "I don't think that kind of gossip is appropriate."

"Oh, sorry." B'Elanna bit her lip and shrunk back into the sofa cushions slightly. "It's just what's going around."

"Well, do your best to stop it, if you can." Kathryn sighed. "First of all, I was the one who suggested that she dress more conservatively. And it was her aunt who suggested the name change. Both are an attempt to get her to blend into society better."

If B'Elanna could have shrunk back anymore, she would have. "Oh."

"As for the rest, just because people are spending time together doesn't mean they are dating. And I can assure you that his anger is entirely directed at me."

B'Elanna was quiet for a minute before saying, "Hypothetically... if they *were* dating, what could you have done that would make Chakotay so angry?"

Kathryn didn't respond with anything but another sigh.

"You told him that you love him!" B'Elanna sat up on the edge of her seat again. "That's it!"

"No, I didn't tell him anything of the sort."

"But you do, don't you? I mean, everybody knows you love him."

"What makes you think that?"

"It's obvious. What I don't get is why he's dating her if he knows. I mean, he's been in love with you for years."

Kathryn told sleeping Miral, "I think your Mommy's romance novels are going to her head."

"All right, I get it. You don't want to talk about it."

"B'Elanna," Kathryn said softly. "It's not that I don't want to, but I can't."

"All right, but if you ever need to..."

"I know where to come."

"Captain?" she asked tentatively.

"Yes?"

B'Elanna fidgeted a little with her hands. "Since we were sort of on the subject of name changes, would you call me Lanna?"

Kathryn was surprised. "Lanna?"

"It's... Well... I had a dream once and you called me that... the time that I wanted to save my mother from Grethor. It's what she called me, and since I had that dream, I've wanted to ask you."

Kathryn was touched. "I'd be honored."

B'Elanna said nervously, "After all, you're Miral's godmother now, and so a part of the family."

"Thank you... Lanna."

“We sure have come a long way since we met, haven’t we?”

Kathryn chuckled. “Yes, we certainly have.” She touched the baby’s cheek. “And this wonderful little miracle is the proof.”

“Who would’ve thought?” B’Elanna reached over and touched her daughter’s dark hair.

“Lanna...” Kathryn held B’Elanna’s hand. “Since we’re family now, as you say,” She smiled brightly. “Why don’t you call me Kathryn when we’re not around Starfleet.”

“That might take some getting used to.”

Kathryn laughed a little. “That’s exactly what Chakotay said when I asked him.”

“Are you really okay with him dating Seven?”

Kathryn shrugged. “I don’t really get a say in the matter.”

“I’ve been worried about you... with all this.”

She touched her chest and felt a surge of emotion. “Oh, I’m okay. I wish I could talk to you about it, but I can’t betray either confidence.”

“Well, he’s a p’tak if you ask me. I know a little about his feelings towards you, and I think he’s being an idiot.”

“It’s a complicated situation.” Kathryn focused her thoughts on Miral and tried not to think about it. She was on the verge of confiding in B’Elanna, but knew she couldn’t.

“If you want my opinion, I think the best medicine for you right now is to get away as soon as debriefings are over. Get away from all of us and be yourself. Find a gorgeous hunk or two and have some fun.”

Kathryn laughed. “Maybe so, although I’m not really interested in playing around.”

“No one says you have to sleep around, just go find someone to flirt with.”

“The press would love that, wouldn’t they?” She laughed again.

“Okay, so go somewhere that the press can’t find you.”

“We’ll see, Lanna.” Laughing with a friend helped Kathryn feel much better, and a long break sounded wonderful.

Harry and Kathryn were finishing up their lunch when Harry said, "I've enjoyed having lunch with you today, Captain."

"I have too, Harry." She smiled brightly at him.

"It reminds me of something I never told you about."

"Oh?"

"Back at the beginning, a couple of weeks after we left the array, you came up to the table where Tom and I were eating. I think you were trying to get to know us better, and after you left, I felt terrible for not inviting you to join us."

She laughed. "Well, thank you for thinking of me."

"You know something, Captain?"

"What's that?"

"Your laugh is wonderful. I don't think I've heard it enough."

"Thank you, Harry." She couldn't help but smile. "Maybe now that we're home, I can relax a little more."

"I hope so." He took the last sip of his coffee and returned to the conversation. "That day, Tom told me that ensigns don't invite captains to eat with them. I was more nervous about being proper around you from that point on."

She smiled over her coffee. "Well, I'm glad that didn't last too long. It would've been a long seven years if everyone had been afraid to interact with me."

Chakotay stepped up to the table and asked, "Harry, could I speak to the Captain alone for a moment, please?"

"Of course, Commander." Harry picked up their empty food trays and said, "Thank you for lunch, Captain."

"Any time." She watched Chakotay as he sat down without making eye contact with her. They hadn't spoken privately in over four days and she was wondering whether Annika had been straightforward with him.

"Did I interrupt your lunch?" he asked gruffly.

"We were finished."

He glanced at her and accused, “Was the hologram the part of your conversation that you wouldn’t tell me about?”

“Yes.”

“You should have told me,” he said quietly, but there was anger boiling under the surface.

“I gave her the opportunity to be honest with you, first. I believed if I made her tell you, she might learn more about why it’s inappropriate. But if she hadn’t told you about it within a week, I intended to.”

“A week? You haven’t known about this for months?”

“No, she just told me about it the other night in an attempt to explain her frustration.”

His shoulders relaxed slightly and he looked down at his hands. “Well, that makes me feel a little better at least.”

“You thought I would’ve let it go all this time if I knew?”

“It didn’t seem likely, but...”

“But you were so angry with me that you’d believe just about anything? Never mind how well I know you and know how much this would bother you?”

“Something like that.”

Kathryn took a drink of coffee and let that thought sink in a little. “Did she speak with the Doctor?”

“Yes, and then promptly broke up with me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You are?” Chakotay put his elbows on the table. “That’s surprising.”

“I’m sorry for your loss. What did the Doctor say?”

“She wouldn’t tell me. I take it she hasn’t spoken with you either?”

Kathryn shook her head. “She has a right to her privacy.”

“Privacy... I guess. If that means anything.” He stared at the table for a moment. “Well, I came to tell you, in no uncertain terms, how manipulative and unprofessional I thought you were to keep that secret from me, but um... I... ah... don’t need to say that after all.”

She crossed her arms across her chest. “I can put her on report if it makes you feel better.”

“That’s not necessary.” He studied her face. “You’re not going to make this easy on me, are you?”

“No, I don’t believe I am.” She was more than put out by his behavior. “I’ve got a tough skin, Chakotay, but the things you said... well, they dented it a little.”

He smothered his grin. “Dented it?”

“Yeah.” She pointed to her shoulder. “Right there. You might not have noticed the little indentation because these shoulders have been carrying a big load for a long time. I think they’re slightly bowed in.”

“I’m sorry, Kathryn.”

“Apology accepted.” She stood and said, “It’s time for our last debrief for the week. Do you think we can manage it?”

“I think that together, you and I can do just about anything.”

“Agreed. So what are we rehashing today?”

Chakotay looked at his PADD. “Oh great... Riley Frazier and the Ex-Borg Colony.”

“Nice cheery topic for a Friday afternoon, don’t you think?”

“Well, since we seem to be on the topic of women manipulating me, why not?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll defend your honor.” She touched his back as they walked out of the dining room. Kathryn passed B’Elanna in the corridor and winked at her. She hoped that her message conveyed that things were okay again.

Debriefings continued for another three weeks, and other than the crew getting antsy, nothing much happened. It was clear to Kathryn that Chakotay was uncomfortable spending time with her alone, but his support as her first officer never wavered.

Little by little, the crew left for a three-month leave, and eventually only the senior staff remained. Starfleet wouldn’t be handing out promotions or reassigning anyone until they’d had a chance to fully review each person’s file and had decided how best to re-integrate the crew into Starfleet. As for the Maquis, it was decided that they would handle each person’s future on a case-by-case basis to determine the best fit. Kathryn and Chakotay were both relieved that no charges would be pressed against anyone, including the Equinox crew, although their past decisions would be reflected in promotions and new assignments.

Tuvok hadn't returned from Vulcan yet, but since she didn't know how long the treatment would take, Kathryn wasn't worried about it. She sent him a message to tell him that she was thinking about him, and he had responded that treatment was going well and wished her well also. The reply, although evasive, was welcome and she felt assured that he was going to be fine.

Part 3 - "A Friendship Restored"

By Dawn

Rated PG-13

Summary: A continuation of Part 2 – Janeway and Chakotay getting settled into life on Earth and redeveloping their friendship.

A month after the debriefings ended, Kathryn was getting settled into her new townhouse that was just inside the city limits of San Francisco. She'd been on a wonderfully long vacation and was ready to have a place of her own again. Chakotay called one afternoon and asked if she had any plans, but she was in the middle of unpacking so she invited him over to help. The movers had delivered her things the day before, and she was enjoying re-discovering her belongings.

Although they had spoken to each other during debriefings, it was the first time they had been alone since their arguments almost two months before, and also the first time they didn't have anything ship-related to discuss.

He brought a couple boxes into her living room. "Where would you like these?"

"Anywhere is fine, thank you. I hope these are marked correctly. When this was all packed up years ago, I don't think the movers cared about keeping everything organized."

"That long?" Chakotay opened one of the boxes. "I didn't think I recognized any of this from Voyager."

"No, most of this stuff is from the house that I owned seven years ago." She pulled out a large item wrapped in a protective film. "This, I think.... Yes!" She held it up triumphantly. "This is a vase that my sister, Phoebe, gave me as a house-warming gift for my last home. She bought it on Alpha-Centauri. I think it's beautiful."

"Very beautiful."

She glanced at him before placing the vase on a table in front of the large bay window. He was acting a little nervous and distracted, so she figured that it was up to her to bring some ease back into their friendship. "My house was sold when we were pronounced dead, and while Mom

couldn't stop the sale, she did manage to have my things pulled out before they went up for auction."

"Auction?" After unwrapping items, he placed them on a shelf for her to put away later.

"Yes, unfortunately. My trust stipulated that all of my assets were to be liquidated at the time of my death, and my lawyer chose auction as the best means for doing that. Luckily, he's also Mom's lawyer and she was the primary beneficiary of the trust, so she had some influence." She found a few more knick-knacks which she proudly placed on the fireplace mantel. "Needless to say, I'm going to be changing that trust for the future."

"I see." He found another container marked fragile and opened it. "So, did you spend all month in Indiana?"

"No." She smiled, remembering her vacation. "But I did spend the whole time with my family. We spent a week at Mom's house, but then I felt like seeing Earth again. We went to Ireland, hopped around Europe a little, spent two days at the most wonderful spa in Switzerland, and then a couple days in Japan."

"Sounds exciting."

"It was. Phoebe insisted that I have a whole new wardrobe so we shopped everywhere we went. I ate the most wonderful food, and spent time really taking everything in. I saw sunrises over the ocean and sunsets in the mountains. I love this planet." She looked out the window at the park across the street.

He chuckled. "That, I know."

"It would be fine with me if I didn't ever leave it again."

"I don't believe that for a minute. The explorer in you wouldn't be able to stand it."

"Oh, I don't know." She turned back to her box and pulled out some more items. "I spent a lot of time with my niece, Katie. Did I tell you about her?"

"I think you showed me pictures." He grabbed another box from the hallway and returned. "You sure have a lot of books."

"I know." She touched the spines of the books reverently. "I'm relieved that nothing happened to them."

"So... you spent time with your niece?"

"Yes," Kathryn went back to her container. "She's almost five and absolutely precious. I want to spend as much time with her as I can. I really want to be part of her life."

Chakotay said, “I went to the Banora colony for a couple weeks and spent time with my sister, Sekaya. She’s expecting her first child, and I can’t wait. It makes me feel like there’s a future for my tribe, even if they’re mostly gone. It’s hard to explain.”

She touched his arm. “Oh, I understand. Completely. With this second chance we’ve been given, I have a desire to really make Earth a better place. I feel like being involved in the lives of all the children I know so that I can nurture them somehow.”

“That’s exactly what I’m feeling.”

“I spent some time holding and rocking Miral during the debriefings. It was the most wonderful feeling – holding that innocent little life.”

“She’s a beautiful baby.”

“I’m eager to see her again. I’ll have to call on them later.”

“I’d like to go with you.” He glanced at her nervously. “If I may?”

“Of course.” She found his hesitation unlike him, although he was likely still feeling self-conscious about his behavior regarding Seven. It had been far from endearing.

Taking a deep breath, he asked, “So... have I irreparably damaged our friendship?”

“No.” She didn’t look up from the books she was putting on the shelves. “It can be mended.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

She glanced at him with a smile that she was sure would put him at ease. “It might take some time before I feel like being nice to you, but I think you’re worth it.”

His eyes brightened. “You think so? I’m feeling pretty foolish.”

“Good.” She looked around the room. “What do you say we clear these empty boxes out of here and go to dinner? I’m getting hungry.”

“Sounds great.” He broke down the boxes and took them to another room.

As she watched him go, she felt content being near him again. During the last month, she had made a point not to worry about their friendship, letting them have a much needed break from each other.

The time away from the crew had been a welcome respite. Her family had gone out of their way to make sure she rested both physically and mentally by refusing to let her wonder what her crewmembers might be doing or if they were settling in okay. They were excited to hear her

stories about the past, but they insisted that she needed to stop worrying about them. She'd been doing it for seven years straight.

That evening at dinner, they'd talked more about their vacations and about where Chakotay might get an apartment. He wanted to be in San Francisco so that he would be accessible to the crew. They had grown to be such a tight-knit family over the years that he didn't want to be too far away.

As she climbed into bed that night, she decided that since their friendship was well on its way to its former ease, her next step would be to get settled into her life on Earth and get used to not having the constant pressure of commanding Voyager. Once she and Chakotay relaxed a little, she figured that gradually easing flirting back into their relationship should come naturally. She hoped that he would come to the realization that he didn't want to live without her.

During the next month, they talked every day and saw each other several times a week. They checked on all the Voyager crew members and re-familiarized themselves with the bay area. A lot had changed in the city since the war, and there was still work to be done. Kathryn also kept busy with her new house, having it updated and refurbished to suit her needs, while she also helped Chakotay shop for furniture for his new apartment.

It was late on one Thursday afternoon when Kathryn decided to stop by Tom and B'Elanna's new home. She'd been at a meeting nearby and was craving some time with Miral.

Tom answered the door wearing an old shirt with paint on it. "Well, hello, Captain. Please come in."

"I was in the neighborhood and thought I'd stop by. I hope I'm not interrupting anything?"

"Only a little painting. We got the urge to redecorate our bedroom today."

"Kathryn? Is that you?" B'Elanna called from further inside the house.

"It's me, Lanna." Kathryn followed the voice to the living room where Miral was nursing. Chuckling when she saw B'Elanna with green paint on her face, she said, "I like the color, but I'm sure it looks better on the wall."

"Go take a look," B'Elanna responded.

Tom led her back to the master bedroom. He said quietly, "I don't think today was the best day to do this. Miral's feeling needy, which leaves only one of us able to paint at a time. We had hoped to get done with this by bedtime."

Kathryn surveyed their work. All the furniture had been piled on the bed in the middle of the room, and only one wall had been finished. The other three were in various stages of prep work. “Looks like I came to the right place. Hand me a paint brush or hand me a baby.”

Tom chuckled. “We wouldn’t ask you to help paint, Captain.”

“Baby, it is.” She headed back out to the living room where B’Elanna was buttoning her top. “I was hoping for some cuddle time.”

“Are you sure you don’t mind?” B’Elanna said as she handed the baby over.

“Not in the least. Miral and I have some bonding to do.”

“Thank you, Captain.” Tom helped her get settled into the rocking chair with a pillow to prop up her arm, a burp cloth, and a baby blanket. “She hasn’t slept for several hours, so I think she’ll be out in no time, especially in your arms.”

Kathryn was as happy as a lark to be doing nothing but looking into the dark brown eyes of the most precious little bundle of Klingon imaginable. She was almost three months old, and it seemed like it was just last week when B’Elanna was going through all the false labors on Voyager. When Miral finally dozed off, Kathryn rested her head on the back of the rocker and fell asleep, too.

She woke to the sound of people stirring in the entryway and was surprised to see that darkness had settled in. Whoever had arrived was whispering so quietly that she couldn’t hear what they were saying. She adjusted Miral carefully so as to not wake her up and stood to indulge her curiosity. Pleased when she saw who it was, she whispered, “Chakotay.”

“Hi,” he smiled brightly. “We thought you were asleep.”

“I was.”

Tom whispered, “You’ve been out for a couple of hours. It’s almost seven.”

“Great time of day for a nap.”

“I brought dinner.” Chakotay indicated the containers that he and Tom were holding. “Luigi’s.”

“Mmmm... smells wonderful.” She let the men pass her and head into the kitchen. As they pulled out all the food and set it on the table, she asked, “How many people are you expecting?”

“Just the four of us, but B’Elanna said to get plenty because she’s starving.”

When Tom left them alone to get his wife, Chakotay whispered, “How’d they rope you into this, too?”

She laughed quietly. "I just stopped by for a baby fix. They were more than happy to hand her over and she's been asleep ever since."

He stood close and rested his hand on the small of her back, looking at the sleeping baby in her arms. "You do have a way with her."

Turning to look up at him, her face was only inches from his. "She knows that I have no intentions of putting her down anytime soon."

She saw his gaze flick down to her lips for just a moment before Tom and B'Elanna came in and redirected their attention.

B'Elanna commented, "If that baby didn't have forehead ridges, one could mistake the three of you standing there for a happy little family."

Kathryn smiled and let Chakotay pull out her chair. "We were just adoring yours."

"Uh huh," B'Elanna gave Kathryn a knowing look. "I'll put her in the bassinet so you can eat."

"I can eat one-handed." She begrudgingly gave up Miral.

"I'm sure you can, but she'll be fine. Besides, she'll need to wake up soon if she's going to get to sleep at bedtime.

During dinner, they chatted about news they'd heard of various crewmembers. Kathryn was thankful for the company and the easy-flowing conversation. She also enjoyed how Chakotay's leg seemed to brush up against hers every time he passed a dish. She was trying to figure out how she could keep him passing food so his thigh would remain next to hers, but she couldn't think of a polite way to ask. He seemed to know what she wanted, anyway, because he eventually left his leg beside hers, just as she'd hoped he would.

"So, Captain. What were you doing in the neighborhood today?" Tom asked.

"I was at the Fednews station for a meeting."

"Oh? What for?" B'Elanna asked.

"It was a preliminary introduction to Gayle Struthers." Kathryn shrugged it off.

Chakotay added, "She's been hounding Kathryn for an interview since the day we returned."

"Isn't she the one that does the really deep, intense interviews on Sunday nights?" Tom asked.

"That's the one," Kathryn answered.

"Did you agree to do it?" Chakotay asked.

“At first I was going to tell her no, but...”

“She roped you in?” Chakotay was amused.

“She’s very persuasive and did her best to convince me that the entire Federation is dying to know more about us and our experiences.” Kathryn was amused at the exaggerations that the media often used. “She reminded me that all the public has seen is repeated broadcasts of the press conference in December, and various ‘sightings’ of us around town, so maybe it’s time to give people a little more.”

“I don’t think it’s us they’re interested in, Captain,” Tom said. “Everyone wants to know more about the valiant captain of Voyager.”

“You make me sound so illustrious, Tom.”

“Well, you are. What you accomplished is going down in the history books.”

She shook her head in amusement. They’d had this conversation many times over the last couple of weeks. “What *we* accomplished. You seem to have forgotten that I didn’t run that ship by myself. If anyone should be famous it should be you, Tom, for flying us all the way home.”

Chakotay spoke to Tom and B’Elanna. “She’s never going to own up to it, no matter how much praise we heap on her.”

Sighing, Kathryn said, “Well, this interview might just do the trick for you. With all the attention and pampering I received this afternoon, I felt like the President of the Federation.”

“Must have been rough for you,” Tom said sarcastically.

“It felt strange, but I’m sure that tomorrow will be even more so. They’re coming to my house at eight in the morning to set up and we start filming at nine.”

“Doesn’t the guest always have some momentous confession on that program?” B’Elanna asked.

“That’s what I hear,” Kathryn sighed. “And she won’t tell me what questions she’s going to ask, either. She wants to catch the ‘full emotion of the moment,’ as she put it.”

Chakotay squeezed her forearm and said, “Just put on your best diplomatic face and you’ll be fine. If I know you, and I think I do... you won’t give anything away unless you damn well want to.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, but I watched this show last week. She had a dignified actor start crying about how his father didn’t love him enough. If she can do that to a rather imposing-looking older gentleman, what’s she going to do to me?”

“He’s an actor,” Tom pointed out. “They can call up emotions in a heartbeat and they really are looking to put on a show. You, on the other hand, are adept at burying your emotions.”

“As Chakotay said, you’re not going to give anything away and you’re not exactly one to tangle with,” B’Elanna said. “All you have to do is to let people get a taste of the real Kathryn Janeway.”

“Well, hopefully I can steer her towards asking about Kes. I can easily get emotional about her and it’ll give her what she’s looking for. I don’t know what I’ll do if she asks me about the Admiral’s sacrifice to save the people she loved, although that’s confidential, so she probably won’t know about it.”

They were all quiet after that statement, as if they’d almost forgotten what the Admiral had done for them. Tom was able to start the conversation again by offering dessert.

After dinner, Kathryn stayed awhile longer to play with Miral while the others painted. It gave her a chance to think more about the upcoming interview and what her answers might be to difficult questions.

When B’Elanna put Miral to bed, Kathryn decided that she’d better get home to straighten up the living room and get to bed herself. Even though they hadn’t finished painting yet, Chakotay offered to walk her home. Tom and B’Elanna asked them to come back the next evening to finish up and so Kathryn could tell them how the interview went.

After Tom closed the door, Chakotay offered Kathryn his arm and they set out into the crisp night air towards the transporter station.

“Have you rehearsed what you’re going to say tomorrow?”

“More or less. Miral was a good audience.”

“I hope I don’t make you feel uncomfortable, but what if she asks you about Justin and your father? You’ve never felt at ease talking about them.”

She took a deep breath. “I think that’s so far in the past that it won’t come up, but if it does, I can give them the facts, I suppose.”

“And destroying the array?”

“I’m sure that’ll come up, but I think my guilt over that has ebbed, thanks to you.” She glanced up at him and smiled.

“I’m sure it also helps that we’re home, safe and sound.”

“Yes, it does.”

He asked, "Assimilation?"

"You're just full of cheery topics, aren't you?"

"I'm just asking you the questions that you're probably apprehensive about rehearsing."

"And if I have nightmares tonight?"

"I'm only a comm call away, and I'd come over in a heartbeat."

She took a steadying breath. He had been a godsend those nights after assimilation, and she was sure that if not for his support, she'd still be having those nightmares. He had stayed up with her many nights talking about anything and everything to get her mind off her ordeal. "It's not as if everyone isn't upset by assimilation. I don't think it'll be a shock that I am too."

"No, probably not." He put his arm gently around her shoulders. "I don't think they'd be privy to the Equinox, would they?"

"No, that's classified. Anything that doesn't paint a rosy picture of Starfleet is classified."

They arrived at the transporter station, and Kathryn was happy for the lull in conversation so she could gather her thoughts. When they started walking towards her house, she said, "She might try to interview you next, you know."

"I'm not sure anyone wants to hear what I've got to say, especially about the war."

"You might be right. 'I told you so' just might not sit well with some."

They walked in silence for a little while until they reached her door. She turned to him and said, "Thanks for walking me home."

"You're welcome." He took her hands and said, "I have one more question for you."

"Okay." She swallowed hard, not sure she wanted to hear what he had saved for last. They were standing so close that she could smell his aftershave and the wonderful masculinity that was all him.

"If she asks you about me, what are you going to say?"

"You?" That wasn't what she had been expecting. She squeezed his hands. "I would never say anything that would put you in a bad light."

"I know you wouldn't." He looked intently into her eyes. "What I mean is... what are you going to say if she asks about us?"

“Oh.” She was quiet as she stared into his questioning eyes, trying to decide how best to answer him. This could be the opening she was waiting for, but she didn’t feel that the ease between them had rejuvenated itself far enough, yet. “You’re asking because the press seemed to think that you and I were involved as soon as they saw us together?”

“I thought it might be prudent for us to talk about this before you share your feelings with the entire Federation.”

“Does it bother you that they thought we were together?” she asked.

“It did at the time, but that was because...”

“...of Seven... Annika, I mean.” She smiled gently. “And now?”

He glanced down and then back up at her. “I’d rather you not announce to the entire Federation that there is absolutely nothing between us. We are friends, at least I believe we’re still good friends, despite... everything.”

“Of course we are.” She could see that he was still worried. “Chakotay, when you were angry with me, I knew why, and I also knew that eventually it would work out. It’s not like it was the first time we’d come to blows. As far as I’m concerned, our friendship is as strong as it’s ever been.” Smiling, she said, “Look at it this way, we’re spending all this time together when we don’t have to, and I’m enjoying it.”

“I’m relieved.” He rubbed his thumb across the back of her hand. “I don’t know how you feel about it, but if you’re asked, I don’t think there’s any harm in letting the rumors continue. It would be preferable to denying that anything exists. After all, we’ve probably been spotted together a lot.”

“Yes, I’m sure we have.”

“If you deny it, people are really going to think something is going on.”

She felt slightly breathless. “I plan on answering the question honestly – that we’re very dear friends and we grew very close out there.”

“That is true.”

She waited for a moment to see if he would say something more, because she couldn’t tell if he was about to suggest they move this forward. When he didn’t say anything else, she looked away, unwilling to push the issue... yet. “Well, I’d better get inside and make sure all the boxes are hidden.”

“Do you need any help?”

“Thank you for asking, but I’ll be fine. I’ll call you tomorrow after the interview?”

“I’d like that. Would you like me to be here for it?”

“No, I think I might be attempted to look at you too often and give things away that I shouldn’t.”

He chuckled. “You’ll be fine. Call me anytime tonight if you need to talk.”

“I will.” She withdrew a hand and touched his chest, feeling the need to convey how much she cared for him. “Good night, Chakotay.”

After she shut the door, she closed her eyes and rested against the wall. Their friendship had definitely returned, but where it was going next and how quickly it might proceed was making her heart feel a little exposed and vulnerable – emotions that she didn’t care for in the least. It was uncomfortable allowing someone to have that kind of affect on her, but if she was going to let anyone into her heart, there was no one she trusted more than she did him.

After the interview was over, Kathryn felt completely drained. It had lasted over three hours, even though only an hour would be aired on the program. When the film crew finally left her house, she tidied up the living room and then replicated a sandwich. Her mind was numb as she ate, not having enough mental energy to think about anything.

It wasn’t until she recycled her dishes that she remembered she was going to call Chakotay, and that he was probably waiting for her. She sat down at the comm terminal and keyed in the connection.

He answered immediately. “Hi! You look beautiful, Kathryn.”

Touching her face, she smiled gently. “They put a lot of makeup on me. I probably look fake and pasty up close.”

“I doubt it. Did you wear that?”

She put a hand on the dark blue blouse. “Doesn’t it look okay? The stylist looked through my closet and picked this out.”

“Looks very nice. I’m just surprised that you aren’t in uniform.”

“Oh. No... Gayle wanted to interview the ‘woman behind the uniform,’ as she put it.”

“Well, you look great. How did it go?”

“Emotional. Exhausting.”

“Did she manage to make you cry?”

Kathryn laughed. “I got a little misty-eyed, but didn’t shed any real tears. She’s good, I will say that.”

“What got you emotional?”

Shrugging, she said, “Several things, but not about what I expected. We talked about how alone we felt out there, and how we relied on each other. And the joy we felt when we finally made contact with home.”

“Well, that’s good.” Chakotay smiled softly. “Anything bad?”

“Yes and no. We talked about some of the more difficult things, but she was able to keep the conversation moving, so we didn’t dwell on any one thing in particular.”

“I’m relieved. I was worried about you.”

“Thank you.” She felt warmed by the compassion in his eyes, but she didn’t have the energy to talk about it. “About tonight... would you give Tom and B’Elanna my regrets? I’d really like to go to Indiana this afternoon and stay for the weekend.”

“Of course, although I think B’Elanna was hoping to have a watch-party on Sunday night. We talked about it last night while we were painting.”

“Oh.” She was disappointed. “I wanted to watch it with my family, and I was going to invite you to join us.”

“Really?” He was surprised.

“Absolutely. I’d like to watch it with both you and Mom, and she asked me to invite you to her home for dinner sometime.”

“I’d love to join you. B’Elanna can still have her party without us.”

“If you’re sure, I’ll call you tomorrow with the plans.”

“I look forward to it. I’m sure Tom and B’Elanna won’t mind at all.”

“Thank you.”

After the comm closed, Kathryn quickly changed her clothes, washed her face, and threw a few things into a bag. The morning left her feeling so drained that she wanted nothing more than to spend some time with her mom and enjoy a little bit of Indiana springtime.

The following Sunday afternoon, Kathryn put her puzzle piece down when she heard the front door open. She told her niece, "I'll be right back, Katie."

She stepped into her mother's foyer to greet Chakotay. Mike, Phoebe's husband, had met him at the transporter station and brought him to the house. She took the bottle of wine that he held out to her and she said, "Thank you, and welcome to Indiana."

He leaned in to kiss her cheek. "It's beautiful here. I'd like to see more of it sometime, but I must say that I'm glad you sent Mike to meet me. I don't think I would've found the house otherwise."

"Come on in." She led him into the sitting room and said, "Make yourself at home. I'll be right back." She went into the kitchen to put the wine in the cooler and to let her mom and sister know that the men had arrived. When she returned, Chakotay had sat at the end of a sofa and was talking to Mike about something they'd seen on the walk.

Katie had crawled up onto her father's lap and was eyeing Chakotay suspiciously from across the room, a sight that was both cute and amusing. Kathryn said, "Dinner will be ready in about thirty minutes. Mom loves to cook the old-fashioned way so the meal is in the oven." She sat in the middle of the sofa, and waved Katie over. The little girl reluctantly slid off her daddy's lap, but didn't go any further.

Kathryn glanced at Chakotay who was watching Katie's reaction. He smiled but said nothing.

"Katie, I'd like you to meet a very dear friend of mine. His name is Chakotay."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Katie."

Taking time to size up the situation, Katie finally decided to creep around to Kathryn, but staying as close to the wall as possible and watching him intently the entire time. When she finally reached Kathryn's lap, she slowly pulled herself up, never breaking eye contact with Chakotay. The adults were enjoying watching her as she quietly stared at him. Finally, she stated, "You need a wipe. You drew on your face."

Kathryn and Mike laughed, and Chakotay smothered his grin. He said, "It's called a tattoo, and it's a symbol of my tribe."

"Would you like me to color it for you? It looks like a rainbow. The first color is red, the second is orange, the third is yellow, and then green, but we need more stripes."

Chakotay had to smile. "No thank you, but if you want, we can draw it on paper and then you can color it. It's an eagle's wing."

"I might," she said matter-of-factly, and then as if deciding he was okay, she jumped off of Kathryn's lap and stood right next to his leg. "My name is Katie. It has five letters. Do you know what they are?"

“Hmmm... I’m not sure. Do you know?”

“K-A-T-I-E.” She pointed to Kathryn. “And this is my Aunt Katie. Her name has five letters too, and they are the same as mine. K-A-T-I-E.”

“I see,” he said in amazement. “How old are you, Katie?”

“Four. The number that comes before five.”

“Yes, it does. Is that your favorite number?”

“No. My favorite number is...” She had to think about it. “My favorite number is seven.”

“Oh, why’s that?” Chakotay glanced at Kathryn.

“Daddy says it’s lucky so that’s how many pieces of candy Grandma gave me for my dessert after lunch.” She held up her fingers and counted to seven before asking, “What did she say your name is?”

“Chakotay.”

“That’s a funny name.”

Mike said, “It just sounds different and you’ve never heard it before.”

“No, I’ve heard it before.” She said it out loud, slowly, “Cha...ko...tay. I think the first sound is two letters.”

“You’re right. C and h,” Chakotay said.

“Cha... like chair.”

Mike said, “That’s right, Katie. Good work.”

Finished with that conversation, the little girl asked, “Can we play with the puzzle now, Aunt Katie?”

“Sure,” Kathryn got down on the floor again and went back to work with the puzzle they’d been assembling before the men arrived. She glanced up at Chakotay who was watching her and asked, “Did you help Tom and B’Elanna any more?”

“Yes, Friday night and we finished yesterday morning. The room looks great with all the furniture put back.”

“I hope they understood?”

“Of course. I think B’Elanna was disappointed about tonight, but she’ll be okay.”

Kathryn chuckled. “Without me there they can make more comments, as I’m sure they’ll want to.”

He smiled warmly at her and then broke the connection by looking around the room. “This is a beautiful house, but somehow, it’s not what I expected.”

“Oh? What had you imagined?”

“A farmhouse. I’m not sure why. Maybe it was when you were talking about learning the basics.”

“Oh that... well, this isn’t the house I grew up in. Mom sold that about fifteen years ago. It wasn’t a farm, but it did have a large plot of land. We grew our own vegetables.”

“This is a very nice home.”

She let her eyes wander around too, enjoying the airiness and the spacious ceilings. “Yes, it is. I feel very content here. When she bought it, I thought it was way too much house for her, but it’s very comfortable for houseguests and there’s a lot of room to spread out. I’ll have to show you the sunroom later. It’s my favorite spot.”

“I’d love to see it.” He caught her eyes again and smiled gently.

Phoebe chose that moment to come in. She sat a little too close to Chakotay and held out her hand, as if for a kiss. “Hello there, I’m Phoebe.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” he said as he took her hand and kissed the back of it.

Kathryn rolled her eyes at her sister’s flirtatious nature, and glanced at Mike who just shrugged and picked up a book off the side table and absently leafed through it. She knew that Mike didn’t feel threatened in the least, but that he liked making a big show of ignoring it.

“Tell me, Chakotay,” Phoebe purred. “Are you as dangerous as they say you are?”

He leaned into her personal space and with a deep voice, asked, “Who says I’m dangerous?”

“People said that I should be worried about my sister, stuck out there with a dangerous man, hell-bent on revenge. So I want to know... are you dangerous?”

“Very dangerous... to anyone who dared threaten your sister.” His smoldering gaze found Kathryn and her pulse quickened with the intensity of it.

Phoebe withdrew, obviously quite satisfied with herself, and turned to wink at Kathryn. “He’s delicious, Katie.”

Kathryn smiled at the pink tinge that showed Chakotay’s slight embarrassment.

He recovered quickly and replied, “Phoebe, if you weren’t Kathryn’s sister and if your husband wasn’t sitting over there pretending to ignore us, I’d show you just how delicious.”

Little Katie asked innocently, “Mommy, why do you think Cha-ko-tay is yummy?”

Kathryn smothered a laugh.

“He just is, sweetheart.” Phoebe stared into his eyes for a second longer and then climbed onto the floor with Kathryn and Katie. “And so are you, my little pumpkin!” They all laughed as Phoebe attempted to nuzzle her squealing daughter’s neck.

Kathryn decided to get out of the way of mayhem and pulled herself up onto the sofa next to Chakotay. She squeezed his forearm and let her hand rest on his wrist. Softly, she said, “Sorry about that. She’s something.”

His chest rumbled quietly with laughter. “She certainly is. I like her already.”

Gretchen came into the room and asked, “What’s all this ruckus?” Without waiting for an answer, she came right up to Chakotay and took his hand. “I’m so glad that you’re able to join us.”

“Thank you for asking Kathryn to invite me. You have a beautiful home.”

“Why, thank you. I do hope you’ll consider it your home too when you’re here. Anything you need, you just look around for it or ask me. Now, I made Biryani. Katie said you enjoyed the replicated recipe?”

“Yes, very much. She made it on special occasions.”

“Well, we don’t allow her anywhere near a real kitchen, but she does have pretty good luck with replicators.”

Chakotay had to laugh. “Sometimes.”

Kathryn felt the need to defend her honor. “I only burned a handful of dinners.”

They both looked at her with amusement, and Gretchen said, “Well, come on into the dining room. Everything is just about ready.”

Over dinner, they had pleasant conversations about Katie, Chakotay’s family in Ohio, his sister’s pregnancy, and about the status of the rebuilding in San Francisco following the war. Kathryn

was growing nervous about the interview broadcast so she didn't say much, but she enjoyed listening to everyone else.

While Phoebe and Mike were negotiating with Katie about how many bites she had to eat before dessert, Chakotay leaned close and asked Kathryn, "Are you feeling okay?"

"Hmmm? Oh yes. Just a little anxious."

Gretchen heard her answer and said, "Well, this is a pretty big deal. We're in the midst of a celebrity now."

Kathryn shook her head, amused. "It's just me."

"Oh, Aunt Martha sure doesn't think so."

Chakotay couldn't help but add, "I've heard about Aunt Martha."

"Have you?" Gretchen looked knowingly at her daughter. "Martha is having a gathering at her house tonight, with everyone she knows to watch the interview. Did I tell you, Katie, that she called a short while ago?"

"Still trying to get me to come over?"

"Yes, but failing that, she wanted to know if you'd be saying anything embarrassing."

"Good ole, Aunt Martha." Kathryn shook her head. "It's quite possible that I will be embarrassing myself, but I don't think she has anything to worry about. Her name didn't come up at all."

"She'd be surprised to hear that," Phoebe joined in on the conversation. For Chakotay's benefit, she added, "Aunt Martha is absolutely sure that she was the inspiration for Katie to go into Starfleet, so all of Katie's accomplishments are really Martha's accomplishments."

"Funny," Chakotay said. "I don't remember her name on the Voyager manifest."

"I can't imagine," Kathryn closed her eyes to block out the thought.

Gretchen stood and said, "Let's get this cleared up so we can get situated in front of the viewing screen. I'm so excited, I'm about to bust!"

Kathryn and Chakotay stood to help with the dishes, but as the guests of honor, they were dismissed and banished to the hearth room after their first trip into the kitchen. She didn't mind because it gave her a few minutes alone with Chakotay. Her favorite sofa was in this room – an oversized love seat. She relaxed into the cushions, crossed her legs comfortably, and savored the plush warmth of the soft fabric.

Still standing, Chakotay watched her enjoyment. “We need to find one of these for your house. You look like you’re in heaven.”

She opened her eyes and patted the seat next to her. “Join me. You’ll love it.”

As requested, he relaxed into the cushions as well and sighed deeply. After a moment of quiet, he said, “I love your family, Kathryn.”

“I’m glad. They’re pretty special to me.”

“I can see why, and I don’t even feel like an intruder.”

“You’re not.” She laid her hand on his arm just as she had before dinner. Looking at the clock, she realized the interview would be starting in twenty minutes. She really hoped that Gloria had pulled things together well.

“What’s on your mind?”

“Oh, just wondering if I should’ve asked to see the final version before it was aired.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine. I can’t imagine you being anything but eloquent and graceful... just like you always are when diplomacy is required.”

“Perhaps, but I don’t usually discuss my personal feelings during first contacts.”

He looked at her intently, as if trying to decide whether to ask something.

“What is it?” she wondered.

“It’s that vulnerability thing again, isn’t it?”

“Vulnerability thing? Again?”

“After you got back from Quarra. You said you’d never felt more vulnerable because the crew and everyone at that station had seen you with your hair down, happy, and carefree. You told me that you felt immensely more comfortable behind the captain’s pips and wanted to get that planet behind as soon as possible so that we’d all forget. You have the same look about you now as you did after you got your memories back.”

She waved it off. He had nailed it, but she wasn’t about to start thinking deeply about her innermost psyche. “I’ll be fine... just a little nervous about being so open.” The rest of Kathryn’s family came into the room as she said, “I’m worried that this isn’t going to answer everyone’s questions, and they’ll be stalking me for more.”

“You’re a celebrity now, sis. Everyone wants to know the wonderful you!” Phoebe curled up with Mike on another loveseat, and Kathryn felt instantly jealous that she wasn’t free to do the same with Chakotay. She’d love nothing better than to hide in his arms for the next hour.

As they got settled in and the program was about to start, Gretchen said, “This is just so exciting... My baby girl on Gayle Struthers!”

Kathryn groaned and hid her face in her hands. She felt Chakotay’s hand touch her wrist to pull it away from her face.

“You’re going to miss it if you hide.” He pulled her hand to his lips and kissed it softly, but instead of letting it go, he held it between his and urged her to lean against him a little. Even that slight contact made her feel warm, as if he was bolstering her up emotionally so that she could confront her next big obstacle. She relaxed into him a little more and directed her attention at the viewing screen, her thoughts not far from the way his thumb gently rubbed the back of her hand.

The announcer said, “Coming up next: A tell-all interview with Captain Kathryn Janeway of Voyager.”

Kathryn’s image appeared on the screen and Phoebe asked, “You wore that?”

“It’s the one you picked out at that little boutique in Belfast.”

“Yeah, but I thought you’d be in uniform. You should’ve worn red. That jacket we found in Milano, maybe.”

She knew exactly which one her sister was referring to and had to agree. “Yes, I do love that one.”

Chakotay asked, “What new jacket is this?”

“I don’t think you’ve seen it. Too dressy for what we’ve been doing.”

Their conversation ended as the program began. Gayle Struther’s image said, “Tonight, I have the distinct honor of bringing you an in-depth interview with Starfleet’s Captain Kathryn Janeway of the Federation Starship Voyager that recently returned from an unplanned seven-year exile in the far reaches of the galaxy’s delta quadrant. Voyager’s return has been hailed as an extraordinary accomplishment and nothing short of a miracle. Tonight, we’ll learn intimate details about the woman who made it all happen.”

Kathryn didn’t know whether to be embarrassed or flattered by that introduction. She squeezed Chakotay’s hand and felt him return the gesture in reassurance.

The image on the screen switched to Gayle in Kathryn’s living room. “The first question I have for you is one that has been on all our minds since that day in December when Voyager burst

through the flames of an exploding Borg sphere. Tell me, Kathryn, how, exactly, did you feel at that moment?"

The camera switched to her, and the lighting showed her looking very soft and feminine. Kathryn felt pleasantly surprised by how her eyes seemed to sparkle. "After what it took to get us there, I was stunned, to put it mildly. I couldn't believe that we'd actually made it and survived the experience."

"Although the news broadcasts showed that moment over and over again, we don't know how Voyager came to be in there. What can you tell us? Did you happen upon the sphere and think, 'Hey, the Borg are heading our way. Let's hitch a ride?'"

"Well, yes, actually." Kathryn laughed. "A large part of the details are classified, but yes, we did 'happen upon' a Borg transwarp hub that we decided to destroy, but before we did, we used it to get home. After we entered the conduit that brought us here, we fired torpedoes behind us and were able to destroy the hub. That sphere was sent to assimilate us and when we realized that we wouldn't be able to outrun it, we allowed it to take us inside. We counted on our shields to keep the Borg out long enough to make it home. Once we realized that we'd been successful, we fired a torpedo at the sphere's primary power source. Thanks to the outstanding piloting skills of Lieutenant Tom Paris, we high-tailed it out of there in the nick of time."

"That's an incredible story. What did you think when you saw Earth for the first time?"

"It was absolutely breathtaking. I was so grateful to be home again and relieved that we'd made it."

Gayle asked, "What did you miss most about Earth?"

"Everything." Kathryn thought for a moment. "The seasons, the sunrises and sunsets, the coffee, but most of all, I missed my mother."

"You're close to her," Gayle stated.

"Yes, very close. I hate the pain that my disappearance caused her, but because of it, our relationship has strengthened a great deal. We wrote letters every chance we could in the last few years."

Gretchen interrupted and told Kathryn, "Thank you, Katie. I loved the letters, too."

Kathryn smiled at her mom before the interview pulled their attention back.

"Tell us who Kathryn Janeway was before she became Captain of Voyager. You were engaged, right?"

"I was," Kathryn nodded. "To a philosopher... a brilliant man, whom I loved very much."

“But he didn’t wait for you.”

“He did for two years, but I don’t fault him for his decision to move on. I wouldn’t have wanted him to grieve endlessly, so I’m glad that he found love again. I sincerely wish him all the best.”

“Your father was a Starfleet Admiral who died in the line of duty. Were you close to him?”

“He was an inspiring man, but I was twenty-one when he died, so he still seems larger than life to me. I did everything in my power to make him proud of me.”

“Do you think if he were still alive, he’d be proud of what you’ve accomplished?”

Kathryn smiled, “I sure hope so.”

“You were with him when he died, were you not?”

“Yes,” she said hesitantly. “I was in the same shuttle accident.”

“And someone else was in that accident too?”

“Both my father and my first fiancé were in that shuttle. I was the only survivor... but that was a long time ago.”

“How did that change who you were?”

Kathryn answered, “How can that not have changed me?” She sighed and thought carefully before answering. “I believe that it gave me the determination to make them both proud, so after a period of mourning, I went on to command school and focused my energy on doing just that.”

“Tell us about Voyager. Your mission was supposed to last three weeks, if I understand correctly? What was that mission, if I may ask?”

“It shouldn’t be that much of a secret. We were sent to apprehend the Maquis ship Liberty, commanded by Captain Chakotay.”

Gayle smiled. “It appears that you were successful.”

“Yes,” she held up a finger to add, “but not quite the way I planned.”

“Were you and the Maquis ship thrown out there together? How did they end up on Voyager?”

“The displacement wave took the Liberty first, and when we were looking for them, we got caught up in the same phenomenon. It wasn’t until a few days later when Captain Chakotay sacrificed the Liberty to save Voyager that the Maquis came to be on our ship.”

“What is a displacement wave, exactly?”

Kathryn tapped her temple. “It would take a lot longer to explain the physics behind it than we have time for in this interview, and we don’t really understand the phenomenon completely anyway. Suffice it to say, a sporocystian life form was the caretaker to a species called the Ocampa. He brought ships out there from across the galaxy in an attempt to find a life form who could take over his role. He died before he could send us back.”

“The Ocampa... you had one on your ship for awhile didn’t you? What were they like?”

A pleasant look crossed her face. “Kes was the Ocampa who joined us. They are a very unique species in that they only live for nine years, but achieve adulthood by age one. Kes was a dear and brilliant young lady and made an inspiring difference to what felt like a very grim situation. She was full of hope and amazement for every discovery, every adventure.”

“So... the Maquis were on Voyager, and they became part of your crew. Was that a smooth transition?”

Chuckling at the memories, Kathryn said, “It was a learning experience for us all, and I’m sure harder on the Maquis than on the original crew. Captain Chakotay agreed to become my first officer and that eased the transition. He helped me a great deal by encouraging me to appoint B’Elanna Torres as my chief engineer. I have never met a more gifted and intelligent woman. We are alive today because of her incredible gifts.”

“So, you were stranded out there, with a ship full of Maquis, and no means of getting home. What kind of thoughts were running through your head? Did you ever think you’d see home again?”

“I was determined to find a wormhole, another sporocystian life form, or anything that would provide us with a shortcut. I would not believe that the Delta Quadrant was the end of our story. And there was a magnificent chance to explore and discover so many new worlds. It was the opportunity of a lifetime, and at times, I felt like we were the first Enterprise seeking new life in uncharted space. That ship had no backup, and neither did we.”

“Did anything in your past experiences prepare you for the Delta Quadrant?”

“Absolutely not.” Kathryn smiled. “But with the combined experiences, knowledge, tenacity, and wits of the entire crew, we were able to figure it out as we went along. We made some mistakes along the way, but we also became a tight-knit team that was able to accomplish the impossible more than once. I am extremely proud of my crew.”

“If you could go back in time and had the choice of not embarking on that journey into the Badlands, knowing then what you know now, would you still go?”

“What a question.” Kathryn thought hard about that one. “Would I disobey orders? No, but I dearly regret the loss of the forty-seven lives along the way. Most of those were from the impact

of the initial displacement wave, but there's not one loss that doesn't break my heart." She wiped away the moisture that had collected in her eyes.

The Kathryn who was watching the interview swallowed hard and squeezed Chakotay's hand. He put his arm around her and held her against his side.

Gayle asked, "When you first made contact with Earth, how did that affect you?"

"We rejoiced because our friends and family knew we were alive. It was a connection to home that we really needed, even though it didn't bring us any closer or allow us to communicate."

"It was a couple years later before communication was possible, wasn't it? When you and the rest of the crew started learning about what was happening here with the war, what were your reactions?"

"We were devastated. Some people had received good news, and the crew at large tried to rejoice with them, but knowing that our home was in turmoil and there was nothing we could do to help was really difficult. The Maquis members learned at that time that all of their comrades had either been murdered or imprisoned, and it opened some old wounds that were hard to recover from. Suddenly, we all felt as helpless to protect our homes as the Maquis had felt trying to protect the estranged colonies."

Chakotay squeezed Kathryn tightly and whispered into her ear, "Thank you."

She turned to him and whispered, "I wanted people to know."

Gayle asked, "I'm sure you encountered some horrible situations out there, some that you're likely unable to talk about, but what would you like the Federation to know about what you endured?"

"I don't want the people of the Federation to have nightmares, so maybe we should move on to another question."

"Kathryn, we know that you weren't on a seven-year vacation of exploration, and you don't have to tell us details, but we would like to know what kind of challenges you faced. What's out there?"

She thought carefully before answering. "The good news is that we successfully outwitted or outran all of the more troublesome species, so if any of our stories give you concern, know that they can be beat." Taking a deep breath before speaking, she said, "The most disturbing species, for me, was one of the first we ran into. The Vidiians. Their entire race was ravaged by a plague that they called the phage. Their medical technology was beyond ours by leaps and bounds, but they depended on organ transplants to survive. The frightening part was that they harvested their organs from living donors."

"Good heavens." Gayle looked horrified. "Did you lose any crew to them?"

“Yes.” Kathryn watched herself answer the question succinctly, and knew that during the interview, she had been thinking about all the people who’d died, and how she didn’t want their families to know the circumstances.

“Any other encounters that you can tell us about?”

“Well, there’s always the Borg. We ran into them quite a few times.”

“And two of your crew were former drones, weren’t they?”

“Yes, Annika Hansen was the only remaining Borg on Voyager after our first encounter with them. Our Doctor was able to remove most of her implants, and over time, she regained her humanity. She is, without a doubt, the most intelligent person I have ever known, and I care deeply for her. The other is Icheb. He was one of four Borg children that joined us after we found them on a derelict Borg cube. We placed the other three with their own people, but Icheb stayed with us and has grown into a remarkable young man.”

“What was the most difficult part of the journey?”

“One thing comes to mind above all others... We found ourselves in an area of space that the crew dubbed ‘The Void.’ It was a region that was devoid of any life. No stars, no planets, nothing to break up the monotony of the day and night. We were expecting to face two years of that.”

“How did you manage?”

“Everyone pulled together to make the best of it, but luckily, we encountered a race of people that needed our help, and through that encounter, we found a wormhole that cut sixteen months off our journey.”

“Did you or the crew ever feel like giving up?”

“Yes, but never all at once, so we pulled each other along.”

“How did you keep your faith?”

“That’s not an easy question to answer. We relied on each other more than any crew has ever had to, and at those times when things looked dire, there was always something that came along to renew our spirit.”

“What are some of the discoveries you made that you can share with us? Cultures, science, or whatever you feel like sharing.”

“Wow... there are so many discoveries that it’s hard to isolate them. Maybe one of us will write a book,” Kathryn laughed.

“Tell us about your first-officer, Commander Chakotay. We know him as a former Starfleet officer who joined the Maquis, who then became your chief confidant. What kind of person is he?”

Phoebe, Mike, and Gretchen all glanced at her as Kathryn felt Chakotay squeeze her shoulders. They listened intently to her answer. “Chakotay is a remarkable man. He taught advanced tactics at the academy, but left Starfleet when the Cardassians destroyed his home colony and murdered over three thousand people who were living there. He’s a peace-loving man who did what he could to get supplies to the surviving colonies and was able to thwart several Cardassian attacks, including a couple against Bajor.”

“And when he agreed to serve under you, was that a smooth transition?”

“Yes, actually, it was. I don’t want to speak for him, but I do know his opinions well, so I hope he won’t mind if I tell you. Chakotay knew that the Federation was trying to avoid a war with Cardassia, and that their hands were tied when it came to the destruction of his home. It was a horrendous tragedy, and his anger was focused on the Cardassians who committed the atrocity. When I asked him to put on the Starfleet uniform again, he did it without hesitation. There was nothing we could’ve done out there to affect change here, so our primary focus was to build a cohesive crew that could face the challenges we would come up against. It wasn’t easy for everyone to put aside their feelings, but eventually, everyone understood why it had to be done.”

Kathryn chanced a glance at Chakotay who had let go of her hand to put his fist against his mouth as he listened. When he looked at her, she saw that his eyes were moist. She said, “I’m sorry.”

He shook his head. “You’re exactly right. I didn’t realize how much you understood.”

She patted his leg as he gratefully accepted a handkerchief that Gretchen offered to him. While they’d been talking, Gayle asked about Kathryn’s impressions of the impact of the war on the Federation.

“It’s devastating, and I’m sure that I haven’t seen the brunt of it. The visible impact on San Francisco is shocking, so many buildings and landmarks were destroyed. Nothing can replace the lives that were lost – so many of my classmates and friends are gone. It’s...” she shook her head. “It’s inconceivable to me what the Federation suffered through.”

“And Starfleet itself – have you noticed any changes?”

“It’s hard to say. Ask me again in six months. We were debriefed and then we’ve been on leave, so I haven’t really had a chance to get a feel for it yet. I’m sure the loss of life has impacted Starfleet severely. I know just from speaking to my own family that it feels like the proverbial rug was pulled out from under them. We’ve been living with the security of knowing that Earth and the worlds inside the Federation were safe places to live, that Starfleet would

protect us, good would always triumph over evil, and that this idealistic society we've created would be our Utopia. But suddenly, that's not true anymore and there's a crisis of faith."

"I've never heard anyone say it quite so eloquently, Kathryn, but you're right." Gayle was just as caught up in the emotions as Kathryn was.

Kathryn continued, "I don't know what I can do, but I hope that the desire to recreate our sense of peace and security is just as strong with every member of the Federation as it is with me."

"Let's hope we can move mountains to make that happen," Gayle said.

"It only takes a grain of faith within each of us."

"Kathryn," Gayle asked. "What does it feel like to have made such a huge difference?"

"How so?"

"This miracle that you've accomplished by bringing Voyager home, the uniting of your crews, the hope that it's given to so many people, the extraordinary stories of how you survived your ordeals, and the impact that you and Voyager must have made on the many worlds you made first contact with. All of these things are because of you, your leadership, and your decisions. How does that feel?"

Kathryn was silent as she thought about the question. "That's a question that I don't know how to answer."

"Your impact on the galaxy is far-reaching and you've brought us hope in miracles. Do you have a feel for the impact you've made?"

The Kathryn watching felt reassured as Chakotay took her hand again, lacing their fingers together as he had five years ago on New Earth and many times since when she needed his silent support.

"In retrospect," Kathryn answered, "It is easy to see that we accomplished something monumental. It's also easy for me to say that I made the decision to strand us out there in order to protect an innocent race of people, and that I was willing to make that sacrifice because it was the right thing to do.

"But, I didn't realize how much that decision would affect me and the lives of countless individuals. We go about our days, all of us, doing our jobs as best we can. You know the old adage – I put my pants on one leg at a time just like everyone else.

"This difference you're talking about isn't something that I decided to do one morning. It was merely living one day at a time, making the best choices I could with the information I had at the time. It was about encouraging the people who were out there with me to do the best that they could.

“Making a difference is about making the best out of your circumstances. It takes the strength to stick with it and perseverance when times get tough. In other words, to be as stubborn as a mule. I’m not saying that I didn’t make mistakes, nor was I always positive and hopeful. There were some very dark times out there, but just as I cared for the crew of Voyager, they also cared about me. That’s what made the difference.”

Gayle asked, “Still, there must have been choices that you made where you knew the outcome would be significant?”

Kathryn answered, “There were some opportunities that we took advantage of, and yes, we knowingly helped when it was within our power and ethics to do so, but no more than any Federation ship would do. There were quite a few times when I didn’t think Voyager would survive. It was either sheer luck or the grace of God, but here we are. Some of us didn’t make it, and I’m surprised that I’m not one of them.”

Kathryn paused before saying, “There are countless stories of men and women who have made a difference by doing just one thing. I suppose that we were lucky to have little moments like that almost every day. We had almost five hundred first contacts. Ninety percent of those went well, and I hope that with the remaining fifty, we were able to leave a mark, plant an idea, or encourage a little thought. It’s hard to tell what the impact will be of every little decision, choice, or even simply the expression of an idea.

“I’m no different than anyone else. The abilities that I’ve needed have emerged as I confronted situations. When that failed, someone has always stepped up to fill the void.”

“Who was that person?”

“Oh, it was so many people, but I’d have to say that, for me, one person rose above all the others – my first officer. It was the never-failing and steadfast support of Chakotay that helped me. His ingenuity and resourcefulness are remarkable, and he stood by my side, every day, so that we could face the challenges together.”

Kathryn felt Chakotay’s hand begin to tremble slightly, so she held it reassuringly.

“It was also Tuvok’s logic, B’Elanna Torres’ brilliance, the trust and intelligence of Harry Kim. We were motivated by our EMH’s thirst for humanity and the search for Annika Hansen’s identity. Tom Paris’ humor grounded us and brought us levity in the most dire circumstances – not to forget his unbelievable piloting abilities and genuine compassion for others. The list goes on and on. Everyone gave each other what they could and we became a family who relied on each other.”

Gayle asked, “What can you do now? What will top this?”

“I don’t think there’s anything that could be more difficult or more rewarding than the last seven years. I’ll just keep doing what I have been doing – to care about the people in my life, and to do all the good that I can, whenever the opportunity presents itself.”

“I have one last question for you.”

Kathryn smiled, “What’s that?”

“How are you?”

She laughed, giving the viewers her full, bright smile. “I’m thrilled to be home.”

“Yes, but after seven years of such intense responsibility, how challenging has it been for you to reintegrate with life here on Earth, and at the same time, struggle with letting go of your role as captain for nearly one hundred and fifty people?”

“Well, I don’t think my role as captain of Voyager’s crew will ever be one that I’m willing to let go of. Being a captain in such a closed community is a far-different role than that which is typical. I love each and every one of them and I hope we find ways to continue to be an integral part of each other’s lives. Chakotay and I have been checking on everyone, making sure they’re getting settled in. We’ll soon be discussing what’s next for each of us, and I hope to make that transition smooth and encouraging.”

“And your personal reintegration?”

Kathryn smiled brightly, “I’ve been enjoying Earth like I never have before. It’s remarkable and I cherish every sunset, every flower, and every little piece of natural beauty I see. I feel like my head has been in the clouds.”

“It has been an absolute pleasure to speak with you today, Kathryn. You truly are an inspiration to us all. I wish for you, and all of those on Voyager, a warm welcome home.”

“Thank you.”

The show ended and Gretchen clicked off the viewscreen. The room was quiet until Katie asked, “Are you done talking now, Aunt Katie?”

Kathryn laughed. “Yes, I think I’ve said more than enough.”

Mike said sarcastically, “I feel motivated to go make the world a better place now.”

“We’ll miss you, Mike,” Kathryn joked in return.

Gretchen said, “I’m speechless, Katie.”

Phoebe added, “I had no idea you were such a good speaker, sis. That was really something.”

“It’s no wonder that you were exhausted after that interview was over.” Gretchen told everyone, “She came here and slept all afternoon.”

Kathryn turned to Chakotay who was quietly listening to everyone. “What did you think? Did I come close to describing the experience out there?”

“Yes,” his voice cracked and he cleared his throat. “Absolutely.”

Phoebe said, “Well, it’s obvious to me, Chakotay, that my sister thinks you’re pretty wonderful.”

“I do,” Kathryn said softly.

“So it seems,” Chakotay replied.

Mike said, “I’m anxious to see what the response to this interview will be. You said some pretty significant things that should motivate some change.”

“I didn’t intend to start a revolution.”

“No,” Gretchen said, “But you certainly were clear about your opinion of the Maquis.”

“Doesn’t everyone feel that way now that the war is over?” Kathryn asked.

“No,” Mike said. “Many think they were the stimulus behind it. There aren’t many who think the war was inevitable.”

“Hmmm,” Kathryn thought about that. “Then I’m glad I could shed some light on it.”

Chakotay asked, “Even if that means you just shot yourself in the foot regarding your career?”

“I don’t really give a damn about my career. There are a lot more important things in life.”

Gretchen added, “And your statement about the Federation being in a crisis of faith may be true, but that’s the opposite message than what the President of the Federation has been trying to convey.”

“Oh,” Kathryn frowned. “I didn’t realize that.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it,” Phoebe said casually. “Not many people agree with him.” She stood up and said, “I think it’s time to get Katie home.”

“Noooo... I want to spend the night!” Katie insisted.

“Not tonight,” Mike said. “You have preschool in the morning.”

“I don’t want to go anywhere tomorrow!”

Gretchen asked, “Would you make a picture for me tomorrow at school? I love your paintings so much.”

Katie sighed dramatically, “Okay.”

Kathryn chuckled lightly at the exchange and watched half-heartedly as her sister gathered up all of their things. She looked at Chakotay, who was very still and quiet. “Did I upset you?”

He slowly turned his eyes to look at her. “No, not at all. I’m worried about you, but I’m not upset. In fact, I’m rather touched.”

“I really don’t think you should worry about my career. I’m not interested in heading out there again.”

“I know.” He smiled softly and pulled his arm out from behind her to hold her hands. “I just don’t want you to be at the center of any coming trouble.”

“I’m not worried about Starfleet or the Federation.”

“I’m not either,” he said intently. “It’s anyone outside the chain of command that I worry about. They may latch onto something you said.”

“If anyone like that exists, and if they truly listen to what I said, the end result could only be positive.”

“If they listen... that’s the key.” He squeezed her arm and said, “I’m probably worrying about nothing.”

She smiled, trying to reassure him, “I don’t think I said anything that momentous.”

“Give yourself some credit,” he winked. “You were very inspiring, and always have been.”

She shook her head as they rose to say good-bye to Katie.

After Phoebe, Mike, and Katie left, the other three retired to the sun room, although the sun had set hours earlier. The room was surrounded by open-air screens, but had a warm, gas stove that kept the chill out of the night air. It was decorated with large, comfortable furniture and overlooked a patio and private garden behind the house. At night, the garden was lit with small lights sprinkled throughout the flower beds and along the walkway. Kathryn relaxed into the settee and let Chakotay pour wine for all of them.

Her mother brought out some fruit and cheese and handed Kathryn a plate. Taking a seat across from her, Gretchen said, “Katie, that interview was really something.”

“I’m happy with the way it turned out.” She nibbled on a slice of mild cheddar. “Although I hope I didn’t appear arrogant.”

“Not in the least,” Chakotay said as he sat down next to her. “If anything, we wish you’d take more credit.”

“I think it’s very clear that as captain, I was the leader, but everyone deserves the recognition. I want to make sure that the Federation learns about our whole Voyager family, not just me.”

“Your modesty is very becoming, dear.” Gretchen smiled at her daughter. “I’ve always been proud of you, but listening to you speak tonight might just have been the icing on the cake.”

Kathryn felt warmed by her mother’s compliment. “Thank you.”

Gretchen said, “Tell me about the two of you. You’re much better friends than Edward was with any of his first officers or captains. When did this friendship become so strong?”

Chakotay and Kathryn looked at each other and smiled. He said, “It was pretty gradual. First, we had to get comfortable with each other’s crew.”

“Yes, although I trusted you immediately.”

“You did?” Chakotay asked.

“Do you think I would have asked you to be my first officer, otherwise?”

“I assumed that it was to keep the Maquis in line.”

Gretchen asked, “Yes, but when did you start becoming friends? I hated to think about you out there isolated from your crew.”

“They were a unique crew in that they didn’t let me isolate myself.” Kathryn looked at Chakotay. “Several invited me to the social gatherings often.”

He replied, “True, but I think it was around that first Christmas, about nine months into the trip. We’d found Amelia Earhart and a whole society of humans that had been abducted from Earth in the twentieth century. We gave the crew a choice about whether to stay or not and anyone who wanted to was to gather in the cargo bay.”

“No one did,” she remembered fondly.

“Afterwards, you held my hand briefly in the corridor,” Chakotay said.

“Hmm,” Kathryn said to herself happily. “Yes, I guess I did. And then we had a Christmas celebration and you and I exchanged gifts. You gave me that collection of short stories.”

Addressing Gretchen, Chakotay said, “And she gave me a dream catcher to decorate my quarters. They were pretty spartan.”

“And the next day you went off and disappeared with that young Kazon. I was not the least bit happy about that, you know.”

“It’s not like you never disappeared,” Chakotay said playfully.

Gretchen said, “Now, I didn’t mean to start an argument.”

Kathryn took a sip of wine. “It’s an old argument. We saved each other’s hides more times than either of us cares to remember.”

Chakotay said, “Your mother doesn’t need to hear that.”

“I’m not oblivious to the dangers of being in Starfleet,” Gretchen responded.

“Our friendship…” Kathryn thought back. “I think it really blossomed the following fall.”

“New Earth,” Chakotay said.

“Oh?” Gretchen asked.

“He and I were bitten by an insect and the Doctor couldn’t find a cure that would allow us to leave the planet. Something in the atmosphere kept us alive.”

Chakotay continued, “So they had no choice but to leave us there.”

“It was a beautiful planet. We named it New Earth, and it was just the two of us for almost two months. That was definitely when our relationship changed.”

“Two months alone? I should say…” Gretchen gave them a knowing look.

“No, Mother, we didn’t take our relationship that far. It was mostly just a close friendship.”

“Mostly?” Gretchen asked.

“I kissed her,” Chakotay volunteered. “But then the ship came back for us, having found a cure.”

“It took you two months to kiss her?”

“So anyway...” Kathryn changed the subject. “Our friendship grew after that, although it had its ups and downs.”

Gretchen rolled her eyes and said, “I don’t believe you two for a second.”

“If you’ll remember, I was engaged to Mark at the time.”

“Oh, I remember,” Gretchen refilled their wine glasses. “A mistake in itself. You’d been engaged for three years.”

“By that time, it had been five, but that’s beside the point.”

“No, darling, it’s not. Anyone who’s your age and can wait three years to get married doesn’t really want to, in my opinion.”

“It’s a moot point now, anyway.” Kathryn sighed heavily. Her mother was hitting a little too close to home. “Did you call Aunt Martha?”

“You really must want to change the subject to bring her up.” Gretchen popped a grape into her mouth.

“You’re right.”

“No, I didn’t call her, but I also silenced the comm so no one would interrupt us tonight.”

“Probably a good idea,” Chakotay responded. “I think this interview is going to put you in demand, Kathryn.”

“It was supposed to satisfy their curiosity, not create more.”

“Yes, but I’ll bet now that the whole Federation knows how personable you are, they’ll all want to talk to you even more.”

Kathryn sighed. “It was the part about making a difference, wasn’t it?”

“Likely,” Gretchen agreed. “You could be an inspirational speaker with that theme. If you ever want to retire from Starfleet, I think you could really do something with that.”

“That may come sooner than later, depending on what they want to do with me now.”

Gretchen asked, “Chakotay, have you given any thought as to what’s next?”

“I’ll probably wait to see what they offer me, but I’d rather stay here than go out into space again. Overall, I was happiest when I was teaching.”

“Sounds like a good plan. If Starfleet doesn’t want you, just come see me. I’ll get you in on the faculty at IU, where I teach.”

“Thank you, I’ll keep that in mind.”

Gretchen said, “Speaking of that, I do have an eight o’clock class of freshmen in the morning, so I should turn in. Chakotay, you’re more than welcome to stay the night. We have plenty of room.”

“Thank you, but I’ll find my way back to the transporter station.”

“Nonsense.” She stood and waved off his statement. “Stay here and enjoy yourself. You two can go back together in the morning.” Leaning down to kiss her daughter’s head, she said, “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Mom.”

“Goodnight, Mrs. Janeway.”

“Gretchen, call me Gretchen,” she said as she went back into the house.

Chakotay looked after her. “She’s wonderful.”

“Yes, she is. Smart as a whip, too.”

“Just like her daughter,” he smiled.

“Flatterer.” She winked and asked, “So, would you like to stay?”

“It would be nice.”

“All right, then.” Closing her eyes, she laid her head on the back of the couch. “Now we can just relax. I love the night air here. Isn’t it peaceful?”

“Yes, very.” He refilled their glasses again and asked, “I hadn’t thought about Kes in a long time until tonight. I wonder what she’s doing now.”

“I hope she’s back on Ocampo. That’s where I imagine her.”

“That sounds nice. She was such a special young woman. It’s hard to imagine her out there alone.”

“She needed people. I missed her so much at times that it hurt.”

“She was like a daughter to you.”

Kathryn's eyes watered with the emotional memories. Trying to lighten the mood, she said, "Yes, and then I tried to replace her with Seven. Night and Day. I wonder which would be more like my real daughter, had I ever had one."

"You'd like to?"

Lifting her head, she asked, "Have a child?" When Chakotay nodded, she continued. "I don't know. It seems a little late in life to be thinking about it, but Phoebe's only four years younger than I and she's thinking about having another."

"She is?"

Kathryn nodded. "I should be content to live vicariously through her."

"Perhaps, perhaps not." Chakotay touched her arm. "Don't dismiss the idea without giving it some thought."

They continued quietly discussing the memories that the interview had brought up for a couple hours. During a lull in the conversation, Chakotay said, "Kathryn, I'd like to apologize again for my behavior with Annika."

She held up a hand. "You really don't need to. Let's just call it water under the bridge."

"Thank you, but I keep beating myself up over it. Your friendship is a lot more important to me than she ever could've been."

She took his hand and held it. "Your friendship is important to me, too."

He sighed, "I guess I just... I'm sorry. You really don't want to talk about this, do you?"

"Not really, but if you need to, we can."

"I'd just like to explain myself, but I haven't figured out how."

She smiled. "Sometimes our actions are beyond any reasonable explanation, or they're at least beyond anything we care to admit. I've had my share of irrational behavior, too."

"I was flattered by her interest."

"I understand."

"And when she decided that she wasn't attracted to me, I felt really foolish for getting involved with her in the first place."

She held his hand tighter, "I can assure you that it had more to do with her inability to feel than it did with your sexual appeal."

“You’re just trying to make me feel better.”

“I’m serious, Chakotay. She said that she enjoyed the first two kisses when she was in control, but then you initiated the intimacy. Most women would enjoy that a lot more, but I don’t think she can feel arousal. If you think about it, having someone put their tongue in your mouth without any feelings of stimulation would be rather repulsive.”

“You talked about it in that much detail?” He cringed.

“She needed to talk about it.”

“It’s discomfoting to know that my girlfriend and my best friend were talking about me that way.”

“I didn’t feel comfortable with the conversation either. She asked if I’d ever kissed you, wanting to know if I experienced a similar non-response.”

He closed his eyes. “Do I need to know this?”

After taking a sip of wine, she responded, “I declined to answer her.”

Pondering that for a moment, he quietly asked, “Will you answer that question now?”

“You want to know if I enjoyed kissing you? That was five years ago.”

He shifted so that he was facing her, with a sudden mischievous glint in his eye. “It seemed to me like you did.”

“You were the last man on earth, so to speak.” She downed the rest of her wine quickly.

“You’re blushing.”

“It’s the wine. I’ve had five glasses, I think.” She stared at her empty glass trying to remember. “Maybe six.”

“So you didn’t like the kiss?”

She chanced a glance at him and he was looking far too amused at the turn of the conversation. “I didn’t say that. It was nice.”

“Nice?”

“I would’ve let you kiss me again, if Tuvok hadn’t called us the next day.”

“I thought so.” He smiled as he finished off his wine too.

“Care for a refill?” she asked as she poured a little more for herself and drank quickly.

“No, but I would like your help with something.”

“What’s that?”

“An evaluation.”

“Of?”

“A kiss.”

“I see.” She felt a flood of warmth infuse her, but didn’t want to give it away so she finished off her wine. “What are the criteria for this assessment?”

“Well,” he took their empty glasses and set them on the side table. “Don’t you agree that getting feedback on one’s performance indicates areas that need improvement?”

“Of course, but my feedback may or may not have any bearing on any future recipient’s preferences.”

He shifted closer so that their legs were touching. “Oh, I think it might.”

She shivered as his cool fingertips caressed her alcohol-warmed face. At least, she thought that was why she shivered. “Your fingers are cold.”

He smiled just before his lips descended and kissed her lips tenderly. He closed his soft, warm lips against her mouth several times and a soothing warmth settled over her. When he withdrew, he looked steadily into her eyes. “What do you think?”

She leaned back and shrugged. “It was sweet.”

“That’s all?”

“Chaste.” She tried not to smile, but she wasn’t entirely successful.

“I see.” He licked his lips. “Can you suggest areas of improvement?”

“This is just my preference, but I’m fond of a more open-mouthed kiss.”

He nodded. “Anything else?”

“And your hands... touching the chin is a nice starting place, but then they need to move.” She waved her hands in front of her face, watching them carefully as they seemed to blur.

“Do you have a specific destination in mind?”

“I like to be surprised.”

“Mm hmmm.” He leaned in to recover the distance she had put between them. “Could I impose upon you for a re-evaluation?”

“You think your performance will improve that quickly?”

“I’d like to find out.”

He was leaning forward about as far as he could and it was up to her to complete the distance. She put a hand on his chest and pushed him back a little. “First, I think we should get a little more comfortable. I think you might agree that for a good field test scenario, it’s important to have proper placement of the subjects.”

“Of course.” He opened his arms as she snuggled closer to his side.

“And I’d like to suggest that the duration of the test be long enough for a thorough evaluation.” She could tell that her words were slurring a little.

He wrapped his arm around her back and pulled her close. “I’ll take that under advisement.”

She looked up into his deep, dark eyes, feeling as if she was in a dream. Her only connection to reality was the tingle his finger created as it traced along the top edge of her lips. Her breathing grew shallow as he gently tugged at her lower lip, opening her mouth seductively to receive his kiss. Ever so slowly, his lips descended, and fuzziness pervaded her senses, causing her to fall into him with her mind, her body, and with the love for him that she’d felt for a long, long time.

Following her suggestion, he caressed her face for only a moment before his fingers threaded into her hair, eventually finding their way to the back to cradle her head tenderly in his hands.

Kathryn melted when the soft warmth of his tongue joined the kiss. Her hands gripped his shirt, silently urging him to take it deeper until their tongues met in the most erotic kiss she’d ever experienced. As he steadily coaxed her into arousal, a moan came from deep within her chest. Much lower, a warm, wet heat settled in her belly where the sensations spiraled up through her until she was light-headed and unable to do anything but react to his kiss. Her body felt afire as his kiss deepened even further, entangling their mouths, and making her crave his touch all over. Unable to stop herself, she arched her body against his, letting him know that she wanted more.

They stayed in the kiss for a long moment until his fingers disentangled from her hair to lightly touch her shoulder. Gently, he held her arm as he brought them slowly out of the kiss. When he drew back, her eyes remained closed and she felt dizzy. Not wanting the arousal to end, she settled against him and laid her head on his shoulder.

He whispered, “Kathryn?”

She didn't want to open her eyes or move even the tiniest muscle. "Hmmm?"

"Are you okay?"

"Mmmhmm." She forced herself to speak. "I think I've had too much to drink."

"I see." He hugged her close and caressed her arm to warm her up. He didn't know that she was already plenty warm, but the touch felt good nonetheless.

After a few minutes, she managed to open her eyes and look up into his kind and caring face.

"Hi."

"Hi, yourself."

"I think you passed your field test," she slurred.

"Oh? Was the tongue an acceptable element?"

"It was delicious," she hummed, feeling languid and dreamy.

"I'll have to remember that next time I kiss a woman."

"Oh? Who're you planning on kissing?"

"You'll be the first to know." He kissed her temple.

She smiled up at him, thoroughly enjoying being in his arms, held and cherished in a way she'd only imagined.

He said, "It's a beautiful night."

"Mmmhmm." Slowly, she turned her head until she could see the screened windows. "I've always loved Indiana in the springtime. I should've bought a house here instead of California."

"Is this where you'd like to retire?"

"Maybe so, although I'd like to live in the mountains too. Somewhere in a natural setting."

"Well, there's nothing saying you can't move."

"True, but I think I'll stay where I'm at for a little while longer."

They sat in silence for a little while, content to hold each other. He slid his hand up and down her arm, and she lay against him with her head on his shoulder. She felt like drifting off to sleep,

but didn't want to miss a moment of being close to him, so instead, she listened to his breathing and the quiet sounds of the night around them.

He broke the silence by asking, "When are your meetings this week?"

"Start tomorrow afternoon." Starfleet wanted to work through their evaluations and recommendations for the crew. "I wish you could join me, though. Maybe I'll suggest that."

"I wouldn't mind. I'd like to have a say in what positions and ranks are offered to our people."

"I think they want my opinion first, but it would be more efficient to go through it together." She yawned and snuggled into him. "I'll see what I can do."

"I think we should go to bed."

"I'm quite comfortable right where I'm at."

He chuckled and nuzzled her hair. "Me too, but if we fall asleep out here, our backs will complain all day tomorrow."

She made no effort to move and held him tightly.

"Come on," he said as he unfolded her from his arms and helped her to her feet. "You need sleep."

"Mmmm... but I was so warm."

"I know." He collected most of the dishes and headed inside to the kitchen. When he returned, she was still standing where he'd left her, holding two empty wine bottles. "Let's go in," he said as he wrapped his arm around her and led her forward. "I think you're a little tipsy."

"A little," she slurred. "But I'm fine." As she set the bottles on the counter and one fell over, she laughed. "Oops."

He straightened out the bottle and said, "We can wash everything in the morning."

She felt a little giddy as he took her hand to walk through the house. Stopping outside the guest bedroom, she leaned into him and said, "Here's your room."

"Where's yours?" he asked quietly as he held her steady.

She pointed to the room at the end of the hall. "Down there."

He turned her in that direction and urged her forward, but she stopped and turned back around, bringing their faces very close together.

She asked, “Don’t you want to practice kissing a little more?”

“Not tonight,” he kissed her softly on the cheek. “We need to get some sleep.”

“Too bad,” she said as she laid her head against his chest and heard the steady beat of his heart.

“Come on,” he turned her again to walk down the hall.

She reluctantly let go of him when she saw her large, cozy bed and flopped down on top of the quilt. She hugged a pillow and closed her eyes, feeling like she was sinking into the mattress. When she felt the flutter of movement over her, she looked up to see him covering her with a blanket.

“Goodnight, Kathryn.” He brushed back the tendrils of hair that had fallen across her face.

“G’night, ‘kotay.” She happily drifted off to sleep.

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 dessert 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 reported 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

Part 5 - "Temporal and Temperamental"

By Dawn

Rated PG-13

Summary: Kathryn Janeway's life becomes infinitely more complicated.

Kathryn was escorted by two security officers through the corridors of the Relativity to a briefing room where she was instructed to wait. She sat down in one of the chairs and tried to clear her mind of everything she had just come from so she could concentrate on where she was now.

Braxton had not been forthcoming about why she was there. She was worried that it had something to do with Admiral Janeway's travel through time, but Kathryn thought they would've done something about that long before now. This might be about some other temporal incursion that she knew nothing about.

She waited ten minutes before the door opened again. Her jaw dropped when she saw her older self walk in.

Braxton said with a sneer, "I'll let the two of you catch up while we make the final part of our journey."

"Where are we going?" Admiral Janeway asked as she sat down.

"To stand trial for the largest temporal incursion ever recorded. Personally, I'm pleased to see that you'll finally have to face the consequences of your blatant disregard of time travel ethics." He stormed out of the room.

Admiral Janeway turned to Kathryn and said, “I’d venture to say that he’s a little irritated with us.”

“I’d say he’s irritated with you.” Kathryn rubbed the bridge of her nose as she looked at her older self. “Care to tell me when, exactly, you were pulled from?”

“I see by your uniform that you’re not part of my past, so that’s good news.”

Looking down at her gray shoulders, Kathryn said, “I like the old uniform better.”

The Admiral leaned back in her chair and explained, “I just left Voyager and was about to enter the nebula. We spoke only five minutes ago. I hope this doesn’t take long, or I’m going to need to figure out how to get another dose of that pathogen.”

Kathryn remembered injecting her with the pathogen and again felt the emotional burden of what the Admiral was about to do. “I am four months into that revised future.”

“You made it home.”

“Yes, thanks to you.”

“You’re welcome.” The Admiral pursed her lips. “Although it seems you were prophetic. The Relativity has intervened.”

“What I don’t understand,” Kathryn held a finger up as she thought, “Is why they brought me from four months into that future, instead of pulling us both from where you were just now.”

“That does seem odd. Did you do something recently to cause trouble?”

Kathryn grimaced. “Of course not.”

A flash of light startled them and now, standing before them, were Q and Q, Jr. “You’re absolutely right, Kathy. You haven’t done a thing, but I have.” Q wagged his eyebrows.

“What is this about, Q?” the two ladies asked in unison.

“Don’t I even get a hello, Aunt Kathy?”

Kathryn smiled almost-sincerely, “Hello, Q. It’s a pleasure to see you again. What have you and your father been up to?”

“You’ll find out!” Q, Jr.’s eyes widened in excitement and both Q suddenly disappeared in another flash of light.

Both Kathryn Janeways looked at each other and sighed in unison. Admiral Janeway said, "Well, this just got a lot more interesting."

"I feel a headache coming on."

Six hours later, when she rematerialized in her own timeline, Kathryn knew at once that the Relativity hadn't sent her back to the exact time she left. There were fewer people in the room, and those that were there looked frantic. She needed to buy some time until she figured out what to tell them.

Chakotay saw her first, and he exhaled slowly to release tension. "Kathryn," he said thankfully as he crossed the room. "Are you okay?"

Patterson was not nearly as calm when he saw her. "What the hell happened? Who did this, Katie?"

"How long was I gone?" Feeling dizzy from her experience, she steadied herself by holding onto the back of a chair.

Johnson answered, "Ten minutes, exactly."

Barely audible, she asked herself, "That's all?"

Chakotay responded, "Ten very long minutes. Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine," she assured him and took hold of his arm for balance. Addressing Patterson, she asked, "You recall Voyager's encounters with the Timeship Relativity?"

"Yes."

"I just had another one, and Q was involved." She rubbed her neck and decided not to tell them how long she'd actually been gone. She was exhausted and needed time to think.

Chakotay asked, "How bad is your headache?"

"Pretty severe, actually."

Admiral Thompson asked, "Is any action required?"

"No, there's no threat. It's over." She sat down and took a long drink of water.

Patterson responded, "Very well. Jones, cancel the red alert and send the Sol Squadron back to their posts. Tell 'fleet security to stand down. The crisis is over." He touched his commbadge to contact Fleet Admiral Khurma to give him an update and to inform him that Kathryn was safe.

Kathryn took a moment during the flurry of activity to catch her breath and gather her thoughts. She looked at Chakotay to gauge his reaction to the situation.

He sat down next to her and asked, “You sure you’re okay? You don’t look well.”

“I’m a little disoriented, nothing to worry about.” She saw that he was handling everything as professionally as he usually did. It appeared that their relationship would not impact his ability to maintain his composure under duress.

After Admiral Khurma joined them, Patterson redirected their attention to the issue at hand.

“Captain Janeway, could you give us a report?”

Kathryn looked around to see who was in the room. “Before I begin, I want to know how many of you are privy to the confidential circumstances behind Voyager’s return?”

Admiral Khurma asked, “Does this pertain to that?”

“Yes.”

Admiral Paris joined them as Khurma replied, “Command Authorization Clearance Level Twelve and above.”

The rear admirals, captains, and aides rose to leave the room. When Chakotay remained, Admiral Wilson asked, “Commander Chakotay? Do you have clearance that I am unaware of?”

“No, sir, but I am aware of what transpired to get Voyager back to the Alpha Quadrant.”

Fleet Admiral Khurma said, “The Commander may stay, but I must have your full agreement that anything said here will not go beyond this room.”

“Absolutely, sir.”

When the room was clear, Kathryn began her report with a slight delay tactic. “As you know from Voyager’s logs, we encountered time travel on two separate occasions. The first was when we were taken back to twentieth century Earth, and the second was to help the twenty-ninth century timeship Relativity apprehend Captain Braxton who was attempting to sabotage Voyager.”

“Yes, although you weren’t as forthcoming about your experiences as we would have liked,” Wilson said.

“I invoked the temporal prime directive. That applies today, as well, sir.”

Wilson was not pleased and demanded, “Captain, are you suggesting that you plan to purposely withhold information from us?”

“Yes, sir, I am,” she said calmly in the face of his rising anger.

“What do you hope to gain?” Hayes challenged.

“Only the safety of the timeline as it currently exists, Admiral. I do not wish to jeopardize our future.”

Paris jumped in before Wilson could respond and said, “She’s completely within her rights to make this judgment. Please continue, Captain.”

Kathryn nodded, trying to figure out how much to tell them of her experiences. “During our encounter with my future self, Admiral Janeway, I was curious about why the Relativity didn’t intervene. Today, I got my answer. The entity, Q, has been keeping them at bay for the last four months. Needless to say, nerves were frazzled on that ship when Q finally released them to do their jobs.”

“Is this the same Q that Picard encountered?” Admiral Johansen asked.

“Yes, sir, and the same one we encountered on three occasions. By delaying the Relativity from resetting the timeline, a second timeline was allowed to fully develop. I don’t grasp the temporal mechanics of it, but I was told that the events that have transpired over these four months have created a drastically different future than the one Admiral Janeway experienced.”

Patterson asked, “So you were pulled out today to correct that?”

“That was Captain Braxton’s intention, but because this was such an enormous temporal incursion, an advisory panel comprised of individuals from the two twenty-ninth century timelines convened to determine the best course of action. Braxton merely brought me and Admiral Janeway in to meet with that panel.”

“Both of you were taken into custody?” Patterson asked with surprise.

She evaded the question by continuing with her story. “It was the panel’s decision to allow this timeline to continue, and that’s why I’ve been allowed to return.”

Admiral Khurma said, “That must have been a real struggle for them – how to decide the fate of the human race based on one incident.”

“Yes, I believe it was, and if Q’s exaggerations are to be believed, it was humanity’s fate that hung in the balance. I only heard the outcome, not the debate. I am happy to report, however, that the current timeline’s pros and cons will produce a far better outcome than those of the other.”

“Can you be more specific?” Khurma asked.

“Sorry, temporal prime directive.” She hoped she was being evasive enough not to arouse any suspicion.

“Do you know anything of your future, Captain?” Khurma asked.

She recognized the leading question and decided to not rise to the bait. “I know that I won’t be time-traveling anymore. The panel seemed to think that if I traveled back in time once, I could do it again. They’re going to keep watch on the Klingons that built the device that Admiral Janeway used twenty-six years from now, but I’ve been outfitted with an implant that will prevent me from time travel in the future. If I come across anything resembling chronitons, I’ll find myself transported to the Relativity.”

Patterson asked, “They can do that? I wonder how that works.”

She wished they could run with that tangent and explore the engineering behind it, but she knew this wasn’t the time or place. “You’re welcome to scan the implant, but I doubt there’ll be any way I can get rid of it.”

“I just might do that,” he said and then asked, “Is there anything else to report?”

“No, you have the gist of it.” She sat back in her chair and took a deep breath. Out of her peripheral vision, she saw Chakotay tapping his fingers on the table – a very clear sign that he wanted to say something but was holding back.

Patterson asked everyone, “Are there any other questions?” Seeing nothing but shaking heads, he concluded the briefing. “Very well then, I think with all the excitement of this situation, we should resume our Voyager crew discussions tomorrow. Captain, if you have a moment, I’d like to speak with you alone.”

“Of course, Admiral,” she remained seated as everyone else in the room rose.

Chakotay said, “I’ll wait for you in the atrium.” He gave her a look that made it clear he wanted to talk, too.

When everyone was out of the room, Patterson came around the table to sit with her. He had been a very good friend of her father’s and Kathryn thought of him as family. He’d been her favorite professor at the academy, and had been instrumental in giving her command of Voyager. She thought him very likeable and affectionate.

He said, “Katie, I’m worried about you.”

She turned her chair to face him and folded her hands in her lap. “Because of my excursion today?”

“A little, but mostly because of events over the last two weeks. I left you alone after you turned down the promotion because you needed some cooling-off time, and I know that Owen spoke to you.”

“Do you agree with him?”

“Wholeheartedly. However, there’s been a lot of talk about you ‘round the tables upstairs and it’s not all good.”

“Because I don’t want to be a commodore?”

“No, it’s more about your continued dealings with the press.”

“I’ve told the press nothing, Admiral.”

“I know, I know. I’ve been impressed with how you’ve handled them. The flip side is that you’re generating quite a positive following from the media. People adore you.”

“And that’s a bad thing?”

“It gives you a lot of power over the public, Katie. I’d venture to say that it’s more power than anyone else in Starfleet has at the moment, Admiral Khurma included.”

“Starfleet could take advantage of that. The Fleet Admiral doesn’t have to be afraid of my influence.”

“I agree, but I know you well. He doesn’t.”

“I’m not going to stop talking to the press, Admiral, but I will continue to be positive about Starfleet and the Federation.”

“Yes, I’m sure you will. You have a knack for making people think you’ve given them what they want without giving away a thing. It’s quite astonishing.”

She laughed gently to avoid aggravating her headache. “The Voyager senior staff all became good at that. You wouldn’t believe how often we managed to exchanged little things like maps, fiction, and music for food and mineral rights. It made for some interesting trade negotiations.”

“They learned from the best.” He looked at her pointedly. “Tell me something else, if I may ask a personal question?”

“You may ask.”

He looked amused at her response. “I’m only asking because of the current politics, and, well, because I’m curious and like to watch out for you in your father’s absence. What’s going on between you and Chakotay?”

Kathryn could see that question coming a light year away. “Will my answer affect my career?”

“It might, but only because we like to place couples in the same city, if possible.”

She frowned at him, not believing his excuse. She had sensed some disfavor towards Chakotay from a few of the brass, and knew that could affect both their careers. “I imagine that his Maquis background is looked upon critically by some.”

Patterson pursed his lips in thought for a moment before answering. “There’s a proposal coming your way, Katie, and the individual behind it likes that you root for the underdog, so to speak. I don’t believe there’s any harm in your friendship with Chakotay, and what others believe about the Maquis won’t matter a hill of beans in the long run.”

“My friendship? Are you telling me to keep it there?”

“Things will settle in the next two weeks. I trust that you can hold off on any unwanted publicity until then?”

“I don’t see a problem with that.” She added, “For two weeks.”

“Splendid.” He clapped his hands together. “Now, about your little adventure today – are you okay? Do you need any help?”

“I’m fine. A little shaken, but fine.” She rubbed her neck to try to ease the painful pressure that was steadily increasing where the implant had been placed.

“This implant – I take it that it’s some kind of restraining order?”

“Yes,” she sighed. “My punishment for abusing time travel twenty-six years from now.”

“Do you feel any pain from it? You don’t look well.”

“Only a little. I trust that Starfleet’s physicians continue to know what they’re doing in four hundred years.”

“Still, you might consult with your EMH. He’ll be able to evaluate it without needing an explanation.”

“I’ll do that.” She touched the tender spot on the base of her skull.

“And this Q, do you think we’ll be seeing more from him?”

“It’s possible, but we’ll have to wait and see. He’s fond of testing me.” She decided that this wasn’t the best time to discuss Q’s motives.

“As he has been with Jean-Luc.” He paused. “I was slipped a note during the meeting to find out what you’re not telling us.”

Kathryn rolled her eyes. “I’m not surprised.”

“The problem is that you’re not sitting at the table with the brass yet. It’s hard for some admirals to accept your lack of candor. I sense that you’re holding something back and I assume others sense it as well.”

“Tell me something. If Picard had the same experience, would they trust him?”

Patterson thought for a moment and nodded. “Probably so.”

“Then they’ve got to trust me.”

“Can you be cryptic with me? Make me feel like you’ve told me something without giving it away?” He winked.

She laughed outright. “There’s nothing more to tell.”

“I don’t believe you.” He looked at her pointedly.

As she gathered her thoughts, she asked, “Perhaps you can advise me?”

“Always a pleasure.”

“If you were faced with the choice between disobeying the temporal prime directive versus satisfying the curiosity of a handful of admirals, which would you choose? And what if you knew that any information shared could jeopardize the security of the Federation?”

“Hmmm. I see your dilemma.” He rubbed his chin. “Is there any chance that you’re putting anyone in danger by withholding information?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Surely you trust me enough to know the answer to that question.”

“Yes,” he sighed. “But I must ask it, regardless.”

“You’ll have to convince them to trust me.”

“I’ll do what I can.” He changed the subject. “Now, onto other business. We’ll start tomorrow with the five from the Equinox again, but I think we came to a reasonable conclusion today.”

“I think so, too. The Equinox is a difficult situation for me.”

“I know, but it’s for the best if we put it behind us and move on. Those five are going to be well cared for, I promise you, as will every other member of Voyager’s crew.”

“Thank you.”

“My aide is setting up interviews for your senior officers next week to discuss potential job offers. That also includes you.”

“All right. Is there anything I should know?” She felt her heart beat a little heavier in her chest.

“Yes, actually. Read up on President Zife and Admiral Khurma. I haven’t decided how I feel about it yet, but they’ve taken an interest in you.”

“They have?” Kathryn was genuinely surprised, even with the information she had about the future.

“Mmm hmmm,” he said as if trying to sound distracted. “And tell B’Elanna Torres to give some thought as to whether she’d like to stay with Voyager’s analysis, work with new ship design, or go out into space again. She’s so talented that everyone wants her, including me.”

“What about her husband?”

“We’ll get her situated first, and I’m sure we can find something exciting for him to do wherever she ends up.”

“I’ll do that. Thank you, Admiral.”

“You’re welcome.” He stood and extended a hand. “Soon, I think you’re going to have to start calling me Matt, though.” When she stood and accepted his handshake, he pulled her into a hug. “Katie, I couldn’t be prouder of you if you were my own daughter.”

Tears welled in her eyes as she felt enfolded in his fatherly affection. “That means a lot to me.”

“It does to me, too.” He pulled back and held her by her upper arms. “I hope that if anything develops between you and that maverick waiting for you out there, that you’ll let me walk you down the aisle?”

She was not expecting that and had to stifle her surprise. “I... don’t know what to say.”

He gathered up his padds and chuckled to himself. “I’d suggest that when he asks, you should say yes.” He widened his eyes suggestively and left the room, leaving her standing there shocked and amazed.

She gathered up her things and headed out to meet Chakotay. He stood up quickly when he saw her coming, and she could tell that he was worried. Smiling to reassure him, she said, “We need keep a low profile. Would you meet me at my mother’s house in an hour?”

“Of course. Is everything okay?”

“Yes,” she assured, unwilling to elaborate. “I have a few things that I need to do before I leave here and I want to avoid the press if at all possible today. I don’t think they’ll expect you to go through the Bloomington station mid-week. I’m going to transport directly into Mom’s front yard.”

“Are you sure you’re all right?”

“Yes. I’m not feeling my best, but I’m okay.” At his questioning look, she added, “Trust me.”

“Of course.”

She smiled gratefully and asked, “You know how to get there?”

“Yes, I’ll see you soon.” He reached out to touch her hand and then thought better of it, so he smiled apologetically and left the building.

Kathryn took a deep breath and went to Admiral Paris’s office where she knew there was a private meeting room she could use. When she was settled, she pulled up the comm unit and contacted her mother to let her know they would be at her house when she got home from work. Then she placed a call to the Doctor on Jupiter Station.

The Doctor beamed. “Captain! It’s good to hear from you!”

“How are you faring with Dr. Zimmerman?”

“He’s as pleasant as ever.”

“You sound upbeat.” Kathryn smiled.

“We’re bonding, much to his chagrin. He’s been doing some maintenance and making improvements to my program. I’ll be able to change my clothing myself! Next time you see me, I’ll be a new hologram.”

She was amused with the joy he found at being able to change his appearance. “Tell me, Doctor, will a name be part of the new program?”

“I hadn’t thought of that. I should ask him,” the Doctor agreed. “After all, it is up to the parent to name the child.”

“That’s true. But, remember, you’ll have to live with whatever name he gives you.”

“Hmmm... good point. I’ll have to think about it.” The Doctor thought for a moment and then realized that she might need something. “So, Captain? What can I do for you today?”

“Probably nothing today, but I wondered when will you be returning to Earth?”

“I haven’t decided. Am I needed?”

“I’d like to see you next time you’re here.”

The Doctor looked at her carefully and with sudden concern. “Are you ill? You don’t look well.”

“Not ill exactly, but I do need your expertise. You’re the only physician that I can talk to because the circumstances are confidential.”

“Captain? You’ve got me worried.”

“You don’t need to be concerned. Is there anyone within earshot who could hear me?”

The Doctor looked around and said, “Possibly. Let me transfer you to another terminal. One moment.”

Kathryn put her elbows on the table and rubbed her eyes while she waited. It had been a terribly long day and it was only two o’clock.

“Okay, Captain. We’re on a secure channel and this is a sealed room. What are your concerns?”

“Today, I was taken by the Timeship Relativity. Do you recall it?”

“Of course. They were involved when we couldn’t detect the cause of some damage to Annika’s ocular implant.”

“Right,” she sighed. “They pulled both Admiral Janeway and me out of our respective timelines to discuss her temporal incursion.”

“Are you suffering from some ill-effects?”

“They’ve implanted something in my brain to prevent me from doing any more time travel.”

He was aghast. “A brain implant? Where is it connected?”

“It’s at the base of my skull.”

“With your proclivity towards headaches, that’s not the location I would have chosen.”

“Yes, I know. My head is hurting quite a bit, but that could just be from the stress and tension.”

“Is it worse than usual?”

Admiral Janeway asked, "The final decision? Has Starfleet become such an autocracy that it doesn't allow defense representation at trials?"

"This is not a trial, Admiral. This is a panel that determines how best to proceed with severe temporal incursions."

"Still, I would like to give a defensive argument before you decide my, or rather, her, future." The Admiral pointed at Kathryn.

Jenkins said, "Trust me when I say that we have debated this at great length for weeks."

"Weeks?" Kathryn asked. "Couldn't you have summoned us sooner so that we could have participated in this debate?"

"Your input is irrelevant, because you don't know the outcome of your actions."

Admiral Janeway said, "I disagree. I know exactly what happens in the last twenty six years of my timeline."

Jenkins glared at her, "But you don't know what happens in the next twenty six years of the Captain's timeline."

Q and Q, Jr. appeared in the familiar flash of light. "Surely they should have some input in the matter, don't you think, Admiral Jenkins?"

"No, Q, I do not." Jenkins was obviously furious with Q.

Braxton turned red in the face. "You and your son are not welcome here, Q. You've caused enough trouble. Go back to the Continuum and harass somebody else."

Kathryn looked at her older self with a raised eyebrow and saw a mirror of her bemused expression.

Q strutted into the middle of the room and struck an ostentatious pose. "Tell the Kathryn Janeways what you have planned for them, why don't you? What retribution would you force upon one of the most brilliant officers in your limited Starfleet history?"

Kathryn said with a strong warning tone in her voice, "Q!"

"Aunt Kathy, you don't understand."

Kathryn held up a hand to silence her godson. "Don't make this worse."

Admiral Jenkins said, "Q, that's the best advice I've heard all week. Don't make this worse than it is. Your interference has created a temporal incursion that is off the charts."

Admiral Janeway asked, "Q's interference?"

Braxton explained with a scathing look, "Q has made my job impossible and prevented us from arresting you the minute you came through the temporal rift." He glared at Admiral Janeway.

Jenkins said, "You're out of line, Captain Braxton. Please refrain from future comments or I'll have you removed from the room."

"Great idea." Q, Jr. snapped his fingers and Braxton disappeared.

"Q!" Jenkins stood and yelled. "Bring him back!"

Q, Sr. said, "Absolutely not. My son is indisputably justified. Braxton is nothing but a hot-tempered nuisance."

Kathryn agreed, but decided not to give voice to her opinion.

Jenkins' temper seemed to be flaring too, but he was able to keep it in check. "If you'll keep quiet for just a few minutes, Q, we'll get this review underway."

"By all means. I'd love to know how you're going to proceed. How will humanity determine its own fate?"

Jenkins addressed the Janeways again. "Q has prevented us from fixing the temporal incursion made by Admiral Janeway until four months have elapsed for you, Captain Janeway, in 2378. The time that has gone unchecked by this board has allowed for a second time-line to be fully established."

Looking extremely proud of himself, Q said, "Do tell her, please, the outcome of this new timeline." Q was giddy with excitement.

Jenkins glared at Q and then continued, "The new timeline, we call it Timeline B, is significantly different than the original Timeline A."

Admiral Janeway asked, "In what way?"

"In Timeline A, the Borg eventually devastate both the Alpha and Delta Quadrants and cause profound loss of life across the galaxy. This has already happened in my history."

Kathryn asked Admiral Janeway, "Didn't you tell me that you defeated the Borg?"

Hesitantly, she said, "I defeated them in battle and developed the technology that you already know about. However, we never developed an offense to completely destroy them. Earth was attacked in 2386, but we were unable to help from our position in the Delta Quadrant."

Kathryn felt like a heavy weight had been dropped on her chest. To have had the technology to help Earth but not able to reach them would have been devastating.

Q, Jr. surprised Kathryn when he jumped in, practically singing, "But in Timeline B..."

He stopped when Jenkins glared at him. Kathryn was impressed with the power of that glare.

Jenkins finished, "But in Timeline B, your actions, Captain and Admiral, have resulted in the complete and total annihilation of the Borg."

Kathryn and the Admiral looked at each other in shock and then back at Jenkins. "Complete?" the Admiral asked. "How is that possible?"

Q proudly told the story, "You see, after what Admiral Kathy is about to do, every Borg in, around, and near any trans-warp hub and the uni-complex is going to be destroyed." Making a 'tally-ho' motion with his hand, Q continued, "It took almost fifty years, but eventually, every Borg ship is obliterated by one species or another."

Jenkins said, "By the year 2385, Timeline B shows zero Borg activity."

"That's phenomenal," Kathryn said in shock.

"Yes, it is," Jenkins said. "This panel, which includes representatives from both timelines, has been specifically created to address this incident. This is where our ethical problem has developed."

Q said, "What's there to discuss? In one future, you're close to losing everything, in the other, you've gained everything. Despite our testing of Jean-Luc Picard and William T. Riker, the Q happen to find humanity amusing. We don't wish to see it destroyed."

Jenkins continued, ignoring Q's interruption. "In addition to the Borg, having you, Captain Janeway, back in the Alpha Quadrant has made an enormous impact on the Federation. You and your descendants are vital to Timeline B's success."

Kathryn did a double take. "My descendants? Surely you mean my sister's descendants."

Q said, "No, no, no, dear Kathy. He's referring to the brood that you and Chuckles produce. I always knew that you'd bear his children." Q looked suggestively at her.

Admiral Janeway leaned over and whispered, "Now that sounds like something to look forward to."

Kathryn rolled her eyes at the Admiral and then looked back at the board. "Surely you're affecting the timeline by telling me this."

Another Admiral spoke up and said, "Yes, but we'll get to that later."

“We’ll see,” Kathryn said. “There might not be any reason for concern.”

“Still, it gave Hayes some satisfaction that you won’t go change up the timeline again. He seems a bit over-concerned about it, if you ask me.”

“He wouldn’t even know it if it happened.”

“No, he wouldn’t. I’ll keep a watch for the Doctor’s shuttle and make sure he has access to whatever he needs.”

“Thank you.”

He paused to gather his thoughts before hesitantly asking, “When Patterson spoke to you after the briefing, did he mention what could be on the table for you?”

“Nothing specific, but he said that the President is interested. I don’t know why.”

Owen tapped his fingers on the table in thought before saying, “Zife is having some trouble now that the war is over. In my opinion, he was elected based on fear of what was coming, and now that it’s over, he needs help. He’s not a good diplomat.”

Kathryn tried to get her thoughts around the issue, but she was having trouble concentrating because of the building pain. “Let’s find some time to talk about this tomorrow, if we could.”

“Of course. I didn’t mean to add more to your day, but I’d like to talk to you privately about this.”

“I appreciate that. It sounds intriguing.”

“This could be a positive step for the Federation. I’ll have a slew of press releases sent to you so you can read all the official policies and communications before next week.” He patted her arm and said, “I’ll let you get back to your notes. Feel free to use the Admirals’ transporter so you can get home without fuss. Tell my aide whenever you’re ready.”

“Thank you, Owen.”

“Give your mother my best.” He ducked out of the room and closed the door.

Kathryn leaned back in the chair and closed her eyes. The pain in her head was escalating quickly, and she was beginning to have difficulty thinking. Before heading out, she scribbled down a few key words that would trigger her memory later.

As she materialized on her mother's lawn, the first thing she saw was Chakotay getting up off the front porch steps and coming towards her. It was the most comforting sight she could've possibly imagined at the end of a long, weary day. She soon found herself engulfed in his embrace and felt like doing nothing more than staying there.

"I'm worried about you," he said quietly, running his fingers through her hair.

"It seems to be a common affliction."

"It does?" He pulled back to look at her.

"You're the fourth person in the last hour to say that to me," she smiled sadly. "My head is killing me. The Doctor's ETA from Jupiter Station is about ten o'clock here, and I really want to lie down."

"Let's get you inside, then." He took her bag and put his arm around her back. "The Doctor is coming to treat you?"

"Mmm hmmm." She keyed in the code to unlock the front door. "Since it's confidential and he knows my headaches well."

"The implant?"

"Right." She sat down on the sofa and put her head in her hands. "This is almost as bad as when those damn aliens were sticking pins into my head."

He kneeled in front of her and helped her get her boots off. "Can I get you anything?"

"I promised the Doctor I'd drink water. He doesn't want me to take any medication until he gets here, though." She unzipped her jacket and he helped her take it off.

"I'll be right back." While he was gone, she pulled off her turtleneck, leaving the gray tank. He returned with a tall glass of water and handed it to her. "Here you go."

"Thank you." She sipped it slowly. "I'd ask for some coffee, but I fear it would be a colossal mistake."

"Probably."

She set the water on the coffee table. "I have so much to tell you, but I'm so tired."

"It'll keep." He arranged the throw pillows for her as she reclined. "I have a lot of questions, but as long as you're safe, they can wait."

She groaned in pain as her back relaxed into the sofa. "Safe, but a little overwhelmed by the magnitude of what happened today."

Covering her with a blanket, he said, "We'll figure it out together."

"Mmm hmm..." Her head hurt too much to open her eyes. She reached out for his hand and felt comforted when he held it gently. "Thank you."

"For what?" He gently brushed her hair back from her face.

"Loving me, believing in me. Everything."

"Easy to do," he whispered as he kissed her forehead. "Get some rest. I'll be here when you wake up."

Kathryn opened her eyes and looked at the clock on the mantle to see that it was a little before seven o'clock. The curtains on the windows had been drawn shut, but there was a little sunlight peeking in. She stretched her neck, trying to relieve some of the pressure in her head, but it didn't seem to help. She gingerly sat up and took a long drink of water. Voices were coming from the next room so she went to investigate.

"Hi there," Chakotay smiled sweetly when she opened the door to the kitchen. "Any better?"

"Not really," she squinted against the light even though it wasn't very bright.

Gretchen asked, "Would you like some soup or a sandwich?"

Kathryn nodded carefully. "Sure."

"Why don't you have a seat," Chakotay guided her to the table and pulled out her chair for her. "I'll freshen up your water."

She put her elbows on the table and rested her head in her hands.

Chakotay returned with her dinner and set it down in front of her. He laid a hand on her shoulder. "Would it help if I rubbed your neck?"

"I don't know, but I'm not sure I could tolerate a massage right now."

He squeezed her arm before sitting down across from her. "Try to eat a little."

Gretchen sat down too. "I hope you don't mind that we ate without you."

"Course not." She picked up a spoon and sipped the warm broth. "I didn't mean to sleep that long."

“You needed it,” her mother said. “Chakotay was just telling me about your day. It sounds pretty tense.”

Kathryn’s spoon froze in midair as she raised her eyes to Chakotay. “You told her?”

“Only a little.”

She gave him a look that indicated she was clearly not happy about him telling her mom anything.

“Katie, all he said was that there was some time travel involved in Voyager getting home, and today the time travel police took you to their ship to discuss it.”

Kathryn swallowed another spoonful of soup and found it soothing. “The time travel element is extremely confidential.”

“Why?” Gretchen asked. “It sounds fascinating.”

Chakotay said, “I’m sure there are many who would find it a little too fascinating.”

Hunkering down to conspire, Gretchen asked, “Are you from the future, Katie?”

“No, I just look old.” She took a tiny bite of her sandwich and chewed it carefully.

Chakotay laughed quietly. “No you don’t, Kathryn.”

“What’s the story, then?” Gretchen asked.

“Mom?”

“Yes?”

“You’re wheedling.”

Gretchen sat back in feigned annoyance. “Fine. Don’t tell me.”

Chakotay changed the subject. “Admiral Patterson called while you were asleep.”

“Oh?”

“He sent you a report that he wants to discuss over lunch tomorrow.”

“If this headache doesn’t get better soon, I might have to ask you to read it to me.”

“Sure. Do you know what it’s about?”

“Politics, I assume. Patterson said that President Zife and Admiral Khurma have taken an interest in me. Owen implied that they want to discuss a position that would assist Zife with diplomacy.”

“Really?” Gretchen was impressed. “The Federation President?”

Kathryn barely nodded and took another bite of sandwich.

Chakotay said, “I’m not sure if Zife is someone you’d want to get in bed with, Kathryn.”

Her spoon froze again and she slowly lifted her eyes to stare at Chakotay. Gretchen smothered a laugh.

“What?” Chakotay asked.

Kathryn said nothing, but Gretchen patted Chakotay’s shoulder and said, “I think Katie’s already got someone in mind for that job, son.”

Chakotay looked confused for a moment and then blushed a charming shade of pink. He smiled at Kathryn before correcting himself. “What I mean to say is that Zife’s popularity isn’t good and there are rumors that he might be involved in embezzlement. I think his days in office are numbered.”

“Must be why he wants help,” Kathryn said after eating another bite. “I’m not going to jump into anything without giving it a lot of thought, especially if those rumors are true.”

“A good plan,” Chakotay responded.

Gretchen asked, “Would you two excuse me for just a minute? I’ll be right back.”

Kathryn thought that now was probably a good time to tell him a bit more about her adventure into the future. “While I was gone today, I was given an assignment, more or less, that will have to take precedence over any position that I accept.”

“An assignment from the future? Won’t that affect temporal mechanics?”

She decided not to tell him everything. He didn’t need to know, but she had to tell him part of it so he’d understand what she had to do. “There’s a reason that Q held the Relativity off for four months. He wants me to do something for him.”

Chakotay’s eyes widened. “Is he blackmailing you?”

“Not exactly. I don’t believe he’ll take back what he’s done for us, and I can choose whether or not to follow through.”

Voice gravely serious, Chakotay responded, “Q can do whatever the hell he wants, and he usually does. Nothing could stop him from resetting all of this and starting over.”

Kathryn sighed. “I know you don’t trust him, and I didn’t for a long time, but my intuition tells me that he’s on my side.”

“What is it that he wants you to do for him?”

“Work towards a permanent alliance with Romulus.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Chakotay said.

“I’m not.”

“The Romulans?” Chakotay pointed out, “You failed to mention this during the debriefing.”

“How am I supposed to tell my superior officers that I have to accomplish what they failed to do following the brief Romulan alliance during the war?”

Chakotay shook his head in denial. “This is too much. He can’t ask you to do this.”

Kathryn sighed heavily and rubbed her neck. “Yes, he can, and he did. He believes I can do it.”

“You can’t back down from the challenge, can you?” Chakotay accused.

“I don’t know that I have a choice.”

“Of course you have a choice. Why does it have to be you?”

“The Q, Quinn specifically, were responsible for the hundred-year war between the Vulcans and the Romulans. Since Q has been preaching enlightenment and the virtues of humanity to the continuum, they’ve charged him with the responsibility of fixing Quinn’s mistakes. One major one being this chasm between the Vulcans and the Romulans.”

“That doesn’t answer my question. Why you? Why not ask a Vulcan do it? Or even Picard?”

“Because they’ll need an intermediary that wasn’t part of the politics with the war, and because Q thinks I’m in a unique situation to actually make this work.”

“Do you have any idea how dangerous this is?”

She looked at him sympathetically, knowing this was hard for him. “I need you to have faith in me to find a way to work towards this without putting myself in danger.”

He looked away and closed his eyes.

“Chakotay...” She held out her hand across the table for him to take. “Give me some time to figure this out.”

Not meeting her eyes, he squeezed her hand before getting up and busying himself at the kitchen sink.

“I don’t believe that Q would ask me to do this if I wasn’t capable, and there may be unknown forces at work that will help me. If there’s a chance that the Federation and the Romulan Empire could find a peaceful co-existence, the benefits would be astronomical. I just need to wait for an opportunity to present itself.”

Gretchen came back into the room and looked back and forth between them. “What’s wrong?”

Chakotay pushed away from the counter and said, “Excuse me, ladies, I need to take a walk. Clear my head a little.”

After he walked out the door, Kathryn closed her eyes and let her head fall back until she realized how much pain that caused. She pushed her half-empty plate away and buried her face in her hands again.

Gretchen asked, “What happened?”

Rubbing her eyes, Kathryn said, “I was asked to do something today that Chakotay doesn’t agree with, but it’s vitally important to the Federation.” She shrugged. “Don’t worry. This isn’t the first time we’ve been through this.”

“What do you mean?”

She frowned as she answered, “I’ve taken chances on a number of occasions to fight for the greater good. He never approves. He always gets upset. But in the end, he always supports me.”

“He had to. You were his captain.”

“Yes, but it was more than that.”

“Why? Because he’s in love with you?”

“He supports me because I’ve asked him to.”

Gretchen folded her hands on the table. “Katie, a good marriage requires give and take from both of you. He needs you to cherish his goals and dreams just as much as you need him to support yours, and I imagine that his dreams probably revolve around having a quiet life with you.”

Kathryn pursed her lips and frowned. “If that’s really what he wants, then a marriage between us wouldn’t work. As long as I have responsibilities, I’ll never have a quiet, risk-free life. I would be profoundly surprised if he wanted me to sit around and keep house.”

“You can’t just push him away. You’re in love with him, and you’ve already suffered too long from not acting on your feelings. This affects both of you and you’re going to have to decide together, with Chakotay, whether or not you’re going to pursue whatever it is that Starfleet has asked of you. Don’t cut him out.”

“If that was my intention, I wouldn’t have told him about it. Whether he and I are to maintain the same friendship we’ve had for years or manage a marriage, I’m well aware that our relationship requires compromise and mutual support. We’re adept at balancing each other.”

“Yes, but he can’t always be on the lower side of the scale. It’s not healthy.”

Kathryn studied her hands for a minute before looking back up at her mom. “What do you want me to do, Mom?”

“Oh, Katie,” Gretchen reached for her daughter’s hands. “If I could, I’d do anything to keep you safe. You’re my baby girl, and you’ve been through too much already. I thought I’d lost you, and I can’t bear the thought of going through it again.”

“Mom...” Kathryn felt her eyes grow hot with threatening tears.

“But I can’t clip your wings. I love you too much.”

Kathryn got up and came around the table. Gretchen stood and they hugged each other tightly. Kathryn said, “I’m so sorry.”

“No, honey, it’s not your fault. You have so many God-given talents. I just wish your job wasn’t so dangerous.”

Kathryn pulled back and looked into her mother’s eyes. “I love you, Mom.”

“I love you, too.” Gretchen laid a hand on Kathryn’s cheek. “And just so you know, I’m falling in love with your Chakotay, too.”

She said quietly, “That’s easy to do.”

“Go...” Gretchen urged her into the sun room. “Lie down for a bit. When he comes back, I’ll tell him you’re in there. You’ll talk, and he’ll be okay.”

“Thanks.” Kathryn followed her Mother’s instructions, but she couldn’t fall asleep with so much on her mind. She thought about Q and the way he’d re-appeared to her after Admiral Janeway had been returned to her shuttle. He’d been adamant that she would be the one and only human

Janeway said, "By the time my Voyager made it home, Starfleet's ability to police the Alpha Quadrant was severely limited by a lack of qualified personnel and a general distrust of the Federation by its citizens."

Richardson said, "In the case of Timeline A, this problem snowballed and made the Federation weak. We were not able to adequately defend ourselves."

"Just because of low public morale?" Kathryn asked.

"Yes, because competent individuals stopped seeking careers in public office and Starfleet," Janeway said. "When we returned, there was an entire generation of Starfleet officers who couldn't hold a candle to the competence level of what our peers could do, even fresh out of the Academy."

Kathryn had a knot in her gut. "And you want me to fix this?"

Jenkins said, "We want you to seek a high-profile position within Starfleet and do what you can to affect positive change. We can't tell you any more than that."

"I'm only one person."

As half of the panel chuckled, Admiral Murphy, Kathryn's descendant, said, "A very inspiring person."

Kathryn looked at the members who were smiling and noticed they were all from Timeline B. "Out with it. I know you want to tell me something."

Murphy asked, "You recently gave a highly publicized interview, correct?"

"Yes, last week. The press has been hounding me ever since."

"Interview?" Admiral Janeway asked.

Kathryn shrugged. "Evidently, the people wanted to meet the woman behind the uniform."

"Did you show them?"

"Not entirely," Kathryn answered, knowing how the experience made her feel exposed.

Murphy said, "That interview put you in the public spotlight."

"I've noticed," she said with unease.

Murphy struggled to not smile. "Timeline B experienced a similar loss of confidence in the Federation, but Voyager's return was a sign of hope that Starfleet could beat the odds. The

Her thoughts returned to the present, not wanting to think about all of the other things they'd asked her to do regarding the preservation of advances from Timeline A. She needed to start shutting down her over-active brain if she was going to get any sleep, so she decided to sit up and watch the nightfall.

Chakotay returned just a few minutes later, shutting the door quietly behind him. She extended her hand to him, and he wrapped it in his own, sinking down on the settee next to her. He didn't look at her and his smile didn't reach his eyes.

He caressed her hand for a minute before whispering, "Seventeen times."

"Seventeen?"

"That's how many times that I almost lost you or that you asked for my support when it could've been fatal for you."

"That many?" She glanced at him and he nodded solemnly, not making eye contact. "I thought for sure you out-numbered me on that."

"How so?" He finally looked at her.

"I kept track, too. You almost died eleven times."

"Ah."

She added with a crooked smile, "But only two of them were your fault."

"My fault?"

"Running off to get back the transporter that Seska stole and staying in that damned graviton ellipse to get the Ares IV module."

"Ah, yes. Not two of my finer moments."

Kathryn picked up his hand and absently studied the back of it. She saw a dark birthmark near his wrist that she'd never noticed before.

Chakotay said, "I've always supported you in the past because I had no choice."

"Because I ordered you to?"

"No," he shook his head. "Because I've been falling in love with you since the day I met you."

"Chakotay..."

“Please, hear me out.” He paused to gather his thoughts. “I can’t imagine not supporting your decisions, because your seemingly insatiable longing to help the greater good is the very essence of who you are, and I love that part of you just as much as I love the way your eyes touch the deepest part of my heart. I’ve never been comfortable with you putting your life on the line to save others, and I can’t give you my blessing any more today than I could four years ago when you formed the alliance with the Borg. However, I will remain by your side, no matter what, because I love you.”

She closed her eyes, unable to bear the intensity of the devotion behind his words. Her heart felt unbearably heavy because of what she’d put him through, knowing she’d have to put him through it again.

“Kathryn?” he whispered.

Still unable to face him, she merely shook her head, but he seemed to know instinctively what she needed. He pulled her into his arms and held her close. She didn’t deserve his love, but she was so very grateful that she had it.

They held each other for a long time before her emotions finally calmed down enough for her to speak. Her voice was hoarse as she said, “My very wise mother had some advice for me.”

“Oh? What’s that?”

“She seems to think this should be a mutual decision for us.” When he didn’t answer, she lifted her head to look at him. “You don’t agree?”

“I already told you that I support you.”

“Yes, thank you. But that doesn’t mean you agree with me.”

“I don’t.”

She nodded and sat up all the way.

“Kathryn, I don’t have to agree with you to support you.”

“I know, but I want you to. I’d like you to help me figure out how to do this.”

“It’s not up to me.”

“Chakotay, I’m offering you the right to help me choose the direction our lives will take. Please accept it.”

He studied her carefully before responding. “This is unlike you.”

“I’m taking my mother’s advice. It’s not easy.”

Frowning slightly, he said, "I think we should sleep on it."

She raised an eyebrow. "You don't think I can do it, do you? Relinquish a little control?"

Smirking, he asked, "What if I challenge you to it?"

She couldn't help but laugh, and then regretted it because of the pain it caused. "Oh..."

"You're still in a lot of pain." He put a comforting hand on her back.

Rubbing her forehead, she said, "I've been so caught up in thinking about temporal incursions that I forgot about it."

"It's after nine. The Doctor should be here soon."

"It seems silly to pull a doctor from across the solar system just to treat a headache."

Chakotay situated himself sideways on the sofa and motioned for her to lie against him. She nestled in comfortably and he wrapped his arms lovingly around her. He said, "But this isn't just any headache, on just any head."

"No?"

"This head belongs to my Kathryn." He nuzzled her hair. "She's something special."

She closed her eyes and snuggled against him, feeling loved and treasured. After a few minutes of silence, she offered, "I think I know how we can do this."

"Do what?"

"Figure this out together."

"Okay, how?"

"You can help me decide what job to take, and what my conditions of employment are."

He caressed her arm. "I can offer advice, but the decision is ultimately yours."

"And I can make a decision based on your advice, and do what's best for us." She looked up at him and added, "For both of us."

"Thank you for that, but I won't hold you to it."

She crumpled her forehead and frowned. "I'm just going to have to prove it to you, then." There would be more than one high-profile job that could affect change, and she'd wait for the right one.

He squeezed her gently. "I love you."

"I love you, too." She laid her head back down on his chest, and lightly ran her fingers across his shoulder and bicep until she fell asleep.

Later, she heard movement in the room, but didn't feel like lifting her head from its very comfortable spot until she heard Chakotay whisper, "She's asleep."

Opening her eyes, she saw the Doctor standing over her with a tricorder. "Not anymore."

"Hello, Captain. I would have called ahead, but Admiral Paris seemed to think I should come see you tonight, regardless."

Kathryn slowly sat up and noticed her mom had arrived, too. "Owen tends to worry about me, but I would've asked you to come." She touched her forehead. "This headache is pretty bad."

He studied the readings. "I can see why, but I don't see any kind of implant."

"Implant?" Gretchen asked.

Kathryn chose not to answer her mom, but addressed the Doctor instead. "That's good. I'd rather that standard medical scans didn't detect it."

The Doctor entered something into the tricorder, kneeled in front of her, and scanned her head again. "Not showing up now, either."

Chakotay asked, "Do you see any signs of neurological strain? She was dizzy when she first returned."

"None," the Doctor said. "But before I dig any deeper, let's make you more comfortable, Captain. I need you to lie on a bed or a table."

Gretchen said, "I'll show you to her bedroom, Doctor."

Kathryn let Chakotay help her to her feet, and they followed them back into the house.

The Doctor said, "Captain, Commander, there's a Starfleet Ensign out here."

"Why?" Chakotay asked.

“In case I need anything and to take me back to San Francisco.”

When Kathryn saw the young man, she had to bite back a smile because he stood at full attention as soon as they entered the room. “Ensign, thank you for helping the Doctor this evening.”

“It was an absolute honor to be able to help you, Captain. Meeting you means so much to me. I hope that you’ll be feeling better soon.”

“Thank you,” she smiled as kindly as she could manage with the throbbing in her head. “Please make yourself at home.”

The Doctor had Kathryn lie on her back, sideways across the bed. He said, “Try to relax, Captain,” as he picked up her head and gave her neck an adjustment with two resounding pops.

“Ahh…” She could feel the tension leaving as soon as he was done.

“Wow,” Chakotay, who had taken a chair by the door, said. “I could hear that from all the way over here.”

“She has a knack for getting her neck out of alignment,” the Doctor commented as he continued to make adjustments.

Kathryn sighed gratefully as the Doctor worked.

He ran an instrument over her head and injected a hypospray into her neck. “That will help the inflammation and alleviate the pain.”

“Thank you, Doctor.”

“You’re welcome. Now, if you’ll turn on your side, I’d like you to continue to relax while I take a look at this implant with some non-standard scanning devices.”

She did as instructed and was happy to see that she was now facing Chakotay. She smiled at him and felt like a love-sick teenager when he smiled in return, showing his adorable dimples.

The Doctor said, “Tell me something, Captain, Commander.”

“What’s that?” Chakotay responded.

“Is this relationship between the two of you public knowledge? Besides the rumors the media is generating, that is.”

Kathryn said, “It’s no secret that we’re good friends.”

The Doctor hummed a little and then said, "I think I've become a keen observer of human behaviors, especially the behaviors of the Voyager crew members, but even without knowing the two of you as well as I do, your feelings toward each other are blatantly obvious."

"And he did catch you sleeping on me, Kathryn."

She answered the Doctor's original question. "As far as the media knows, there are only invalidated rumors, and it needs to stay that way for just a little longer."

"Why's that?" The Doctor asked as he picked up another scanner.

Chakotay responded, "Her future isn't settled yet, and we'd like the media to focus on that rather than on more personal issues."

The Doctor said, "Mums the word then, but if you two spend any time around the Voyager crew, it won't be a secret for long."

Smiling at Chakotay, Kathryn said, "I trust that the Voyagers, as we've started calling them, will keep things in the family."

"Aha!" The Doctor said to Kathryn's head. "There you are."

Her eyes glanced towards the Doctor and then back at Chakotay. "What scanner did you use?"

"One I developed for detecting objects that are slightly out of phase, and that's what we've got here. This won't be detectable unless someone is specifically looking for it."

"That's good," Kathryn said.

Chakotay listened with interest as the Doctor continued, "It is placed on the surface of your skull, not connected to any nerves. I suspect the dizziness you felt was the phase variance, but it appears to be stable now."

"So nothing to worry about?" she asked.

"Not that I can see. It's made of the same poly-deutonic alloy that my emitter's made of, and it bears a striking resemblance to the neural interface I found in Admiral Janeway's brain. I wonder if I invented this, too."

Kathryn said, "It's possible. Have you thought about developing that interface?"

"I've put it on a list of things I'd like to research, but I haven't done anything with it yet."

"I think you should definitely pursue it. A great deal could be developed from that technology." Kathryn glanced at Chakotay, who was giving her a very odd look. She figured she should stop talking about the future to avoid arousing suspicion.

“All finished, Captain. I don’t believe that the implant is going to cause you any problems.” The Doctor started putting his tools in his bag. “I think the best thing you can do now is to get a good night’s rest. I’ll leave another dose of strong analgesic for in the morning.”

She slowly sat up, “Thank you, Doctor. I feel much better.”

Chakotay saw the Doctor and Ensign out while Kathryn got ready for bed. She had washed up and was in her nightgown when she heard a knock on the bedroom door. He looked surprised when he saw her. “Hi, I brought you a fresh glass of ice water.”

“Thank you,” she smiled as she took a sip. Leaving the door open, she set the glass on the nightstand and turned down the bed. “Mom said she’s got you situated?”

“Yes. She replicated some clothes for me to sleep in and showed me where the refresher is for my uniform.” He picked her discarded uniform up off the bed, not quite able to take his eyes off her. “I’ll do yours, too.”

“Thank you.” Kathryn could see that her nightgown was attracting Chakotay’s attention and that made her feel pleasantly alluring. She figured if they were destined to procreate, there wasn’t much harm in enticing him. She took her uniform out of his hands and set it on the chair by the door. Her mouth crooked in a mischievous grin as she pulled him further into the room and shut the door behind him.

“Kathryn?” he questioned when her arms wrapped around his neck.

She raised an eyebrow. “I’m going to kiss you, if that’s okay?”

He smiled nervously. “Of course. I’m just a little taken with what you’re wearing, or rather, what you’re not wearing.”

“What? This old thing?” she asked playfully as she glanced down at the low-cut gown.

He groaned as she pressed her body against him. “You’re trouble. You know that, don’t you?”

She stood on her tip-toes and kissed him softly. “Yes, but I’m your trouble.”

He smiled devilishly as he took her mouth into a deeply passionate kiss while his hands explored the satiny fabric. As always, when the heat of his lips and hands touched her, her body spiraled into a state of arousal that left her breathless.

When the kiss ended, they continued to hold each other, cherishing the intimate contact. Kathryn laid her head on his chest and mused, “If you continue to kiss me like that for the rest of our lives, I don’t think you’ll have any problem convincing me to do whatever you want.”

“See, that’s where you’re wrong. You’re too cautious. Just rip his shirt off, for crying out loud, and get down to it.”

“The romance between us is wonderful – only a couple weeks old.”

Admiral Janeway rolled her eyes. “And here I was hoping you’d tell me how good it was. I’ve often wondered how intense he’d be. If you’ve kissed him, you must have some idea.”

“It is intense, yes. He’s very attentive.”

“Do you suspect that you’ll writhe and moan under his touch? I often thought I might.”

“You have a dirty mind, you know, and you sound like Phoebe.”

“My mind is no dirtier than yours.” Admiral Janeway added, “I’ll bet he’s a lot more skilled than Mark. Won’t fumble around so much. And willing to spend a lot more time on the buildup than Justin ever was. I bet Chakotay’s adventurous, too – maybe even a ‘take charge’ kind of man.”

Kathryn laughed. “I bet you’re right.”

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 you’re 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 reporter 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 reporter 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?”

“Nooooo.” 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 possibly. 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.

Part 7 - “Preparing for the Future”

By Dawn
Rated PG

Summary: Now that we've got that decided, there's work to do.

Late Monday morning, Kathryn was waiting to see Fleet Admiral Khurma and found herself rather annoyed with his receptionist, an officious woman who didn’t appear to have a high opinion of anyone. Kathryn tried not to take the haughtiness personally, but it was irritating nonetheless.

She’d never been to this office before. It was significantly more elaborate than any other part of Headquarters. The elevator opened onto a corridor with plush red carpet, solid wood paneling, and chandeliers. Kathryn thought the extravagance was misplaced and it looked more like a grand hotel than a military building.

That morning, she and Chakotay had transported directly from Aspen. They’d spent a wonderful Sunday morning lying in the luxurious king-sized bed, an afternoon skiing in the beautiful Rocky Mountains, and an evening enjoying a nice dinner in front of the fireplace. She delighted in the memories of how much they’d also enjoyed each other.

Her first stop that day had been to Admiral Paris's office to ask if she could set up residence in his conference room for the week. He was thrilled to have her there, and even more ecstatic about the response to her unplanned press statements on Saturday. Kathryn had put that out of her mind after leaving town, but Paris informed her that her comments had been re-broadcast all weekend and that journalists had picked apart and over-evaluated everything she said, all in a positive light.

Patterson joined their conversation a few minutes after she arrived, and the three of them discussed her trip to Paris. She informed them of her decision to accept the assignment, but added that she wasn't accepting their espionage request until she had more information about the issues and the people involved. They weren't thrilled, but they understood her concerns and told her that they respected her decision. All three came to the conclusion that the matter wouldn't be addressed until she officially started her new assignment and after the Admirals had a chance to talk to the rest of their group.

Chakotay was spending the day greeting the Voyagers as they arrived for their conferences which would be taking place all day Monday and Tuesday, with follow-up meetings on Wednesday and Thursday. There were six detailers handling the thirty-minute conferences, and Kathryn was thankful that Chakotay was there to help the Voyagers feel more comfortable.

Kathryn's attention was brought back to the officious receptionist when the com-terminal signaled a message had arrived from the inner-sanctum, as Kathryn had decided to call Khurma's private office.

The self-important receptionist raised her chin. "Captain Janeway, Admiral Khurma will see you now."

Kathryn stood and graciously said, "Thank you." As the doors opened automatically, she took a deep breath and put on her best 'captain's mask.'

"Captain Janeway, please come in," Khurma came around from behind the desk. He motioned to a sitting area near an inactive fireplace. "May I get you anything? Coffee, tea?"

"Coffee would be lovely, thank you." Kathryn took a good look around the sanctum while he ordered their coffees from the replicator. The décor matched the outer office in extravagance, but the colors were blue and gold.

Khurma said, "I see that you're taking stock of your surroundings, Captain."

"Yes, Admiral. I was noticing how the décor is so ornate on this floor."

He looked around and nodded. "If you ask me, I think it's a bit excessive. I try to spend as little time here as I can. My study at home and the office in Paris are both preferable."

Kathryn smiled. "Paris is a lovely city."

“And my overbearing receptionist, who came with the position, isn’t there. She is at least quite good at managing my schedule.”

“There’s something to be said for that.” Kathryn hadn’t really engaged in small talk with him before. She found him different and much more personable than she had expected.

“Tell me what’s on your mind, Kathryn.”

“At the moment, I was thinking how much more relaxed you seem to be today than you were on Saturday.”

“Yes, I’m afraid that one of my failings is that I let President Zife affect my disposition,” he sighed. “My wife often points out that after I meet with him, I’m a little on edge. He’s putting a lot of pressure on Starfleet to fix the problems in the Federation.”

“I noticed that. I worry that he believes sending me out there will be a quick fix. I don’t think my presence will do anything but placate people until the real problems, whatever they might be, are addressed.”

“I agree, and for now, that’s all I’m expecting you to do. If you’re successful and bring a few members back, we’ll all be thrilled. But the problems run deep, and at this point, I’ll be happy just to open a dialogue and diffuse some tense situations.”

“Understood,” she said, although she thought they could do a whole lot more if they put their minds to it.

“I’m perfectly aware of what the problems are, and I know there is no quick fix. Meanwhile, the President will want to ride on the coat-tails of your achievements and fame. How do you feel about that?”

Kathryn waved her hand and shrugged. “I think he can believe he’s taking advantage of my sudden popularity, but I suspect that the public is smart enough to figure it out. The questions that I’ve been receiving from reporters have recently addressed concerns about the safety of the Federation.”

“Yes, I’ve been following your statements to the press.”

“What’s your take on their questions?” She was hoping to lead the conversation toward the press’s interest instead of her responses.

“The statements you made on Saturday were a surprising change from your previous evasive maneuvers, but I thought you handled it well. It’s exactly the kind of press coverage that the President will like, as long as you can continue to steer interviews away from pointing fingers and towards your ideals about everyone thinking positively.”

“It felt like that’s what they wanted to hear.”

“The President loved it. He called me yesterday to congratulate me on coaching you to say the right things.” Khurma laughed. “I hope you don’t mind that I didn’t correct his assumption.”

“Of course not.” Kathryn smiled, and after a moment’s pause she informed him, “I’ve come to give you my answer about this assignment.”

“I was hoping that was the case. What did you decide?”

“I’d like to accept, but with a few stipulations.”

“Well, that depends on what they are.”

“President Zife implied that my office would be in Paris. I’d rather be here.”

Khurma nodded. “I’d rather you be here, too, although you will have to attend some Security Council meetings in Paris. My intention is to be a buffer between you and the President. I believe that he’d like to keep you under his thumb, but I think you’ll be more successful if you have a certain amount of separation from him. You don’t need him looking over your shoulder and meddling in your discussions. So yes, you can set up office here at Headquarters or at the San Francisco Federation Council building. What else?”

“What size staff would I have?”

“Typical staff of a vice admiral is one lieutenant and one ensign, but that can be easily amended. You’ve got a big job to do, and I’m sure having the right people, regardless of rank, would be beneficial. I’m happy to give you as many resources as you need.”

“I’ll start with two aides for now and see how that goes, but I’d like to choose them.”

“Of course, all Admirals do.”

“Also, I feel the need for two security officers on my staff. I’m concerned that with the amount of publicity I’ve been receiving, someone might try to take advantage of the public’s perception that I’m valuable.”

“You’re quite valuable to us, Kathryn. I think that’s a sensible precaution, although when you’re traveling, you’ll also have the security of whatever ship you’re on.”

“Thank you. My last request concerns my working style. I’ve become accustomed to working on my own. I’m happy to give daily reports, happy to attend briefings and committee meetings as needed, but I would like the autonomy to proceed with this assignment as I see fit.”

Khurma thought about the request for a long moment before replying. “I can appreciate that you don’t want to be micro-managed, but ultimately, you report to me, and I report to the Federation President. He has a specific agenda in mind, as do I, about where we’d like you to start.”

“Do your agendas match?”

“No, unfortunately. I'm concerned that if you bring a third agenda to the table, we'll have trouble before we ever get out the door.”

“I'll follow orders and would appreciate your guidance. I'm more concerned with President Zife's interference, than yours.”

“I'm glad to hear it. Once you get a little deeper into the assignment, if you find that your ideas drastically differ from mine, we can discuss it. I try to keep an open door with my immediate staff, and your assignment is one of my top priorities at the moment.”

“I appreciate that.”

Zhurma finished his coffee and set the empty cup on the side table. “Anything else?”

“When would this assignment begin?”

“Immediately. There are a couple of situations that are rather heated, although President Zife has some other ideas about where he'd like to send you, first.”

“I'd really like to take leave next week for personal reasons.”

“Just one week?”

“Yes, to honor a promise to a friend.”

“May I assume that friend is Commander Chakotay?”

“Yes. We've made plans to leave for the Banora colony on Monday to visit his sister.”

Khurma nodded. “Thank you for being up front with me about your plans. I think that would be fine, especially considering how busy you've been over the last month. A week away might even provide some rejuvenation. I'd like you to keep your travel plans private, however, or the media might think the Banora colony's membership is up for debate.”

“Understood. I'd rather not have the media follow me there, either.”

“Also, to ensure your safety, I'd like to send a starship to that sector while you're there. I'm sure we could find some nebula for it to study.”

“If you feel that's necessary, that would be fine, although we've made arrangements to take a private transport.”

Khurma scratched his chin in thought for a moment. "Private transport. I'm not sure that's a good idea. You are, of course, free to do that, but it might put you in a vulnerable position if someone unsavory learns of it. Would you be opposed to having a Starship take you, since we'll have one going in that direction anyway? It's perfectly acceptable to do that, and you'd get there faster."

"I'll consider it, but I'd like to discuss it with Chakotay."

"Tell him that it's for your safety and I think he'll agree. Otherwise, you might have a Starship on your tail the entire time to keep a watch on you."

"He does worry about my safety." She nodded in agreement, "All right, we'll travel on a starship."

"Good, that's settled." Khurma stood and Kathryn followed suit. "If that's all, Captain, I'd like to officially welcome you to this assignment." He extended his hand for a handshake and she took it.

"Thank you, Admiral."

"You'll turn over command of Voyager on Saturday night and receive your promotion immediately following. That's also when we'll announce it to the press. Please try to have your staff in place before Saturday so we can announce that as well. You might appease a few interested parties if one or two of your staff were former Maquis."

"I'll consider that, but probably as security. They get a little heated when it comes to Federation politics."

"Understandable. Perhaps your staff can begin working while you're gone." He walked her to the door. "Don't hesitate to call me if you have any questions or concerns." Extending his hand for another handshake, he said, "Welcome to the brass, Admiral Janeway."

"Thank you, Sir."

Kathryn felt a sense of wellbeing when she rounded the corner and saw Chakotay standing in the corridor talking to B'Elanna. She thought back to the first time she met them and found it incredible how close they had become. B'Elanna had gone from hating her to becoming a very good friend, but she was still the same brilliant, strong-willed woman that challenged Kathryn every chance she could. And Chakotay... Kathryn just smiled to herself thinking about their relationship.

He looked towards her, almost as if he sensed her coming before the sound of her footsteps could've reached him. At first, his expression was concerned, but then he saw something in her smile that reassured him, because his dimples quickly lit up the already bright corridor.

When she was close enough, Chakotay asked, “So, how did it go?”

Kathryn answered with relief, “It’s done.” She laid a hand on B’Elanna’s shoulder. “How are you, Lanna? Have you had your conference?”

“Just finished it.”

“I want to apologize for not helping you prepare for it.”

“Don’t worry about it, Captain. It was an easy choice for me, and it sounds like you’ve had more than enough on your plate.”

“It’s been a little full, yes.” Kathryn sighed. “So, what did you decide?”

“Starship design at Utopia Planetia. I’ll be leading a design team on a completely new concept that incorporates a lot of what we did to Voyager.”

“Oh, Lanna! That’s wonderful! I can’t imagine anything more perfect for you.”

“Thank you, Captain, for everything.” B’Elanna glanced at Chakotay and then back at Kathryn. “And that includes making this old man happier than I’ve ever seen him.”

“You’re welcome. He’s made me pretty happy too, you know.”

“I can tell,” B’Elanna laughed. “So, Captain, did you just come from deciding what you’re going to do?”

“I did,” Kathryn took a deep breath.

“And are you going to tell us?” B’Elanna probed.

“Yes, on Saturday night.”

“A hint?”

Chakotay answered, “She’s going to move mountains.”

“That’s a given,” B’Elanna laughed. “All right, I’ll be patient, but I’m not good at it.”

“Thank you for understanding,” Kathryn said.

“I do.” She looked between them and said, “Well, I’m sure Miral’s getting hungry, so I’ll catch up with you later.”

“Have a good day, B’Elanna,” Chakotay said as the young woman left. He turned to Kathryn and asked, “So it went well?”

“Very well, actually. I had nothing to be nervous about.”

He glanced at the clock and said, “We have about ten minutes before the next round comes through. Do you have time to sit with me?”

“Sure.” She followed him to the row of chairs against the wall and sat down. “Admiral Khurma’s demeanor was remarkably different today, and I believe that I’m going to like working for him, after all.”

“Really? That’s quite a change from what you said yesterday when you thought he’d just get in your way.”

“I know.” She shrugged. “He admitted to being irritable after talking with the President, and other than Saturday, I’ve never spoken with him alone. He’s surprisingly easy to talk to and seems like he’ll be as open as he can to my suggestions.”

“I’m relieved to hear it. That will make your job a lot less stressful.”

Kathryn nodded. “We agreed on my office being here, and he wants to act as a buffer between me and the President. I’m not sure how the President will take it, but I’m pleased with it. Oh, he also agreed with putting two security officers on my staff. I didn’t tell him that was your suggestion, however.”

He chuckled. “That’s quite all right.”

“I also spoke with my two favorite admirals.”

“And?”

“They respect my decision not to cooperate until I feel safe doing so.”

Chakotay frowned. “That doesn’t sound very positive.”

“It was fine,” she said as she looked up and down the nearly-empty corridor. “This isn’t the best place to talk about it.”

“You can tell me later.”

“I will,” she smiled and took his hand. “Khurma is giving me a week to go to Banora, but he’s insisting that a starship take us.”

Chakotay frowned. “An entire starship? To take us on vacation?”

“When I told him where we’re going, he said he wanted a starship in that sector for my safety and protection.”

“Okay, I can see that.”

“And then he said if we were to take a private transport, he’d assign that same starship to protect us.”

“So it’s going our way whether we want it to or not?”

“Exactly.”

“All right. It seems unnecessary, but I’m all for keeping you safe.”

“Khurma thought you might agree.” Kathryn squeezed his hand. “Well, I’ve got a lot to do, so I’d better hop to it.”

“What’s on your docket?”

“Public affairs wants to meet with me about the banquet Saturday night. I need to get with facilities to look at available offices and decide where I’m going to set up shop. I have a staff of four to recruit, and Tuvok will be here this afternoon and wants to talk.”

“That reminds me. Annika was here and she’d like to see you sometime this week, too.”

“You spoke to her?”

“Mmm hmm.” He looked away.

“How did that go?”

“The conversation was a bit stilted, but it was fine,” he answered guardedly.

She took note of his sudden tension as she asked, “When Tuvok is finished this afternoon, would you direct him to Paris’ conference room? I suspect that’ll be around 2:30.”

“I will,” he said quietly. “Enjoy your day.”

“Chakotay?” She looked at him carefully. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” he assured with a smile that didn’t reach his eyes.

She stared at him for a long moment and could tell that he wasn’t. “Did I say something wrong?”

“No, love.” He squeezed her hand. “I’m fine. Really.”

“I'm not convinced.” She narrowed her eyes. “Just tell me if it's me, my job, Annika, or Tuvok.”

He waved it away. “It's just Annika. I don't want to talk about it.”

“Okay, but I'm sure I can help you with that.”

“How so?” He picked at a piece of lint on his trousers.

Kathryn leaned into him and grazed her lips along his jaw, whispering, “I feel confident that my feminine wiles can make you forget all about any other woman. You're just going to have to wait about six hours until we're alone so I can show you exactly what you do to me.”

He laughed out loud. “Thank you.” His eyes were full of emotion as he looked at her. “I love you, Kathryn.”

Her eyes widened suggestively. “Yes, you most certainly do... and you do it quite well.”

He began to blush and pointed in the direction she had arrived from. “Go before you cause a problem, you lecherous woman.”

As she walked away with a little more swing in her hips than usual, she turned and asked, “How many was it? Four? Five times? I lost count.”

“Go!” He glared at her with amusement sparkling in his eyes.

Next day...

“Captain Janeway?”

Kathryn sighed as she heard her name being called from behind her. So many people were pulling at her and all she wanted to do was get a cup of coffee and a bagel. She schooled her features and turned around.

“Captain!” Harry Kim smiled brightly. “I was hoping to see you today. Do you have a few minutes?”

“Harry,” she said with relief, having no qualms whatsoever about talking with him. “Walk with me, would you?”

“Of course, Captain.”

“I'm headed to the commissary for a much needed cup of coffee. Are you hungry?”

“A little.”

“Good, I’d love some company.” She thought that a few minutes of quiet would be better, but since that wasn’t likely to happen, his company would be preferable to most. “Have you had a conference with your detailer, yet?”

“Yes, Captain, first thing this morning.”

“How did it go?”

Harry scratched his cheek before he said, “It was fine, overall, but I’m unsure about what to do.”

“Oh? Anything I can help with?” she asked as they walked through the doors into the seating area.

“I hope so.” He paused before asking, “Could we sit for a minute, Captain? Do you have time?”

“I’ll make time.”

“I know you’re busy.”

She squeezed his arm in reassurance. “Not too busy for you, Harry. Let’s get a bite to eat first. I skipped breakfast this morning and am regretting it.”

Once they got their coffee and snack, they took a seat at a table in the far corner of the dining area. Kathryn wasn’t sure why Harry led her so far away, but she assumed he wanted privacy. She asked, “So, are you not sure about your choice of assignments?”

“I don’t know what I expected, but the three options aren’t it. I have until Thursday to decide, but...”

“Do you want more time? We don’t need to announce your posting Saturday night.”

“I’m not sure that more time is going to help. Captain Blair of the Phoenix has invited me to be his second officer.”

“Oh, really? That’s wonderful! I knew that operations officer on a ship would be an option, but I hadn’t heard which one.”

“It’s a galaxy-class ship, and I think I’d enjoy it, but I’m not sure I’d be happy on any ship that’s not Voyager.”

She smiled sympathetically. “I know exactly how you feel, but we all have to move on.”

“I know, but the Voyager family has become so important to me that I don’t want to be away from everyone. It feels like I’d be losing part of me.”

“It’s a great opportunity, though. Second officer on a galaxy-class is a really great post, and you’re perfect for it. Even with only seven years under your belt, you’re a fine officer, quick thinker, and very adept at encouraging and developing the skills of those under your command.”

Harry blushed slightly, “Thank you, Captain. It means a lot to hear you say that.”

“I mean every word. Would you like examples?”

“No,” he chuckled as he stopped her. “But thank you, Captain. The other two posts are both in ship design – one overseeing a new project that will study how to use the Borg technology to enhance sensors, and the other is to join the shuttle design team. They want both Tom and me because of our work on the Delta Flyer.”

“Those are incredible opportunities, too. You certainly excel in both.”

“Thank you, but I’ve already accomplished those. It would be teaching the rest of the designers to incorporate what we’ve already done.”

“True,” Kathryn nodded. “I see your dilemma. You want something new, but you’re not sure if you want to be on another ship.”

“My real dilemma is that I know what I want, and it’s not one of these three.”

“Ah,” Kathryn perked up. “Maybe I can help. What is it that you want?”

“I want to work for you, Captain,” he said quietly.

She was touched, but knew that he didn’t know what he was asking. “Harry…”

“Before you say no, hear me out.”

“You don’t even know what I’m going to be doing.”

“I can guess, and I think that I’ve gotten to know you well enough that I bet it’s not far from the truth. The Voyagers have been discussing it for the last couple of weeks, and we believe that we’ve figured it out.”

“Have you?” she asked, a little amused that they’d been speculating so much.

“I’m sorry if that bothers you, Captain.”

“Of course not, and it doesn’t surprise me, either. I’m quite used to being the focus of gossip and speculation. What have you come up with?”

“I think you’ll be promoted to Admiral and that you’re going to work in Paris for Admiral Khurma to act as a deputy security advisor to coordinate the diplomatic and tactical movements of the entire fleet.”

She bit back a smile. “You think they’d let me direct the assignments of the entire fleet? That’s what the Fleet Admiral does.”

“I know, but I think he wants you to advise him.”

Kathryn tried to contain her mirth. “I’m honored that you think so highly of me, but no, that’s not what I’ll be doing. I can see why you’d want to work for me if it was, though.”

“But it’s got to have something to do with diplomacy, doesn’t it?”

She took a sip of coffee and tried to decide how much to tell him. “I trust that you’ll keep what I’m about to say in the strictest confidence.”

“Absolutely, Captain,” he said eagerly.

“It cannot enter into the speculative arguments of the Voyagers, in any way. Don’t even hint that you know anything, and after Saturday night, don’t suggest that you had any prior knowledge.”

“Okay,” he said confidently. “You can trust me, Captain.”

“I trust you completely. I just want to be clear that I’m not telling you this lightly.”

He nodded. “I understand, Captain.”

“You’ve just about got it, but not quite. The title’s not right, and I won’t be coordinating the fleet.”

He looked confused. “I’ve got it right, except for the title and the assignment? What part of that is correct, then?”

“The diplomatic part. There’s been no mention of a large scale effort, just me.”

“You’re going to be a solitary diplomat to fix all the problems of the entire Federation?” he asked disbelieving.

“You’re making assumptions.” She sipped her coffee before saying, “I can’t explain it in detail right now, but I don’t think that working for me is the right thing for you.”

Harry looked down, “I understand. After seven years with the same people, I’m sure you need a break.”

“No,” she said quickly. “That’s not it at all. Like many others, I’m actually finding it difficult to socialize with anyone except the Voyagers because no one knows what we’ve been through.”

“I’ve found that to be true for me, too. My old friends just aren’t the same, and I even found it difficult to relate to the woman you saw me with last week.”

Empathetically, she said, “What I meant to convey is that you need a change. I’m the only commanding officer you’ve ever served under. You should get some new experiences. Go out there and show Starfleet how talented you are. If you don’t break from me at this point, you’ll be limiting your career.”

“May I speak freely?”

“Of course.”

Harry said, “I don’t care about my career right now. What I care about is that the home that I thought I’d never see again has changed, and I don’t like what it has become.”

“Your family?” she asked with concern.

“Not that home. They’re exactly the same as they’ve always been, and they don’t understand that I’m a changed man.”

“That’s not unexpected.”

“What I mean by home is Earth and the Federation. There doesn’t seem to be any pride left. There’s no excitement about exploring or that unquenchable urge for scientific discovery. It seems that all anyone cares about is pointing fingers at whomever they think is to blame for the problems.”

Kathryn replied, “Earth was attacked while we were gone. It’s normal to feel threatened, and people have to move beyond that basic need before they can start thinking in terms of self-actualization.”

“I agree, and I’ve heard what you’ve said in every interview and press statement. But I’ve also looked around me at the people listening to you, and that’s the only time that I see a spark of energy and hope. I want to help you restore that, and I can’t imagine that anything else would be fulfilling. No matter what job I’d have, my foremost concern wouldn’t be sensors or encouraging junior crewman to succeed. It would be how I could restore that essence of whatever it was that made me want to go into Starfleet.”

“You sound like me.”

“I’m glad you think so, because I want to help you. If I may be a little presumptuous, I think we made a good team when I assisted you in first contacts and negotiations.”

“We made a great team and you are almost as intuitive to my needs as Chakotay is. I really missed not having you at my side last weekend in Paris.” She took a deep breath, giving herself a moment to mull it over.

“Will you consider it?”

“In your conference, did you talk about a promotion or are they saving it to be a surprise on Saturday?”

Harry said, “I was told that I’d receive one.”

She didn’t want to spoil the surprise for him, so she spoke generally. “I can have two aides, and both would be beneath what your rank will be.”

“I don’t need a promotion.”

She laughed. “Yes, you do. It’s just that the skill level required is lower than what you’re capable of.”

“That doesn’t matter to me, because it would be something new and would be for a cause I really believe in.”

“I won’t be in Paris much, I hope. Was that where you were hoping to live?”

“Where I live isn’t important as long as I’m making a difference.”

She smiled at hearing her own words come back at her. “I’ll likely be going into space frequently.”

“I expected that you might.”

She grinned, “Have you had enough of your mom’s apple pie?”

He patted his belly, “More than enough. Truth be told, it’s not as good as I remembered.”

Laughing, she said, “Not many things are. Distance makes the heart grow fonder.” She looked at her coffee cup, “Although nothing is quite like the taste of fresh brewed coffee.”

“We’ll have to take some coffee beans with us this time.” Harry said, “Replicators don’t do the real thing justice.”

“No, they don’t. But they’re nice to have.”

“Do you have time for a quick story?”

“Sure.” She loved talking to him.

“The replicated apple pie never tasted like home because it wasn’t mom’s apple pie, but it was more than the fact that it wasn’t made by her. I never told anyone because I was often given a piece of apple pie to cheer me up. My mom, although Chinese, is very dedicated to cooking Korean cuisine because she thinks it makes my Dad happy, and he goes along with it because he thinks it makes her happy. He once told her that she should try her hand at apple pie because he liked a piece he had somewhere. So, she decided that she could make the Korean version of an apple pie.”

“Oh?”

“There aren’t many who can tolerate her pie. Most think it’s just awful, but would never tell it to her face. She combines three or four Korean dessert recipes to create this weird concoction of boiled apples, peppercorns, not quite enough sugar, and pine nuts in a rice flour crust, topped with toasted bean powder and edible flowers.”

Kathryn couldn’t help but make a face. “That sounds terrible.”

“It is, when you compare it to real apple pie. But it’s Mom, and it’s home. I just wish it was as good as I remembered. It’s hard to believe, but I got used to Neelix’s blend of herbs and they were nothing like Korean flavors. I wrote to her in one letter that I really missed her pie, and she’s inundated me with those pies since the day we got home.”

Kathryn laughed. “So you want to leave just to get away from those pies? I don’t think I’ll mention that when I talk to Admiral Patterson about you.”

“So you’ll consider it?” he asked hopefully.

“I’ll do more than that,” she smiled affectionately. “You’ve convinced me, but I need to run it by Patterson because he’s overseeing all the Voyager reassignments. I’d love to have you with me, just so long as you understand that it will be a lot of politics, and it isn’t the best career move. The job has absolutely nothing to do with operations, sensors, ship design, or engineering.”

“I understand completely, Captain.”

“Good. Now I need to find an ensign who knows a lot more about recent history than you and I do, and I’d like to find two security officers that I trust who are willing to take this on, preferably former Maquis. I’m afraid that if I don’t act quickly, the choice will be made for me.” She stood up to go.

“Can I help you with that?” He took her dirty dishes for her. “Finding security staff, I mean.”

“You have some ideas?”

“I do. Justin Jarvin and Mark Yosa, assuming all the Maquis will keep their commissions.”

“They will if they want them. You’re sure of their interest?”

“Yes, if you have time, I can explain.”

“Not now.” She gave it only a moment’s thought because she’d trust any of Voyager’s security officers with her life and much more. “Would you do something for me today if you have time?”

“Absolutely, Captain. I have nothing else on my schedule.”

“Please find Chakotay and fill him in on this conversation. I’m sure he’ll be surprised that I’ve told you as much as I have. Tell him your thoughts and ask for his assessment. I’ll be happy with any two Voyager security officers that you and Chakotay agree on. Then ask the officers to find me before the end of the day. Could you do that?”

“Yes, Captain. Thank you for giving me this opportunity.”

She patted his back. “Thank you, Harry, for wanting to do this. I feel like you’ve lifted a weight off my shoulders.”

He was beaming as they left the commissary.

Chakotay was only half listening to Harry as they walked down the hall until Harry asked, “So, what do you think?”

He stopped and turned to the younger man. “I’m sorry, Harry, my mind is really preoccupied. What were you saying?”

“We can talk later if this isn’t a good time.”

“Now is as good a time as any, I suppose. A lot of your former shipmates have been vying for my attention all morning, and I’ve just got a lot on my mind. Plus, I offered to help the Captain fill her new staff. Sorry, you don’t need to hear all that. Are you concerned about what your detailer offered?”

Harry looked amused. “You didn’t hear a word I said.”

“I’m sorry,” Chakotay sighed. “You deserve my full attention.”

“It’s not a problem, but I think I can help you.”

“Well, that’s good news.” Chakotay glanced at an empty meeting room and said, “Let’s go in here.”

“Captain Janeway asked me to talk to you,” Harry said as he sat down.

“All right. You need help figuring out which assignment to accept?” Chakotay tried to remember the options Harry had been given.

“No, what I was just telling you was that the Captain has agreed to let me work for her.”

Chakotay’s jaw dropped slightly. “She has?”

“I had to convince her, but she came around.”

“Did she tell you what she’s going to be doing?”

“Not in detail.” Harry recapped the earlier conversation and then said, “So now she’s asked me to get with you to decide which two Voyager security officers to invite to be on our team.”

Chakotay exhaled a long sigh and set down the padd he’d been holding. He leaned back in his chair and studied Harry for a moment. “I think this is a mistake for your career.”

“I’m aware of that, but I still want to do it.”

“I don’t think Kath... the captain would have agreed unless she knew that you understood that.”

“I want to do this, Commander. I want to work for her.”

Chakotay looked at Harry thoughtfully for a moment, wondering to himself just how much of a crush the young man had on his Kathryn. Chakotay smiled to himself and then became serious again. “All right, but I’m going to make a request of you.”

“Of course, Commander. What can I do?”

“This position is going to be extremely stressful for her, and as her senior aide, I want you to urge her to take care of herself.”

Harry smiled. “Of course, Commander.”

“I’m serious about this. Bring her food, bring her water, coffee when she needs it. Encourage her to get rest and to stop working at a reasonable hour, and tell her you’re under my orders if she protests. She gets so wrapped up in her responsibilities that she forgets about her own needs.”

“I can definitely do that.”

Chakotay continued, “You don’t know, and won’t know for awhile, the full extent of what she’s taking on. She has a public image to maintain and will have a lot of classified information to

juggle amongst a large number of constituents. They will all want her to disclose everything she knows, but she won't be able to be completely open with anyone. I hope that she'll confide in you, but she may not in order to protect you."

Harry asked, "Will she be in danger?"

"With all this publicity, she's become very influential and very popular. I hope that the result is all positive, but we can't be so naïve as to believe no one will take advantage of her or her fame. I've asked her to request two security personnel on her staff, in addition to the security that will be assigned by whatever ship she's on. I'd like you to also be on your toes, and be her eyes and ears in all situations. She's going to have to play up her charming personality in order to get people to trust her and talk to her. Don't get so wrapped up in all the good that you'll be doing that you lose your perspective."

Harry asked, "Do you have reasons to be suspicious? Has something happened?"

"No, nothing has happened, but I'm rather fond of her. I don't want anything to happen. She has tendencies to leave herself open and exposed."

"Such as?"

Chakotay described it as best he could. "When she has free time, she likes to step away from a crowd. She says it's to get a broader perspective, but it results in her being alone and vulnerable. For example, she likes to look out windows, find gardens, walk along rivers, and look out over cliffs. Her love of nature has only increased since she's been home."

"I've seen her do that, but I never thought about it being dangerous."

Nodding, Chakotay added, "She also doesn't like to ask people to do things for her. There are a lot of situations that require it, but she'd much rather take care of things herself than to be waited on or endanger someone else. This can be something as large as that time when she manually launched a torpedo herself or something as insignificant as stepping outside of a banquet room into the kitchen to refill her own water glass."

"I understand what you're saying, but I also don't think she's going to let me control her that much."

"Don't think of it so much as control, but as maneuvering. Think tactically and stand up to her when you need to."

"I'm impressed that you've noticed all those little details about her."

"Yes, well, I've been looking out for her for a long time." Chakotay didn't add that he had also been completely in love with his commanding officer all that time, too.

“I hope that as I learn more about this situation, that any threats will become clearer. She told me about the need for security, and I have a couple of suggestions that she asked me to discuss with you.”

The two men discussed the security personnel, and Chakotay agreed with Harry’s recommendations and made some of his own. Harry would talk to the officers and then get back with Chakotay later that day. As they were getting up to leave, Harry asked, “May I ask you a personal question, Commander?”

“Sure.”

“Are you and the Captain dating?”

Before opening the door to the room, Chakotay replied, “Dating is a tenuous stage in a relationship, so in that respect, I would have to say no. There is nothing tentative about how we feel.”

Kathryn was safely ensconced in her temporary office – Admiral Paris’s conference room. It was a small room with no windows and was decorated in different shades of Starfleet gray. The proximity to Owen’s office and the subdued colors put her at ease and made her feel at home. Enjoying the quiet, she focused on getting through her messages, reading reports, perusing press releases, and skimming through tactical scenarios in order to catch up on the last seven years of Federation history.

She glanced up to see Chakotay coming in and quietly pulling the door shut behind him. His dimpled smile was a balm to her frazzled mind, encouraging her to toss aside the PADD she’d been reading and lean back in her chair.

“Hi there, beautiful,” he said as he leaned over her chair and kissed her.

“Hi, yourself,” she smiled. “Do you have a break?”

“Until tomorrow,” he sat down next to her. “It’s after five.”

“It is?” She checked the clock and frowned. “Hours have gone by and I didn’t even notice.”

“Time to call it a day.” He began stacking her PADDs for her.

“Mmmmm,” she groaned. “There’s so much more that I need to do before tomorrow.”

He shook his head. “No, there’s so much that you want to do. That’s a big difference.”

“Yes, I know.” She looked despairingly at the pile of work facing her.

Chakotay said, "I had an idea today while talking to Tuvok."

"What's that?" she asked.

"He said he's splitting his time between Earth and Vulcan."

"Right," Kathryn nodded. "He'll be teaching the fall semesters here, and spending the rest of the time with his family. He said it would keep him in touch with Starfleet without missing too much of his grandchildren's younger years."

"I think you should talk to him about your assignment from Q. He might have more time than you to look into it, and he's closer to the situation."

Kathryn shook her head in amusement. "Do you think it's the years of working together that has made us think alike, or is it just the chemistry?"

"You already told him about it?"

She nodded. "Yesterday afternoon. He's intrigued, but didn't have a lot to say because we weren't in a secure location."

"Good. I think he was trying to get an idea from me today how I felt about it, although he wouldn't come right out and say it."

"And since I didn't mention to you that he knew..." Kathryn laughed. "A tangled web."

"This new job of yours could possibly become the most tangled web imaginable."

"Did Harry find you?" She hadn't heard anything more from him, so she was worried.

"Yes," he simply answered. "We had a long talk."

"What do you think?"

"At first," Chakotay said, "I thought it was an incredibly bad idea."

"I don't know that it's the right thing for him in the long run, but he really wants to do this. I'd sure love to have him."

"Maybe he's the one who'll be the future politician," Chakotay offered.

"I'm not sure what his future holds."

"I believe that he has a crush on you."

She grimaced as she closed her notebook. "You've said that before, and I don't agree."

“I know you don’t, but I see it clear as day. He’s infatuated with you. I almost pointed it out to him as a reason I don’t want him to take this job.”

She chuckled, “You afraid of a little competition?”

“Hardly,” he raised an eyebrow. “I was afraid that he’d get so wrapped up in how wonderful you are that he’d forget to watch out for you, but then I changed my mind.”

“Why’s that?”

“I honestly believe that he’d take a bullet for you.”

“Chakotay,” she objected. “I’d never want him to risk his life for me.”

“You’d never want anyone to do that, but I want everyone who’s around you to make that their top priority, including myself.”

She sighed. “I don’t think anyone is going to be shooting at me.”

“I sincerely hope not.” He dropped her stack of PADDs into her satchel. “Your two security officers will be Scott Doyle and Justin Jarvin. You may speak to them if you like, but they’re on board and I’ve had a long conversation with each.”

Frowning, she said, “I just wanted you to get a feel for who might like to work for me, not fill the jobs.”

“Do you have qualms about either?”

“No. They’re perfect, and Yosa or O’Donnell would have been fine too.”

“Harry and I took the liberty of talking to several. We decided that Doyle and Jarvin would make the best team and their skills complement each other. They’re eager to serve and thrilled that you want them on your staff.”

She smirked, knowing full well that he conveyed her opinions without ever asking what those opinions might be. “Good to know. Now all I need to do is find an ensign who wasn’t on Voyager. I’ve been given a list of potentials, but haven’t had time to study their files.”

“I don’t have anything to do tonight, so I can help.”

“If you want to,” she said as she closed the computer terminal and stood up to go.

“I do. Makes me feel like I have a little bit of say in who’s going to make your job easier.” He picked up the satchel and asked, “What is all this you’re reading?”

“Seven years of Federation history.” She shrugged, “I need to write a speech for Saturday night, and I want to find something new to say.”

“I think you should have Harry help you with that. He has the time, he’s quite passionate about the topic, and he’d be very good at it.”

She thought about what Harry had said to her earlier and agreed. “Good idea. Remind me to call him after dinner.”

No longer hiding their relationship, he put his arm around her as they walked through the corridor and took the elevator down to the main floor. As they were walking through the atrium, they encountered a group of about twenty Voyagers who were surprised and thrilled to see them.

Tal Celes ran up to Kathryn excitedly and then suddenly stopped. “Captain Janeway! May I hug you?”

Kathryn laughed and opened her arms to receive the excitable young Bajoran. “Of course, Celes.”

They hugged for just a moment until Celes said, “I don’t know what strings you had to pull, but I’m thrilled with my new assignment. Thank you so much!”

At a loss for what that might be, Kathryn merely smiled brightly and said, “You’re welcome. I’m so glad that you’re looking forward to it. When do you begin?”

“About a month before the students arrive for the fall semester,” she beamed.

Ensign Sue Brooks was so adept at reading Kathryn’s body language that she always knew just what question to ask to help her along. Sue asked, “What will you be doing at the Academy, Celes?”

“I’ll be working for the Academy admissions office, helping new students get oriented and assisting the Dean.”

Chakotay noted, “We’re going to have quite a few Voyagers on staff at the Academy. Maybe we should set up a weekly lunch or something.”

“Oh! Can we? I’d be happy to organize it, Commander!”

“That would be great. Thank you, Ensign.”

They all walked out of the building together and Billy Telfer asked, “Captain, Commander, we’re all meeting at Keno’s Pizzeria over on twelfth street. Would you join us?”

Chakotay glanced at Kathryn for confirmation and then answered, “We’d love to. Thank you.”

As they walked down the street, Kathryn and Chakotay held hands, quite happy that they didn't feel the need to hide their relationship. At a traffic signal, Sue glanced down at their joined hands and then looked back up at her and smiled in approval.

Kathryn stepped closer to Sue and asked, "How much do you know about the last seven years of Federation history and politics?"

Sue said, "Not a whole lot, but I'm a quick study if you need help with something. I kept up with the news reports over the last two years, but of course, that only touches the surface."

"I've been reading our recent history all day and it's all starting to blur together."

"I know what you mean," Sue said. "Did you know that I went to the University of Texas before coming to the academy?"

"No, I didn't." Kathryn was surprised. She thought she knew everything about her crew.

"Yes, my degree is in Earth History and Political Science, so I know exactly how you feel about cramming history into your memory."

Kathryn glanced at Chakotay who was trying really hard to contain his smile and not give anything away. She touched Sue on the shoulder and asked, "Did you accept a new assignment today?"

"I did, as a junior aide to Admiral Nechayev."

"Would you mind if I stole you from her?" Kathryn asked.

"No, Captain, I wouldn't mind in the least," Sue said happily.

Smiling brightly as they walked across the street, Kathryn remarked, "Alyna might."

Chakotay said, "I guess my workload for the evening just got lighter."

When they got to the restaurant, it was packed with Voyager's crew. Kathryn asked Billy, "When you said everyone, you meant it, didn't you?"

"It was an impromptu thing, but the owner doesn't mind. He's my uncle."

When people started noticing that she and Chakotay had arrived, Kathryn could literally see the rush of conversation fly through the room as heads turned and applause began. She shook her head and held up her hand for them to stop, but they didn't.

Chakotay leaned down to say into her ear. "Just enjoy it."

An idea occurred to her. She looked up at him and said, "Kiss me."

“Gladly.” He lowered his lips to hers and gave her a full, lingering kiss amidst a cacophony of whooping, hollering, and whistling all around them.

When the kiss ended, she hugged him and said, “This was a good idea. I'm glad they all get to see this before the rest of the world does.”

“Me, too.”

When the sound returned to a more manageable level, Kathryn quickly found Sue and said, “If you can find Harry Kim, tell him that you're on our team. He'll fill you in on what he knows, but keep everything extremely confidential. Not a word to anyone.”

“Thank you, Captain.” Sue beamed. “I'm thrilled.”

“I am, too. I'm going to have a very over-qualified staff, but we've got our work cut out for us.”

“If my guess about what we'll be doing is right, I'm sure we will.”

Part 8 - “Kathryn Janeway: Merely Human”

By Dawn

Rated PG

Summary: Tom Paris Observes Kathryn Janeway

I've spent a lot of years watching Kathryn Janeway. She is remarkable – the most complicated person I've ever met. On the outside, she's this tough-as-nails captain who achieved the monumental, single-minded goal of getting us home from the other side of the galaxy. On the inside, she's just like anyone else... strong when she has to be and weak when she doesn't want to be. She has this uncanny ability to roll with the punches when the stakes are high. I like to think I can do that, but she actually does. Lucky for us, her wagers usually pay off.

She just shocked the Voyager crew. Not that we didn't see it coming eventually, but she just kissed Chakotay in front of us. We're at a pizza shop in San Francisco... one owned by Billy Telfer's uncle, no less. Hard to believe that we're actually here, on Earth, and that we've been home for almost four months.

My life changed that day, four months ago. My daughter was born. Miral Kathryn Paris is nothing short of a miracle. She's my heart and soul, and I've never been more vulnerable and more in love with any living being in my life. Her middle name is fitting... Kathryn... named after her godmother. I hope that Captain Janeway can instill in Miral a little of her spark. I

certainly wouldn't mind if Miral took after her, except for the Captain's penchant to put her life at risk. That, I could do without.

That day four months ago also brought me back to Earth and to my father. Mom too, of course, but I've never had issues relating to my Mom or my sisters. Dad and I, however, well, we've finally fixed our relationship. It feels strange, but it also feels good. I'm a changed man, and so is he. Now that I have a daughter, I think I know how he felt – a dad wants so many good and wonderful things for his child. I just wish Dad had found a better way to communicate with me. He's trying to do it now, though.

Dad thinks of Captain Janeway as a daughter. Does that make her my sister? It fits... we're both risk takers, both Starfleet brats from birth. Dad once asked me why I couldn't be more like his favorite protégé. I knew who he was talking about; he talked about her all the time. I was furious with him for comparing us, but now that I know her so well, I wonder what my life would've been like if I had been more like her. I might be further ahead in my career, and I also wouldn't have been nearly as much fun.

I'm not saying she's not fun. After all, she just kissed Chakotay in front of all of us. And now everyone knows what I've known all along – that they've been in love with each other for years. You can't sit on the bridge with them every day and not notice the chemistry and the sparks. B'Elanna told me four days ago that they'd finally hooked up, and here's the proof. Not that I didn't believe B'Elanna, but seeing them locked at the lips is a lot different than hearing about it.

Captain Janeway has become a living legend throughout the Federation in the last four months. Everyone is giving her accolades for accomplishing the impossible by getting Voyager home and destroying half of the Borg armada in the process. No one but the Voyagers and selected few others realize that it took two Kathryn Janeways to do it. Now that was a sight to behold – the two of them on the same bridge. The energy between them sizzled.

It was hard for me to tell which one to listen to, but my intuition told me to follow my Captain. At that moment, I wanted to take Voyager home almost as much as the rest of the crew, but not for me, for them. As it turned out, I'm glad I followed the Captain's orders because it made for one hell of a ride. I can't wait to tell Miral what I was doing while she was being born.

Since we've been home, Captain Janeway has become probably the Federation News Corps' most sought-after celebrity. They seem to catch her everywhere she goes, and I feel bad for her. After all those years of loneliness to be suddenly thrust into the public eye has got to be unsettling. Yet, I'm just as obsessed with watching her as anyone else. The big difference is that I'm watching all these news clips to try to figure out what she's not saying with her evasive answers, which is a lot.

As I watch her circulate among the crew tonight, I find myself wondering what Voyager would've been like without her. She gave all these Maquis a second chance and a fresh start, just like she gave me. Not every Starfleet captain would've done that with as much outward confidence in our ability to make it work. Personally, I think she was just rolling the dice again.

A few weeks ago, I asked her about it... whether she realized how much she influenced me over the years. She said that my transformation was my own doing; she merely gave me the opportunity. Chakotay jokingly credited B'Elanna. But I know, in my heart, that it was due to Captain Janeway.

When she first came to see me in New Zealand, I didn't want to like her. However, I decided to go with her because it was more interesting than what I had been doing. At the time, the wounds I carried from Dad's cavalier attitude towards me were still pretty raw, and receiving a hand-up from the one person whom he believed I could never live up to was irritating. However, once I saw her in action out there, I started to respect her.

About a month or two into the trip, I started to see past her bravado and realize that she was merely human, despite what my father led me to believe. Something about that contradiction enticed me, and the more I got to know her, the more I wanted her to like me. That sounds dumb... as if my self-confidence needed outside approval. But in a way, it did, although I'd never let anyone else know that. I guess I thought that gaining the respect of my Dad's star pupil would somehow fill the void he had created by never approving of me.

Now, I'm not saying that everything I've done in the last seven and a half years is on the up and up. Far from it. But even when I was up to no good, I could see a spark of amusement in Captain Janeway's eyes. I think she needed me to bring levity to our little community, and she trusted me to know when to stop. Well, most of the time.

I failed her twice. She forgave me both times. Something my Dad hadn't done yet. Did I purposely disobey orders to see how she would react? I don't think I did, but it's possible that my subconscious was interfering. Still, I wasn't surprised that she threw the book at me. If I didn't deserve it for something, I would've deserved it for another. In the end, I feel like a better man because she made me realize that I was important to her, I was valued, and no matter what I did, she'd force me to live up to my responsibilities. I had no choice. There was no prison to hide in and no rebel force to join. I had to face my friends, and worst of all, I had to face her.

I was outwardly indifferent when she demoted me, but when I earned my rank back, I knew I had also earned her trust. That moment felt fantastic because the first time she gave me that rank, it was because she wanted my piloting skills and my experiences added up to the rank of Lieutenant. The second time she gave it to me, it was because she believed in me.

The pizza has been served, but she's not eating any. She's walking around, touching every person she talks to, and even those who just pass by her. It amazes me how she can soothe and energize people just by being in the same room. Of course, there are times when she can also clear a room with just one look.

I'm watching Chakotay, too, and as always, he's watching her. I chuckle at her reaction as he wraps an arm around her waist from behind. She's not used to the public display of affection, and stiffens in shock until she realizes that it's perfectly okay and relaxes into him. He presents her with a plate of pizza and whispers something into her ear. I like her smile in response – it's definitely one of those quirky Janeway smiles. She's still listening to Mariah Henley, but she's

obviously enjoying the fact that Chakotay hasn't let go of her. I'm glad for them. They're going to be good for each other.

She's talking to Harry now. He confided in me a short while ago that he gets to keep working for her and he's thrilled. I'm not sure whether it's a good idea. He likes her a bit too much, and thinks she can do no wrong. And she tends to coddle him. It's gotten better in the last year or two, but there's still that tendency toward over-protection between them. I'm inclined to have a talk with him about her faults before they start work again, but I don't want to create unneeded tension. Their duties are a top secret thing for now, but I have no doubt that it's going to be something huge. The last thing they need is for me to cause problems for them.

It's Saturday night, the night of the big celebration to mark the achievements of Voyager's crew and to hand out promotions. I'm feeling luke-warm about the whole thing. I mean, I'm all for having a big party, but I'd be just as happy with a barbecue with only our friends and family – they're the only ones who care about what we'll be doing next anyway. This 'dog and pony show' is going to get old, fast, and it's going to be a very long night. But I suppose all my friends deserve their special moment in the spotlight, so I'll grin and bear it.

Of course, you can guess who'll be getting the biggest spotlight. Yes, the one and only – Kathryn Janeway. She's arriving now, on Chakotay's arm, wearing the new white dress uniform. I halfway expected her to be in a fancy gown, but I guess since she's probably getting promoted, she has to wear the uniform like the rest of us. She looks great, though. Her bearing and command presence is strong in the uniform, and a dress simply wouldn't do that for her.

I've been thinking about her a lot since the pizza party. It's hard not to because all one had to do is turn on a news feed to be reminded. The reporters must have been tracking her every movement. They broadcasted her image all over the damn quadrant, asking her over and over again what they couldn't wait until tonight to hear. I was amazed at her grace and dignity under all that pressure, not that I hadn't seen it before. She merely gave the cameras that disarming Janeway smile that made you know she was up to something. I loved those days on Voyager when she had that smile. It meant we were in for an interesting ride.

I watch her circulate among the crowd again. Every single person wants to talk to her and try to catch a little of what they believe makes her great, as if simply being around her can rub off on a person. They have no idea that it isn't possible. I've been trying for years.

I might be leaning towards a little hero worship tonight. Why not? That does seem to be the theme for the evening. She really is remarkable. I just wish all these people knew why. It's a lot more than the sum of her accomplishments and her public persona. It's because that even when she's afraid, she can look down the business end of a phaser rifle and not blink, and under all that strength and intelligence, she's one hell of a pool player. Best of all, no matter how bad you screw up, she's always ready to believe that you can do better.

I remember the time when we went to rescue Annika from the Borg Queen. She had to have been scared when she beamed into that cube to confront the leader of the Borg, yet there was nothing in her demeanor that showed it. But when we got back to Voyager, and she and I were the only ones left in the Delta Flyer, I saw her in a moment of vulnerability. She had her eyes closed and her head back on the headrest behind her. At first I thought she might be injured, but when I asked her if she was okay, she simply asked, "Did I just do what I think I did?" I love that about her – that full-speed-ahead, take-care-of-business attitude. Only in retrospect does she think about what she managed to pull off. Now that's what I call thinking on your feet.

She's heading towards me now, after stopping to talk to B'Elanna, who had managed to get far enough away from me that I couldn't hear what they said. Now she's here in front of me with one of the biggest smiles I've ever seen on her face. Feeling gallant, I kiss her cheek and say, "You look radiant tonight, Captain."

She quirks that smile of hers, obviously amused at my flattery. "Thank you, Mr. Paris." Her hand holds my arm as she says, "Tom, I don't know if I explained it well a few weeks ago when we talked about how much you've changed, but I want you know that I'm proud of you. Watching you become the man you are today has been one of the highlights of the last seven years for me."

My heart is in my throat as I answer with uncharacteristic sentimentality, "I've only become who I am because you believed in me, Captain."

"I do believe in you, Tom, and I always have, even when things got rough. Your father told me a long time ago how talented and capable you were, and even though you didn't realize it, he was right. You have definitely made me proud to be your Captain, your friend, and... maybe even your older sister." She winks, knowing exactly how "our" father feels about her.

Someone else draws her away and Chakotay takes her place in front of me. With an amused smile, he says, "I'm proud of you too, Tom. I may have wanted to shoot you at one time, but for some reason I can't explain, you're now one of my closest friends."

B'Elanna steps up and says, "That's okay, Chakotay. I once wanted to shoot him, too, but look at us now."

I say, "B'Elanna, you wanted to shoot everyone, including the Captain."

We all look at Captain Janeway as B'Elanna says, "Lucky for Chakotay that I didn't."

"Lucky for you, you mean." Chakotay raises his eyebrows. "I think she made the ride home a lot more interesting than I ever would have."

Another thirty minutes of mingling goes by before we sit down for dinner. I'm glad that my table is adjacent to the command team's, because I love watching them, especially now that they are openly affectionate with each other. The wait staff is bustling around pouring champagne, and we all know that it's time to quiet down because something is about to happen. I expect to see

our captain standing at the podium, but it's the Fleet Admiral. I've seen pictures of him, but have never met him in person. He's an imposing-looking soldier with an aura of authority so strong that no one could possibly doubt that he's the top dog.

Admiral Khurma says, "Good evening, Ladies and Gentlemen. We have gathered to celebrate the extraordinary achievements of Captain Kathryn Janeway and the crew of the Federation Starship Voyager. They not only managed to survive a solitary existence in the farthest sectors of our galaxy, but they also managed to find a way home in a miraculously short period of only seven years. I can think of only a handful of achievements throughout the history of the Federation that are as notable as this astounding feat of perseverance and ingenuity."

Admiral Khurma pauses to receive a champagne flute. "Would everyone except the Voyager crew members please stand."

I'm surprised to see how many friends, family and VIP's are here tonight. There must be three times as many people standing as there are sitting, not including the reporters and photographers holding position at the back of the room.

Raising his glass, Admiral Khurma offers a toast. "To Voyager, her valiant captain, and her exceptional crew: May your journeys always bring you home."

I smile as a chorus of "Hear, hears" echoes around the room and everyone toasts us. I watch Captain Janeway put a hand over her heart and say a heartfelt, "Thank you." As she lifts her glass in return, we all drink with her.

The dinner is much better than I expected. You never know what you're going to get at these banquets, but then again, anything would be better than some of the weird things we had to eat out there in the Delta Quadrant. I have to laugh as I taste the strange little potato puff in the center of the plate. It's flavored with leola root! There has got to be a joke coming later to go along with it.

After dessert is served and all the plates are cleared, there's an air of expectancy as we wait for what's coming. Admiral Khurma takes the podium again and says, "Tonight, it is my distinct honor to introduce the woman who needs no introduction." He extends a hand towards the table at the front of the room and says, "Please give a round of applause to Captain Kathryn Janeway."

The room breaks out in a thunderous standing ovation for her, and I figure why not, so I join in. I whistle as she lovingly squeezes Chakotay's shoulder before she walks up the short stairs to take her place at the podium. She shakes hands with Khurma and he kisses her cheek. She looks proud as she scans the room, waiting patiently for the applause to die down. She lets it continue for a moment before she holds up her hands to request us to quiet down. I decide to push the envelope and take it up a notch by whistling some more. I laugh as all the Voyagers join me, and she merely shakes her head and smiles.

When we finally calm down and retake our seats, she says, "Thank you all for that very enthusiastic greeting. First of all, I'd like to express my appreciation to our hosts, and in doing

so, want to take the blame for the little potato-like puff that was served with this evening's meal."

The Voyagers laugh and she winks at us. "That puff was flavored with a root that our Talaxian cook, Neelix, served at far too many meals. The leola root is a strong and rather pungent source of nutrition, and in our opinion, entirely too prolific in the Delta Quadrant. Voyagers, you will be relieved to know that this marks the end of our leola root supply." She laughs as the Voyagers break out in thunderous applause once again.

"Tonight marks four months since we arrived in the Alpha Quadrant." She looks at the clock and adds, "Actually, it was about four months and six hours ago when Lieutenant Tom Paris flew Voyager out of the exploding Borg sphere. I don't have to remind any of you what an incredible moment that was." Her eyes find mine, and I wink at her. I love her quirky return smile.

"Our journey home, although a lot shorter than any of us dared to dream, was not without pain and hardships. There were too many times when I didn't think we'd survive. I'd like to take a moment to remember those who didn't make it home. Some of their families and friends have joined us this evening. Please dim the lights as we pay tribute to each of them."

She turns to the large screen behind the podium and speaks the name of each of our fallen comrades as their pictures are displayed. I feel a strange mix of sadness and pride. The music that it's set to is a beautiful piece that I've never heard before. I'm surprised that she includes the Maquis who didn't survive the initial displacement wave, and even more surprised that she knows their names. I'm very glad that she left off Seska – that would've really put a damper on the evening. When she gets to the image of Lieutenant Stadi, who flew the shuttle that brought me to Voyager, I remember how overcome I felt when I first saw her... the ship, I mean.

After a moment of silence to remember, Captain Janeway speaks again. "I feel a personal loss for every one of these fine men and women, and my condolences, and those of our entire crew, are with their loved ones. I wish every one of them were here with us tonight."

She pauses for a moment as the lights come up, and I can tell that she is using the moment to control her emotions. She's good at that. The problem is that she usually relies on an adrenaline high to manage it, and she doesn't have that right now. The emotional pause only lasts a handful of seconds, but I can tell from the look in her eyes that she is deeply affected by reading that long list of names.

When she speaks again, she is composed. "I would like to take a moment to highlight a few of our accomplishments to remind us that although our primary focus was to get home, we did stop along the way..." She tilts her head to finish her sentence. "...a few times. It wasn't easy out there, but we did have one grand adventure. It took our entire crew to make it all possible."

I love the sparkle in her eyes as she starts to describe our more dramatic moments, but it makes me a little homesick for the adventures. "We saw stars go supernova. We made first-contact with four-hundred sixty-seven species and life forms. We extended sensors and astronomical surveying capabilities far beyond anything that had come before. We saved two planets from

ultimate destruction. We decimated the Borg. We discovered cures for diseases we didn't know existed. We extended the capabilities of holographic technology, even striving towards granting holographic individuals sentience. We found both Klingons and humans living in the delta quadrant and we even solved the mystery of Amelia Earhardt. We also discovered descendants of Earth's dinosaurs living and functioning in a technologically advanced society. We found the Ares IV from Earth's first manned mission to Mars, and we found Friendship One. We made great strides in the fields of propulsion and warp dynamics. We incorporated Borg nanotechnology into the area of medicine. And I think the most astonishing achievement of all is that we remained united in our effort to get home."

She receives an immediate standing ovation from the non-Voyagers, but their accolades are not for just our captain. They're for all of us. I think her comments made it clear that it was the entire crew who accomplished these things. I appreciate the sentiment behind it. Most Starfleet blowhards take all the credit.

Everyone quiets down to hear more of what she has to tell us. "As we look to the future, I implore you all to keep the love of exploration and discovery close to your hearts. I heard someone say earlier this week that he wanted to rediscover the passion that first led him to attend the Academy. Let us remember that, even when we carried the burden of what seemed like an impossible goal, we still remained true to who we are. Whatever the burdens we face from this point forward, we are and forever will be Voyagers. We are stronger when we are united and when working towards a common goal. Tonight, I invite our families, friends, loved ones, and the entire Federation to join us. We can all make a difference. When we work together, we can accomplish something greater than we dare imagine."

I don't know who was first on their feet, but I wasn't far behind them. She deserves the applause. It was a very inspiring speech. I watch as Chakotay and Admiral Patterson join her on the podium. In the midst of the applause, Patterson hugs her first, and then Chakotay hugs her, too. I whistle loudly again as she gives him a very quick kiss. There it is, for the entire Federation to finally see... Kathryn Janeway is in love with her former-terrorist first officer. I bet there are a few of the brass who are cringing right now, and I love it.

As the applause dies down, I watch Chakotay as he calls out, "Crew of the Federation Starship Voyager, Attention to Orders."

Throughout the room, all one hundred and forty-seven Voyagers stand and snap to attention. Everyone is wearing the white dress uniforms, except Annika, Naomi, and Icheb, who still complete the picture in their white dresses and white tuxedo. It's a sight to see.

Chakotay stands back and Captain Janeway reads from a PADD. Even from this far away, I can see the moisture in her eyes. "To Captain Kathryn Janeway, Commanding Officer, USS Voyager. Stardate 55239.6. You are hereby requested and required to relinquish command of your vessel to Admiral Matthew Patterson, Commanding Officer, Utopia Planitia, as of this date. Signed, Fleet-Admiral Kamil Khurma, Starfleet Command."

She turns to face Patterson and taps her commbadge, “Captain Janeway to Starfleet Command. Please initiate a com-link with the USS Voyager.”

A disembodied voice replies, “Com-link initiated, Captain. Please proceed.”

“Computer, confirm voice authorization and identify.”

Voyager’s computer responds, “Voice authorization confirmed. Captain Kathryn Janeway, commanding officer, USS Voyager.”

I see her swallow hard before saying, “Computer, transfer all command codes to Admiral Matthew Patterson. Voice authorization: Janeway-delta-four-seven.”

The computer responds, “Transfer complete. USS Voyager now under command of Admiral Matthew Patterson.”

An ensign blows the bosun’s whistle, and I feel a chill settle over me.

Patterson says, “I relieve you, Captain.”

“I stand relieved.” She discreetly touches her eye to brush away a tear, and I look at B’Elanna who isn’t managing to hide the tears at all. I put my arm around my wife as Admiral Patterson shakes our former Captain’s hand, and the ceremony is over.

Patterson says, “May all of Voyager’s commanding officers love her as much as you do.” With that, he pulls her into another hug.

Everyone applauds again, although this time it’s subdued compared to what preceded it. I don’t think anyone really wants her to step down as Voyager’s captain, certainly not me. It marks the end of something amazing – the most amazing part of my life, for sure. I honestly hope that whatever Captain Janeway is going to do next will be equally as adventurous, but will also give her a chance to be herself. I wonder what sort of things she could do without the weight of Voyager on her shoulders.

The next part of the evening takes awhile, but it’s still fun to see everyone get their accolades. I’m sure there are people in here that are a lot more bored than I am. Admiral Patterson asks each Voyager crew member, starting with the lower decks ship’s operations crew, to stand in front and receive their orders for their next assignments. Some promotions are handed out, and some awards, too. I’m glad that everyone is receiving commendations for bravery and extended tour ribbons, and I’m equally glad that more significant awards are being handed out where someone has really done something amazing.

I wish that Captain Janeway were up there with Patterson, but one quick glance at her, and it’s clear why she’s not. She’s doing all she can to fight tears of joy, but they’re escaping anyway. If I hadn’t already given my handkerchief to my wife, I’d pass it over. Regardless, we all know

that these awards are from her and Chakotay. Every time one is received, each one of the Voyagers turns to the head table and stands at attention. It's no wonder that she's emotional.

When the only Voyagers left are the senior staff, Captain Janeway steps up to the podium. "Would the senior staff, including Annika Hansen, please join me?"

We all rise and take our places, in order of rank. Annika is on one end, Chakotay on the other. She says to the gathered audience, "May I present Voyager's senior staff." Then she tells everyone our names and ranks, as if they don't know. She beams at us as everyone applauds, and I feel kind of proud. Voyager was good to me, and these people are my best friends.

She says, "This outstanding group of individuals has achieved honor, merit, and valor above and beyond anything I could have ever imagined. They continuously exceeded my expectations, standing beside me day in and day out. I couldn't have asked for a better group of officers and friends." She smiles at us while the audience applauds politely. I bet their hands are getting tired of clapping.

She steps up to Annika and says, "Annika Hansen, for your advances toward incorporating Borg and nanoprobe technology in the areas of medical science, sensor technology, munitions, and propulsion, I award you the Starfleet Civilian Commendation Medal, the highest award Starfleet can award to a civilian." Captain Janeway hugs her amidst another round of applause.

Next is the Doctor, or I guess we should call him Joe. I can't believe it took him this long to settle on a name, and he picked Joe. I hope there's a story behind it. "Doctor, or I should say, Dr. Zimmerman," she turns and takes something from Admiral Patterson. "For your advances in medicine and for your ingenuity and work in protecting and safeguarding the lives of Voyager's crew and many others, I award you the Starfleet Legion of Honor and the Starfleet Surgeons Decoration. Thank you, Doctor, for teaching us all about valuing life, no matter what form it may take." He also gets a hug from the Captain, and I lean forward a little so I can see the look on his face. He looks like he could sing. I bet he would if we asked him.

Now, it's Harry's turn. I can't wait to see the look on his face and I'm glad that I get to stand next to him. "Ensign Kim," she is beaming as she takes an award from Patterson. "For outstanding achievement in sensor technology, I award you the Cochrane Medal of Excellence." Harry had the biggest smile on his face as she pins the award on him. I'm surprised that she's picking up another. "For putting yourself in harm's way to achieve mission objectives and for bravery and service above and beyond the call of duty, I award you the Starfleet Medal of Valor." She hugs him, and I watch his face. His eyes are closed and I can tell that he's moved.

Patterson steps in and says, "Ensign Harry Kim. For outstanding services and achievements as Voyager's Operations Officer, it's my pleasure to grant you the rank of Lieutenant Commander."

My jaw drops as I realize that they just gave him a three-step promotion. And then I realize that she's standing in front of me. Ah, oh. Here it is. I take a deep breath as she smiles at me knowingly, as if she can tell what I'm thinking. She winks at me as she picks up my award. "Lieutenant Thomas Eugene Paris, for outstanding achievement as a pilot, bridge officer, and

medic, I award you the Starfleet Medal of Valor, the Distinguished Flying Cross, and the Starfleet Life Saving Medal.” She pins the three awards on my dress uniform and then I hug her. Really, really hug her, and totally miss the round of applause that I receive. She finally whispers with a chuckle, “Tom?” and I have to let her go.

Now Admiral Patterson is stepping up. “Lieutenant Thomas Eugene Paris, it’s my pleasure to grant you the rank of Commander.” And I’m shocked. I figured I’d get Lieutenant Commander like Harry, but not this. I catch the Captain’s eye, and she winks at me again. I think she’s enjoying the fact that I’m stunned. It doesn’t happen often.

My mind is a blur as she hands out awards to B’Elanna and Tuvok, and suddenly, I hope that all this is being recorded so that I can listen to what she tells B’Elanna. I’m in shock. I look over at my wife and see that she is also now wearing the rank of Commander, so at least I know that much. I manage to catch Patterson also awarding Tuvok the rank of Commander. A ship full of commanders, that’s what we became, it seems.

Now she’s standing in front of Chakotay and she’s saying, “Commander Chakotay, for your archeological and historical discoveries, I award you the Gan Laikan Medal of Discovery.” She takes a second award from Patterson and turns back to him. “For outstanding achievement as a Voyager’s first officer, I award you the Starfleet Medal of Honor.” She pins the award to his chest, and I could swear that her hand lingers there a lot longer than decorum allows.

I think Chakotay is surprised when Patterson stands in front of him. “Commander Chakotay, it’s my pleasure to grant you the rank of Captain.” It’s possible that he’s as shocked as I was when Patterson exchanges his Maquis rank bar for four shiny little pips. Chakotay looks at Captain Janeway and I can tell there’s a non-verbal exchange between them. She looks very smug, and I love that she’s surprised him.

As the applause dies down, Patterson stands at the podium and says, “I’d like to announce the future assignments for each of these individuals. Annika Hansen will be joining the Daystrom Institute. Dr. Zimmerman will be joining the research staff at Starfleet Medical. Lieutenant Commander Kim will be joining Captain Janeway’s team at her next assignment, to be announced in a moment. Commanders Paris and Paris-Torres will both be joining my team at Utopia Planitia in starship concept design. Commander Tuvok will be dividing his time teaching personal defense at Starfleet Academy and the Vulcan Institute of Defensive Arts. Captain Chakotay will be resuming his position at Starfleet Academy teaching Advanced Tactical Training.”

The audience applauds us once again as we take our seats. I caught sight of Chakotay squeezing Captain Janeway’s hand before he walked down the stairs in front of me. She stays on the platform and Admiral Khurma takes Admiral Patterson’s place.

Admiral Khurma says, “Ladies and Gentlemen, I am honored to be able to present the final and most distinguished award this evening.”

Captain Janeway's eyes widen, probably because she hadn't given any thought to receiving an award herself. My guess is that she believed they were only announcing her next position and probably a promotion.

Admiral Khurma stands in front of her and says, "Captain Kathryn Janeway, in recognition of remarkable leadership, meritorious conduct, and multiple acts of personal bravery which protected your crew in times of extreme hardship and danger, I award you the Christopher Pike Medal of Valor." I join in on the applause as she proudly receives the award, but Khurma has more so we pause for a moment. "Also, in recognition of your achievements in sustaining Federation Principles in adverse circumstances, I also award you the Star Cross, the most distinguished medal that a Starfleet officer can receive."

Now everyone is on their feet, giving her another standing ovation. I expected our energy would be waning at the end of such a long night, but because it's Captain Janeway, we all produce an unlimited amount of appreciation. It doesn't last long because we're all eager to hear what's coming next.

Admiral Khurma waits until we're reseated and quiet. "Captain Kathryn Janeway, for outstanding service to Starfleet, it's my sincere pleasure to grant you the rank of Vice Admiral." He removes her pips and replaces them with the three-pip admiral rank bars. I can tell by the pleased look on her face that she knew this part was coming. He's shaking her hand. "Congratulations, Admiral."

Admiral Khurma lets the applause continue until it finally begins to wane. He has a slightly amused look on his face as he says, "Admiral Janeway's next assignment has become the most talked-about speculation I've heard in a very long time." He turns to her and asks, "Would you like to tell them?"

She smiles brightly and says, "Please, be my guest."

He turns back to the audience and pauses dramatically, as if enjoying every second of what he's about to say. "I am thrilled to announce that Admiral Janeway has been appointed to the position of Envoy on behalf of the Federation Security Council. She will engage in diplomatic discussions with current and past members of the Federation in order to facilitate open communication so that we may rekindle the basic principles of the Federation – sharing knowledge and resources in peaceful cooperation and space exploration."

To the casual observer, Kathryn Janeway looks proud to accept this challenge as the room once again applauds her. Her chin is high, her smile is wide, her eyes are alert, and her posture is perfect. I've studied her body language at length, however, and what I see is that, although the weight of Voyager has been lifted from her shoulders, a new and much heavier yoke has just taken its place.

I'm worried about her. I look at my wife, and I can see the concern on her face, too. I look at Chakotay's profile. He's applauding along with everyone else, but his eyes have that determined look that he gets before an important mission. Knowing that Harry will be working for her, I

wonder what his reaction is, so I glance over. His chest is lifted in pride, but I can see the determined look on his face, too. I wonder if he knew what he was signing up for. The job sounds glorious, but knowing the political turmoil we've returned to, it sounds overwhelming, and I worry that it might also be very dangerous.

END Part 8

Part 9 - "Communications Gone Awry"

By Dawn

Rated R

Summary: Kathryn and Chakotay go to visit Sekaya

Captain Young extended his hand in greeting after Kathryn and Chakotay materialized in the small transporter room. "Admiral, Captain, welcome aboard the Pioneer. I'm Captain Bernard Young, and it's a pleasure to meet you both."

"Thank you, Captain." Kathryn and Chakotay each accepted a handshake in turn as they stepped off the pad.

Kathryn said warmly, "I hope we haven't delayed your ship from attending to other business."

"No, sir, of course not. We're honored to have you aboard, and I have to tell you that my crew is very excited to meet you."

Chakotay nodded and said, "We'd be delighted to meet them, as well."

Kathryn added, "Absolutely, and you don't need to address me as sir. Admiral will be fine if the need arises, but since I'm on vacation, please call me Kathryn."

"And please, call me Chakotay."

"I will, and call me Bernie." He was very cordial. "If you'll follow me, I'll show you to your quarters."

Bernie told them all about the Pioneer while they walked down the corridor to the turbolift. Kathryn felt a strange sense of déjà vu, not having been in space since Voyager docked. She almost felt like she'd never been planetside. If not for Chakotay's hand in hers, she might've thought their return had all been a dream.

They arrived at the VIP suite and followed Bernie in. He turned to say, "I hope these quarters are suitable. If you need anything, please don't hesitate to ask."

“Thank you,” Chakotay said as he looked around. “This is quite elaborate. I can’t imagine that we’d need anything else.”

Bernie smiled in agreement. “The Pioneer was built a year ago to be a diplomatic vessel. She’s small and discreet, but under cover, she’s heavily armed and has the bio-neural circuitry that I know you’re familiar with. We have only ninety crewmembers onboard, but we have many amenities for accommodating a large number of dignitaries.”

Kathryn asked, “Why do I have a feeling that Admiral Khurma sent us on this ship for a reason?”

Bernie nodded, “I didn’t want to bring up business until you got settled in, but Admiral Khurma would like us to get acquainted because the Pioneer has been assigned to be your flagship for the foreseeable future.”

Kathryn chuckled. “I suspect that I have a message from him regarding that, but I haven’t checked in since Friday afternoon.” Kathryn glanced around the room. “Are these to be my permanent quarters?”

Bernie said, “If they’re acceptable to you. However, I can show you all of the options if you’d like.”

“I’m sure this is more than adequate,” She set her bag down on the desk and peered into the adjoining bedroom to see that it had its own sitting area as well. “I think this suite must be twice the size of the captain’s quarters on Voyager.”

“Yes, and twice the size of mine, as well,” Bernie commented. “But that’s why we call it a VIP suite.”

“Well, thank you. Although I don’t know yet how often I’ll be traveling, it’ll be nice knowing I have a little ‘home away from home’ here.”

“I’ll give you a tour later, but on this deck, there are eight available officer’s quarters, a conference room, small dining room, and a private office for you and your staff to use. Do you know how large your staff will be?”

Kathryn was a little surprised with the extent of the space that would be available to her. “At the moment, only four, but I may add more as needed.”

“We’ll be able to provide for whatever you need. And of course, my entire crew is at your disposal for security, research, or anything else you need. Meanwhile, I’ll see to it that your office has enough space for six, just in case.”

“Thank you, I’m sure that will be more than sufficient.” Kathryn was still getting used to the fact that she was an admiral and had such resources available to her.

“I’ll leave you to get settled, and we’ll be on our way to the Banora colony if you’re ready.”

“Thank you, Bernie.” Chakotay shook his hand again. “I appreciate that you’ll be looking out for us this week.”

“It’s our pleasure. I’m well aware that your celebrity status puts you at risk, and we’ll do our best to safeguard you while you’re on leave.”

Kathryn waved it off. “I’m sure that this will be a very dull week for you.”

Bernie and Chakotay exchanged knowing looks. Bernie replied, “I hope it will be. Perhaps you can put us to work for you while you’re gone.”

“I don’t want to think about it this week, but I would love to get more acquainted with you en route.”

“Perhaps you would like to join me and my first officer, Commander Ral Melis, for lunch and then she can take you on a tour of the ship?”

“Bajoran?” Chakotay asked.

“Yes,” Bernie answered. “She was a captain in the Bajoran militia and recently graduated from Starfleet Command School.”

“Impressive,” Kathryn noted. “We’d love to join you both, please let us know when.”

“I will. Welcome aboard.” Bernie nodded and left them alone.

Kathryn sighed and plopped down on the couch. “Well, I guess I might as well make myself at home.”

“An entire starship at your disposal and you don’t have to command it,” Chakotay sat next to her. “Will you be able to manage?”

“No, I want to go fix that skip I feel in the power grid.”

“I wondered if you noticed that.”

Kathryn nodded. “Captain Young seems like an amenable man.”

“Yes, but he would have to be, as Captain of a diplomatic vessel.”

“I should read the crew compliment and start getting to know some of these people.”

“I think you should relax. We have a day and a half to ourselves, and I believe you promised me some time alone.” Chakotay looked at her suggestively.

She agreed even though she felt like working. “Yes, you’re absolutely right. We should mingle with the crew a little since they’re excited to meet us, but other than that, I’m all yours.”

“Besides, you can get to know them on the way back, when I’m not here.”

“Very true.” She pushed him back so that he was reclining on the throw pillows and then stretched out on top of him. “I need to get as much of this in as I can.”

“I’m more than happy to help you with that.” He threaded his fingers through her hair.

“Are you, now, Captain?” She kissed him softly.

“Absolutely, Admiral. I’m here to serve under you.”

She laughed at their old joke and then got serious. “No, you aren’t.” She touched his face reverently. “We’re in this together.”

He lifted his head, encouraging her to kiss him again. She didn’t hesitate.

“Kathryn?” he asked between soft nips on his lips.

“Hmmm?” she responded as she kissed along his jaw.

“Would you like to inaugurate this couch or the bed?”

She paused in her kisses to answer, “Both. I want to remember making love to you all over these quarters.”

“That might take some time. These are large quarters.”

“Mmm hmmm,” she answered as she kissed him again. “Better get started.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” He got to work.

That evening after dinner, Kathryn and Chakotay stayed in the Pioneer’s mess hall so they could socialize with the crew. They were the star attraction, and everyone wanted to ask questions and hear stories about the Delta Quadrant.

Kathryn stepped away from the group to refresh her coffee and pulled Chakotay aside. “Should we go back to our quarters?”

“I think they’d be very disappointed if we left now.” He guided her to a quiet spot.

She almost giggled. “They’re as exuberant as the group of scientists that we went out with two weeks ago.”

“Yes, they are.” He smiled at her excitement. “You might run into this little bit of hero worship everywhere you go.”

Rolling her eyes at his comment, she said, “I don’t know that it’s hero worship, at least I hope not. There’s just a certain excitement in hearing about the unknown. Maybe someone should write some fictional novels based on our adventures. They’d be a lot more interesting.”

“I’ll suggest that to Ensign Taylor. She has a real flare for creative writing.”

Kathryn laughed. “I can’t wait to read them. It has to be better than that dreadful ‘Photons Be Free’.” She placed her hand on his shoulder, “But don’t tell Dr. Joe that I said so.”

“Dr. Joe?”

“Do you like it? I’m trying to use his new first name. I’ve got three former crewmembers who all want me to start calling them something different, and now there are all these new ranks to remember. At least I can call four of them commander.”

“Three new names?”

“Annika, Joe, and Lanna.” She sipped her coffee.

“She asked you to call her Lanna?”

She nodded. “During debriefings. We were engaging in a bit of girl-talk, mostly talking about you,” Kathryn winked and continued, “and she said that it would mean a lot to her if I would call her that. It was what her mom called her.”

Chakotay frowned. “I’ve heard you saying that, but I thought I just misunderstood.” He did a double take as they started walking back towards the gathered crew. “You talked to B’Elanna about me?”

Kathryn assured him, “Nothing much, really. She was trying to get some gossip about you and Annika, but I didn’t give her any.” At his unconvinced look, she stopped and laid her palm over his heart. “Trust me.”

He grimaced slightly, but nodded. “I do, Kathryn. I’m just not entirely comfortable with it.”

Worried, she said quickly, “Chakotay, I assure you that I’d never...”

“I know.” He squeezed her hand and relaxed. “It’s fine. You know how that whole affair embarrasses me.”

She raised herself up on her toes and kissed him. “I’m sorry that I brought it up.”

He smirked. “You just kissed me in front of a group of strangers again.”

“I know,” she said with amusement. “It’s getting to be a habit. I hope you don’t mind?”

“Of course not.” He squeezed her shoulder. “Now go amaze these people, and I’ll go talk about you with Bernie.”

She rolled her eyes again and said, “Just don’t tell him how stubborn I can be.”

“You? Stubborn?” Chakotay pretended to be taken aback. “Wouldn’t believe it for a moment.”

Chakotay nodded at Bernie who left his conversation to join him at a table on the far side of the room.

Bernie commented, “The crew is enamored with her. She’s fascinating to watch.”

“Yes, she is.” Chakotay nodded. “But I’m rather biased since I’m in love with her.”

“May I pry into your personal life? How long have you felt that way?”

Chakotay furrowed his brow, not expecting such a direct question. “Why do you ask?”

“Commander Ral has only been with us for a few weeks. My former first officer and I are in a relationship and decided that it’d be best if we weren’t serving together.”

“Oh? Where is she now?”

“On Earth, working at Starfleet Command. We’re getting married in a month. I just wondered how you managed to work together and love each other.”

“By doing our damndest to ignore it.” He glanced at Kathryn. “We never acknowledged the attraction while on Voyager, and she’s got such a good poker face that it was really hard to tell how she felt. We were best friends, enjoyed each other’s company, and were there for each other during the hard times, but it was never more than that.”

“I’m sure that was difficult without the opportunity to change assignments. I’ve considered asking Judy, my fiancée, to travel with us, but I’m afraid she’d be bored without anything to do. At least with Kathryn being primarily stationed on Earth, I’ll be back there often.”

“I sure hope so, since I’ll be on Earth, too.” He looked wistfully at Kathryn, but turned his attention back to Bernie. “What is Judy’s position now?”

“She’s working for the public affairs office, tracking all of the facts and reports that Starfleet sends to the Federation Council for press releases and so forth. It’s not a command position, but

she's very good at it. She always helped me keep my facts straight while ferrying around all the diplomats."

"Really?" Chakotay was very interested.

"Yes. That's what the Pioneer has been doing for the last year. The changes are not easy to keep up with, but it certainly hasn't been boring."

Chakotay had an idea. "How would you feel about Judy working for Kathryn?"

Bernie sat up a little straighter. "Would that be possible?"

"She wouldn't be your direct subordinate, and I think Kathryn could still use another staff member."

"To do what?"

"Well, all four of her current staff are from Voyager, and none are familiar with current politics and recent history."

"And that's what Judy excels at." Bernie looked excited. "Do you think Kathryn would be interested?"

"She could use someone knowledgeable. I'll mention it to her."

"Thank you. I won't mention anything to Judy until I hear back from you. Don't want to get her hopes up."

"And I'm going to try my best to keep Kathryn from working this week."

"I'm sure she needs the break." Bernie looked over at Kathryn and asked, "Is there anything about her that I should know?"

Chakotay took a sip of his tea as he thought about it. "I don't think she'd like it if I told you about her idiosyncrasies."

Bernie laughed. "I bet not. I just want to make sure our working relationship gets started off on the right foot. With all the good publicity she's been getting, I think she can really do some good out here. Just by watching her today, I can tell that she's terrific with people. They obviously adore her and they've only known her for an hour."

"You don't have to convince me." Chakotay smiled. "I started adoring her the minute I met her."

"I'd just hate it if something I did or said resulted in making her job more difficult."

“I don’t think you have anything to worry about. She’s very clear about her expectations, and if she doesn’t like something, she’ll tell you. Voyager was a closed community, and we all had no choice but to get past any differences. She set the tone for that. Although she may be stubborn and demanding at times, she’s also very gracious and forgiving.”

“I suppose there’s a reason why she’s so popular with her former crew and the press.”

“She’s pretty easy to work with once you get used to her attention to detail. Nothing escapes her notice, and she’s exceptionally intelligent.”

“I read her profile. She has a PhD in Cosmology?”

Chakotay nodded. “The philosophy and structure of the universe. She’s a scientist at heart.”

“Well, if Voyager was going to be stranded with anyone in command, sounds like you were blessed to have her.”

“Without a doubt.” Chakotay thought carefully about what to tell Bernie before asking, “If I may be candid with you?”

“Of course.”

“She’s going to be pulled in a lot of different directions, each contingency wanting her to do their bidding.”

“I have no doubt.”

“You might offer to be a sounding board for her, but I believe that between President Zife, Admiral Khurma, and the Security Council, she’s going to have plenty of parties telling her what she needs to be working on.”

“So you’re suggesting that I merely follow orders as opposed to offering suggestions?”

Chakotay shook his head. “Not exactly. I’m sure she’ll want your advice, especially since you’ve been out in the trenches. Just be sensitive to the fact that she’s juggling several agendas.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, although if I may be equally as candid, President Zife is the problem and any agenda that he has will be the wrong one.”

Chakotay was getting a feel for Bernie and decided that he was a good match for Kathryn. They’d work well together, and Chakotay felt good about entrusting Kathryn’s safety to him. He continued to talk to him for well over an hour while Kathryn captivated group after group of enthusiastic listeners.

When they finally managed to get away, it was after ten o’clock. Kathryn said, “I’m really sorry that we stayed so late.”

“Don’t be,” Chakotay smiled as they got into the turbolift. “I didn’t have any plans except getting you to bed, and it’s not too late for that.”

Kathryn laughed and took his hand as they were deposited on their deck. “You were rather chummy with Captain Young. Anything I need to know?”

“Yes, you should ask his fiancée to work for you.”

“Oh?”

“She’s exactly what you need – someone who knows what’s going on out here, and she’ll likely want to help, too.”

“Is she onboard?”

“No, she works for Public Affairs on Earth, but she was his first officer until recently.”

“Really?” Her eyes widened. “The plot thickens.”

Chakotay laughed as they entered their quarters. “Look her up in the morning. For now, however...” He took her into her arms. “We’ve got other things to attend to.”

She was about to comment when he silenced her with a deep kiss and all thoughts of work drifted away as he worked towards that goal of making love to her in every possible location in her quarters.

When they arrived on Banora the following afternoon, the first thing Kathryn noticed was how lush and beautiful the planet was. “Wow, this is wasn’t what I expected at all.”

“No?” Chakotay asked as he carried their bags to the ground car that was waiting for them. “What did you expect?”

Kathryn gave the driver a kindhearted smile while she answered Chakotay. “A desert, although I have no idea why. I’m glad it’s warm like I suspected. I brought all summer clothes.”

Chakotay quipped, “There’s probably a desert on this planet if you really want one.”

“No, no, that’s quite all right,” she laughed. They rode out of the large town and into a more rural area that reminded Kathryn a lot of the hilly regions of New England. The big difference was that most of the fields hadn’t been cultivated for crops.

“Penny for you thoughts?”

“Hmm?” She turned her head to look at him.

“You’re very quiet.”

She rested her hand on his thigh and gave him a warm smile before looking out the window again. “I’m just admiring the beauty of the landscape. I can see why you want to spend a few months here.”

“I’m reconsidering that.”

Kathryn looked at him in surprise. “You are?”

“I’d still like to spend a couple weeks here, but I really don’t want to be away from you all summer.”

She casually waved away his concerns. “I’m likely to be working and traveling a lot, and we wouldn’t be able to spend much time together. You should spend the time here with your sister.”

“Traveling already?” He sounded a little put out. “How much do you think you’ll be gone?”

“Not sure, yet,” she shrugged. “But I plan to use the time while you’re gone to get out there and meet people. I don’t believe I’ll be very effective from a desk on Earth.”

“I didn’t realize you’d be leaving already,” he mumbled and looked out the window, away from her.

She looked at him, wondering why he was acting brusque with her. Surely he realized that she’d be traveling a lot. They’d even talked about it. Shaking her head, she dismissed it, figuring he was just nervous about seeing his sister. Her hand was still on his thigh, so she gave it a gentle squeeze, which he returned when his hand covered hers.

They soon arrived at Sekaya and Steven’s house, and Kathryn felt at home right away. She knew that Sekaya was close to her due date, but was surprised to see just how pregnant she was. Kathryn was welcomed with open arms and they all fell into easy conversation. They gave her and Chakotay a quick tour of their homestead, and then Sekaya coaxed Kathryn into the kitchen to help fix dinner.

Sekaya was undeterred by their warnings of Kathryn’s cooking abilities and vowed to turn her into a master chef by the end of the week. The dinner turned out well despite Kathryn’s involvement, and they spent the rest of the evening out on the veranda, playing cards and talking about Voyager, politics, and their families. Steven and Sekaya were active in local politics and had strong opinions about the current state of the Federation.

Kathryn would have thought it a perfect evening if Chakotay hadn’t been so detached. She couldn’t figure out what was on his mind because every time they were alone long enough for her to ask, Chakotay made an excuse to go into another room. He was even ignoring the signals

they had developed long ago for silent communication. When she crawled into bed next to him, he was already asleep, so she didn't have a chance to talk to him then, either. She chalked it up to his being in an irritable mood and figured a good night's sleep would resolve his sulkiness.

The next day was the colony's Autumn Harvest Festival. Kathryn had imagined it would be a religious ceremony, but except for a blessing of the food, there was nothing religious about it. It was a full-fledged carnival, art fair, and music festival. Chakotay was pleasant throughout the day, but he wasn't openly affectionate with her, nor did he go out of his way to see to her comforts as he usually did. She didn't need him to cater to her, but she was surprised that he remained distant.

The following morning, Sekaya encouraged Kathryn and Chakotay to take a short trip into the capitol city to shop in the capitol square market. Chakotay was looking for a new belt, and she felt like perusing the clothing to see if she could find anything unique. When she finished looking in one shop, she realized that she'd lost track of where Chakotay was and decided to go to the front of the store to see if she could spot him. While she was waiting, a large man walked up to her and said, "Admiral Janeway."

She quickly scanned her surroundings. They were being watched by everyone in the immediate area, and several men who were focused on them periodically scanned the vicinity. Her hackles were up instantly, and she squared her shoulders. "And you are?"

He smiled genuinely and took a step back. "Forgive me for alarming you, Admiral. I'm used to being recognized without introducing myself." He extended his hand, "I'm Grant Cameron, Governor of Banora."

She relaxed and accepted his handshake as Chakotay stepped up to join them. "I mistook your security detail for henchmen."

Laughing, he said, "That's not far from the truth, but I'm surprised you noticed them."

"She has a knack for it," Chakotay said as he offered his hand as well. "Governor Cameron, I'm Chakotay."

"Yes, Sekaya's brother. She speaks very highly of you, Captain."

Kathryn said, "Your colony is delightful, Governor."

"Thank you, Admiral." He bowed his head slightly. "I hope that you enjoyed the Harvest Festival yesterday?"

"Yes, very much," Kathryn smiled. "I'm impressed with how vital the entire community is. Everyone seems to know each other, yet it's a rather large colony."

"We have almost two hundred thousand people living here, but most say that it feels like one big, happy family."

Kathryn agreed, “Banora is very welcoming and hospitable.”

The Governor said, “Admiral, would you accept my invitation to join me for a meal while you’re here? I would welcome the opportunity to engage in a discussion about the current state of affairs.”

“I’d be honored, Governor, but I’m trying not to think about work this week.”

He looked slightly deflated. “That’s completely understandable, Admiral, and I commend you for taking what I’m sure is a much-needed vacation.”

“Thank you for understanding, Governor.” She felt bad for turning him down, but knew that Chakotay probably wouldn’t be very happy with her if she accepted. “Perhaps when I’m ready to return to my ship at the end of the week, we could find some time to speak?”

“I would be delighted.” He pulled a card out of his pocket and gave it to her. “Steven and Sekaya know how to reach my office, but that is my private comm line. Please use it any time, and if you happen to find a free moment, I’d love to chat with you.”

“Thank you, Governor.” She tucked it into her pocket. “I’ll be in touch.”

He cordially took his leave and then Chakotay asked, “Why didn’t you accept his invitation?”

She furrowed her eyebrows. “Because I’m on vacation with you.”

“But when someone of that importance asks you to lunch, you should go.”

After mulling that statement over for a moment, she calmly said, “I was under the impression that you didn’t want me to think about work this week.”

He shrugged and looked away. “Is that possible?”

She responded with a low, cool voice, “Not entirely, but I didn’t think you’d appreciate it if I made an appointment to discuss politics with a government official during our last week together for awhile.”

Without meeting her eyes, he said, “It’s just one lunch. Besides, I don’t expect you to work your schedule around me.” He quickly changed the subject, “Do you see anything here you’d like to buy?”

“No,” she was annoyed with him, but tried not to show it. “We can head back, if you’re ready.”

“Not yet. I’d like to check out a leather-works shop that’s just up the street, if you don’t mind.”

“Don’t mind at all,” she extended a hand for him to lead the way out of the shop. When he couldn’t see her face anymore, she let her eyes roll slightly and sighed. Something was bothering him, and she was frustrated that he was using snide comments to give her hints rather than coming right out and saying what was on his mind.

She decided to let it go to avoid an argument in the middle of the public square. After all, she wasn’t unfamiliar with his moodiness. He just hadn’t been that way since they’d been a couple.

After dinner that evening, Sekaya invited Kathryn to go on a walk. They were both eager to let the men have some bonding time and get away to talk for a bit. Kathryn had high hopes that she could develop a strong friendship with the woman she hoped would eventually be her sister-in-law.

As they walked, Sekaya told her all about the homestead and what they’d done to cultivate it since they settled on the land five years earlier.

Kathryn asked, “May I ask what brought you to Banora?”

“Steven,” she said. “We met while I was studying economics on Tezra Prime with full intentions of trying to rebuild Trebus. He was visiting one weekend for an agricultural economics symposium, and he propositioned me in a bar.”

“Propositioned you?”

“Yes,” Sekaya laughed. “There was a sleazy alien who wouldn’t back off and things were about to get tense when Steven came up and put his around me as if we were already an item and asked, ‘Darling, is this man bothering you?’”

“And what did you do?”

“Well, you’ve seen how gorgeous Steven is... tall, muscular.”

“I try not to notice those things about someone else’s husband,” Kathryn said with a wink.

Sekaya laughed and continued, “The alien was a small, slimy man, and was immediately intimidated. I gladly accepted the exchange of suitors and when we were alone, he kept talking to me as if we were a couple – asking about my day and if I’d had dinner yet. The rest is history.”

“That’s a great story,” Kathryn commented. “And Steven grew up here, right?”

“Yes. He’s never lived anywhere else.” Sekaya looked out over the meadow. “I love it here... so peaceful. Quite different from Earth.”

“Oh, I don’t know. My home town is pretty quiet, although you can’t find this much wilderness on Earth unless you’re in a jungle or a park.”

“I’ve only been to San Francisco, and I didn’t care for it. Too big and too many buildings.”

“I agree. I have a house there for convenience, but I’d like a second home in a woodland setting.”

“Two homes?” Sekaya asked. “Sounds like a lot of upkeep.”

“Well, in the city, there’s not much upkeep needed, and I can hire anything done. I’ve had to do that for every house I’ve owned because I’ve spent so much time living on a starship.”

Sekaya was quiet for a minute. “May I ask you a personal question, Kathryn?”

“Of course.”

“Is your relationship with my brother a permanent one?”

Kathryn tilted her head and smiled. “I certainly hope so, but we haven’t discussed it. We’ve only been together for a few weeks.”

“The way he talked about you in his letters and especially over the last month during our calls, I assumed that he was madly in love with you.”

“You say that as if you doubt it.” Kathryn focused her attention on a tree branch as they walked past it.

She fidgeted a moment before continuing, “I know you’ve only been here three days, but I expected him to act different with you around. Something feels wrong.”

Kathryn nodded. “How was he when he visited you before?”

“I could tell that all wasn’t right with his spirit, but his life had just changed abruptly and some unrest was to be expected. Although we haven’t spent much time together since we were children, I still think I know my brother. It seemed like he was forcing himself to be in a good mood, if that makes sense.”

“It makes perfect sense. I’ve seen him do that often.”

“And when he spoke to me last week about you coming, I could tell that something significant had changed because he was buoyant and openly expressive. I expected to see that same happy man when you arrived.”

“You don’t think he’s happy?” Kathryn asked.

“I hope you don’t think I’m meddling in your relationship, but I’m worried about him.”

“I don’t think you’re meddling because I don’t believe you’d bring it up if you weren’t sure that I love him.”

Sekaya agreed. “You are the closest person to him. I was hoping you could reassure me that he’s okay and not suffering from the hardships in his life. I don’t know him well enough, yet, and I figured that if you love him despite his sullen behavior, you must know what’s in his heart.”

Kathryn thought about that for a long moment before deciding what to say. “He periodically ruminates on his past, but I don’t believe the memories haunt him like they used to. However, I won’t argue with you that he’s not in good spirits at the moment. He’s annoyed about something that I haven’t figured out, yet. His bad mood began on the drive to your house.”

“I guess we’re all entitled to our moods. Me especially,” she touched her protruding belly.

“That we are. I wonder if the changes in our lives are just starting to sink in for him, or if he’s anxious about the future. I’ll see what I can do to bring him out of it so that he’s not a bear all summer. It’s probably something to do with me, although I don’t understand what.”

“I’m looking forward to having him here. We’ve been apart for the better part of thirty years, and I’d like to get to know him again. I hope it’ll be good for his spirit to re-connect with family.”

“I hope so, too.” They walked along for another half an hour, telling each other stories about Chakotay. Kathryn told Sekaya about how optimistic Chakotay could be and how he was an unending support to her.

Sekaya stopped to sit on a large rock that afforded a striking view. “This was probably a mistake.”

“What was?” Kathryn looked out over the hills and valleys spread out before them. “The walk?”

“Sitting down. I’m going to need your help getting back up.”

Kathryn put her hand on Sekaya’s shoulder and sat down next to her. “I’ll be happy to when you’re ready.”

“I assume you don’t have children?” They both leaned back and stretched their legs out.

“I’ve had some crewmembers that felt like children, but none of my own.”

Sekaya hesitated before asking, “Do you plan on having any?”

“Yes,” Kathryn said without thinking about it. “I’m not sure when, but I’d like to.”

“May I offer a piece of advice?”

“Of course,” Kathryn bit back a smile.

“Don’t listen to anyone who tells you pregnancy is great. I’m not a fan.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Kathryn chuckled. “I can’t imagine that it’s very comfortable, but still, I think it will be an incredible feeling to have a baby growing inside me.”

“Well, that part is pretty great.” Sekaya rubbed her belly. “Would you like to feel him?”

“Are you sure?” Kathryn knelt down and let Sekaya put her hand on the baby. She shied away when she felt the rolling movement under hand. “Is that painful?”

“Not at all. It feels like someone pushing against me from the inside.”

Kathryn put both hands on Sekaya’s stomach and savored the movement of the child within.

“Thank you for this.”

“You’re welcome.” Sekaya smiled at Kathryn. “You’re not what I expected at all.”

“I’m not?” Kathryn raised an eyebrow.

“No.” Sekaya shook her head lightly. “Despite the friendliness that you radiate when on camera, I thought you’d be a hard-nosed, militant woman in person.”

She laughed. “I can be.”

“I’m sure. I don’t think you would’ve survived out there otherwise, but most successful military leaders I’ve met have their commanding personality with them all the time. Very rough and strict.”

Kathryn retook her seat next to Sekaya. “I’ve met the type, but I prefer to motivate my crew by bolstering their confidence rather than scaring them into obedience. I’m more of a diplomat and scientist than a military strategist, although when attacked, I become more of what you were expecting.”

“I can see that about you.”

“Thank you. I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“It’s meant as one. The more I get to know you, the more I can see why my brother loves you.”

“I just hope he can tolerate me in the long run.” Kathryn stood up and looked out over the valley again. “I love him very much, but I worry that we are too strong-willed for each other.”

“I doubt it. As you said, he’s just in a mood.”

Kathryn nodded quietly as she looked at the sun dipping low on the horizon. “Yes, but I know how difficult I can be. I’ve wondered if he’d be better off with someone who needs to be taken care of.”

“And that’s not you?”

“Not in the traditional sense.”

“But as a woman who is under a lot of public pressure, surely you need someone to be yourself with, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Kathryn agreed. “I do, and he’s been that for me since we first developed our friendship. Somewhere along the way, we fell in love but refused to acknowledge it. Now that we have, it’s opened up a whole new level of complication to our relationship.”

After a long, quiet moment, Sekaya said, “We’d better head back. We walked for over an hour, and it’s going to be dark soon.”

Kathryn helped Sekaya up and they got underway, walking quicker this time to get home before dark.

On the way back, they talked about plans for the rest of the week. Kathryn told Sekaya about meeting the Governor, and Sekaya agreed that Kathryn should accept the invitation, regardless of the mixed messages she was receiving from Chakotay.

Fifteen minutes into the walk back, Sekaya suddenly stopped and gasped.

Kathryn turned around. “What is it?”

“A cramp,” Sekaya took a deep breath and held her hand against the side of her belly. “Probably walking too fast.”

“Let’s slow down a little. We probably have at least a half hour of daylight left, and I bet we can make the last fifteen minutes in the dark.”

Sekaya nodded and they began walking again, this time not saying much.

“Oh, no…” Sekaya stopped again and held her hands tight against her stomach, her eyes wide with worry. “This can’t be happening now.”

“You think its labor?”

“It’s too soon,” she said with alarm.

Kathryn calmly asked, “But you’re due in less than a month, aren’t you?”

“Yes, but that’s a whole month. I’m not ready for this.”

“Perhaps the walking triggered it.”

Sekaya covered her mouth with a shaky hand. “Kathryn…”

“It’s all right.” She tenderly put her hand on Sekaya’s back. “Let’s rest for a few minutes and maybe the cramps will subside.”

While they were resting against a tree, two more cramps happened within five minutes of each other. The sun was dipping below the horizon and Kathryn was getting worried. “I think we’d better call for help.”

Sekaya asked with a slight panic in her voice, “But how?”

Kathryn pulled a communicator out of her pocket. “With this.”

“Who can you call?”

“We have several options, but first we’ll try Chakotay.” She tapped the communicator and said, “Janeway to Chakotay. Do you read me?”

The line was quiet for a moment until it clicked in response. “Kathryn? Are you all right?”

“Yes, but we need help getting back.”

“What’s wrong? Where are you?”

Sekaya said, “We walked to the rock. Steven will know.”

Kathryn added, “It appears that Sekaya has begun early labor, and we’re afraid that if she does much more walking, it’ll progress too quickly.”

“Labor? Already?” Chakotay said, slightly panicked.

Kathryn said calmly, “You’re not helping ease her concerns, Chakotay.”

“Sorry,” he said quietly. “I’ve found Steven and will fill him in.”

Sekaya said, “Tell him we’re more than halfway.”

“Understood. Sit tight for a minute.”

After the com channel closed, Kathryn suggested, "Maybe it'd be best if I contact the Pioneer, or is there a medical transport system we could use?"

"No!" Sekaya was adamant. "Don't use a transporter on me!"

"All right," Kathryn said calmly. "Is there a reason?"

"I hate them. I've been transported twice and I just can't stand having my molecules scattered like that."

"Only twice?"

Sekaya scowled. "The reason I love living away from Earth so much is that we use significantly less technology here. No transporters, no replicators. There are some things that are just unnatural."

Taking a deep breath, Kathryn said calmly, "Okay. No transporters." This was going to make getting help significantly more challenging.

Clenching her belly again, Sekaya took a deep breath and blew it out. "That one was stronger."

"How bad does it hurt?"

"Not too bad, but it's unsettling. They feel like strong menstrual cramps."

A couple minutes later, her commbadge chirped, followed by, "Chakotay to Janeway."

"We're here. What do you know?"

Steven asked, "Sekaya? Are you okay?"

"It's not bad. I'm just worried," she answered.

"Okay, we're going to head your way on the four-wheeler. It's the only vehicle that we can get down the path."

Sekaya cringed and Kathryn asked, "Don't you have any kind of medical shuttle that could come to our location?"

"Yes, but that's only to be used in life-threatening situations. I'm not sure this qualifies."

Kathryn suggested, "I could contact the Pioneer to send a shuttle."

"No," Sekaya said. "I don't want an entire starship coming to my rescue over some cramps."

Steven said, "I contacted Dr. Lotha, and she said it would be best if you didn't try to walk much until she can assess the baby."

"All right," Sekaya acquiesced.

"We'll be there soon, honey," Steven responded before a click ended the com signal.

Sekaya breathed through another cramp and then asked, "Do you always carry one of those communicators with you?"

"Yes, as a safety precaution. The Pioneer is standing by if the need should arise."

"An entire ship just waiting out there while you're on vacation?"

Kathryn nodded. "Starfleet is a little over-protective because of all the publicity."

"Will a ship be watching Chakotay while he's here?"

"No, but I think he and I should set up a regular check-in time."

Sekaya was quiet for a few minutes, and reached for Kathryn's arm as another cramp hit. "Sorry, Kathryn."

Kathryn covered Sekaya's hand with her own and shook her head. "Don't be sorry. Hold onto me as much as you want."

When the pain subsided, Sekaya said, "I'm scared."

"Of labor?" Kathryn held Sekaya's hand for comfort.

"I'm not ready for this," she choked on her words. "I haven't even got diapers, yet."

It was hard not to be amused at something so insignificant, but Kathryn understood how unrealistic fears could frighten people in times of stress. "We can get diapers for him at a moment's notice."

"I know, but I still had three solid weeks to finish things. I wanted everything to be perfect when we bring him home."

Kathryn assured her, "I know you do, but he's not going to know. All he cares about is having a warm place to sleep, your milk, a dry bottom, and your love. The rest of it is just a bonus."

Sekaya breathed through another pain. "I hope he's okay. We've been trying for so long to get pregnant."

“He’s going to be just fine. Steven and Chakotay will be here soon and we’ll get you to a hospital, and then you can focus on bringing him into the world.”

“I’m scared of that, too,” Sekaya cringed. “I want to do this naturally without drugs, but I don’t know if I can.”

Kathryn put her arm around Sekaya who was beginning to cry, and said, “Just take it one step at a time. The pain will build gradually, and if it gets to be too much, ask for medication. Our bodies are made for this, and you may find out that although it’s exhausting, you’ll have the strength you need to cope.”

“How do you know so much?” Sekaya wiped at her eyes.

“Only because I’ve been through some pretty tough situations that I didn’t think I could bear, but the strength was there when I needed it.”

“I’m sorry,” Sekaya sniffed and wiped her eyes on her sleeve. “You must think I’m a blubbing mess.”

“Hardly,” Kathryn held her close. “I think you’re doing just fine.”

“But you’re a really famous person that I barely know, and I’m going on and on.” Sekaya stopped talking as another contraction hit.

Kathryn held Sekaya’s hand firmly. “I may be famous, but I’m just a regular woman who hopes she’ll be your sister soon.”

“Really?” Sekaya relaxed again.

“Yes, but don’t tell Chakotay. He should come to that conclusion on his own.”

“Mum’s the word, but I hope so, too.” Sekaya laughed as she said, “Maybe in a year or so, I’ll be sitting next to you telling you to not worry about whether the nursery is painted with teddy bears.”

Kathryn laughed. “And I’ll be asking for pain meds. You can hold my hand while my sister, Phoebe, goes and paints them.”

“I need to think of a name,” Sekaya said all of a sudden. “We have a long list, but I don’t know which one.”

“Remember that list of what the baby needs?” Kathryn asked. “A name is not one of them.”

“Do you think Chakotay would be upset if I gave him our father’s name? I was going to talk to him about it this week.”

“Kolopak?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t think Chakotay would mind. He’d probably be very proud.”

“Yes, but I didn’t know if he planned on using the name for his own son. It’s a tradition to pass it down among the men.”

“You can still ask him before you name the baby.”

“Do you want a son named Kolopak?” Sekaya asked.

“I haven’t given it much thought, but this isn’t about me. You should talk to him.”

Sekaya winced in pain again. “I think I hear them.”

Kathryn’s ears picked up the noise of an engine. “I do, too.” She wanted to stand up and wave them down, but decided not to let go of Sekaya. When the men came into view, she could tell by the way they slowed down that she needn’t have worried about being seen.

Steven jumped off the four-wheeler and ran over. “Honey? Are you okay?”

Sekaya lunged into his arms, “I’m scared.”

Chakotay helped Kathryn to her feet and whispered, “Is she okay?”

Kathryn nodded and whispered back, “She’s just worried about everything. A pretty normal reaction.”

Steven walked Sekaya over to the four-wheeler until she dug in her heels. “I don’t know about this. Being bumped around on that thing could be worse than walking.”

“I’ll go slowly.”

“How will Chakotay and Kathryn get back?” she asked.

Chakotay held up his wrist lamp and said, “We’ll walk.”

“The sooner we go, the sooner we can see a doctor,” Steven said as he hopped onto the seat. “Chakotay, will you help her get on behind me?”

“Of course.” He and Kathryn both helped Sekaya get settled.

Sekaya grabbed hold of Steven’s waist and held on tight. She said, “Kathryn, thank you.”

“You’re welcome. We’ll see you soon.” She patted Sekaya’s back.

Kathryn and Chakotay watched as Steven turned the vehicle around and drove back up the trail. She looked at Chakotay who was absorbed in watching them leave. “She’ll be fine.”

Chakotay spoke loudly. “Steven is a nervous wreck. That baby is three weeks early.”

“I know, but she’ll be okay. The contractions were really light and the doctor might be able to stop them.”

“Why did you walk so far?” Chakotay asked with annoyance.

Kathryn could tell that his emotions were running high, as happened often when he decompressed after a rescue operation. “She knew the path well, and I assumed she knew her own limitations. She couldn’t have anticipated that she would go into labor tonight.”

“Still, taking a pregnant woman all the way out here?”

Kathryn pursed her lips to contain her escalating anger. “She invited me.”

“Yes, but you have better training than this.”

Trying to avoid fighting with him, Kathryn looked towards the sky and took a deep breath.

“Let’s just get underway, shall we?”

“Fine.” Chakotay turned on his wrist lamp so they could see where they were stepping on the path, and he started walking without taking her hand.

His behavior was infuriating, but she wasn’t prepared to argue with him when he was stressed from worrying about his sister. She took a steady breath and followed along behind him.

They had walked for about ten minutes when Chakotay said, “You know, this is just like you to wander off.”

“I beg your pardon?” Kathryn stopped in her tracks, deciding enough was enough.

“You do this. You leave yourself unprotected in dangerous situations, just so you can see a little nature or get some fresh air, and this time you had a pregnant civilian with you.”

“I wasn’t unprotected.” She glared at him. “This wasn’t dangerous. We merely went for a walk.”

“What if someone had followed you out here? I thought you two were just going down to the edge of their property.”

“That was the edge of their property. They have a lot of land. I had my commbadge. Why are you so worked up over this?”

“You’d been gone for over an hour.”

“Yes, and you could have contacted me.”

“Kathryn, do you have any idea how concerned I was when I heard my badge chirp?”

She rubbed her neck in an attempt to tamp down her anger. He knew she could take care of herself. Why was he being such a jerk? “Chakotay? What’s going on with us?”

“Oh, so you’ve finally noticed?”

“What the hell does that mean?” she asked. “If you have something to say to me, then just say it. You’ve been sulking around for three days, doing your best to avoid talking to me. I don’t appreciate what you’re implying.”

“I didn’t think you realized I was even upset. I’ve been trying to figure out if this relationship is one-sided and if you were aware of my emotions at all.”

Kathryn’s mouth dropped open in shock. “I can’t believe you think that. After all we’ve been through? All the promises we’ve made to each other? You seriously think that I don’t love you?”

“It’s not that,” he said angrily. “I know you love me, but I’m not sure that you’re invested in this relationship. It seems like I’m the one doing all the work.”

She hung onto her self-control and avoided smacking him for saying that. Instead, she said, “As soon as we know that Sekaya is okay, I’m calling the Pioneer back.” She’d been afraid that her career would hurt their relationship. She just didn’t expect it to happen so soon.

“You’re leaving?” Chakotay threw his hands up. “Of course you are. Fine!”

“I don’t know what else to do, Chakotay. How can I possibly convince you that I want this relationship beyond what I’ve already said and done over the last two months? I’m not going to stand here and plead my case in hopes that my words will somehow prove stronger than my actions.”

“I’m not upset about the last two months, Kathryn. I’m upset about the next two.”

“Why? Because I don’t want to spend them here?”

He glared at her. “No, because you don’t want to spend them with me and you seem to think it’s okay to make decisions for both of us. I’m not under your command, Kathryn.”

She threw her hand up in exasperation. “You said you wanted to spend the summer here so I made my own plans!”

“Yes, and you didn’t want to leave Earth, but now you are.”

Her voice loud, she asked, “Don’t you think the situation has changed a little since I said that? You’re the one who helped me make the choice!”

“Yes, but when I offered to spend the summer with you, you just dismissed it without giving it a moment’s thought.”

“Because I thought it was important for you to spend time here!” She was getting angrier at his irrational behavior by the minute. “Let’s just get back to the house.”

He walked along with her, but kept talking. “Did it occur to you that I could’ve traveled with you?”

“No, it didn’t. Is that what you want?”

“I thought you were planning on easing into this job from Earth.”

“You’re talking in circles.”

“Dammit, Kathryn! You don’t have to be rude!”

“Rude?” She stopped and glared at him again. “You think I’m the one being rude?”

“Yes, I do.”

“I came here so we could have a nice week together before having to be apart, and since that first day in the car, you have been dismissive and short with me. I don’t appreciate it one bit. I forgo a conversation that could be work-related so that I can spend time with you, and you admonish me for it. I try to establish a friendship with your sister, and then you yell at me for going on a damn walk with her. What do you want from me, Chakotay?”

His voice was low as he said, “I want you to want to spend time with me because you can’t bear the thought of being apart, not because you feel obligated to.”

She pinched the bridge of her nose to force back the tears that threatened. “I can’t do this, Chakotay. I love you, but I don’t think I can be the woman you want me to be.”

Alarmed, he asked, “Are you breaking up with me?”

Her voice faltered as she answered, “I certainly don’t want to, but if you need me to languish when I’m not in your presence, I’m never going to be that woman. I’ll love you, I’ll miss you,

and I'll look forward to being together, but I'll never allow myself to suffer because I can't be physically close to a man. Surely the last seven and a half years are proof of that?"

Backing off from his anger, he said, "Kathryn, that's the last thing I'd ever want. I just wanted you to be happy that I offered to give up my summer plans to be with you, and I was hurt when you weren't."

"That's it?" She couldn't believe it.

"That's what started it," he admitted.

"All of this angst just because you wanted me to swoon with happiness that you changed plans at the last minute?"

"Don't make it sound so dramatic," he admonished.

"It is," she glared. "Chakotay, I really don't need this from you."

"What do you mean by that?" he asked defensively.

"I mean that if I'm going to survive being pulled in ten different directions at once, with the burdens of the Federation on my shoulders, I would appreciate it if you could be straightforward with me. If you want more time with me, then tell me. If you want to empower me to do this job, you've got to trust me when I tell you that I love you, and you've got to give me room to maneuver. I can't do this if I've got to continually worry that I'm not filling your needs, and I can't read your mind."

Deflated, he said quietly, "I'm sorry, Kathryn. It was never my intention to make your life more difficult."

He looked so dejected that her expression softened. "You haven't made my life difficult, only the last three days."

He extended his hands to invite her to hug him. When she settled in, he wrapped his arms around her and said, "Please don't leave, yet. Would you stay for the rest of the week?"

"I don't want to go." She couldn't stop the tear that fell as she relaxed into his embrace. They hadn't hugged since they'd been in Banora and she missed it desperately.

"I love you," he choked.

She swallowed the lump in her throat. "I love you, too."

They walked back to the house in silence, but holding hands. When they arrived, there was a message on the comm that gave them contact information for the hospital. Chakotay placed the call while Kathryn got a glass of water.

Steven answered, "Did you just now get back?"

"Yes, we took it slow because it was dark," Chakotay said as an excuse. "How is she?"

"The doctor got the labor stopped, but she has to remain on bed rest until delivery. We're hoping she can make it at least another week or two so the baby's lungs can fully develop. He'll survive if he's born, but it would be better to keep him in the womb for now."

"That's good. Is there anything we can do?"

"Not tonight," Steven answered. "I'll call you in the morning."

Kathryn stepped up, "Is she awake?"

"Drifting in and out of sleep."

"Would you tell her that I'll paint teddy bears for her tomorrow?"

Steven smiled. "Yes, I will. Thank you, Kathryn."

After the comm closed, she said, "I'd like to take a shower and call it an early night, if that's okay with you?"

"Sure. I'm feeling tired, too."

Kathryn managed a small smile and squeezed his shoulder in reassurance. "I won't be long."

Less than an hour later, Chakotay crawled into bed with her. She smiled to herself at the loose pants he was wearing, because he'd never worn so much clothing to bed before. At least, not that she knew of. Even during the last two nights, he had only worn his boxers. Of course, she'd also been wearing pajamas every night they'd been here. She'd felt the need since she was a guest in someone else's home.

His muscled chest was bathed in moonlight, and she longed to touch it. Pushing down her feelings of sorrow that stemmed from their argument, she rolled to her side and snuggled up against him for comfort. He lifted his arm to make room and then wrapped it around her shoulders in a loving embrace.

"I'm really sorry, Kathryn." He laced his fingers through hers. "I'm worried about you, and about us, and how all of this is going to work out."

She studied their hands in the moonlight, and watched the shadows they cast upon his bare chest. "I'm not perfect, and I know that this job is going to consume most of my time and energy, but you are the most important thing in my life, and I hope I never give you reason to doubt that."

He squeezed her shoulders and kissed the top of her head, too emotional to speak.

She brought his fingers to her lips, gracing them with warm, lingering kisses. Her eyes closed as she relished the feel of his warm skin under her cheek. He smelled of soap with a light touch of the spicy aftershave that she adored. Her emotions swelled as she thought about their argument and how she'd come close to ending this. Tears stung her eyes and she released his hand to wipe them away.

“Come here,” he said as he pulled her up so that she was lying completely on top of him. He arranged the sheet over them, but his hands remained underneath to casually run his fingers up and down her back.

The simple and loving touch was enough to comfort her and keep her tears at bay. She sighed contently, relishing the way she fit so completely against him.

Chakotay combed his fingers through her clean hair and gathered it to the side of her neck. He slid his fingertips over her shoulder as if he was inspecting it.

She asked, “What do you see?”

“I’m looking for dents.”

“Find any?” She smiled.

“Not yet. Maybe your skin got tougher.”

“No, if anything, you’ve made it softer.” She pushed up on her hands and looked down at the V of her neckline. She pointed to the center, right above her breasts and said, “I think the dent is here this time.”

He touched the spot she pointed to and then let his finger slide down. “It’s a terribly long dent.”

Shivering, she said, “I think you’re right.”

Wrapping his arms around her, he rolled them over so that he was lying almost on top of her. He kissed the ‘dent’ on her chest, starting at the top and working his way down, pushing the v of the tank down to give his lips access.

Kathryn felt the beginnings of a warm gush between her legs. “You know what we’ve never been able to do before?”

“What’s that?” he asked between kisses.

“Have make-up sex.” She ran her hands over his muscled arms, grazing his nipples with her thumbs.

“That’s true. I hear it can be pretty amazing.” His erection was growing hard against her leg.

“Almost reason enough to have an argument.”

He shook his head. “Next time, let’s just skip ahead to the sex.”

“Agreed.” She crossed her arms to grab the edge of her tank and lifted it over her head.

“Although just think how many times we could’ve had make-up sex on Voyager.”

His chuckle was low in his chest as he nipped at her breasts. “Well, if your former first officer hadn’t been so obtuse.”

“And if your former captain hadn’t been so obstinate.” She gasped as his lips covered her nipple and his tongue stroked broadly over the pebbled tip. “Oooh, Chakotay.”

He released her breast and settled down beside her. The soft pads of his fingertips examined the curves of her face, going over each line, each freckle. Kathryn’s breathing was shallow as she watched his lips and focused on his touch. A long moment of tense anticipation ended as their eyes locked and he whispered with reverence, “My Kathryn.”

She felt a chill from the pure devotion that she could see in the way he looked at her. His lips descended slowly, as if a magnetic force attracted them towards her. The soft warmth surrounded her as all of her senses were drawn towards their kiss.

Kathryn stood on Sekaya’s veranda watching the last sunset she’d see on that planet for awhile. She was alone in the house because Chakotay and Steven had gone to the hospital to visit Sekaya while Kathryn had gone into the capitol city to talk with the Governor.

She heard noise in the house indicating that they’d arrived home, but she decided to stay put so she wouldn’t miss the beautiful scene laid out before her. As loving arms enclosed around her from behind, she settled back against his warm chest and said, “I’m going to miss this.”

“The scenery or the hugs?”

“Both.”

They quietly watched the sun settle low on the horizon, its bright glow sending rays of soft orange light stretching into the pale blue sky.

Kathryn asked, “How’s Sekaya?”

“Bored, but fine. She asked if you would stop by in the morning before you leave.”

Nodding, Kathryn said, “Of course. Did you tell her that we finished the nursery?”

“Complete with diapers and little socks. She was happy, but wished she could’ve been the one to do it.”

“I know.” She nestled her head under his chin. “I wish I could stay until the baby is born.”

“We all do, but we’ll send pictures. She’s going to name him Kolopak.”

Kathryn smiled, remembering their conversation the night Sekaya went into labor. “Are you okay with that?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t I be?”

Shrugging nonchalantly, Kathryn suggested, “What if you have a son?”

He became quiet and she wished she could see his eyes. Finally, he said with strained emotion, “There’s no guarantee that I’ll ever have a son, and I’d like to honor my father by giving his name to his first grandchild.”

“I think he’d be very pleased.” She squeezed his forearm.

Steven came out on the veranda with a tray of tea and coffee, breaking the intensity of the moment. “Kathryn, I know this is your last evening with us, but would you mind terribly if I excused myself to get some work done?”

“Of course not,” she said. “Is everything okay?”

“I’m fine. Just a little behind and I’d like to catch up before the baby decides he’s waited long enough.”

“By all means,” Kathryn waved. “Go crunch numbers to your heart’s content and we’ll enjoy this beautiful sunset without you.”

They all chuckled lightly and then Steven bid them goodnight and went back into the house. As he poured their drinks, Chakotay said, “This was nice of him.”

Kathryn took the coffee and sat down on one of the four wicker chairs. “I wish there was a settee out here so we could snuggle.”

“We can head inside after awhile,” Chakotay said as he sat down near her. “First, however, I have a birthday present for you.” He handed her a medium-sized gift bag.

She protested, but accepted it. “You didn’t have to get me anything. My birthday’s not for another week.”

“Of course I had to give you something. I never miss your birthday.” He helped her by taking the thin tissue paper she had removed from the bag.

“And I treasure every gift you’ve given me.” She lifted out a folded piece of deep blue, rich fabric. “A scarf?” It was very soft and felt luxurious under her fingers.

“A wrap. I saw you looking at it earlier this week in one of the shops. The clerk called it a pashmina, although I don’t know what that is.”

“It’s beautiful.” She unfolded it and wrapped it around her shoulders. “A pashmina is a wrap made from silk and cashmere.”

“The blue really brings out your eyes. You look stunning.”

“Thank you,” she smiled warmly. “I’m looking forward to colder weather so I can wear it.”

“I wasn’t sure what to get you. It’s our first gift exchange as a couple.”

She folded the wrap back up and tucked it in the bag for safe keeping. “It’s perfect,” she said graciously. “And it tells me that even when you’re angry with me, you’re still conscientious about what I’m doing.”

“It’s second nature for me to watch you. I’ve been doing it for so long that I can’t help it,” he admitted. “Not that I’d want that to change.”

She caressed his arm. “I wouldn’t either.”

He bowed his head for a short moment before saying, “So, tell me about your conversation with Governor Cameron.”

“It was enlightening.” She picked up the tri-corder she’d brought outside in case he wanted to talk, and set up a dampening field so they wouldn’t be overheard by anyone who might be trying to spy on her. When she was done, she said, “As you know, I’ve heard many opinions that the President is the reason behind the Federation’s problems, but until today, no one had offered a viable hypothesis.”

“Oh?”

“Cameron believes that the President is playing favorites. He wouldn’t go on record with any specifics, but he indicated that I should examine the business contracts that the Federation council made for the post-war rebuilding effort.”

Chakotay said, “It’s pretty obvious that Zife is involved in some kind of embezzlement scam. How else could he have come into so much wealth while in office?”

“It doesn’t sound like embezzlement. It’s more likely graft.”

“What’s the difference?”

She explained, “Embezzlement is when someone takes money or resources entrusted to them for their personal use. Graft is when someone uses their influence for extortion and receives gifts or money in return.”

Chakotay grunted. “Well, I don’t care what you call it, he’s doing something illegal, and that’s not the only reason his popularity is declining rapidly. What made him okay as a war-time president doesn’t make him right for the rebuilding effort, not that I believe he was good for that, either. He lacks any charisma. I want to slap that smirk of his right of his face and take his expensive tastes and cram them down his throat.”

Kathryn raised an eyebrow at Chakotay’s vehement reaction. She couldn’t help but crook a smile. After all, it wasn’t anything new to see him getting worked up over politics. She said, “I think his lack of charisma is definitely a factor in his lack of overall popularity, but I suspect that he’s very personable to the right people. He was quite affable to me because he thinks I’m going to help him.”

“So long as he doesn’t become lecherous towards you,” Chakotay’s eyes flashed with anger.

“Don’t worry, love.” She patted his arm. “I can hold my own.”

Chakotay looked off in the distance as he dreamed. “What I wouldn’t give to be a fly on the wall in his office when all of this comes crashing down around him.”

Ignoring his comment, she got back to the subject at hand. “What surprised me today was Cameron’s insight. He suggested that we study where the raw materials have come from and check on the current status of those planets.”

Chakotay looked at her incredulously. “Do you think he’s granting special privileges to those members?”

“Quite the opposite. Cameron alleged they were told that it was their duty to the Federation to provide the materials at cost, and then were ignored when they needed help.”

“Help with what?”

“He wouldn’t say.”

Chakotay was quiet for a moment before asking, “Do you feel like you can trust Cameron?”

“Yes,” Kathryn said slowly. “Because he’s right.”

“How can you be sure?”

She contemplated how much to tell him, but she knew she could trust Chakotay more than anyone else. He alone could be an unbiased, although not a dispassionate, sounding board. “It’s the same thing that I was led to believe before I took this job. However, it’s just now becoming clear where the corruption is and I’m guessing it involves some major players in Federation politics.”

“Led by whom? Patterson and Paris?” Chakotay frowned. “I don’t think you should rely on their information until you know who their sources are.”

Shaking her head, she said, “I think they suspect about the same as you do – that he’s come into too much wealth too quickly. This corruption has to involve a lot more people than him, which will make it difficult to prove.”

“So, who knows about it then? Khurma?”

“I’m not sure yet, but I have a plan for how to find out. Let’s just say a little birdie told me, and it’s a bird that I can trust.”

His expression was worrisome. “How can you be so sure? If you’re right about this, then you’re going to need a lot of proof.”

She hesitated before saying, “You’ll have to trust me.”

“I was afraid you were going to say ‘temporal prime directive’.”

Not expecting him to get it right, she choked on her coffee.

“Kathryn?” He handed her a napkin and took her cup.

“Fine,” she held up a hand to stall him until she regained her composure.

“That can’t be it, can it?” When she nodded, he asked angrily, “What do you know? Have you had another time travel experience that you haven’t told me about?”

“No, you know all about it,” she said firmly.

“Obviously not all.” His jaw set in frustration, “Damn it, Kathryn. Have you any idea how dangerous this is?”

Her voice was calm. “Yes, but we’ve discussed that.”

“Not at this level, we haven’t,” he spat. “Until now, I was only concerned with how his corruption would affect your career, and if you would get caught in the middle of the political fallout from all this. I thought maybe the most dangerous part of this would be if someone wanted to hurt you in order to make some political statement. Now you tell me that someone

from the future told you that there's some kind of large scale, organized extortion going on? This is dangerous business you're dealing with here!"

"I realize that," she held his arm in an attempt to calm him. "But we've always known there was some kind of corruption. I just have to be smart about this and stay one step ahead of everyone else. What I know gives me leverage that he can't possibly be aware of."

He wasn't calm. "Care to fill me in or are you going to take back your promise to build our future together?"

She squared her shoulders under the weight of his accusation. Without a doubt, she knew he was only lashing out because he was afraid, so she looked directly into his eyes to assure him. "I never meant to keep you in the dark about this. I didn't realize until talking to Cameron today how much I already knew."

"I don't understand."

Choosing her words carefully, she said, "When I was taken by the Relativity, I was told that there was a political force at work that would eventually undermine the longevity of the Federation. If I discover it, I am to do whatever is in my power to repair the damage. In the timeline that no longer exists, Voyager returned to a Federation that was burdened with political distrust and a Starfleet that was severely handicapped because of a lack of faith. In the future of this timeline, the same problem exists, but because of the hope that came with Voyager's return, the outcome was less destructive. My role, whatever it may be, is significant enough to alter the long-term strength of the Federation."

With a low voice, he said, "So much for the temporal prime directive."

"I know. Their goal was not just to protect the timeline, it was also to protect the Federation. Without Starfleet, the temporal review board doesn't exist, and so by empowering me to create a temporal incursion, they're safeguarding the timeline from future tampering. When Q asked me to pursue the Romulan alliance, I believed that he was giving me a hint as to where to start. I thought the political distrust must have started with further dealings with Romulus. By taking this job, I believed that I would be put into a position to work on an alliance, but now I believe I'm dealing with two separate issues."

"And you don't know why Q made his request?"

"No," she shook her head. "Only that he wants to fix Quinn's mistakes."

"There has to be more to it than that."

"I suspect he'll show up at some point and tell me. Until then, I can only concentrate on what's in front of me. At the moment, it has nothing to do with Romulus."

He sighed heavily. "I have a bad feeling about this."

“I trust your instincts, but knowing what’s at stake gives me a purpose to make sure I do this right. It may take a long time, but I intend to bring light to the problem and let Starfleet put two and two together. If I ask the right questions to the right people, I can set things in motion without getting my hands too dirty. The patriot group that Patterson and Paris are working with can do a lot of that.”

Chakotay thought about this for a moment and then asked, “How do you know the exact nature of what Zife is doing? And how do you know who you can trust?”

“Trust will have to be earned. I plan to keep all the intelligence guarded so I don’t inadvertently encourage anyone to dig around where they shouldn’t. As far as specifics about what’s happening,” she sighed, “I’m just putting pieces together. After talking to Cameron today, I really think that Zife is at the crux of the problem, although I can’t imagine that he’s pulling this off alone. His business associates are likely pulling some strings.”

He shook his head. “This is huge.”

“I know. I was tempted to call Captain Young to get him started on research, but I decided that if communication were being monitored by Starfleet or the Federation, it would only alert someone that Cameron gave me information.”

“You’re going to have to tread carefully.”

“I know,” she sighed. “I’m very glad that Commander Walker will be joining my staff.”

“Is that Young’s fiancée?”

“Yes. She’s joining my staff tomorrow, and Harry and Sue will catch her up to speed. Or she’ll catch them up, either way.”

“I assume you’re going back to Earth first?”

Kathryn nodded, “I’ll spend a few weeks there setting up my office and meeting with everyone under the sun before Khurma gives me my marching orders.”

“You already have a schedule?”

“Probably. When I checked my messages last Tuesday, there was a long list of people who wanted a few minutes of my time. I gave Sue access to my messages and put her in charge of my itinerary. I think she’ll help me keep my head on straight and won’t hesitate to protect my time.”

“What will you have Harry do?”

“I want him to attend the meetings with me and be a second pair of eyes and ears. Judy will be in charge of research, and I'm going to have Doyle and Jarvin learn all they can about each planet we visit. I want them to get chummy with their peers.”

“And get the dirt?”

“Exactly.”

“Good call.” Chakotay nodded thoughtfully. “I can't help but wonder what kind of help those planets needed and weren't getting.”

“I don't know, but with Starfleet having limited resources, I worry that some might feel slighted when it's merely an issue of not enough people to put out the fires.”

He blew out a long sigh as he took all the information in. “We're not going to be able to talk this freely while I'm here.”

“I know,” she said sadly. “Over the last seven and a half years, I've gotten rather used to having you as a sounding board.”

“Kathryn,” he said as he held her arm. “If you need me, at any time, just say the word and I'll be with you at a moment's notice. Knowing what's at stake gives things a new perspective.”

She chose her words carefully so as to not hurt his feelings again. “I appreciate your offer, but as of August, you'll have commitments, too.”

“I realize that, but teaching tactics is a far cry less significant than what you'll be doing.”

“In the grand scheme of things, maybe, but in the same way that you didn't want me to retire, I don't want you to, either. We'll have a healthier relationship if we've each got our own reason to get up in the morning.”

“That doesn't make it any easier to go our separate ways at this point. We haven't worked separately since we met, and I'm uneasy about you going off on your own without me. Especially considering what you're getting involved in.”

Her lips curved into a sympathetic smile. “I wouldn't exactly say we're going our separate ways, Chakotay. I still want to come home to you, and only you know the entire scope of my responsibilities.”

He caressed the back of her hand with his thumb. “Promise me that you'll keep me in the loop as much as possible? I know there will security issues and things that I don't have clearance to know, but I want to continue supporting you to the best of my abilities.”

“I'm counting on it,” she assured him. “We'll resurrect some of our old hand signals, and maybe we can come up with a code word for some of the key players.”

“The dog is barking could be Zife making demands.” Chakotay laughed.

Glad to see that his mood had lifted, she laughed, too. “That’s a good one. Maybe I could refer to Owen and Matt as the pilots who want coordinates.”

He chuckled. “I’m sure they do. And I suppose that the conspiracy theory that we talked about tonight could be ‘the recipe?’”

“Sure. For example, I could tell you that ‘the recipe’ is on target, but needs a bit more flushing out.”

“And more facts could be more ingredients.”

Kathryn set her cup down and looked around at the darkening landscape. “I’m hopeful that the next couple of months will be fruitful. I wouldn’t mind if you did your own digging into past news reports to search for clues.” She hoped that would give him something to focus on besides worrying about her.

“I’ll do that.”

“Chakotay,” she held his hand and looked into his eyes. “Despite our communication problems, I really do want to create a future with you.”

“Communication problems?”

“Our argument earlier this week, and just now, you thought I was keeping information from you.”

He looked embarrassed. “I think I’ve just been over-reacting.”

“Maybe a little,” she smiled sympathetically. “But I’ve got to be more aware of your feelings, and I know that you’re worried about me, which I understand completely. We’re also trying to develop this relationship under unique circumstances.”

“Yes, that’s true. Seven years of friendship under a command structure is hard to grow out of.”

“Exactly. And we don’t have Voyager to connect us anymore. We’re used to working on the same thing, and having the same community around us.”

He stood and tugged on her hand to draw her up to him. Wrapping his arms around her, he said, “We do have one thing going for us, though.”

“What’s that?” She smiled as he pressed his body against hers.

“We’re in love.” He kissed her sensuously, the touch of his lips making her head spin as a warm gush settled in her middle.

Breathless, she responded, “Yes, we are. Let’s try to remember that.”

“I don’t foresee that being a problem,” he said against her lips. “Let’s go to bed.”

End Part 9

Part 10 - “No Unnecessary Risks”

By Dawn

Rated PG

Summary: Getting down to business.

The next day, Kathryn stopped by the hospital as promised, assuring Sekaya that the baby would be fine, that labor would be manageable, and that they’d keep in regular contact. She treasured the friendship that they’d begun and vowed to keep it going.

After she said goodbye to Sekaya, Kathryn pulled Chakotay into an unoccupied room at the hospital. She rose up on her toes and kissed him. “I miss you already.”

He cradled her face in his hands, looking at her as if he was memorizing every freckle. “Take care of yourself.”

“I will. I have an entire starship looking out for me, you know.”

Shaking his head, he said, “That hasn’t exactly kept you safe in the past.”

“I’ll be careful.”

“No unnecessary risks.”

She crooked a smile and assured him, “I promise that all risks will be completely necessary.”

“Why doesn’t that make me feel better?”

“Because you know me too well.” She kissed him again. “I’ll call you every evening so you can sleep at night.”

“I’ll count on it.” He hugged her tightly to his chest. “I love you, Kathryn.”

“I love you, too.”

“Kathryn, I wanted to ask...” He swallowed hard.

His hesitation prompted her to look up, and what she saw was a very intense expression. “What is it?”

“When I come home in August...”

“Yes?” She had a feeling that he was about to propose again. Her insides knotted nervously.

He dismissed what he was going to say. “This isn’t the right time or place. We can talk about it later.”

“Are you sure?” She caressed his cheek with her thumb to encourage him. “If there’s something you want to talk about, I can take a little more time here.”

“It’s nothing,” he admitted. “I was just thinking that maybe we should move in together, but it’s probably premature to be talking about that when we don’t know what your life will be like in two months.”

She hid her disappointment. Living together wasn’t exactly the romantic invitation she was hoping for, although with their recent argument, she wasn’t sure it was the right time to be thinking about any kind of permanence. They had a lot to work out before making a binding, long-term commitment. “We can talk about it when you get back.” She kissed him lightly again.

“I’d like that.”

She stood back and straightened her blouse in preparation for leaving. “I should’ve put my uniform on before beaming back.”

“You don’t need it. You radiate a command presence regardless of what you’re wearing.”

“I’ll call you tonight.”

Just as she was about to call the Pioneer, he stopped her hand from touching her communicator and pulled her against him. One hand was on her back, pressing her firmly against him. The other hand cradled the side of her neck, his thumb gently caressing her jaw.

She closed her eyes in anticipation, feeling a flutter of arousal at the intimate touch. As his warm lips closed over hers and his tongue swept unhurried through her mouth, she moaned and her body came alive with their deeply passionate kiss. Her face warmed as the spiral of heat rose from her core, making her tremble with need. Their bodies were pressed so tightly together that she had no doubts that he was just as affected by the kiss as she was.

With his lips barely touching hers, he said, "I'll be dreaming about reuniting with you in August, and looking forward to the day when we won't have to say goodbye to each other for more than a few hours at a time."

The conviction in his voice gave her pause, making her realize that he needed reassurance. She delicately kissed his sensuous lips. "Once I do what I need to do, I'm all yours."

He pressed his hand firmer against her back. "I want you to be mine while you're doing what you need to do."

She looked into his deep brown eyes and said, "I'll try."

"Thank you." He released her so he could hold her face with both hands. Kissing her forehead, he whispered, "Take care of yourself. I love you, Kathryn."

"I love you, too." She stepped back and tapped her communicator. "Janeway to the Pioneer. One to beam up."

When she materialized on the ship, she saw Bernie waiting for her. "I hope you haven't been waiting in the transporter room for me all morning, Captain."

He extended a gentlemanly hand to help her step off the transporter pad. "No, I just happened to be near when you called. How was your vacation?"

"Banora is a beautiful colony. I enjoyed myself immensely."

"I'm glad, although I was hoping Captain Chakotay would change his mind about returning with us."

As they walked out into the corridor, Kathryn said, "He was torn, but since his sister is expecting a baby any day, he made the right choice to stay with her for awhile longer."

"Of course." Bernie directed her to turn left to get to the turbolift.

"I should study the schematics of this ship. I have no idea where I'm going."

"You'll get used to her in no time. I assume you want to go to your quarters first?"

"Yes, to change into uniform. If you have time in about an hour, I'd like to talk."

"I'm all yours, Admiral, as is this ship."

She smiled. "Then I'll give the same order I've given for the last seven and a half years. Set a course for home."

"Aye, Admiral." He said happily.

Once dressed, she studied her reflection in the mirror, tugging down on the bulky jacket in an attempt to make it fit better. It was the first time she'd worn the admiral's uniform, and she wasn't sure how she felt about it. The double-set of pips on gold bars was flashy and the decorative details made her feel like she was in a dress uniform. However, she had to admit that she liked the longer jacket. She'd had to work very hard to keep her belly flat for the old one, but this one was a little more forgiving. She supposed that the reason admiral uniforms were cut this way was because most of them had grown soft in the middle. She put on the finishing touch, the belt, and immediately decided that the accessory was the worst part of the whole ensemble. She said to her reflection, "It looks like a big bull's eye, for crying out loud."

She quickly scanned her messages, checked in with her staff on Earth, and dug into work. During the two-day trip back, she met with most of the Pioneer crew and directed Bernie to have all available officers working on confidential research. Sciences were to evaluate the sources, availability, and cost of material needs for the post-war rebuilding efforts. Security was to research all of the distress calls and Starfleet's responses during the past two years. Meanwhile, she and Bernie had long conversations that mirrored what Governor Cameron had alluded to – a conspiracy of exploitation that didn't sit well with her at all. She could easily see why Owen Paris and Matt Patterson were eager to take action, but hesitant to do so without proof.

Back on Earth, her staff had already furnished and supplied her offices at San Francisco's Federation office building. Within a day of arriving, she was completely booked with meetings, including several with Admiral Khurma to catch her up to speed on the President's agenda.

With the promotion to Admiral, her life changed significantly. She now had at least one security officer with her at all times because of her fame and high profile job. While she was on Banora, Starfleet had reconfigured the security protection at her San Francisco home. She had energy barriers on all her windows and an impenetrable locking system on all the doors. When she told Chakotay about it, he was pleased, but commented that it might make living together difficult to conceal. She had to agree.

Khurma asked her and Harry to travel with him to Paris for a week. She appreciated that her new commanding officer insisted on attending all meetings that included President Zife, yet he gave her the freedom to establish her own working relationships with key members of the Security Council.

The meetings were to inform her of past resolutions and to catch her up to speed on current debates and policies for diplomatic relations. Most of the information shared was public knowledge and not as useful as her conversations with Captain Young and Governor Cameron. There was hardly a minute when she wasn't in a meeting or at a social function during that week. She was exhausted, but she was establishing good working relationships.

Gretchen, Phoebe, and Katie came to Paris to celebrate Kathryn's 43rd birthday. She was glad to see them because she was feeling depressed at the notion of spending her first birthday back on

Earth without her family. The four of them, plus Harry and her bodyguard Scott Doyle, had a lovely dinner at a French bistro and then climbed the Eiffel tower together.

She called Chakotay every night and filled him in as best she could, and in return, he kept her apprised of events on Banora. Sekaya gave birth to Kolopak on May 23rd and was a happy, healthy baby boy with dark brown eyes and a head full of black hair. Kathryn made a mental note to visit her favorite yarn shop in Bloomington at her first opportunity so she could knit him a blanket.

Upon returning to San Francisco, she gave an official press conference to assure the Federation citizens that she'd begun work and to give them the satisfaction of knowing she was studiously absorbing as much information as possible. She conveyed that she was equipping herself with knowledge before setting out into space to open diplomatic dialogues.

She and Harry were exchanging notes to wrap up the week when Sue buzzed her. "Admiral, I apologize for the interruption."

"That's all right," she said as she smiled apologetically to Harry. "What can I do for you?"

"Dr. Zimmerman is on hold and doesn't want to bother you if you're busy, but he wants to know if you have any social plans for the weekend."

Kathryn was amused. "Send him through." She said to Harry, "I'll just give him a minute."

"Take your time, Admiral," Harry said with a chuckle.

When the doctor's image came up on her monitor, she asked, "What do you have in mind?"

"I'm sorry to interrupt you, Admiral."

"It's quite all right, Joe. Harry and I are just comparing notes."

He said with excitement, "The New York City Opera is premiering a new opera tomorrow evening, and I think it's one you would really enjoy. Would you like to accompany me?"

She frowned. "Opera?"

"Not a traditional one. It's a love story and all the music is inspired by Twentieth Century American jazz. I know you love that genre, and even though it's been months since you said it, you did promise me that we'd socialize more."

"That was almost six months ago, and I was thinking we'd play some golf on the holodeck or I'd show you my DaVinci program."

"Yes, but since Chakotay isn't here, I thought you might need encouragement to let your hair down, so to speak. Call it a birthday celebration. I'll even bring a gift."

“Well, how can I resist that?” She winked at him. “I assume this is a formal occasion?”

“All debuts are, but I don’t believe you need a ball gown.”

“I’m sure I can drum something up. May I reconnect you with Sue so that she can make travel arrangements?”

“Of course, Admiral, and thank you. You’re going to love this performance, I’m sure.”

“I’m looking forward to it.” She quickly added, “Oh, and Joe, I have a security escort everywhere I go. I’m sure he or she can stand in the back, but they’ll have to be with me.”

“I’m pleased that you’re taking your personal safety seriously, Admiral.” His smile was genuine. “I’ll work out the details with Lieutenant Brooks. Thank you again, and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Kathryn shook her head in amusement after she closed the comm link. She asked Harry, “Would you like to be my security? Sounds like this would be right up your alley.”

“I’d love to see it, but I already have a date.”

“Oh? Do I know her?” Kathryn rested her chin on her hand, eager to hear all about it.

“Her name is Michelle Hurst, a civilian,” he added. “She works downstairs in the press office.”

“First date?”

“Second, if coffee counts.”

“Coffee always counts in my book. Where’s the second date?”

Harry blushed and looked down at his hands. “I’m taking her out to dinner and then I thought we’d walk along the beach. It might be corny, but I think she’ll like it.”

“Sounds very romantic.” She loved the close friendship that she was developing with all the members of her staff. There was something to be said for only having five people to look after. “One suggestion, if I may?”

“Of course,” he said eagerly.

“Wear slacks that you can roll up in case you want to walk in the water. There’s nothing quite like a nice kiss when your toes are squishing in the sand.”

He laughed. “I’ll remember that.”

“You’ll have to tell me all about her on Sunday at Captain Young’s wedding.”

“I’ll give you a full report.”

Kathryn laughed and held up a hand, “Oh, I don’t need to know everything.” She winked at him and said, “Let’s finish this up so we can get out of here early. I don’t know about you, but my brain has absorbed about all it can for one week.”

“Mine too, but I think we’ve made progress. I’ll work on this more tomorrow to come up with a reference system for all of this information.”

“No, no, no... don’t work tomorrow. With the wedding, it’s going to be a busy weekend. This can definitely wait until Monday.”

“Yes, but I want to get on top of it while it’s all fresh.”

“I know this is the pot calling the kettle black, but don’t forget to take some time off while you can. Once we head out into space, we’ll wish we could.”

“I will, Admiral.”

They quickly finished and got out of the office by 3:30. Kathryn went straight home and happily took a long, hot bubble bath. Later that evening, she called Chakotay.

“Hi there, handsome,” Kathryn smiled brightly when Chakotay’s image came up on the screen. He was holding Kolopak.

“Handsome? You’ve never called me that before.”

“I wasn’t talking to you.” She leaned forward and touched the screen, wishing she could touch the baby. Newborns were her weakness.

“Oh, thanks,” he said with a laugh. “How was your day? I see you’re ready for bed, and it’s not even dark there, yet.”

“I’m wiped out from the week and the time zone difference. In Paris, it’s almost midnight.”

“I saw your press conference this morning.”

“Was it too vague?” Kathryn frowned. “I wanted to give them more, but there’s nothing to report.”

“I think it was fine. It’s only been three weeks since the public has heard from you, and I doubt anyone thinks you could have solved anything since then.”

“I’m thinking about doing these every Friday morning, if I’m on Earth.”

“That would be a good way to stay in the public eye, although if I may make a suggestion?”

“Sure.”

“Only do them when you have something for them. Otherwise, they might not keep listening.”

“Good point.” She thought for a short moment before adding, “I doubt I’ll have a problem staying in the spotlight.”

“Speaking of that, Steven had a suggestion that you keep a low profile when you head out.”

“Why?” Kathryn furrowed her eyebrows. “We want the publicity.”

“Yes, but not at the risk of attracting unwanted attention. Especially on those planets that I told you about last week – the ones with terrorist activities.”

She nodded in thought. “Could you forward me your research on those? I’d like to look at it and send it to Commander Ral. She has a team looking at something similar.”

“Sure, but I suspect she already knows. It’s all public news reports.”

“Still, it would be good to cross reference the research,” she said in conclusion before changing the subject. “Oh, I won’t be available to call you tomorrow evening.”

“Oh?” He adjusted the now-sleeping infant in his arms.

“I have a date,” she said with a little smirk, and then laughed at his double take.

“A date?” he asked with surprise.

“Dr. Joe has invited me to attend an opera premiere in New York – some jazz thing.” Kathryn smiled to reassure him. “I thought it might be fun, and a good way to keep me from working all weekend.”

He grimaced. “Opera?”

“He assures me that I’ll love it.”

“If you say so,” he looked at her askance. “But don’t forget to take your security with you.”

She held up a hand in surrender. “Not to worry, Sue has already made arrangements.”

“I have plenty to worry about with you. Do you also have security lined up for the wedding?”

“Yes, it’s all set.” Changing the subject again, she asked, “Are you doing okay there?”

“Just fine. I think I’m getting the hang of this baby-thing. He’s got a good pattern of sleep established and I sleep right through his cries at night. Tomorrow, Steven and I are going to start work on a playhouse for him.”

“A playhouse? He’s only two days old!”

Chakotay laughed. “Yes, but I want to build him something, and that’s what Sekaya and Steven could agree on. They’ll keep it in storage for a couple years, but it’ll be built and ready for him when he wants it.”

“Sounds like fun,” Kathryn smiled genuinely, wishing she were there, too, but duty called. She sighed tiredly. “Well, if it’s okay with you, I’m going to turn in. I’m looking forward to sleeping in tomorrow, and I want to take full advantage of that by going to bed nice and early.”

“I can see you already, lazing around like a soft, lazy cat.”

“That’s me.” She winked and then said with sincere affection, “I love you.”

He touched the screen. “I love you, too. Have fun at the opera.”

“I will.” She touched his fingers in return. “Goodnight, Chakotay.”

“Goodnight.”

By the middle of the next week, she was getting used to the rhythm of working regular hours. She and B’Elanna exercised together in the mornings, and the Voyagers kept her busy by inviting her to dinner often. By the second week, she wondered if there was a conspiracy afoot, because she received casual invitations at least every other night, and not all came from her former senior staff. She didn’t mind one bit and was enjoying developing more relaxed friendships with her former crew.

After a month in San Francisco, Kathryn’s team headed into space for their first round of diplomatic conferences. Over the course of two-weeks, she met with the dignitaries of four planets that were clearly favored on President Zife’s agenda. Two had left the Federation during the war, and the other two indicated that they’d suffered great economic losses during that dark period, although Kathryn didn’t see any indicators of hard times on any of the worlds.

She learned that, due to their involvement in the rebuilding efforts, the economies on all four planets had thrived since the war. The planets were all heralded as success stories, and all the well-publicized speeches given by the local government officials were full of tedious accolades for the Federation and its President. Kathryn’s diplomatic skills weren’t required, and she said as little as possible to avoid aligning herself with all the brown-nosers.

Kathryn went back to Earth for a week to assess what they'd learned and make plans for their next excursion. At a meeting with Admiral Khurma, she boldly asked, "Was there a point to those conferences?"

He chuckled. "No, not really, except to showcase all of the successful connections that the Federation has molded during the last two years."

Trying hard not to roll her eyes, Kathryn said, "I see."

"Go ahead, Kathryn. I don't mind one bit if you express your irritation."

She smirked. "It was all a bit much. I hope we haven't lost ground."

"Have you listened to the media response?" he asked.

"One of my aides is reviewing the news reports for me."

As he poured her a cup of coffee, Khurma said, "I'm never sure whether it's helpful when the media freely expresses their take on political situations, especially when they interview the so-called experts for their opinions. However, in this case, it's going to work in your favor."

"What do they say?"

"That it was clear by your lack of comments during the last two weeks that there was nothing of importance going on. They surmised that these outings were nothing more than President Zife using your fame for a publicity tour."

"They're right." Kathryn scratched her chin. "How is the President taking it?"

"He told me that your presence was a positive step in the right direction. He's thrilled with all the publicity from the events, and as far as I know, hasn't paid attention to the Fednews. I'm guessing that he really doesn't take much interest in what the so-called experts have to say."

"Intriguing observation," she nodded appreciatively, thinking that if Zife didn't pay attention to the news, then she could work that angle.

Khurma handed her a PADD and said, "Now, the real work begins."

Kathryn briefed her staff on Khurma's agenda, which was to appease the governments of the Federation members who had expressed ardent dissatisfaction with recent council decisions. Her assignment for the next five conferences was to listen and placate.

On all five planets, Kathryn felt their frustration with the Federation Council. They believed the Council lacked any true authority and that the President had far too much influence. In addition,

she learned that Federation-wide resources had been cut for scientific and medical research, assistance with space exploration was no longer available, and the sponsorship program for students to attend Starfleet Academy had diminished almost completely.

There were numerous concerns about why their planets were asked to cut back while others, like the President's home planet of Bolius, were profiting. Kathryn assured all that she heard their concerns clearly, and although it might take time to forge change, she hoped that they would bear with her.

Overall, the coverage in the media was positive, and the journalists who pontificated on her every comment were correct when they said it was too early to expect results. She was, however, amused by all the discussion around how she should proceed. None of it was very useful, but it served a good purpose in that it got people talking about how to reunite the Federation. It was a far cry from all the finger pointing that had been taking place just two months previous, around the time of the awards banquet.

Still aboard the Pioneer, Kathryn was struggling with how to proceed and decided to seek out her favorite sounding board. She placed a call to Chakotay.

He smiled as he said, "You're calling early today."

"I just finished a dinner meeting to engage in yet another debate with my staff," she sighed, feeling a little gloomy.

"Are they not living up to expectations?"

"Quite the opposite. They're very good at debate, all of them. Problem is we agree on the issues."

"That's not exactly a reason to be concerned," he pointed out.

"No, it's not." She smiled half-heartedly. "They're a good group, and they've finally relaxed around me, which I really appreciate."

"That must mean you're relaxed. A happy Kathryn equals a happy crew." He studied her face with concern. "Problem is, you don't look it, and you're still in uniform."

"I don't feel it." She rested her chin in her hand. "I know how much you've enjoyed me calling while wearing my nightgown, but I really need to talk to you."

"Oh?"

"I've initiated this as a secure transmission, but we still need to be careful."

"I understand." He sat up a little straighter. "Is anything wrong?"

She gave him a look. “Yes, the Federation is falling apart.”

“Other than that?” he asked with a smirk.

Laughing at his humor, she said with sincerity, “Thank you. I needed that.”

“Tough day?”

“Perplexing day.” She held up a PADD and then set it down. “We compared your research on reported terrorist activities with the planets that were contracted to provide raw materials for the rebuilding effort, and there is a well defined correlation.”

“Someone is trying to get the Federation’s attention.”

“Exactly.” She laced her fingers together and rested her chin on them. “My instincts are telling me to pursue this, but I’m not sure that’s the wisest thing to do right now.”

“Are you worried that you’ll be adding fuel to the fire? Giving publicity where it’s not needed?”

She nodded. “Most are no longer Federation members. All have suffered significant economic depressions because of the situation.”

“Have you spoken to Admiral Khurma about it, yet?”

“No. My concern is that I’m opening a can of worms, and I don’t know if I’m prepared for this, yet.”

“Oh, I’d say that you can handle just about anything thrown at you from the concerned governments. All you need to do at this point is to listen.”

“Yes, but how do I convince my C.O. that I want to pursue this without letting him know what I know?”

“I see your dilemma,” he said as he scratched his chin in thought. “Well, seems to me that in your conversations with the governments over the last two weeks, it has been suggested that there has been a severe lack of egalitarianism under Federation law.”

“And that is a true statement. There is a significant lack of equality when it comes to economic opportunities.”

“I’d also tell him that your staff has been doing research on allegations regarding Starfleet’s lack of response to distress calls. See what his reaction is.”

She chewed on her lip as she thought about it. “He might want to know why I pursued that research, and it’s possible that he knows the reasons already.”

“I would hope he knows, since he’s the commander in chief of the fleet. I take it that those allegations are not in your reports?”

“No.”

“Tell him that they were off-the-record comments because they didn’t directly affect the planets you were meeting with, and because you heard the same thing from several sources, it seemed prudent to do some research.”

She mulled it over for a moment. “Yes, I see what you’re saying. If I base my reasoning on situations he knows I’m aware of, he won’t be suspicious. And I could ask to start meeting with those that have withdrawn. I’ve learned one thing for sure from the last five conferences – we’re on the verge of losing a lot more members unless we make some changes.”

“You need to conduct exit interviews, so to speak. It’s a valid next step for your agenda. First, you met with those who are happy and profitable, then those who are middle of the road.”

“And now, I should meet with those who are royally ticked.”

“You’ll get to use those marvelous diplomatic skills everyone says you have.”

She laughed. “Little do they know it’s just my feminine charms.”

“Use what you’ve got. That’s what I plan to teach my students this fall.”

She rubbed her face tiredly and changed the subject. “How many more days till I see you?”

“Sixteen.”

“If I stay out here, I’ll miss your homecoming.”

“Are you coming this way? Maybe you can give me a ride.”

Winking at him, she asked, “Want to make out on the way home?”

“You read my mind. See, it’s very easy to do,” he joked.

“When you’re flirting, sure.” She felt a deep longing to see him in person. “Unfortunately, Banora is nowhere near the systems I want to visit.”

With a serious tone, he suggested, “Call Khurma in the morning so you can make a decision, and we’ll make plans accordingly. If you need to stay out there, I completely understand.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.” His smile was very convincing. “These planets are at the root of the discontent and I suspect you’ll learn a lot.”

“If they’re willing to talk, and that’s a big if.”

“I have no doubts that they’ll talk to you. People like to complain so I’m sure you’ll get an earful from everyone you meet.”

She sighed. “You’re probably right, and I’m the one who said we need to start listening to each other, right?”

He chuckled. “Yes, in one of your more inspiring speeches.”

“Remind me to keep my mouth shut, would you?” she asked sarcastically.

“Hmmm.” He widened his eyes appreciatively. “I kind of like you with your mouth open.”

“Chakotay!” she exclaimed with her mouth wide open, and then she quickly shut it. “I hope your sister didn’t hear you say that!”

Laughing, he said, “No, I’m alone in here.”

She rubbed her cheeks, knowing she must be flushing a bright shade of pink. “You’re incorrigible.”

“Nah, just missing you.”

“Awe,” she dropped her shoulders. “I should postpone this trip.”

“No, get it over with. Maybe you’ll be done soon after I get back. How many systems do you need to visit?”

“Oh heavens, there are at least half a dozen that fall into this situation. Possibly more.”

“Well, you visited these last five in two weeks,” he pointed out.

“Yes, but they weren’t as disgruntled.”

“So maybe it’ll take three weeks, or a month. It’ll be fine.”

She still felt like she was disappointing him, but she had no choice. “We’ll keep talking every evening.”

“Yes, absolutely. It’s something I look forward to. If you have time, I wouldn’t mind a good morning call, too.”

“As long as I’m not planetside, I’d love that. They’d have to be quick, though.”

“Or I could just watch you get dressed. It’s one of my favorite ways to pass time.”

She crooked a smile. “And here I was thinking you preferred watching me get undressed.”

“Either one is preferable, because at some point in the process, you’re not wearing anything.”

“Oh, I see,” she laughed. “Can I see Kolopak? I need a baby fix.”

“Sure, let me see if he’s awake. I’ll be back in a minute.”

While he was gone, she took off her coat and pulled the pins out of her hair. It had grown long enough that she could put it up in a bun again. Her sister had told her that it made her look old, but Kathryn thought it afforded her a more professional appearance.

“Look what I found,” Chakotay said as he sat down with a gurgling two-month old.

“Awe,” Kathryn said as she crossed her arms to hug herself, wishing she could be hugging him. Kolopak was bright-eyed and looking right at her. “He’s precious.”

“Do you see that smile you put on Aunt Kathryn’s face?” Chakotay asked the baby. “That smile is reserved for just you and me, kid.”

She laughed, realizing just how big her smile must be. “Yes, it is, but Miral and Katie probably get it, too.”

“I’m not complaining. I love your smile, and the more I see it, the happier I am.” He winked at her and then kissed Kolopak’s head.

“How are you ever going to tear yourself away from him?” Kathryn waved her fingers and made silly faces at the baby.

“It won’t be easy, but Miral is on Earth and I miss her, too.”

“Lanna said she’s crawling all over the place now.”

“I bet she’s a mover.” Chakotay smiled. “Oh, I was supposed to tell you – Steven and Sekaya have asked you and me to be Kolopak’s godparents. Are you interested?”

“Oh,” Kathryn’s heart melted. “I would be honored.”

“I’ll tell her,” he said happily. “Now you have two.”

“Three. I’ve also got Katie.”

Kolopak snuggled up under Chakotay's chin. "I love this best. He fits right in there."

Kathryn was beaming. She wanted so much to tell him that she looked forward to having babies of her own, but thought it would rush their relationship too much. They talked for a little while longer and finally decided to say goodnight. Kathryn settled into bed early, taking a lot of reading material with her, but feeling a lot more centered than she had all day.

First thing the next morning, she called Admiral Khurma. She had all her notes prepared to argue her case, but didn't need any of it. He agreed immediately, indicating that her plans mirrored his own. He'd intended to send her after she'd had time to get up to speed, but since she'd already done that, there was no reason to delay. He had only three systems in mind to start with, and she readily accepted his recommendations.

Kathryn made a quick call to Chakotay. "Good morning."

"Hi," he said with a big grin.

"Sorry to wake you. I didn't even think about the two-hour time difference." She loved the way his hair stuck up in all directions first thing in the morning.

"That's all right. I asked you to call me in the mornings." He smiled affectionately. "Do you need a pep talk before calling your C.O.?"

She shook her head, smiling. "No, I've already talked to him. I just wanted to let you know that he's on board and that we'll soon be setting a course to the first system. He had three in mind for me."

"Was it a difficult conversation?"

"Not at all. I was worried about nothing."

"I'm glad," he said with a yawn. "Sorry."

"Quite all right. I need to run. Some nutty old Admiral scheduled a briefing that starts in fifteen minutes."

His eyes twinkled. "You'd better get going, then. I know she doesn't have much patience for tardiness."

"I'll call you tonight."

"Looking forward to it already. Oh, and do me a favor, would you?"

"Sure, what is it?"

“Increase your security as you go to these systems.”

She tilted her head to the side. “Consider it done.”

“Thank you,” he said quietly. “You’d better go. Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

When she arrived at the staff briefing, she poured a cup of coffee and then called the meeting to order. “Good morning, everyone. I’ve invited Captain Young and Commander Ral to join us today because we have a new assignment.

“After this briefing, Captain, I’d like you to set a course for Sirius IX.” When he nodded his confirmation, she continued. “As you may recall from our discussions earlier this week, Sirius is one of the planets that we’ve been concerned about. They dropped their Federation membership less than a year ago, and have suffered at least six terrorist attacks in the last sixteen months.”

Judy said, “Starfleet labeled them local insurgencies.”

“That’s correct,” Kathryn said. “We’re assuming that the insurgents are Sirians, but we can’t be certain. Sirius is the first of three planets that we’ll be visiting in the next couple of weeks, so I hope you don’t mind not returning to Earth right away.”

“Not when there’s work to do,” Harry said.

Kathryn agreed. “These are not pre-scheduled conferences, although I will make contact with the governmental authorities to let them know we’re coming.”

Harry asked, “Will the press be following us?”

“Admiral Khurma indicated that Starfleet won’t be issuing a press release, but we should plan for it just in case.”

Bernie said, “Sirius IX was a very active member of the Federation. Their council representative, Karnet, served on the Judiciary Council for many years.”

“Their withdrawal was highly publicized,” Judy noted. “Karnet was furious about the contract that they agreed to for titanium alloy. He was publicly scorned for going back on his word, and that’s when he convinced Sirius to cede from the Federation.”

Harry said, “Then he’s probably taken all of this personally.”

Bernie nodded. “Very much so. He lost his career and his homeworld was called ‘disloyal to the needs of the Federation.’ Because of the publicity behind it, the citizens of Sirius have become very hostile.”

“Towards Karnet?” Kathryn asked.

“No, towards the Federation and Starfleet.”

Ral said, “It appears that the insurgencies were made to look like attacks from off-worlders in an effort to prove that Starfleet wouldn’t come to their aid.”

Judy added, “Although they weren’t Federation members at the time of these insurgencies, the citizens still expected Starfleet to show up.”

Justin said, “It took a couple of days, but Starfleet eventually went at the request of another Councilman, a friend of Karnet’s. When the ‘fleet arrived, the local authorities had already proved that the explosion had not come from off-world. But by that time, the local press had blown the whole thing out of proportion.” He shrugged, “Pardon the pun.”

Kathryn glanced at Jarvin with slight amusement, but asked, “What do we know about the subsequent attacks?”

“More of the same, unfortunately,” Ral said. “But from what I’ve read, the forensic reports indicate that a variety of methods were used for the explosions, and it’s likely that there are numerous parties involved.”

Kathryn asked, “What is Karnet’s current status?”

Doyle said, “He’s still holding public office. Evidently, the citizens don’t blame him and have elected him as Chancellor.”

Harry asked, “What do we know about the terms of the contract? We’ve covered so many planets that I don’t recall the specifics about this one.”

Picking up a PADD, Ral scrolled through the data. “Our research reports that the exchange rate was three quarters of market value, and it was for forty kilotons of titanium alloy.”

Doyle whistled. “That’s a hell of a lot of titanium.”

“Yes, it is,” Kathryn quickly processed all the information. “Okay, in summary, we have a contract that was as unreasonable as it was inequitable; we have hostile citizens who despise us; and we have a leader with a personal grudge who is extremely knowledgeable about our government’s inadequacies.”

Harry tugged at his collar. “And we’re going here first, because?”

“It’s the closest,” Kathryn said. “Karnet is going to have in-depth knowledge of what happened on the Council when all these problems began. He’s a valuable source of information to get at the heart of what will placate those who are disgruntled.”

“Admiral,” Bernie leaned forward to look directly at Kathryn. “I’m extremely concerned about our safety going into this situation. I think it would be wise to talk to Karnet onboard rather than sending you down to the planet.”

“I appreciate your concern, but my goal is not just to get information from Karnet, it’s to let the people of Sirius see that we’ve come to them, to meet with several government officials, to listen to their concerns, and hopefully to earn their trust.”

Doyle said carefully, “I suggest sending a security team in advance to secure the transport site and meeting facility.”

“Agreed.” She could tell by the intense looks around the table that her normally relaxed team was on edge. “We all need to be on our toes for this next round of conferences. Jarvin and Doyle, I want you to work with Commander Moore to organize a comprehensive security detail for both Harry and me. Do what you can to anticipate any trouble. Judy and Sue, I want as much information about Karnet as you can drum up. Ral, would you consult with them?”

She nodded. “Of course, Admiral.”

Kathryn continued, “Captain Young, I’d appreciate any further insights that you have prior to our arrival.” She turned to the whole group. “It will take thirty hours to get to Sirius at warp six, so let’s use this time to our advantage. Dismissed.”

Bernie remained seated, giving Kathryn a clear signal that he wished to speak further. The action reminded her so much of Chakotay that she felt a sense of *déjà vu*. When the room was clear, she said, “Bernie, I know we’re heading into a dangerous situation.”

“Yes, we are. We’ll do our best, but this is a heated situation.”

“Don’t you think the citizens have had time to cool off in the last six months?”

“The insurgencies have lessened, yes, but the anger is still there, especially now that they’re cut off from the Federation. Sirius was dependent on off-world resources and is experiencing multiple economic dilemmas as a result. It’s as if we’ve placed an embargo on them to force them into surrender.”

“Which is exactly why we need to address this situation before it gets out of control.”

“It’s already out of control. They are extremely vulnerable right now, with no way to defend themselves. They no longer have the ability to fuel their spacecrafts, nor the facilities to build new ones.”

Kathryn clicked her tongue. “So you’re saying that they’re backed into a corner, ready to fight.”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

“Are they cut off from trade by their own choice or by our directives?”

“A little of both, most likely, but they probably blame the Federation. That’s something you can bring up in your discussions.”

“Well, I’m ready to fight for them. I’ll find a way to bring them back.” She stood up to indicate the conversation was over. There were things she needed to do.

Kathryn stepped onto the bridge of the Pioneer. Although she hadn’t been there often, she felt right at home. They were moving into the Sirius system and she felt the need to watch the planet come into view.

Bernie greeted her with a nod. “Admiral.”

She responded in kind and stood behind the Captain’s chair at an empty console where she could monitor sensor readings. There was nothing unusual on the monitor, nor were there any spacecraft in range. That in itself was odd when approaching a warp-capable planet. Sirius had become so dependent on Starfleet that they had technically lost their warp capabilities for the immediate future.

Ensign Igre at ops reported, “We’re receiving a transmission from the planet.”

Young turned to her and she nodded. He said, “On screen.”

Karnet appeared. “I’d like to say welcome to Sirius, Captain Young, but in all honesty, I can’t.”

“I understand, Chancellor,” Bernie replied.

As they were talking, Kathryn walked around and joined Bernie. “Chancellor Karnet, thank you for agreeing to meet with me.”

He shrugged. “I’m not sure it’s a good idea, but if you’re willing to listen, I’ll tell you what I know.”

“I’m more than willing to listen.”

“I need to warn you that the news regarding your arrival has leaked out,” Karnet said. “If you’re out for publicity on this visit, you’re going to get it.”

She raised her hands in a gesture of acceptance. “I would’ve rather kept this quiet, but we’re prepared for that situation.”

“All right,” he said, as if he didn’t believe her. “Do you still want to send down a security team in advance or do you want to make a grand entrance?”

Kathryn was annoyed that he believed she was only interested in talking to him for the publicity. “I’d like to send down a security team, if that’s acceptable to you?”

“Sure, but if you want to meet in the capitol building, which is secured against unwanted transports, you’re going to have to beam down outside of it. There’s quite a gathering waiting for your arrival. Contact me when you’re in range.” He cut the signal.

She pursed her lips. “Helpful, isn’t he?”

Commander Moore, the Pioneer’s security officer, pointed out, “He lacks respect for your rank, Admiral.”

“Yes,” she said absently and then turned to Moore. “He has no respect for Starfleet, and therefore my rank is of little consequence. My guess is that he’s dealt with more than his fair share of admirals.”

Bernie ordered Commander Moore to prepare his team for transport. “Leave your phasers holstered unless absolutely necessary. Do nothing to provoke the crowd.”

“Aye, Captain.”

Kathryn turned to Bernie. “You’re expecting a riot?”

“Just taking precautions, Admiral.”

“Let’s try to keep a positive outlook, shall we?”

Bernie looked like he wanted to disagree. “Of course, Admiral. I’d also like to make sure we leave this planet having made a good impression and with you in one piece.”

“My goal as well, Captain.” She turned to leave. “I’ll be waiting in my office.” As she left, she thought about how similar Bernie and Chakotay were. Both had tendencies towards being over-protective, but, at the moment, she was missing Chakotay’s composure in potentially volatile situations. He understood her motivations like no one else and let her do her job as long as she had backup.

It seemed that Bernie didn’t understand how a heated situation like this could be beneficial in the long run. The people here needed help, and although they might outwardly reject her, she believed that each one harbored a spark of hope for a better tomorrow. A journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step.

Harry was waiting for her in their offices, and he looked tense. “Admiral, is it time?”

“Not yet.” She gestured for him to sit with her in their briefing room. “Harry, sit and talk to me. I need you to relax.”

“Relax?” he guffawed. “I was just watching the news broadcasts. Our visit is all over the Federation, and the people down there aren’t welcoming us with open arms.”

“No,” she said calmly. “They aren’t, but I need you to keep in mind that we’re here to help them. We need to earn their trust, and we can’t do that if we go down there looking like we’re about to jump ship.”

He took a deep breath. “I suppose you’re right, but aren’t you a little scared?”

“Me? Scared?”

“You never get scared?”

She shrugged nonchalantly. “Sometimes, but in situations like this, I feel more determined than anything. If something happens, we’ll deal with it, just like we always do.”

“Okay,” he said with forced enthusiasm. He swiped his hand to the side as he said, “We’re just going to transport down there, walk inside the building, and start listening.”

“It’s as simple as that.”

Bernie’s voice came over the comm system saying, “Admiral Janeway, Commander Kim, please report to the transporter room.”

When they arrived at the transporter room, four security guards were waiting for them, including Doyle and Jarvin who were acting as their personal bodyguards. As they stepped up on the transporter pad, Kathryn noticed that they all had their hands on their phasers.

She said, “At ease, gentlemen. We’ll trust that the area is secure until we know otherwise. You’re armed, and that satisfies the General Order to protect me.”

They all nodded and reluctantly put their hands to their sides. However, all four of them instinctively closed ranks a bit tighter around her and Harry. Kathryn didn’t mind, if it made them feel better.

“Let’s do it.” She nodded at the transporter operator. “Energize.”

The deafening sound of thousands of voices greeted them on their arrival. Kathryn watched as her security guards tensed, but she was proud of them for not pulling weapons. She stepped forward and with an outstretched hand said, “Good morning, Chancellor Karnet.”

He accepted her handshake, but looked skeptical. “You are one brave woman.”

She raised an eyebrow, but didn't comment. "Shall we go inside?"

"You aren't going to make a statement?" He waved towards the reporters who were clamoring for her attention on the steps behind a line of security officers.

"I'm not here to talk to them, Chancellor. I'm here to talk to you." When he looked at her with disbelief, she added, "It's your planet. If you want them to know why I'm here, it's up to you to tell them."

"I have no idea why you're here, Admiral." He ushered her inside.

As she walked into the building, Kathryn took note of what the crowd was yelling. It was something about Starfleet, but she couldn't make it out, exactly. It wasn't too much of a stretch of the imagination to know that it was negative, which made her even more determined to affect positive change.

They were escorted into an elaborately decorated room that had a gorgeous marble floor and a high, domed, stained glass ceiling that was at least ten meters above their heads. The large, oval conference table had a beautiful, lustrous finish and would have easily accommodated twenty people. Kathryn commented, "This room is beautiful. What is its usual purpose?"

Karnet gave her a scowl as he answered her question without any further explanation of its history or meaning. "Cabinet meetings."

She looked around appreciatively despite his lack of enthusiasm, taking the opportunity to check her surroundings without appearing suspicious. She found all four exits and saw that each was guarded by both a Starfleet and a Sirian security officer. Commander Moore was among them.

"Will anyone else be joining us?" Kathryn asked, thinking it odd that they needed ten security officers for just Karnet, Harry, and herself.

"In a few minutes. I thought we'd be outside for awhile, yet."

"I see." She found his diplomatic skills severely lacking, but she knew that he didn't want her there. "Where would you like us to sit?"

"Wherever you want." He motioned towards the table and then said, "I'll be right back."

After he and the security guards left the room, Kathryn glanced at Harry. "What do you make of this?"

"They don't want us here," he whispered.

Doyle spoke discretely. "Admiral, it's unsettling that they left us in here alone."

“Yes,” she looked up at the ceiling. “I noticed that, too. Let’s go check out the artwork on the walls.” If something were to happen, she wanted to be near an exit or near a supporting wall of the building. Although she might be brave, she wasn’t stupid.

Harry played the part by saying, “I think this is my favorite piece, Admiral. It looks like a representation of the seasons.”

The four of them conferred on the painting at length before Karnet and his security returned with six other men who all looked at her suspiciously as they took seats around the table. It was obvious that they had specific chairs that they wished to sit in, so she and Harry took two of the seats that remained.

“Good morning, gentlemen. I'm Kathryn Janeway.” She noticed that she was the only female amongst all eighteen men in the room. One might think those were bad odds, but she believed it to be an advantage.

After they made their introductions, Kathryn realized that there were four main participants in the conversation; everyone else was someone’s aide.

Karnet asked, “Admiral, you indicated that you want to hear our concerns. Where would you like us to begin?”

“At the beginning, please. You were asked by whom, specifically, to provide tritanium alloy to the Federation at a price that was below market value?”

They all looked at each other and one of them said. “Interesting place to begin, Admiral. Is that why you’re here? To follow up on that contract?”

“Absolutely not.” She made eye contact with each and said, “I'm here to find out what went wrong and why. Your planet was a vital, thriving member of the Federation until this contract was signed, or so I've been led to believe. If the tensions preceded the contract, please tell me.”

“There was the war, of course,” another said. “That created plenty of tension on the Federation Council. Since you weren’t here, you wouldn’t know that.”

She nodded. “Tell me about it.”

They talked about the war for a short time, which led to a discussion of the attacks against Earth and Betazed and the draining of the Federation’s resources. All of them had theories about ways the war could have been better managed, but Kathryn didn’t feel the need to debate it with them because that wasn’t relevant to the problem at hand.

Conversation was flowing easily when they got around to discussing the contract, but Karnet remained silent unless there was a correction to be made. She learned who had instigated the contract – a special ad-hoc committee appointed by the President and consisting of his most

trusted advisors. None of them was an elected member of the Federation council, a fact that raised alarm bells for Kathryn.

Kathryn asked, “What was that final determining factor of your decision to withdraw your Federation membership?”

Karnet finally spoke up. “Our citizens demanded it. They were furious with Starfleet and the Federation. There were riots in the streets, protests on the front lawn of this building, and letters and calls pouring in from all over our world. We tried to convince them that it was a mistake, but they wouldn’t hear of it.”

“It wasn’t what you would have chosen?” she asked the gathered group with surprise.

“No, Admiral. We know how much our economy and well-being depended on other worlds, but the people wanted us to become independent again.”

“And does that determination still exist? Are they willing to put forth the effort to manufacture the products you need? Are they willing to negotiate for and purchase technology using resources available to you on this planet?”

Karnet said, “I find it very unusual for you to suggest that, Admiral.”

“Why’s that?” she asked.

“No one from outside our world has ever suggested that as an option. All we’ve heard is warnings that we’d rue the day we left because we couldn’t possibly survive on our own.”

“That’s unfortunate.” She frowned. “Then the question is, as I see it, whether you can survive on your own.”

None of them answered. They were either looking at the table, each other, or playing with the PADDs that were in front of them.

Kathryn looked beyond those at the table to the Sirian security officers. All four of them were looking hopefully at her, and she bit back a smile. There it was, the spark of hope she’d been looking for. “Gentlemen, I think we’ve just found our starting place.”

Karnet crossed his arms and studied her. “And how do you propose that we go from here? Keep in mind, Admiral, that the mob outside shouting insults at you mirrors the opinions of all four billion citizens of Sirius.”

“Can’t be done,” one of them said.

Another said, “Maybe...,” but stopped when they all heard breaking glass above them.

Doyle shouted, "UNDER THE TABLE! NOW!" He grabbed Kathryn and pushed her forcefully to the floor. Urgently, he rolled her underneath the table and covered her with his body, his arms folded over her head to protect her from the explosion.

Chakotay sat in Sekaya's living room, half watching the Fednews broadcast and half working on his lesson plans. The fact that Kathryn had gone to Sirius IX that day was all over the news. When he'd first seen the mob that awaited her arrival, he was sure that her plans would be aborted. No one in her right mind would have beamed down in the middle of all that. But then, as she materialized, he realized that his best friend and lover was not in her right mind.

At first, he was terrified for her safety, but that quickly changed as he became angry at her for putting herself in such a dangerous situation. There was not a single doubt in his mind that her actions were of her own choosing.

He'd watched her intently and had seen that she'd carried a look of composed resolve. In the midst of all the yelling and shouting of the crowd, she'd been completely relaxed. He'd seen that before. It was her game face, and he knew it meant trouble. She was prepared for a confrontation. He hadn't been able to tell what she said to the Chancellor, but it had been short and to the point. They'd gone inside and there had been no news in the two hours since.

He had listened to two hours of endless debate about why she was there, discussion of all the problems that Sirius IX faced, and speculations about whether there was any way they could overcome them. It was tiresome to listen to, but he didn't want to turn off the news for fear that he'd miss her exit. He had to know when she was safe again.

To keep his mind occupied and control his anger at her careless disregard of her own well-being, he was outlining his syllabus, trying to recall how he set up the class schedule when he'd taught it ten years previous. His attention was drawn to a sudden, complete silence on the broadcast, and he looked up just in time to see a reporter stare bravely into the camera in the midst of dust and floating debris.

She reported, "An explosion has just rocked the Sirius Capitol Building."

Chakotay's heart fell. He dropped his PADD and stared in disbelief at the screen. The reporter indicated that the camera was fixed on the building, but with all the dust in the air, he couldn't tell if it was still standing. A cold dread filled his chest.

Sekaya walked into the room, "You're still watching the Fednews, brother?"

He leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees, not taking his eyes off the screen. He swallowed hard in order to say, "Kathryn was in there."

"What's happened?" She watched for a moment and then gasped. "No! Are you sure?" She sat down and held his arm. He absently squeezed her hand, but didn't reply.

The reporter said, "What we do know is that the capitol building is still standing. It looks like the explosion originated inside the building, coming through the domed glass ceiling. No news yet on whether those in the building are still alive. As you know, today..."

Chakotay closed his eyes and bowed his head. This couldn't be happening. Not now. Not to her. He prayed for her life. For Harry's life. For Scott and Justin, too. They were all in there. He prayed that they weren't dead or in pain.

The reporter said, "A Starfleet rescue team has just arrived on the scene."

Chakotay looked up. Ignoring the reporter's words, he watched what the Starfleet personnel were doing. They were scanning the building, and he wished he was there helping them. He wished that more than anything.

Sekaya said, "They'll rescue her. I know they will."

The rescue team moved inside and Chakotay said, "That's a good sign."

"Why?"

"It means the building is sound and there are life signs in there. They wouldn't go in otherwise." His heart was beating heavily and he could barely breathe. All he could do was wait.

Kathryn couldn't breathe. Scott Doyle was on top of her, his arms pinning her head down. He had pushed her with such force that her face and hand had smashed against the floor. White, hot splinters of pain shot through her arm and head.

She'd known when the explosion hit because the shockwave moved through her like a force of nature. It had been accompanied by the sound of glass shattering, plaster ripping apart, and metal giving way under enormous pressure. Moments later, she'd become aware of the debris that was falling around their table.

Once it was quiet again, she tried to lift her head, but Doyle wouldn't let her. She groaned, "Scott."

He urgently whispered, "Stay down, Admiral." He adjusted his hold to relieve some of the pressure on her head and body, but he kept her covered.

Kathryn turned her head so that the injured side of her face wasn't against the floor. Unable to see because of his arms, she asked, "Did everyone make it?"

"No one's moving. Shhh."

She knew that he was worried about a second attack. A low-impact bomb like this could easily be followed by an assault force rushing into the building. She felt him pull his phaser out of its holster and heard him power it on. They remained completely still for several minutes, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

When he felt that they'd waited long enough, he slid off of her. She lifted her head and touched her face with her uninjured hand. Her fingertips came away covered with blood.

"You're hurt," Scott said. He helped her roll over so he could take a look.

"Not severely." She winced as he touched each side of the wound on her forehead.

"It's a pretty big bruise, and it's swelling up. Sorry about that." He touched his commbadge. "Doyle to Pioneer. Do you read me?" There was no response.

"Did security test the commbadges before we arrived?" she asked as she pushed herself up. The dizziness threatened to overwhelm her, but she kept it in check.

"I don't know, ma'am." He took his badge off to see if it was damaged.

She tried her own badge without any luck, so she took his. "I'll try amplifying the signal. Check on Justin and Harry."

While she worked, he went around to everyone who was nearby. Luckily, all of them had made it under the table, but only Kathryn and Scott had gotten to the center.

He came back to her. "Everyone's alive. Some are bleeding heavily from shrapnel, including Kim."

"Try it now," she handed the badge back to him, and scooted over to check on Harry. Her injured wrist made it difficult to maneuver along the floor.

"Doyle to Pioneer. Do you read me?"

"Lieutenant!" Bernie's voice answered immediately. "A rescue team is on its way. What's your status?"

"We've got eleven people under a large table in the conference room. Janeway and I are the only ones who are conscious. She has a head injury and several people are in need of immediate medical attention."

"How many of our people aren't accounted for?"

"Four security officers, including Moore. I don't know if they made it out of the room. With all the dust and debris in here, I can't tell."

Bernie replied, “Transporters still won’t break through their security barrier. We’ll have to get everyone out of the building before we can bring them up. Admiral, can you hear me?”

“Yes, Captain.” She was applying pressure to a gash in Harry’s leg as best she could.

“How severe is your injury?”

“It’s manageable. How close is that rescue team?”

“They’ve just transported down. Let’s keep this signal active until they get there. Is there any reason to suspect that this was an intentional act of war?”

“Not that I’m aware of, Captain. No one at the table harbored hatred towards Starfleet.”

“Understood. We’ll treat this as another insurgency.”

“Agreed.”

“Admiral, get out of there as soon as you can.” His voice sounded worried.

“Severe trauma patients first, Captain. But I’ll make sure my back is covered.”

“Just so you know, this incident is being broadcast live across the Federation.”

She took a steadying breath. “Understood.” That meant the people she loved were probably worrying themselves into a frenzy, but she couldn’t think about that right now. Harry was starting to come around. “Harry?” She patted his cheek. “Are you with me?”

His eyes fluttered open, and his first instinct was to call her by her former rank. “Captain?”

“You’re injured. Don’t try to move your right leg.”

Sucking air between his teeth, he said, “Damn, that hurts.”

She felt along his abdomen. “Any pain here?”

“No,” he grunted. Forcing his eyes open to look at her, he said, “You’re hurt, too.”

“Just a bump. Will you be okay for a minute? I need to check on the others.”

He closed his eyes against the pain. “Mmmhmm.”

While listening to Bernie and Scott discuss the rescue team’s movements into the building, Kathryn moved over to Karnet. He was starting to wake up. “Try not to move, Chancellor.”

“Was that a bomb?”

“Yes, I think it was. I’m guessing a weak one, though.” She saw that he, too, was bleeding heavily from a deep gash across the inside of his forearm. “Lieutenant, I need your help.”

Doyle came over. “What with?”

She opened her jacket and said, “We need to tear off a strip of fabric to use as a tourniquet, but my wrist is injured and I can’t do it.”

“Hold on.” He stopped her from tearing her shirt and turned around to grab something off the floor. “I already had to tear mine apart for Justin.”

Karnet asked, “Tearing your clothes off for me, Admiral?”

As Doyle tied the strip beneath Karnet’s elbow, Kathryn answered, “Glad to see you have a sense of humor under all that surliness.”

He winced as the fabric was tightened. “Yeah, well, I was annoyed.”

“Obviously.” She nodded to Doyle when he was finished to indicate that’s all she needed. “Are you in pain anywhere?”

“No. Help me sit up?”

She wasn’t sure that was a good idea, but if the situation were reversed, she knew she’d want to have a look around, so she used her good arm to give him leverage. The exertion made her head spin, and they both ended up resting against the table legs.

He said miserably, “This is a fine mess.”

“Got any ideas who might have done it?”

“A few.” Looking around, he said, “Are they dead?”

“Just unconscious.”

A voice from outside the room yelled, “Admiral!”

“In here,” she said weakly, the pressure in her head too painful to manage a loud yell. Doyle took over and helped the rescue team find them.

While the team was clearing a path through the heavy debris, Karnet said, “I’m really sorry about this.”

Kathryn crooked a half-hearted smile. “I am, too. This was a really nice room.”

He huffed a laugh. “That’s the least of my worries.”

One of the Pioneer’s security officers knelt in front of her. “Admiral, let’s get you out of here.”

She couldn’t remember his name. “No,” she waved towards the others. “They need medical attention more than I do. Kim, especially.”

“I’m under orders, Admiral. You first.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You really don’t want to argue with me right now, Ensign.”

“Aye, Admiral.” He hesitantly moved over to pull Harry out.

Karnet said, “He’s right. You need to get out of here.”

Kathryn rolled her eyes. “Don’t you start, too.”

“You’re not like any admiral I’ve ever met.”

“Good. I guess you’ve had some bad experiences with a few?”

“That’s putting it mildly. Hayes, Wilson, Nechayev. Do I need to say more?”

“I’ve got the picture. They’ve crossed my path a couple times, too.”

As he watched a second medical team come in and start pulling his cabinet members out on stretchers, he sighed deeply. “I am so tired of this.”

She heard the despair in his voice and knew it was an opening. “Let me help you.”

“Can you?” He looked at her. “That’s a serious question. Do you have any clout whatsoever?”

“All that publicity you think I’m after? It’s a very powerful tool, and I’ve got a hell of a lot of people standing behind me.”

He looked her in the eye as he considered what she’d said. With a shrug of acceptance, he said, “Go back to your ship, Admiral. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

“You’ll be okay?”

“Eventually.” He gestured towards the cleared path. “Go. Let the quadrant see that you’re okay. I’m sure they’re concerned about their favorite celebrity.”

Chakotay was thankful that the reporters kept a camera on the Sirian capitol building so he could watch as the team brought each injured person out on a stretcher. He'd turned the sound off, not wanting to hear any more of what the reporters had to say.

Sekaya said, "There's another. Do you recognize any of them?"

"The first was Harry Kim. The others, I can't tell. None of them look small enough to be her, though."

She rubbed his back to offer comfort. "At least none of them has come out with blankets over them."

He nodded slowly, but he also knew that they'd take the bodies last. His eyes were getting dry from staring so hard at the screen, so he had to take a break to close them.

"There!" Sekaya shouted.

Chakotay popped his eyes back open and blew out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. "Kathryn," he said with relief. She was walking out, no stretcher needed, and Scott Doyle was right there with her.

"She's okay, brother."

He moved closer to the screen to try to get a better look at her, but as soon as he did, the camera zoomed in. She was holding a compress against her forehead, but her expression showed no pain and no alarm. She was a skilled actress, and although he could usually read past that, he saw nothing to indicate she was in trouble. Her eyes were sharp and clear as if this incident hadn't affected her in the slightest.

She moved to stand in front of a cluster of microphones that were thrust towards her. She dropped the compress to reveal a large bruise on her temple. Seeing the injury made Chakotay flinch and touch his own head. He turned the volume back up so they could hear her.

"Admiral Janeway, can you tell us what happened?"

She was short and to the point. "An explosive device came through the domed glass ceiling."

"Do you have any idea who did it?"

"No, I don't." She tugged on her earlobe.

Chakotay saw her signal for him and he whispered to the screen, "You're okay."

A reporter asked, "Are there any deaths?"

Kathryn said, "I only know the status of the people who were with me, and all were alive when we checked them before the rescue teams arrived."

Another asked, "How did you manage to survive the explosion?"

She turned to Doyle and reached across with her good arm to lay it on his shoulder. She answered, "Thanks to some very quick thinking on the part of Lieutenant Scott Doyle."

Chakotay noticed the move and told Sekaya, "Her arm is hurt."

Sekaya replied, "She did just survive an explosion."

A reporter asked, "Were you with Chancellor Karnet at the time of the explosion?"

"Yes, I was. He should be out soon."

"Admiral, can you tell us anything about your conversation with the Chancellor?"

"Not today. Let's focus on getting the injured to safety, and then we can discuss politics at a later time. If you'll excuse me." She bowed out gracefully and let Doyle call for transport.

Chakotay breathed a sigh of relief and rubbed his tired eyes.

Sekaya turned off the viewscreen. "Why don't you go lie down?"

He smiled weakly. "Thank you, that's a good idea." He rose from the couch and stretched his tired muscles. When he got to the bedroom he had shared with Kathryn, he flopped down tiredly and hugged her pillow, just as he had every night since she'd left. It was silly, he knew, but comforting.

Tears pricked at his eyes, and he shivered with goose bumps as the gravity of what had happened began to sink in. She mentioned that Doyle had saved her life. Chakotay owed Scott an immense debt of gratitude.

He had just dozed off when Sekaya stuck her head in the door. "Chakotay? Kathryn's on the comm."

He jumped up. "So soon?"

"She hasn't been treated yet."

"What?" He ran into the next room and sat at the desk to see her waiting for him; her head was bowed and she was holding the compress against her injury. "Kathryn?"

She lifted her eyes and smiled tiredly. "Hi, I just wanted to let you know that I'm okay."

“I saw. Oh, Kathryn.” Those hot tears were pricking at his eyes again.

“I didn’t know if you’d be watching.”

“I always am,” he said as he touched the screen. “Why aren’t you in sickbay?”

“I am, but we’ve only got one doctor and two nurses, and others are more critical. I’m using Dr. Murphy’s office to call you.”

Chakotay folded his fingers together and rested them against his chin. “Kathryn…”

“I know,” she said quietly. “This could have…”

“Yes, it could have.” He furrowed his eyebrows. “I’m still reeling from worrying that I’d lost you, but even before the explosion, I was more concerned about that mob than about any potential terrorist activities.”

“If the Starfleet uniform were going to incite riot, we would’ve known when the advance team went down.” She took the compress away from her head and set it down. “I think the ice is making it worse.”

“Looks pretty bad. What hit you?”

“The floor. Doyle was pushing me under the table before I knew what was happening.”

“Scott did that?”

“Against a marble floor, yes.”

He cringed. “Well, I’m still grateful to him, even if he did hurt you in the process.”

“So am I. Grateful for him and Commander Moore, both. Moore phasered the bomb in mid-air so it didn’t detonate on the table we were under.”

Feeling nauseated, Chakotay said, “My God, Kathryn.”

She looked at him with intensity. “I really think I made a difference today.”

“I sure as hell hope so,” he said with reproach. “Although I can’t imagine what would’ve been worth this amount of risk. Couldn’t you have had that meeting on the ship?”

Frowning, she said, “It made a huge difference for me to go down there and show the people that Starfleet wasn’t scared of them. I won’t let a few insurgents control the situation with intimidation tactics.”

“That mob was not a few insurgents.”

“I realize that, but by the time I left there, the crowd was listening to me instead of yelling at me. That’s a significant and very dynamic change.”

“They were scared. Of course they were listening.”

“I know, but we’ll have a much better chance of softening their hearts if they’re afraid and willing to accept help than if they’re angry. It’s the people on this planet that wanted to cede from the Federation, not the government. I got through to the Chancellor today, and it took that explosion to do it. He asked for my help.”

“You’re suggesting that the bomb was the catalyst for change that you needed?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I’m saying. It had the complete opposite affect that the insurgents wanted, and we couldn’t have planned it better if we’d tried. You know as well as I do that miracles can happen in heated situations like this, when everything is on the line.”

“Everything? Including your life?” He couldn’t believe she was willing to risk it all for one planet, or if she just thought she was indestructible.

Someone caught her attention. “A nurse is waiting. I’ll call you tonight?”

“Go do what you need to do.” He wasn’t sure he’d be in the best frame of mind in a few hours.

“I love you, Chakotay.”

“Get some rest.”

“I will,” she gave him an odd look as she ended the transmission.

Chakotay felt the need to get out of the house and take a walk. He didn’t know whether to be angry or relieved. There were so many emotions and thoughts going through his mind that he couldn’t make heads or tails of how he felt.

He was angry at Kathryn for putting herself in the situation, angry with her staff and the Pioneer crew for letting her go, angry with the people who hurt her, and angry with the President for letting this whole mess happen in the first place. At the same time, he was relieved that she was okay and thankful for everyone who watched out for her. Losing her would be devastating.

That night, as he lay in bed, he relegated ‘her’ pillow to the chair beside the bed. He’d finally come to the conclusion that he was mostly angry with Kathryn, and it was clear by her recklessness that her ego needed to be taken down a notch. Staring harshly at the pillow, he hoped it would absorb some of his anger so he’d be cool when he talked to her the next day. She’d called again that evening, but he’d been out walking and decided not to call her back. She needed to rest and he was in no mood to talk civilly to her.

At some point, he fell asleep, but woke up later feeling bereft. He reluctantly reclaimed the pillow and curled up around it. No matter how angry he was, he still loved her and still needed her. He just wished that she could open her heart up enough to realize how deeply he felt, so she would act with a little more caution.

Kathryn hadn't slept well and woke up early. She wanted to talk to Chakotay, but knew that it was too early on Banora Colony to call. She showered and dressed in everything except her coat. Her wrist was still tender, and she had a slight headache, but otherwise, she'd recovered from her previous day's injuries.

Admiral Khurma had called her the night before and told her no uncertain terms that he disapproved of her actions. His words stung, but she felt strong enough to take it and hoped that he was reacting more in fear than in disapproval.

She took the time to make notes and write her report from the conference and incident on Sirius. Her meetings weren't scheduled to begin until eleven, and the first one was a short briefing with Sue so that she could take Harry's place for the day. He didn't want the time off, but she'd insisted.

While she worked, her thoughts drifted too often to Chakotay. He hadn't returned her call the night before, and she didn't know what to make of it. He was usually so eager to talk to her that he wouldn't miss the opportunity.

At ten, she decided to make the call. Coffee in hand, she initiated the connection.

He answered, saying, "I was expecting your call an hour ago."

"I didn't want to wake you," she smiled apologetically.

"I was up."

"Did Sekaya tell you I called last night?"

"Yes, I was out walking. Needed some fresh air after sitting in here watching the news most of the day. I didn't want to wake you when I got back."

She nodded. "I bet you were hoping I'd be asleep."

"Were you?"

"No, I really didn't sleep well all night. Too many things on my mind."

"Such as?"

“For one, I wanted to talk to you because I needed a friend. Khurma gave me a rather brutal dressing down.” She frowned. “It’s been awhile since I’ve been through something like that.”

“You got one during debriefings, didn’t you?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Thanks for reminding me.”

“What did he say?”

“What I should’ve expected, I guess.” She pressed her palm against her forehead where it ached from the bruise. “I’m afraid that he’s lost some confidence in me because I couldn’t get him to understand my motivations yesterday, so I was awake for awhile trying to figure out how to make myself clear. I went through quite a few message drafts before I gave up and tried to sleep. Then, I kept thinking through the conversation I had with the Sirian Cabinet, trying to formulate a game-plan for how we should proceed.” She sipped her coffee. “We’re meeting at noon and my goal is to work through a tangible plan.”

“You’re going back?” he asked with disbelief.

She raised an eyebrow. “You thought I’d run away with my tail between my legs?”

“I’d hoped that you’d have a modicum of sanity.”

Doing a double take, she asked, “What did you say?”

“You heard me. Are you insane? You can’t go back down to the planet! People are trying to kill you or haven’t you noticed?”

“I’m not stupid!” She jutted out her chin and blinked slowly. “And I don’t appreciate your tone.”

“My tone?” He said angrily. “When you tried to murder Lessing, you admitted it was a mistake, but I think the fact is that you’ll do anything when you’re out for blood. It’s not Ransom this time, its Zife, and instead of Lessing, you’re going to kill yourself and every officer you take with you.”

“That’s uncalled for!”

“Well, someone has to make you face facts. If not me, who’s going to stop you this time?”

She pushed back from the desk and turned away, reeling from his bitter words. Her eyes were burning, but she would not submit to tears.

Softer, he said, “Kathryn, you are not invincible.”

Still not looking at him, she said, “This is not up for debate. I have a job to do and there are risks involved.”

“What happened to including me on the decisions that will affect our life?”

She glared at him. “This has nothing to do with us. This is about billions of people who are hurting, and it’s about setting an example for the rest of the damn quadrant!”

“You’re turning this into a personal vendetta, assuming that only you can single-handedly save the future of the entire Federation. Let me make myself clear, Kathryn, you are only the messenger. You don’t have to do this alone, nor do you have to lay your life on the line every single time.”

“I’m not trying to,” she yelled. “I’m trying to show these people that they haven’t been forgotten and that the Federation cares about them.” She pounded her finger on the desk as she said, “But it starts here. It starts with me. If this is going to work, everyone has to follow my lead. That’s not going to happen if I let a handful of terrorists control the situation. The fact that they are after me proves that I’m making a difference.”

He raised his voice in response. “Terrorists who haven’t been caught and who would’ve killed you yesterday if not for the quick thinking of a few men. Men who, by the way, wouldn’t even be there if I hadn’t asked them to keep an eye on you.”

“Excuse me? You think Doyle and Jarvin are working for me because of you? Do you think you can control me that much or are you just that self-centered?”

“Ohhhhh, Kathryn. Don’t even go there. You don’t want to know what I have to say right now about your ego.”

“Why don’t you enlighten me, Captain?”

“You’re pulling rank?” he asked, fuming. “What are you going to do? Write me up for insubordination?”

“Don’t tempt me.”

“That’s low, Kathryn. That’s really low.”

She opened her hands. “I’m waiting. What about my ego?”

He shook his head, refusing to say anything.

“You’re in way over your head, Chakotay. You’ve made it quite clear what you think of me, and if you think you can fix this by merely refusing to tell me that I have an ego the size of planet Earth, you are sadly mistaken.”

Chakotay narrowed his eyes. “Do I need to remind you that your older self sacrificed everything for her career, and she was left bitter and alone in her old age?”

She shook her head. “Don’t. You have no idea what you’re talking about because you have no clue what she suffered through.”

“She risked everything to give you a better life and you’re throwing it away.”

“Throwing it away?!” she yelled. “You think I want to sacrifice my dreams of having a family and a quiet life on Earth to be out here doing this? I don’t, Chakotay. I’m doing this because I have to. I’m doing this because I’m the only one who can.”

“Are you willing to die for it?”

“If that’s what I have to do, then yes, that’s exactly what I’m going to do.”

“Kathryn, the Federation can find itself another hero, but the people who love you can’t find another you.”

“No, Chakotay. I AM the hero, and you’ve made it perfectly clear that you can no longer speak for the people who love me. And just so you know, I had no intentions of going down to Sirius again, but...” she said with a shrug, “you didn’t even give me the benefit of the doubt before you called me insane, bloodthirsty, and homicidal.”

“If not there on Sirius, you’d risk your life somewhere else. And you’re mistaken. I’ve said all of this because I care about you, and I want to keep you alive.”

“Odd way to show you care – by refusing to support me and kicking me when I’m down.”

“Goodbye, Kathryn. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.” His eyes were intense as he closed the connection.

“Like hell you will.” As she stared at the dark screen with the Federation logo, she held her hand against her mouth, trying hard not to cry, but the tears would not be impeded as her heart shattered into a million pieces. An overwhelming grief settled over her, making her feel like she was suffocating as she tried to draw air into her aching chest.

Late the next evening, Kathryn was reading through some data in her quarters when her comm unit signaled an incoming call. Still sitting in her favorite chair, she asked, “Computer, identify the caller.”

“Captain Chakotay,” was the computer’s response.

She clicked her tongue. “Then he can leave a message.”

“Please restate the question,” the computer asked.

“Disregard.”

Twenty minutes later, she couldn't concentrate because she wanted to know what he'd said. She went over to the computer interface and played the message.

His image appeared. “I'm about to turn in and wanted to hear about your day. I suppose you're probably at a reception or something tonight.” He looked down and then back at the screen. “I want to apologize for saying things last night that I shouldn't have, and for jumping to conclusions. We could've had a much more reasonable discussion if I would've let you talk through your plans first. So, if I don't talk to you tonight, I'll see you on the Fednews tomorrow. I received Sue's notice that you have a press conference scheduled. Good night, Kathryn.”

After the transmission ended, she stared blankly at nothing in particular, feeling completely numb. After a few minutes, she snapped out of it, and anger surfaced. Glaring at his now-still image, she asked, “Jumping to conclusions? Not keeping your mouth shut? That's what you're apologizing for? Not for discrediting every kind word you've ever said to me?” She angrily pushed the tears off her cheeks and then typed a two-word text message back to him. “Message Received.”

She was extremely grateful that she'd never opened her heart to him on Voyager, because if he'd attacked her like this out there, she didn't think she would've been able to continue working with him.

“Admiral?” Harry asked after the end-of-conference staff briefing.

“Yes?” she asked distractedly.

“May I speak with you for a moment?”

“Of course.” She sat back down and gave him her attention. “You have something else to add?”

“No, I think we covered everything.” Not meeting her eyes, he said, “If I've done something wrong, I would like to know what it is so that I can apologize and make amends.”

She closed her eyes briefly and softened her posture. “You haven't done a thing wrong, and you've been an outstanding support since the day you asked for this job. I probably don't say this enough, but you continually exceed my expectations and I'm delighted that you're still working with me.”

Looking directly at her, he said, “Thank you, Admiral. I appreciate the compliments but I can tell that you’re upset about something. Was it the bombing or did something happen down there that I don’t know about? Are you upset with someone else?”

“No, Harry,” she said with a sigh. “I’m the one who owes you an apology if my disposition has led you to believe that I’m anything but thrilled with the work you’re doing. All of you.”

“Your disposition?”

She waved away his concern and stood up. “Thank you for reminding me that I need to leave my personal problems at the door.”

“Admiral?” He stood up with her. “Do you want to talk about it? I’ve got a pretty good ear.”

Quietly, she said, “No, but thank you for offering.”

“Are you sure? I consider us more than just co-workers. I consider us friends, and you look like you could really use one.”

She swallowed past the lump in her throat. A friend is exactly what she needed, but her one true friend had shown her that he was anything but. “Thank you, Harry.” She touched his arm. “That means a lot to me, but I’ll be fine. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

As she walked back to her quarters, she chastised herself for letting her bad mood show. It was unprofessional and certainly not befitting of an admiral.

When she was alone, she risked checking her messages and saw that there were two from Chakotay. She hadn’t spoken to him for four days, and he still hadn’t taken the hint that she wasn’t interested in returning his call. His messages had been very brief and relatively harmless, so she decided it wouldn’t hurt her to listen to them.

The first one said, “Good morning, Kathryn. I don’t know if you received my message last night, so I wanted to make sure you knew that I’m leaving Banora Colony today and will be out of communication for a few days. Perhaps when I’m able to use a comm again, you’ll have cooled off enough that you’re willing to talk to me. I hope you’re well.”

“Not likely,” she muttered as she played the next one.

“I’m on the transport vessel now and was surprised to learn that I do have access to a comm station. It’s not secure, but I’m here if you want to talk.”

“And I was looking forward to a few days’ reprieve.” She rolled her eyes and shut down the terminal.

Several days later, she was sitting alone in her quarters staring out the viewport when her chime rang. “Computer, identify visitor.”

“Captain Young.”

She took a deep breath and straightened her shoulders. “Come.”

“Am I interrupting anything?”

“Not a thing. Have a seat.” When he settled across from her, she asked, “Can I get you a drink?”

“No thanks, I'm fine.”

“What can I do for you?”

“I just wanted to check in because we haven't spoken in a few days. Are you happy with the way things resolved on Sirius?”

She wove her fingers together. “Happy is not quite the word I'd use, but I'm content to let things settle there for awhile. I suspect that until there's a significant change in Federation leadership, we won't see the fruit of our labor.”

Nodding slowly, he said, “I agree, although I must congratulate you on turning Karnet around so quickly. The change in him is remarkable.”

“Thank you, but I think he'd hit rock bottom and the timing was right for him to accept aid.”

“Regardless, getting the Council and the Sirian Cabinet to both agree to change the planet's status to protectorate is extraordinary.”

She smiled half-heartedly. “I appreciate the encouragement.”

After a short pause, he asked, “Are you okay, Kathryn?”

“Why do you ask?” She tried not to sound defensive.

He leaned forward in his chair and clasped his hands. “I mean from your injuries. Any residual pain or concerns?”

“I'm fine. They were pretty minor.”

“I know you're not part of my crew, but you're on my ship, and I like to make sure that anyone who has been injured is getting the care that they need.”

“Your medical staff is young, but they are competent.”

“Glad to hear it. Since we’re merely a diplomatic vessel, we act as a training ground for recent medical school graduates who’ve shown potential.” He looked at her nervously. “Anyway, I’m rambling. I’m really here because I want to apologize for questioning your orders on the bridge. I should’ve asked to speak with you privately, and I don’t want my error in judgment to negatively affect our working relationship.”

She furrowed her eyebrows. “From what I recall, we did discuss it privately after our first briefing regarding Sirius.”

“Yes, we did.”

“Your comments on the bridge weren’t as positive as I would’ve liked, but you didn’t say anything that warrants concern.”

“Okay,” he relaxed. “I just wanted to clear the air in case there was a problem. I want you to know that you can talk to me about anything.”

She crooked a small smile. “I appreciate that, Bernie. Thank you.”

As he got up he said, “While Chakotay was onboard, he told me that you’d be straightforward if I did anything that caused a problem for you. I should’ve taken his advice. Goodnight, Kathryn.”

“Goodnight,” she said absently as he left. Sighing deeply, she laid her head on the back of the chair and stared at the ceiling. Once again, she’d let her disposition affect her working relationships, but the truth was that she just didn’t care at the moment.

She thought about reading a report or maybe picking up a novel, but neither interested her. It was too early to go to bed and she wasn’t tired. These periods of inactivity between conferences were uninteresting at best.

She thought about what Bernie had said as he left – that Chakotay had told him she was straightforward when something was bothering her. While that was true when it came to fellow officers, she was exactly the opposite when it came to personal relationships. There’d been times in her relationship with Mark when she hadn’t talked to him for weeks because she’d been angry.

The comm signaled an incoming call and she groaned. “All right, time to be straightforward so he’ll stop calling.”

It had been a week since their argument and she felt that she could calmly deal with him. She braced herself and hit the receive button.

“Kathryn! I wasn’t expecting you to answer.”

“You caught me in a rare moment,” she said flatly.

“How are you?”

She shrugged. “Fine.”

“Good, glad to hear it. I’m back on Earth now, just wanted to let you know.”

“Thanks for keeping me updated. Now that you’re settled, there shouldn’t be a reason for you to keep leaving messages.”

He frowned. “I’ve been leaving messages so that we could try to work this out, but we can’t do that if you’re unwilling to talk.”

“I have nothing to say to you, Chakotay.”

Raising his eyebrows, he said, “That smoke coming out of your ears tells me otherwise.”

“What do you want me to say?”

He looked away and then back. “I want you to say that you’re ready to put our argument behind us.”

Shaking her head, she said, “I’m not, and I don’t know that I’ll ever be.”

“You’ve got to meet me halfway, Kathryn.”

“No, I don’t. We’re not on Voyager anymore and I have no motivation to be cordial.”

“No motivation? Don’t you have any feelings for me?”

“Yes, but I’m trying to get over them.”

“All right. Message received, Kathryn. You’re still angry, and I can live with that. I’ll even give you the space you want, for now. Good night.” He ended the transmission.

She ran her fingers furiously through her hair and then picked up a picture of them and threw it against the wall.

Part 11 - “A Lost Spark”

By Dawn

Rated NC-17

Summary: Kathryn dealing with the ramifications of their argument

Kathryn felt adrift as she stared out her office window at the rebuilt Golden Gate Bridge. The Pioneer had arrived in orbit only an hour before, and she had a press conference scheduled for eleven. It was a little after ten on a Monday morning, and Sue had just informed her that Chakotay had an appointment to see her. She wanted to cancel it, but she didn't have the energy to explain why. Besides, Sue was bubbling with happiness about getting the two of them a few minutes together.

It had been three weeks since their horrible fight, and two weeks since she'd heard from him. He'd been right. She'd needed time and space to cool down, but once her anger faded, a fog of depression had settled over her. She'd tried to focus on work, but couldn't concentrate and, instead, wanted to sleep as much as possible. Sleeping made the days go by faster and kept her from having to socialize or stare at nothing in her quarters.

Sue beeped her and said, "Captain Chakotay is here to see you."

"Send him in." She took a deep breath before she turned to face the door. When he walked through, she felt the air leave her lungs and had to steady herself by gripping the windowsill.

He waited until the door closed behind him. "I wasn't sure you'd agree to see me."

"I didn't have the energy to explain why not to Sue, but I can't have this conversation right now. I have to face the press in less than an hour."

Walking towards her, he said, "I know, but now that we're on the same planet, I wanted to see you as soon as possible."

She was already leaning against the window and felt trapped as he came close enough to hold her hand. She looked down at their joined fingers. It felt like a dream, strange and surreal, to be touching him. Their fingers blurred together and it was only when she felt the warm splash on her hand that she realized she was crying.

Lifting her chin with a finger, he said, "I've missed you."

She wanted to scream and yell and pummel his chest, but felt dazed as his lips descended to hers. Once she realized he was kissing her, she pushed against his shoulders to get him to stop.

He whispered, "Let it go."

"I can't." She pushed against him again, but he wouldn't budge.

"Yes, you can." He kissed her softly, in stark contrast to how tightly he was holding her.

Feeling overwhelmed, she pulled her head back. “No. Please,” she begged as she wiped away her tears.

“Shhhhhh.” He stopped kissing her, but he didn’t let go. “We can fix this if you’ll let me in.”

“How can I?” She trembled, unable to think clearly because of the ever-present fogginess in her mind.

His lips brushed against her forehead. “We’ve been apart for too long, and I know that once our spark is rekindled, we’ll be able to put this behind us.”

Sadly, she asked, “You think it’s that simple?”

“With us, nothing is ever simple.” He lifted her chin again. “Let me kiss you.”

She clamped her eyes shut and realized too late that he took her silence as permission. When his lips touched hers again, she felt a surge of arousal course through her. It was the first strong feeling she’d felt in weeks, and she latched on to it.

She knew that she was kissing him for the wrong reason, but she loved him and, for three months, she’d been starved for physical touch. Her defenses dropped and she went from pushing him away to holding on for dear life.

When he felt her response change, he relaxed his grip and began to rub her back gently. The kiss faded and their foreheads touched. He said, “I know you’re angry, but what we have is special enough that I’m not letting you go.”

“I’m not thinking straight right now.”

“Then don’t think, just feel.”

“No, it’s not the kiss. In general, I’m in a…”

“Shhhh,” he said as he pulled her into his arms. “We’ll be okay.”

“It’s not that easy.” She wiped her eyes.

“Nothing worth having ever is.”

Ducking out from under his arms, she said, “I need to pull myself together. The press conference begins in twenty minutes.” Now that she was away from him, she could begin to push down her turbulent emotions and replace them with the forced confidence she needed for her public image.

“And you don’t want them to see your tears.”

She ignored his comment and stepped into the washroom to touch up her makeup. “Do you have to get back to work?”

“I have a faculty meeting at fourteen hundred, but I'm all yours until then.”

As she studied herself in the mirror, she felt utterly confused about him. There were so many conflicting emotions in her mind that she felt off-balance and hazy, and unfortunately, he'd been the only person in the last eight years who'd helped her regain stability when she felt that way. In a moment of weakness, she asked, “Would you come with me? After the briefing, we can have lunch.”

“I'd like that.”

Kathryn walked into the press briefing room and all eyes immediately fell upon her. She had the uncomfortable impression that she was about to face the Spanish Inquisition. For the first time since she'd started this job, she wasn't telling people about what she was going to do. She was here to report on what she had done.

“Are you nervous?” he asked.

As she answered, she surveyed the room. “There's a lot riding on this. I'm grateful that my speech was written ahead of time.”

“I doubt you'll have a problem. After all, there are at least 146 people who would follow you to the far edge of the galaxy and back.”

“Now I just need to expand that number to a few hundred billion.” She was relieved to have his support again.

Admiral Khurma came up to greet her, and Kathryn walked with him to the podium. She glanced back and saw that Chakotay was leaning up against the wall, looking with boredom at the gathering of reporters and photographers. She put him out of her mind and focused on the job at hand.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, and thank you for coming today. I have a short statement before I open the floor to questions.

“During the last two months, I had the opportunity to visit with eight planetary leaders who are unhappy with the current state of the Federation. I also met everyday people who are struggling to make ends meet. I met some who are angry enough to use violence as a means for getting their point across. I also met a great number of people who hold a spark of hope that circumstances will be improving soon.

“The war has been over for two and a half years, long enough to put aside the disagreements that divided us. Most of San Francisco and the capital city on Betazed have been rebuilt. The damaged space stations are well on their way to becoming fully functional again, Starfleet has begun replacing the lost ships, and Starfleet Academy enrollment is higher this coming semester than it has been for the last nine years.

“I found that the one thing that unites every individual in this quadrant is a desire for peace. To achieve that, everyone is going to have to work towards improving each other’s quality of life. Feelings of hatred and intolerance have to be resolved, because they are counter-productive. If we can find common ground between us, the hurdles that we’re facing can be crossed.

“I will be discussing the issues that were brought to my attention with members of the Federation Council. The concerns of those I visited with have been heard, and although it may take time to bring about positive change, we’ll work through it together.”

She looked around for reactions and wasn’t entirely confident that they understood. “Now, I’ll open the floor up for questions.”

A reporter asked, “What was your initial reaction to the bombing on Sirius IX?”

“My first concern in a crisis situation is always the welfare of the victims. Following that, I was concerned that yet another act of violence would be demoralizing for the citizens of that world.”

Chakotay watched Kathryn as she answered questions from the reporters and recognized that she was in her element. He didn’t relish the publicity that came with being both a Voyager and being in a relationship with her, but he understood the need for it. The media was a powerful tool for what she was trying to accomplish, and she wielded it like she commanded a starship – with poise, intelligence, and unbelievable courage.

Although he admired her tremendously, he wished that the fame didn’t inflate her ego quite so much. When she was on top of the world, she tended to be reckless and arrogant. Now that she was home, he planned to calm her anger and bring her metaphorically back down to Earth.

When the conference was over, Kathryn shook hands with a great number of people. Both reporters and Starfleet officers wanted to meet her and offer support, congratulate her and express concern about her welfare on Sirius. She thanked them graciously and offered them bits of encouragement in return.

When she was finally able to break away, Kathryn returned to Chakotay and said, “Shall we make a run for it before anyone else wants to talk to me?”

“Really?” he asked with disbelief. “Looks to me like you love the attention.”

Not sure how to take that, she answered, “I have to be outgoing so they feel at ease approaching me.” She took his arm to walk out with him, but felt a sense of emptiness by his response to the

press conference. Glancing back to make sure the two security officers were following them, she led him outside. “Where would you like to go?”

“Oh, doesn’t matter to me. How about Billy’s uncle’s place?”

“That’d be fine.” Before they began to walk, she paused to tell the security detail where they were going. The walk was only two blocks, but they were stopped four times by civilians who wanted her autograph on the way. She took it in stride, but could tell that Chakotay was becoming a little impatient.

When they arrived, they found a secluded table in the back. The security guards sat at opposite ends of the counter so they could watch both her and the entrance. She’d given Scott and Justin the day off, and these two had been randomly assigned by Starfleet.

“Is something wrong?” Chakotay asked.

“What?” She hadn’t been paying attention to him, but then realized what he’d asked. “Oh, I was just checking on my security. They’re new.”

“Ah. I was hoping to run into Doyle.”

“Why’s that?” She was afraid that he wanted to give Scott the third degree for not protecting her well enough.

“To thank him, of course. For saving your life.” Chakotay reached across the table and took her hand.

She smiled appropriately. “I’m sure he’d like to see you, too.”

Billy’s uncle happily greeted them and acted as their waiter. As they ate, they made small talk about the Voyagers he’d seen since arriving on Earth a week before.

Kathryn worked up the courage to ask, “So, what did you think of the press conference?”

“I think it was exactly what they wanted to hear.”

“I tried not to offer any specific promises.”

He shrugged. “Like quadrant-wide peace? You could give the politicians a run for their money with promises like that.”

She smiled a little in response, but her heart felt heavy. The way he kept alternating between affection and criticism made her unsure whether to keep trying to reconnect with him or walk out the door. Not wanting to make a scene, she decided to be patient for the moment.

Before going their separate ways for the afternoon, they made plans to meet at her house for dinner. She felt anxious, fearing that another argument loomed in the near future. However, if she could be brave in the face of terrorists, she could be brave in the face of the man she loved.

When he arrived at her house, his attitude had changed for the better and she was relieved. After he greeted her with a simple kiss, he offered to help her cook. They didn't talk about much except the food they were preparing as they worked together in the kitchen.

Over dinner, Kathryn didn't feel much like talking, so she asked him questions and listened to his answers. He told her about the faculty members he'd met and about those who were still around from when they'd been in school. He was pleasant, and she was glad she didn't have to say much.

After they cleaned up the dinner dishes, they moved to the couch. Although she wanted to watch the Fednews reports to see what the response was from her press conference, she didn't suggest it. She was afraid that watching it might make him chide her again.

"Oh, meant to tell you," Chakotay said. "B'Elanna and Tom have invited us to dinner Wednesday evening to catch up. I told them we'd love to."

"Wednesday?" She just realized that she hadn't told him about her plans for the week. "Do you think they'd have us over tomorrow instead?"

"I don't know, why?"

"I'd like to see them, but I'm going to Paris Wednesday morning and won't be back until late on Saturday."

"Paris? You're leaving again already?"

"Sorry, I forgot to tell you. This afternoon, Khurma, Harry, and I outlined a strategy to try to address some of the issues, and he wants to meet with the Council as soon as possible to get started."

He frowned. "I'd planned to spend time with you this week since my classes begin next Monday."

Feeling awful, she said, "I'm sorry, Chakotay. I didn't think about your calendar or I would've told him that I needed a week in San Francisco first. I was in such a fog by the end of the day that I was accepting whatever he and Harry decided. I'll call him now to see if we can postpone." She rose from the couch.

"No," he grabbed her hand to stop her. "It's obviously important, and I don't want to get in the way."

She sat back down. “I keep making you angry, but I'm not trying to be inconsiderate.”

He rubbed his eyes tiredly. “We’ll figure it out, Kathryn. No relationships are without their problems.”

“I'm aware of that, but I can’t keep fighting with you.”

Picking up her hand, he asked, “Do you want to know what I think would help?”

“I'm not sure I do.”

“Come here.” He took her hand and drew her close. Lacing his fingers through her hair, he brought them together for a kiss.

The physical touch was a balm for her turbulent emotions. It gave her an outlet to release some of the frustration and anguish that she was trying so hard to control. Whatever their troubles might be, one thing was certain – there was a connection between them. Even now, in the midst of her despair, his mouth was so intoxicating that her thoughts faded into the background.

“Kathryn,” he said against her lips. “Let’s go upstairs.”

She knew that sex wasn’t the answer, but she wanted to feel good and it was easier to go along than to stop and deal with their problems. When they got to her bedroom, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her again, but for her, it was a kiss that didn’t fit the moment. He was pushing them into what could’ve been a passionate kiss, but all she wanted was to be held. They stopped to remove their clothing before he drew them together again, naked and exposed. He was eager and demanding as he kissed her lips, her jaw, and her neck.

The kisses were deep, but she didn’t feel the usual heat surging through her. She didn’t mind the aggression, but she wished that he was doing this because of love as opposed to whatever he was feeling towards her. She didn’t know if he was hurt, irritated, or just plain angry, but because she felt lost and alone and because she loved him, she willingly opened herself to him.

When she’d had as much kissing as she could tolerate, she backed away, pulled down the covers, and sat on the bed. She began to feel unsure about what they’d started, but he was on her before she had a chance to complete that thought. She held his head as he took pleasure in her breasts, although she felt like she was watching him kiss someone else. Trying to ignore that, she focused on the way her fingers felt at home in his thick, black hair.

What he was doing was enough to arouse her body so that she was ready when he entered. She clung to him as he thrust within her, hoping that he didn’t notice her lassitude. The sensation of being filled felt good and she tightened her muscles to bring him more pleasure. When he released his seed and collapsed on top of her, she let her hands glide over his muscled back, savoring the sensation of being held.

He whispered, “We need to take care of you.”

“No,” she said as she kissed the side of his head. “I don’t think I can manage it right now.”

“Kathryn?” He lifted himself off of her, pulling out in the process. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” She swallowed hard as she studied his arms. “I just want to be held as I fall asleep.”

He looked devastated. “Oh, Kathryn. Did you not want this?”

She said carefully, “I needed to feel close to you.”

Closing his eyes in sorrow, he drew her into his arms and pulled the sheets over them. “I’m so sorry.”

“Shhh,” she said as she situated herself into her favorite spot in his arms. “I don’t want to talk anymore. Just hold me.”

Chakotay watched her as she drifted off to sleep. He felt terrible for making love to her. He closed his eyes in regret. It wasn’t love. It was sex. Holding her even closer, he prayed that she wouldn’t pull back again in the morning. As he thought about their encounter, he began to realize that he’d misread her signs. She’d been very quiet and accepting of whatever he’d done, but it was all at his insistence. With remorse, he bowed his head and kissed her temple.

He’d seen the confusion in her eyes after the press conference, but she’d been put on such a high pedestal by all the reporters, that he was sure she didn’t need to hear more praise from him, too. If anything, he thought she needed normal conversation that had nothing to do with her job. That’s what he’d been trying to do all day – bring some normalcy back to their lives, as if that was possible.

He was angry about her going to Paris, but he knew he had to accept it. The work that he’d planned for them to do on their relationship could wait a week. As he looked at her lying peacefully in his arms, he wondered how long it would take her to figure out that all he really wanted was for her to think about him before making decisions. That’s what she’d promised months ago.

She woke as the first light came filtering through her windows. Her head was resting on Chakotay’s shoulder and she was snuggled against his side. Slowly, she pulled out of his arms and sat up.

He woke with her movement. “Kathryn? You okay?”

“Yes,” she said as she put her robe on. “I’ll be back.” She went into the bathroom and looked at herself in the mirror. Her hair was a mess and there was makeup smeared under her eyes. She

groaned and looked away, not wanting to face herself or the coming day. The last thing she felt like doing was sliding into the admiral persona. After using the toilet, she washed her face and brushed out her hair. It was still dirty, but at least it wasn't a tangled mess.

When she returned to bed she was disappointed to find him waiting for her. She was craving some time alone downstairs.

He held out his hand to her. "It's only five, come back."

She reluctantly agreed, but laid on her side looking away from him. As he spooned up behind her, she clamped her eyes shut and tried not to make any moves to invite further intimacy. She was glad that she hadn't taken off her robe because it made her feel a little more concealed and protected.

She felt numb and couldn't stop the silent tears that fell from her eyes. It was time to let go of him so she could start functioning again. Although she'd learned from the temporal committee that she was to have children with him, she couldn't fathom how this relationship could work long enough to make that happen. Of course, no one had said anything about her having a happy life. Was she destined to stick with him just to preserve future generations, or would they be smarter to take their relationship back to only being friends? She didn't know if she could handle either situation, but she also didn't want to go on like this.

"Kathryn?"

She turned her face further into the pillow, afraid that he'd noticed her tears. "Yes?" she responded quietly.

"I can't sleep, either. Are you hungry? I could make us breakfast," he suggested hopefully.

"Can you hold me for awhile longer?"

"Of course," he said as he snuggled around her more tightly.

As they lay there, she focused on hardening her heart. She forced herself to think about their arguments. He'd misinterpreted her, and he didn't really understand the burden that she was bearing. He'd verbally attacked her and kicked her while she was down. On top of that, he'd been rude and pushy. She hoped all these thoughts could help her find stability that didn't depend on anyone else. Whether or not they remained friends was still open, but her heart wasn't.

When she woke again, Chakotay wasn't with her. She looked at the clock to see that it was a little before seven, her usual time to wake up. She closed her eyes again to enjoy the solitude that had been her safe haven for the last few weeks. That lasted for a good minute and a half before she heard footsteps coming up the stairs.

He stuck his head in the door as she sat up and tightened her robe. “Are you awake?”

“Just woke up a minute ago.” She forced a smile as he brought in a tray.

“I thought you might enjoy the luxury of breakfast in bed.” He set it down and took a seat at the foot of the bed.

“Thank you, this is very thoughtful.” She picked up the coffee and let the welcome scent wash over her. “You’re already dressed?”

“I need to get to the campus. New cadet orientation begins at eight, and they want the faculty there. I hope you don’t mind, but I borrowed the shower in the hallway.”

“Of course not.”

He looked down and then said, “Kathryn, I’m sorry about last night.”

She had taken a bite and couldn’t respond right away. “About the sex?”

“Yeah,” he cleared his throat, obviously not expecting her to be so abrupt. “I hope I didn’t hurt you.”

“The sex didn’t hurt.” She didn’t want to imply that she wasn’t hurt emotionally. His lack of regard affected her deeply.

He tried to read her expression. “You’re sure?”

“I wouldn’t have said it if I wasn’t.”

“All right.” He held up a hand to let her know that he was backing off that topic.

“The omelet is very good, thank you.”

“I’m glad you like it.” An awkward silence stretched between them until he said, “Well, I should go.”

Kathryn offered, “I’ll call Lanna about rescheduling for tonight.”

“Thanks, I might not get a chance today.” He smoothed out the bedspread where he’d been sitting.

“If they’re available, I’ll leave you a message.”

He added, “I could meet you there.”

“All right.”

“Well,” he said as stepped forward and gave her a kiss on the forehead. “Have a good day.”

She tried to smile appreciatively. “You too, and thanks for breakfast.”

“You’re welcome,” he said at the door. “Good bye.”

When he was gone, Kathryn rolled her eyes and sighed heavily.

Later that morning, she was sitting at the conference table in her office, dully staring at the window in the exact spot where she’d let Chakotay kiss her the day before.

“Admiral?” Harry asked.

It took her a moment to bring her attention back to him. “I’m sorry, what were you saying?”

“Nothing yet, but I would like your opinion about prioritizing the issues. Should we decide that in advance or should we let the Council set the agenda?”

She blinked slowly and took a deep breath. “I’m not sure it matters. What do you think?”

“We could go in there knowing what we’d like to address first, but be open in case they want to make a change.”

“Sure,” she smiled weakly and rubbed her face. “Where’s the master list?”

He pointed to the only PADD in front of her. “It’s got what you need.”

“Thanks.” She forced her eyes to focus on the little screen. None of the issues felt stronger than any other, although impeachment of the president was sounding more and more like a good idea. A new leader would make the rest of this a hell of a lot easier.

“If I may make a suggestion?”

“Feel free.”

He said, “Let’s start with revoking all unfulfilled and expired resource contracts. They’re not going to be honored, so it shouldn’t make much of a difference to the Council, and it’s a positive step in the right direction.”

“Let’s do that.”

He was quiet for a moment, and then asked, “Would be okay if we took a break for a moment? I’d like another cup of coffee.”

She smiled. “When did you start drinking so much coffee?”

“Working with you is rubbing off on me, I guess. May I get you one?”

“Thank you.” She stood up and stretched. “While you’re doing that, I need to call B’Elanna.”

“I’ll leave you alone, then.”

She waved him back to their conference table. “No, no. You’re fine.” As she was keying in the connection to Utopia Planetia, she composed her mouth into a smile.

“Katie!” Patterson said as he answered the comm. “Glad to see that you’re home. How were things out there?”

“As you’d likely expect, Matt, there were a lot of unresolved issues.”

“No doubt,” he smiled. “What can I do for you this morning?”

“I’d like to speak with Tom or B’Elanna for a moment, if they’re free.”

“Sure. Tom’s out flying, but my second favorite engineer is here.”

Kathryn chuckled slightly. “Who’s your first?”

“You, of course.” He winked. “I’ll go fetch her for you.”

She glanced at Harry and he smiled in return. Her attention was diverted back to the screen when B’Elanna answered.

“Admiral! Welcome home.”

Kathryn lifted an eyebrow. “I thought we agreed that you’d call me by my name?”

“Well, I didn’t know if this was a personal call, or not. How are you?”

She took a deep breath. “I’m glad to be home. Chakotay mentioned that you invited us to dinner tomorrow night, but I’ll be in Paris. I’m calling to see if you and Tom are free tonight instead. It doesn’t have to be anything special.”

“We invited Harry over tonight,” she said with a frown. “How long will you be in Paris?”

Harry came over to the desk. “Excuse my interruption.”

“Of course,” Kathryn said.

He smiled. “If it’s okay with both of you, we could all get together tonight. I was going to have to bow out early anyway because Michelle asked me out for a drink.”

“Ditching us for a girl?” B’Elanna asked.

“I hope you’ll forgive me.”

“I’ll try,” B’Elanna said in jest. “Then it’s settled. See you all at six?”

“Sounds good, thank you,” Kathryn smiled.

After Kathryn and Harry got back to the table, he asked, “How is Chakotay?”

“Hmm?”

“Chakotay? I assume you saw him yesterday?”

“Oh, he’s fine.” She glanced toward the windowsill again.

“I know I’ve offered too many times, but if you need to get something off your chest, I’d be happy to listen.”

She squeezed his forearm. “Thank you, but we should get back to work. Do you have the notes from the Cairn Homeworld?”

Kathryn and Harry were a little late getting to Tom and B’Elanna’s house because she’d received a comm from the former Cairn Representative she’d met with the week before. She couldn’t exactly cut the conversation short because he was calling to congratulate her on a job well done with the press conference.

“Come on in!” Tom said as he pulled her into a quick hug, and then did the same with Harry. “Welcome home, weary travelers.”

“It’s good to be back,” she said happily.

“Kathryn,” Chakotay had risen to greet her. “How was your day?”

“Busy,” she replied. “But I doubt you want to hear all the boring details,” she said casually, but she noticed that Chakotay gave her an odd look.

“Are you kidding?” B’Elanna came in and hugged her, too. “I’m dying to hear what the reaction was to your speech yesterday. It was great!”

“Thank you, but you should be complimenting Harry.” She nodded towards him. “He wrote the speech.”

“You did?” B’Elanna asked with surprise. “Wow! That was really good.”

“Thanks,” Harry said. “She’s getting tired of saying the same old thing, so she let me give her some new words. I hope the bit about quadrant-wide peace wasn’t over the top, but I thought it sounded like a nice ideal.”

Kathryn caught Chakotay’s eyes and he was clearly dumbfounded with the realization that she hadn’t written the speech he’d admonished her for.

B’Elanna distracted her by ushering her into the kitchen. “There’s someone in here who wants to see you.”

Sitting in a highchair and covered in mashed peas, Miral was the most precious little klingon she’d ever seen. “Miral,” Kathryn gushed. She quickly sat down next to the baby and wiped a smear of peas off the ridged forehead. “Are these yummy?”

“She really gets into her food,” Tom commented.

“I can tell.” Kathryn picked up the spoon and dipped it into the jar. “Would you like more?”

Miral opened her mouth wide and leaned forward to try to get the spoon.

Laughing, Kathryn said, “I’ll take that as a yes.”

“A glass of wine, Kathryn?” B’Elanna asked as she set the glass down out of the baby’s reach.

“Would love it, thank you.” Kathryn took a sip of the fruity white wine. “This is really good. Cool and crisp.”

“We thought you’d like it,” Tom replied.

“Delicious. I apologize for us being late. I got a call that I couldn’t find a way to end graciously. You’d be surprised how talkative a telepath can be when you’re too far away for them to read your mind.”

“Twenty questions?” Chakotay asked.

“More like forty.” She gave him a guarded smile.

Harry said, “That conference on the Cairn Homeworld was the easiest one we’ve had, though. They just read our minds, so we didn’t have to convince them of our sincerity.” He nodded

towards Kathryn. “And it was incredible how the Representative took to our favorite admiral. He was like an over-protective grandfather with you.”

“The trouble with mind-readers is that they have far too much insight.” Kathryn smiled at Harry, but noticed that Chakotay was listening intently to every word that was said. She remembered how the kindly old man had taken her aside and told her that love has a way of healing itself, even when we don’t think it’s possible.

“Well, don’t worry about being late. Dinner is just now ready anyway,” B’Elanna responded as she set a platter of lasagna down in the center of the table.

“Looks good,” Chakotay said.

As they ate, Tom asked, “So, Kathryn, tell us, did you get any feedback from the speech yesterday?”

“Some,” she said modestly. “Sue filled me in this morning, and it sounds like it got a positive response in the media.”

“I’d say,” B’Elanna remarked. “You didn’t watch yourself on the news last night?”

“No,” she waved the topic away. “I already knew what I had to say.”

Tom said, “When you first took on this job, I was really worried that it would be too huge, you know? But now that you’re doing it, I think this is the best thing ever for you.”

Kathryn raised an eyebrow. “And why is that, Tom?”

“Because anybody would follow you anywhere to do anything.” He pointed his fork at her. “You would make the best con artist.”

“You’re comparing me to a con artist?” She laughed, and it felt good.

“Well, yeah. You could say anything in front of the camera and the reporters would jump all over it and turn it into something huge. I mean, all you said yesterday was basically, the war is over, it’s time for peace, get behind me and we’ll work on it together.”

“That was the gist of it.” Kathryn was enjoying Tom’s analysis immensely. She glanced at Chakotay and saw that the muscles in his jaw were tense.

Tom said, “You didn’t promise anything, you didn’t report on anything, yet everyone is falling all over themselves to step in line. It’s really something.”

Humored, she said, “Well, thank you, I think.”

“He meant it as a compliment,” B’Elanna noted. “I mean, what is your job, really? To talk to people?”

“Pretty much, although I prefer to think of it as listening.” She took a sip of wine. “Listen to complaints, offer sympathy, and communicate those complaints back to the Council.”

“With a few of your and Harry’s kick-ass speeches sprinkled in here and there,” Tom added.

In a joking manner, Chakotay said, “You two are going to make her head explode if you keep it up.”

Kathryn was startled by the negativity of his comment, but replied coolly, “Don’t worry, Chakotay. My self-esteem has taken a few poundings recently. It’s a nice change to have some positive support from friends.”

His expression changed immediately from a joking smile to a look of alarmed concern. Kathryn looked away quickly.

The other three were taken aback, but Tom broke the tense moment by changing the subject. “So what really happened on that one planet?”

“Which?” Kathryn asked, relieved to move on. “I’ve been to twelve.”

“The one with the explosion, of course. That was really something how you two walked out of there with only a scratch.”

“Yeah,” B’Elanna said. “Do you have some kind of personal shield device? I can’t believe the number of times you’ve walked out of a bad situation unscathed.”

Harry said, “Well, that’s not entirely true. I had a huge, gaping wound on my leg and she had a severe concussion and broken wrist.”

“Still,” Tom said. “You survived an explosion.”

She glanced nervously at Chakotay before replying. “It was nothing more than what you heard on the news reports. The bomb was dropped through the stained glass ceiling above us.”

“You said Doyle saved your life. What did he do?” Tom asked.

Harry answered for her, and he did so with dramatic flair. “It’s amazing how quick that guy can move. As soon as we heard glass breaking, he had her on the floor and was shoving her under the enormous conference table that we were sitting at. Needless to say, the rest of us high tailed it under there, too.”

Kathryn added, “And thankfully, everyone who’d been at the table made it.”

“Come on,” Tom urged. “You’re not giving us enough details. We’re action deprived here!”

Kathryn glanced at Chakotay again saw that he was watching her carefully. She turned to Tom. “You didn’t get enough action in the Delta Quadrant?”

“Yeah, but it was like quitting cold turkey when we got home. I need to live vicariously through you and Harry.”

“You’ll like this one, Tom,” Harry said with excitement. “Moore, the Pioneer’s security chief, actually phasered the bomb so it exploded in mid-air.”

“Impressive,” B’Elanna remarked. “Kudos to him.”

“No kidding,” Kathryn remarked. “We wouldn’t be here right now if he hadn’t.”

Chakotay closed his eyes and laid his fork aside.

B’Elanna asked, “So you were there, under the table. Did you know what’d happened?”

Kathryn was nervous about telling much more. She could tell it was upsetting Chakotay, and despite her desire to be strong, she didn’t want to hurt him. “Yes, we knew, but Doyle had me completely covered.”

Tom smirked, “I bet Scott loved that. Full body contact with you.”

Kathryn rolled her eyes. “I’m sure that was the last thing on his mind.” She tried to reassure Chakotay with a smile, but he was looking down.

B’Elanna looked back and forth between Chakotay and Kathryn. “You’ve already heard all this, Chakotay?”

“Pretty much,” he responded.

Kathryn said, “I’m sorry.”

He shrugged. “They wanted to hear the story.”

“Sorry, we didn’t mean to...,” Harry said nervously.

Kathryn offered, “Maybe we should talk about something else.”

Tom took the hint and started telling everyone about an incident that happened at Utopia Planetia. Kathryn surreptitiously glanced at Chakotay and saw that his eyes were downcast and that he was pushing food around on his plate. She couldn’t tell if he was angry or sad.

They were both quiet during dessert, giving the others ample opportunity to talk about Miral's latest accomplishments and discuss Harry's impending date. Kathryn participated in the conversation, asking questions to keep them talking, but Chakotay remained silent. She didn't want the conversation to turn back to her or her job, but unfortunately, it did.

B'Elanna asked, "So, what are you doing in Paris?"

She quietly said, "Just talking to the Council."

"We're going to try to address some of the concerns," Harry added. "There are little things that can be done that will get us headed in the right direction."

"Oh," Tom said, "You've got to check out this one bar while you're there."

Kathryn grimaced. "I don't really think a bar is the safest place for me to be. Wouldn't do to have my security guards drinking, anyway."

"Harry could go," Tom said.

B'Elanna commented, "It must feel strange to walk around with security guards all the time."

Kathryn shrugged. "It's not so bad once you get used to it. I don't have much privacy, but with the number of people who want to stop me on the street, it's good that they're there. I try to be as gracious as I can, but it's difficult to keep up the act and be alert at the same time."

"You can't even walk to the grocery store alone, can you?"

"No," she said with a sigh. "But without the recognition, it wouldn't matter how motivating Harry's speeches are. Nobody would be listening."

Tom said, "I guess you are playing a part, aren't you?"

Kathryn nodded towards Chakotay. "He's often said that I'm a good actress."

B'Elanna sensed the building tension and said, "Let's get this cleaned up, shall we? Harry has a hot date, and you probably want to get home, Kathryn, if you have to be in Paris in the morning."

"Don't worry about that. Our meetings don't start until late in their afternoon." She took some of the dishes over to the counter.

Harry said, "If it's all right with all of you, I'll head out."

"Don't let us keep you," Tom patted him on the back. "You're going to have to introduce us to this girl sometime."

Rolling his eyes, Harry said, “That’d be worse than introducing her to my parents, and I’m not sure it’s that serious.”

B’Elanna laughed. “We’re not that bad.”

Harry caught Kathryn alone when she went back to the table to get more dishes. “Admiral, are you set for tomorrow?”

“As much as I can be, but if they ask for details, I might need your help recalling information.”

“We could talk over breakfast if you need me to go over anything again.”

“We’ll be fine, but feel free to kick me under the table if I... well, you know.” She was embarrassed to admit that she’d been distracted easily, but she also knew that she could trust him.

“And load you with coffee, I know.” He smiled genuinely.

“Thank you, Harry, for all the work you’ve been doing. I couldn’t have done those last two planets without you.”

“I’m happy to help. Well, not happy, but thankful that I can. I think it’s actually made me feel more confident.” He unexpectedly hugged her. “I’ll keep you going, don’t worry.”

Overcome with emotion, she held him tighter. He obviously understood what was going on now with the tension between her and Chakotay being the reason for her depression, and for a reason that she couldn’t explain, he felt like a lifeline. “Thank you.”

Harry said his goodbyes to Tom and B’Elanna on the other side of the room, giving her a chance to compose herself. She looked up and saw that Chakotay was closer than she expected. He was looking down and bracing his arms on the back of a chair.

He looked up when he felt her eyes on him. “Kathryn?”

With resignation, she said, “I guess you heard all of that.”

Nodding, he asked, “What’s going on?”

With a hoarse whisper, she admitted, “Coping with... with just about everything during the last few weeks has been difficult for me. He’s been keeping me afloat.”

Chakotay closed his eyes and turned his head. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Do you really need to ask me that?”

Tom interrupted as Harry was walking out. “Ladies, why don’t you let Chakotay and me clean this up? Miral needs some time with her godmother.”

Kathryn was glad for the distraction and cheerfully lifted Miral out of the highchair while B’Elanna dusted the fallen crumbs off the baby’s diaper-covered bottom.

“Want to help me give her a bath?”

“I’d love to.”

Once they got the baby in the tub and occupied with toys, B’Elanna asked, “What’s going on with you two?”

“It’s not open for discussion.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that I don’t want to talk about it.” She used a plastic dolphin to squirt water on Miral’s tummy, making the baby squeal with glee.

“You’ve barely said anything to each other tonight. Something’s obviously wrong.”

Kathryn sighed. “Please, drop it.”

“What did you do?”

“What did I do?” She asked with shock. “You automatically assume that I’m the one to blame?”

“No!” She backpedaled. “Of course not, but something happened between you two and it’s obvious that you’re angry and he’s sad.”

Throwing the dolphin into the water, Kathryn said, “Quite the opposite, actually. Just forget it.”

“I want to help.”

Shaking her head, Kathryn replied coldly, “B’Elanna, there’s absolutely nothing you can do, and talking about it isn’t going to solve anything. The damage is done. End of story.”

“I don’t believe that. He loves you!”

“You don’t know that,” she said crossly and stood up.

“Yes, I do!”

Kathryn raised her voice. “How could you know more about his feelings than I do? I’m the one in the relationship, or lack thereof. I have first hand knowledge. You do not.”

“Don’t yell at me,” she said angrily. “I’m only trying to help and, in case you’ve forgotten, I’m your friend now.”

Fuming, she dried off her hands and rolled down her sleeves. “You’ve just crossed the line.”

“What line is that? You want me as a friend, but you refuse to talk to me like one. I know you, and you only get this cold and distant when something is really wrong. I won’t let you push me away.”

Kathryn felt like something snapped in her mind, and her fury instantly transformed into grief. She closed her eyes and turned away, whispering, “Don’t do this, Lanna. I can’t take anymore.”

“Then talk to me,” she implored.

“Not now. Not while he’s here.”

“Okay,” B’Elanna said with acceptance. “We can talk when you get home.” Turning towards the baby, she said, “Come on, let’s get her washed up.”

Kathryn turned back around and looked at her friend. She’d had so few girlfriends in her life that it was difficult to know how to relate. “Perhaps we could get into our morning exercise routine again?”

“I’d like that. Monday at the officer’s gym?”

“I’ll be there.”

After they got Miral put to bed, Kathryn told everyone, “I should go. I still have to pack and go over some notes.”

Chakotay joined her in the entryway and said, “I’ll walk you home.”

“I’m not walking. I have a ground car now.”

“You do? When did you get that?”

“In June,” she said quietly, surprised that she hadn’t told him.

Chakotay glanced back at Tom and B’Elanna, and then said very quietly, “I want to talk before you leave for Paris.”

B’Elanna grabbed Tom and said, “Come outside with me. I want to show you... a star or... whatever.”

Kathryn looked away dejectedly, not wanting to face him.

He reached for her hands. “Kathryn, I'm afraid that I've hurt your feelings.”

“You've just now figured that out?” She pulled her hands away. “I don't want to talk about this right now. It's too hard and I have to keep functioning for the rest of the week.”

“We can fix this if you'll talk to me.”

“No, we can't. We can try to maintain our friendship, but for now, I need some time by myself to regain my strength.”

He cradled her cheek in his hand. “Please, Kathryn, don't shut me out.”

She snapped and swatted his hand away, unable to contain her anger. “Are you kidding me? Have you any idea how much you hurt me?”

“Oh, Kathryn. I wasn't trying to hurt you.”

She looked at him in disbelief. “No? What did you think would happen?”

“I was hoping you'd act with a little more caution.”

She fisted her hands to keep from slapping him. “You're saying that tirade of yours was some kind of disciplinary action?”

“No, that's not what I was trying to do,” he said angrily. “Look, I don't want to get into that conversation with you again, so let's just drop it. I want to know what you meant when you said your self-esteem has taken a beating. What's happened to you?”

“If you don't know then I'm not about to tell you.” She turned away. “I've got to go.”

“Kathryn, stop.” He grabbed her hand as she reached for the doorknob. “Talk to me.”

“I can't. Not here, not tonight, not when I'm feeling this way.”

“Please, let's work through this together.”

She whispered, “I'm not strong enough for this. It's too much.”

He wrapped his arms around her from behind. “You're the strongest woman I know.”

Furious, she twisted abruptly away from him and yelled, “Is that why you keep shoveling more guilt on me?”

“I never meant to make you feel guilty.”

“Then what the hell did you intend to do? All I wanted that day was your support and someone to confide in, but you berated me, Chakotay! You dressed me down twice as hard as my C.O. and he’s the head of the entire fleet!”

Defending himself, he yelled, “I was angry! I’m sorry!”

“And your anger gives you the right to insult me? You called me a bloodthirsty murderer, Chakotay! In one brutal conversation, you discredited every ounce of support that you’ve ever given me! And you’re still trying to knock me down! I can’t take it!”

“Kathryn, I’m sorry. I thought…” He stopped mid-sentence.

More calm, she said, “Chakotay, I need some time to myself. I have no idea what to say to you that will fix this. Just give me four days in Paris, and we can talk when I get back.”

“Don’t you understand how scared I was that day?” he asked, completely ignoring her plea to go.

“Damn it, Chakotay. I never meant to scare you. How many times do I have to tell you that? We’ve been through enough volatile situations that I thought you would understand. I believed that if you had all the information I had, that you’d support what I was doing there.” She threw a hand up in the air. “You know, even without knowing, I thought you trusted my judgment. You know what it’s like to carry the responsibility of an entire ship, but you have absolutely no idea what it’s like to carry the responsibility of the entire Federation. You were supposed to be my support through this.”

He retaliated angrily. “What information did you have, Kathryn? What could have possibly kept you safe in a mob of people that were yelling how much they hated you? What about the people who would die for you? Are their lives mere pawns in this galaxy-wide chess match you’re playing?”

“You think this is a game?” she yelled. “This is no game, Chakotay. This is the future of our entire quadrant we’re talking about. I have to take risks to get people to stand up and notice that there’s someone who actually cares about them. I can’t show fear!” Her voice was growing hoarse, but she kept yelling. “Don’t you understand that I have to wear this larger than life persona when I’m out there, because if everyone knew how overwhelmed and vulnerable the real me is, they wouldn’t follow me to the next planet much less the other side of the galaxy.”

He looked at her in complete dismay. “Are you listening to yourself?”

“Chakotay,” she said sadly. “My question is, are you listening to me?”

“Yes, I’m listening to you,” he said softly. “But what I’m hearing is that you believe the entire fate of the Federation rests solely on your shoulders. It doesn’t, Kathryn. All you were asked to do was to be a voice of hope, and if you should figure out how to remove the President from office, then you should.”

“You say that like it’s a simple matter of telling him to go home.”

“But don’t you see that he’s losing power more and more every day, just because people are starting to follow you? It’s you, they’re following, Kathryn. The you that’s scared, the you that’s vulnerable. That part of you is what makes you so compassionate. You’re inspiring to billions of people just by uttering a few words that are nothing more than a call for peace.”

“It takes a lot more than speeches to make people follow me.”

“Sure it does. It takes your intelligence and your compassion.” He stepped closer. “What it doesn’t take is you risking your life to make an impression. If one of these gambles didn’t come packaged with a miracle to save you, then what would those billions of people be left with? If you think they were despairing before you arrived on the scene, imagine what they’d be feeling after you died a pointless death.”

“If that happened, they’d find a way. I believe they’d do it for me.”

“I asked you to keep yourself safe for me because I can’t imagine living without you. But I also want you to be safe for them. I know what’s at stake here, but it can’t work without you. I bet that’s the exact same thing that your C.O. told you.”

Close enough to reach her hands, he said, “You, Kathryn, are the beacon of peace that you’re calling for. People stand up and notice you because you’re a gifted leader. I will support you, but I need you to understand that everything you do also affects me.”

She stared at him quietly for a long moment, tears falling unheeded. Once she noticed them, she wiped them away. “That’s not possible because I’m alone, Chakotay. Because of the way you’ve made me feel, I’m no good to anyone. If it weren’t for Harry...” She turned away and walked out the door. “I’ll call you on Sunday.”

“Kathryn, please!” He followed her out the door. “What do you mean by that? You’re not alone!”

She kept walking until her unknown security detail helped her into the car and drove her away.

Chakotay was left standing on the porch. He closed his eyes in despair, having no idea whether she’d comprehended what he’d said. He slowly turned and went back in to tell their friends that he was leaving, but he only got a few feet when he saw them in the kitchen, staring at him in shock. With disbelief, he accused, “You were eavesdropping?”

Tom found the words first. “When there was yelling, we came to check on you, but then we froze.”

Chakotay closed his eyes. “How much did you hear?”

B’Elanna asked, “Who asked her to remove the President from office?”

Dropping his head back, Chakotay groaned. “You don’t want to know.” Looking directly at them, he said, “You didn’t hear any of this. Is that understood?”

“All right, I didn’t hear that part,” B’Elanna said. “But I did hear the rest.” She pulled him over to her couch and made him sit down. Curling up next to him like any sister would, she said, “She may need to be alone, but I don’t think you should be.”

“You shouldn’t have been listening.” Chakotay looked at B’Elanna. “Did you talk to her? Did she say anything?”

“She said a lot more to you than she would admit to me. She’s really unhappy, Chakotay.”

“I thought she was just angry because I yelled at her.”

“She was trying to hide it,” Tom said. “But she was miserable at dinner. There was no enthusiasm about her job whatsoever. I didn’t mean to upset you by talking about the bombing. I was only trying to get her excited about what she’s doing. That’s what all three of us were doing. We weren’t trying to inflate her ego.”

“She was trying not to say too much in front of me.”

“It was more than that,” Tom said. “Even Harry has noticed. He called us this afternoon to ask for our help in trying to reach her. She’s depressed! Surely, you can see that?”

He buried his face in his hands. “I didn’t until tonight, and it’s my fault. I thought she’d gotten too overconfident and reckless and I called her on it.”

B’Elanna looked at him like he was cracked. “Overconfident? The woman was doing everything she could to avoid crying in my bathroom!”

Tom said, “What we saw tonight is not the fearless Captain Janeway that we all know and love. She’s struggling with something big.”

“I know exactly what she’s struggling with, and thanks to your eavesdropping, you do too. But I was trying to ground her. You two know what she’s capable of when she thinks she’s invincible.”

“Invincible?” Tom did a double take. “When has she ever felt invincible? I think that she was prepared to die every time she put her life at risk. I can’t even count the number of times she risked Voyager or herself just to make a difference or save somebody.”

B’Elanna sighed. “I can list quite a few if you want.”

“No, you’ve made your point.” Chakotay ran his hands through his hair. “She’s a risk taker. I know that.”

“Hell yeah,” Tom said. “And she always comes out on top. The woman knows how to push the envelope. That’s what makes her phenomenal. God, remember that time she took Voyager between the binary stars?”

B’Elanna tapped her finger on the coffee table. “You know, Chakotay, I bet that she realized that the crowd on Sirius was mostly interested in seeing if she had the guts to show up. That’s the situation she was facing, not the threat of the bombing. But even when that happened, she’d enabled her security team to save all of them.”

“Maybe, but she couldn’t have predicted that Moore was going to phaser the bomb. She had nothing to do with that.”

Tom shrugged, “She had enough sense to take that large of a security team down with her. And she was able to take them into that situation armed, without inciting the crowd. I doubt there’s any other ‘fleeter that could’ve pulled that off. If she got dressed down for it, I bet it’s because Khurma doesn’t really understand what she’s capable of.”

Chakotay felt sick to his stomach because of what he’d said to her. “I just wanted her to be careful.”

“That’s not who she is,” B’Elanna said. “She would sacrifice herself in a heartbeat to save one person, let alone the entire Federation.”

“What have I done?”

When he got back to his apartment that night, Chakotay pre-recorded a message and sent it to Kathryn. He knew she wouldn’t want to talk to him, but he needed to apologize nonetheless.

“Kathryn, I am so sorry.” He closed his eyes. “What I’ve done didn’t hit me until you were walking out the door, and you were right. I wasn’t listening to you because I was so caught up in my own emotions over this situation that I wasn’t paying any attention to yours. You are the most important person in my life and my heart is breaking with the realization that I’ve hurt you. Please, I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me.” He ended the message and hit send, hoping she’d open it before she left.

Chakotay went through the motions of the next few days, but his heart wasn’t in it. His heart was halfway across the planet, and she was miserable because of him. He wanted to call her, transport over to see her, anything to try to fix this. But she’d specifically asked to be alone, and the last thing he wanted to do was push her further away. He went on two vision quests to try to figure out what to do, but the only answer he received was to be patient.

Kathryn received his message as soon as he’d sent it, but his apology didn’t make the things he’d said any less hurtful. No matter what he said now, Chakotay had been right. Her decisions

affected him, making her yoke that much heavier. Regardless of how much she meant to him, she was sure that he didn't love her or trust her enough to give her the freedom to do her job.

Once she got to Paris, she suppressed the entire situation so she could exude the confidence that she needed to get her points across to the council members. As she lay alone in her hotel room each night, she tried to figure out if all the horrible things Chakotay said about her were true. How could he love her when she didn't love herself?

On Sunday afternoon, Chakotay answered the knock at his door and found Justin in uniform. His first thought was that something had happened to Kathryn. "Jarvin? Is everything okay?"

"Just fine, Captain. The Admiral is coming here in a few minutes, so I need to do a security sweep. Do I have your permission?"

He sighed and stood out of Justin's way. "Of course." He thought this was overkill, but if that's what her team's method of operations was everywhere she went, then that was fine by him. At least it gave him advance warning of her arrival. He hadn't been sure when and if she was going to contact him.

Justin returned and contacted Doyle to give him the all clear.

Chakotay asked, "What's her mood today? Do you know?" It was a question that many on Voyager had asked each other when she was in her more tumultuous phases.

"I haven't spoken to her today, sir."

"Drop the sir, Justin. It's just me."

"It's a habit," he said. "I'm getting the hang of this Starfleet life. It's much more formal."

"Yes, it is," Chakotay said absently.

Justin leaned towards him and said, "I can't speak for the Admiral, but I can tell you what I'm feeling."

"Please do." Chakotay was very well aware that he was not about to get Justin's feelings, but a masked way of telling him about Kathryn.

"I find it demanding to keep up the façade when we're out there being diplomatic. At the end of the day, I feel like shutting down because I'm so drained. It's good to be back among friends so we can rejuvenate a little."

"Rejuvenate?"

“Yeah. An uplifting boost would help a lot. I’ve been feeling a little down, a little isolated.”

Chakotay closed his eyes and sighed. He’d really made a mess of things. “Thank you, Justin, for telling me how you feel.”

“Any time. We’re Voyagers, you know. We look after each other, and I know you’ll be able to help me.”

Another knock at the door kept them from saying anything else. Chakotay took a deep breath before opening it. “Kathryn.” He was genuinely happy to see her, although the anxious bats flying around in his belly gave him pause.

“May I come in?”

He shook the fog out of head. “Sorry, of course. Please come in.” Remembering that Justin was still there, he added, “We’re all scanned and secure.”

Kathryn raised an eyebrow at Justin. “Thank you, but I don’t think you needed to do that here.”

“I’ll note that for the future, Admiral. We’ll be down in the lobby if you need us.” Before he shut the door, Justin discreetly winked at Chakotay.

“May I hug you?” Kathryn asked.

“Of course,” he said apologetically. Folding her into his arms, he said, “I’m a little nervous and I’m not thinking straight.”

She relaxed more into the hug. “I don’t want you to be nervous around me, but if it helps, I’m not thinking straight, either.”

He tucked her in closer, knowing how much she liked to snuggle into his neck. Caressing her back, he quietly asked, “Are you okay, Kathryn?”

She didn’t answer right away. “No, but I’m working through it.”

“I want to help.” He kissed her head. “I want to fix what I’ve done.”

Kathryn turned her face toward his shoulder and hugged him tighter, but said nothing.

They held onto each other for several minutes, neither of them speaking, just needing to be in each other’s arms. Chakotay was uneasy about her silence, fearing that she was working up the courage to tell him something that he didn’t want to hear.

“Kathryn,” he whispered. “I’ve finally realized how much I hurt you. Please forgive me?”

She pulled back to look at him, but didn't let go of him. "You were just responding to things that you don't like about me. How can I fault you for being honest and telling me like it is?"

He lowered his head. "Because, I'm a prized idiot. I've been acting like I'm still your first officer, and I'm not. I'm your best friend, and I should've found a significantly different way to convey my concerns. I didn't listen to you and I missed all the signs."

She stepped out of his arms and walked towards his windows, putting one hand on her hip, the other massaging her forehead. Her posture lacked any of the confidence she usually carried. "We've lost something very special."

"We'll find it. We always do."

Shaking her head, she whispered hoarsely, "It's gone."

He felt his heart breaking. "Kathryn, please give us another chance. We mean too much to each other to give this up without a fight."

"Fight." She dropped her head back. "Funny you should use that word. I am so tired of fighting."

"We're just having trouble adjusting, that's all." When she didn't comment, he kept talking. "We're stuck in our roles as the command team of Voyager. It was my job for seven years to watch your back, give you advice, and point out problems. I managed your staff, and I think I even did a pretty good job at managing you."

"Managing me?" She turned to look at him.

He shrugged. "Making sure you took breaks, bringing you food, doing things that I knew would lift your spirits. I also guided you towards working on problems that would give you a mystery to solve. You're energized by solving problems."

Her bearing softened and her head tilted as she looked at him with gratitude. "I know. I just didn't think of all that as managing me, but I appreciated it nonetheless."

Smiling a little, he fidgeted with a potted plant.

She asked curiously, "Aren't you going to explain how I'm still stuck in my role as your C.O.?"

"No," he glanced at her with a slight smile. "I've done more than enough talking."

"Have you?"

Turning to face her, he put his hands on his hips. "Yes, I have. And now, it's time for me to start listening. I want to hear about everything you're struggling with. Everything from

temporal mechanics and political conspiracies down to..." He tried to think of an example. "Down to what color shoes you should wear."

She leaned a hip against the side of his couch and absently picked at a ball of lint. "You'd be willing to listen to all of it?"

"Yes, although I might have an opinion every now and then."

"I rather like your opinions when you've taken time to listen to mine and when you offer them in kindness," she said quietly.

He took her positive spin on that criticism as a sign of encouragement. "And I want to hear about your joys, too. About how exciting it was to see the press corps hanging on your every word, because when you've got their attention, you have the power to affect their outlook. Exactly like you did a week ago."

Her lips parted in surprise. "You saw that? I thought you didn't approve of anything that I was trying to convey."

"Yes, I did, and I would do anything right now to rewind back six days and change every word I've said. Even more than that, I'd like to rewind a month and take a lot of other things back as well."

She looked out the window. "I need some time without you in my life."

His heart fell. "Please, Kathryn, forgive me."

"I already have. I wouldn't be here otherwise." She looked back at him. "But that doesn't mean that the problems go away or that we can even maintain a friendship without fighting."

"How can we work on the problems if we're not together?"

"I don't know," she whispered. "But regardless of how strong you think I am, I don't have the fortitude to keep struggling with this and do my job at the same time. I wish I could choose to salvage our friendship, but I've got to regain my confidence first."

He realized that he needed to find a way to keep her from giving up. "May I offer a suggestion?"

"Yes."

"Go out on a date with me. Tomorrow night." He barreled on before she could protest. "You see, it'll be my first day teaching in quite some time, and I'd like to go out to dinner to celebrate. I know this lovely little restaurant in Tuscany that has the best coffee. If we leave in the middle of the afternoon..."

"Chakotay," she started to protest.

He began walking around a little. “At dinner, I’d like to tell you about my day. Perhaps I can think of a few anecdotes that’ll make you laugh. I’d also like to hear about your day. Actually, I would love to hear about your exciting trip to Paris. I hear it’s a wonderful city, and I’d love to visit there sometime with you as my tour guide.”

“That’s not, exactly, what I had in mind when I said I needed time.”

“I know, but I’m not going to let you go, Kathryn. If you’re feeling as disconnected and foggy as I think you are, then leaving you alone to cope with it is out of the question. Over the last four days, I’ve thought hard about every conversation we’ve had in the last month, and you were sending me clear signals for help. I was just too dim-witted to see them.”

She was about to comment when he plunged on. “If you’ll go out with me, I promise that I will not say anything that could possibly provoke an argument. If you were to tell me that you’re going to move to Paris, for example, I would simply ask if I could join you for dinner every now and then.”

“Chakotay, I don’t want to pretend to be something that we’re not. It’s not fair to either of us.”

“I’m not pretending. I never have.” He took a small step towards her, but was still on the other side of the room. “Kathryn, I know you’re hurting, and I want to help you get back on solid ground. Once you’re there, we can figure out where we stand, but I won’t let you suffer through this alone. You have my word that I won’t even try to kiss you until you ask me too.”

She closed her eyes for a long moment as she weighed the choices. “Okay,” she yielded. “I’ll have dinner with you, but not in Tuscany. That’s a memory that is very close to my heart, and I don’t want to do anything that would tarnish it.” Her eyes began to fill.

“Okay.” His voice cracked with emotion. “I’ll find a place, and I’ll work it out with Justin.”

“Okay.” She closed the distance between them and placed a simple kiss on his cheek. “I wish you the best for tomorrow, and I’ll see you after work.”

He took a chance by reaching for her hand as she turned away. She stopped but didn’t turn back. Worried that even a kiss on her hand would be too much, he opted for caressing her fingers for a moment before letting her go.

The next morning, B’Elanna knelt next to the couch to try to wake Kathryn up. “Kathryn?” She laid a hand on her arm and rubbed it gently. “Kathryn?”

“Hmm?” Kathryn opened her eyes and then sat up quickly. “Lanna?”

“I just came here to check on you. I was worried.”

Kathryn moistened her lips and looked around. “How did you get in?”

“Give me some credit.” She shrugged, and stated, “I threatened Scott within an inch of his life.”

“What time is it?” She rubbed her face to try to shake the sleep off.

“Almost eight. I got worried when you didn’t show up at the gym.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Lanna.” She wrapped her blanket around her. “I couldn’t sleep last night, and I didn’t even think about setting an alarm.”

B’Elanna sat down next to her. “You’re wearing sweats.”

“I was cold,” she said with a slight shiver.

“It’s the middle of August,” she said incredulously. “Are you sick?” She put her hand on Kathryn’s forehead.

“I don’t think so.”

She touched Kathryn’s cheeks, too. “You don’t feel hot.” B’Elanna regarded her quietly for a moment, and then looked around a little. It looked as if Kathryn had moved her bedroom downstairs and the place was a complete mess. “How come you’re sleeping on your couch?”

She shrugged. “Just couldn’t sleep upstairs.”

“I’ve been thinking about you since last Tuesday.”

Kathryn sighed. “Sorry that we kicked you out of your house.”

“I have a confession.”

“Oh?”

“Tom and I heard a lot of your fight. We didn’t mean to eavesdrop.”

“I see.” Kathryn wrapped herself up further in her protective cocoon. “Well, we were in your entryway.”

“Yes, that’s true.” B’Elanna looked around again. “Can I just acknowledge the elephant in the room?”

“Which one? There are so many to choose from.” Kathryn gestured around her head.

B'Elanna smiled, glad to see her friend had at least a little sense of humor. "You're right about that."

"What do you want to know, Lanna?" Kathryn asked seriously.

"You're supposed to oust the President?" she asked in disbelief. "Who gave you that assignment?"

"You don't want to know." Kathryn tucked her knees up to her chest.

"Actually, I do, because I want to go kick the crap out them."

"It's very, very complicated."

"No doubt. Is it the fleet admiral? Did he ask you to?"

"Nope."

"The Council?"

Kathryn shook her head.

"My father-in-law? I know he wants him out."

"Everybody wants him out, but no, my obligation is not to Owen."

"My boss?"

"Not Matt, either."

B'Elanna stared at her. "Did Section 31 recruit you?"

"They don't exist." When B'Elanna looked at her skeptically, Kathryn added, "Within official Starfleet channels."

"Out with it," B'Elanna said. "I'll keep listing names until you tell me."

Kathryn furrowed her eyebrows. "You just told your former Captain, 'out with it?'"

"I'd like to emphasize the word 'former,' and you're evading the question."

"I really can't tell you, and please don't ask. I'm not trying to be difficult."

"You're always difficult." B'Elanna sighed. "Fine, don't tell me, but I still want to kick the crap out of them."

Kathryn smiled. "Thank you for looking out for me."

"That's what friends are for, especially Klingon ones."

"Aren't you late for work?"

"Aren't you?"

She rested her head on the back of the sofa. "I don't want to be the admiral today. I'm tired of it."

"Good excuse. I told Patterson that you needed my help and he said to take as much time as I needed."

"He's protective of me," Kathryn said with a shrug.

"Many people are."

Kathryn sighed. "I'm just so tired of all this."

"And there's the second elephant."

"Where?"

"You're depressed."

She stared at the wall, not wanting to acknowledge it. "I don't want to talk about that."

"You've got to."

"No, I don't," she said adamantly.

B'Elanna barreled on. "I've been there and if you recall, you're the one who pulled me out of it. Do you want me to start pointing out the symptoms or can you just agree with me?"

"Fine," Kathryn pulled her blankets around her tighter. "I'm depressed."

"What was the catalyst?"

Kathryn mumbled, "I always get depressed when I lose someone I love."

"But you haven't lost him."

"Haven't I?"

"I don't think so. Did you call him yesterday?"

“Went to see him.”

“Did you break up with him?”

“I tried, but I ended up accepting a date with him for tonight. But that’s it. Then it’s over.”

“You tried? The Janeway I know always succeeds when she puts her mind to something. I don’t think you tried very hard.”

Kathryn’s stomach began to tighten and the heat of tears pushed against her eyes. She hid her face behind her hands because she was afraid that this cry wouldn’t simply be a few tears that escaped.

B’Elanna wrapped her arms around Kathryn. “I know you must hate this, but you’ve got to just let it out.”

“It’s too much,” Kathryn trembled as the flood of tears came. “I can’t keep going.”

“You were serious when you said that you’re carrying the weight of the entire Federation on your shoulders, weren’t you?”

“He said he’d support me, Lanna. He was supposed to help me do this.”

“Instead, he read you the riot act because he was scared.”

“I was doing fine until then, but stupid me, every time I open my heart, it just gets broken. I love him so much, but all we ever do is fight. Six? Seven? Big, big arguments this year. Just when I think we’re on solid ground, it all falls apart.”

“Tom and I told him he was an idiot. Does that help?”

“I wish it did, but I’ve got to let him go.” Kathryn’s tears fell harder. “I can’t expect him to stick with me through this. It’s not his burden, it’s mine.”

B’Elanna held her close. “You know that no matter what happens, you have a whole slew of people who love you, don’t you?”

“Yes, but you’re not him.”

They were quiet for a long time while Kathryn calmed her tears. B’Elanna asked, “I need to ask you about one more thing.”

“Must you?”

“Something you said scared me, because I’ve been there, and I know you have, too.”

“What?”

“You told him that if you died, people would solve all these problems themselves. And a few minutes ago, you said that you can’t keep going. I just want to make sure. Have you thought about it?”

“Dying?” Kathryn sniffed and wiped her cheeks.

“Yeah.” B’Elanna let her head rest against Kathryn’s.

“I’ve faced it many times. So have you.”

“That’s not what I mean. You’re talking about martyrdom. Are you really thinking about that?”

“I can’t admit that and keep my job.”

B’Elanna took a deep breath and hugged her tighter. “I understand. We’re going to fix this.”

“It’s not fixable.”

“Yes, it is. Don’t end it with him tonight. I’m not trying to prolong the inevitable, but I recommend that you give this some daylight, now that all the issues are out there on the table.”

“Lanna…”

“I’m serious. Dead serious,” she glared. “I’ve been there. I know what it’s like.”

“You didn’t tell me that when I made your chief engineer.”

“Well, you didn’t tell me, either, so I’d say we’re equal.”

“That sounds dumb.”

B’Elanna sighed. “Just promise me that you won’t destroy the person you love the most today. You’ll hurt worse.”

“I’m not contemplating suicide, Lanna.”

“I know. Can’t be a martyr that way.”

Kathryn looked at her second best friend and saw the worry in her eyes. “Okay, I won’t make any drastic changes in my life today.”

“Thank you.” B’Elanna stood up and pulled the blankets off.

“Hey.”

“You have two choices, Admiral. Either we’re both taking the day off to eat chocolate and buy ridiculous outfits, or we’re going to work. Which is it?”

Kathryn huffed, “Work,” and then added, “But I wouldn’t mind doing something with you tomorrow night. You know, just to keep me from thinking too much.”

“You’ve got a deal. Let’s go.”

“B’Elanna? You said to call ASAP?” Chakotay asked over the comm.

“I just spent the morning with Kathryn.”

“And?”

“Whatever you do, do NOT let her break up with you.”

“I wasn’t going to.”

“Good.”

“What happened?”

“She is severely depressed, Chakotay, and you’re a p’tak for breaking her heart.”

“B’Elanna?”

“Severely,” she emphasized, “Depressed. You remember what happened in the Void when she decided to sacrifice herself?”

“Yes,” he said worriedly.

“She’s there. Don’t let her go.”

Part 12 - “Fixing Kathryn”

Rating: NC-17

Summary: Trying to make things right

By Dawn

Chakotay looked up when he heard the restaurant become quiet. Kathryn had just come in and was speaking to the host near the entrance. His heart fluttered because he knew that their entire future was hinging on the success of this evening.

When she was escorted to their booth, Chakotay stood up to welcome her. “Kathryn,” he said with a smile and leaned in to innocently kiss her cheek.

“I hope you’ll accept my apology for being late again.” She scooted into the seat across from him.

“It’s no problem. Did you have a busy afternoon?”

“It was a quiet day actually, but it never fails that someone calls just before I’m ready to leave.” She furrowed her brows apologetically. “I had planned to go home first and change.”

“I don’t mind. I’m just glad you’re here.”

“I almost called you to reschedule, but I thought…” She trailed off, not finishing her sentence.

“It wouldn’t hurt my feelings if you’d like to go home, but it wouldn’t hurt to get a bite to eat at least.”

“That’s true,” she caught his eyes for just a second before redirecting her attention to the menu in front of her. “Have you been here before?”

“It’s a first for me. Justin recommended it when I called him about setting this up.”

While they were looking over the menu, their waiter brought them a bottle of the house wine, compliments of the chef for the two very special guests.

A few minutes later, the waiter came back. “Pardon the interruption, Admiral Janeway, but we have a young guest in the restaurant tonight who would love to have your autograph.”

Kathryn glanced at Chakotay who seemed unperturbed, but she wasn’t sure if he was hiding his opinion. She accepted the paper menu and pen from the waiter and scribbled a quick signature. Politely, she said, “If you receive any more requests, would you convey that I’d prefer not to sign anymore this evening?”

“Absolutely, Admiral,” he said courteously. “I apologize for the intrusion.”

When the waiter was gone, she said, “I’m sorry about that, Chakotay.”

“There’s no reason to be. It comes with the territory.”

“You didn’t feel that way last…” She stopped and waved her hand in front of her face. “I’m sorry. Forget I said that. No reason, whatsoever, for me to go there.”

He reached across the table and gave her hand a simple squeeze. “I was out of line last week, and I assure you that I completely understand how you need to maintain your public image. If I may be completely honest with you, I think you handle it all with grace.”

Her eyes stayed with his slightly longer before she averted them. “Thank you. We should probably decide what we’re going to have.”

They were quiet until after the waiter took their orders. Chakotay broke the silence by asking, “How was your day other than quiet?”

“There was nothing really worth mentioning,” she said casually. “Especially in light of your first day of classes. How did they go?”

“I was a little nervous since I haven’t done this for so long, but once I got up in front of the students, I felt right at ease.” He tugged on his ear in slight embarrassment. “That and they were a little star struck.”

She laughed quietly. “I’m sure they were. Did you get a lot of Voyager questions?”

“Of course. And Maquis questions, too. I don’t think either class absorbed much of the syllabus, but since they were eager to start discussing specific incidents, I punted my plans and we dove right in.”

“What did you talk about?”

“They wanted to know a lot about how the Maquis operated, which I glossed over. Then, of course, they wanted to discuss how many times we triumphed over the Borg and how we managed to do it.”

She smiled. “And what did you tell them? Pure luck?”

“Luck is not something we take into consideration in tactics,” he noted. “I told them that letting the Borg attempt to assimilate a torpedo is a nifty trick, and when you have Borg in your cargo bay, depressurizing works best. Oh, and any Borg that are left behind can eventually become a really good friend, with a lot of patience and care.”

Teasing, she said, “Just don’t try to kiss one.”

“All right,” he clicked his tongue. “I deserve that one.”

“Of course it won’t help your students, but having Annika and her nanoprobes around was a tactical advantage in quite a few situations.”

“That’s true. Also won’t help them for me to explain that we also had you. They’ll need to know how to gain a tactical advantage without having the super women of Voyager on board.”

“Super women?” she asked with a smile.

“You, Annika, and B’Elanna.”

“And all three of us butting heads – a First Officer’s nightmare.”

He held up his hands in surrender. “I just tried to stay out of the way and to keep it from coming to blows.”

The waiter interrupted the conversation as he brought their dinner. After they began eating, Kathryn said, “Of course, the likelihood of them facing the Borg isn’t what it used to be.”

“You think we did that much damage?”

“Yes, I do,” she said with assurance.

He looked at her quietly for a moment.

“Penny for your thoughts?” She sipped a drink of wine.

“Oh,” he blushed slightly. “I was just thinking how nice it is to see you smile.”

She stiffened and looked away. “Yeah, I’ve been a little…”

When she didn’t finish her sentence, he said confidently, “We’re going to turn that around.” Without pause, he changed the subject. “One of my students wants to interview me for an article in the campus newspaper.”

It took her a moment to change gears, but then she asked, “Any specific topic in mind?”

“Just a get-to-know-the-faculty article, I assume.”

“I look forward to reading it.”

“Just in case there’s something about me you don’t know?” He winked at her. “So, how was Paris? Did you make any headway?”

“Some.” She explained in more detail, and that led them to talk about the last two peace conferences that he hadn’t heard any details about. Kathryn didn’t ask his advice on anything, but she didn’t have trouble telling him about what she’d learned.

After they finished dessert, they stopped on the sidewalk outside the restaurant. Chakotay asked, “May I walk you home?”

“I have my ground car back at the office.”

“Oh, I forgot about that.”

Justin, who was standing by, offered, “Admiral, it’s almost as far to the office building as it is to your house, and both routes have been secured for you. We can move your vehicle for you so you’ll have it in the morning.”

Uncertain about what to do, she stood still and absently scratched her forehead with her thumb. She said so that only Chakotay would hear, “I’m not sure. I feel so off-balance.”

Chakotay reached out for her hand and placed it in the crook of his arm. He turned to Justin and asked, “To her house?”

“Aye, sir.” Justin corrected himself, “Yes, Chakotay, I mean.”

As they walked ahead of her security, Kathryn whispered, “What was that all about?”

“Justin, you mean?” When she nodded, he continued, “Yesterday, I asked him to relax around me. We’ve been friends for a long time.”

“Yes, I know.” She relaxed a bit, too. “One of the reasons I like having him on my staff.”

He patted her hand.

When they arrived at her door, Kathryn hesitated before unlocking it. She looked back to see that Justin and the other guard were not within hearing range if she kept her voice to a whisper. “Chakotay, thank you for dinner tonight.”

“You’re welcome, but I should be thanking you for joining me. I thought it was a nice evening.”

She looked away. “Yes, but…” She was having a lot of trouble finishing sentences this evening.

“Before I go, could I ask a favor?”

Nervously, she asked, “What’s that?”

“May I use your restroom? I have a long walk back.”

Kathryn slowly crooked a smile. “Sure,” she said as she pressed her thumb on the security panel. “Come on in.”

Once inside the entryway, she froze and he almost ran into her. “On second thought, I don’t know if this is a good idea.”

“It’s not?”

She turned around and tried to usher him back out. “No, I’m sorry.”

“Kathryn, wait. What’s wrong?” He stopped her by holding her elbows. “Surely you’re not that uncomfortable around me?”

She closed her eyes and sighed. “No, I just forgot that I left a mess in here and I don’t want you to see it.”

Amused, he let go of her arms and stepped back. “What have you been doing? Rebuilding your replicator again?”

“No,” she said desolately, rubbing her eyes with her fingers.

He guided her into the living area. “Come on, it can’t be that bad. I saw it a week ago.”

They both stopped when the lights came on. He looked around and tried to hide his reaction, but Kathryn could see that he was stunned and that there was a flash of distress in his eyes. Her feet were frozen to the floor with embarrassment.

He moved first. “Well, you have been very busy with work since you’ve been back. I’m happy to lend you a hand.” Picking up as many dirty coffee cups as he could carry, he walked into the kitchen saying, “After all, it was I who filled up your evening tonight. The least I could do is assist with what I can.”

When he returned, she hadn’t moved an inch. “Kathryn, may I help you with your coat?”

“Hmm?” she asked as he stood behind her. “Oh, my coat.” She unbuttoned it and let him ease it off her shoulders. “Thank you, it’s hot.”

As he hung it up, he nodded to her shirt. “Are you wearing the standard double layers, too? Why don’t you go change while I help you a little down here?”

“You don’t have to,” she said sadly.

“I know, but I don’t mind at all. Go on up.” He waved at the staircase as he gathered up more dishes off her coffee table.

She did as directed and made a bee-line past her bed to get into the bathroom for a quick shower. Every time she looked at her bed, she was faced with the memory and the physical evidence of sleeping with Chakotay.

As she showered, she was unsure what to think about him being downstairs, not to mention what to think about the entire evening. It felt so natural for him to take care of her this way, but she was extremely embarrassed by what he’d seen. He’d alluded to her feeling depressed, but now

that he'd seen the state of her house, it was hard to hide that she was not herself. Worse yet, she'd been completely unable to step into her professional compartment around him. She felt uncomfortably exposed.

When she finished showering, she dressed in a tank-top and pajama pants, having no reason to impress him, she'd taken off her makeup and brushed out her hair. She headed down the stairs, but stopped midway to watch him working in the kitchen with his back to her. She acknowledged that he was a good man at heart, despite his recent behavior.

Once she'd fully opened herself up to loving Chakotay, she was vulnerable in a way that she'd never felt before. With Mark, she'd been in complete control of the relationship. She merely needed to crook her finger and he'd do whatever she asked, whenever she asked it. She knew it wasn't a healthy relationship, but it worked for her at the time and it gave her confidence.

Now, she had Chakotay. Like her mother said, a good relationship requires give and take. The problem was that she had nothing to give, and what she wanted most was to receive his support, his affection, and his confidence in her. He'd told her in May that he didn't want to wait until she was done with her mission to be together, but since his tirade, he hadn't even told her that he loved her. Not since after Justin's death had she felt so lost and alone.

“Kathryn?”

Startled, she opened her eyes. “Sorry, was just thinking.”

“That's all right,” he extended his hand to encourage her to finish coming down the stairs.

She rubbed her tense neck as she said, “You really didn't have to clean all those dishes. I'm embarrassed for having been such a slob.”

“I didn't mind a bit, and I know how they can pile up when you're busy.”

She moved around him and gathered up the dirty clothes she'd left on a chair. Not wanting to be in her bedroom, she'd been changing downstairs and hadn't cared enough to take her dirty clothes up to the hamper.

He watched her take them up and took the time to stack PADDs, wipe up spilled coffee, and throw away used tissues. The sheer number of them meant that she was either struggling with a cold or she'd been crying heavily. He had little doubt that it was the latter, and surmised that it had happened while B'Elanna had been there that morning.

When she came back down again, she descended the stairs slowly, taking stock of the situation. He couldn't help but notice her and smiled. “You look like you're strategizing.”

“Do I?” She stayed at the bottom of the stairs, away from him. “Well, professor, what's your advice for the best tactical maneuver?”

“That depends on what you’re trying to accomplish.” He set the trash can down. “For example, if you’re looking for the nearest exit, you’ve got a problem because there are security guards outside.”

“And the windows are all reinforced with a polaron energy barrier.”

“That presents a substantial obstacle.” He walked a little closer and held out his hand. “Let me rub your neck. You’ve been pulling at it all night.”

“Not necessary,” she held up a hand to stay him off.

He bit back a grin. “With that tone of voice, I almost expected to hear my former rank behind your protest.” He turned back to the couch, straightened the sheet that covered it, and sat down on the end opposite her pillows. “You know you need it, and you know I can help. It’s just a simple neck rub.” He patted the couch in front of him.

She hesitated and then asked, “Just my neck?”

“Shoulders, too? Whatever you’d like.”

“That’s not quite what I meant.”

“I know.”

She stepped into the sitting area, but didn’t close the distance. “I was strategizing how to gracefully ask you to go home. Have you used the restroom yet?”

“Funny, I forgot all about that.”

Raising an eyebrow, she asked, “Using tactical maneuvers to get into my house?”

“It’s not beneath me.” He tugged on his ear, his smile showing off his dimples.

“I’ll note that for future reference.” Eyeing the couch, she said, “Just a simple massage? No underlying strategies for weakening my resolve?”

“None.”

She eyed him suspiciously as she tentatively sat down with her back to him. “Why don’t I believe you?”

As he laid his hands on her shoulders, he said, “I know it’s going to take some time, but I’m covertly trying to regain your trust.”

“You just blew your cover.” She sighed as he ran his fingers through her hair to gather it to one side.

“Darn, now you know my ulterior motives.” His fingers expertly found the spot that always bothered her the most.

“Just so you know, I do trust you.”

“With information and your safety, yes. But not with your heart.”

She was quiet as he worked on her neck, feeling him press firmly to relieve the pressure on the two knots that were giving her trouble. She began to relax as his fingers threaded up into her hair to massage the back of her head. His therapeutic touch calmed her anxiety and made her feel more comfortable with him. It was nothing like the massages he’d given her on Voyager. They’d always had a hint of sensuality that was enough to arouse her. She’d often wondered if he’d sensed that.

“May I work on your shoulders?”

“If you’d like.”

“Is there still lotion in the guest bathroom down here?” he asked as he got up.

“There should be.” She used the moment alone to redirect her thoughts away from anything sensual. She’d be weakening her own resolve, confusing him, and prolonging the inevitable.

She gave him a guarded smile when he returned, but the smile turned genuine when he handed her a hairclip. She gathered her hair up off her neck and secured it tightly.

“I’m not trying to suggest anything, but could I lower the straps of your tank?”

She did it for him, afraid that letting him do it would be too suggestive.

He put lotion on his hands and began to work his thumbs into the stiff muscles of her shoulders. It would take awhile to loosen her up, but he’d take however long was necessary. Looking at the sheet they were sitting on, he said, “Just a suggestion, and one you can disregard, but you might want to move back to your bed. Sleeping here is not doing your neck any good.”

She tensed up in response, and then relaxed as his hands pushed her shoulders back down. “I haven’t felt like doing laundry.”

His fingers paused and his eyes closed in a moment of grief. She was avoiding her bed because of that night last week. Not wanting to make her uncomfortable, he took a calming breath and began massaging again. He pushed past the lump in his throat to make an excuse for her.

“Laundry isn’t my favorite thing, either. Did you know that I rarely made my bed on Voyager?”

“Good thing I never enforced crew quarter inspections.”

“More than you realize. You would not have been at all pleased with some. I could tell you stories.”

“I’d love to hear them sometime.”

“And I would love to tell them.” His fingers were digging deep and hard into the muscles, but they were so tight that the pain probably felt good. As he began to work down her back over the shirt, her commbadge beeped.

She groaned and dropped her head before saying loudly to her coat on the nearby coat rack. “Open the channel. Janeway here.”

“Kathryn, this is Admiral Khurma. I hope I’m not calling at a bad time?”

“What can I do for you?” She was grateful that Chakotay hadn’t stopped rubbing her back.

“Representative Niceen just called to tell me they have a proposal to present to us tomorrow in Paris.”

She took an unusual pause before replying, “Would it be possible to convene the meeting here? I’m concerned that if we go to Paris for one meeting, we’ll be pulled into others, and I’ve got a lot on my calendar tomorrow.”

Khurma paused, too. “I don’t know. It would be highly irregular to ask a council committee to meet away from the Paris headquarters. I could insist that we have to return immediately.”

“If they can’t come to San Francisco, I’ll go, but I’d prefer to stay here.”

He paused again. “Kathryn, are you not feeling well?”

Chakotay’s hands stopped.

“It’s just late, Admiral. Please accept my apologies.”

“No apology necessary. As I’ve told you before, you may speak freely at any time. I’ll contact Niceen to find a better date or location, and leave you a message so I won’t interrupt your evening again. Get some rest, Kathryn. Khurma out.”

Chakotay hesitantly resumed the massage, but started again at her shoulders to ease down the tension the conversation had just generated.

“That went well,” she said with a sigh.

“I wouldn’t worry about it. He seems very understanding.”

“I just didn’t want to go to Paris again so soon. As you know, I wanted to be home as much as possible, but it’s not turning out that way.”

“Things rarely turn out like we expect, but I’m sure that you just got that point across.” He worked his thumbs into the muscles on the left side of her upper back.

“We communicate pretty well on official matters. He and I have a briefing at least once a day, sometimes more.”

“I remember you telling me about that. You said you’re very comfortable working for him.”

“I am, or I was.” She pulled her knees up to her chest and leaned forward to give him better access to her back. “I haven’t mentioned it to you, because of… well, you know. But it’s been a little tense since he gave me a formal reprimand.”

“A formal? On your file?”

“Yes,” she sighed. “That was hard to swallow.”

His hands stroked lightly down her back in an attempt to soothe her without hugging her. “And then I called.”

She only nodded in response as she bunched up a pillow and rested her chin on it.

He continued his light touch on her back. “Do you remember when you gave me a formal reprimand?”

“You don’t like to talk about her.”

“I’ll make an exception. I was so upset that I had let you down, because in my heart, I thought I was doing what I could to protect you and the rest of the crew. I felt really brave going in there to get back the technology she stole. When you brought Voyager in to rescue me, I felt like an idiot.”

Her eyes were growing hot, but she pushed down the feeling. “It’s hard to get knocked down when you think you’ve done a valiant thing.”

“And even harder when it comes from someone you love.”

She straightened her back and changed the subject. “Lanna and I made plans to play velocity tomorrow night.”

“That’s good. It’ll probably help release more of this tension.”

“I think so, too.”

“Just promise me that you won’t pretend my head is the ball.”

She chuckled. “I wouldn’t.”

Putting more lotion on his hands, he said, “Let’s work your arms, then. So you’ll be limber enough to give her a good match.”

“Aren’t your hands getting tired?”

“Not at all.” He paused before starting on her arms. “Unless you’d like me to stop?”

“It’s helping a lot. I just don’t want to wear your hands out, or give you the wrong impression. And it’s getting late.”

He began to work her right shoulder and her upper arm. “My hands are fine and it’s only nine, so relax.” He continued, “I’ve been told that touch is a great healer, and I’m under the impression that we both need healing.”

She let him work quietly for awhile as he moved from one shoulder, digging in deep across her upper back. “Lanna was here this morning.”

“I thought she might’ve been.”

“Oh?” Kathryn turned her head.

“She called me to tell me I was a P’tak.”

“Was that all she said?”

“That was the gist of it, but she’s worried about you.” He moved to the other shoulder.

“We had a long talk, and I told her more than I should have. About us, I mean, but I don’t think I said anything that she didn’t already know.”

“I’m glad that you two are developing a strong friendship. Would you have imagined it seven years ago?”

“Not at all.” She turned her head to watch him work her arm. “I was going to tell you tonight that this is it for us, but Lanna has threatened me within an inch of my life if I do.”

He didn’t pause at all as he said, “I’ve had similar threats from her. She’s fierce when she’s determined.”

“That she is.”

Shrugging nonchalantly, he said, “Well, then, for B’Elanna’s sake, maybe we should get together again later this week or over the weekend. Whenever you’ve got your resolve back up.”

She shivered as he took the clip out of her hair. “You think you’ve torn it down, some?”

“Of course not,” he joked. “You’re much too stubborn for that.”

Her back and neck stretched up as he massaged the tension back out of her scalp. “I’m not stubborn. I’m strong-willed.”

“Is that what you call it?” She leaned her head back to make it easier for him to get the sides of her head.

“Yes.” She turned around to look at him, a serious expression on her face. “Chakotay, despite what Lanna said, this...”

He held a finger against her lips. “Don’t say it.” Pulling it away, he added, “Not tonight. If you’re sure about this, waiting won’t change anything, but if there’s any doubt in your mind whatsoever, waiting just might change everything.”

She looked into his eyes for a long moment and finally nodded. “We’ll wait.”

Looking at the couch, he said, “Let’s get you settled in, here. I’ll sit with you for awhile.”

“You don’t need to stay. I’ll be okay.”

“I need to stay, so that I’ll be okay.” He got up and fluffed her pillows for her, knowing exactly how she liked them. She hesitantly stretched out, but relaxed into the pillows as soon as her head touched them. Covering her with a blanket, he said, “I’ll turn out the lights.”

“You’re going to watch me sleep?” she asked as he walked away.

“I still have my book here. Thought I’d read for awhile.”

“All right.” When it was semi-dark, she closed her eyes and soon drifted off to sleep.

He pretended to read until he was sure she was out, and then he tiptoed up the stairs to remove ‘his’ mess. It was eleven by the time he’d finally remade her bed, put her clean clothes away, and tidied up as best he could. He thought it strange how, even though it was her house, it felt like his home, too. He’d never felt like a visitor.

Although he didn’t want to wake her, he thought he should say goodbye and let her know that she could move upstairs if she wanted. He kneeled down in the dark, next to her head, and whispered, “Kathryn?”

She hummed quietly, but didn’t wake up until he caressed her arm. “Kotay?”

“Shhh... just wanted to tell you that I'm leaving. Your bed has clean sheets if you want to move upstairs.”

Lifting her head, she asked, “You washed them?”

“They’re all clean. Do you want help going up?”

She laid her head back down. “Comfy here.”

“You look it.” He so badly wanted to kiss her, but knew she wouldn’t want it. Feeling brave, he picked up a squishy throw pillow, and lifted her arm to tuck it up close to her.

“A pillow?” she asked sleepily as she accepted it.

“The support will help your back.” He worked up the courage to stroke her hair back from where it lay on her cheek, causing her to open her eyes and look at him. He glanced at her eyes for a second and then redirected his gaze back to her hair. “I have a very special pillow that I sleep with when I miss you.” He squeezed the one she was holding. “If it’ll help you, think of this as me.”

He could see the moon’s reflection in the moisture of her eyes. Hoping her shields were down, he kept talking. “I know that I’ve hurt you deeply, and I'm very sorry. I was scared out of my mind, and I'm afraid that I temporarily lost my mind as a result. I would never, ever intentionally do or say anything to cause you pain. You are my life, Kathryn. I love you so much it hurts.”

Tears fell swiftly down her cheeks as she asked, “You still love me?”

“Of course, I do. More than ever.”

Her lips trembled. “You haven’t told me in so long that I wasn’t sure.”

“I haven’t told you?” His heart fell.

“Not since before...” She closed her eyes, making more tears fall.

“Oh, my love. I am so sorry. I didn’t even realize.” He caressed her hand. “Can I hold you?”

She lifted her head and shook it. “I can’t, I'm sorry.”

The rejection made him feel like he couldn’t breathe, but he refused to let it get to him. “I understand, but I'm not leaving you like this.”

She wiped her tears away. “You should go sleep.”

“No, I should be here with you. You’re hurting, and despite what you say, I know you need me.” He leaned forward and kissed her temple, causing her to recoil slightly. “Even if you can’t accept my love, I’m giving it to you.”

She turned her face to bury it in the pillow as she began to cry in earnest.

“Don’t be embarrassed,” he said as he gathered her hair and laid it over her shoulder. “It’s just me.”

“That’s just it.” She sat up and wiped her tears away angrily. “I don’t want you to see how hurt I am. I don’t want to be weak, and I hate it that you’ve weakened me so much.”

“No, love. I need to see this so that I know what an idiot I’ve been.” He handed her the box of tissue.

“But deep down, you must believe those awful things you said about me. I’ve been trying to decide if they’re true.” She blew her nose and then took another couple of tissues to wipe her eyes.

“No,” he swore. “They’re absolutely not true. I was way out of line.”

She covered her mouth with both hands and the tears fell as her body began to shake. “But I did almost kill Noah.”

Unable to stop himself, he got up on the couch and pulled her into his arms. “It was an awful situation, Kathryn. You know how undeniably stressed you were, and you’ve already let go of this. I am so sorry that I even mentioned it. That has got to be one of the stupidest things I’ve ever done.” He rubbed her back as she cried into his shoulder.

She clung to him as she said, “I wasn’t trying to kill my officers. I treasure every single one of them.”

“I know you do.” He wrapped his arms completely around her. “I’m so sorry. And you’re not out for blood, either.”

Her hand reached out for a tissue and then she blew her nose right up against his shirt. When she was done, she mumbled, “I am a little.”

He bit back a smile and then kissed her head. “Zife has really made a mess of things, hasn’t he?”

Nodding against his chest, she said, “I want to wring his neck.”

“So do I, love. So do I.” He held her in silence for awhile. She went through a couple dozen tissues as her tears ebbed and flowed a few times.

When she finally calmed down, she sat up on her own and rubbed her face. “I’m a mess.”

He took her hand between both of his and watched her for a minute. “Have I convinced you that I’m an idiot, yet?”

She crooked a smile. “You didn’t even need to try.”

He squeezed her hand and smiled in return. “I deserve that.”

She let him hold her again for awhile and then said, “I need some time to deal with this.”

“I’ll give you whatever you need if you promise me that you won’t isolate yourself.”

Absently playing with his sleeve, she said, “It’s easier by myself where I don’t have to put on an act.”

“I know.” He squeezed her gently. “But it will get worse. We’re going to get you through this, Kathryn. I won’t let you sink, and none of your friends will either.”

Tears fell again as she admitted, “I need help, but I don’t want to let you in again. You broke my heart, and you broke me. This isn’t who I am – this sad, vulnerable, overly-dependent woman. I hate this.”

He clamped his eyes shut in pain. “I know my apologies don’t really help, but somehow, we’ll get you back on your feet. You’re not alone in this.”

“But I’ll be stronger if I can do this without you.”

“You’ll be stronger when you can rely on your best friend to keep your heart safe. When you can do what you need to do and feel secure that I’ll love you, no matter what.”

“I don’t think I can.”

He brushed his fingers through her hair. “Let’s take it one day at a time, just like we did a couple years ago. I promise that I’ll always be here for you.”

“You can’t promise that.”

After chancing a light kiss on her forehead, he said, “I can until my dying breath. After that, there are many people who love you and they will give you strength. You’re going to be okay.”

“I have to be.”

He resituated her a little so they could hold each other more comfortably, and then lightly caressed her back with just his fingers. As the deep, even rhythm of sleep settled over her, he let himself cry silently for all the grief and pain he’d caused.

The next day, Kathryn met B'Elanna bright and early to walk the track at the officer's health club. She reported that although she hadn't broken up with Chakotay, yet, she'd made it clear that the relationship couldn't go back to the way it was. She was irritated when B'Elanna shrugged off her decision with a "We'll see."

Her meeting with the small committee of Council representatives had been relocated to San Francisco, for which she was grateful. It took only an hour for them to present their strategies for resuming pre-war services to all Federation worlds. Khurma told her afterwards that although it was a small step, it was an issue that had received no acknowledgement before she got involved.

As he was preparing to leave her office, Khurma said, "I know I just asked last night, but you didn't directly answer my question. Are you feeling all right, Kathryn?"

"I'm fine, Admiral. Do you have concerns about my work?"

"No, not at all. You're doing an excellent job. I just like to make sure my staff members are happy and healthy."

She raised an eyebrow. "Do you ask all of them periodically if they're feeling all right?"

He thought for a moment. "Now that you ask... it seldom comes up." He looked carefully at her. "I believe that this position we've placed you in could become overwhelming if not handled with a certain level of detachment. I would hate to see that loss of fire in your eyes become permanent, so if there's anything we need to change, please feel free to tell me."

"I'm as determined as ever, Admiral."

"Yes, I can see that. Just don't let that determination take over your entire life. This is just a job."

She felt slightly uncomfortable with the conversation, but refused to show it. "Understood, sir."

"That's not an order, Kathryn. Just some advice from an old man."

"You're hardly old," she hedged a smile.

"Old enough to know that there is much more to life than Starfleet. Don't miss it," he said as he walked out the door.

She sat down behind her desk and put her head in her hands. It was time to let go of what happened a month ago. Khurma had only known her for a short time, but her depression had even become obvious enough that he felt the need to say something.

Her personal life, on the other hand, was a royal mess. If she were to take the time to make a pros and cons list regarding Chakotay, she was pretty sure that the pros would be victorious, but it was the cons that kept her from following her heart. As Chakotay had said, waiting for a short time had its merits. He'd definitely made a complete turnaround in his interactions with her, but she wasn't convinced that it would last forever.

B'Elanna had guessed right. Kathryn had been thinking about how martyrdom might benefit the cause. She didn't have a death wish, but she wondered if she was popular enough that her demise might positively affect the Federation. If the unthinkable happened and she was killed, she hoped her speeches would be taken to heart so that her goals might be accomplished post mortem. What she didn't want to consider was the grief and pain that her death would bring to Chakotay, her friends, and her family.

Martyrdom might work, but not as a deliberate ploy. She trusted her instincts to know when it was important to put her life on the line, but she also had a gut feeling every time about whether she'd survive or not. If she let the fears of her loved ones influence her actions, she was worried that she might become too cautious and fail to do her job.

Sue beeped in and interrupted her introspection. "Admiral, Dr. Zimmerman is here to see you. Are you available or would you like him to return at a later time?"

Kathryn thought it unusual that Sue didn't ask if she wanted to see him, but rather when. She said, "Now is fine," although she couldn't imagine what he needed to see her for.

"Good morning, Admiral," he practically sang, entirely too chipper.

"Morning. What can I do for you today?" She wondered what was in the bag he'd just set on her desk, making himself at home.

"Just a social call. How are you?" He was practically bouncing on his photonic feet.

"I'm fine," she said guardedly, but with slight amusement. "However, you look like you're just about to burst with good news. Do you have something to tell me?"

"No, no, nothing like that. I just want to be clear that this is a social visit between friends."

She eyed him suspiciously. "What's in the bag, Joe?"

He opened it up. "Now that you ask, I'd love to show you the latest innovation in medical tricorders that we've developed over at Starfleet Medical. Come around here, and I'll give you a demonstration."

As she joined him in front of her desk, she said, "That has got to be one of the most unoriginal excuses you've ever used to get me to submit to a physical."

“It seems to have worked, and it is new technology.” He ran the scanning interface slowly around her head.

When he stopped, she asked, “Only a brain scan today?”

“Are you feeling unwell elsewhere?”

“What makes you think I'm feeling unwell up here?” She tapped the side of her head.

“Not a thing, Admiral. I'm just giving my new scanner a test run. Care to see the results?” He handed her the tri-corder.

She sighed. It was a scan of her brain chemicals and activity, and she knew from personal experience what these particular results meant. “Who sent you?”

With faked surprise, he asked, “You want me to reveal my sources?”

“Yes, I do.” She frowned. “Sources? Plural?”

He evaded the question. “Officially, you're perfectly healthy, Admiral. I have nothing of note to report from this social visit.”

“Unofficially?” She decided to play along with his game.

He put the tri-corder away and handed her an unmarked container of medication. “One dose per day will help.”

She opened it to see tiny white capsules. “What are they?”

“The same placebos you took a few years ago, but in a form that doesn't require a hypospray.”

“Is there any record of them?” she asked, knowing full well that a diagnosis of clinical depression would likely end her career. However, she could tell by his covert approach that he obviously knew that, too.

“No record at all,” he assured. “Your neurons will be firing at full strength again once your serotonin is leveled out.”

She had to admit that she was relieved that there was something chemically wrong. It made her weakness easier to accept. “How many doses are here?”

“Six weeks, and that should be enough, but I wouldn't mind testing out another tri-corder on you at that point. Your first dose,” he said as he injected her with a hypospray. He gave her a second, and said, “A mild analgesic. Now, if you'll sit down here, we'll take care of your headache.”

“I didn't tell you that I have one,” she said as she sat in one of her low-back visitor chairs.

He stood behind her, and began manipulating her neck. “You didn’t have to.”

After a resounding pop, she felt the tension ease away. As he continued to make slight adjustments on her skull, she said seriously, “I would like to know who sent you, Joe.”

“Two of your friends came to see me. B’Elanna and Chakotay.”

“They told you that I was depressed?” She was surprised, and a little concerned that they would both violate her privacy.

“Not directly. B’Elanna asked yesterday for advice about an unnamed friend who might be experiencing symptoms, wondering if there were non-medical interventions she could try. I suggested exercise and keeping the friend socially engaged. I didn’t know she was talking about you until Chakotay came to see me this morning.”

“And what did he say?” She wasn’t really annoyed at them, but a little embarrassed that they’d gone to Joe.

He came around to sit across from her. “I assure you he said nothing to breach confidentiality.”

The slight rise of unease deflated. “Then how did you know?”

“He merely asked me to make a social call because he was concerned about your headache. I could tell by his mannerisms that there was more to the story, but he wouldn’t say anything further and I didn’t feel it was appropriate to push him. I knew something was up, and then I put it together with B’Elanna’s call yesterday.”

“All right. I won’t berate them too harshly,” she acquiesced.

“They are your closest friends, and they do have your best interests at heart, as do I.”

“I know, and thank you. He and B’Elanna have both taken me on as their personal reclamation projects. However, I foresee a conspiracy to keep my evenings full.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time.” Joe picked up his tri-corder and scanned her entire body. He didn’t look at her when he said, “Might as well seize the moment to get a full physical in.”

She rolled her eyes, but let him continue.

After Joe left, she sent a quick text-only message to Chakotay. “Your covert maneuvers have been exposed again. Joe just left here. You might want to rethink your tactics, Professor.”

A few minutes later, she got a response. He wrote back, “What you don’t realize, love, is that part of my tactical strategy involves exposing my maneuvers for your contemplation. Was he able to treat your headache?”

She wrote back simply, “Yes, and more.” A few years ago, she’d told him about the so-called placebos that the doctor had given her after her last dive into depression. It had reassured both of them that she was able to retake command of the ship.

Over the next two weeks, life returned to a semblance of normal. Her workdays were busy, and her evenings were filled with casual invitations from friends and family. Although she and Chakotay only went to dinner once more by themselves, she saw him almost every night because he received most of the same invitations.

The evening that was the most confidence-strengthening was hosted by Tuvok. He invited Voyager’s former senior staff to his personal defense classroom for a brush-up. They all balked at first, but decided it could be fun to battle each other.

Kathryn watched with enjoyment as the opponents sized each other up. The challenge with this group was that no one wanted to hurt anyone else, but as the evening wore on, their competitive natures began to take over. She was first matched with Harry and easily and good-naturedly took him down. Tuvok informed him that he should not be afraid to assault his commanding officer if need be, generating a lot of laughter from everyone.

The air of competition was high when Tuvok instructed, “Admiral, Captain, please take the mat.”

She immediately sensed his hesitation and formulated a strategy based on his weak spot – her. Her usual approach was to wait until attacked before defending herself, and she knew exactly how to do it, regardless of the size, weight, strength, and any weapon her attacker might have. She faced Chakotay with a determination to win the battle. Knowing he wouldn’t expect it, she made the first strike with what she knew would be the quickest and most effective way to incapacitate her opponent – a powerful right thrust straight at his nose.

He deflected it by grabbing her arm and twisting it, forcing her to turn with it. She knew that he intended to pin her against him, but she ducked and rolled out of his grasp before hopping back up to her feet.

Chakotay’s eyes narrowed as he hunkered down. “Impressive move.”

“You think you’re stronger than me.”

“I know I am.” He waited for her to attack, knowing that offense was her weak spot. She didn’t disappoint and did a leap attack accompanied by a full kick to his abdomen. He recoiled in pain before running back at her. This was what she was waiting for. She dropped her center of gravity and charged, throwing him over in a somersault.

“That’s two hits, Captain.” She knew she looked smug as he got to his feet.

Tuvok said, "All right, let's have..."

Chakotay interrupted. "This isn't over, Admiral."

She raised an eyebrow as she hunkered back down. "Give me your best shot."

When he lunged forward, she swung out her right leg to disable his knee and he dropped to the floor like a sack of potatoes.

Growling, he jumped back up before giving her time to anticipate his action. Knowing he wouldn't hit her, the only remaining defense was to deflect his full body charge by spinning fast around and elbowing him in the back.

Roaring in response, he reached behind him and grabbed her arm so fast that she had no time to react. Within seconds, he had her pinned against his front with her arms trapped. "Now, what are you going to do?" His voice was low and heavy in her ear.

Arousal shot through her from being restrained against him. Licking her lips, she had a plan to use her own reaction against him. She struggled just enough that her back was slightly arched, her arms pinned tighter, and her breasts heaving. She breathed deeper than she needed to, just to emphasize his favorite part of her body. As Tuvok took a step forward, Kathryn shot him a glare with the clear instruction to stop.

Chakotay asked, "Not ready to give up?"

"I never surrender. You know that."

"There's a time when even that is the best option, Kathryn."

"Really? You want me to surrender next time I'm attacked?" She felt it as he immediately tensed. She knew he'd been referring to surrendering to him, personally, but she had to use what she had, and talking to her opponent was one of her greatest strengths.

He recovered by saying, "Depends on the nature of the attack." Pulling her arms tighter, he said, "You're not getting away from me."

It was time to strike. She relaxed her body as if she was giving up, and pressed herself back into him, knowing her rear was right in line with his crotch. It was enough to make him gasp in surprise and forget what he was doing. She pulled her arms out, grabbed his, and took him down. Before he realized what had happened, she was straddling him with his arms pinned to the floor.

"You relaxed your guard, Captain." She was still aroused as she looked triumphantly into his eyes.

He could see the fire in her, and his heart leapt for joy. She was back. “How do you know that wasn’t my strategy all along?”

Realization struck her, and she knew she’d been caught. Her cheeks felt warm as she looked away and stood up.

Tuvok said, “Very nice maneuvers from both of you.”

Kathryn nodded in appreciation and went to stand next to Annika. She felt slightly flustered under Chakotay’s intense gaze from across the room.

Before they left for the evening, Chakotay caught B’Elanna alone and said, “Definite progress.”

“Agreed,” she answered, not wanting to talk at length with Kathryn watching.

They all went out for drinks afterwards, but Kathryn kept her distance from him. Normally, he would’ve been offended by the cold shoulder, but he knew it meant her resolve was dissipating. She didn’t trust herself around him. In response, he purposely caught her eyes as often as possible to give her a loving and reassuring smile.

Two days later, Kathryn walked back from Khurma’s office with a heavy heart. He’d just informed her of a new mission, one that she didn’t feel ready for.

When she got back to her desk, she decided that she’d better let Chakotay know as soon as possible, although she was dreading making the call. The nature of what she’d be dealing with in the months ahead meant that their relationship couldn’t continue, and she owed it to him to talk to him face to face.

He answered immediately. “Good morning, Kathryn. This is a pleasant surprise.”

“I’m sorry for bothering you during your advising hours,” she said quietly.

“No apology necessary. I’m always happy to talk to you.” He paused, noticing something in her expression. “What’s wrong?”

“I’ve.” She started to tell him and then stopped. “I need to talk to you.”

“Okay. What about?”

“In person. Could we meet over your lunch?”

“Sure, I have a class at 13:00.”

Her shoulders dropped. “And I have a briefing at noon.”

“Kathryn, what is it?”

She hesitated. “I’d rather speak in person.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yes.” She knew she didn’t sound convincing.

“Do you have time right now? I can come to your office.”

“I don’t want to take you from your work.”

“My appointments can be rescheduled. I’ll be right there.”

While she waited, she finished the work on her desk. He arrived about fifteen minutes later and was immediately let in by Sue. Kathryn finished up a communiqué and rose to get him a tea, but he stopped her with a hand on her arm. “Are you okay?”

His proximity was difficult to ignore. “I’m okay. I have an opportunity to pursue one of my obligations.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve been asked to begin diplomatic conversations with the Romulan Empire.”

His mouth dropped open. “Wow!”

She relaxed with his unexpected enthusiasm. “I was shocked when Khurma told me. Someone in the Romulan government, who Khurma trusts, wants to initiate a dialogue with the Federation.”

“Wouldn’t something that huge be handled by the President?”

“They don’t want to talk to him. They’ve asked for me, specifically.”

“Well, it makes sense, considering all of the publicity you’ve had.”

She nodded, “Yes, that’s how they learned about me, but I have to proceed confidentially. No one is to know that I’ll be having these conversations. They merely want to open a discussion to explore possibilities and believe that I’m the best person to talk to.”

“Do you think Q had anything to do with this?”

“Possibly,” she shrugged. “But I still haven’t heard from him.”

“I expected him to show up again before now.”

“I did, too.” She placed a hand on his arm. “Khurma wants me to leave as soon as possible.”

“You’re going to Romulus?”

“The location of the meeting is confidential, but my orders are to proceed to the Neutral Zone. I don’t know how long I’ll be, or if I’ll be able to communicate if we head out of Federation Space.”

“I understand.”

“I’m not sure you do. I don’t know what to expect when I get there, or how long I’ll be gone. When I’m done, Khurma wants me to immediately begin a diplomatic tour along the outer borders of Federation space since I’ll be out there. I’ll be gone for at least four months, but depending on how much time it takes, it could be well into next year before I get back. It’s too soon to tell.”

His shoulders sagged. “Oh.”

“Chakotay, I don’t want to go, especially not right now, but how can I turn this down?”

“You can’t,” he said sadly. “Who knows about this?”

“They contacted Khurma directly yesterday afternoon. Only he, you, and I are to know about it. The Pioneer crew won’t even know until we leave Federation space.”

“I should thank him for trusting me.”

“I insisted.”

“Thank you, then.” He looked deep into her eyes. “Oh, Kathryn. Will you be okay?”

“You mean with my undiagnosed problem?” She put some distance between them.

“I’m worried about you.”

“I know. There’s a lot riding on this and I have to be at my best.” She took a steady breath. “I’m leaving tomorrow afternoon.”

“So soon?”

She closed her eyes, not wanting to confront this issue at the moment, but she had no choice. “Chakotay... I can’t wait any longer.”

“I understand that you need to go. It’s okay.”

Shaking her head, she said, “That’s not what I meant. You asked me to wait to end our relationship, but I’ve got to do it now.”

He faced her with resolve. “No, Kathryn, you don’t.”

“Don’t make this harder than it is. I’ve been putting it off for over two weeks.”

Determined, he said, “I’m going to make this as difficult as possible, because I refuse to let you do this to us. I refuse to let you do this to yourself.”

She begged, “Please, Chakotay.”

He took her hands and waited until she looked directly at him. “Kathryn, do you love me?”

Looking away, she said, “Don’t make me answer that.”

“I already know the answer, but I want you to say it.”

“I can’t lie to you.”

“I know.”

Facing him again, she answered, “Yes, Chakotay, I love you, but…”

He stopped her by covering her lips with his fingers. “There’s no buts. You love me, and I love you, and we’ll work this out, however long it takes.”

Pulling his fingers away, she said, “You keep doing that.”

“What?”

“Putting your fingers on my lips. It’s annoying, and I can’t get a word in edgewise.”

He smiled guiltily. “That’s why I do it.”

“Yes, I love you,” she repeated as she moved away from him, “but I have to let you go. It’s too hard for me out there, knowing that any decision that I make is going to torment you, and I can’t take your negative reactions.”

“You don’t trust me, yet,” he said sadly.

“I don’t want you to put your life on hold while I do what I have to do.”

“That’s not your choice to make.”

“Yes, it is. By letting you move on to find someone else, I’ll know that you’ll be okay if something happens to me.”

With disbelief, he asked, “You really think that I can just find someone else and magically stop loving you?”

“You wouldn’t be alone.”

“That is the most absurd thing you’ve ever said. Kathryn, I can’t possibly be with anyone else but you, and whether you’re here or not, I’ll be in love with you, and only you.”

“But you told me that you didn’t want to put our relationship off until I get all of this taken care of.”

He stared at her dumbfounded, and then rolled his eyes. “Of course I’d rather not wait to live happily ever after, as I’m sure you’d rather not, either, but that’s not how this is working out. Are you afraid that if we suspend things for six months, our love will diminish?”

“Yes, it did in the last six.”

“Only because I was a jerk.”

“And because I pissed you off.”

“Let’s resolve this, right now.”

“How?”

“Let’s take the unknown element out of our relationship completely.” He kneeled down in front of her. “Kathryn, would you marry me?”

“You can’t be serious. Marry you?”

“Yes. We can get married tonight. Owen could officiate, and then we’ll have a party with your family. We can spend a wonderful night together before you have to leave.”

She groaned. “Chakotay, you’re insane.”

“Just say yes, and I’ll prove to you that my commitment is forever.”

“I’m trying to break up with you, not commit to a lifetime of fighting. You don’t want to be stuck with a woman who makes you angry every other week.”

“As I said, that’s not your choice to make. I will do everything in my power to avoid fighting with you. We’ll talk calmly through every issue and we won’t let things build up.” He rubbed

his thumb tenderly across her knuckles. “Take a chance on us, Kathryn. You know this is meant to be.”

“Meant to be? Don’t you think that’s a little idealistic?”

“Not when it comes to us. Forgive the sappiness, but I believe you’re my soul mate. You’re brilliant, you’re brave, and I love you with every fiber of my being.”

Rolling her eyes, she begged, “Give me an insulin shot, please.”

He couldn’t help but laugh as he stood up. “Forgive my schmaltziness, but it comes with the territory when proposing marriage.”

“Chakotay, you can’t promise never to fight with me. I don’t want you to turn into...” She sighed. “Into Mark, always willing to make the sacrifices to keep me. It’s not right.”

“All right, if you want me to argue with you, then I will, but I’ll do it without insulting you. That doesn’t change who I am.”

“I can’t change who I am, either.”

“And that’s the last thing I’d want.” Chakotay tilted his head in concern. “Do you know that Tom and B’Elanna heard part of our argument?”

“Yes.”

“They corrected a huge misconception that I’ve held for years, because I was blinded by my fierce need to protect you.”

“And what’s that?” She crossed her arms.

“That you don’t risk your life because of arrogance; you do it because you care.”

She crooked a smile and looked away, and then back. “Most of the time, but even I have to admit to being a touch overconfident in some situations.”

“Your confidence gives you an edge, and I was literally sick to my stomach when I realized that I took that from you. Now that we’ve been through this, I’ve learned an invaluable lesson. I’m not going to turn into Mark,” he said with a smile, “But I’m a wiser man, now. I will strive to protect your heart as much as I try to protect your life.”

She looked at the floor, where the figurative remains of her resolve lay shattered at her feet. “Having an admiral marry us is not exactly the kind of wedding I’d want.” She watched his eyes light up as he realized that she wasn’t turning him down.

He winked. “Then spend the night with me anyway, and we’ll have a wedding whenever and wherever you want.”

She shook her head in dismay. “You really want to marry me?”

“Absolutely.”

“I’m a handful, you know.”

“No one knows it more.” He kissed the back of her hand. “How about this? Let me go make arrangements to cover my classes, and then we’ll have lunch after your noon briefing. We’ll make a list of things that need to be done before you leave, and you can tell me then what kind of party I’m planning for this evening.”

“What *kind* of party?”

Before triggering the door to open, he replied, “Wedding reception, engagement party, or going-away party.”

As he walked out the door, she knew her smile was one of her ridiculous, toothy grins and probably ten meters wide. He’d just turned her heart right side out, and she honestly had no idea how he’d managed it. Perhaps he was the better tactician after all.

He was waiting outside her office when she returned from the briefing. She was delighted to see him, but there was a silly butterfly dance going on inside her stomach that hadn’t been there since those first kisses six months before.

“Did you get everything worked out?” she asked.

“Yes, I’m all yours.”

She smiled brightly. “Yes, I do believe you are.”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way.” He laughed.

Kathryn took a couple minutes to touch base with Sue before going into her office. Once inside, she said, “I’ve already sent the rest of my staff home to get ready to go, including my security detail. Should I call for backup or would you be willing to stick with me for the rest of the day?”

“I think I can watch your back. I’ve been doing it for years,” he said. “How was the briefing?”

“Typically not brief at all, but how could it be when the reason behind it was to completely eliminate every task on my desk that has nothing to do with where I’m going?”

“Feel lighter at least?”

“Yes and no.”

“I understand.”

“Give me ten minutes and I’ll be ready to go. Could we have lunch at my house? I’d prefer being alone.”

“I’d like that, too.” He waited patiently for her to finish up what she needed to do.

Kathryn was quiet on the short trip home. They held hands the entire time, something they hadn’t done since they first started dating, and it felt warm and natural.

When they arrived at her house, Kathryn dropped her things on the entry table and said, “Let’s sit down.”

“Would you like me to prepare lunch?”

“Not just yet, let’s talk for a minute.” She tugged on his hand until they were both sitting on the couch, turned towards each other.

He quietly waited for her to begin. When she was silent for over a minute, he said, “This makes me think I’m not going to like what you have to say.”

She took his hand. “Tonight, I’d like to have just a quiet dinner with my family, and you of course.”

“Okay.” He took a deep, shuddering breath.

“I’ve dreamt about our wedding for years.” She smiled when he looked at her in surprise. “Yes, in my weaker romantic moods on Voyager, I’d let myself dream about a future with you. Does that surprise you?”

“Well, yes, actually. I didn’t think you’d ever allowed yourself that kind of luxury.”

She shrugged. “Sometimes, when things were going well and I felt a longing for you, I’d imagine our future. It made me feel hopeful, and a little indulgent.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“When I imagined our wedding, it definitely was not a quick, rushed civil ceremony in an admiral’s office.”

“What? Isn’t that every woman’s dream wedding?” He laughed nervously.

“Not exactly.” She resituated herself so that she was curled up next to his side with his arm around her. “I pictured an outdoor setting, maybe in the woods, wearing a dress, flowers in my hair, my sister at my side, and Katie and Naomi dressed in pretty little dresses with flower baskets.”

“It sounds beautiful. Was I there?”

She felt the warmth in his humor. “Yes, in a tuxedo, although I couldn’t decide who would be your best man.”

“Well, if the wedding were today, I’d probably ask Tom, but maybe Ayala.”

“I don’t want to get married when we’ve just barely begun to heal, and I’d rather not rush our wedding so that it can be a relaxed day when we aren’t feeling sad that I’m about to leave. Then I’d like to go away with you for a couple weeks, and start our life together.”

“It’s a perfect plan.”

She cradled his jaw in her palm. “Provided we can keep ourselves on an even keel until I get back, I will agree to marry you. I don’t mean that to sound like an ultimatum, but I’m sure you understand my hesitance, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do.”

She looked down. “I can’t seem to control my emotions when I’m with you, and I don’t like being out of control.”

He lifted her chin and caressed her cheek. “We’ve just had a hard time adjusting and finding a balance with each other, but how much we love each other hasn’t changed. You have nothing to worry about with me. Regardless of how many arguments we have and how many brainless things I say, I’m here for you, and I love you.”

“I’m a little worried that we’re only good at friendship.”

Shaking his head, he said, “No, we’re just not good at communicating. I jump to conclusions too quickly, and when you’re out there, you get completely focused on your job.”

“Yes, I do, and I don’t think I can change that. Not right now.”

He looked at her sadly for a long moment and then said, “I’ll accept that if you’ll promise to do everything in your power to stay alive for me.”

She smiled warmly. “I’ll do my best. You give me something to live for.”

“Thank you.” His thumb stroked across her cheek.

“It’s a relief to put this behind us.” She said quietly, “Thank you for not letting me go.”

He leaned forward and gave her a short kiss. “I never will.”

“We’ll keep talking,” she said confidently. “Even when I’m out of range, I’ll record messages to you.”

“And I’ll do the same. When you get home, we’ll have to be tenacious about merging our lives.”

She laced her fingers with his. “I don’t want to officially get engaged until after I get back.”

“Superstitious?”

She crooked a smile. “You know me too well. I don’t have much luck with engagements.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I think I got pretty lucky when your last engagement didn’t work out.”

She nodded quietly.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that.”

“No, that’s okay. You’re right, and if you ask my Mom, she’ll tell you that you’re a much better match for me. Mark was... comfortable.”

“And I’m not?”

She smiled mischievously up at him. “You have a knack for making me feel deliciously uncomfortable.”

He coughed in surprise, and his voice cracked as he said, “I wasn’t expecting you to go there.”

She patted his knee and stood up. As she went into the kitchen, she said, “Not for about eight hours.”

Blushing, he followed her into the kitchen to get lunch. As they sat down to eat, she squeezed his hand, trying hard to keep her emotions in check. She was relieved when he directed the conversation towards business.

“Let’s make a list of things we need to do.”

“All right. First thing is to call my Mom and make plans for tonight, and to let her know that I’m leaving. She won’t be happy.”

“She’ll understand. Will you be able to tell her where you’re going?”

“I’m not supposed to, but I’ll tell her what I can.” She left it at that. “There are so many things I need to do, but I find myself wanting to spend every moment with you. I’ve wasted the last two weeks.”

“They weren’t a waste. Maybe taking a step back was what we needed to make this stronger in the long run.” He smiled sweetly. “So, what is it that you need to get done? The faster we do it, the more time we have.”

“Well, I need a haircut. Katie’s birthday is Saturday and I haven’t found a present for her. I need to do some cleaning, close up this house, and take care of my personal business for who knows how long.” She sighed. “It feels exactly like it did eight years ago when I took command of Voyager.”

“Well, I can’t help you with the haircut, but I can take care of the rest for you.”

“I can’t ask you to do that.”

“I know, but I want to. If we won’t see each other for awhile, then I’m going to make sure I spend every available moment with you before you leave.”

“Thank you.” Her mind was spinning with everything that needed to be done. “Oh, I might not be here for Miral’s birthday, too.”

“Miral is only going to be one. She won’t notice that you didn’t personally pick out a gift for her. Tell me what to pick up for Katie, and I’ll go do that while you get your hair done.”

“I should just deal with that on the ship and take time to pack instead. Since I’ll be out for awhile, there are a few more things I’d like to take with me.” She took a bite, and then held up a finger until she finished. “Oh, I meant to tell you – a messenger will be arriving shortly to deliver some documents for us to sign.”

“What for?”

“I called our family lawyer after you left this morning. I’m naming you as my beneficiary and giving you power of attorney so that you can conduct business on my behalf while I’m gone.”

“Okaaay,” he said skeptically.

“When I was reported missing on Voyager, my assets froze, and it ended up costing me lot of time and expense to get all of that figured out when we got back. If something should happen...”

“It won’t.”

“I like your optimism.” She squeezed his hand in reassurance. “I’d also like you to be able to pay the gardener, keep up the utilities, and whatever else needs to be done in my absence.”

“I’m happy to, but I don’t think I need power of attorney to do that.”

“I know, but all of this would be simpler if we were married, and this will take care of the legal aspects.” The door chime rang, interrupting their conversation.

When she came back, she pulled a large computer padd out of the packet, and said, “I’m sure there are easier ways to handle this, but it’s something I want to do.”

“If it’s important to you, I’ll do whatever you like. I want to put your mind at ease.”

She set it down, and looked at him. “I want to do this so that you can make decisions with our combined resources.”

“What kind of decisions?”

“Earlier this summer, I was considering selling this house and buying another for both of us. Would you be interested in that?”

He smiled. “You didn’t tell me about that.”

“I know. The idea hadn’t solidified in my mind, yet. But if we’re going to get married, it makes sense.”

“This house is fine. I like it here.”

“Wouldn’t you like to have a home with some land? It would be nice to get out of the city and live amongst nature. We could keep this house, too, for when we need to stay close by.”

“I’ll look,” he smiled. “But Kathryn, I’m capable of securing the financing and purchasing a home for us.”

“Maybe near the ocean,” she smiled. “And you won’t need to secure financing.”

“I won’t?”

She held up the padd. “Not if you sign this. It’ll give you access to my assets.”

“Oh.” He realized what she was saying. “You have enough resources to purchase a home outright? And keep this one?”

“We do, yes.” It felt good to be taking this step with him, even though she’d been ready to call the whole thing off only a few hours earlier. Trust and acceptance was liberating.

He took a deep breath. “I’m a little surprised by all this.”

Reaching across the table, she laced their fingers together. “My heart feels lighter because this feels like a permanent commitment. I'm resolving myself to the fact that no matter what happens, you're sticking with me. I've been so worried about making you wait, trying to keep this relationship strong over a long distance, and managing that while I'm doing my job. Something clicked today, and I'm going to let go of all that. Now, I want to make sure that you're okay if something were to happen to me.” She knew what his credits were, and they consisted only of a lump sum from Starfleet upon returning and what he was earning as a professor.

“I will never be okay if something happens to you, but my heart feels lighter today, too.”

She smiled brightly. “I tried to get rid of you, but failed miserably.”

“Good,” he said with a smile.

She moved the padd in front of him so he could see. “Okay, let's do this, so we can get back to the list.” She pointed to the screen. “This is the primary resource account that's available to take care of any minor needs that come up.”

His eyes widened. “That alone is enough for a house, Kathryn.”

“Not the kind of house I want.” She pressed the keypad to scroll to the next screen. “This is the total of the accounts available for that.”

His jaw dropped. “You're joking, right?”

“No.”

“I had no idea.”

She shrugged. “Wealth doesn't matter a hill of beans inside Starfleet.”

“No, but resources like that can give you a certain amount of influence.”

“I prefer not to think of it that way.”

“You really want to use that much on a house?”

“Heavens no, but a house with land would be nice, somewhere secluded with lots of trees.” She smiled. “I thought you might like it, considering how much you enjoyed exploring and working with wood on New Earth.”

“That's very thoughtful of you, but I have to say that I feel slightly uncomfortable about this, mostly because of this.” He pointed to the total line.

“Give it some time to sink in. Explore some possibilities. I honestly don’t know what it would take to find what I’m imagining.”

He took a deep breath. “I should know by now not to be surprised by you, but I am. Continually.”

“Thank you, Scott,” Kathryn said as she closed the door to her house. She heard the locking mechanism click into place as she turned to Chakotay. “Well, that’s it. You can’t get out until seven in the morning.”

“Are you getting used to the security, yet?”

She followed him into the kitchen. “Oh, I don’t know. It feels a little strange having the security detail at home, but perfectly natural as I’m walking around. It’s not like Tuvok would ever let me go anywhere without it.”

“That’s true.” He watched her get a glass of water to take upstairs. “Your family was in a surprisingly good mood tonight.”

“I think it was an act.”

“How can you tell?”

“They were in too good of a mood.” She walked past him into the living room where she picked up a couple things, and then started up the stairs. “All that genuine interest in what I’m doing. They’ve never expressed it in that much detail before.”

“Probably because they knew you wouldn’t tell them,” he suggested as he followed her up, grabbing his overnight duffel on the way.

“Did you hear Katie? She thinks I’m going on a vacation.”

“It would be hard for a five year old to understand. She seemed to enjoy the gift, though.”

“Are you kidding? She loved it!” Kathryn set the things she brought upstairs into her Starfleet trunk. “Of course, what little girl that age wouldn’t love dolls? You did a great job picking them out.”

“Thanks.” He leaned up against the door frame as he watched her move around the room, putting more things in the trunk. “Can I help with anything?”

“Hmm,” she looked around. “Yes, in my study is a stack of poetry books next to the chair. Would you grab those?”

He did as instructed and went into the next room, which she'd set up with a desk and computer interface. As he picked up the books, he noticed a picture of him and her from the awards banquet and picked it up as well. Remembering that night, he touched the image of her beautiful face. He was missing her already.

"Shall I put them in?" he asked when he returned.

"Sure, go ahead. I'll be just a minute," she said from the bathroom.

"Take your time." He set the books and picture in, and then glanced around her room to see if there was anything else he thought she might like to have with her. Seeing nothing of note, he decided to get more comfortable and took off his shoes and socks. He smiled to himself when he heard her start the shower and was glad that he'd taken the opportunity to clean up when he'd gone by his apartment earlier.

His stomach was in knots, not because she was leaving the next day, but because they planned on being intimate. The last time had been such a painful experience for her that he was anxious about her reaction this time. He turned down the overhead lights and switched on the lamp by his side of the bed. He slid his shirt off his shoulders as he considered what her reaction might be. Would she be nervous? Would she have lower expectations? Or would she have higher expectations? They hadn't really kissed for weeks, and even then, they hadn't felt the same electricity that had been there back in May.

Every time they'd been together had been a completely different experience, so he didn't know what to expect. The first time, she'd been almost shy. It had been so unlike her, yet even under her uncertainty, she had been quite passionate. Other times, she had been gentle and loving. And there were two times when she'd been very aggressive. 'Those were fun,' he thought, a silly grin on his face.

"Chakotay?"

"Hmm?" he asked as he turned around.

She was standing in the doorway to the bathroom, wearing only a thin chemise. She raised an eyebrow. "I was all ready for a grand entrance, and you're over there staring at the wall."

"Sorry." He smiled with slight embarrassment as he walked over to her. "You're beautiful, Kathryn." Coming right up next to her, he put his hands on her waist. "I was over there thinking about all the times we've made love."

Crooking a smile as she leaned into him, she asked, "Do you have a favorite?"

"They're all so special, it's hard to choose. What about you?"

"You're evading the question."

He chuckled nervously. "It's the truth. The first time was very sweet."

"I'm a little embarrassed about that one."

"Why?" he asked in disbelief.

She shrugged. "I was a little virginal, which is not exactly me."

"As long as you'd been abstinent, you might as well have been. It was a breathtaking experience to seduce you into opening up to me that night."

"I wonder how long I'll be gone this time. You might have to do that all over again."

"I hope you're not gone that long, but I'd be delighted to relive that experience." His hands dropped to her hips and slid around to her backside. "What about you? Your favorite?"

She leaned further into him. "Depends on my mood. Sometimes I want the slow and intimate connection. Sometimes I prefer the unbridled passion."

"What's your mood tonight?"

She glanced away. "I'm not sure."

Finding her nervousness endearing, Chakotay caressed her back through the slippery fabric. "Well, since you don't have to report to the ship until thirteen hundred, we've got plenty of time to try both, several times."

"Don't you have class in the morning?"

He shook his head as he reached up to slide his fingers along her jaw. "It's all taken care of." Lifting her face to his, he sprinkled two light kisses on her lips before settling in to coax her mouth slowly open.

She unexpectedly pulled her face away to look at him.

"What is it?" He cradled her cheek in his palm.

"I'm nervous."

Smiling affectionately, he said, "So am I."

"I want tonight to be amazing, but I'm too worked up about it to relax."

"To make up for the last time, or because it's our one night together for awhile?"

"Both, and because it's also make-up sex, and you asked me to marry you today."

He took her hand to lead her over to the bed. “May I point out that you turned me down?”

“I didn’t turn you down,” she said as she crawled under the covers. “I am going to marry you someday.”

After switching off the lamp, he took off his pants and stretched out on his side next to her, his head propped up with his arm. His fingers roamed over her moonlit face. “If I may offer a confession, I’ve thought of you as my wife for a long time.”

“Have you?”

“One of the many reasons I wouldn’t let you go. As far as I’m concerned, this became a lifetime commitment from the first kiss.”

“Back on New Earth?”

He remembered that night fondly. “Maybe not back that far, although at the time, it would have been a lifetime commitment since we were alone on that planet. But I was thinking about that night at your mother’s.”

“When I was drunk?”

“Yes,” he smiled. “I’d already decided that if you let me in, I’d be setting up residence. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all, despite my withdrawal.”

He leaned forward to kiss her lips lightly. “I was really worried about you.”

“I know, and I’m sorry.”

“Shhhh...,” he kissed her again. “No apologies needed. Well, except by me, since the whole thing was my fault. I can be such an ass when my head isn’t on straight.”

She laughed. “I’m glad you said it.”

“But you were thinking it?” he asked with a smile.

Kathryn reached up to touch his face and looked deep into his eyes. “Even though I will have to take some risks, I will do whatever I can to stay safe, for you.”

A chill ran through him. “Thank you.” He saw worry float across her eyes, and knew that he needed to reassure her, too. “If the worst happens, and you don’t come back to me, I’ll find a way to keep going. It will break me, but our friends will pull me through.”

Both of their eyes were overly moist, but she smiled in despite of it. “We’re a pair, aren’t we? Lying here in bed on our last night together, and we’re talking about such a dreary subject.”

“Maybe this connection is what we need more.” He brushed his fingers through her hair, knowing how much it relaxed her. “May I kiss you?”

“You’ll never need to ask permission to do that again,” she said as she drew his head down.

His mouth moved against hers, gradually encouraging her lips open to taste her sweet tongue. She threaded her fingers into his hair, pulling him down to deepen the kiss. The delightful sparks between them were alive and well, sizzling through his veins and targeting all of the energy into his arousal. Kathryn moaned, arching her body to give him the clear signal that she wanted to be touched.

His hand slid down to fill his palm with her supple, warm breast. In response, she moaned again and pushed her tongue into his mouth, arching her chest further into his hand. The satiny fabric made it delectably easy for his palm to slide over her puckered nipple, one after the other as he gave each breast the attention it deserved. He was reminded of her reaction when she’d been pinned against him a few nights before. She’d responded immediately to being held tightly and seemed to be unable to tamper her arousal from the forcefulness of his maneuver.

Their kiss lightened in pressure, but progressed into a slow dance of tongues and lips, each wanting to tantalize and tease the other. Sliding his hand down her satiny stomach to the edge of her gown, he carefully gauged her reaction when he first stroked her bare leg. He didn’t want to push her too fast, but when she opened her thighs to invite him in, all uncertainty flew out the door. His fingers skimmed up the inside of her leg and grazed the red, springy curls. The intimate contact drew another deep moan out of her, enticing him to linger there, caressing the soft fur and coaxing her into a higher state of arousal before sliding his hand up under her gown to satisfy his craving to feel her bare breasts.

She broke the kiss in a gasp as his hand squeezed the fullest part of her breast, slowly drawing his fingers away until he was lightly pinching only her nipple. He’d never done that before and her breathless reaction was definitely worth remembering. He whispered, “You like that, I see.”

As he did it again with a slightly firmer pinch at the end, she whimpered, “Yes,” and arched her back, giving him an open-mouthed gasp. “Hurts so good.”

He switched to the other breast, circling around it teasingly before squeezing it as well. It was definitely when he got to the tips that she reacted the strongest, panting with quiet gasps.

The image of her pinned were still foremost in his mind, so he pushed the chemise up over her head, fully exposing her luscious body. Before he could pin her down, she reached up to bring him down for another deep kiss. He let the dance of their mouths continue as he took hold of her wrists and pushed them ever so slowly back down onto the bed. Never letting go of her hands, he moved his knees between her welcoming legs and kneeled over her. He pushed her wrists down and behind her waist, pinning them behind her back. “Are you okay with this?”

“I don’t know. What are you planning to do?”

He leaned over and kissed her soft belly. “Kiss your body.”

Breathing heavily, she replied, “I’m very okay with that.” His tongue circled her naval and then with brief, slow licks, he worked his way up to her breasts.

Hovering over her nipple so that his warm breath caressed it, he said, “I’ve been thinking about that night at the gym, when you were pinned against me. You were aroused, weren’t you?”

She tried to push her breast up into his mouth, but he wouldn’t accept it. “How could you tell?” she asked as she panted, her mouth forming an ‘o’ as she imagined his lips taking what they wanted.

“I can tell when you’re aroused, and right now,” he darted his tongue out for a quick lick. “You are very, very aroused.” He licked it again. “If that room hadn’t been full of people, I would have had you on the mat, just like this.” His tongue darted out, but he purposefully missed. She gasped anyway.

He looked up into her eyes and adored the fire he saw in them – it had been missing for far too long. While he was locked in eye contact with her, he lowered his tongue and licked slow and hard across the distended nipple. She closed her eyes as she gave him a deep, guttural moan. He whispered against her other nipple, “I love that sound. Give it to me again.”

She said, “Make me.”

“Is that a challenge?” His eyes widened, and he repositioned himself to lie with his belly pressed hard against her pubis, his hands holding her arms securely, and his face just centimeters away from her breasts.

“Yes, and next time we reserve the gym for ourselves. There’s some equipment in there that…” she gasped in surprise as he latched on to her nipple.

He sucked firmly as he pulled away, tugging the nipple lightly between his teeth. She couldn’t help but moan deeply in pleasure as his tongue tickled the tight, taught nub. When he let go, he asked, “You were saying?”

Panting, she said, “I forgot.”

He licked up her cleavage. “Something about equipment in the gym. You’d like me to lay you over it?” He licked underneath her breast and up the side.

“Uh huh.”

He clicked his tongue in rebuke and then darted it across her nipple again. “Now that would be a serious breach of regulations, Admiral.”

“Uh huh,” she whimpered as she arched as best she could with her hands pinned. She begged, “Please.”

He was happy to oblige and dropped his mouth widely over her full, ripe breast, adoring the fact that she’d gotten a little softer in recent months. She’d grown even more luscious and inviting than she’d ever been before. His lips were in heaven as they roamed over her silky breasts, making her tremble and writhe beneath him.

When she’d had enough, she pulled her arms out and latched onto his head. “I need you. Now.”

“I can see that.” He chuckled as he pushed up to sit between her open legs. He drew two fingers up through her folds to find her dripping with clear, slippery juices. He wanted to dive in and taste her, but he could tell by her impatient writhing on his penetrating fingers that she really did want him inside immediately.

She commanded, “Do it now or I’m throwing you on your back and doing it for you.”

“I’d like to see you try.”

Her eyes narrowed right before she pounced. Although he knew what was coming, it took him a second to register what had happened when he found himself on his back with her straddling him. He gasped as she impaled herself in one, fast movement.

Kathryn stretched her body to its full height as she leaned over his chest and caught his lips in a deep kiss. He grabbed two silky handfuls of hair to hold her close, and moaned deeply as she squeezed her inner muscles around him. He was in heaven.

She pushed herself up, positioned her knees for the best leverage, and began to rock against him, maneuvering it so that her clitoris was getting all the benefit of the grinding movement. He let her continue pleasuring herself, not minding at all that his penis was inside her, going along for the ride.

However, not wanting her to come yet, he laced his fingers through hers and pulled to encourage her to lay down on top of him again for another kiss. He put one arm around her back and one holding tightly against her bottom. “Hold on.” As soon as she locked her legs with his, he rolled them over so that she was under him again.

He remained still for a moment, looking into her eyes. At first, she looked sweet and loving, but then the side of her mouth crooked wickedly and she squeezed her vaginal muscles hard. His eyes widened as he asked, “Is there something you want, my love?”

She squinted while she ordered him very calmly to, “Get moving. Now.”

He licked his lips as he tried not to smile too wide. “Yes, ma’am.” He lifted her legs into the air and began thrusting powerfully into her. She rose up on her elbows and threw her head back in ecstasy, clenching her abdomen tight into the fold he had her in. The tension was exquisite for both of them as he pumped in and out. When it became too intense for him, he opened her legs in a V, but didn’t let go of her ankles.

She dropped back onto the bed and let him have his way with her as he positioned the angle of his thrusts so that his hard penis rubbed against the inside front wall of her vagina. The pressure was intense and Kathryn could feel her body begin to tremble through no control of her own. There was nothing she could tighten or maneuver to control the intense pleasure that was centered deep inside her. Her mouth dropped open as she repeated, “Oh, Oh, Oh,” over and over again in perfect timing with his thrusts.

When the deep wave overtook her, she cried out in ecstasy. Chakotay knew he had her right where he wanted her, and slowed down to savor the delicious moment. She’d had a vaginal climax, not something they’d achieved but once and it was only when the passion had been deep and all-consuming. After the tremors stopped, he quickened his pace again, not wanting her to come down from the high.

Letting her legs drop, he leaned over her and worked hard and deep to keep her going. When he knew he was about to come, he reached down and pressed his fingers against her clitoris. She arched up in surprise and opened her legs even wider. The tension was incredible at the height of his climax. He shouted, “Kathryn!” as he felt the hot semen shoot deep inside her. He held her thighs tightly against the sides of his hips and thrust fast several times, pausing between each one.

When his mind cleared he looked down to see her smiling beautifully at him. Her voice was husky as she said, “touch me.” Staying inside, he coated his fingers with her juices and let his fingers glide slowly up from her folds to the hard, protruding nub that was firmly out from under its protective hood. He caressed it very slowly, keeping his eyes locked with hers. When he saw her eyes roll back into her head, he slid his finger twice across the tip, causing her body to convulse under him.

He watched over her as she lost control, drawing his finger along her folds, but taking care not to touch the oversensitive tip again. She had almost a dozen aftershocks until she finally dropped her arms and legs limply to the side.

After pulling out of her, he stretched out against her side, carefully moving her arm out of the way. He leaned over her and gave her lips a soft kiss. “Was that amazing enough?”

“Unhuh.” She was completely sated and unable to move.

He pulled the sheet over them and enfolded her in his arms, whispering, “Thank you for forgiving me. I love you, Kathryn.”

She forced her eyes open and lifted her hand to glide her fingers around his face. “I love you, too.”

They looked at each other in the moonlight, both trying to memorize the moment so they could remember it in the months to come. She turned on her side and snuggled up in her favorite place, sighing contently.

Chakotay moved his fingers lightly over her back as he watched over her. He wanted to savor the way she looked, the way she felt against his side, the softness of her skin beneath his fingers. A slight chill ran through him at the disconcerting thought that something might happen to her, but he pushed it away, not wanting to cloud this time together with worries about the future.

He felt something tickle his chest and looked down at her face to see that she had it covered with her hand. When he drew her hand away, she lifted her wet, tear-filled eyes up so he could see what he’d discovered.

“Heeeey,” he said as he wiped her cheeks. “Why are you crying?”

“Can’t seem to stop it,” she said as she smiled through the tears. “I think it’s just an emotional release.”

“Well, then, you should get it all out. Do it properly.”

She laughed as more tears streamed down. “This is absurd. I’m a Starfleet admiral for goodness sake.”

“True, but you’re also a woman who has had a tough couple of months, and now that it’s settling down and you’ve had a physical release, I’m sure it’s a perfectly normal reaction.”

“Just don’t tell any Romulans that deep down, I’m a normal, emotional woman.”

He held her close and kissed her forehead. “Your secret is safe with me, as is your heart.”

Part 13 - “A Vessel of Diplomacy”

By Dawn

Rating: PG

Summary – At work again throughout the Quadrant

“Goodnight,” Kathryn said to Harry just before she entered her quarters. They’d finished a long day of research and study on Romulan politics, and her mind was mush. All she wanted to do was to take a nice, long bath, call Chakotay, and go to bed.

She took her coat off and laid it on the back of a chair, and was pulling off her turtleneck when a voice said, “By all means, Kathy, continue disrobing.”

Kathryn jumped. “Q,” she said as she turned around. “I was wondering when you’d show up again.”

“You were expecting me?” he asked with faked surprise, his hand over his heart. “I’m honored.”

She went to the replicator to get a cup of coffee, but before she got there, one magically appeared in her hand. “Thank you,” she acknowledged as she took a sip. “Nice blend.”

“Aren’t you going to ask me what I’m doing here?” he asked with barely contained excitement.

Kathryn clicked her tongue. “Something about this mission you’re sending me on?”

“That *I’m* sending you on? The Q don’t send humans on missions. How preposterous!”

She sat in the chair across from him and neatly crossed her legs. “Why else would a Romulan Senator ask to speak to me personally?”

“Because, dear Kathy, you’re the Mother of Peace! That’s old news.” He waved it away.

“No, that was one of the benefits of mating with you.”

“Don’t go crying about that now,” he mocked.

She rolled her eyes. “What is it that you want me to do, Q?”

“Talk to him. Is that so hard?”

“That’s it? Just talk? That was worth changing history?”

“No, no, no. You have it all wrong. I didn’t change history for Federation/Romulan peace. I changed history so that humanity would survive. For reasons unbeknownst to me, I find you interesting. I would hate to see all of you perish.”

“Then why have you asked me to talk to them?”

He waved her question away. “Surely you’ve heard of the ‘I’ll scratch your back, now you scratch mine’ phrase before?”

Sighing, she said, “Yes.”

“I’ve saved humanity, now I want you to return the favor by talking to a Romulan.”

“Okay.” She was growing impatient with the circular conversation. “Then what is talking to the Romulans going to accomplish?”

“Q, Jr. wants to see his godmother in action, of course! He’s heard so much about your legendary diplomacy tactics that he wants to watch you win over the most hard-headed, xenophobic race in this quadrant.”

“I don’t buy it. Are the Romulans a danger to humanity?”

“Work, work, work. Is that all you think about? Don’t you and Chuckles have a romance going on? Tell me all about it, and I want details!”

“I’m sure you already know. After all, you’re omnipotent.”

“Were you really going to throw it all away because I asked you to do something? When have you ever listened to me before?”

Kathryn sighed. “Not everything is about you, Q. The temporal board gave me an assignment as well.”

“As I recall, they also told you to mother a little brood.”

“Yes, but the future of Starfleet is significantly more important.”

He waved her off. “Kathy, my dear, you’re not listening to a word I say.”

“Then enlighten me.”

“As you so aptly put it years ago, the Q are the self-appointed guardians of the universe, but even they have made mistakes.”

“The Vulcan-Romulan war, for example.”

“Now you’re getting it! I firmly believe that the Q still need a messiah of human consciousness. You have the Q’s attention, Madame Admiral, and if you can prove that humanity is up to the task of surviving despite its lack of good judgment, it’ll just prove that I’m right.”

Kathryn narrowed her eyes, and raised her index finger. “Let me get this straight. You’re suggesting that talking to Romulans will prove that humanity will survive, which in turn, gives you the right to say ‘I told you so’ to the continuum?”

“Bravo! I knew you’d get it!”

“But I don’t, Q. What does Romulus have to do with our survival?”

“You’re looking for a correlation where none exists.”

“But you just said...” Kathryn groaned in frustration. “Just tell me what I’m supposed to accomplish.”

“Absolutely nothing. You’re merely a vessel of diplomacy. Someone to open the door. No one will walk through it for some time.”

“Just talk,” she stated again. “What about? The weather?”

“Wasn’t it you who said the key to diplomacy is listening?”

“Yes.”

“So, answer his questions. After all, he invited you.” He snapped his fingers and was gone.

Kathryn yelled at the empty air, “My life would’ve been so much easier if you’d told me that six months ago!”

Q popped his head through the bulkhead just long enough to say, “Now, what would have been the fun in that?”

She would have thrown something at the bulkhead if it would’ve done any good, but instead, she decided to have her shower, put on her pajamas, and contact Chakotay.

“Hi, Beautiful,” he said as soon as his image appeared.

A smile tugged at her lips. “You say that as if you mean it.”

“And you say that as if you doubt it,” he said with a wink. “How was your day?”

“Boring until Q showed up.”

On the bridge of the Pioneer, Kathryn stood behind the command center as they waited to receive a communication that would give them their next heading. They’d arrived at the pre-designated coordinates several hours earlier, after a three week trip to the Neutral Zone. It took that long because Pioneer’s maximum cruising speed was warp six.

Captain Young slowly paced across the command center. He stopped and looked at Kathryn. “Admiral, do you at least know what type of ship we’re looking for?”

“No.” She had not confided in him any specific details about the mission. “I know who wants to meet with me, but not how he will arrive.”

“How do we know this isn’t a trap?”

Kathryn was annoyed with his impatience, but she didn't show it. "We don't." If it were her bridge, she'd silence chatter like this. This conversation would be more appropriate in private, but she wasn't interested in getting into a debate with him about protocol. She genuinely liked him and considered him a friend, but if he continued, she'd have to remind him who the ranking officer was.

To redirect his attention, she said, "Captain, I suggest a scan for tachyons and anti-protons."

Bernie looked at her briefly before nodding to Ensign Igre to go ahead. They all waited quietly for the report.

"I'm detecting faint tachyon emissions ten thousand kilometers to port."

"Admiral?" Bernie asked, "What do you suggest?"

"Hold position and wait."

He nodded and returned to his chair, but thankfully, they didn't have to wait long.

Commander Moore, the Pioneer's chief of security, said, "I'm receiving an encoded transmission for Admiral Janeway. It's marked confidential."

"May I take it in the briefing room, Captain?"

"By all means," Bernie replied, a little irked about being kept in the dark.

Kathryn understood his frustration. She'd be frustrated, too, but she didn't have the luxury of confiding in him. Sitting at the head of the briefing table, she opened the computer terminal and typed in the access code she'd been given. A Romulan officer appeared.

"Admiral Janeway, I presume?"

"Yes, and to whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?"

"I am Commander Morat, communicating on behalf of an interested third party. Have you informed anyone onboard your ship about the nature of this meeting or that Romulans are involved?"

"No, I haven't."

"Prepare for transport."

"Wait!" Kathryn held up a hand, and was relieved to see that Morat stopped to listen. "I need assurance that this isn't a trap."

Morat looked to the side, and then responded, “What would give you that assurance, Admiral?”

“A goodwill gesture, Commander. I want you to come to this ship while I go to yours.”

“Your crew would detect that I'm Romulan, and that is unacceptable.”

“I can order that no scans be taken of this room and put one of my most trusted officers in here with you. Once you're here, I will initiate a security lockout with my command authorization level. Not even the captain of this ship can override it.”

Again, Morat looked to the side before asking, “Who is the officer?”

“Lieutenant Commander Harry Kim.”

“Was he with you on Voyager?”

“Yes, he was my operations officer.”

He glanced away before saying, “That is acceptable. How much time do you need to put these safeguards in place?”

“Ten minutes, and I require that my senior security officer, Lieutenant Justin Jarvin, also a former member of Voyager's crew, join me on your ship.”

“You're asking a lot, Admiral.”

“I'm willing to call this off if your ‘interested third party’ believes I'm being too careful. I'm here at his request, and I need to take precautions for my safety. I'm sure you both understand.”

He checked before replying, “Very well. I will contact you again in ten of your minutes. Inform Commander Kim that I will not discuss anything with him.”

The connection terminated before she responded, “Very well.” She tapped her commbadge. “Janeway to Kim and Jarvin, please report to the briefing room. Mr. Kim, bring a good book. Mr. Jarvin, bring three pulse communicators.” Then she tapped it again, “Janeway to Captain Young, could I speak with you in private?”

“On my way,” he said eagerly and arrived seconds later. “What did you learn?”

“In ten minutes, I will be transported to the vessel that is waiting out there.” She pointed to the viewport.

“Admiral?”

“Surely you realize that there's a cloaked ship there?”

“Yes, of course, but are you sure this is a wise decision?”

Kathryn was expecting that question. “One officer from their ship will be transporting to this room, and Commander Kim will remain with him at all times, and I am taking a security officer with me. I must have your assurance that you will not scan this room in any way, because no one, including you, are to know the species of the officer.”

“You don’t trust me.”

“Captain,” she used his rank purposely. “I trust you without question, but I’m following orders. I expect you to do the same. Do nothing that will reveal who I’m meeting with.”

“Aye, Admiral. Who are you taking with you?”

“Lieutenant Jarvin. He’s the most skilled officer we have at hand-to-hand combat, should the need arise.”

“Admiral, I will follow orders, but I urge you to reconsider this exchange.”

“Bernie, I’m sure you can piece together who is out there from the information you have. Where there is a lot at risk, there’s also a lot to gain. Admiral Khurma sent me on this assignment with full knowledge of what I’m doing.”

“Does the rest of your staff know who you’re meeting with?”

“No, they do not. Kim and Jarvin will be hearing it for the first time momentarily.” As if on cue, the two officers entered the room. “Please take a seat, gentlemen. I’ll be with you in a moment.”

“Any further orders?” Bernie asked.

“Yes, keep an eye on those tachyon emissions. If they move, follow them.” She turned to Justin. “Did you bring the communicators?”

“Yes, Admiral.” He opened his palm to show three small disks.

She picked one up and gave it to Bernie. “This is a technology that we developed on Voyager. The pulses travel at a low frequency that is virtually undetectable by sensors, and it will enable us to keep a pulse on each other, so to speak. You’ll have one on the bridge, Kim will have the other in here, and Jarvin will have the third. Kim and Jarvin will send a pulse every five minutes to assure you that all is well. Kim will send a double tap and Jarvin will send a single tap. As soon as our guest arrives, I will activate a force field around this room. He will think that you can’t penetrate it. I expect you to make him believe that.”

“All right,” Bernie said. “We’ll do whatever we can.”

“I appreciate it.” As Bernie left the room, she turned to the other two who were waiting patiently for their assignments. “Gentlemen, you’re about to meet some Romulans.”

A Romulan centurion led Kathryn and Justin to an empty conference room onboard the cloaked Romulan vessel. Justin discreetly touched her back to get her to turn around and face him. She looked at him in question, and he moved his eyes up to a corner of the room and then back to her.

Kathryn nodded and then turned to look out a viewport at the Pioneer in the distance. As she turned back, she glanced up and saw what Justin had seen – an image recording lens. She didn’t think it was anything to worry about, but was glad he had pointed it out, nonetheless.

The door opened and a Romulan civilian came into the room. “Admiral Janeway, Lieutenant Jarvin,” he extended a hand. “A pleasure to welcome you both. I am Rabom, senior advisor to Praetor Hiren and member of the Continuing Committee.”

Kathryn accepted the handshake graciously. “It’s a pleasure to meet you as well, Senator. I’m sure you understand the need for my security precautions?”

“Yes, yes, of course. You are a valuable commodity in the Federation, I’m sure. Please have a seat, and just call me Rabom. I am not a senator.” He directed her towards a chair, and then nodded at Justin to take another, farther away from them. “I’m a civilian, but with a certain amount of influence and benefits due to my large business holdings. Can I get you anything?”

“Do you have the ability to replicate a Terran drink called coffee?”

“Hmmm... I don’t know, but I’ll find out.” He went over to the replicator and asked for it. “What do you know? I do!” Happily placing the steaming mug in front of her, he said, “I promise that it’s not poisoned.”

“Thank you, but I hope you don’t mind if Lieutenant Jarvin takes a quick scan?”

“By all means,” he said as Justin made the scan.

“It’s safe, Admiral.”

She nodded her thanks to Justin and said to Rabom, “We’re in the habit of taking certain safety measures. I hope you don’t take offense.” She inhaled the soothing aroma before taking a sip.

“A wise precaution, Admiral,” he said as he sat down with his own drink. “Now, I’m sure you want to know why I asked you to meet with me.”

“I must say that my curiosity is piqued.”

“Well, as you know, the Romulans and the Terrans have had a turbulent history, but two years ago, we put aside those differences and worked together to defeat the Dominion, Cardassians, Breen, and so on.”

“Yes, I understand that the Romulan alliance was the turning point of the war.”

“It was, and although the Senate was divided on the issue, I believe it was a necessity, but that’s old news.” He put his elbows on the table and said, “What I want to talk to you about is how to usher in an era of peace between us. I’ll be up front and tell you that this is a political move on my part.”

“Are you running for office?”

“Yes, Admiral. The time is coming soon for a new Praetor, and I want the job. My instinct tells me that there’s a younger individual, who was vital in the war effort, who will also be vying for the position. I don’t want him to get it, and believe me, you don’t want him to be appointed either.”

“Why is that?”

“I can’t give you that information. I’d like to, but I can’t.”

She understood and turned the conversation in a different direction. “A political move you say. Do you want it known on Romulus that we’ve had this conversation?”

“Not right now,” he held up a hand. “But when the time comes, I would.”

She nodded. “Will you notify me before that happens so that I may be equally prepared on my end?”

“Of course.”

“Why do you want to speak with me? I’m merely a Starfleet officer on a diplomatic tour.”

“You think so?” He smirked. “If my research is correct, you’re a very powerful woman, Admiral.”

“My influence may have been exaggerated in the media, Mr. Rabom.”

“Ah,” he held up a finger. “But isn’t the media where the real power over the people begins?”

She chose her words carefully. “If that influence is used judiciously, yes, I do believe that with enough popularity, one can sway public opinion.”

“This is exactly what I’m talking about. I asked to speak to you because I believe in you. You weren’t involved in the war, and from what I’ve seen so far, you operate with indisputable moral

principles. In addition, you have the attention of just about everyone in our two quadrants. I don't trust others within your government, nor does our Senate or our citizens, but I do trust you."

Kathryn sipped her coffee. "I can't affect change within my government unilaterally."

He raised an eyebrow. "Yes, Admiral, I believe you can, but I don't need to ask you to do that. I'm sure it will happen without my influence. What I want is an honest answer from you."

"To what question?"

"Will the Federation Council stand by its promises once they're made? Do you think peaceful coexistence and open exchange of scientific knowledge between us is possible?"

"Honestly, I think it depends on many factors, and it's not something I can predict. The Council is under a lot of pressure from disparate constituencies right now."

"Go on," he encouraged.

"How would the Romulan citizens respond to this proposal?"

"They are, in general, quite sure of their superiority, and would see it as an opportunity to either offer aid to those less fortunate or exploit them."

"That's honest, at least."

"However, there's another, much larger issue that will complicate matters."

"And that is?"

"I'm sure you've heard about the underground movement to reunite with Vulcan, and that movement is gaining influence. I don't think we can permanently ally with the Federation without acknowledging that."

"Vulcan is a highly respected member of the Federation."

He nodded. "What about your citizens? What's the general feeling about Romulans?"

"We represent so many worlds that I can't possibly give you a general opinion. However, I'd say that, with our history, mere mention of your people generates anxiety."

"Fair enough. What about you? What do you think?"

Kathryn gave it some thought and said, "I'm a lover of science, Mr. Rabom, and the more that scientists share their knowledge, the more progress can be made. Who knows what possibilities this could launch?"

“I like the way you think. Have you ever considered running for office, Admiral? You have a gift for evasive answers.”

Kathryn smiled. “I’m not trying to evade your questions.”

“I know, but you are and you’re doing it so wonderfully that I feel like we’re accomplishing something here.”

She had to laugh since that is exactly what Matt Patterson had told her. “You aren’t like any Romulan I’ve ever met.”

“Ah, then you haven’t met a Romulan politician.”

“That’s quite true. I have a question for you, if I may?”

“Of course.”

“If you aren’t the next Praetor, is this conversation null?”

He gave that careful thought before replying. “Yes and no. I have to proceed delicately to avoid inciting contempt from this other individual. He’s out for fame and glory, I’m afraid.”

“Not good qualities in a leader.”

“No, they aren’t. But for now, I believe that I’m not on his radar screen, so to speak. I suspect that if he does rise to power, it will be short lived and I’ll be waiting to clean up the mess.”

“I’ll watch for your name, then. How long will it be before a change happens, do you think?”

“Within a year, if things proceed according to established protocol.”

“Understood,” she tapped her fingers on the table. “Is this meeting to warn me about that?”

“I am loyal to the Romulan people, Admiral. When and if you learn more about this other individual, I would like you to remember that.”

Kathryn furrowed her eyebrows. “I don’t quite understand.”

“The *Romulan* people, Admiral. My loyalty is to Romulans. I can’t say more than that right now.”

“All right. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“I asked to meet with you because I merely wanted to get to know the human who I believe will be rising to power soon, as well.”

She had to smile at that, because it wasn't the first time she'd heard it. "If I move from Starfleet to politics, it will not be happening any time soon."

"Perhaps, but that doesn't mean you won't continue to be influential. Not all power comes from the head of the government. Nor should it be assumed that an elected leader reflects the opinions of all. Do you agree?"

"It's impossible for one person to reflect the opinions of all, Mr. Rabom."

He nodded. "I believe this to be true for the Federation. On the same token, I hope that you will be reminded of this conversation if the citizens of Romulus make a mistake regarding their choice for a future leader. One man does not speak for all."

They continued to talk for well over an hour, but both decided that they should not dally out of concern that they might be discovered.

As Kathryn and Justin rematerialized in Pioneer's briefing room, Harry looked up from his book as if this was a completely normal event.

Kathryn said, "Commander Morat, thank you for your time today."

He bowed his head in response. "Safe travels, Admiral."

"To you, as well." After he dematerialized, she said, "Well, that was interesting."

Justin said, "To say the least."

"What happened over there?" Harry asked.

She felt she could confide in him since he was now aware of the situation. "A conversation with an influential Romulan civilian. We will definitely be watching his career."

"Admiral," Justin said. "I love watching you work, but today takes the prize. He told you a hell of a lot more than you told him."

Amused, she responded, "Thank you. Would you do some discrete research on our new friend and see what you can find out about the other man he mentioned?"

"I'd love to, Admiral. I'm eager to find out who he might be."

"As am I. Enlist Harry's help if you need him."

Harry said, "I'd love to help, and I'm very curious."

"May I tell him, Admiral?" Justin asked.

She nodded, “But I trust that you will both keep this in the strictest of confidences?”

“Absolutely,” they both responded.

“Not even a word to your closest and most trusted friends.”

“You have our word,” Harry answered.

Justin said, “Not even a log entry.”

“Thank you.” She took a cleansing breath. “I feel like a weight has been lifted to have this over with. Shall we?” she asked as she gestured towards the bridge door.

When they walked in, Bernie stood up immediately. “You’re back.”

“Yes, and there is no cause for concern. We’re finished here.”

Bernie relaxed. “Very well. Shall we proceed to the Algeron system?”

“Yes, please.” Kathryn, Harry, and Justin headed towards the turbolift doors, but she paused to address the bridge crew. “I trust that all of you will keep any assumptions about what transpired today to yourself and that your logs will represent the dullest of ship’s operations today. What happens on the bridge, stays on the bridge.”

A chorus of, “Aye, Admirals,” was given to her in response.

When she got back to her quarters, she took her hair down and shook it out, toed off her boots, and got out of her tunic. What had started out as a very tense day had turned into a memorable experience and a remarkable boost to her confidence. Still, she couldn’t help but worry about the other individual that Rabom had referred to. She hoped Justin and Harry would find some useful information.

She replicated her dinner, and as she sat down to eat, a flash of light startled her. Her surprise turned to joy as she saw a huge bouquet of white roses on the table in front of her. “Thank you,” she called out, knowing Q was listening. Evidently, she had accomplished exactly what he’d wanted.

A month went by before the Pioneer was close enough to communicate directly with Earth by subspace. She and Chakotay had sent pre-recorded messages in the meantime, but it wasn’t the same as talking directly. The morning they were close enough, Kathryn got up early, checked their coordinates, and quickly hopped onto the comm terminal. Butterflies were flitting around her belly as she keyed in the security code to establish the encoded subspace link.

It took several minutes to connect, and then she was put in standby until he accepted the comm on the other end. As she waited, she wondered if she'd keyed in the wrong location, and then she looked at the time. Laughing to herself, she realized it was just shy of five in the morning. He was likely fast asleep.

She let the standby continue while she got a cup of coffee to drink and a report to read. He'd see his message light blinking when he woke up.

Her anticipation made it difficult to concentrate, but staring at the report was as good as any way to pass the time.

"Kathryn?" he asked in surprise.

She happily put the PADD down. "Hi there, sleepyhead."

"You're okay." He visibly relaxed.

"I'm fine. Were you concerned?"

"I was worried when the comm said it had been on standby for almost an hour."

"Sorry about that. I was anxious to talk to you as soon as we were in range, but I didn't check the time."

He chuckled. "How long have you been up?"

"I placed the call as soon as I crawled out of bed. You know, it's been over six weeks since we've talked."

"Yes, six very long weeks, but I've saved every single one of your messages and played them over and over again, just to hear your voice."

"You have not." She laughed.

He held up a hand in protest. "I wouldn't lie to you. You plan to marry a pathetic man who pines for you."

Shaking her head in amusement, she said, "From your messages, it sounds like Tom and Lanna have kept you busy."

"They've certainly tried, as have others. I told you that I started our Delta Quadrant textbook, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did," she smiled. "How's it coming?"

"Slowly. I'm still trying to get the Caretaker incident written with just the right tone."

“It’s a text book, not poetry.”

He blushed a little. “Yes, well, I wanted to capture the true feeling of what it was like when I first stepped foot on your bridge.” He changed the subject. “Enough about that... I’ve been very curious about your success out there, but didn’t want to ask. Are we on a secure line?”

“I didn’t mention anything because I couldn’t be sure of the security of the pre-recorded transmissions, but yes, this is as secure as I can make it.”

“And? Last I heard about it, Q had come to see you.”

“The planned meeting went extremely well, a very surprising conversation. You didn’t hear about it in the media, I hope?”

“No, not a thing.”

“Good. The party involved just wanted to meet me.”

“That’s all? Was it the person at the top?” He followed her lead in speaking without using specifics.

“No, but not far removed. There is no agenda at this time, just an interest in establishing the ground work of a relationship. Depending on how things work out politically for both worlds over the next year, we’re considering a scientific partnership as a first step.”

“That’s fantastic, but... all that worry.” He sighed.

“I know.” She pursed her lips. “I could throttle Q.”

“Watch out. Saying his name might summon him.”

“I wish. He could come in very handy sometimes.” She quirked a smile. “He sent me roses.”

“He did?”

“Three dozen white ones, as soon as I got back to my quarters.”

He narrowed his eyes playfully. “I’m the only person who is supposed to give you roses, love.”

“You give me peace roses, and I’ve treasured every one of them.”

“That’s what I should have brought you the night I gave you the massage. I’ve always given you one when you’ve been hurt.”

“I never really thanked you for that massage and for pulling me out of my mood.”

“You’re welcome. I will always be there for you, as I’m sure you’ll be there for me.”

“Always.” She wanted to reach out and touch him. “Oh, Chakotay. I miss you.”

“I miss you, too, but this won’t last forever.”

“Is that what you’ve been telling yourself?”

“Hourly.”

She rested her chin in her hands. “Tell me what we’re going to do as soon as I get home.”

“Ah, I have many plans. Most of them take place in the bedroom.” He winked.

Laughing, she said, “Thank you for cheering me up.”

“Were you blue?”

“Lonely. It’s rather boring out here between systems, although I’ve been socializing with the crew a lot more than I ever did on Voyager.”

“Good,” he smiled. “How are the discussions going? I’ve read the news reports, but it’s hard to tell how accurate it is.”

“We’ve visited only the three systems that have been publicized, and the media coverage is pretty accurate.”

“Then they’re all considering rejoining?”

“Yes, but with trepidation and misgivings. I think everyone is waiting to see what everyone else is going to do. No one wants to be the first to swallow their pride, and unofficially, they’re all waiting for a change in our government.”

“Makes sense. I wonder what it would take to bring them back, outside of an election.”

“Don’t know, but I’m looking for opportunities to show unexpected acts of kindness.”

“Just so you don’t leave yourself exposed,” he warned.

She bit back a smile. “You’d be impressed with the security precautions I’ve been taking. Bernie’s protective streak is almost as strong as yours.”

“I’m glad to hear it. What have you changed?”

“Various safeties, depending on the situation. We’ve decided to use the pulse communicators every time, and so far, they haven’t been detected.”

“B’Elanna did well with that invention. Have you had to adjust the frequency on them?”

“No, it’s been low enough to go completely unnoticed.” She remembered something she was supposed to do. “Oh, would you ask Lanna if she has time for a little project for me?”

“Sure, what is it?”

“I want to know if it’s possible to enhance commbadge technology with an undetectable scanner, similar in frequency to the pulses.”

“What do you want to scan for and how would you read the results?”

“We would have to download results by interfacing with a computer, and we’d be doing a basic security sweep when a tri-corder can’t be used.”

He furrowed his brow. “Have you run into that kind of situation?”

“No,” she said nonchalantly, “Just an idea I had.”

Giving her an odd look, he said, “All right, but I know you’re not telling me something.”

“How can you tell?” she asked with a grimace. “I’ve got a better poker face than that.”

“I know your mannerisms inside and out.”

She sighed and decided to confide in him so that he wouldn’t think she was hiding something significant. “There are certain advances that I’d like our former crew to make, despite being back in the alpha quadrant.”

“Sounds like an assignment from your little excursion last March.”

“A hope.” She smiled softly, “As there really is no way to check to see if I’ve followed through or not.”

“What will be, will be, regardless of what would have been.”

She laughed again. “If anyone is listening to this conversation, they would find that impossible to decipher.”

“I’ll ask her. She’d probably love to do something that would help you.” He shrugged, “And it would be a great tactical advantage, too. Right up my alley.”

“Yes, it would. And they’d be very useful for over-protective ship captains.”

Chakotay smiled. "He's still giving you a hard time?"

"I believe he's figured out what crosses the line, but it's hard for him. He's used to being the diplomat, not ferrying one around."

"From what you've described, you're becoming good friends."

"Yes, we are. He, Judy, and I have meals together often. They're both very good at debating the most innocuous issues. It has turned into a little game and keeps us from getting too bogged down with the more serious problems."

"Sounds like fun."

"It is. Oh... meant to tell you about a message mom sent."

"About?"

Kathryn felt chagrined. "I forgot to tell her about giving you power of attorney."

"Ah, yes, I know about that."

"You do?" she asked with amused interest.

"She came by my apartment unexpectedly a few weeks ago and asked what my intentions were towards you."

Kathryn laughed. "She did? What did you say?"

"I confessed." He looked down and tugged on his ear.

"You're blushing."

"Well, the cat's out of the bag as far as your mom is concerned. She told me that she'd received a letter from the attorney and wanted to know what led us to make that decision."

"That explains her message then. She said she'd be adopting you into the family."

"And she has," he said affirmatively. "I've been to Indiana several times and Katie and I are becoming pals."

"That's good. I'm glad you're spending time with them. Maybe you can commiserate about my absence."

He looked at her with undisguised love. "I've really missed talking to you."

“Me, too.” She hoped her expression conveyed her love, as well. “Are you available to talk tonight?”

“It just so happens that my busy social calendar has an opening for you.”

She winked at him. “Today, Harry and I are going to lend a hand in sciences. We passed an anomaly yesterday that has them perplexed.”

Smiling, he said, “Right up your alley. Have fun.”

“Thanks.” She touched the screen. “I Love you.”

“I love you, too, Kathryn.”

She started her day with renewed energy.

More than a week later, Chakotay answered the comm after the last student of the day left his office. Seeing that it was Tom calling from Utopia Planetia, Chakotay said, “Hi, what can I do for you?”

“Turn on the Fednews channel. Kathryn’s about to speak from Ktaris.”

He did as instructed, and the screen changed to a reporter talking in front of an empty outdoor stage, reducing Tom’s image to a box in the corner. “She’s doing a press conference today? She didn’t tell me that.”

“Patterson got a call about it and turned it on for all of us to watch. It’s a last minute thing.”

“What has the reporter said?”

Tom said, “Just that Kathryn and the Ktarian President have an announcement. Mostly, they’ve been rehashing what she’s been doing all year and what led to Ktaria’s dissolution of their membership. Do you think they’re rejoining?”

“That would be great, but I don’t know if they can officially do that without the Council approving.” They listened quietly for a few minutes while they waited.

The reporter said, “Security is taking position on the stage. President Sarkgret and Admiral Janeway should be speaking momentarily.”

Tom said, “There she is,” as the gathered crowd began applauding and the two leaders walked out of the capital building and stepped onto the stage. They were both smiling and waving to the Ktarians who had come to hear them speak.

Sarkgregt took the podium first. “Ktarian friends,” he said as he looked around. “Over the last three days, the Governance Committee has had extensive conferences with Admiral Kathryn Janeway and her exceptional team. We have debated the circumstances surrounding Ktaris’ withdrawal from the Federation, and it is clear to all of us that the concerns no longer exist or they include issues that are in the process of being resolved.” He turned to Kathryn in acknowledgement and the crowd cheered.

Tom said, “They’re giving her credit for the changes.”

“She’s accepting on behalf of the Council,” Chakotay noted.

After applauding her as well, Sarkgregt spoke again. “Today is an important day for Ktaris. Today, we put aside that which has divided us from our neighbors across the quadrant. Today, I am happy to announce that Ktaris is officially petitioning the Federation to reinstate our membership.”

The crowd cheered again, and Sarkgregt turned to shake Kathryn’s hand. She was beaming.

Chakotay said, “Fantastic. This is the turning point she was hoping for.”

Kathryn took his place at the podium, but had to wait until the applause died down. She turned to smile at Sarkgregt and said something in his ear that made him put his hand on her back and nod happily at her. Chakotay carefully took in every move she made, not wanting to miss a moment.

She held up her hands and the crowd quieted. “Friends of Ktaria, I am delighted with what we’ve accomplished together. The past is behind us, and it’s time to forge ahead with new initiatives and new relationships. By formally petitioning the Federation, you have been granted protectorate status, and may immediately re-open trade.” She smiled again as a chorus of applause erupted.

B’Elanna had joined Tom at the comm unit. She said, “Chakotay, she looks happy. Really, really happy again.”

“She is.” He wanted to hug Kathryn. “This is great news for her.”

Tom added, “For all of us.”

Kathryn started speaking again. “We haven’t crossed every hurdle, but I’m full of hope that we will very soon regain...”

Her words were cut off as a Ktarian security guard grabbed her from behind. Chakotay’s eyes were wide as he shouted, “Kathryn!” He watched intently, wondering what the guard was trying to shield her from.

“What the hell?” Tom asked. “He’s not protecting her!”

Within seconds, the guard had her on her knees with a phaser pointed at her head, holding her in place by her hair. Chakotay wanted to hit something, but all he could do was stare at the screen in fear.

The camera was shaky as it zoomed in on Kathryn and then zoomed back out to get everyone on the platform. All eight Starfleet officers had their phasers aimed at the Ktarian, and the President's security was closing ranks. With all the noise of the crowd, it was impossible to hear what was being said.

The reporter said nothing and the entire crowd stopped speaking at once, wanting to know what was happening. President Sargregt was clearly negotiating for Kathryn's release, and the Ktarian was yelling something about Starfleet at him, during which he angrily clocked Kathryn in the side of the head twice. Chakotay's fists tightened so much that his fingernails dug into his palms.

The camera zoomed in on Kathryn again, and Chakotay could see that she was calm, despite the blood trickling down her cheek. She was attentively watching her security team – a good sign. While the Ktarian was completely focused on yelling at the President, they made their move. Justin held out three fingers flat in front of him, and then in perfect rhythm held out one, two, and on three, Kathryn threw herself on the floor and all the phasers on the stage fired at once.

Chakotay gasped along with Kathryn when the stunned Ktarian crashed on top of her. Doyle and Moore were at her side in seconds, pulling him off and helping her to her feet. The crowd started applauding the maneuver when three more Ktarians took them by surprise in a second attempt to take Kathryn.

“No!” Chakotay, Tom, and B'Elanna all yelled at once.

Doyle and Moore saw it instantly and began fighting two of the attackers. The third aimed a phaser at Kathryn and fired, but missed when Kathryn's leg came up in a perfectly executed kick and hit his arm.

“Yes!” They yelled as they watched her, Doyle, and Moore continue to fight hand-to-hand. The other Starfleet officers were moving in to help or had their phasers aimed and were ready to fire as soon as they had a clear shot. Kathryn's attacker somehow found another phaser and soon had her pinned against his front with the clear intention of using her as a shield.

“Come on, love, you can get out of this,” Chakotay urged.

“She's not clear,” B'Elanna said. “She'd hit Doyle.”

“Then hit him!” Chakotay yelled.

Kathryn had evidently come to the same conclusion and made the move they all knew she was capable of. She dropped suddenly and used all her strength to toss the large Ktarian to the floor

and then sunk her elbow into his shoulder, forcing him to drop the weapon. They barely missed hitting Doyle, but it surprised his opponent enough that Scott was able to take him down. Once she was free, the six remaining officers fired, stunning all three.

“Yes!” Chakotay yelled again as pride swelled in his chest. “That’s my Kathryn.”

Moore, Jarvin, Kim, and another officer immediately closed ranks around her and bent their knees in defensive postures, just in case anyone else tried to come at her. Sargregt had been put into a similar guarded position by his security team. When the crowd realized that no other attack was coming, they erupted in thunderous applause once again.

Kathryn put her hand on Moore’s back to signal him to stand down. As she came out from behind him, she extended a hand to Sargregt. He pushed through his security to gladly accept it. The President laid his hand on Kathryn’s shoulder in a caring gesture, probably asking if she was okay as he handed her a handkerchief. She nodded, but her left hand was on her lower back and she was walking with a slight limp.

As the crowd continuing cheering, Tom said, “I bet she pulled a muscle.”

“He was twice her weight, at least,” B’Elanna pointed out.

His arm protectively around Kathryn’s shoulders, Sargregt stepped up to the podium to address the crowd. Once they were quiet, he said, “I think we all just witnessed a testimony to the fact that Admiral Janeway can do just about anything when she sets her mind to it.”

Chakotay agreed and smiled broadly as Kathryn shook her head in amusement.

Sargregt continued, “I realize that you couldn’t hear what was being said up here. I’ll be up front with you. The attacker was upset about our decision to rejoin the Federation. He harbors great resentment over the past, and I know that some of you agree with him. I urge all Ktarians, in fact, I urge everyone throughout the entire quadrant, to accept the fact that it’s time to put what happened during the war behind us. Harboring hate and fear only holds us back and will eventually cause more devastation than the war itself.”

Chakotay watched Kathryn’s expression change and knew that she was relieved that someone else had finally realized what the temporal board had indicated would happen if the Federation fell apart.

Sargregt invited Kathryn to say something, and she agreed. “Please forgive the interruption earlier.” She paused while the crowd chuckled quietly. “I was saying – although we have hurdles to cross, it is my hope that we can work together for a peaceful future that will both ensure everyone’s safety while also reigniting our passion for exploration and scientific discovery. Violence,” she gestured to where she had been on her knees, “is not the answer. Open dialogue is. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to return to my ship for an ice pack.” She winced and the crowd laughed quietly again and gradually another round of applause swelled loudly.

She shook Sargregt's hand and then took Harry's arm to be escorted off the stage to an area not blocked from transport. The camera stayed with them until the Pioneer's transporter beamed them away.

Tom said, "Damn, that was impressive."

"It was only two months ago when she flipped Chakotay like that," B'Elanna said.

"Yeah, but no one was pointing a phaser at her in front of a crowd of thousands."

Chakotay said, "We know what she's capable of. I'm thankful she had the ability to fight back."

B'Elanna asked, "So, old man, you want to come over for dinner? We'll watch the press eat this up."

"Sure," he said with a smile. "I'll meet you at your house within the hour."

After the comm closed, Chakotay leaned back in his chair with a sigh of relief. He rubbed his face and took a deep breath. Kathryn had handled the entire situation by the book, ensuring the best outcome, but he couldn't help the niggling fear that he could've lost her today. He pushed that fear down and concentrated on the pride he felt.

As he opened a message interface to key in a note for her, he had to smile as he recalled the shocked look on that Ktarian's face when she kicked him. It was priceless.

He typed, "Kathryn, I saw the whole thing, and I am so incredibly proud of you right now that I want to burst. Not just for taking that Ktarian down, but also for talking that world into following you. This is exactly what you were hoping for and I believe others will soon be following in their footsteps. If anything, your attackers ensured that this event will get significantly more press than it would have if they hadn't shown up. I'll be at the Paris' this evening if you want to contact me. All my love, Chakotay."

When Kathryn and her team rematerialized in the Pioneer's transporter room, she was finally able to give in to the pain in her back. She groaned and leaned against Harry.

"Admiral!" he said as he supported her.

"Damn that hurts." She clamped her eyelids shut.

Cooper said, "He was twice your size."

"Yeah, noticed that." She let them help her down the step as her eyes watered.

“Admiral,” Justin said. “We would have gotten to you.”

Turning to look at him, she quirked a smile. “No doubt, but I saw an opportunity and took it. I hope you don’t mind.” With the arm on her uninjured side, she squeezed Justin’s shoulder and looked around at the eight men who were with her. “Thank you all for your work today. Your cool heads and quick thinking kept that from being a really unpleasant hostage situation.”

Scott said, “Thank you, but why is that you’re the only one who has come back injured?”

Bernie had walked in just as Scott spoke. “Yes, why is that?”

Kathryn turned to him. “Because, Captain, I just kicked ass, that’s why.”

“Yes, I saw that.” He smiled in amusement as all of the men tried to keep from laughing. “Is everyone, besides her, all right?”

Cooper reported, “Yes, Sir.”

“Good work today. We were preparing a second team to surprise him, but you were so quick that we didn’t need to.” Bernie nodded his thanks. “Commander Kim, would you see that she gets to sickbay?”

“Yes, Sir.” He was already supporting her, but tightened his hold and ushered her out the door.

As they walked down the corridor to the turbolift, she asked, “What did you think about this week?”

“I think they were probably ready to rejoin the Federation already, but if they want to give you credit for changing their minds, then I’m all for it.”

“You’re exactly right. Sargregt pulled me aside Tuesday to tell me that is precisely what he intended. He could see that none of the other worlds were willing to take the first step, and although he knew there was disagreement among the Ktarian civilians, the Governance Committee had made the unanimous decision to rejoin before we arrived. They were behind his idea to lead the way for all the other hesitant worlds.”

As they got off the turbolift, Harry said, “Politics really are about couching the message in just the right way to win the public over.”

“That’s right,” she smiled. “Diplomacy on a grand scale.”

When they walked into sickbay, Dr. Murphy was ready for her. “Admiral, please lie down on a biobed.”

Kathryn frowned at the young doctor. “I’m not sure I can even get up on one.”

“Oh, just a moment.” Dr. Murphy ran the tri-corder over Kathryn’s back. “You’ve pulled several muscles and your vertebrae are out of alignment.”

Fighting the urge to roll her eyes, Kathryn merely nodded. “I thought that might be the case.”

Harry offered, “Let’s take off your tunic and have you lean against a bed so she can heal the muscles.”

Dr. Murphy picked up the deep tissue regenerator and said, “Oh, yes, good.”

Kathryn had to smile at Harry’s smooth way of giving the young doctor guidance. She glanced at Harry and noticed that his cheeks were slightly pinker than usual, and that he was casting furtive glances at the doctor. She looked down and bit her lips to avoid laughing. It seemed that the doctor’s muddled behavior might be due to a budding romance with Harry.

Dr. Murphy was able to quickly heal her back. “How does that feel, Admiral?”

Tentatively flexing, she said, “Better, thank you.”

“Can you lie down on your stomach?”

“I believe so,” Kathryn said, more tolerant of the doctor’s fumbling in light of her discovery. She let Harry help her up, and as soon as Kathryn was prone, Dr. Murphy immediately went to work on her head and spine. Kathryn wondered what sort of flirtatious glances were going on above her, but decided to let them have this moment and not indulge her curiosity.

When she got back to her quarters, she saw that Chakotay had sent a text message to her. Her first instinct was to be wary of what he might say since this was the first time she’d been in clear danger since Sirius, but she reminded herself, “You’re trusting him to keep his word.”

It only took her a moment to read it, and in response, she touched his picture and whispered, “Thank you.” She’d call him just as soon as she had a nice, long soak in her bathtub.

The next month was eventful enough to keep them busy as they traveled to a handful of systems within close proximity of each other. One was still a member of the Federation, two were former Federation worlds, another was a protectorate that had never moved past that status, and the last was a world that had always been independent and wished to remain that way.

Kathryn’s relationships with the Pioneer crew continued to develop throughout the fall. Many of the science and engineering personnel approached her daily with questions that ranged from asking her advice on an engine issue, to wanting her opinion on the latest astronomical survey. She suspected they were looking for ways to strike up a conversation, and she had to admit that it was flattering. It was enjoyable to interact with a crew that wasn’t her responsibility. She felt free to develop friendships and be social without the constraints of command.

She played poker regularly with a group of men from security. She learned at the first game that one of them had dared another to invite her, and they were shocked when she accepted. Since then, they made sure she was available before scheduling subsequent games, and they never failed to make her laugh. As she grew closer to them, it was also easier to communicate non-verbally with them while they were on away missions.

She also spent many evenings with Sue. The young lieutenant had seen the blanket that Kathryn was making for Kolopak and asked for help learning how to knit. Once she got the hang of it, they often sat together in Kathryn's quarters knitting, talking, and listening to music. Kathryn loved the friendship they were developing and found that they had a lot of interests in common.

Friendships with her own staff extended beyond just Sue. One evening when she and Harry were going over notes, Harry asked, "Admiral, do you have any objections to me pursuing a relationship with a member of the Pioneer crew?"

Kathryn quirked a smile. "You don't need my permission to date."

Blushing, he said, "Well, yes, but I was worried about it being inappropriate because we're visitors here."

She sighed. "Visitors, yes, but since we took on this job, we've spent a lot more time on this ship than we have at home."

"That's true."

"And remember, when we're at home, so is this ship, for the most part." She glanced at him. "Who is the lucky young lady?"

"Amy Murphy."

"The doctor," Kathryn said knowingly. "I thought so."

"Really? Why?"

"The looks you give each other."

"She's giving me looks?"

Kathryn laughed. "Ask her out, Harry."

In early December, they were on their way to the last conference on their itinerary when Kathryn came down with stomach flu. After coming back from sickbay, she called Chakotay to let him know that she was going to bed and wouldn't be able to talk.

“You look terrible,” Chakotay said as soon as the connection was made.

“I feel it.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nausea, stomach cramps, fever, and you don’t want to know what else.” Kathryn held her arms protectively around her middle.

“Have you been to sickbay?”

“Yes, it’s a virus and she can’t do anything.”

“I’m sorry. I wish I could be there to take care of you.”

She groaned. “I’m gonna lay down.”

“Okay, call me when you feel up to it.”

“Mhmm,” she said as she turned off the computer without bothering to disconnect the comm-link first.

The next morning, Kathryn was on her way to her office when Bernie stopped her in the corridor. “Kathryn, shouldn’t you be in bed?”

She groaned slightly, wishing that she could be. “We need to prepare for the next conference.”

“It’ll wait while you recover. If what you’re feeling is anything like what Judy is feeling, I can’t believe you’re even up and around.”

“She has it, too?”

“You didn’t know? Kim, Jarvin, Doyle, and Moore are all sick.”

Her shoulders sagged. “I have no staff.”

“You have Brooks, but you don’t want to infect her with this.”

“I’ll send her away, but I’ve got to get out of my quarters for awhile.”

Bernie sympathized, “I understand. Let me know if there’s anything I can do to help.”

Kathryn waved and walked on. There was no doubt in her mind that they all picked up this virus on the last planet, a week ago. What she didn't understand was why it took so long to incubate. She put it on her list to think about, but she had a dozen other things on her mind already. However, after the second time she'd fallen asleep at her desk, she decided that perhaps Bernie was right and she needed to go back to bed.

She was in the corridor when Bernie commed her. "Admiral, may I see you for a moment?"

"Mmm hmm. Where?"

"I'll come to you."

"kay," she said as she leaned against the wall. He probably thought she was still in her office, but she didn't have the energy to walk back. She'd made it a good twenty meters, and that felt like an accomplishment.

"Kathryn?"

"Hmm?" she asked as she opened her eyes.

"I think you were asleep standing up." He put his arm around her back and helped her start walking again. "You need to go back to bed."

"s where going." She felt the ship lurch. "What was that?"

"What?"

"Inertial dampeners malfunction."

"You're just dizzy."

They were almost to the turbolift when an ensign stepped in to help. "Shouldn't we just transport her to where she's going?"

Before Bernie could make the call, Kathryn slumped to the floor.

"Admiral!" the ensign yelled as he caught her head before it hit.

Kathryn forced her dry, gritty eyelids to open. Her mouth tasted horrible and her abdomen felt like it had been hit by a shuttle. She took stock of her surroundings and realized that she was in the Pioneer's sickbay.

"Admiral?" Dr. Murphy asked. "How are you feeling?"

She croaked, "Stomach hurts."

"I know," Amy said nervously. "It's not a virus. I'm sorry."

Kathryn blinked a few times to focus on the anxious young doctor. "Then what is it?"

"A parasite, but I'm still working on a treatment."

Groaning, Kathryn pushed herself up to a sitting position. She cringed with pain. "What time is it?"

"Almost oh-nine-hundred. You fainted yesterday and have been here since."

Kathryn let that sink in a moment, and then looked around. "Where are the others?"

"Everyone seems more comfortable in their quarters, and until I find a treatment, there's nothing I can do. I've given you as much pain medication as I can, and you slept with a sedative, but I can't give you more for awhile."

"May I go? I prefer to be alone."

"I'll call for a transport."

When Kathryn got to her quarters, she grabbed hold of the desk to stabilize herself. It hurt to stand up straight, but she knew she needed to call Chakotay or he'd worry. They had an understanding that she'd call every night.

When she made the connection, she just stared at his image, trying to decide if the transmission was blurry.

"Kathryn? Are you okay?"

She shook her head. "Mm mm. It's a parasite... going back to bed."

"Shouldn't you be in sickbay?"

"Spent the night there." She reached out to touch the screen, and a wave of nausea hit her.

"Need to go." Not bothering to end the call, she rushed for the bathroom and barely made it.

Chakotay cringed as he heard her retching. He closed the connection for her and immediately placed a call to Captain Young.

"Captain Chakotay, what can I do for you?"

"I'm calling to check on Kathryn's condition, but you don't look so good, either."

“I’ve been up all night with Judy, but I’m not sick.” Bernie rubbed his forehead. “So, you’ve spoken to her?”

“Evening before last and just now. What’s going on?”

“Just now? Isn’t she sedated in sickbay?”

“Sedated? No, she just called me from her quarters, but couldn’t talk because she was sick to her stomach.”

Bernie sighed heavily. “The six officers that attended the last peace conference have all contracted a parasitic disease, and Dr. Murphy has been unable to find a cure. She just determined last night that it wasn’t a virus.”

“Is there a prognosis if she’s unable to find a cure?”

“It doesn’t look good. They’re all suffering from severe dehydration, and some internal bleeding because it’s attacking their gastro-intestinal tract. We think that’s the reason Kathryn fainted yesterday.”

“Fainted?” Chakotay asked worriedly.

“I assumed she told you.”

“She didn’t have a chance.” Chakotay tried to think of what he could do. Being so far away, he felt helpless when all he wanted to do was hold her. “Has your doctor contacted Starfleet Medical?”

“Not yet, but if she doesn’t figure out something soon, I’m bringing us back to Earth.”

“How soon? Surely if a team here was working on a cure while you’re en route, they might find something before you arrive.”

“Dr. Murphy is doing her best, but I don’t want to undermine her confidence.”

“Meanwhile, those six people are suffering?” Chakotay was getting angry. “Boost her confidence some other way.”

Bernie held up a hand to placate him. “I understand, my wife is suffering, too. I’ll go check on Murphy’s progress right now.”

“And why aren’t they in sickbay? You’ve been taking care of Judy, but who is taking care of the others?”

“We have a limited medical staff, Captain, and they’re doing the best that they can.”

Chakotay could tell that Bernie was losing patience with him. “All right, I’ll back off, but please, see what you can do.”

“I will, and I’ll contact you when I know something.”

“I would appreciate it.” He signed off and leaned back in his chair, trying to figure out what he could do. He wanted to call Dr. Joe, but that would be crossing the line, and he needed to let Bernie handle it. Meanwhile, he prayed that Kathryn wasn’t suffering too badly.

Chakotay didn’t hear from Kathryn over the next couple of days, but he did receive updates from Bernie. All six patients were moved back to sickbay so the two nurses could help all of them at the same time. Starfleet Medical began assisting with the research within two hours of Chakotay’s call, but it took them two full days to find a treatment.

“Kathryn!” Chakotay answered, excited to hear from her. “I’ve been thinking about you. How are you feeling?”

“I’ve been worse,” she said with a lack of energy, but with a pleasant smile. She was wearing her robe and had just woken up.

“Bernie said that you started receiving treatments yesterday morning.”

“That’s what I hear, but I wasn’t cognizant enough to know. Dr. Murphy said it will take a full ten days of treatments to rid our systems of these pesky little trojans.”

He smiled sympathetically. “I wish I could’ve been there.”

“No, you don’t. I think it would have disgusted you. It did me.”

“You were sick. I would’ve held you through all of it.”

She raised an eyebrow, not believing that he’d actually do that. “We haven’t even said the ‘in sickness and in health’ vows, yet.”

“I don’t need to say them to stand by them.”

Her smile was sincere. “You’re a good man, you know?”

“Thanks, I’m glad that I’ve redeemed myself in your eyes.”

Softly, she replied, “Several times over.”

Chakotay’s heart felt warmed by her love, and wanted nothing more than to take her into his arms. “How are you feeling, really?”

“Exhausted, weak, still a little queasy. I lost a little over five kilos.”

“Don’t worry, you’ll gain it back.”

Laughing a little, she said, “I thought you’d like my smaller figure. I’d already dropped a couple kilos since August.”

“I’ll take you however I can get you, but you don’t need to diet on my account.”

She shook her head in amusement.

“What’s next on your schedule, or have you thought that far?”

“We’re holding position outside the Jorian system until we’ve recovered. Then, we have four days of meetings planned.” She sighed. “However, since we’ve had to change the dates, I don’t know if our schedule will be as busy.”

“Then you’re coming home?” he asked hopefully.

“Yes, and even with this setback, we’ll still make it in time for the reunion. Can you believe only a year has gone by?”

“Most people say the exact opposite.”

“I’ve had a busy year,” she said with a smile.

“Yes, you have.” He gazed longingly at her. “I really wish I could hold you right now.”

Her voice wavered as she said, “Me, too. I hate to admit it, but I could use some TLC.”

“We’ve got all of my winter break to do nothing but burrow together under some warm blankets.”

“I’m looking forward to it.” She touched the screen, wishing she could touch his face. “I should go. I’d like to read a few reports before I fall asleep again.”

“All right, but don’t push yourself. Rest.”

“I’ll try... and I’ve got my pillow.” She said with a wink. “I love you.”

“Love you, too, and I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

“Admiral Janeway, a pleasure to finally meet you in person,” President Nakmyre extended his hand in greeting as she and her escorts materialized in a courtyard outside the Jorian conference center.

“And you as well, President Nakmyre. I apologize for our delay.”

“No apology necessary. I trust you are feeling better?”

“Yes,” she smiled graciously as they entered a long, utilitarian corridor. “Were you able to reschedule all of the meetings?”

“Not all of them, but I believe we’ll still be able to cover everything we’d like.” He waved his hand toward their surroundings. “Please forgive the lack of grandeur with this entrance to the center, but the main foyer is crawling with far too many civilians and reporters to be considered safe for either of us.”

“I don’t mind. I actually prefer this over all the ceremony that usually goes along with these visits.”

“Yes, I know what you mean.” He gave her a knowing look. “It’s nice at first, but it gets tiring quite soon thereafter.”

It was a very long corridor with a couple of turns, but eventually, they passed through a second set of doors that led into an administrative office area. Nakmyre said, “There’s a conference room down here that will suit our needs for this morning. I’d like to speak to you alone before we start bringing in the committees, assemblages, and whatnot.”

She chuckled. “That will be fine. Perhaps you can brief me on the mind-set of those we will be meeting with.”

“That’s exactly what I plan to discuss.” He opened the door to the conference room and directed her inside.

Kathryn nodded at Harry and Justin who had arrived with the initial security team. Turning to the president, she said, “I’d like to introduce my senior aide, Lieutenant Commander Harry Kim.”

He extended his hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. That’s a long title, how should I address you?”

Accepting the handshake, Harry said, “Commander Kim, Sir.”

“Very well, then.” Nakmyre indicated that they should be seated. “Can I get you anything to drink? I understand that you’re a lover of the Terran beverage called coffee?”

“Yes,” she smiled. “My reputation precedes me.”

“I have just the thing that I want you to try.” He turned to the table behind him and poured three hot beverages for them. “This is a similarly brewed drink, but not quite so bitter.” Setting them on the table, he said, “I do hope you like it.”

She glanced up at Justin and he gave her a discreet nod indicating that it had been scanned and was safe for her to drink.

Nakmyre noticed and jokingly said, “I assure you that I would not poison you, my dear Admiral.”

After a small sip she said, “Of course not, but out in the Delta Quadrant, it became a habit to check every food and beverage for compatibility with our human physiology. I’m afraid it’s a habit we haven’t broken.”

“That’s quite understandable, Admiral. I don’t take offense. How do you like it?”

She took another sip. “It tastes like a combination of our coffee and tea, with a little chocolate thrown in. What do you think, Commander?” she asked Harry.

“A good description, although I think it leans heavily towards black tea.”

“Then if it is to your liking, shall we get started?”

“Please,” Kathryn nodded.

“I would like to discuss a great deal with you this morning in preparation for a luncheon we’ll be attending with the leaders of a five-planet coalition that we’ve developed out here.”

“A Coalition? Really?” She leaned forward inquisitively. “I thought I would’ve heard about something like that.”

“No, you wouldn’t. I’d be concerned if you had, because it’s something we’ve chosen to keep very quiet.”

“What’s the nature of the coalition?”

“Our foremost reason for creating it was for protection. The planets include Joria, Catork, Jarmara, Maio, and Rewn.”

“All of which ceded their membership at the same time,” she noted. “Approximately one month before war was declared on Cardassia.”

“Correct, Admiral. We saw what was coming, and because our sector is halfway between Earth and the Bajoran wormhole, we were concerned about our vulnerability. We believed this might be the first point of attack on the Federation.”

Kathryn nodded slowly. “All of the planets between Maio and Deep Space Nine are either uninhabited or lie in the demilitarized zone.”

“Precisely. So you understand that our primary concern was our own safety. It may sound selfish, but it had been our belief for years that the Cardassian Treaty was a colossal mistake. Our neighbors in the demilitarized zone had already suffered because of it, and we did not want the Federation bartering away our planets as well.”

Kathryn let his statement sit for a moment so that he would feel confident that he had been heard. “I’d like to say that I can’t imagine that the Federation would do that, but after spending seven years with a ship full of Maquis, I know better.” She nodded towards Justin. “Lieutenant Jarvin is from the former colony on Ronus, for example.”

“My condolences, Lieutenant,” Nakmyre said solemnly.

Justin merely nodded and didn’t add to the conversation.

“President,” Kathryn said, “I’m not here to ask you to defend your reasons for leaving. I’m here to ask if you’d like to return.”

“That’s a very complicated question.”

“I know, but I want to hear everything you’d like to tell me.”

He raised an eyebrow. “And you only want to stay four days?”

“I’ll stay as long as necessary, but it’s my hope that I’ll be able to grasp the primary issues in that amount of time.”

“We can certainly touch on them.” He laid both of his hands on the table, palms down, and paused for just a moment before looking back at her intently. “Admiral, I hope you don’t take this the wrong way.”

“You can talk to me about anything.”

“I would like to know whether you are merely a messenger for President Zife, or if you have the power to truly affect change.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Also, a very complicated question.”

“I realize that, but I’m not willing to expend the energy to go through this process if your job is simply to find out why we’re unhappy and tell the Federation President, because I don’t think he gives a damn about any planet except those who are providing for his extravagance.”

“President Zife,” she said carefully, “has a vested interest in rebuilding the Federation.”

Nakmyre rolled his eyes and sat back in his chair. “The Federation that he’s responsible for tearing apart. He only wants to get re-elected, and I can tell you this – our coalition has a mind to rejoin the Federation just so we can have a say in electing the next President because it sure as hell better not be Zife.”

Speaking calmly to avoid agitating him, she said, “As you must know, I have no power to control who is nominated next.”

He squinted. “You’d have significant power, Admiral, if you decided to throw your name into the hat.”

Kathryn took a slow, deep breath and glanced at Harry who was trying really hard not to smile. ‘He’s no help,’ she thought casually. Turning back to Nakmyre, she said, “As I’ve told many individuals already, if I decide to go in to politics, it will not be this year.”

“My dear Admiral, you already are in politics. The question is, what are you going to do with the political power that you have?”

“I am going to continue my attempts to restore faith in the principles of the Federation. My goal is simply to bring us back together because we are stronger united, and with that strength comes peace, and with peace comes prosperity, and with prosperity comes advancements in knowledge.”

“High ideals, Admiral. Can you do it?”

She sat back. “I can sure as hell try.”

Nakmyre smirked and then turned to Harry. “Commander Kim, did she say that eight years ago? That she can sure as hell try to get you home?”

Harry said confidently, “That’s exactly what she said, more or less.”

“Exactly? More or less?”

Looking directly at her, Harry said, “She told us that we had no idea of the dangers we’d face, but that one thing was clear – that we would all, Starfleet and Maquis, have to work together if we were going to survive.”

Justin said, “If I may, I’d like to add that she said that she wouldn’t settle for taking seventy-five years to get home. She’d find a way back.”

Kathryn gave him a look. “We, Lieutenant. I said *we’d* find a way back.”

Justin bit back a smile. “Of course, Admiral.”

Nakmyre said, “As I suspected. So, can you do it again, Admiral? Can you unite a disparate people and beat the odds?”

She clicked her tongue. “I can’t do it alone.”

“Well, Admiral, I have to be honest with you. I don’t believe the Federation, as it currently exists, is capable of holding up its own principles. I have a lot of faith in the ideology, but I don’t have faith in the leadership. So, please, tell me what you plan to do with the information I give you.”

“I will take everything we’ve learned from every world we’ve been to, find the common denominators, and work with Starfleet and the Federation Council to address the issues.”

“Who do you report to?”

“Fleet Admiral Khurma,” she replied.

“Who reports to President Zife.”

“Yes, he does. However, I have the ear of the Council and its subcommittees, and more importantly, I have the ear of the Federation Citizens. I’ll bring the issues to the public if I have to.”

“Fair enough. Our concerns really shouldn’t be all that surprising. If the Federation wants our five planets back, then we have two specific demands.”

“Which are?”

“We want a specific plan for how to protect the Council from the influence of the President. They need to work as a checks and balances system, not as a royal court that bows to the President as if he’s some kind of monarch.”

Kathryn was doing her best not to smile, but she wasn’t entirely successful. “And?”

“We want an open acknowledgement that there have been unfair trade agreements for the rebuilding of San Francisco and Betazed. There is an enormous disparity between the value of the contracts for the raw materials and the value of the contracts with the privately held construction companies.”

She scratched her neck. “It’s going to take four days to tell me that?”

He shrugged. “After they get through criticizing past decisions and postulating on future ones, I believe that is exactly what they’re going to say. These are the issues we believe need the most attention and we’re willing to put the bargaining power of seven billion potential Federation citizens behind them.”

“If that’s so, then I suggest we let them speak their mind about the past and not get into any debates. Postulating is not very helpful, but if they need to tell me what they believe will happen if we continue in the direction we’re going, I’ll let them speak.”

Nakmyre asked, “Are you prepared to take the brunt of their anger?”

“Yes, as long as the conversations are productive. We don’t want this conference to escalate into a blame-session.”

“Agreed,” he said.

“Following that, I’m eager to hear ideas about how to accomplish these two issues that you’ve brought to the table.” She folded her hands neatly in her lap. “It will certainly be interesting to see how President Zife responds.”

Nakmyre shook his head in amusement. “Admiral, I can already tell that this is going to be an entertaining week.”

“Good morning,” Kathryn called from across her quarters to the comm unit when she heard Chakotay complete the connection. She’d been on standby waiting for him to connect for about fifteen minutes, but decided to finish getting ready in the meantime. “I’ll be right there.”

“Take your time,” he called back.

She came back into the main room and stood in front of the desk to talk to him. “I can’t seem to get these pants pinned right.”

“What are you doing?”

Taking the pin out, she let him see what the problem was as they dropped low on her hips. “They’re too big, and I tore the new ones I just replicated.”

“So replicate another.”

“Seems such a waste.” She folded the waistband at her side and stuck the pin through. “These fit me two weeks ago.”

He chuckled. “You’re not on rations anymore, you know.”

“Yes, I know.” She managed to get the pin closed. “There. I don’t think that bunches out too much.”

“It’ll be fine once you put your tunic on.”

She smiled at him and walked away from the terminal again. “Keep talking while I grab my boots.”

“Are you running late?”

“Yes, Nakmyre wants me to join him for a private breakfast since this is the last day of the conference. He wants to hear my reactions to what has happened during the visit.”

“I hope the food is better than the dinner you told me about last night.”

She made a face as she sat down in front of the computer again to pull her boots on. “Jorian cuisine leaves a lot to be desired. Maybe I should replicate something quick before I go.” She looked at the clock. “But I don’t have time.”

“Go on,” he urged. “We can talk this evening.”

“You sure?” she asked as she slipped on her tunic. “We’re finished on the planet at fourteen hundred, and then I’ll want to debrief with my staff. Its Thursday there isn’t it? Do you have plans tonight?”

“None, and I won’t make any so we can talk.”

She stopped what she was doing to focus on him. “I’d like that. Would you read me another chapter of that book?”

“You like my voice that much?”

“Yes, I do. I miss you tremendously.”

“Only five more days until you’re home,” he said with anticipation.

Grinning, she said, “I’m looking forward to that TLC you promised.”

“Me, too, and don’t worry about your pant size. I plan on spoiling you once you’re here to get your weight back up.” He winked at her. “I love you, Kathryn.”

She kissed her fingers and touched the screen with them. “I love you, too. Talk to you after dinner.”

It was almost fifteen hundred by the time Kathryn was finished on Joria. She’d sent Harry and Judy back to the ship over an hour earlier thinking she’d be right behind them. However, a handful of Maioans cornered her to discuss an issue they didn’t believe got enough attention – the status of the planets in the dematerialized zone. President Nakmyre saw what was happening and gracefully extracted her from the aliens’ discussion.

Then, as they began to walk through the main foyer, a group of reporters pounced on them. She hid her frustration and put on her game face as they shouted questions.

“Admiral Janeway, do you believe this conference will result in Joria rejoining the Federation?”

She glanced at Nakmyre to see if he wanted to answer, but he declined. Kathryn responded, “It is my hope that all the conferences we’ve held during the past four months will result in many worlds rejoining the Federation. However, there are significant issues that need to be addressed in every case.”

“What are the primary issues for Joria?” another reporter asked.

“Equitable opportunities for all Federation worlds and they’d like the Federation Council to examine their decision making processes to ensure that all members’ opinions are weighed equally.” She watched Nakmyre for his response and wanted to smile when he nodded, but she kept her poker face.

“Is there anything you’d like to add, President?”

He said, “We appreciate Admiral Janeway’s time this week, and look forward to a continued relationship with her as we work through this difficult decision. The Admiral has been attentive and gracious, and I know that we can trust her to do all that is within her power to affect the changes that we’re requesting.”

“Admiral Janeway, where do you go next?”

“Home to the Terran system.”

“And what is first on your agenda when you return?”

She smiled and then looked into the camera that was taping the interview. “Voyager’s One-Year Reunion and celebrating Earth’s winter holidays. Following that, I’ll be meeting with the Federation Council to convey all of the information that my team has gathered during the past four months. Thank you for your questions.” She nodded graciously and turned around to give her security team the sign that she was ready for them to be aggressive about getting her out of the center.

The four men blocked the reporters and guided her towards the side entrance that she’d used every other time, as it would be much easier to leave.

President Nakmyre caught up with her. “Admiral, just a moment, if you please.”

She caught Scott’s eyes and secretly expressed her annoyance before turning on her smile. “Yes, President?”

“Thank you again, Admiral, for this week.” He shook her hand and then held it between both of his. “It has been a pleasure getting to know you, and I hope that we can talk again soon.”

“You’re welcome, President. I’ll be in touch as soon as I meet with the Council.” She didn’t know how to pull her hand back without seeming rude.

Justin said, “Admiral, we’re due to leave orbit soon.”

Nakmyre kissed the back of her hand and let go. “I mustn’t keep you any longer, then. Safe travels, Admiral.”

“Thank you.” She bowed her head slightly and then let her team escort her away. As they walked through the doors that led to the administrative offices she said, “Thank you, Lieutenant.”

“You’re welcome,” Justin replied. “Commander Moore wants to organize a rematch of the last poker game tonight, so I thought we should head back.”

“Don’t tell Nakmyre that,” she said with a smirk. “However, I won’t be able to join you this evening as I have plans to call Chakotay and I want to get back to a very good book.”

“Maybe tomorrow, then?”

“I’ll plan on it.”

As they walked, Kathryn thought about getting home for the Christmas holiday. She’d been on the diplomatic tour for sixteen weeks and was exhausted, both mentally and physically. She longed for the comforts of home, especially for the comforts that only Chakotay could provide. Smiling to herself, she wondered if he’d propose marriage again on Christmas. Maybe he’d even give her a ring as her Christmas present.

“Here, Admiral,” Ensign Jones directed her to the doors that led to the long corridor. He directed the group to stop once they were in the corridor, and tapped his commbadge. “Jones to Pioneer.”

“Go ahead,” replied Bernie.

“Do you have a fix on our location, sir?”

“Yes, Ensign, but we can’t initiate transport until you’ve cleared the building’s perimeter.”

“Aye, Sir. Proceeding to the exit.”

“We’ll see you soon. Pioneer out.”

“Let’s go,” Jones said and the group moved forward.

Kathryn asked, "So, why does Moore want a rematch? Did I miss something?"

"Because, he can't believe that you actually beat him," Justin said.

"Didn't he invite himself to the game just so he could play against me?"

"Yes," Jones said, "Because he didn't believe us when we told him how good you are."

Scott asked, "Why does this remind me of the night you hustled Paris at pool?"

"Because men can't..." She stopped and looked around. "Did you feel something?"

"Feel what?" Jones pulled out his tri-corder.

The hair on the back of Kathryn's neck stood on end. She moved to the wall and held her hands over it. "There's a change in the electro-magnetic energy of the environment."

"You can feel that?" Davis asked, his tri-corder was out, too. "I'm not picking up anything."

"May I?" she asked, reaching for his tri-corder.

"Of course, Admiral."

She changed the scan setting and waved it around. "Nothing. Not even our life-signs. Jones?"

He tried to scan Doyle. "Same result."

"Something's wrong," Justin said as he tapped his commbadge. "Jarvin to the Pioneer."

When he got no response, she tapped hers. "Janeway to the Pioneer." She tapped it again, "Pioneer, do you read me?"

All four of her security guards pulled out their phasers. Jones said, "I suggest we move quickly, Admiral."

Still looking at the tri-corder, she held up a finger. "Wait. I've got something."

"Admiral?" Justin asked nervously.

She had moved a few meters back up the corridor and scanned a junction box. "Nothing to worry about. Just an overload in the building's security system."

"Regardless." Justin was anxious. "I'd feel better if we got you out of here. Let's move."

"All right," she said. "I'm more than ready to get back to the ship."

They flanked her tightly as they walked quickly down the corridor. Although she didn't think there was anything to worry about, she felt relief when they turned the corner and saw the exit doors.

She felt an energy burst fly past her head a split second before Scott yelled, "GET DOWN!" He pushed on her shoulders and turned her to face away from the weapon's fire so he could place his body protectively in the path of the blasts.

The rest of the team returned fire as they closed ranks. Kathryn cursed herself for not realizing that the security system had been sabotaged. She couldn't see what was happening behind her, but she heard a body fall, and prayed it wasn't one of her people. She tried to look and Scott yelled, "NO!" as he closed his arms around the sides of her head.

Justin yelled, "DOYLE! GET HER OUT OF HERE! NOW!"

Without pause, Scott held her upper arms protectively to get her on her feet and pointed in the right direction. "RUN!" he yelled.

Knowing he was right behind her, she took off as fast as she could, refusing to look back. She heard a cry of pain and another body hit the floor, but she didn't stop. Then another cry of pain. Scott yelled, "No matter what – keep running! I won't let them get you!"

More footsteps were on their tail, and she knew it had to be her team catching up. They'd taken out the attackers and were following her out to safety. At least that's what she thought until she heard a strange voice yell, "Get the woman!"

"Aaaaagh!" she heard Scott yell behind her and she knew he was down.

"Shit!" She hit her commbadge, hoping like hell she could get through. "Janeway to Pioneer!"

"Go ahead, Admiral," Bernie replied. "We've..."

"GET US OUT... Aaaaaah!" she screamed as the phaser fire burned through her back.

"ADMIRAL!" Bernie yelled.

As she crashed to the floor, she knew that help would be on the way. She tried to move, but her body wouldn't respond as it twitched from the neural damage the weapon had caused.

"Got her!" someone yelled triumphantly as the footsteps thundered close.

Bernie's voice was still coming through the commbadge. "Do you read me?! KATHRYN!"

The strange voice instructed, "Destroy the badge." Kathryn was rolled over onto her back and the badge was ripped off. "She's still conscious."

She couldn't see, but she could still hear Bernie's voice calling for her, sounding so much like Chakotay that she yearned to cry out to him. A phaser blast struck beside her head and her link was severed.

"Stun her again," was the last thing she heard before she blacked out.

Part 14 - "A Missing Piece"

By Dawn

Rated R

Summary: Something Goes Wrong

On the bridge of the Pioneer, Ensign Igre announced, "Captain, we've lost contact with the away team. I'm not reading any comm signatures."

Bernie stood, immediately on alert. "Were they still in the corridor?"

"Yes, sir."

"Let's not take any chances. Moore and Ral, take a team down there."

"Aye, Sir."

"Igre, scan for anything out of the ordinary."

While Bernie waited for results, he tapped commands into his console to gain access to what Igre was looking at.

The ensign reported, "There's a dampening field of some kind surrounding that part of the building."

"Was it there before?"

"No, sir. It appears to be a malfunction of the security system."

A com line opened automatically and they heard Kathryn yell, "Janeway to Pioneer!"

"Go ahead, Admiral," Bernie replied. "We've..."

"GET US OUT... Aaaaaah!" Kathryn's scream blared through the com system.

“ADMIRAL!” Sudden fear gripped his chest and he was on his feet. Not closing his com line with Kathryn, he called out, “Young to Moore! They’re under attack! The Admiral’s been hit!”

Moore replied urgently, “Beaming down now.”

They heard an unknown voice yell through Kathryn’s commbadge, “Got her!”

Bernie stared wide-eyed at his bridge crew, yelling, “Admiral! Do you read me? KATHRYN!” He tried using her given name to get a response.

The unknown voice instructed, “Destroy the badge.”

Another voice said, “She’s still conscious.”

Bernie yelled, “Stop! Whoever you are, don’t you dare hurt her! Hang on, Admiral!”

They heard a loud pop and Igre announced, “We’ve lost the signal.”

“Hail President Nakmyre. Now.”

When the commanders, Harry, and two additional security officers arrived outside the building, it was eerily quiet. The Jorian security officers that were normally stationed outside the conference center were lying on the ground, unconscious, and there was no one else around. Moore motioned for the team to draw phasers and to divide up on each side of the metal doors that Kathryn and her team were to have come through. They kicked the doors open.

They saw Doyle first, lying prone not thirty meters from the door. Ral kneeled down to check for his pulse and grimly stated, “He’s dead.”

The others moved fast as they advanced down the corridor. When they arrived near the turn in the corridor where the other three officers were lying, Moore kneeled down to check them. All three were twitching with slight seizures.

Harry had his tri-corder out, scanning for life signs. “Nothing,” he said with a slight panic. “She’s not here!” He quickly went around the bend, continuing to scan, hoping to find something.

Moore followed him. “Kim! Stop!”

“Here.” Harry stopped at a power junction box. “There’s an overload in the security system. It’s sending out an electro-magnetic field.”

“That’s what’s blocking the sensors?”

“If I can just...” He pried it open and studied the internal workings. Stepping back, he aimed his phaser and destroyed it. The lights flickered, but their scanners started working again.

“Good work,” Moore said.

They both ran back to the fallen security officers and scanned for any clue as to where Kathryn might be. Harry shook his head as he studied the readings, growing angrier every second. “She’s not here.” He ran back to where Doyle’s body was and scanned again. “There’s some human DNA residue here, but I’m not detecting her life sign. Nothing.”

“Ral to Pioneer.”

“Go ahead, Commander,” Young responded anxiously.

“Janeway is missing. Her security and Jorian security are down. We need immediate medical assistance.”

“Understood. Additional search teams are already on the way, as is Jorian security. Begin a detailed security sweep. We need a lead, and we need it now.”

The teams searched for hours into the night, but there was no sign of her. Starfleet Command expanded the search by sending over a dozen starships to trace warp signatures, because no one wanted to consider the implications of Admiral Janeway being held hostage. Starfleet was never willing to negotiate with terrorists, and the consequences of losing Admiral Janeway because of that policy were unthinkable.

Chakotay sat on the edge of his couch, his elbows resting on his knees, and stared at the comm terminal. Kathryn had said she’d call him after dinner, and it was almost 10:00. He laced his fingers together to keep from wringing his hands. Normally, he’d think that she just got involved with some situation planet-side, but normally, they didn’t set a specific time to talk.

She’d said that she would contact him every night, and except for when she was sick, she’d kept that promise. Even when she couldn’t talk, she’d managed to send a quick text message telling him not to worry. Tonight, he’d received no such message.

He about jumped out of his skin when the terminal indicated an incoming call. He ran over and flipped it on, saying, “Kathryn, I was... B’Elanna.” His shoulders dropped.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“I was expecting Kathryn to call. Sorry,” he said distractedly. “Do you need something?”

“Just making sure you had the Fednews on. She got more press today.”

Not shutting the comm off, he ran over to the viewing screen and flipped it on. “Is the broadcast live?”

“I don’t think so,” B’Elanna called after him.

The newscaster was talking about something irrelevant and Chakotay was growing impatient. “Did I miss it?” he yelled back at the comm unit.

“No, not yet.”

He stared intently at the screen, hoping to receive an explanation that would set his fears at ease.

The newscaster finally reported, “In other news today, Admiral Janeway finished her last conference in what has been a very busy sixteen week tour of the outlying systems in the quadrant. This is a recording of her statements earlier this afternoon.”

Chakotay listened carefully, reaching out to touch her image on the screen while she was talking. As always, she answered the questions with grace and composure. However, nothing she said gave him any clue as to why she hadn’t called. Not even a trace of the body language communication that they’d worked out over the years.

B’Elanna called out, “Chakotay? Are you there?”

Taking one last look at her image, he went back to the terminal and sat down. “Yeah, I’m here.”

“What’s wrong?”

“She was supposed to contact me hours ago.” He wrung his hands together and glanced back at the viewing screen. “I’m worried.”

“I’m sure she’s fine. Probably got invited to a state dinner to celebrate the end of the conference or something.”

“Maybe,” he said anxiously. “I should try to contact her. Talk to you tomorrow?”

“Sure. She’ll be fine, Chakotay.”

He nodded as he cut the link, and keyed in the commands to establish a new one. A minute later, he got a Federation emblem with a message, “Unable to connect.”

Staring at the message for a few minutes, he thought about the reasons he couldn’t connect, and hoped that was why she hadn’t contacted him. There was some kind of interference that was preventing it. He looked back at the news on the view screen and saw that they were still discussing her. “That came through,” he said aloud to himself about the video footage. It was unsettling, but being unable to connect to the Pioneer could be the result of any number of issues.

He keyed in a text message, knowing it would go through more easily than a video transmission. “Kathryn, please contact me tonight, no matter how late. I’ll stay by the comm. All my love, Chakotay.”

After he hit send, he stared at the screen for a few minutes, willing some kind of response. “What is it you say?” he asked as if talking to her. “A watched pot never boils?” He got up to make a cup of tea.

Hours later, he woke up suddenly from where he’d fallen asleep on the couch. He checked the time and found that it was after two in the morning. He jumped up and went to the comm to check for messages. His heart sank when he found none.

Chakotay looked up when he saw movement at the back of the classroom. His last class was taking their final exam, and he found it hard to believe that someone had finished this early. What he saw filled him with sudden foreboding. It was Admiral Paris and another member of the tactics teaching faculty.

When he arrived at the desk, Paris spoke quietly. “Captain Chakotay, we need to talk. Commander Peterson will remain with your students until they finish their exams.”

Something had happened to Kathryn. His gut told him that something was very wrong, especially because she hadn’t called this morning, either. He was shaking slightly as he gathered his things and left with Paris.

Chakotay asked nothing and Paris said nothing as they walked to Chakotay’s private office. When the door was closed, Paris took out a tri-corder and erected a dampening field around the room. He held a finger to his lips as he scanned the office for listening devices, something that Chakotay did on a regular basis because of the need to protect Kathryn’s security. Satisfied that they were free to speak, Paris said, “We’ve got a problem.”

“How big?” Chakotay’s heart was in his throat.

“She’s missing, Lieutenant Doyle is dead, and we have no idea who has her.”

Chakotay felt the floor start to move, but he managed to sit down in one of the chairs behind him. He leaned forward to rest his elbows on knees and clasped his hands to keep them from shaking as a feeling of dread washed over him. Paris took a seat next to him and extended his hand to Chakotay’s shoulder in a vain attempt at comfort. Chakotay’s military training kicked in and he got himself together. “What’s the situation?”

“I’m going to be as straightforward with you as I can, because I know if I were in your shoes I’d want all the specifics. As a Captain, your clearance allows you access to the confidential information, but you must not share the details with anyone.”

Chakotay nodded his understanding. His heart was thumping heavily as Paris explained the situation. His heart froze upon hearing that she'd been so close to freedom when she was stunned, and he was doing his best to concentrate on the facts. "Could she still be on the planet? Was there another ship in orbit? Anything?"

"It's a very busy planet with a lot of interstellar traffic. She could've been on any of more than a dozen ships, and we have as many of our own tracking their movements. The government of Joria is working with us in full cooperation. They respect and admire Katie, and do not want the blame for this."

"I assume this happened yesterday?"

"Yes, at about fifteen hundred hours. I would've come to you sooner, but I wanted to know more, just in case there was no need to be concerned. I'd rather you not have to go through this."

"We'd planned to talk last night and I didn't hear from her. I was afraid something had..." He couldn't finish the sentence.

"So you would've been calling me today, I'm sure. She was due back here within the week. She wanted to be back for Voyager's reunion and Miral's party next Wednesday."

Chakotay closed his eyes and tried to take deep, steadying breaths. "Is there anything I can do to help? I could take another ship out there to search."

"We've got every available ship, fifteen of them, working on it. There are twelve following warp trails, the Pioneer is still in orbit, and two, including the Enterprise, are scouting the nearby systems. I wish I could send you. From what I understand, your intuition is spot-on, but you're too emotionally attached. If it were my wife, I'd go in guns blazing and ask questions later."

Surprised that Owen used the term wife, he said, "That's exactly what I feel like doing. Logically, I know you're right; it wouldn't be a tactically sound move, but I've got to do something. I can't just sit here and wait."

"You can do your best to mollify her family and friends, and I'll give you as much information as I can."

"I have to be honest with them, and I'm not willing to be placated."

"I know, but at this point, I don't know what you can do that we're not already doing. I'll send you the reports as I get them, and if you have any ideas, I'm all ears. I'm not asking you to lie to her family. Katie's status will be announced at sixteen hundred during a press conference. I suggest that you not attend because the press would swamp you."

"Agreed," He said with frustration. "But I would like to see it."

“It’ll be a live broadcast on the Fednews. Try to keep the Voyagers, my daughter-in-law specifically, from panicking and stirring up more trouble. Everybody in Starfleet and the Federation is doing everything they can to find Katie. Even the governments in the surrounding areas that aren’t Federation members are searching for her, too. I don’t have to tell you how valuable she is and what’s at stake.”

Chakotay’s heart constricted at the thought. “Is there a chance that someone just wanted a private conversation with her?”

“It’s possible, and I hope that’s all it is.”

“But your instinct tells you otherwise?”

“I’m not sure. The lack of communication indicates that someone has a need for her specifically, rather than to make demands for a hostage exchange, but we can’t think of any of the governments she’s been meeting with who would need to go to that extreme. It’s more likely that it’s someone she hasn’t talked to before.” Paris got up to leave. “If you need to talk, please call me.”

Chakotay nodded uncomfortably.

“Would you like me to call on Gretchen?”

“No, I’ll call her,” he said grimly.

When he was alone, he took a moment to absorb what he’d just been told. Kathryn was missing, and there wasn’t a damn thing he could do about it. He angrily fisted his hands, trying to get control over his emotions.

He pictured Kathryn standing on the bridge of Voyager, confident, powerful, and her eyes flashing with determination. That’s the woman he wanted her to be right now, confidently facing her adversary, either demanding release or calmly listening to a troubled soul who needed her help. Those two scenarios were the only ones he would consider.

When he felt as determined as he hoped she did, he walked around his desk to place the most difficult call he’d ever had to make, to tell Kathryn’s mother that she’d disappeared without a trace, for a second time.

On board the Pioneer, the entire crew was at red alert. No one had left their posts, no one was sleeping, and no one was smiling. Everyone was focused on analyzing sensor readings, formulating strategic analysis, going over forensic reports, and combing through past mission logs looking for any clue that would tell them where to look.

As the three security officers returned to consciousness, they were immediately on alert and waved off Dr. Murphy's recommendation that they rest. Every one of them felt personally responsible for her abduction and jumped back on duty. They couldn't remember anything specific except that the phaser fire had come out of nowhere and that they'd covered her so that she and Doyle could try to make an escape.

After completing scans of the nearby systems, the Enterprise returned to be the wingman for the Pioneer and to continue to aid in the rescue and recovery operation. Every lead was turning up empty, and the warp trails had all run dry. Besides re-examining what they'd already done, there wasn't much they could do except wait.

Chakotay had made contact with Gretchen, but found it impossible to tell her the bad news over the comm. She'd immediately sensed that he was upset about something and invited him over, saying that a good meal and some family time would give him a new perspective.

He slowly ascended the steps to the porch of the Janeway home, his longing for Kathryn overwhelming him. It was all he could do not to break down as he forced his feet to move towards the door.

"Chakotay!" Gretchen said as she opened the door and pulled him inside. As she wrapped him in a warm hug, she said, "Whatever is troubling you, it'll be okay. Come on in."

He shook his head as he looked down at the woman who looked so much like her daughter. "We have to talk."

"For heaven's sakes, son, what is it?"

"It's Kathryn," he managed to say past the lump in his throat.

"What's happened?" Her eyes were wide with fear.

"She's been abducted." It was all he could say before he had to find a place to sit down.

"Abducted? By whom? How?" She sat next to him and let him hold her hand.

"They don't know." He shook his head. "Owen had just told me when I called you. There's a press conference at four. She was leaving a building to go back to the ship and her team was attacked. One man is dead and the others are still unconscious."

"And she's gone?"

Chakotay concentrated again on the image of his brave Kathryn in order to get through this conversation. "We have to remember that she can handle a lot, and maybe someone just wanted to talk to her."

“Oh, Chakotay.” She covered her mouth, forcing back a sob.

“Gretchen,” he put his arm around her and held her close. Rubbing her back, he said, “We have to focus on her strength and her resilience. She’s stronger than anyone who would stoop to such a level, and she’s survived when the odds were a lot worse than they are right now. At some point, her captors will make their demands known, and Starfleet will be ready.”

As Kathryn returned to consciousness, she stamped out the burgeoning fear that crept into her mind. She couldn’t see anything, couldn’t hear anything, and she couldn’t move. Her arms were tied behind her back from elbow to wrist and her legs were bound from her knees to her ankles. The pain in her shoulders was severe from being pulled back so tightly. She feared that the ligaments had been stretched beyond their limits.

Every nerve in her body felt like it was over-stimulated, causing pain with every sensation. She was freezing cold and realized that she was wearing only her tank and underwear. Her hands and feet were completely numb, but she didn’t know if it was from cold or lack of circulation or a combination of both.

She struggled against the bonds, but the thin chains wouldn’t budge. She relaxed in order to take an inventory of what she knew. There was something in her ears preventing her from hearing. She was wearing a blindfold. The smell around her was slightly foul, but she couldn’t place it. The floor was cold, probably metal. It was damp, which she assumed was condensation because of the chill in the air. She could feel low, steady vibrations in the floor, so she could assume that she was on a ship. An uneven surge in the vibrations every few seconds told her that the engines were misaligned, and because it was so obvious and regular, the ship must not be in good condition.

Trying to remember the details of her abduction, she concentrated on whether she had seen a face, but there was nothing. Doyle had protected her so well that she hadn’t had a chance to look. She took a deep breath, trying to calm herself. She thought about Chakotay and wondered how he would react to her missing. How would her mom react? She clamped down those thoughts because they would do her no good. Her hope was that she could negotiate with whoever these people were, or that they’d make demands in exchange for her return and Starfleet would find a way to extract her. She just had to hold out for a little while, knowing that her discomfort would end, and she would be okay.

The good news was that her treatment was not characteristic of Cardassians, Romulans, or any other known enemy, so this was probably a much smaller operation. It wasn’t likely a negotiating member of the Federation because none would treat her so poorly if they wanted her to do something for them. In all probability, they were rebels or a small group of terrorists.

She didn’t know how long she’d been left alone, but it felt like hours. She was hungry, she had to use the facilities, and she was extremely cold. She called out, “Is anyone there? Hello?”

Listening for vibrations that could have indicated footsteps was difficult with her ears plugged. She demanded, "There are standards for the treatment of prisoners." She waited. "I can't help you if you don't talk to me."

Nothing. She relaxed as best she could, but it was difficult when she was bound so tightly. At some point, she fell asleep, because she was awakened by something being pushed forcefully against her mouth. She lurched back hard to fight off the certain suffocation. Struggling to get away was pointless as her head was pushed forward harshly against the object. She gasped and turned her head when she realized it was dripping wet. It was shoved between her lips and she was unprepared for the water that suddenly filled her mouth. She choked and coughed on the liquid, some of it coming uncomfortably out of her nose.

The sponge was removed and she was hit across the jaw. She reeled from the pain and gasped again when the sponge was stuffed back in, resulting in another choking spell. This happened repeatedly until she got the rhythm and was able to block her airway in time to actually receive the water that was being poured down her throat. When they left her alone again, she struggled to catch her breath. The exertion left her exhausted and the impacts on her face made it feel huge and swollen. She'd been struck enough times in her life to know that the pain she felt wasn't severe, but it was disconcerting given her state of helplessness.

"They can't just expect us to sit here and do nothing!" B'Elanna slammed her fist into the hardest pillow within reach. It was Saturday, and Kathryn had been missing since Thursday night.

"Yes, they can," Chakotay said calmly as he took a long swig of his beer. It was late in the afternoon, and Tom and B'Elanna had come to Kathryn's house that morning and dragged him back to their house, knowing he needed to be with people.

"How can you take this sitting down?"

"Because I have to," he said with controlled indignation. "What I'd like to do is to hijack a ship and turn over every damn rock in this quadrant until I find her, but that's not feasible."

"Let's do it. We'll get Voyager out of dry dock. She's still space worthy. Then round up the crew that's still in the sol system."

Chakotay could tell that B'Elanna wasn't serious, but pretending to make plans would give them something to do. They'd been sitting around all day feeling miserable. "We'd only have a quarter of the crew, but it might be enough."

"Yeah. We could go to Joria first, search for clues..."

Tom came in with Miral and asked, "Go where?"

Chakotay took another drink. “We’re planning a mutiny against Starfleet to go look under rocks.”

“Sounds constructive.” He opened a new bottle and joined them. “The trick is to figure out what fifteen starships, nine planetary security forces, and the entirety of Starfleet command missed.”

B’Elanna concentrated in thought. “Something obvious, I’m sure. Something we’ll find just as soon as we beam down.”

“A clue,” Tom added.

“A calling card from her abductors would be nice,” Chakotay suggested.

“Yes, with spatial coordinates, shield harmonics, and the slogan, ‘Will negotiate peacefully for release of irate redheads,’” Tom said.

B’Elanna snorted. “I bet she’s pissed.”

“They had no idea what they were getting themselves into,” Tom concurred.

Rubbing at his face to allay the ever-present raw emotions, Chakotay said. “This is so damn hard.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” B’Elanna offered tentatively.

“Not really,” Chakotay answered. “I’m afraid that I’d turn into a blubbering mess if I did. Besides, at least we know that Harry and Justin are working on it.”

Tom said sadly, “And Scott did what he could.”

“We could go hit something,” she suggested. “The gym on campus should be empty because of the holidays.”

“While we’re half inebriated?” Hitting sounded like a good idea, but going there drunk was not. He sighed. “I might take you up on that tomorrow, though.”

“Good.”

Tom asked, “How is her mom doing?”

“She’s just like her daughter, keeping herself busy to avoid thinking about it. I was over there all evening, and the rest of Kathryn’s family came over after the press conference. With Christmas coming, Gretchen has gone into high speed getting the house ready, sure that Kathryn will be home in time. She refused to be consoled because she won’t accept anything but a positive outcome.”

“I hope she’s not disappointed.”

“Me too, but I know she understands on some level that this...” Chakotay couldn’t finish the sentence as his eyes filled with tears. He stood up quickly and went to stand outside in the cold.

B’Elanna frowned. “I don’t think that was the best thing to say.”

“His emotions are so close to the surface that anything could set him off. I’m not sure that drinking was the best idea.”

“Maybe, maybe not.” B’Elanna got up and went outside where the cold drizzle sobered her slightly. She put her hand on Chakotay’s back, letting him know she was there. He instantly pulled her into his arms, not saying a word. She held on as tight as she could, not sure what else she could do. Her own emotions were surging with anger and fear for her friend.

The complete isolation continued for some time. Kathryn had no idea how long. It could have been days. It could have been a week. She was experiencing sensory deprivation and having trouble keeping unwanted hallucinations at bay. At times, her hallucinations took her back to the Borg cube to be assimilated, at other times they took her to the physical endurance ritual to save Kes. She relived the battle that the crew had been forced to remember because of the failing memorial, and she re-experienced her death many times over at the hands of the alien who wanted to lure her into his matrix.

Each time her mind returned to reality, she found herself in a cold sweat, trying to rid herself of the horrible memories. Being completely alone with no other stimulation made that impossible. She’d always used distractions as a way to cope with tragedies, and hadn’t developed any other techniques that she could fall back on now. The fear, agony, and grief that she’d ignored throughout her entire life would not be subverted. She was left tormented and distraught, unable to escape the implications of her actions and it shook her to the core.

Her captors continued to give her water via the sponge, but there was no food and no relief for her needs. She had no choice but to lie in her own filth as she grew weaker and weaker from the lack of nutrition and warmth. Her arms and legs felt like lead and she hoped like hell that her hands were getting some kind of circulation.

She gasped in shock as she was doused suddenly by intense cold. It took her a minute to realize that they were hosing her off with water. She struggled in vain to try to deal with the deluge, but there was no way for her to do anything except bear it until it was over. When it ended, she shivered uncontrollably, her teeth chattering against each other. The sponge was given to her again, and she had no choice but to accept it. She couldn’t survive without it, and she had to survive. She’d promised Chakotay that she would keep herself alive and she would not break her promise.

When she felt like she could drift off to sleep, she was suddenly and violently pulled to her knees. She yelped in pain as her malnourished and stiff muscles were forced to work. Unable to hold herself up, she had to rely on the hands of her captors, which were harsh and unforgiving in their rough handling of her injured arms and shoulders. The pain was almost enough to make her pass out.

She could hear voices, but with her hearing muffled, she couldn't make out their words. Her blindfold was ripped off and a bright light shone on her face. She closed her eyes to protect them, but even her eyelids didn't filter out the intensity or the pain that it caused. When she turned her head to look away, it was turned back forcefully. One of her earplugs was pulled out roughly so someone could yell to open her eyes. The unexpected volume caused her to wince in pain. She was so disoriented and over-stimulated that she couldn't track anything that was happening.

She heard someone say, "Oh, how the mighty have fallen. I've seen enough," and the blindfold was harshly tied back on and the earplug shoved back in. She was dropped callously to the floor, the pain of the impact radiating throughout her back, shoulders, and neck. Left alone again, she tried to recover from the assault by breathing deeply and finding a comforting image to latch onto. Chakotay's arms... holding her, rocking her. It wasn't a memory, but a dream she clung to for sanity. Gone was her ability to repress her thoughts of him because he was her only source of relief. He would be there when this was over and she would accept every comfort that he offered.

"Uncle Kotay?" Katie asked as she climbed up onto his lap and faced him.

"Yes, sweetheart?" He tucked wayward strands of hair behind her ears, the action reminding him sadly of a different set of auburn locks.

Her eyebrows furrowed, she asked, "What day is today?"

"Tuesday." He patted her ankle, wondering what she was thinking about so hard.

"The number day. What's the number?"

"Twenty-one?" He wasn't sure what she meant.

Katie's blue-gray eyes were deep set in concentration. "You're wrong. Twenty-one is when Aunt Katie is coming home, and she's not here."

Chakotay's heart fell. He took Katie's hands, and said, "She got lost."

"Lost?" Katie frowned. "Then we should call her and tell her how to get here. All she has to do is go to a transport station. They'll take care of her."

Phoebe came into the room and smiled at the two of them. “She’s really taken a liking to you.”

Chakotay smiled sadly. “Amazing how much she looks like her aunt.”

“I know.” Phoebe came up and kissed the top of Katie’s head. “It’s a comfort, but also a reminder.”

Katie looked up at her mom. “Uncle Kotay said Aunt Katie is lost. We should call her.”

Phoebe looked at him in alarm. “She didn’t need to know!”

“She asked.” He looked at Katie. “Tell your mommy what you thought was supposed to happen today.”

“It’s twenty-one, Mommy. The number day when you said Aunt Katie promised to come home.”

Phoebe closed her eyes in anguish. “Yes, Katie. You have a good memory.”

Chakotay said, “Sweetheart, we can’t call Aunt Katie because we don’t know where she is and she doesn’t have her communicator.” He pointed to the badge on his shirt.

“She’ll know what to do. Don’t worry.”

He bit his lip and nodded. “If she finds a transporter, I’m sure she’ll ask for help.”

“She better ask quick! Gramma said dinner is almost ready.”

Chakotay said sadly, “Katie, she won’t be home today. We don’t know when she’ll be home.”

The little girl scowled at her uncle. “You’re wrong! She is coming today because she promised!”

Phoebe said, “Honey, when someone is lost, they can’t always keep their promises.” She kneeled down next to Chakotay to look her daughter in the eye. “Someone bad might have her. Do you remember when we talked about stranger danger?”

Katie’s mouth dropped open in shock. “A bad person took her? But she’s a grown-up!”

Chakotay said, “Sometimes bad people can take grown-ups, too.”

“No!” Katie turned to face her uncle. “She’s just lost and she’ll be back. I know it!”

He gently held Katie’s head and gave her a kiss on the forehead. “I think so, too. Not today, but hopefully soon.”

Kathryn woke slowly and listened carefully to her surroundings. After the most recent assault, her earplugs hadn't been put back in, and she wanted to take advantage of that to try to gain her bearings and keep unwanted hallucinations at bay.

After a few minutes of listening to nothing, she was able to pick out a new sound, and immediately froze. Someone was there with her, and he or she was breathing slowly and evenly. Because she hadn't heard or felt any footsteps, the person had to have been with her when she woke up. Weakly, she asked, "Who's there?"

With a small gasp, the breathing stopped. A moment later, a voice asked, "How'd you know I was here?"

Kathryn moved her head slightly towards the voice. "You're breathing."

"Shhh," the voice said as it crept closer to her. "They don't know I'm in here."

"Who?"

"The others, on this ship."

Despite her powerless state, Kathryn knew this was an opportunity not to miss. "What ship?"

"I don't know if it has a name."

"Species?"

"A mix," he said nervously. "I saved..."

"Yes?" She flinched when she felt him touch her face.

"I won't hurt you. It's not much, but I saved my meal for you." He touched her lips. "You should eat."

Her hunger pains had long since passed, but she knew not to look a gift horse in the mouth, so she opened hers to accept whatever he offered. It tasted like stale, salted crackers, but her stomach rumbled in response. After having trouble swallowing the first bite, she asked, "Water?"

"Oh, okay." He scrambled away and returned. "I saw them give it to you with a sponge, but I'd like to try using a cup."

"Mmmhmm."

He attempted to pour the liquid into her mouth sideways. "Some might spill, but I think this must be more pleasant for you."

When they were done, she asked, "Loosen the bindings?"

"Oh... oh... no... I'd get in trouble. No, I can't. Here, another bite."

Kathryn ate it, but was afraid she'd pushed him too far because he'd grown quiet. "Does this ship stop anywhere?"

"I can't tell you that." He gave her another bite and then hesitated before admitting, "We stop, but that's when it gets bad for you. I've watched them."

"I need your help."

"No... no... I... I... I... can't. What could I do? There's nothing. They'd kill me!"

"If you see anyone from Starfleet, let them know I'm here. They'll come if they know."

Surprised, he asked, "They're looking for you?"

"Yes."

"Starfleet doesn't care about people."

The anger in his voice gave her pause. "It may seem that way."

"They don't care."

"Yes, they do. Please help me," she begged.

"I'll try."

"Chakotay, I'm sorry I don't have more to give you," Owen said. "As you'll see by the list I've forwarded, we've received hundreds of tips."

He downloaded the data into a PADD and scanned it. "These are from all over the quadrant."

"Yes, and we don't want to discredit any of them, but there are too many. We're starting with the ones that have come directly from Starfleet personnel in the sectors surrounding Joria first, but since it has been six days, she could be anywhere."

Chakotay rubbed his forehead. "I'll look through it, but I don't know that I'll be able to come up with anything new."

“I realize, but I want you to have all the information I can give you.”

“Thank you, Admiral.”

Owen sighed. “I don’t deserve your thanks. I’m sure you know that I encouraged her to take this job in the first place.”

Chakotay looked back at the screen, seeing the pain in the older man’s expression. “You’re not the only one. I did, too, because it’s a perfect fit for her abilities.”

“If it weren’t so dangerous.”

“You sound like Mrs. Janeway.”

With appreciation, Owen said, “Gretchen and I have too much in common. How is she holding up?”

“As well as can be expected, I suppose. She’s making herself very busy with Christmas, since the holiday is only three days away, but I’m afraid that it’s starting to sink in that Kathryn won’t be home in time.”

“She’s done the same thing for many years.” Owen looked down and then back up. “Would you do something for me?”

“I can try.”

“I know it might be difficult, but would you spend time with Gretchen?”

Chakotay nodded. “I’ve been there at least every other day. Kathryn’s family is my family, too.”

“I hate for her to go through this alone. Nor you, for that matter.”

Blinking back the burning in his eyes, Chakotay said, “I won’t let anyone who Kathryn loves go through this alone. She’d want all of us to support each other.”

After a quiet moment, Owen said, “Well, son, I’m still holding out for a Christmas miracle.”

“We need one.”

“When Katie gets home, make her happy, would you? Do anything you can for her.”

Chakotay had to close his eyes to control the emotions. His voice cracked when he replied, “That’s all I’ve ever wanted to do.”

Owen cleared his throat slightly. “All right. Well, I’ll see you in a few hours at Miral’s party, won’t I?”

“I’ll be there.” When the conversation ended, Chakotay took the list over to Kathryn’s couch to read through it. It was an arduous task, but he gave it his best shot. The only thing he saw was a pattern of locations, and the analysis Owen had attached noted the same.

One thing that he was confident about was that if anyone had actually seen Kathryn, then she would’ve been in a position to get out of trouble. He didn’t think her captors would be stupid enough to show their hand by letting her be seen by hundreds of people.

With a sigh, he tossed the PADD aside and picked up a framed picture that he’d put on the coffee table several weeks earlier. At the time, it had helped him feel like she was there with him, but in the last week, it had served as a lifeline. The image was a copy of the one he’d tossed into Kathryn’s trunk the night before she’d left. It was a picture of them taken at the awards banquet last May.

He reclined on the couch and called for the overhead lights to dim. The image was best when viewed in the soft yellow of the table lamp. Although they were both wearing the white dress uniforms, Kathryn was as beautiful as he could ever remember seeing her. She’d been in her element that night. This particular image had been captured when they’d been mingling before dinner. Her hair hadn’t grown long enough to pull up, yet. She’d styled it with long, beautiful curls, looking so elegant that one could’ve mistaken her uniform for a ball gown.

He touched the image of her face. Her blue-grey eyes sparkled with amusement, and her mouth was half-crooked into one of his favorite smiles. He couldn’t recall who they’d been talking to at the time. So many cameras had been clicking away at them all night that he’d begun ignoring them soon after walking into the room. However, he imagined that she’d been talking to one of the Voyagers, probably Harry.

He’d received a short text message from Harry two days ago. It hadn’t said much except that they were doing everything in their power to find her and leaving no stone unturned. Harry had begged his forgiveness for not being with her at the time she was taken, and Chakotay could tell, by his words alone, that Harry was in an awful state. In reply, Chakotay had done his best to bolster Harry’s confidence, realizing that Harry needed to know that Chakotay and all the Voyagers had faith that he was doing whatever he could.

Chakotay turned out the lamp and hugged the frame close to his chest. His thoughts returned to Kathryn, as flashes of countless memories played through his mind. He pictured her when she was most happy: playing pool in Sandrine’s; interacting with Naomi in the messhall; and rocking the newborn Miral. He thought about the way her expression was rapturous at the mere scent of freshly brewed coffee, and the blissful respite that soon followed her first, long drink. He also recalled the way Kathryn would glance at him across their shared console and wink when she was teasing the bridge crew about something.

The emptiness he felt at her absence was like a gaping wound inside his chest. It had been one hundred and twenty-three days since he'd last held her in his arms, and exactly one year since Voyager had arrived on Earth's doorstep. The Voyager reunion had been scheduled for that day, but when she'd gone missing, they'd postponed it a week. Most of the Voyagers were returning to Earth for the holiday and would still be able to attend.

Chakotay had planned to propose to her in front of their Voyager family. He'd been looking forward to this day for months, expecting it to be one of the happiest days of his life. Instead, it had turned out to be one of the saddest. His face crumpled, finally giving heed to the tears that had been threatening since he'd woken that morning.

He looked at her picture again and touched the image of her cheek. His voice cracked as he said, "Oh, Kathryn. I miss you so much it hurts. Whatever you're going through, please be strong and know that you're loved."

The assault was just as painful psychologically as the first two had been physically. She'd been hosed off again, but this time, it had been with warm water and more care had been given not to exacerbate her injuries. Unfortunately, it had relaxed her so that she'd been unprepared for the physical assault when it came.

She was hauled painfully to her knees and her blindfold removed to allow the bright light to once again blind her. An unknown voice demanded, "Who did you meet with on Stardate 55725?"

The vertigo from being pulled upright made it difficult for her concentrate. "...have to contact... ship." Her reply earned a bone-jarring blow across the cheekbone. If not for the hands holding her up, she would've fallen over.

"Self-righteous Starfleet whore!" The interrogator grabbed her jaw painfully. "Who did you talk to? Are you planning a revolution?"

"No," was all she could manage to say. She felt like she was going to vomit.

"Cover her eyes."

The blindfold was tied back on, once again, too tight. It put uncomfortable pressure on her eyeballs and added to the always-present vice-like pain in her head. Unknown hands groped her painfully, forcing her to endure harsh squeezing and pinching of her breasts. She refused to react.

The unknown hand asserted itself over her pubis, the heel of the hand pressing painfully above her pubic bone. "Tell me what I want to know if you want this to stop here."

"Go to hell."

In response, the hand dug in even harder before changing tactics and delivering several painful blows to her lower abdomen. It wasn't long before blessed unconsciousness carried her away from the pain.

Picard rested his eyes on each of the officers in the crowded briefing room aboard the Enterprise. "While I understand everyone's desire to retrace our steps, it's not going to do us any good until we have some new data."

"Agreed," Bernie replied. "We've done as much analysis as we can with all the information we have. I suggest that we go back to Joria and look for more clues."

Riker said, "It's been seven days. What are you hoping to find?"

"I don't know, but I'm at a loss as to what else to try."

Troi suggested, "Have we examined the visual logs from the conference? Any chance that the Jorian President could identify persons who don't belong?"

"There were five different races represented," Moore said. "Not to mention the reporters."

"True," Data said. "But perhaps I can assist by acquainting myself with all the individuals who were given clearance to attend."

Troi said, "Then you can scan the images and make matches."

"Yes, Counselor," he responded.

Harry asked, "What about checking the staff of the conference center to see who had clearance to access the security system? Someone had to have inside information to sabotage it without alerting Jorian security to the problem. There might even be cell residue on the equipment itself."

Picard nodded. "Excellent idea, Commander Kim. I suggest we set a course immediately."

"Agreed," Bernie replied, glad to have something to focus on.

Kathryn was in total darkness, enveloped by a complete lack of light and sound that she'd grown used to. It's not that she didn't crave the sunshine warming her face, but there, inside her mind, she could imagine anything she wanted. In her lucid moments, she escaped to her happy places. Places where she was content. Places where she was cared for. She was a child, swinging in the warm summer breeze, her Grandma pushing her higher and higher. She'd loved the sensation in

her belly as she flew forward and back. Those wonderful hands were always there to catch her and propel her forward again.

Her memories of Grandma morphed into a warm house on a cold winter night. It was Christmas Eve and there were iced gingerbread cookies and warm apple cider. Phoebe was spinning in her new dress. Mommy and Daddy were sitting by the fire, snuggling close, watching their girls twirl like ballerinas as they listened to music from the Nutcracker. She was safe there. Nothing bad ever happened on Christmas.

She realized that she was humming “Silent Night” and let herself fall into the image of white snow falling in the darkness, blanketing the rolling hills of Indiana. The Earth was quiet, the snow muting the sounds of nature and the sounds of civilization. A silent night. She began humming the second verse, the words played through her mind. It didn’t matter that the words weren’t quite right. Each phrase of music was broken as she drew in shallow breaths to keep going.

She knew she was sick. Her throat was sore and her chest rattled. She shivered not just from cold, but also from fever. Falling back into her mind, she remembered being sick on Voyager. She’d been sitting with the Doctor in the holodeck, listening to him contemplate the very existence of life, turning decisions over and over in his mind until he’d made himself mad with the variables and possibilities. She’d been reading “La Vita Nuova.”

“I felt a loving spirit suddenly, past a long slumber, in my heart arise; from far away then love I seemed to see, so glad, I could his face ill recognize.” She knew Dante spoke of Godly love, but that night with the Doctor, as she lay feverish in the holographic chair, she thought of her love. The loving spirit that had risen in her heart was her Chakotay, her best friend who had a spirit so loving, it took her breath away.

He’d met her in the corridor that night and he’d known that she’d needed loving care as he’d guided her into her quarters and helped her get to bed. He’d given her a simple medication to break her fever, and then he’d sat with her until she’d fallen asleep. She imagined him doing that now as she lay in the darkness, watching over her as she fell asleep, sick with fever. She knew that he was thinking of her, loving her, and somewhere, he was crying for her.

Chakotay closed the door in relief. He’d just come back to San Francisco from a dismal day in Indiana where he’d spent Kathryn’s Christmas holiday with her family. After leaving the transporter station, a reporter had provoked him into an angry eruption.

The press had been confronting him at every opportunity to get his reaction to Kathryn’s disappearance, but he hadn’t been able to pull together the emotional strength to face them calmly. Today’s encounter had been different. He’d had enough and decided to say exactly what he’d thought. He hoped that the admiralty didn’t come down on him for it, but nothing he said had been untrue.

Sitting on the couch, he clicked on the viewscreen and switched to the Fednews channel, even though he'd grown tired of watching the newsfeeds. However, it was in his best interest to listen to the reaction from his outburst.

The news channel was broadcasting recaps of debates on her disappearance. Everyone had a theory, but the primary ones were that she was part of a connived scheme with the President, that she disappeared to get away from the public eye, that she'd gone undercover to flesh out a spy, and more likely ones that included hostage scenarios. The one that made his blood run cold was that she was already dead, assassinated in anger. There was even speculation that Starfleet or the Federation had ordered the assassination to keep her from blowing the cover on an illegal conspiracy. The mystery and drama behind her disappearance was media fodder and every mention of her made him feel nauseous.

He sat and watched for an hour. At one moment, he was angry enough to throw a book at the screen. At another moment, he was wiping away his tears as he watched a segment of that first interview that marked the beginning of the media's infatuation with her. That was also the night he'd kissed her. Looking back, he wished that they'd simply gone into hiding where they'd be safe from the galaxy. If only life were that easy.

An advertisement for the evening news caught his attention. A snippet of something he'd said foreshadowed an in-depth report that would be aired momentarily. He groaned and decided to get up and call B'Elanna.

Once she answered, Chakotay said, "Turn on the news. I need your advice."

"On what?" she asked.

"How to proceed with Starfleet after losing my temper with a reporter. Call me back when it's over, would you?"

"Will do. Try not to worry, though."

Chakotay closed the comm and resettled on the couch where he waited for the media to twist his words for their own amusement.

"Today, our own Maureen McDown had a chance encounter with Captain Chakotay, the beloved friend and companion of Admiral Kathryn Janeway, and gained a rare insight into his thoughts regarding the mystery behind her disappearance nine days ago."

Chakotay sighed. It figured that the introduction would be all about how great the reporter was for harassing him into talking.

"Tell us, Captain, how do you feel about the speculation surrounding Admiral Janeway's disappearance?"

“How do I feel?” Chakotay’s eyes flashed with anger. “I feel like the media has turned this into a damn circus!”

“Where do you think she is, Captain?”

“Do you believe, for one second, that if I knew where she was that I’d be standing here talking to you? I’d be on my way to knock the living daylights out of whoever has taken her!”

“So you believe that she was abducted?”

“Hell, yes, she was abducted!” Chakotay stormed off and then returned with his fists balled in anger. “I have a message for everyone who’s going to watch you twist and contort what I’ve said here. Kathryn Janeway is an extremely compassionate woman who loves this Federation enough to sacrifice her life for it. Please keep that in mind as you dissect everything she has ever said in a sordid attempt to uncover some kind of Machiavellian plot of immoral political trickery. She would never... and I repeat NEVER... sacrifice honesty and integrity for her personal gain.”

The reporter was taken aback, but managed to say, “Sir, that’s just one opinion, and certainly not the majority.”

He took a step back to control himself and then said, “It’s deplorable that anyone would even suggest it.” He pointed forcefully to the sky, “Kathryn is out there somewhere, right now, doing whatever she can to get back to us. When she does, there’s going to be hell to pay for whoever has dared come between her and the people she loves, which is every damn person in this damn quadrant!”

Chakotay continued to watch the news as the media evaluated his words to come to the conclusion that he was in love with her and, because he knew her better than anyone else, they should all get behind him and give Kathryn their unconditional support. They deduced that she was trapped somewhere, suffering on their behalf, and that the entire Federation should unite to pray for her safe return.

He clicked off the broadcast when the comm unit announced an incoming message. He clicked it on to see B’Elanna. “Did you see it?” he asked uncertainly.

“Hell, yes! You have nothing to worry about, and you were well justified to say every bit of it. Tom’s parents are here and they agree.”

He took a deep breath. “Not that I really care what Starfleet thinks, but I should, for her sake.”

“You’re fine.” She looked at him sympathetically. “Try to get some rest. You look like you need it.”

Chakotay nodded and clicked off the comm. He stretched out on the couch and curled up with the afghan that Kathryn always wrapped around herself. She’d been gone so long that it didn’t

smell like her anymore, but that didn't detract from the memories of her warmth. He was so exhausted that he fell asleep within a few minutes.

Kathryn woke to gentle hands washing her legs with warm water, and she knew that it was the man she'd asked to help her. Afraid that the 'bath' meant another assault was coming, she murmured, "Help... please."

The water stopped and he came around to her face. "You're awake."

"Pleeease," she begged.

He placed a cracker in her mouth. "You need to eat."

Chewing was painful, but she somehow managed to get the dry cracker down. "You ask... help?"

"I tried, but he didn't believe me."

"Tried?" she whimpered.

Putting another bite in her mouth, he explained, "I was sent to get supplies, and there was a man in a Starfleet uniform. I told him that I needed his help, and that a human woman was being held captive on my ship."

After swallowing that bite, she asked, "ship near?"

"That was days ago." He fed her again. "The man was really rude. He asked if I expected him to believe me and then asked if I was going to tell him that you were Admiral Janeway."

"And?"

"That's it. One of the others from my ship was getting near and I couldn't be seen talking to a 'Fleeter."

She'd never felt so disheartened. "Please... anything... help."

"I know, but I'm just as much a prisoner as you are." He fed her again, and the bite got lodged in her dry throat causing her to start coughing painfully. That was all it took for her to vomit everything he'd just given her and then she passed out.

Unsubstantiated claims of sightings continued to pour in and it seemed as if the entire Federation was on the lookout for her, increasing the already impossible number of leads. There were a few

allegations mixed with a handful of parties who claimed responsibility and who were making demands. The problem was that they couldn't all have her so Starfleet didn't know whom to believe. Chakotay feared that if the parties became aware of each other, whoever was right might consider doing something drastic to prove themselves.

Chakotay watched the rain outside the window of Headquarter's largest meeting room, where the Voyagers had come together to celebrate their one-year homecoming anniversary. When it had been planned two months before, everyone had been excited, but without their former captain, the mood was somber and grim. They'd all hoped that by postponing it for a week that they'd be able to celebrate her safe return.

The Voyagers sat around tables, quietly chatting, each forming their own speculations on what had happened to her. Chakotay couldn't take it and had excused himself from the conversations. His plan to propose to her in front of their Voyager family made their presence hard to take.

Tom came over to look out the window with him. "The rain is fitting."

Chakotay nodded solemnly. "Yes, it is." He swallowed hard to try to contain his turbulent emotions.

"When she gets back, we'll plan another party, and we'll really have a reason to celebrate."

"She'll like that. I know she misses everyone."

Tom put a hand on Chakotay's back. "She's strong. I bet she'll have them looking down the business end of a phaser rifle before long."

"Yeah," he sniffed, trying to clear his head. "Hell hath no fury like Kathryn Janeway when she's pissed." It felt good to say, but after twelve days, it was difficult to keep believing that she would get herself out of trouble.

"No doubt. She's really something else, isn't she?" Tom said.

"Yes, she is." Chakotay pulled the diamond ring out of his pocket. "I don't know why I'm showing this to you, but I feel the need to tell someone what I was planning tonight."

Tom tried to lighten the mood by saying, "It's beautiful, but I'm already married."

Chakotay wanted to laugh, but wasn't able to manage it. He looked at the diamond glistening in comparison to the dull raindrops outside. "I think she'll like it."

"I'm sure she will." Tom was quiet while Chakotay put it back in his pocket. "Will it be a surprise?"

"No, not really. We talked about getting married before she left in September. She was finally feeling like herself again, and had decided it was time to break up with me."

“Break up?”

“Yeah, but then I proposed.” Chakotay managed a smile. “She told me I was insane.”

“So what changed her mind?”

With a shrug, he replied, “Somehow, I convinced her that she loved me despite my idiocy, and I vowed to spend the rest of my life protecting her heart as much as I tried to protect her life.”

“You must’ve been very persuasive.”

“I’ve never wanted anything so much in my life... until now.” Chakotay quickly moved the topic along. “But she didn’t want a rushed wedding done in your father’s office. She wants the real thing with flowers and the whole works.”

“And she’ll get it. We’ll plan a party to top ‘em all.”

“I’d like you to be my best man, Tom. Would you consider it?”

“I’d be honored,” Tom said sincerely. “We’ve come a long way since that day on Ocampo, haven’t we?”

“You know why, don’t you?”

“Because a gutsy woman, who can’t seem to stay out of trouble, told us to shape up or ship out?”

Chakotay managed a small smile. “That’s exactly right.”

Consciousness crept up on Kathryn as she slowly regained her bearings. She was extremely light-headed and the deck felt like it was rocking back and forth. Forcing herself to take inventory of her condition, she knew that it was getting pretty serious. Her mouth and throat burned so much that she couldn’t swallow. Her chest rattled ominously and when she tried to take in more than a shallow breath, she ended up coughing up thick, foul tasting phlegm out of her lungs.

She had long since stopped feeling hungry, but she could tell by the feel of her legs that she’d lost a lot of weight. Her body was giving her all the warning signs of starvation, but she was helpless to do anything to prevent it. Sharp pains often shot through her abdomen, but she had no idea why.

Trying to piece together what she knew, she strained to remember details. She was still on the same rickety barge with the uneven engines. She’d been hosed off and hauled up for inspection four or five times, she couldn’t remember for sure. Unfortunately, she also couldn’t remember

many details about any of the encounters. No species' names, sounds, or smells came to mind. Nothing that would identify anyone, but it was clear to her that her captors had her up for auction. At least when an exchange took place, things would change and she could watch for avenues of escape or communication. Not that she had the strength to punch her way out of here. She couldn't even lift her head.

It was time for her to come to terms with dying. She felt sad for her loved ones. They wouldn't be handling this well. Chakotay would be beside himself with grief and angry that he couldn't do anything to save her, but he'd promised her that he'd get through it. She knew he would. Her mom would be distraught, and then fall into a depression until Phoebe got her some help. Phoebe would have Mike to get her through it, and they'd help Katie. Sweet, precious Katie. Kathryn had so much wanted to see her grow up. And so much for those descendants she was supposed to create. She hoped the Kate from the future wouldn't mind not existing.

Her dear friends from Voyager, they'd be almost as upset as Chakotay. They were as close to her as her own family, perhaps closer in many ways because of what they'd survived together. They'd think it a horrible tragedy to lose her this way. She loved every single one of them and she hoped they'd bolster each other.

She was starting to fade as she thought about the way a martyr could initiate change. It was looking more probable, but now that she'd defeated depression, had a soon-to-be loving husband, and had made progress with her job, she wasn't the least bit interested in pursuing the death option. When she started drifting off to sleep again, she imagined herself in Chakotay's loving arms. That was where she wanted to die.

She'd just drifted off when she felt vibrations in the floor. She tried to shut down her mind in preparation for another assault. This one came hard and fast, and was more violent than any of the others had been. She was kicked repeatedly, beaten and bashed in the head, yanked up and thrown down, and she was completely defenseless to stop it.

As she lay on the floor attempting to recover from the brutal attack, her head spun and nausea overwhelmed her as she heaved the meager amount of liquid that had been in her stomach. She tasted blood, but she didn't know where it was coming from. Someone yanked her up again and said something, but she wasn't able to comprehend the words. Her blindfold was torn off and a bright light blinded her, but she was too weak to do anything about it. As she was dropped again to the deck, blessed unconsciousness asserted itself and gave her a much-needed escape from her misery.

Part 15 - "Impressive, Commander Kim"

By Dawn

Rated R

Summary: Where is she?

Fourteen days had passed since Kathryn's abduction, and tensions on the Pioneer were running at an all time high.

Commander Moore said, "Captain, we're receiving a transmission from an unidentified source."

"What type of transmission?"

"Standard subspace visual transmission on an insecure frequency."

Bernie had a feeling that this could be an important lead. "Commander Ral, get a secure message to the Enterprise to start tracking it with their enhanced sensors. Commander Kim," he turned to Harry who was at the secondary ops station. "Work your magic."

"Aye, Captain," Harry nodded intently, already analyzing the carrier wave.

"On Screen," Bernie said. When the image came up, they all squinted to try to make out details in the darkness. Bernie ordered, "Lower bridge lights to thirty percent."

"Is that a child?" Moore asked about the small, huddled creature they were seeing. The top of its head was visible, as was its upper body, but the face was hidden.

Bernie walked towards the viewscreen. Not taking his eyes from it, he asked, "Igre, can you increase the volume?"

Over the hum of the alien ship's background engine noise, they heard the creature breathing – a wheeze accompanied every intake, and a rattled, labored cough came out with every exhalation. As the camera zoomed in closer, they could see that it was definitely a humanoid.

Ral said, "That's a Starfleet tank. Could that be...?"

Moore interrupted, sounding horrified. "No, it can't be."

Harry glanced up from where he'd been concentrating on the sensor readings. He had to fight down the bile that rose in his throat at the site before him. A small, female body was mottled with deep, purple bruises and dried, crusted blood. Oozing from multiple places was fresh blood, so dark it appeared black as it reflected the camera light. He looked back at his sensor panel, unwilling to miss his opportunity to help her.

The female began coughing harder and they all stared as she heaved painfully and vomited. As horrible as the sight was, few could tear their eyes away. Seconds later, a figure disguised completely in black yanked on the bound arms of the woman, pulling her up to her knees as she screamed in pain. A bright light was turned on and the woman's blindfold torn off.

A distorted voice mocked, "Smile for the camera, Admiral."

Everyone on the bridge gasped in shock at Kathryn's condition. Dark red blood seeped from her mouth, and her head lolled on her shoulders until it was yanked into position. Her entire body was covered in bruises, and it was clear that she was completely helpless to stop the assault with her arms and legs bound tightly.

The bridge instantly became a flurry of activity with orders being shouted in all directions. Harry forced himself to concentrate on the data in front of him, trying to block the sound of her severely congested coughing and cries of pain. He couldn't help her if he got emotional. She was alive, there was a carrier wave to analyze, and that's all that mattered at the moment.

The same distorted voice said, "If Admiral Janeway's life is important to you, cease your search. Any attempts to rescue her will result in her immediate death." With that, she was dropped mercilessly to the deck and the transmission ended.

Bernie asked gravely, "What do we know?"

Harry continued to force down his emotions. "It was sent on a subspace carrier wave originating in Sector 032, but I'll need more time for analysis it to pinpoint it beyond that."

"Good work, Commander."

Ral said, "The inside of that ship looked like a Kressari freighter."

"How can you tell?" Bernie asked.

"I was detained in one, and I wasn't blindfolded," she said morosely. "The Cardassians used them for smuggling."

"That's right." Justin had arrived on the bridge halfway through the transmission. "Our Maquis cell encountered one full of Starfleet weapons when the Cardassians were trying to frame the Federation."

Bernie asked, "Can we analyze that voice. Is it Cardassian?"

"If it is Cardassian," Justin said, "Whoever has taken her has a personal vendetta against Chakotay. Maybe they were waiting for him to get involved before they made a move."

Bernie said, "Then they've just tipped their hand, but before we jump to that conclusion, let's find out what we can about that voice. Moore, open a channel to the Enterprise."

Picard's image appeared on the screen, and he was immediately all business. "We're still analyzing it, Captain Young, but it's clear that something we've done has struck a nerve. Now we need to figure out what that was."

"Were you able to get a visual?" Bernie asked.

“Yes,” Picard said grimly, “and we need to work fast. I’ve got my entire senior staff studying it, but it was well concealed. It’s going to take them awhile.”

“In the meantime, I suggest we cover some of the distance towards that sector.”

“What sector, Captain? It was untraceable.”

Bernie turned around in surprise. “Commander Kim?”

Harry answered confidently, “It originated from Sector 032 on a subspace carrier wave, frequency modulation of 626.4 decibels.”

Picard’s eyes widened appreciatively. “I’m impressed, Commander. You did that more efficiently than Commander Data.”

“Thank you, sir.” Harry wished he could feel better, but the affects of what they’d just witnessed were starting to seep in, leaving him feeling shaken.

Bernie said, “And based on a visual observation, Commander Ral believes we’re looking for a Kressari Freighter.”

“Outstanding work,” Picard replied. “I agree, Captain, let’s cover some of that distance since it’ll take three hours at your warp six. I suggest a slightly circuitous route until we know more.” Picard looked away and then back at the screen. “There’s a class nine nebula in sector 030 that could cover our tracks.”

“Agreed. Shall we convene on the Enterprise for a joint briefing in one hour?”

“Yes, I assume you’ll alert Starfleet Command?”

Bernie closed his eyes in anguish. “Yes, Captain.”

When the transmission ended, Bernie said, “Good work, Commanders. I’d say that it must take a lot to impress Jean-Luc Picard, and you two certainly did it today. Keep working on the analysis and let me know if you uncover anything. I’ll be in the ready room.”

Once behind closed doors, Bernie took a moment to compose himself. Violence had always been difficult for him, which is why he’d chosen the diplomatic track in his career. His tenure in Starfleet had exposed him to more brutality than he cared to recall, and although he hadn’t grown immune to it, he’d certainly become desensitized over the years. However, seeing a woman bound and suffering from such cruel treatment, a woman he considered a dear friend, was gut-wrenching.

He sat down at his desk and initiated a com-link with Admiral Khurma to deliver the news.

Khurma's secretary, a woman who annoyed him a great deal, intercepted. "Captain Young, the Fleet Admiral is in a meeting. Perhaps you should consider sending him a pre-recorded message. As you know, Admiral Khurma has a very busy schedule."

Young took a deep breath and plastered on his best diplomatic face. "Yes, Ms. Randolph. I realize that he's a very busy man, and I wouldn't have set this transmission as priority one unless I meant it. I'm quite confident that he will want to speak with me. Now."

"Please hold," she snooted condescendingly.

Bernie sighed deeply as her image was replaced with the Starfleet insignia. He didn't have to wait long.

Khurma asked urgently, "Bernie, you have something for us?"

"I'm sending you a transmission we just received from Janeway's captors."

"Another party claiming that they have her?"

Bernie paused before delivering the solemn news. "It contains a visual recording of her and a threat to stop our search. She's been brutally assaulted, Admiral."

Khurma's jaw set in controlled anger. "Assaulted how?"

"Beaten. Her torso and legs are mottled with bruises and blood. She's bound, appears malnourished, and by the sound of her labored breathing, I believe that she's extremely ill."

Khurma looked away for a moment in grief. "What do we know?"

Bernie quickly relayed a summary of the onboard follow-up conversation. "We're proceeding to that sector and will continue analyzing en route."

"Do you have anything to back up the implications of the Cardassians or the Kressari?"

"Not at this time. I think it's premature to start making any accusations. It could merely be a coincidence or a stolen freighter."

"Agreed, but if your assessment leans in that direction, please let me know immediately. If that's who we're dealing with, then we've got a much different problem on our hands than we've been led to believe."

"Of course, Admiral." Bernie had an idea. "Would you be willing to convince Starfleet Medical to release Admiral Janeway's medical files for evaluation?"

"For what purpose?"

“I’d like to know if there’s anything physiologically unique about her that could help us distinguish her bio-pattern from other humanoids. I understand she was assimilated at one time. Perhaps there are some traces of Borg technology in her body?”

Khurma nodded. “An excellent idea. I’ll contact Dr. Zimmerman, Voyager’s EMH, to do the analysis. He’ll know immediately, and I’d rather not invade her privacy any more than absolutely necessary.”

“Thank you. I’ll report back to you in two hours, and Admiral, it might be best not to show the video feed to Captain Chakotay unless we uncover a personal vendetta. This is more than a man in love could take.”

“Agreed. We’ll begin an analysis, as well. Khurma out.”

Harry joined the briefing on the Enterprise while it was already in progress. He tried not to flinch under Captain Picard’s questioning stare, assuming that he was receiving ‘the look’ for being late. Commander Data was going over his analysis of the carrier wave, adding further details that Harry hadn’t had time to extrapolate.

He listened carefully to the conversations and mentally gathered the list of facts. They only had the visual supposition that she was on a Kressari freighter. The analysis of the voice pattern did not reflect any known Cardassian markers, and was more likely human or a genetically similar species. The search was narrowed slightly within the sector Harry had determined, but they still had almost sixteen parsecs to cover.

Captain Picard said, “Commander Kim, your original analysis was remarkable. Do you have anything to add after studying it further?”

Harry cleared his throat slightly. “I didn’t have a chance to do more analysis because I received a priority communication from Dr. Zimmerman, Voyager’s former EMH. I’ve learned about something that I think will help us. I apologize for being late.”

“No need to apologize, Commander,” Bernie said. “What do you have?”

Harry looked around the table nervously because of what he was about to reveal, even though he’d been given permission to do so. “The Doctor revealed that Admiral Janeway has a unique implant at the base of her skull that we’ll be able to distinguish with our scanners.”

“Implant?” Riker asked. “What kind of implant?”

“Because of the Admiral’s repeated experiences with time travel, the 29th century ship that polices temporal incursions implanted a device that will prevent her from experiencing further temporal breaches.”

Data asked, "Do we have access to previous scans of this device?"

"No, they're part of her confidential medical records." Harry held up a PADD. "Dr. Zimmerman made the only existing scan. It's virtually undetectable because it's out of phase, but he's given me the exact phase variance, and indicated that it's made from the same poly-deutonic alloy as his portable holographic emitter. That alloy doesn't exist outside of these two devices, so if we reconfigure the scanners on both ships and account for possible dampening fields, it could give us a signal as clear as if she was wearing her commbadge."

Dr. Crusher said, "I can access her medical files, if needed."

"As can I," Dr. Murphy added. "What do we need to know?"

Harry said, "Not this part of her files. Anything related to her time travel is sealed, but I've been assured that we have what we need."

"If that fails," Bernie asked, "Do you know if there are any Borg implants in her?"

"No, I'm sure that all of it was removed. Her partial assimilation was over two years ago, so if there were any traces of Borg components in her afterwards, I'm sure I would have detected them at some point." He looked at the doctors. "Although I presume that part of her medical records is accessible."

"Very well," Picard said. "This implant may be just what we need. I only hope it's large enough to detect."

Harry said, "It's less than a gram, but it should light up our sensor grid as soon as we find it."

"I wish we'd had this information as soon as she was abducted," Dr. Crusher said. "We could've saved her a lot of pain."

Harry nodded. "I didn't realize that the implant existed until today, and Dr. Zimmerman didn't realize that it could be detected from a distance."

"Let's get to work, then," Picard said. "Engineering and Ops – begin making adjustments to the scanners of both ships. Commanders Riker and Ral – coordinate a search pattern strategy. Security – begin coordinating tactical plans, because I suspect one or both ships will come under fire before this over. I don't have to tell you that our most important priority is extracting the Admiral, and time is of the essence."

Bernie nodded in closing, "Let's get her back, people."

As they began to leave, Picard came over to Harry and shook his hand. "Excellent work, Commander. I'm truly impressed."

"Thank you, sir." Harry tried to smile despite his unease. "I'm just anxious to rescue her."

“I understand, and it appears that you’re holding up quite well under the emotional stress. It’s commendable considering how close your Voyager crew is to each other.”

“It’s not easy, sir.”

“I know it’s not. I know it all too well.” Picard hesitated and then said, “If I may make a suggestion?”

“Of course, sir.”

“Once this is over, allow yourself time to grieve for what’s happening now. I’ve learned the hard way that it’s a vital part of coping with the long term stress of situations like these.”

Harry took a deep breath, afraid that if he acknowledged the emotional strain, the floodgates would open. “I’ll keep that in mind, sir.”

Kathryn felt like a herd of elephants had stomped across her midsection. The pain of fractured ribs cut through her like a knife, and nothing could ease her pain. The energy had faded from her body to such an extent that she couldn’t manage anything but moving her lips. Her breaths were shallow and difficult, and her heart pounded with slow, irregular thuds that shook her chest.

She didn’t feel the vibrations of her visitors’ approach this time, but she could hear their voices. They mustn’t have replaced her earplugs after the last assault.

Whoever was in the room nudged her body with their foot, but she was unable to respond. She expected to feel more pain with the movement, but with the amount of pain that was her constant companion, a little more was hardly noticeable.

She heard her friend say, “We’ve got to stop him from treating her this way, or she’s not going to be alive when we get there. All those buyers are going to be furious.”

“He wants her defenseless, Norval. She’s still alive. Don’t worry.”

“Barely alive. She hasn’t eaten in weeks and she’s lost a lot of blood. I don’t think she’ll last for three more days. He’s drawn this out too long, and if we get caught, we’ll be hung out to dry for the way she’s been treated.”

“You forget. We’re holding the cards here. Starfleet won’t negotiate for hostages, and we’ve just sent them a message saying that we’ll kill her if they try anything.”

“You’re as insane as Pratin – going up against Starfleet. We’re going to get caught.”

“You’re paranoid and you’re forgetting how much latinum we’re going to earn for this.”

“I’ll be surprised if Pratin doesn’t kill us, first.”

“He took you under his wing, protected you. Don’t forget that he saved your life in that backwater bar. Why would he kill you now?”

“Because he’s been planning this all along, and I think he recruited us just for manpower. He demanded our loyalty and then he’s going to drop us out the main airlock. He doesn’t care about us.”

“You’re delusional, Norval. And you worry too much. Come on, we’ve got to go let him know that she’s still alive.” He nudged her hard. “Stupid bitch.”

Kathryn was wrong. She could do more than move her lips. She could lift an eyebrow. If she got out of this alive, she just learned the name of her ally, and he was their weak spot.

After thirty hours of searching the sector without any results, the crews of both ships were exhausted and on edge. Four other ships had been ordered to the sector, but were concentrating their efforts in concentric circles outside the Enterprise and Pioneer search patterns. The Pioneer was in the middle of one last scan before heading off to rendezvous with the Enterprise. Picard had suggested that they compare and analyze before reinitiating the search.

Harry poured over the sensor grid. He hadn’t been able to sleep since he saw the video transmission, and the only thing that got his mind off of Janeway’s condition was calculating trajectories, carrier wave frequencies, and phase variances.

Bernie put his hand on Harry’s shoulder. “Commander, you’ve got to get some rest.”

“Can’t sleep.” He didn’t look away from the console.

“Then see Dr. Murphy for a sedative. You’re exhausted, Harry.”

“I know, but I can’t stop until we find her, or until I pass out.”

“And you think that’s healthy?” Bernie asked.

“No, but it’s what I…” Harry’s eyes widened as he saw a ship moving into the long-range sensor grid. “Look there! It matches the specs of a Kressari freighter!”

Bernie turned to tactical. “How far away are they?”

“Three light years, sir.”

“Kim, are you scanning for that alloy?”

“Yes, sir, but we’re too far away. I need to be within 1.7 light years.”

Bernie asked, “Where is the Enterprise now?”

“Half a lightyear, in the opposite direction,” Ral answered.

“Alter course towards the freighter and hail the Enterprise.”

When Picard’s imagine came onscreen, he asked, “Yes, Captain?”

“We’ve located a ship that matches the specs and we’re altering course.”

“Understood. Send us the coordinates and we’ll be right on your tail.”

“Pioneer out.” Bernie took his command chair, ready to get this over with. “Helm, engage at maximum warp.”

Within an hour, they were close enough that the alloy should have appeared on their sensors. Harry checked and rechecked his calculations, and still, there was nothing. He cursed and muttered to himself. The Pioneer Ops officer, Ensign Igre, joined him at his station. “Captain Young suggested that I help you, sir.”

Harry nodded, but didn’t look at the younger officer. “He thinks I’m fatigued, and he’s right. Could you recheck my calculations? I’m not finding what I want.”

“Perhaps because it’s not there,” Igre said as he re-calculated. “Looks right, but did you account for a change in variance that a ship that size would need for a dampening field?”

Harry groaned. “No, damn it. I am exhausted. Start with the same frequencies of the one they used on Joria, and then let’s rotate through the spectrum.”

“Aye, sir.” Igre input the data as Harry watched the screen.

Harry pleaded, “Come on... you know she’s out there.”

“Pardon, sir?” Igre responded.

Harry shook his head, not taking his eyes away from the screen. “I’m talking to the scanners, not you.”

A few minutes went by without results and Igre said, “Nothing. I’ll start the cycle through again. Perhaps they’re using a variable amplitude.”

“There’s a strange power output on that freighter, don’t you think?” Harry looked at the data. “It’s an uneven pulse. That’s it!” He typed in commands as quickly as his fingers would allow.

The screen lit up like the star on top of a Christmas tree. “YES!” Harry shouted. “There she is!”

Young stood up quickly and turned around. “You’re sure?”

“She’s in the aft section, port side. Lifesigns are weak, but she’s there.” Harry felt tears prick at his eyes.

“Notify sickbay. Hail the Enterprise and adjust our heading for attack pattern beta.” He touched his communicator, “All hands, battle stations.”

Being a faster ship, the Enterprise had almost caught up with the Pioneer by the time they entered visual range. Their combined attack pattern would make it look like they were ignoring the freighter until they were right on top of them.

“Steady as she goes,” Bernie said. “Standby weapons, standby shields. Be ready to drop them for transport as soon as their shields are disabled.”

“Standing by,” Moore confirmed.

“Helm, prepare to adjust our heading. Kim, keep your finger on that transporter.”

“Ready, sir.”

The tension on the bridge was thick as they waited. At the last possible second, Bernie yelled, “Hard to starboard!”

The ship keeled to port and the crew almost lost their balance as the inertial dampeners struggled to compensate. Harry didn’t budge from his panel. It would’ve taken a Herculean effort to break his concentration.

“Power weapons, raise shields... and FIRE!”

It took almost no effort to subdue the bulky freighter. The surprise attack worked. Moore shouted, “Their shields are down!”

“Drop our shields. Kim, get her out of there!”

Only a flick of a button later, Harry pulled his fist back with a jubilant, “Yes! We’ve got her!”

On the viewscreen, they saw weapons fire come over their bow and knew the Enterprise was taking over. Bernie ordered, “Raise shields and retreat.”

“Sir?” Moore questioned.

“We’ve got our precious cargo. Let the Enterprise handle it from here.”

Through the daze of semi-consciousness, Kathryn heard the impact of weapon's fire only seconds before she felt the tingle of a transporter beam. She felt relief as she rematerialized and heard Dr. Murphy gasp and then ask worriedly, "Admiral?"

She barely groaned in response, unable to do much else as she lay almost face down on a biobed.

Someone untied the blindfold and reassured her by touching her head. "Admiral, you're safe. You're aboard the Pioneer, and we'll get these bindings off."

The harsh surgical lights were painful, even though Kathryn was looking down and her eyes were closed. She heard the beep of a medical tri-corder and Dr. Murphy whisper, "Good God almighty."

Someone said frantically, "I can't get these bindings loose. The chains are imbedded into her skin!"

"I'll get a laser scalpel to cut through them," someone else answered with urgency.

Dr. Murphy said, "Sickbay to bridge."

"Go ahead, Doctor."

"Is the Enterprise within transporter range?"

"Yes, they've just taken the freighter into custody."

"I need Dr. Crusher's assistance," she said shakily.

"Understood."

Kathryn knew she was in bad shape, but as she heard the medical staff buzzing around her, she also knew that she was going to live and that everything would be okay. Her thoughts centered on Chakotay, and how warm and wonderful his smile would be when she woke up. He was always there when she woke up.

Beverly rushed down the corridor to the Pioneer's sickbay. When the Enterprise had been assigned to be the Pioneer's wingman, she'd received a message from the Director of Starfleet Medical to take command of Janeway's treatment upon rescue. She'd hoped that the Enterprise would find the Admiral first, so that she wouldn't have to undermine Dr. Murphy's confidence, but the call for help was a good sign that her youthful pride wouldn't get in the way of treating her patient.

She rushed into the room and was immediately accosted with the horrible smell of human stench. Knowing that it was an indicator of just how badly Kathryn had been treated, she ignored it and jumped in to help. “What’s her status?”

Dr. Murphy said shakily, “I don’t where to start. I’m sorry, Dr. Crusher.”

“It’s all right,” she laid a steady hand on Amy’s shoulder and began an initial scan as the nurses were finishing cutting through the bindings and turning Kathryn onto her back. Beverly had to steel her own emotions as she saw the extent of the emaciation and deep bruising that covered Kathryn’s body, not to mention the way she’d been bound. “Let’s take it one step at time.”

“She’s so important, and there’s so much…” Amy was starting to freeze up.

Beverly stated calmly, “Right now, she’s your patient and she needs your help. Don’t worry about who she is outside of this room. Has she been conscious?”

“She was semi-conscious when she arrived.”

“How responsive was she?” Beverly asked as she studied the readings.

“She groaned a little and clamped her eyelids when we took off the blindfold. That was it.”

Beverly reconfigured her tri-corder for a more intensive scan, seeing exactly what was going on with their patient, and it was not good. To help the young doctor learn and regain her confidence, she asked, “What’s the first step in trauma treatment?”

“Stabilize the heart and lung function.”

“Right,” Beverly said as she closed the biobed arch and activated the respirator. “And what do your scans show?”

“She has advanced pneumonia and is in acute respiratory distress. Septic shock and infection have compromised her heart. Her blood pressure is dangerously low.”

“Keep going,” Beverly encouraged as she began the procedure to drain the fluid from Kathryn’s lungs. Once that was started, she initiated a blood filter in an attempt to remove the microorganisms that were impairing the heart function.

Amy reported, “Her heart is stage three arrhythmic and the cardiac muscle has thickened to compensate. Other vital organs – she’s in renal failure and her liver and pancreas are infected.”

Beverly nodded. “I see both bacterial and viral infections throughout her body. What antibiotic treatment do you suggest?” She began surgery on Kathryn’s heart as Amy administered the needed medications. The young doctor had been sufficiently prodded into action and was treating the dehydration, fever, parasite infestation, vitamin deficiency, and anemia.

Amy said, "Computer, increase sickbay ventilation by twenty percent." She glanced at her nurse who was standing by waiting for instructions. "Ensign, get started on cleaning her up. Use the sonic cleaner on her head and then start regenerating the damaged tissues on her neck and face. When you're finished, work on her legs until we can get to her torso and arms."

Beverly announced, "Her heart is stabilized for the moment, and I'm moving on to the thoracic fractures and hematomas. Dr. Murphy, when you're finished, would you begin treating the abdominal injuries?"

"Yes, Dr. Crusher." She stood on the other side of the biobed arch and studied the readings. "Those damn parasites have eaten away at her intestines."

"We'll have to do surgery later. Portions might need to be removed before we can re-introduce food."

"Understood," Amy said as they worked in concert. Because of the extent of the damage, it took both of them operating for well over four hours to get all of Kathryn's bones and soft tissues healed, and to do what they could for her organs. Beverly had to return to the treatment of the heart and lungs twice as the changes in Kathryn's body chemistry affected them.

When they were finished, they withdrew the arch in order to finish cleaning her. While one of the nurses cut away the sagging and soiled undergarments, Kathryn began to moan.

Beverly was reducing the swelling in Kathryn's brain when she noticed her eyelids begin to flutter. "Admiral?"

"Cold," she shivered.

"I know," Beverly said sympathetically as she did the final touches on the skull repairs that the nurses had done before. "As soon as we get you cleaned up, we'll get you into something warm and comfortable."

"Where...?" Kathryn's voice faded.

"You're safe aboard the Pioneer, Admiral."

"Mmmmm." Kathryn tried to open her eyes. "Bright lights."

While the nurses ran the sonic cleaner over Kathryn's naked and gaunt torso, Beverly leaned so that she cast a shadow on her patient's face. "Admiral? Are you in pain?"

"Arms horrible...Head... stomach." Kathryn blinked rapidly, trying unsuccessfully to open her eyes. "Cha...kotay?"

Beverly glanced up at Amy for a hint on how to answer.

Amy said, "Captain Chakotay is on Earth."

It looked as though Kathryn had fallen back to sleep except for the way she was trembling. Beverly administered pain medication and said softly, "This is a strong analgesic and contains a mild sedative, Admiral. We'll get to work on your arms in a few minutes."

"...long... gone?" Kathryn shuddered uncontrollably as a nurse began to place her fragile legs into a pair of loose pants.

"Seventeen days," Amy answered.

"...he know?" Her voice was raw and shaky.

"That you've been rescued? Probably not, yet." Amy helped the nurses pull the pants up Kathryn's legs, causing their patient to cry out in pain as they lifted her hips.

"Careful!" Beverly said.

While she was being jostled around, Kathryn forced her bloodshot eyes open. "Please..." she begged.

Beverly laid her hand on the top of Kathryn's head. "I know it hurts, but you'll be asleep soon."

"Please...Ch...ko... worried."

"We'll get word to him as soon as possible, Admiral," Beverly promised as they carefully laid her legs back down and covered her torso with a folded blanket for modesty. "Try to rest for now. Your body needs it."

Kathryn accepted the promise and relaxed as the nurses worked on her arms and the doctors on her shoulders. "Burns," she complained.

"The analgesic should be working," Amy said with concern.

"Stop pulling on the embedded chains until the medication has time to reach the area. With her blood pressure being so low and the damage to the arteries in her arms so extensive, it will take longer."

A few minutes later, Kathryn tried to speak again. "Need..."

"Need what?"

"Pee," Kathryn's closed eyes clamped tightly in slight embarrassment.

Beverly touched Kathryn's newly healed shoulder with compassion and whispered, "You've got a catheter."

After Amy finished repairing her other shoulder, they slipped a shirt over her lolling head. The nurses hadn't done anything more to her arms, but began to slip them into the shirt causing Kathryn to scream in pain.

"Stop!" Beverly shouted in alarm. "It's too much for her!"

The nurses backed off. "Sorry, we thought they'd be anesthetized by now."

Beverly used a tissue to dab Kathryn's tears. "Admiral? I'm going to give your arms a local anesthetic. Do you understand what that means?"

"Mmhm," she moaned, still recovering from the pain. "Numb."

Beverly administered a hypospray into each shoulder. "Don't worry when you can't feel them. Tell us when."

They all stopped working until Kathryn mumbled, "Okay."

As carefully as they could, they slipped her injured and limp arms delicately into the sleeveless top and went back to repairing the damage caused by the bindings and lack of nutrition. Her arms were nothing more than bruised, bloodied skin and bone, with no muscle mass whatsoever.

Beverly gently lifted Kathryn's head and removed the hard head rest. She replaced it with a large, soft pillow and brushed Kathryn's wilted hair back from her neck and face. She whispered, "Are you still with us?"

"Mmmhmm."

"How is your pain now?"

"Dull. Sleepy."

Beverly suggested to Amy, "Let's put a bolster under her knees and get her covered with warming blankets. I'd like to make her as comfortable as possible while we finish her arms. After what she's been through, she could use as much tender care as we can provide."

As they were getting her situated, Kathryn mumbled, "Thank you."

Beverly glanced up at Amy and smiled warmly before answering Kathryn. "You're welcome, Admiral. We're glad to have you back."

"Me, too. Was awful."

“We can tell,” Amy said with sorrow.

Beverly smoothed down Kathryn’s hair. “Rest now. We’ll be right here if you need anything, and we’ll make sure someone has contacted your captain friend.”

The two doctors left their patient and stepped into the small office. Amy said, “Thank you so much. I wouldn’t have been able to manage it.”

Beverly touched the young doctor’s arm in reassurance. “You did very well once you got going.”

“Yes, but... I’m sorry. I know you’ll have to report this.”

“No, Doctor. I only need to report that I assisted. Please don’t feel bad for getting nervous. When I got my first posting out of medical school, I had the opportunity to work on a ship with a full staff of doctors, and had time to gradually work into handling traumas on my own. There is no reason to feel ashamed for needing help. It says a lot that you knew to ask for it, and I’m glad we were close enough that I could.”

“I couldn’t risk not asking for help. I wanted to impress you, but the Admiral’s condition was overwhelming.”

“Their treatment of her was appalling, and I have half a mind to go beat the crap out of them myself. It’s probably good that her Captain friend isn’t here right now.”

Amy fisted her hands in frustration. “It doesn’t look like they fed her at all! Her body weight is twenty-one kilograms less than it was nineteen days ago. Even then, she’d already lost about seven kilos because of that damned parasite that her team contracted.”

“It’s a miracle that she’s still alive, even more so that she was conscious. And her arms? I have no idea how they still had any blood flow. By the way they were bound, I fully expected that we’d be replacing them with prosthetics.” Shaking her head, Beverly said, “I can’t imagine enduring that for seventeen days and being aware of it.”

Rubbing her face, Amy said, “It makes me ill.”

Beverly smiled warily at the uneasy young woman. “Me, too.” She put her hand on Amy’s shoulder. “And just so you know, you have impressed me, and you can continue doing so by working through a treatment plan for her. We’ve still got a lot of work to do on her heart, in addition to treating the malnourishment and intestinal damage. Before she can eat, we’ll have to open her up to remove the damaged tissues, but that will be risky until her blood pressure stabilizes.”

Amy said, “And her blood pressure might not stabilize until we can get some food in her.”

Beverly nodded, “A no-win situation, but we’ll do what we can intravenously. Let’s give her a few hours before we decide how to proceed. Meanwhile, we should write our reports and study the scans of her organs.”

“Okay.”

“It’s going to take time, but we’ll get her back on her feet.”

Chakotay looked up from his book when he heard the door chime. He marked his place and went to the door, unsure who’d be visiting on such a cold, winter morning. When he opened the door to see Owen Paris and two security officers, his heart fell.

“Come in,” Chakotay said as he opened the door.

Owen nodded and instructed the security officers to remain in the living room. He asked, “Captain, could we step into another room please?”

Chakotay nodded solemnly and led the way up to Kathryn’s office room. He felt numb, afraid that Owen had come to give him the worst possible news.

Owen went about his usual routine, scanning for listening devices and setting up a dampening field while Chakotay used the time to bolster his strength.

When he was finished, Owen turned to Chakotay and triumphantly said, “We’ve got her.”

Chakotay gasped in relief, feeling the same intense surge of emotion that he did when he’d found out she’d been taken. He sat down and closed his eyes, taking a moment to compose himself. “Is she okay?”

“No,” he said quietly. “She’s in pretty bad shape.”

He felt sick to his stomach. “How bad? Is she on her way home?”

“I don’t know all the facts, but I wanted to get over here as soon as I found out that she’d been extracted. I apologize if my security detail alarmed you, but we’ve all been put on increased protection.”

“What do you know?”

“Dr. Zimmerman and Commander Kim had the idea to scan for her temporal implant. It took a couple days of searching, but they got her out of there. Her abductors appear to be mercenaries out for a profit.”

“So it was the Pioneer? When did they find her?”

“About four hours ago. The dolts were all asleep when the Pioneer attacked. We believe that there are more people involved than those whom we have in custody, so her status is classified level twelve. Not even my security detail knows that she’s been rescued.”

Chakotay nodded in relief. “Thank you for telling me.”

“You’ll need to keep up the act that you don’t know, and I think we can be compassionate enough to let Gretchen know as well. I trust that she can play the part, too. If anyone is watching you, they’ll expect you to go see Gretchen upon getting news from me, regardless if it’s good or bad.”

“She’ll be grateful. She’s not holding up well.” Chakotay looked out the window and braced himself for the answer to his next question. “Can you tell me anything about Kathryn’s condition?”

“A medical report hasn’t been released, yet, but I know that Dr. Crusher from the Enterprise is assisting the Pioneer’s medical team. Captain Young has told us that Katie is barely conscious and they’re working hard to stabilize her. He said that the way she has been treated was inhumane and outright appalling.”

Chakotay steeled himself. “Why wouldn’t the doctors have released a medical report yet?”

“I assume that it’s either because they’re still working on her or the injuries are such that her privacy needs to be protected.”

“If those bastards did anything to her…” Chakotay’s heart rate jumped at the thought that his Kathryn had been sexually violated.

“Captain,” Owen warned. “Don’t jump to conclusions. It’s only been a few hours.”

“Where is the Pioneer? I need to go.” He stood up anxiously.

“No, Chakotay. If you were to leave right now, it would be entirely too obvious that we have her, and you could lead someone right to her.”

He implored, “Admiral, if she’s hurt… if she was tortured… she needs me. She’s not always as strong as she seems.”

“I know how hard this is for you, Captain. I’ll do my best to update you on her condition as we learn more, and hopefully, they’ll bring her home very soon. I’m sure she’ll want to see you, too, but she’s got a whole ship full of people whose entire focus is helping her. No one will let her suffer any longer.”

Chakotay lowered his head into his hands to try to compose himself. He asked, “Would you have Bernie give her something for me?”

“I’ll try.”

“Ask him to replicate a single peace rose. It’s important that it’s a yellow/pink hybrid peace rose.”

“She’ll know who it’s from?”

“Yes.”

After Paris left, Chakotay commed Gretchen to say that he was coming to Indiana. He had just talked to her the day before on New Year’s Day, but Gretchen wasn’t looking well at all. Chakotay decided that he’d take a few changes of clothes, and do what he could to comfort Gretchen until Kathryn came home. Maybe they could help each other.

Harry entered the darkened sickbay wearing his night clothes to find Dr. Murphy sitting alone in her office. The treatment area was farther in the back of the room, so he couldn’t see Kathryn.

Amy looked up at him, her soft brown eyes tired, but brimming with warmth and kindness. “Commander Kim? You look exhausted.”

“I’m sure we all do, but I can’t sleep. I’m too keyed up from this morning.”

“And likely over-tired from all the tension of the last few days.” She came around her desk to scan him with her medical tri-corder.

He put his hand up to stop her. “I’m not here for treatment. I just want to check on the Admiral.”

“Ah,” she smiled sympathetically. “She’s resting comfortably. We gave her a strong sedative a few hours ago.”

“You had to sedate her?” Harry asked worriedly.

“To operate, and then she was having some troubled sleep. The sedative will quiet her mind so she can get some healing rest.”

“I guess she’s probably going to have bad dreams for awhile. I know I would.” Harry tried to look past the office to see her, but the sightline was obstructed by bulkheads. He wished for Voyager’s open sickbay, but he figured this ensured more privacy for the patients.

“Would you like to sit with her, Commander?”

“Could I?” he asked eagerly.

“Sure, although you shouldn’t stay too long,” Amy said as she walked him back. “You’ll want to get some rest before your next duty shift.”

“Don’t worry about that. I’m officially off-duty until the Admiral needs me again. I suspect that’ll be awhile.” He stopped in his tracks when he saw her, overcome with emotion.

Amy pulled up a stool and placed it next to Kathryn’s bed, and then noticed that Harry had frozen. She asked, “Are you okay?”

Harry nodded and finished walking over. He reached out to touch Kathryn’s head and stopped, alarmed at her overly-pronounced cheekbones and the tubes that were attached to her nose. “She’s so pale and thin.”

Amy touched his elbow to indicate that he should take a seat. “May I ask you a question, Commander?”

“Of course, and please, call me Harry.” He still hadn’t worked up the courage to ask her out.

“All right, Harry.” She blushed slightly. “How does the Admiral feel about touch? Do you know?”

“Touch?” He furrowed his eyebrows. “What do you mean?”

“Well, has she ever patted you on the back or something like that?”

“Oh, that kind of touch,” Harry chuckled. “Yes, she’s very fond of it. We used to count how many times in one shift she’d touch someone’s shoulder or arm. The record was something like thirty, but that was in a stressful situation. Oh... and we had a running tally of how many times we saw her touch Chakotay when someone else could see it. It was well over a thousand by the time we made it home. She’d be mortified if she knew we’d done that.”

Amy laughed quietly. “Good, then I think it’s safe for you to hold your commanding officer’s hand.” She tucked the blanket against Kathryn’s side to reveal her arm. “Touch has a healing affect, and I think it might be therapeutic for both of you.”

Harry gasped as he saw how bony and frail Kathryn’s arm was. He braced himself as he picked up her delicate hand and stroked his thumb across the back of it.

“She looks pretty fragile, doesn’t she?” Amy put her hand on Harry’s back.

“It’s shocking. She’s such a strong woman. You’d never know it by looking at her right now.” Harry looked up at Amy and noticed the pain in her eyes. “Are you okay?”

She looked away, trying to curb her emotions. “Today has been difficult.” She pushed the tears away annoyingly. “I shouldn’t be telling you this, but I’ve never seen someone in such an appalling state.”

“Hey, there...” Harry set Kathryn’s hand down and turned to the doctor with concern. “Maybe you’re the one who needs some therapeutic touch.”

Amy bit her lip and shook her head, but allowed Harry to take her hand. “This is my sickbay. I’m supposed to be the one doing the healing in here.”

Harry chuckled and said, “Doctor, heal thyself.”

She wrapped her arms around herself. “Harry, would you call me by my first name, too? It’s...”

“Amy, I know.” He felt a longing for this woman that he’d never felt for anyone else before. “I’d love to.”

She looked away shyly and went to pick up a container of lotion. “Would you like to help me rub some of this into her arms? It should soothe the newly repaired skin.”

“Sure,” he smiled, suddenly very interested in spending as much time with Amy as possible.

They sat across from each other, each tending to one of Kathryn’s arms. Amy said, “Tell me about her.”

“About the Admiral?”

“I know her from the time you two have spent on the Pioneer, and from all the press and publicity, but tell me how she really is. You’re closer to her than anyone else on this ship.”

Harry smiled as he carefully rubbed the lotion into the thin, hairless skin. “Well, she’s extraordinary, really. I’ve tried to figure out if she feels like a parent to me, but when I compare her with my parents, the relationship is a lot different.”

“She’s your mentor,” Amy offered.

“Yes,” Harry agreed. “But there’s more to it than that. I consider her a good friend and would do anything for her. But as a commanding officer, she’s got to be best. One time she came down hard on me because of something I did wrong, and she told me that even though what I’d done meant I wasn’t the perfect officer anymore, it also meant that I was a better man.” He decided to skip over the details about his illegal love affair. “She draws the best out of people, and over the last eight years, I’ve tried to do whatever I could to make her proud of me.”

Amy asked, “She seems like she’s very forgiving and compassionate.”

“Oh, yes, definitely. Especially when it comes to her crew.”

“I wish I knew her better.”

Harry smiled. “I have an idea.”

“What’s that?”

“Voyager’s welcome-home anniversary party will be rescheduled when she’s able to attend. Would you like to go with me?”

Amy took a moment to think about it before she nodded. “I’d love to, if I can. What kind of party will it be?”

“I’m not sure, but others will be bringing a date, too, so you wouldn’t feel out of place.” He threw that in to see if she picked up on the word date.

She blushed again and said, “I hope that we’ll be in orbit.”

“I suspect that you will be, since she’ll be there.” He indicated Kathryn.

They heard someone enter sickbay, so she stood and said, “I’ll be back.”

After she was gone, Harry whispered, “Well, Admiral, looks like you just got me a date. I’m sure you’ll be thrilled to know that you were so helpful while sedated.” He finished applying the lotion and took a minute to examine her arm. Her skin had a yellow hue and was nearly translucent with dark pink lines of newly regenerated tissue crossing her entire forearm at irregular intervals. He fought down his revulsion as he realized that they indicated where she’d been bound.

He tenderly ran his fingers up and down her whole arm, trying to transfer some kind of invisible healing power that would speed up the process. Her hands had always been slender, but he could clearly see every bone in her fingers and each tendon in the back of her hand. Afraid to massage deeply, he softly caressed her skin to instill some warmth and comfort.

He was startled when she moaned and flexed her fingers. “Admiral,” he whispered, not wanting to frighten her. He held her hand carefully and touched her shoulder to see if she was waking up.

She murmured hoarsely, “... knew you’d come.”

“I’m here,” he replied, not sure if she was lucid.

“Love you,” she said softly as her fingers squeezed his.

He bit back a smile when he realized that she mistook him for Chakotay. Attempting to give her some comfort, he said, “I love you, too.” It wasn’t a lie, and he knew that Chakotay would want her comforted in whatever way she needed. He wondered if someone had told Chakotay that

she'd been rescued. He certainly hoped so, but he'd check on it when he returned to his quarters, just to make sure.

Kathryn felt the pull of consciousness creeping back to her. She was happy where she was. While asleep, there was no pain, no fear. She felt strange. Something was different. Instead of the hard floor, she felt like she was floating. Instead of the acrid smell, she sensed the familiar scent of a starship. Something was holding her down, though. Her arms felt like lead, and whatever was on top of her kept her from drifting away.

Kathryn forced her right arm up, but it was blocked. She groaned in frustration, trying to force it away, but it was too strong. Someone was talking to her, someone was touching her shoulder. Adrenaline rushed through her and she cringed and pulled away. Someone was going to hurt her again and she had to fight back. Her heart was beating fast, pumping hard as she struggled against the aggressor.

The voice continued speaking and Kathryn began to notice that the touch was gentle and soothing. The fear began to fade as she realized that whoever was with her wasn't trying to hurt her. Was it Chakotay? The soft voice became clearer and Kathryn had to force her eyes open to see who it was.

"Admiral?" A beautiful, red-haired woman looked down on her with kind, but concerned eyes. "You're safe. You're okay."

Kathryn stared at the woman for a long moment until she realized that something was on her face. Her arm was easier to move this time and she managed to pull it up, although the movement was jerky and filled with pain. She touched the soft tubes that were connected to her nose and looked up at the woman for an answer.

"It's to help your lungs. You needed more oxygen." Beverly took it off. "We'll see how you do without it."

"Where am I?" she croaked.

"You're on the Pioneer. Do you remember?"

Kathryn tried to think, but there was an itch on her cheek that was bothering her. She reached up to scratch it and encountered something stuck there. The woman redirected Kathryn's hand.

"It's a feeding tube. Better leave it alone for now."

"Feeding?"

Beverly nodded. "To help your stomach adjust to receiving food again."

Kathryn closed her eyes to try to remember, and she recalled something. “Chakotay? He was here?”

Beverly shook her head sadly. “No, he wasn’t. Commander Kim said you thought he was Captain Chakotay.”

“Oh,” Kathryn said, deflated. She wanted Chakotay’s touch desperately, and not having it left her feeling bereft.

“Are you in pain?”

Kathryn took a quick inventory and decided that she was mostly okay. “Headache. Sore. My arms hurt.”

Beverly scanned her and said, “Let’s see what we can do.”

Kathryn studied the beautiful woman as she took readings, and finally realized who she was. “You’re Dr. Crusher?”

“That’s right.” Her face lit up with a smile. “Do you remember meeting me?”

“From the Enterprise.” Kathryn was starting to feel more aware and looked around. “What ship is this?”

“The Pioneer – your flagship.”

Memories flooded back all at once, and Kathryn gasped in fear. “They... they...”

“Shhh...” Beverly touched her shoulder, “You’re safe, Admiral.”

“Bernie – I need to talk to him! Captain Young!” Her breathing was fast and hard from the energy surge that came with all the agonizing memories.

Beverly tapped her commbadge. “Sickbay to the bridge.”

“Yes, Dr. Crusher,” Bernie replied anxiously. “Is everything all right?”

“Yes, Captain. Admiral Janeway is awake and urgently wishes to speak with you.”

“On my way.”

When the communication ended, Beverly said, “Try to slow your breathing. I’ll be right back with an analgesic.”

Kathryn nodded and relaxed into the pillow, surprised that she was alive. Her alarm began to fade as she accepted that the danger had passed.

When Bernie arrived a few minutes later, Beverly intercepted him and whispered, “Captain, I’m afraid that she’s fallen asleep again.”

“In the three minutes it took me to get down here?” Bernie stepped over to Kathryn’s bed and looked down at her.

“Not asleep,” Kathryn said huskily without opening her eyes. The exertion of her panic attack had taxed her energy.

Bernie put a hand on her shoulder. “Welcome back, Kathryn.”

She looked up at him and saw that his eyes were surrounded by dark circles and he appeared exhausted. “You don’t look so good, Captain.”

He shook his head in amusement and closed his eyes for a brief moment. Pulling up a stool, he sat down and rested his elbows next to her shoulder. “I’ve been a little concerned about my favorite admiral.”

“Oh? Did she get into trouble?”

“A little.” He found her arm. “May I hold your hand?”

She nodded and moved her fingers slightly in response. His touch made her arms hurt more, but she welcomed it nonetheless.

“How are you feeling?”

“Much better than...” Kathryn frowned. “How long have I been onboard?” She coughed some.

“About twelve hours.”

“Ah,” she closed her eyes to rest. “Better than I felt thirteen hours ago.”

“I’m so sorry, Kathryn.”

She would have shrugged if she’d had the energy. “It wasn’t unexpected that someone might try something.” Looking at him again, she asked, “Do you have them in custody?”

“They’re in the Enterprise’s brig. We didn’t want them on the same ship as you.”

Glancing at Beverly on the other side of the room, Kathryn asked, “Close by?”

“The Enterprise is our wingman until we’ve brought you safely home, but we’re holding position in sector 032 until we receive further orders from Command. We aren’t convinced that we have everyone involved, yet.”

“You don’t.” Kathryn stated. “They were planning to meet with buyers in three days. I don’t know how long ago that was.”

“Buyers?”

“For me.” She closed her eyes again, feeling the need to rest. “Have they been interrogated?”

“Yes, but no one is talking.”

“Norval or something. Can’t remember.” She frowned. “He’s the weak spot. Offer him immunity and protection.”

“Immunity? After what they did to you?”

She squeezed his hand and looked at him again. “I doubt he helped, unless it was against his will. He’s been coerced. Scared of the boss. Pratin, I think.”

“All right. I’ll talk it over with Picard.”

“If it’s not too late, we can set up a bust. Offer me up as bait.”

“No, Kathryn. There is absolutely no way I’m sending you back in there.”

“You have to,” she insisted. “It won’t work unless they see me.”

“We can send Lieutenant Brooks in as your decoy.”

“No! I won’t let you put her in danger.” She didn’t want anyone else to experience that feeling of helplessness. Her adrenaline surged, causing her to start coughing uncontrollably. An alarm went off as she pulled her hand away to cover her mouth.

“Kathryn...” Bernie stood over her, helpless to do anything.

Beverly rushed over and injected a hypospray. “Try to take a deep breath, Admiral.”

The coughing subsided, leaving her feeling wiped out. She looked up when she felt Beverly replace the oxygen tubing into her nose.

She scanned Kathryn and said, “You’re recovering from a severe case of pneumonia. You’ve got to take it easy.”

She nodded her understanding and then said hoarsely, “I don’t like it, Bernie.”

Beverly said, “Captain Young, we should let her rest.”

He acknowledged Beverly and then said, “Kathryn, if I'm going to risk someone’s life, it’s certainly not going to be your’s. Not in this condition. Starfleet is not in the habit of sending officers into undercover operations who aren’t physically able to defend themselves.” He touched her hand again. “I’ll discuss a plan with Admiral Khurma and Captain Picard and get back to you.”

She knew she would be easily outnumbered and there wasn’t a thing she could do about it. Chakotay would be pleased. Chakotay. “Bernie?”

“Yes?”

“Does Chakotay know I'm here?”

“Admiral Khurma said he’d get word to him, but I haven’t heard anything back, yet.”

Kathryn closed her eyes in acceptance. She felt Bernie’s hand move up to her shoulder. “I'm sure he told him as soon as he could. Chakotay’s been kept in the loop the whole time, and he even helped with some of the data analysis.”

“Thanks,” she said as unwanted tears formed behind her eyelids.

When Bernie was gone, Beverly put a tissue in Kathryn’s hand and commented, “Those emotions just surge right up when you don’t want them, don’t they?”

Kathryn wiped her eyes, cringing as the muscles in her arms and shoulders protested painfully. “Always when we’re weakest.”

“After what you’ve been through, they’re perfectly natural.”

“I'm worried about my family,” she said tiredly. “Seventeen days is a long time.”

“It was interminable,” Beverly said. “But we’ll get you home soon.”

“It’s just that…” Kathryn couldn’t stop the tears that fell and she felt oddly comfortable confiding in Beverly. “I doubt you want to hear all this, but he and my family, I don’t know that they could bear it.”

“I want to hear whatever you’d like to tell me,” she said with compassion. “I’ve faced death a few times and I always worry about my family – my son and the man I love. But I also know that people are strong when they have to be. To quote you from one of your speeches, those of us in Starfleet have our own special families to pull each other through.”

Kathryn smiled a little through her tears. “Throwing my own words back at me?” She wiped her eyes and tried to fight a yawn.

“You were very inspiring, especially to those of us who live in a starship community.” Beverly touched her shoulder and said, “Try to get some sleep and let the captains worry about everything else. I suspect they’re more than eager to finish the job and see some justice.”

“Thank you, Doctor, for listening.”

“You’re welcome, and please, call me Beverly. If you need a friend to talk to, I can be here in minutes.”

“I appreciate the offer, although I’m not sure how much I could tell you.”

Straightening the blankets, Beverly said, “You can probably tell me just about anything. Aside from doctor/patient confidentiality, I carry the rank of captain so I have a pretty high security clearance.”

After another yawn, Kathryn closed her eyes. “Depending on how long we’re out here, I might take you up on that, Beverly.”

“I hope you do, Admiral.”

“Kathryn,” she said drowsily.

“Kathryn,” Beverly gathered up her patient’s hair and laid it gently on the pillow as she drifted off to sleep.

When Kathryn opened her eyes the next time, she felt more alert, although still very weak. Her arms were throbbing, but she assumed that was to be expected after they’d been bound for so long. Glancing around the darkened sickbay, she saw the young Dr. Murphy sitting in her office. Kathryn closed her eyes and snuggled into the pillow to try to go back to sleep, but the pain was distracting and she was too weak to make herself comfortable.

“Admiral?” Amy whispered tentatively.

Kathryn looked up and said, “I’m awake, Doctor.”

“Computer, increase lighting slowly to twenty five percent.” Amy’s hand shook slightly as she scanned her patient with the tri-corder. “How are you feeling?”

“Uncomfortable and sore, but not too bad considering.”

Amy looked at her nervously and asked, “What can I do to help?”

Kathryn looked at the young woman with concern. “I was about to ask you that. Are you okay, Doctor?”

Amy nodded quickly with embarrassment. “Yes, I... I'm sorry, Admiral. I'm just a little nervous having you as a patient.”

Smiling with understanding, she said, “You have nothing to be nervous about. I'm pretty easy-going, especially in this state.”

“That’s what Harry... I mean, Commander Kim, said.” She blushed and set down her tri-corder.

Kathryn enjoyed seeing the little spark in the young woman’s eye. “You and Harry have become friends?”

“Yes,” Amy said quickly and then asked, “How can I make you more comfortable? Are you in pain?”

“My arms are throbbing. I think that’s what woke me up, and I still have a headache, but that’s typical for me. I'm thirsty, and I’d like to turn on my side.” She hated giving her such a long list of complaints, but she was the doctor and that’s what she was there for.

“All right,” Amy left to get a hypo.

Kathryn looked after her in amusement. Young officers were always nervous around her, and she had no idea why. It’s not like she was that scary. She looked up when she felt the hypo deliver medication into her neck. “What time is it?”

“Mid-morning – almost ten.” She went to the replicator and returned with a cup of water with a bendable straw. “Take small sips, Admiral. Your stomach can’t handle much.”

“Is that why I still have this tube in my nose?”

“Yes, it’ll be a couple of days before you can switch to clear liquids. We have to be careful not to disrupt your electrolyte balance.”

Kathryn knew what that meant and asked, “How are my kidneys?” as she tried to sip only enough to wet her mouth. Her hands were unsteady and Amy had to help her hold the cup.

“You’re in renal failure, but it should start improving soon.”

Kathryn indicated that she was finished drinking. “How long has it been since I was last awake?”

“Dr. Crusher said you spoke to Captain Young late yesterday evening.”

“So a little over twelve hours.” Kathryn closed her eyes, feeling exhausted.

“Would you like to lie on your right side or left?”

“Right, I suppose.” She chose that side so she’d be able to see people coming in and out of the room.

Amy pulled back the blankets and then put her hands under Kathryn’s legs and back.

“You’re not going to do this alone, are you?” Kathryn asked, alarmed.

“You only weigh about forty kilos, Admiral.” Amy easily picked her up and scooted her over to the edge of the bed.

“Forty?” Kathryn looked at her arms, realizing just how thin she was. “I lost that much weight so quickly?”

Amy came around the bed and helped her roll to her side. “The infections and that annoying parasite made it worse.”

Kathryn cringed in pain. “I don’t think this was a good idea – too much pressure on my shoulder.”

“I think I can help you with that.”

“How?” When Amy put a second pillow under her head, she realized sadly that she didn’t have the strength to lift it herself.

“Bolsters and pillows,” she said as she placed the supports behind Kathryn’s back and helped her roll back slightly. “Do you feel stable?”

“Not quite. It’s my arm,” Kathryn said with frustration. “I’m sorry.”

“Not at all, Admiral. I see the problem.” She adjusted Kathryn and then added a pillow between her knees and one to support her upper arm.

Kathryn said tiredly, “Now I feel all packed up and ready for shipment.”

“Is it too much?”

“No, it’s fine. Very cozy.” Kathryn sighed as Amy pulled the warm blankets back over her. “Before I drift off again, would you call the captain and ask if he has any news?”

“Sure.” She tapped her commbadge. “Murphy to Young.”

“Go ahead, Doctor.”

“Admiral Janeway is asking if you have any news, sir.”

“Can she hear me?”

Kathryn responded, “Yes, Captain.”

Amy stood by while they used her comm signal to converse.

“You were exactly right about the man you called Norval. After I promised him our complete protection, he went right to work advising our combined security teams.”

“Good. When will this happen?”

“Tonight, just before midnight. We’re preparing the freighter for launch now, and if you can manage to stay awake for another ten minutes, I have something to give you.”

“What’s that?”

“If I told you, it would ruin the surprise.” Bernie chuckled. “I’ll be there soon. Young out.”

Kathryn looked at Amy with a raised eyebrow. “What do you suppose he has?”

“I don’t know,” she said with curiosity. “But while we’re waiting, do you mind if I close the arch and initiate a treatment on your heart?”

“Will I fit under it with all these pillows?”

Amy laughed. “Yes, I’m sure you will.” She pushed a button to close the bed. “I should have done this before we turned you over, but it’ll still work.”

“Are you sure? What sort of treatment is it?” Kathryn looked at the arch nervously. The confined space made her feel anxious.

“Your heart is infected with a rather stubborn organism that we’re trying to filter out. It has hardened the cardiac muscle so we’re softening it by doing regeneration every four hours. Your body has so few proteins for regeneration that we’re focusing our efforts in the critical areas first, and then we’ll be able to rebuild some of your lost muscle mass.”

Kathryn sighed as the list of ailments continued to grow. “With all these problems, how was it that I was still alive when you found me?”

“I’m not entirely sure, Admiral, but I know that if we’d been delayed much longer, you wouldn’t have been.”

Kathryn closed her eyes and tried to ignore the worry she held for her mom and Chakotay. She felt the tears threaten again, but wiped them away. Amy noticed and handed her a tissue. She accepted it with a little embarrassment and broke the tension by saying, “I tried to convince

Harry once that captains don't cry, and that I just had something in my eye. He pretended to believe me."

"Then I'll pretend to believe that admirals don't cry, either." Amy said without looking at her so that she would have a little privacy. "That, and with all that's going on with your body, your hormones are significantly out of balance, too. I could treat them, but it's better to let them stabilize naturally."

Kathryn yawned in agreement and blinked hard to try to stay awake. "When you're finished, could I have another sip of water?"

"Sure," Amy paused the treatment so she could hold the cup for her. "May I ask you a question about Harry? Woman to woman?"

Kathryn was amused. "Sure, although I'm surprised that you're comfortable enough to ask me that."

Amy pulled away quickly. "I apologize, Admiral. I didn't..."

"No, no, Doctor, you're fine," Kathryn smiled to give her reassurance. "I'm glad that I was able to put you at ease so quickly."

"Oh," Amy went back to the arch. "I just wanted to ask if Harry dates a lot."

"Are you interested in him?"

"I think so. He asked me on a date, I think."

"Harry is genuine and very sincere. I'm sure you can trust his intentions to be honorable." She yawned before she asked, "Does that answer your question?"

"I think so." Amy blushed. "You're right, I can't believe I'm talking to you about this."

Kathryn smiled and closed her eyes, unable to keep them open. "I don't mind. Helps me keep my mind off my own romantic woes."

"You have romantic woes? With Captain Chakotay?" Amy covered her mouth in embarrassment. "I'm sorry. That was crossing the line."

She yawned again. "You didn't say anything wrong. I'm worried about how difficult this must have been for him."

"Especially with all the publicity you've been getting."

"What? My disappearance is public knowledge?" Kathryn frowned.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have told you that,” she said worriedly. “I’m sticking my foot in my mouth right and left. I’m sorry, Admiral.”

“No, no... that’s fine.” Kathryn sighed tiredly. “I should’ve realized that it would be.”

The biobed arch opened. “All done,” Amy announced, but didn’t meet Kathryn’s eyes.

“Doctor,” Kathryn said as she reached for Amy’s hand. It sent a surge of pain into her shoulder, but she ignored it. “You haven’t said anything wrong. To answer your question about Harry, I’m sure that as soon as he finds the right young lady, he’ll be more than ready to commit to a long-term relationship.”

They were interrupted by the door to sickbay opening. When Captain Young came around the bulkhead carrying a bouquet of peace roses, Kathryn gasped and new tears filled her eyes.

“Kathryn, I was given a very specific message to give you one peace rose, but I trust that whoever sent it wouldn’t mind if I gave you two dozen.”

Her lower lip trembled as she reached out to touch them. “May I hold one?”

“Of course.” He took one out and gave it to her. “May I assume these are from Captain Chakotay?”

Kathryn nodded and wiped away at her tears as she held the soft flower against her lips. “He knows I’m okay.” She looked up to see that Amy was holding a cloth handkerchief over Kathryn’s head. “Thank you.” She dabbed at her tears with it.

“I’ll set these over here so you can enjoy them.” Bernie put them on a medical cart. “I’ve got to get back to work, but I’m glad I got to see that joy on your face.”

“Thank you, Bernie.”

“You’re welcome,” he said as he walked away, waving behind him.

Amy instructed, “Computer, reduce lighting to ten percent and initiate privacy lock on sickbay.” She tucked Kathryn’s blankets around her shoulders and said, “Time for you to get some rest.”

“Would you write a letter to Chakotay for me? Let him know what my condition is?”

“Sure. Is it okay to release your medical information?”

“Be brief and generalize. I don’t want to alarm him unnecessarily, but he’ll want to know. And tell him I’m still looking forward to the TLC he promised and the rest of that novel. I’m guessing that the letter will have to go through the Fleet Admiral, but I don’t mind him knowing my condition, either.”

Amy smiled brightly, "I'd be happy to."

"Thank you, Doctor."

"Would you call me Amy?"

"Yes, I would." Kathryn smiled. "I'm glad you got over your nervousness."

Amy smiled and nodded towards the rose. "And I'm glad that you got the good news. He sounds like quite a romantic."

Kathryn thought about that night in Tuscany. "Yes, he certainly can be." She closed her eyes and dreamt about the way he'd held her close while they'd looked out over the River Arno.

Part 16 - "The Good Ship Lollipop"

By Dawn

Rated R

Summary: Beginning to Recover

Gretchen stepped into her living room to see Chakotay standing in the entryway, staring intently at a PADD. "Chakotay? Who was at the door?"

It took him a moment to answer. "Owen Paris. He brought me this."

"What is it?" She wiped her hands off on the towel she'd brought with her and went to him.

His hands were trembling. "A letter from the Pioneer's CMO. Evidently, Kathryn asked her to write to me."

"What does it say?" Gretchen took his arm and encouraged him to sit down with her on the couch. Her insides were knotted in anticipation of what the letter might say about her daughter's condition.

Chakotay cleared his throat and read out loud:

"Dear Captain Chakotay,

Admiral Janeway asked me to write to you on her behalf. As I type this, she has just fallen asleep holding a rose with the bud resting against her lips. She looks very peaceful, and if I understand the nature of your relationship correctly, I hope that image brings you comfort.

He paused to wipe his eyes and sniff. His voice cracked as he continued,

I believe that she won't mind if I tell you that she cried when Captain Young delivered your flowers a few minutes ago. She has been concerned about you knowing her status since the moment she regained consciousness, and receiving your acknowledgement gave her some peace.

The Admiral wants me to give you a report on her condition without alarming you. I'm afraid that I can't do one without the other, so I'm opting for the former. Before I begin, however, I want to assure you that we are doing our best to keep her pain-free and comfortable. She is very weak and has spent most of the last twenty-four hours asleep, having been awake only three times for short periods. The first was about four hours after she arrived. Since then, she has slept in ten to twelve hour intervals. Her disposition is good and she seems more concerned about her health and her loved ones than she does about her ordeal."

Chakotay stopped reading and closed his eyes.

Gretchen rubbed her hands. "It seems to fit with her personality not to dwell on what happened."

"Yes." He nodded. "She tends to keep painful memories locked away until the danger has passed and she feels in control enough to face them."

"You sent her roses?"

Holding up the PADD, he said, "I didn't know if I could send a message like this because of security reasons. I sent her one specific type of rose because I knew she would've realized who it was from the moment she saw it."

"You should send her something in response."

"She said she likes to hear my voice. I should record something."

Gretchen asked, "Would you like me to read the next part for you?"

He took a deep breath and said, "No, let's just get through it. I have a feeling this is going to be difficult."

"Dr. Crusher, CMO of the Enterprise, has been assisting me with the Admiral's treatment. We healed as much of the repairable tissue damage as her body will accept, but our primary concerns remain – widespread infection and malnutrition.

I'll address the malnutrition first. The Admiral was not given food during the seventeen days she was imprisoned. I know that you are aware of the parasite that she carried prior to her abduction. Because she was unable to complete the course of treatment for the parasite, it returned and caused extensive damage to her intestines. The irreparable tissues have been removed; however, the combined impact of the parasite and the starvation has resulted in the Admiral's current weight being 35.38 kg. The ensuing complications are as expected – loss of

muscle mass, renal failure, anemia, abnormal heart rhythm, hypoglycemia, and electrolyte imbalance. The shorter length of her intestines and colon will impede normal weight gain, thereby delaying her recovery.

Chakotay's voice had shaken as he read the last half of the paragraph.

"What parasite is she talking about?"

He filled her in and then said, "She'd already lost weight, but I can't begin to imagine what she must look like at 35 kilograms."

"She hasn't weighed that little since she was twelve." Gretchen looped her arm through Chakotay's and said, "Keep going, although I'm not sure I want to hear more."

"The widespread infections have impaired her vital organs with the most significant damage being to her heart, but we are working relentlessly to counteract the resistant infections and repair the damage. It is our hope that by the time we bring her home, they will be eradicated. A virulent case of pneumonia has already been cured, although her lung tissue will take longer than usual to heal because of the complications from the malnutrition, as is the case throughout her body.

Again, it is not my wish to alarm you, but she will need constant care once we return to Earth. You'll want to make preparations for that in advance if you want her at home rather than at Starfleet Medical.

Admiral Janeway also asked me to include the following message: 'Tell him that I'm still looking forward to the TLC he promised and to hearing the rest of that novel.'

Dr. Amy Murphy, CMO Pioneer"

Chakotay took a steadying breath, but said nothing.

"What novel?" Gretchen asked.

He smiled for what felt like the first time in weeks. "When she was recovering from the parasite, she was physically exhausted, but wide awake. So when we talked in the evenings, I read to her. We were about halfway through a Jane Austen novel."

"Which one?"

"'Persuasion.' She hadn't read it before and it seemed fitting."

Gretchen said, "I haven't read that one, either. What is it about?"

"A woman who had given up on love seven years earlier, and finds it again. She remains faithful to her past and still moves forward into the future."

“Perfect.” Gretchen laid her head on her future son-in-law’s shoulder. “You’re good for her.”

“I hope so.” He looked at the PADD again. “I’m going to take a leave of absence from the Academy for the coming semester.”

“You don’t need to do that. We’ll make sure she has care.”

Shaking his head, he said, “I don’t want to leave it up to anyone else. She’s too precious.”

“You make her sound like she’s going to break, and you’re the one who keeps telling me that she’s strong. You know how stubborn she is. Spending day in and day out caring for her would not be healthy for you or your relationship. We don’t know how long her recovery will be.”

He studied the letter for a minute and then said, “Perhaps you’re right in the long term, but not at first. I’ll let the Academy know that I won’t be back for at least a month or two.”

“We’ll know more when she gets home, but it sounds like once she gains some weight, she’ll be fine.”

Sighing heavily, he said, “I hope that’s all it is. What worries me is what the doctor didn’t say.”

“You don’t think she told you everything?”

“She didn’t list any specific injuries like concussion or broken ribs, nor did she discuss what Kathryn’s condition was upon rescue.”

Gretchen patted his arm and got up. “Then she must not have any specific injuries because that report indicates that her health problems are the result of being kept in unsanitary conditions and not fed. We’ll get her back on her feet in no time.”

Kathryn’s eyes felt dry and grainy, but there was a tug on her fingers that she had to investigate. She pushed her eyelids open to see the blurry image of Sue Brooks in a sickbay gown sitting with her. “Sue?”

“Admiral?” she asked shakily. “How are you feeling?”

“Ready to run a marathon. You?”

“Hmph. About the same.”

Kathryn looked at Sue’s gown again and then realized why she was wearing it. Dread washed over her. “Oh, Sue. You’re back from going undercover, aren’t you?”

Pushing tears out of her eyes, Sue nodded. “Just finished getting treated about thirty minutes ago, but Dr. Crusher won’t release me until morning.”

“Treated? Were you hurt?”

Sue’s jaw shook and she looked away.

“Sue?” Kathryn begged for a reply. “Please tell me.”

“We had to make it look real. Those chains,” Sue sobbed. “How?” She covered her mouth and cried harder. “I’m sorry. You don’t need me to fall apart like this.”

Tears fell down Kathryn’s face, too. “I couldn’t feel my limbs after awhile. A day maybe. I’m not sure.”

“Oh, Admiral.” Sue picked up Kathryn’s hand and held it against her cheek. “I was only bound for about six hours, and I know it wasn’t as tight as you were. Then I kept thinking about Scott and how he’d died, and...”

She gasped, “Scott is dead?”

“Yeah,” Sue nodded as she cried.

“Oh, no.” Kathryn felt like she was going to be sick.

“I had Justin and a few others right there with me the whole time. He kept reassuring me when he could, but I kept thinking what it must’ve been like for you. I just can’t imagine seventeen days, and without food, and the beatings you suffered...the isolation...”

“Sue!” It was too much to bear and a severe wave of nausea engulfed her. Kathryn clamped her eyes shut. “Need doctor.”

“Dr. Crusher!”

“What?” Beverly ran in. “Admiral?”

“Gonna be sick,” Kathryn managed to say.

“Hang on.” Beverly picked up a hypospray and injected something into Kathryn’s neck. “Take slow, shallow breaths. We’re going to turn you on your side so you don’t aspirate.”

She retched as they moved her, but thankfully, nothing came up.

As Beverly tenderly stroked Kathryn’s hair, she instructed the older of the two nurses, “Patty, would you hand me a cold compress set to level two?”

Seconds later, Kathryn felt the cool cloth on her forehead and the queasiness was beginning to fade. “Is Sue still here?”

“Right behind you, Admiral.”

Kathryn whispered, “Would you hold my hand?”

She came around and picked up both of Kathryn’s hands. “I’m sorry that I upset you.”

“Shhhh...” She started to retch again, but managed to control it.

Beverly’s gentle voice said, “You’re safe, Kathryn. Let it go if you need to.”

“Rather not.” She licked her dry lips. “Sue, talk to me about knitting. I need to think about something else.”

“I haven’t done...” Sue hesitated, and then plunged ahead. “I’ve been waiting for you to get back to keep going, but I’m still excited about the projects we were talking about. Do you remember the basket weave afghan pattern I found?”

“Mmhhh. Color?”

“I’m leaning towards emerald green. What do you think?”

Kathryn asked, “May I have a sip of water?”

Beverly continued her soothing touches. “Patty is getting it.”

“Emerald is hard to match with furniture. Darker might be better.”

Sue gently stroked Kathryn’s forearms. “Or a sage green would show off the pattern more.”

“Mmmhhh.” She felt a straw against her lips and took a small sip. “Thank you.”

Patty said, “You’re welcome, Admiral. I’ll hold it right here if you want more.”

Beverly adjusted her hold on Kathryn. “I always like dark yarns because they hide my mistakes.”

Kathryn asked, “You knit, too?”

“I attempt to knit, but I have one blanket that I started years ago. It’s six meters wide and about eight centimeters tall. And, it’s rather bumpy.”

Sue laughed and then stopped abruptly. “Sorry.” Then she laughed again.

“That’s quite all right.” Beverly chuckled, too.

Patty added, “All I’ve ever managed is a scarf that’s not long enough to go around my neck, and I’ve been fiddling with it off and on for forty years.”

Eyes still closed, Kathryn said, “Sounds like my first project. It became my sister’s doll blanket.”

Beverly asked, “How are you doing now, Admiral?”

Kathryn took another sip of water and said, “Better. I think it’s passed.”

The cloth was removed from her forehead. “Let me know if you want this back, but you get cold so easily.”

“Can I eat something?”

Beverly scanned her with a tri-corder and then said, “Not, yet. I’m sorry. We have to do this gradually or you’ll go into shock.”

Kathryn sighed. “As soon as I can have it, I want ice cream, and lots of it.”

Beverly patted Kathryn’s head. “It’ll be at least ten days, but you can pick any flavor you want.”

Sue and Kathryn looked at each other and in unison, said, “Coffee.”

Patty asked, “Admiral, would you like to stay on your side or roll back?”

“Roll back, please.”

Once they got her settled, Beverly told Sue, “I’m sure I don’t need to remind you to keep to innocuous topics.”

Looking miserable, Sue nodded. “I’m sorry.”

When Beverly left, Kathryn pointed out, “I asked you to tell me about it.”

“I know, but I didn’t need to go on and on. I’m really sorry.”

Kathryn’s fingers found Sue’s and squeezed them. “Let’s commiserate when I’m not as likely to vomit, shall we?”

“Maybe by then, I won’t feel the need to.”

“Hopefully, I won’t either, but I need to know... when did Scott die? Was he abducted with me?”

“No,” she said with a shake of her head. “It was instant. Phaser blast in the corridor where you were taken.”

Kathryn took a deep breath, trying to cope with yet another loss. She’d had far too much experience over the years and knew that she needed to set aside her grief until she could come to terms with it. “Tell me about the outcome from today.”

“It was successful. We arrested four individuals and took their crews into custody for further questioning.”

“Do we know who they are?”

“I don’t, but Captains Picard and Young do.”

“Where are the prisoners now?”

“The four are in the Enterprise brig. The crews were transferred to a starbase, but I’m not sure which one. Interrogations begin in the morning.”

“To see why they wanted me?”

“Yes, and to see who else they know. These arrests represent four or five groups who claimed that they had you, but the last I heard, there were fourteen claims.”

“Fourteen?” Kathryn’s eyes widened.

Sue nodded. “The number seemed to change hourly because it was hard to decipher what was accurate information. It got a lot higher at one point until someone figured out that there was duplicate data.”

“Wow.” Kathryn yawned. “That’s pretty complicated.”

“That just touches the surface.” Sue groaned.

“I want to know more, but I’m about to fall asleep on you.”

“Sleep, then. We’ll fill you in later.”

“You said you’re stuck here for the night?”

“Yes, I had a concussion.”

Kathryn’s eyebrows furrowed. “Were you hit?”

“No,” She made a face. “I fell over.”

With a smile, Kathryn asked, “If you’re not too tired, would you sit with me? Touch feels good after the isolation, and what you were doing earlier with your fingernails felt soothing on this new skin. It’s itchy.”

“I’d love to.” Sue picked something off of the floor and said, “Did you drop a rose?”

“Oh, no! Is it smashed?” Kathryn felt a sense of loss as she held the withered bud.

Sue nodded towards the vase in the corner and whispered, “I could get you a new one.”

Chewing on her lower lip in thought, Kathryn said, “You wouldn’t tell Chakotay that I ruined this one, would you?”

Laughing, Sue said, “Your secret is safe with me.” She took the sad looking one and tucked in the back of the arrangement. “Besides, some water just might perk it up. Here... This one looks good, and the thorns have already been trimmed.”

Kathryn accepted it happily and held the petals against her lips. “Thank you.”

Pulling a chair up beside the bed, Sue said, “Rest now.”

“Thank you for taking my place today. I didn’t want them to ask that of you.”

“I know. Captain Young told me that you weren’t in favor of it, and I knew why. Just so you know, I did it to keep you from going back in there. And I think every woman on both ships would have done the same.”

“I wanted to go, but...”

“I know. Today’s operation made all of us sick.” Sue began running her fingernails lightly over Kathryn’s forearms. “We all adore you. I hope you know that.”

A smile graced Kathryn’s lips. “When I’ve had my coffee, sure.”

“There used to be a ‘weather report’ on Voyager, where the crew would warn each other about your mood before you arrived. Did you know about that?”

Chuckling, Kathryn said, “Nooo. I heard the term used, but I thought it was the general mood of the crew.”

Sue laughed quietly. “Not the crew, just you, so that we could inform each other what type of mood you were in – social, introspective, detached, playful, commanding. That sort of thing.”

Even though her eyes were closed, Kathryn raised an eyebrow. “I asked Chakotay often what the weather report of the day was. The first time, he gave me the strangest look and I thought he didn’t realize what I meant.”

“We never did this to steer clear of you. I hope you realize that.”

“Are you sure about that? One of those moods could easily have been hostile.”

“No, it never was. We all realized that the stress you were under was profound, and although we couldn’t do anything to alleviate that, we wanted to be what you needed us to be, socially. Sometimes, that would be a friend, like right now. Sometimes, that would be a colleague.”

Kathryn opened her eyes and looked at Sue. “That’s...” She pushed past a lump in her throat. “I think that’s one of the nicest things I’ve ever heard. Are you sure that’s not just you talking?”

Sue shook her head. “Not just me. I wanted you to know so that you can be reminded of how much you’re respected.”

“Thank you.” Kathryn took a shaky breath and closed her eyes again. Sleepily, she said, “Incredible, isn’t it? How an experience like this can affect a woman? By the media’s standards, I’m probably one of the most respected women in the Federation right now. But a handful of...” She took a deep, unsteady breath.

Sue laid her hand on Kathryn’s shoulder. “No, Admiral. Keep your thoughts on Voyager’s crew right now. Think about the time when we were trapped in that closed subspace anomaly and you built a new Federation and lived by those ideals. We were never prouder of you.”

“You’re good for me, Sue.” Kathryn smiled. “I think I just might have to keep you around.”

“I hope you do. I don’t want to work for anyone else.” She resumed her soothing touch on Kathryn’s arms. “How many other commanding officers would want me to give them healing touch?”

“Ones that are friends,” she mumbled, dozing off to sleep.

Kathryn heard people talking quietly through her haze of sleep, but it wasn’t enough to wake her up completely. She let the quiet conversation drift over her, not really listening, but not completely ignoring it either. When it stopped, she wondered why, so she opened her eyes. What she saw surprised her, and she wasn’t sure if she should let them know she was awake or close her eyes and pretend to sleep. Opting for the first choice, she said, “Is this a new development or are you two just really good at keeping secrets?”

Sue and Justin jumped apart, both of them covering their mouths with their hands. “Admiral! We thought you were asleep.”

Eye-brow raised, Kathryn said, "Obviously."

Justin's face had turned a deep shade of pink. "My apologies, Admiral. This was completely out of line, and I would never..."

"Justin?" Kathryn interrupted.

"Yes, Ma'am?"

"Are you under the impression that you've offended me?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"You haven't."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Justin?"

"Yes, Ma'am?"

"Stop saying 'Yes, Ma'am.'"

"Yes... Okay."

Sue came to his rescue and explained. "Admiral, he came to check on me, because today he was with me the entire time, helping me through the whole thing. Not just as a security officer, but as a friend."

"You don't need to explain," Kathryn said with a warm smile.

"I don't..." She looked at Justin, who was nervously studying the floor. "We don't want you to think that we just happened to choose your bedside as a place to make out. That was our first kiss, and it happened unexpectedly."

"It's my experience that the best first kisses are never planned, but I think this one is going to be a great story for you to tell someday. Especially to other Voyagers, and they'll get a great laugh, thinking it's at my expense." Kathryn winked. "But go ahead and tell it. I'll enjoy it, too."

Sue pressed her lips together, trying not to laugh.

Justin said, "Thank you, Admiral, for being so understanding. Today has been a very emotional day, and I'm afraid that I'm not thinking very clearly."

Kathryn's mouth crooked into a smile, and she calmly called out, "Doctor?"

Beverly came around the corner. “Yes, Admiral?”

“Is Sue okay to return to quarters if she promises to return for a checkup first thing in the morning?”

Beverly glanced at the three people looking expectantly at her, and pulled out her tri-corder to take a scan. After a few beeps, Beverly’s eyes shifted to Justin and then back to her patient. “It’s never a good idea for a patient who is recovering from a severe concussion to be left alone, unmonitored. I’ll attach a cortical monitor, but I’d feel better about releasing you if you can arrange to have someone check on you hourly.”

Sue glanced at Justin who nodded discretely. She replied, “I can make arrangements.”

Beverly said, “I’ll be right back with the monitor.”

“Thank you, Admiral,” Sue said.

“A word of advice,” Kathryn said. “Those cortical monitors are very sensitive to heart rate and body temperature changes.”

Justin suddenly had a small choking spell as Beverly returned. She asked, “Is he okay?”

Kathryn said, “Just swallowed wrong. He’s fine.”

“Are you awake, Admiral?”

“Yes?” Kathryn opened her eyes to see Amy standing over her, obvious excitement in the young doctor’s eyes.

“A gift arrived for you!” She held up a mini-PADD and two earpieces. “Captain Young passed this along to me at the staff briefing. It contains an audio-only transmission from Captain Chakotay.”

She gasped. “Really? How could he send it?”

“He must have sent it through the same channels that I used to send him the letter.”

Letting Amy put the buds in her ears, Kathryn asked, “You sent that already?”

“Of course, I did it as soon as you asked.”

“I was hoping you’d let me read it first.”

“Oh,” Amy touched her chest. “Please accept my apology, Admiral.”

Kathryn shook her head slightly. “It’s fine. I’m just surprised.” She took the PADD and smiled. “Besides, if you hadn’t sent it, then this wouldn’t have arrived.”

Amy helped Kathryn place the earbuds so she could listen privately. “Unless you need anything, I’ll leave you alone to listen to it.”

“Nothing right now, but thank you. I’m eager to hear this.”

“Enjoy!”

Kathryn’s fingers were trembling as she keyed in the commands to play the recording. She closed her eyes to let his voice wash over her.

“My dearest Kathryn... I... I love you and I miss you so much.” He paused. “I’m...” He stopped again for a deep breath. “I’m sorry. Maybe if I just talk quickly, this won’t be so difficult. More than anything, I want to be with you right now. Your message said you’re still looking forward to my TLC, and that’s exactly what I want to give you.” His voice broke as he said, “I just want to hold you, and keep you safe, even though I know that’s impossible.”

Kathryn wiped at her tears. The raw emotion in his voice was intense and she wanted nothing more than to hold him, too.

“The first thing I want to tell you, just to put your mind at ease, is that I’m okay, more or less. I’m at your mother’s house, and she and I are the only ones who know about your current status, outside the admiralty. You were exactly right when you said that our friends and family would be there for me. I had to be strong for some, and others were strong for me, although I’m not sure how strong I would’ve been in the long run. Right now, I’m trying to keep myself isolated because I’m sure that the joy in my eyes will be an immediate giveaway.

“I’m so thankful to have received Dr. Murphy’s letter. Of course, I’m not at all pleased with your condition, but knowing is better than not knowing. All Owen had been able to tell me is that you were in bad shape and that you were treated inhumanely. I’ve had to really fight to keep my fears from running rampant. The letter put your mom’s heart at ease, because she believes that your health issues include only what’s in the report. I’m not going to try to convince her otherwise, but I know that can’t be all there is.”

He paused again before saying, “I don’t know what to say that will give you comfort, except that I’m thinking about you constantly, and I hope that you’re no longer in pain and able to rest comfortably. I love you, and knowing that you were suffering breaks my heart. You are precious to me, and I would give anything to erase the last month for you.”

After taking a moment to clear his throat, he said, *“I’m getting a bit emotional. My guess is that you’re probably crying, too. I hope someone has a large box of tissues for you.”* He took a deep breath. *“Now, because you’ve told me that the sound of my voice makes you feel better, I’m*

going to give you a lot of it. And so that you don't have to hear this part of the message again unless you want another really good cry, press the forward key to hear more of 'Persuasion.'"

Kathryn wiped her tears away and happily did as instructed.

"I don't know if I'll be able to send more than this one chapter, and I suspect that you may listen to this a few times, so I'm going to tell you one, very important thing that I want you to hear over and over again before I start reading. I love you, Kathryn."

"Now then, chapter fifteen: Sir Walter had taken a very good house in Camden Place, a lofty dignified situation, such as becomes a man of consequence; and both he and Elizabeth were settled there, much to their satisfaction."

Kathryn remained very still, afraid to make a sound. She sensed that someone was near, but the ever-present darkness pervaded her senses and she couldn't see. Her hearing was muffled, but as always, she could feel the vibration of the ship beneath her. She swallowed painfully past the dryness in her sore throat, trying not to groan from the emptiness caused by her hunger and thirst.

An unexpected sound startled her and she gasped in terror knowing she was about to be beaten again. She could feel her heart racing as she prepared for the assault. When someone touched her arm, she recoiled and screamed, "Nooooooooooooooooo!"

The lights blinded her and she turned her head away. A hand touched her face and she flinched, knowing she was about to be hit. "Pleeeeeeeeeeease, no more! Pleeeeeeease," she begged.

The blinding lights lowered again, and her earplugs were being taken out. She shook her head vigorously to delay the loud yell that she new was coming. Strong hands held the sides of her face, forcing her to remain still. She knew that she was crying, but she couldn't help it.

"Shhhhhhh," a kind and confident voice said. "You're safe, Kathryn. You're safe."

"Please don't hurt me," she whimpered.

"I won't hurt you. You're safe here." The restrictive touches on her face changed to soothing strokes through her hair. "Kathryn, you're safe. It's just a bad dream."

"Noooo," Kathryn kept her eyes clamped shut.

"Open your eyes. The lights are down and you'll see that you're on a starship. I will never hurt you." The soothing touches moved down to her hands and massaged them very gently. "You're safe, Kathryn."

Barely audible, she cried, "Too much pain to be safe."

“Where does it hurt? Your arms?”

Kathryn nodded and turned her face away when the gentle hands left her. She jumped when she felt something cold sting her neck. Her eyes opened in alarm. “What!?!”

“Shhh,” Beverly laid her palm against Kathryn’s cheek. “It’s just a pain reliever.”

“Where?” Surprised, Kathryn looked around the room.

“The Pioneer’s sickbay.”

“But...” Kathryn touched her face and her arms, trying to connect with reality. “I was about to be attacked. I was...”

Beverly shook her head and looked at her with compassion. “It was a nightmare. You’ve been here for over forty-eight hours.”

Eyes wide, Kathryn said, “But it was so real.”

Pulling up a stool, Beverly sat down and held Kathryn’s hand. “Tell me about it.”

“No,” she shook her head. “It’s too awful. You don’t want to know.”

“Yes, I do. Remember, I know what your condition was when you were extracted, so I doubt that anything you tell me is going to upset me anymore than that did.”

“It was...” Kathryn’s throat felt like it was on fire. “May I have some water?”

“Yes, although, would you prefer some warm tea? It might be more soothing?”

“Could I?”

Beverly squeezed Kathryn’s fingers and got up. “Yes. It’s time we started introducing some clear liquids into your diet.”

“If that’s so, may I have some vegetable broth instead?”

“Absolutely.” Beverly ordered it from the replicator and returned. “Let’s see if we can get you sitting up a bit, too.” She called in Patty and together, they resituated Kathryn so that she was reclining, the rose lying on Kathryn’s lap. “This should make keeping the broth down a little easier.”

Kathryn accepted the cup, but realized quickly that she didn’t have the strength to hold it.

“Can’t!”

“I’ve got it,” Beverly assured her, and then told Patty, “Thank you, Lieutenant. I’ll call you if we need help.”

“Of course, Doctor.”

Beverly not only held the cup, but she held Kathryn’s right arm, too. “We’ll work together.”

Swallowing the first sip of warm liquid that she’d had in weeks, Kathryn sighed happily. “That feels good.”

Beverly smiled. “Simple pleasures.”

After another sip, Kathryn asked, “Can you take this tube out of my nose now?”

“Not tonight, but if your electrolytes are leveled out by tomorrow afternoon, you’ll be done with it.” Beverly was practically hugging Kathryn to help her hold her own cup. “So tell me, what made you think you were back on that cargo ship?”

Frowning, Kathryn said, “I’d hoped you’d forgotten.”

“I may be getting old, but my memory isn’t that far gone, yet.”

“Old? You can’t be much older than I am.”

“You’d be surprised,” Beverly smiled as she helped her take another drink. “I’m 54, and you’re trying to change the subject.”

Kathryn sighed and then explained, “It was dark, my arms hurt, I was hungry and thirsty, and my ears were plugged.”

“Did your captors plug your ears?”

She took another sip. “Mmmhmm, and I was blindfolded. I’m not sure how long it was before I began hallucinating from sensory deprivation.”

“That’s difficult to predict, probably a couple of days.”

“The only time they interacted with me was when I was about to be attacked. What alarmed me here was a noise that I couldn’t distinguish, probably because my ears were plugged with the earbuds. I assume that was about the time you touched me. At least, I assume you did.”

“Yes, to try to calm you because your heart rate had escalated. The noise you heard was someone leaving sickbay.”

“Too many associations,” Kathryn admitted quietly.

“And nightmares aren’t unexpected. If it’s okay with you, I’d like to administer a suppressant to keep them at bay for a couple of days until your heart has had time to heal.”

“Fine with me. I’d rather not deal with them at all.”

“Unfortunately, that’s not likely, but at least we can hold them off until you’re healthier and can start seeing a counselor.”

Kathryn groaned. “I don’t know if it’s the thought of a counselor or the broth, but I’m feeling a little nauseous.”

“Both, perhaps.” Beverly took the cup and set it down. “Let’s take a break. The Enterprise has a counselor if you’d like to talk to her.”

“No,” Kathryn shook her head adamantly. “I’m sure she’s perfectly fine, but I’m not ready yet.”

“Her name is Deanna Troi and she’s a very good friend. However, she’s an empathic Betazoid, so you can’t get much by her.” Beverly smiled. “But there’s no pressure. I know that it’s difficult enough to start a conversation with a counselor in the first place, but to have to change horses midstream, so to speak, is a pain.”

“I’ve met her before.” Kathryn tried to remember where. “She’s a friend of Lieutenant Barclay’s, isn’t she?”

“Yes.” Beverly chuckled. “Reg used to be stationed on the Enterprise and Deanna was his counselor. She’s one of the few people he feels comfortable interacting with outside of holograms.”

“Ah,” Kathryn said with a click of the tongue. “That explains some things. I was afraid they were an unfortunately mismatched couple.”

Beverly laughed loudly. “No, no, no, no, no, no... in Reg’s dreams perhaps, but Deanna is engaged to Will Riker.”

“Really?” Kathryn asked with interest. “I went out on a blind date with him at the Academy, but I’m embarrassed to say that I walked out in the middle of it.”

“Oh?” Beverly laughed. “I’d love to hear the story, and so would Deanna.”

“All right then, I’d love to meet her.” She held up a finger. “But not as a patient.”

“I’ll let her know.” Beverly winked.

Kathryn continued to sleep most of the time, but knew that she had a lot of visitors from the Pioneer crew because they left notes of encouragement for her. Even though she didn't have the energy to visit with all of them, her spirits were lifted knowing that they were thinking of her.

The men from security had come by and played a no-stakes poker game with her. It was fun to laugh with them, but she'd had to recruit Justin to hold her cards for her. Halfway through the game, she fell asleep, but at least she'd had time to talk to them about what had happened the night she'd been abducted. She assured them that she didn't hold them responsible even though they hadn't forgiven themselves, yet.

Amy spent the days with her, and Beverly spent the nights so that one doctor was always on duty to administer the continuous treatments her heart required to fight the infection that had set up residence. Regardless, she was slowly gaining strength and, by the fourth evening onboard, was able to feed herself and hold her head up without support.

She had just finished eating soup when she heard the doors to sickbay open. Knowing she probably had visitors, she patted her mouth with a napkin and set the cup aside.

Beverly poked her head around the corner and asked, "Kathryn? Are you feeling up to some company?"

"Yours? Of course."

"I brought friends. Are you game?"

"Sure," she said with a smile.

Will Riker walked into the room first, with a huge grin on his face. "Kathryn Janeway," he said as he kissed the back of her hand. "After all these years."

She smiled. "It's been awhile. How are you, Will?"

"A lot better than you, I'd say." He didn't let go of her hand as he asked sincerely, "How are you feeling? Are you comfortable?"

His charm was as engaging as she remembered. "I'm as comfortable as I can be. Evidently, my little adventure qualifies me for the really fantastic pain-relievers."

"Little adventure?" he asked with disbelief, and then a smile spread across his face. "I was about to ask what you'd consider a big adventure, but then realized I already knew the answer."

She laughed. "Yes, I've had a rather large adventure, too."

"Well, you did tell me years ago that you wanted to explore a part of deep space that no one has seen before. You got your chance, didn't you?"

“I can’t believe you remember I said that.”

He winked at her. “What can I say? I was enamored with you.”

Deanna walked up and said, “Lucky for me, Will, she wasn’t as enamored with you.” Smiling brightly, Deanna extended a hand. “I’m not sure if you remember meeting me, Admiral. I’m Deanna Troi.”

“I do.” She accepted the handshake with as much strength as she had. “You were at the Pathfinder reception.”

“Yes, as a guest of Lieutenant Barclay.”

“Our honorary Voyager crew member.”

“Does he know about that? He’d be honored with that title.”

Kathryn felt instantly at ease with the beautiful woman. “I’m not sure if he does or not, but I’ll find out.”

Beverly said, “Kathryn, I told Deanna that you and Will were an item back at the Academy.”

“An item?” Kathryn tried not to cough.

Will corrected, “We had one blind date.”

Deanna asked her fiancé, “So, why didn’t you ask her out on a second date? Was she too good for you?”

Kathryn laughed and said, “I’m afraid I’m the one to blame. I ran out on him before we even had a chance to order coffee.”

He asked, “Why did you do that? I never knew.”

Deanna nudged him. “I can just imagine what you were like at the Academy – probably anything but her type.”

“Hey now,” he said with a laugh.

“Actually, I expected you to be extremely arrogant and full of yourself, Will,” Kathryn said. “But I found you to be exactly the opposite. You were the most attractive, intelligent, charming, and wonderful man I’d ever met.”

Wide-eyed with mirth, he asked, “And that made you run for the door?!”

“Yes, it did,” she chuckled. “I was far too serious of a student.”

“Well, you did have very lofty goals of becoming a science officer.”

Kathryn shook her head in amusement. “And you were going to be a captain and invite me to be on your crew. Does that offer still stand, Commander?”

They all laughed as Will said, “Absolutely, Admiral.” He winked at her again. “I would do the honorable thing and offer a former classmate a hand up, especially one whose career never took off.”

“Well, what can I say? I got lost.” She leaned forward a little and whispered, “Do me a favor, though, would you?”

“Anything for you.”

“Don’t tell my dear friend Chakotay what I just said about you.”

Deanna laughed. “All you said was that Will was the most wonderful man you’d met by the time you were what? 19?”

“True,” Beverly said. “You didn’t meet Chakotay until you were...”

“35,” Kathryn answered. “I was sent to capture him, and it seems that I did.”

Will asked, “So the rumors about you and your former first officer are true?”

“Depends on which rumors.”

He whispered, “How long have you two been an item?”

“Hmmm...” Kathryn made a show of counting with her fingers, and then proudly announced, “Ten months.”

Will laughed. “I don’t believe it for one second.”

She shrugged. “Well, that’s how long ago we acknowledged it.”

“Yes, but...” He stopped when his commbadge beeped. “Pardon me, please?”

Kathryn nodded and waved at him that it was fine.

He tapped his badge. “Riker here.”

Picard’s voice responded. “Commander, I hate to cut your visit short, but there’s a situation that requires your attention. I’ll brief you when you return.”

“Understood. On my way.” He cut the comm and bowed, “Ladies, it’s been a pleasure.” Taking Kathryn’s hand, he kissed it again and said, “I hope your recovery is quick and that Beverly keeps giving you those terrific drugs.”

They all laughed and waved good bye. Beverly said, “If you’ll excuse me, too, for just a minute, I’m going to relieve Dr. Murphy.”

Deanna looked back at Kathryn. “You’re feeling happy.”

“Beverly told me that you’re empathic.”

“Empathy has nothing to do with it,” she stated matter-of-factly. “You have a huge smile on your face.”

“I think it was your charming fiancé.”

“Yes,” Deanna smiled. “He does have a way with people, when he wants to.” She leaned in to conspire. “But rest assured, he can be a real bear.”

“Can’t we all?”

“So true.” Deanna pulled up a stool. “Beverly told me that you have zero interest in talking to a counselor, and I respect that, but I want to make sure that you’re coping before the Enterprise leaves your side tomorrow.”

“Honestly, I haven’t even begun to cope with it, and it’s not that I don’t want to see a counselor, I’m just not ready, yet.”

“Of course you’re not. It’s only been four days.” Deanna’s response was heartfelt.

Kathryn pointed to her head. “And Beverly has been giving me a neural suppressant so that I’m not having nightmares. That ends tonight, however.”

“In preparation for going home?”

“Yes.” Kathryn took a steadying breath.

“Are you ready?”

“For nightmares? No. For going home? Yes. It’s been five months since I’ve seen Chakotay, and even then, we only had one good day together.”

“One good day?” Deanna asked.

Kathryn closed her eyes. “I can’t believe I just told you that.”

Deanna laid a hand on Kathryn's arm. "It's all right. You don't have to talk about it."

"Oh, it's just that we had an argument last summer and it took a lot out of me." With a trembling voice, she asked, "What do your empathic skills detect about me now?"

"That you're hurting," Deanna said quietly. "And that I really wish the Enterprise was going back to Earth with you."

Kathryn sniffed and wiped her face. "It's probably best that you're not, because in, what? Two minutes? I've told you more than I've ever admitted to a counselor in my life." Smiling ruefully, she shook her head at Deanna. "You would not be good for helping me rebuild my carefully constructed emotional barriers."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

The two women looked at each other and then laughed. Kathryn said, "I'm sorry."

"No need to apologize, Admiral."

Groaning, Kathryn said, "Please, don't call me that. I don't feel very admiral-like right now, especially since I'm being so emotional in front of a complete stranger. Tell me, do you affect everyone like this?"

Deanna smiled. "Most people who talk to me are doing so with the intention of releasing pent-up emotions, so yes. But maybe you just need a friend to confide in. If you do, I would be honored if you'd let me be that friend. I'll still treat anything you say with the greatest confidentiality."

"Thank you, I appreciate that."

Deanna touched Kathryn's hand. "Are you okay with going home?"

"Yes." She felt a lump in her throat. "Chakotay has been my rock for the better part of the last eight years, and I really need him right now." A shiver ran through her with the intensity of her longing.

"Do you want to try to talk through your 'little adventure' with me?" Deanna held up a placating hand. "As a friend."

"No," Kathryn shook her head. "I'm putting it off until I can be with him."

"May I ask why?"

Kathryn lifted her shoulders in the slightest of shrugs because it was all she could manage. "Because he'll catch me when I fall apart." With watery eyes, she looked at Deanna. "Probably not what you'd expect to hear from Admiral Janeway, is it?"

“Why do you say that?”

Shaking her head, she replied, “Because of who I am, this larger than life officer who brought a ship home from the Delta Quadrant and who is supposedly reunifying the Federation.”

Deanna stared at her compassionately for a long moment and then sighed softly. “I wonder if Captain Picard would mind if I took an extended leave of absence.”

She said through watery eyes, “You don’t want to do that. Chakotay will help me through this, just like he’s helped me through every traumatic experience for the last eight years. He knows me better than anyone else, and he’ll know how to pull me through.”

“Yes, but you’re also in love with him.”

“And that’s a problem because?”

Deanna said, “Because you’re going to try to protect him by not telling him the worst of it. And if anything from your argument is unresolved and causing you pain, you’re not going to tell him that, either.”

Kathryn quickly looked up at the counselor, wondering what she sensed. “He’s a good man.”

“I’m sure he is, but if your relationship hasn’t completely healed from that argument, this could put too much strain on it. I just want you to consider seeing a counselor sooner than later.”

“No, I’m happy to say that you’ve got it wrong.”

“Oh?” Deanna asked with a smile. “I love it when I’m wrong. Tell me.”

Laying her head back tiredly, Kathryn gave Deanna a suspicious look. “I have no idea if you’re joking.”

Deanna laughed. “My empathic skills usually guide me correctly. When they lead me astray, it fascinates me. Honestly.”

With a grin, Kathryn admitted, “Well, you’re right in that I probably won’t describe the worst of the vivid details to him, but he’ll know. However, this won’t strain our relationship. If anything, my health forces me to make some changes that will bring us closer together. And don’t worry, that argument has long since been over, even if I feel sad that it happened.”

“Okay.” Deanna accepted her reasons. “I won’t push you to see a counselor, but I would love to keep talking to you, even if we have to do it over the comm.”

Kathryn raised an eyebrow humorously. “And that’s not seeing a counselor?”

“Not officially, unless you want it to be. I meant it when I said I’d be honored to be your friend.”

With a yawn, Kathryn asked, “What’s your clearance level?”

“Depends. Why?”

“Because some of the things that are weighing me down involve issues that I can’t discuss with just anyone.”

“We’ll figure it out. I can get clearance as needed or you could speak in non-specifics. I’m a full-commander, but I’ve been granted special clearance on a case by case basis.”

“Will you be upset if I don’t call for awhile?”

Deanna smiled brightly. “No. I’m just thrilled you’re considering it.”

“I’m surprised, too. Will you let me keep up a few of my self-imposed emotional barriers? I’ve never seen a counselor that wasn’t intimidated by me, so I’m not sure what to expect.”

Shaking her head in amusement, Deanna replied, “Just knowing you have those barriers is half the battle. When and with whom you use them is entirely up to you. Oh, and just so you know, my empathic skills don’t work over long-distance, so you’ll actually have to tell me what you’re feeling.”

“Good to know.” Kathryn’s eyes were feeling heavy. “I’m afraid that I’m going to fall asleep on you.”

“That’s all right. Can I get you anything for you?”

“No, but thank you for asking.”

“Admiral?” Deanna started to ask a question, but stopped, looking uneasy. “I’m not sure what to call you if you don’t want me to use your title.”

“Kathryn works pretty well between friends.”

“Thank you for trusting me with your friendship, then.” Deliberately, she spoke her name.

“Kathryn? Would you like me to stay near tonight in case your nightmares return?”

“Oh, you don’t need to do that. I have plenty of experience dealing with them, far too much experience, really.”

“I’d like to stay.” Deanna motioned towards the outer room. “I can keep Beverly company and then I’ll be here if you need a friend. There’s no reason you need to face difficult memories alone when we’re here to help you through it.”

Kathryn suddenly felt unsure about facing anything. She bit her lips to ward off the unwanted emotions and her voice broke as she admitted, "I'm not ready to discuss what happened."

Deanna took Kathryn's hand, and looked at her with compassion. "I know, and I won't ask you talk about it. I'll just be here with a box of tissue."

"I wouldn't mind that."

"Beverly and I will both be monitoring you, and if you show any sign of distress, we'll wake you up."

Letting her heavy eyes drift closed, Kathryn whispered, "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Computer, lower lights to ten percent illumination." Deanna tucked the blankets up around her and very gently caressed her arm. "Sleep now. You're safe."

Kathryn ran as fast as she could, but just as her fingertips touched freedom, she was ruthlessly yanked backwards into darkness. She screamed in terror as a fiery pain burned through her back and made every nerve in her body sizzle with an agonizing sting. Something stung her neck and her body arched forward, right into someone's comforting arms. Kathryn clung to that person with every ounce of energy she had.

"You're safe, Kathryn. You're safe."

She was trembling and out of breath, unsure of where she was, but on some level, she knew that the person belonging to the soft, comforting scent wouldn't hurt her.

"Kathryn, take deep, slow, breaths. It's just a bad dream. You're safe, and no one will hurt you here."

She felt the woman's hand rubbing her back and concentrated on that sensation as her heart raced, beating hard and heavy in her chest. Tears fell unheeded down her cheeks as she was held in a tender embrace.

When Kathryn calmed some and felt a little less alarmed, she whispered hoarsely, "Who are you?"

The woman pulled back a little to reveal her black eyes and long, dark hair. "Do I look familiar?"

Kathryn blinked slowly and then looked around to see a woman with bright blue eyes and red hair scanning her. Then it all started falling into place. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. With a groan, she said, "Sorry. Was disoriented."

Beverly said, "That's all right. Do you know where you are, now?"

"Yes, Pioneer's sickbay. How long have I been asleep?"

"About three and a half hours. Pretty good, considering we didn't taper you off of the suppressant."

Sighing, she looked back at Deanna. "I think I'm okay."

"I know you are." She smiled at her reassuringly. "Or at least you will be. It takes time for the subconscious to cope with trauma."

"Don't I know it? I've been through this a few times." Kathryn put her arms back to lower herself and then yelped in pain.

"I've got you!" Beverly said as she supported Kathryn's weight and helped her lie back down. "Don't do that to yourself. Your poor arms."

"I keep forgetting that I barely have any arm muscles left."

"Within a week, your body should be healthy enough to accept more regeneration. I could put braces on them until then, if you'd like."

"NO!" Kathryn yelled, and then realized how loud she was. Softer, she said, "Thank you, but no. I'd rather them be free."

"I understand."

Kathryn nodded at the closed tri-corder. "How did my heart handle that nightmare?"

"Your heart rate skyrocketed, but your cardiac muscle kept up. I gave you a very slight stimulant to wake you up so that you wouldn't have to endure too much of it."

"Thank you." She closed her eyes tiredly. "Since you're both here, I have a question for you."

"What's that?" Deanna asked.

"Did you think I wouldn't notice tonight's scheme to get me to see a counselor?" Kathryn glanced first at Deanna and then pointedly, but with amusement at Beverly.

Beverly didn't meet her eyes. "Whatever do you mean, Kathryn?"

"It was clear as a bell that Picard's call was a well-rehearsed line."

"Actually, he's a very good actor," Beverly noted.

Kathryn pointed out, “And then you made an excuse and never came back.”

“I got busy.” Beverly shrugged. “But it seems to have worked.”

“Yes,” Kathryn nodded at Deanna and told Beverly. “She wants to follow me home to make me well again.”

Beverly held Kathryn’s hand. “So do I, and from what I’ve heard walking around these two ships, so does everyone else.”

Kathryn sighed. “So I can get back to work.”

“No,” Deanna said. “Because you are highly respected and adored.”

“I wasn’t fishing for a compliment, but thank you.” Her tears began to flow anew and she looked at Deanna. “You said something about a box of tissues?”

As Deanna handed her one, Beverly softly caressed Kathryn’s shoulder. “I should let you get back to sleep. Do you need anything?”

“No,” she closed her eyes and crossed her arms over her body, hugging herself as much as her strength would allow. When she heard footsteps, she opened her eyes and saw that Deanna was still with her. “I don’t have to talk about the nightmare, right?”

“Only if you want to.”

Kathryn closed her eyes. “It wasn’t that bad.”

“But disorienting.”

“Waking up always is.” Remembering the fear, Kathryn felt the heat of tears wash over her again and did her best to curl her body as the emotional onslaught took over. She was grateful when Deanna helped her roll onto her side, facing her newest friend.

“Let it go. You’re safe with me.” Deanna rubbed her back. “Computer, dim lights to ten percent.”

Feeling freer in the near darkness, Kathryn cried harder, accepting Deanna’s comforting touch and admitting the truth, “I was running... trying to get away,” she said through her tears.

“And you were so close to the exit. I know.”

Kathryn tucked herself into a tighter ball, still crying. The raw emotions continued to ebb and flow as the memories of that night came back to her. She kept trying to stop, but memories of what happened and thoughts about what Chakotay must have gone through when she didn’t call

kept assaulting her. Deanna continued to soothe her without saying anything. Just her touch and her presence gave Kathryn permission to let go for awhile.

When a lull in the emotions arrived, Deanna spoke quietly. “What they did to you is inexcusable, Kathryn. When you get home and have had some time to recover, I want you to tell Chakotay how angry and upset you are. Express that anger however you need to, but get it out. Throw things or hit something, whatever it is that you need to do. Then, I want you to call me. Can you do that?”

“Yes,” Kathryn said weakly. “I’m sorry about this emotional display. It’s not me.”

“I assure you that it has never, once, crossed my mind that any Starfleet captain or admiral would be prone to emotional outburst. However, enduring seventeen days of torture would break anyone’s emotional fortitude.”

She hadn’t thought about it as torture, but Deanna was right. It was. Kathryn covered her mouth as the tears came again. “Oh, God. I want to go home. I need him.”

Deanna leaned over her and gently held Kathryn’s shoulders, whispering, “I know you do and it’ll only be one more day. Cry yourself to sleep if you want. I’ll stay right here with you, and by the time you wake in the morning, this ship will be in the Sol system.”

“Thank you.” Kathryn wiped her nose and tucked back into her ball. She had every intention of getting a hold on her emotions, but then the counselor stroked her hair and it felt so much like something Chakotay would do that she broke down again and did exactly what Deanna suggested – cried herself to sleep.

Kathryn woke up with a start and realized that she was cold and shivering. Pulling the blankets up around her, she attempted to snuggle back in and get warm.

Beverly stepped into the room. “Kathryn?”

Lifting her head, she asked, “What time is it?”

“Almost six. Are you okay?” She came around to the side of the bed and touched Kathryn’s shoulder.

“Yes, just cold and a little nauseous.”

Beverly said, “You’re probably hungry. Do you need to use the lavatory?”

Sighing, Kathryn said, “Yes.” She hated this part of being so weak and helpless, but it couldn’t be avoided.

Beverly called in Patty, and together, they helped Kathryn do what she needed to do and, in no time at all, got her back in bed with a fresh gown.

Once settled, Beverly gave her a bowl of hot cereal and fruit. “Your diet expands today, natural sugars.”

Kathryn looked at the mush and sighed. “I am a firm believer that the sugar in ice cream is very natural.”

“You can believe that all you want, but unless you want to go into diabetic shock, I’d suggest avoiding it for a little while longer.”

With a grimace, Kathryn ate a bite of the cereal. Begrudgingly, she admitted, “This tastes better than I expected.”

Beverly laid an extra blanket on top of Kathryn. “If you get too warm, you can throw this off.”

“Thank you.” After another bite, she asked, “Are we in the Sol system yet?”

“We will be within the hour. I’m due back on the Enterprise before seven, and Deanna has already gone back. Do you want to talk to her again before the Enterprise takes off for Deep Space Three?”

“No, I’m not sure I have the emotional strength. She makes me cry.”

Beverly smiled with a small laugh. “I suspect that she probably just helps you cry. I know I’ve spent many a night in her company crying over a good... well, I won’t mention it.”

“A good what?”

“Something that you want, but can’t have.”

“Something with unnatural sugar?”

“You got it in one. A word of advice regarding Deanna – if she ever visits you in person, she is easily bribed with a good quality chocolate.”

“Noted.” Kathryn finished the cereal and set the bowl down. “Thank you for setting me up to talk to her last night.”

“You’re welcome.” Beverly helped Kathryn lie down and snuggle under the blankets.

“Hopefully, you’ll sleep for awhile longer. Dr. Murphy will work on getting you on your feet this afternoon in preparation for leaving tomorrow.”

“Do you know they want me to do a press conference in the morning?”

“Yes,” Beverly said warily. “How do you feel about that?”

Kathryn shrugged tiredly. “I’m not sure that I’m strong enough. Seems a bit hasty to put me in front of the public so soon.”

Beverly sighed. “In my medical opinion, you need to go straight to Starfleet Medical, and I think this is a really bad idea.”

“Did your opinion get overridden?”

“Yes and no. I understand the need for the public to see you, and it will be very dramatic. However, I’ve made it clear that I expect certain precautions to be in place.”

“I trust your judgment, but I think it’ll be fine if I can stand up on my own. I’m not sure what I’ll say, however. Maybe Harry Kim can write something for me.”

“He’s a fine officer.”

“Yes, he is.” Kathryn yawned. “One of the best.”

“Computer, illumination down to twenty percent.” Beverly tucked the blankets up around her patient. “Are you comfortable?”

“Very.” Smiling contently, she said, “Thank you for everything this week. I really appreciate your care and your friendship. It means a lot to me.”

Beverly’s eyes grew moist. “You’re welcome, Kathryn. It’s been an honor getting to know you and I think you’re a remarkable woman.”

“Thank you.” Kathryn blinked back the tears. “Now you’re going to make me cry, too.”

Grabbing a tissue for both of them, Beverly said, “It’s been an emotional week, one that I’ll never forget.”

More controlled, Kathryn asked, “Next time you’re on Earth, will you let me know? I’d like to talk when I’m more like myself. Perhaps for some unnatural sugar and coffee.”

“I’d like that a lot.” Smoothing out Kathryn’s blankets, Beverly said, “Now, get some rest. You have a big day tomorrow.”

“Would you thank Deanna for me?”

“Of course. Send us a message after you get settled in at home so we know how you’re doing.” She patted her hand through the blankets. “Goodbye, Kathryn.”

“Good bye.” She felt happy that she had two wonderful new friends, but a little sad that they had to part ways so soon. Still, she only had to wait a little over twenty-four hours and she’d be in Chakotay’s arms. That definitely put a smile on her face as she dozed off to sleep.

The morning went by quickly. Her first physical therapy session got her out of bed and standing precariously for a few minutes, and then Kathryn asked her staff to come to sickbay for a meeting. However, after about thirty minutes of status reports, Kathryn began wearing out and was getting easily confused.

Harry asked, “Admiral, may I make a suggestion?”

“Of course.” She squinted as she tried to concentrate.

“We’ve been operating under the assumption that you wouldn’t be back to work for awhile.”

“That’s true. I’m planning to take at least two months, if not longer.”

Harry nodded. “My suggestion, then, is that you don’t try to get a grasp on all of this information right now. Everything is going to change in two months and nothing about this conversation will be relevant.”

“You’re right,” she let her eyes close. “Why am I trying to think about this?”

Sue said, “If I know you, it’s probably because it’ll help you regain your bearings.”

Harry noted, “The first thing you always asked for after returning to duty after a stay in sickbay was a full systems report.”

“Standard Operating Procedure.”

“Hard habit to break,” Justin noted.

Kathryn looked around at her group and asked, “How are all of you doing?”

They exchanged glances with each and Harry spoke for everyone. “We’re fine, Admiral.”

“You are?” she asked doubtfully.

Judy asked, “Do you want the ‘chin up’ response or do you really want to know?”

“I really want to know.”

Sue said, “It’s painfully obvious that we’re one man short, and that we were...” She shook her head, unable to continue.

Kathryn looked at all of them and no one would say anything, so she finished for them. “That if my extraction had come just a few hours later, you’d be two people short.” Then she nodded at Justin. “Or that the weapon that took Scott from us also shot Justin and me.”

Harry said, “We’re going forward with the ‘chin up’ method of dealing with this because we have to.”

“I know.” Kathryn patted the underside of her own chin. “Mine must have an invisible force-field holding it up because I have no idea how I’m managing otherwise.”

They all did a double take and then slowly began to smile.

She looked at them with understanding. “We’ll do a memorial service for Scott with as many Voyagers as we can gather. I’ll tell you then what his last words were, but I’ll break down if I do that now.”

“We understand,” Judy said.

“So,” Kathryn said as she took a deep breath. “Harry, I’ll leave it to you to manage all of this in my absence. Don’t let Admiral Khurma intimidate you. He’s a good man, and he wants what’s best for the Federation. Once my status is made public, I don’t think any of these worlds will expect me to do much in the near future, so there shouldn’t be any pressure.”

“We’ll take care of it,” Harry said.

Justin said, “Admiral, all you should concentrate on is getting stronger so you can keep kicking a…”

She cleared her throat to stop him. “Noted, Lieutenant.” She winked at him and then spoke to everyone. “Thank you for all of your work this fall, and I hope that you’ll take some time off, at least a month.”

As they got up to leave, she asked, “Harry, a moment please?”

“Yes, Admiral?”

“May I ask a favor?”

“Anything for you.”

“I have no idea what to say at the press conference in the morning. Do you?”

He smiled. “I was hoping you’d ask. I have several ideas.”

“Thank you. I need to sleep right now, but I’d love to hear them a little later.”

“Comm me whenever you’re ready.”

“I will.” She looked around the empty sickbay. “Where’s Dr. Murphy?”

“She said she’d be back in a few minutes. Do you want me to call her or the nurse?”

“I just need help lying down. Would you mind?”

Harry quickly set his PADDs down. “Of course not. What do I need to do?”

“Just support me as I lie back because I can’t put any weight on my arms.” Kathryn felt a little self-conscious, but quickly realized that she had no reason to be. He was so much like a son to her that it was very natural. As he tucked her in and turned down the lights, she smiled at the thought of having a son of her own some day.

Kathryn woke to a grumbling stomach and decided to practice sitting up on her own. She didn’t get far before she felt like she was going to pass out from dizziness, but luckily, Patty had seen what she was trying to do and caught her before she fell off the bed.

“Admiral, be careful!”

She sighed. “Just attempting to assert my independence.”

Amused, Patty got her situated and asked, “Would you like some lunch?”

“Yes, thank you.”

Patty returned a minute later with a bowl of soup, and while Kathryn ate, Amy came in to do some regenerative work on her legs.

During the procedure, Kathryn asked, “You haven’t mentioned Harry in a few days. How’s that going?”

Amy gave her a pained expression. “Not well.”

“Oh? Do you want to talk about it?”

“I don’t know. I feel a little awkward since you and he are so close.”

Kathryn nodded. “I understand, but I won’t be upset if you tell me that you’re not interested in him.”

“No, no, no, noooo. That’s not it at all!”

“Okay,” she replied patiently.

“It’s just…” Amy held her breath and then said, “I think I’ve confused him so much that he has probably decided I’m not worth the trouble.”

“I highly doubt that.”

“Maybe, maybe not, but I have no idea how to approach him, now that I’ve messed things up.”

“Tell me what happened and we’ll come up with something.”

A short time later, Amy nervously rang the chime to Harry’s quarters. When he answered, she forced a smile and asked, “May I come in?”

“Of course.” He welcomed her in and asked, “Can I get you anything?”

“No, thank you.” Looking around anxiously, she asked, “Could we sit down?”

“Of course.”

Once they were settled, Amy said, “I know that I’ve been challenging this week, and I’m sorry.”

His shoulders relaxed. “You don’t need to apologize. This was the worst possible week for us to start dating, and I’m sorry if I put any pressure on you.”

Amy looked into his patient and understanding eyes. “I asked the Admiral about you the first day she was back. I still can’t believe I had the nerve, but I did.”

“What about?” he asked with an anxious laugh.

“I don’t mean to make you nervous.”

Harry shook his head. “I’m not. She is very dear to me, and if there was something that you felt you couldn’t ask me directly, I wouldn’t trust anyone else to give you better advice.”

“I asked her if you were the type who had a lot of girlfriends. You know, a player.”

Harry threw his head back in a laugh. “What did she say?”

“I think she was trying not to laugh like you just did. Of course, she could barely move her head at the time.” Amy couldn’t help but smile with him. “She said that I could trust your intentions to be honorable.”

“She’s right. Although I’ve dated a lot, I don’t have the best of luck.”

“She asked me a few minutes ago how it was going because I hadn’t mentioned it again. Has she spoken to you?”

“No, she hasn’t mentioned a thing, but I don’t think she would unless I brought it up. She’s not exactly the type to play matchmaker.”

Amy took a deep breath for courage. “She gave me some advice, so here goes. This might make things more awkward between you and me, but the Admiral believes it’ll do exactly the opposite and she knows you better than I do, and I’m rambling, so here goes...”

“Amy, you don’t need to be nervous.”

“That’s easy for you to say.”

He held her hand. “It’s true. I’m not at all intimidating. I’m just Harry – a regular, normal, friendly guy.”

Looking down at their clasped hands, she plunged forward. “The truth is that I’ve been trying to act aloof and a little subdued so that you wouldn’t see how infatuated I am with you.” She bit her lip and braved looking up to gauge his reaction.

He knitted his brow. “I was under the impression that you found me dull.”

“Noo!” She placed her hand on his arm. “I can’t stop thinking about you, but I was afraid that I’d scare you away.”

“Well, that’s a relief,” Harry said, taking a deep breath. “I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you since we met last July.”

“Really?”

He nodded pitifully. “I was disheartened because I’d turned you off so quickly.”

“Far from it. I’m so sorry, Harry. Could we start over?”

“I’d rather just keep going from here,” he said with a smile. “If you’ll promise to be yourself and completely open with me?”

“I will, but you may not want to hear everything that’s going on in my mind.” She wrung her hands. “I do this when I fall for someone. I start planning our entire lives.”

He chuckled. “I’d love to hear about my future, as long as you keep in mind that since we’re in Starfleet, we have to remain somewhat flexible with whatever life throws at us.”

“Like being thrown into the Delta Quadrant?”

Winking, he said, “A prime example.”

“I’m not entirely sure what my career path is anyway. After the last two months, I’m feeling rather inadequate as a doctor.”

“Come here.” He opened his arms and drew her into them, cuddling her close. “I suspect that no one in their first year after medical school would have been able to handle the Admiral’s condition, so don’t get too discouraged. Tell me about your dreams. What do you think about when you fall asleep at night?”

Nuzzling against him, she said, “Lots of things – none of which I should tell a man before I’ve even kissed him.” She sat up quickly. “Oh! I forgot!”

“What?” he asked, startled.

“Admiral Janeway! I lost track of time.” Amy looked at the clock. “I was supposed to give you an explanation, kiss you, and bring you back before she fell asleep.”

Harry squeezed her shoulder affectionately and tapped his commbadge. “Kim to Janeway.”

Kathryn replied with a sleepy, husky voice. “Yes, Mr. Kim?”

“I understand from Dr. Murphy that we have an appointment?”

Sounding groggy, she replied, “At some point today.”

Harry chuckled. “I have a... personal situation that I’d like to attend to. Could we postpone for just a little longer?”

“Take your time.” The smile in her voice was evident. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Thank you, Admiral.”

Kathryn said, “No rush. I’m just going to doze until you get here. Janeway out.”

Pulling Amy back into his arms, Harry said, “Now, I believe you were saying something about kissing me?”

Having just opened her eyes, Kathryn asked huskily, “Has your personal situation been resolved to your satisfaction?”

Harry gasped and then closed his eyes in embarrassment. “I didn’t realize that you were awake, Admiral.” A warm blush spread across his cheeks from the double meaning of her question.

“So it seems,” she replied with a smirk.

He glanced around the corner to check for Amy and then leaned in close to whisper. “Thank you for advising her to talk to me.”

“I trust that you were conscientious with her feelings?”

“Of course,” Harry said with a tender smile. “I think I’m falling in love with her.”

Kathryn knew she was beaming. “Did you tell her that?”

“Not in so many words.” Harry looked up again to check for the subject of their conversation. “She seems a bit inexperienced with relationships so I don’t want to rush it.”

“I sensed that, too. She’s only a couple years younger than you, but she lacks your confidence and social skills.”

Harry sat up straighter and smiled, announcing, “She’s awake.”

Kathryn turned her head to see Amy coming in. “Hello, Doctor.”

“Admiral,” Amy said, her cheeks tinged with a slight blush. “Would you like to keep working on your speech or are you ready to try walking?”

Kathryn glanced at Harry, and in an attempt to hide what they had been talking about, said, “I think we’re at a stopping point, don’t you?”

“Yes,” he said quickly. “Shall I come back?”

“Nope,” Kathryn said. “I’d like you to help me, if you’re willing.”

“I’d love to.”

Amy said, “Let’s do a couple of stretches before we start. Harry, would you ask Patty for a cup of orange juice?”

“I’ll be right back,” Harry went into the outer area of sickbay.

Amy quickly whispered. “Thank you, Admiral. He was as understanding as you said he’d be.”

“He’s a good man.”

“Yes, I can see that,” she said with a huge smile as he came back into the room.

Harry looked suspiciously at both of them. “You were talking about me. I can tell.”

Kathryn said, “Just some girl talk. Nothing to worry about.”

“I can tell already that this is what it’s going to be like when I introduce you to my family.”

Kathryn told Amy, “But when Mrs. Kim serves you a very strange apple pie, do your best to eat it, but don’t tell her it’s the best thing you’ve ever had or you’ll have to eat it forever.”

Laughing loudly, Harry said, “Oh man, I’m going to have to eat that again this week, aren’t I?”

Amy’s commbadge beeped. “Ral to Dr. Murphy.”

She set Kathryn’s leg down and tapped her badge. “Yes, Commander?”

“Captain Young has called a senior staff briefing to discuss Pioneer’s schedule for the next month. Are you available?”

“When will it be?”

“As soon as everyone arrives, Doctor.”

Amy frowned apologetically at Kathryn, but relaxed when Kathryn nodded her assurance that it was fine. “I’ll be there in a few minutes, Commander.”

“Thank you, Doctor. Ral out.”

“I’m sorry, Admiral,” Amy said.

“Don’t be.”

Harry added, “If anyone understands, she does. Really.”

“I hate to delay this again.”

Waving her concerns away, Kathryn said, “Not to worry. Have Patty standing by out there, and Harry and I will give it a go.”

“You’re sure?” she asked skeptically.

“Yes, go on.”

“See you in a little while,” Harry said. When she was gone, he added, “She’s worried about leaving you alone now that Dr. Crusher’s not here to back her up.”

“We’ll be fine. And since we’re in the Sol system, if an emergency situation comes up, help isn’t far away.”

“I’ll remind her about that.”

“Ready to help me up?”

He leaned over and wrapped his arms under her. “Ready?”

“Yes.” She’d learned from doing this a few dozen times to keep her eyes open so the vertigo wouldn’t be so strong. Her legs were strong enough that she was able to swing them around on her own. A moment later, she was sitting up and leaning against him for support.

“Should I let go?”

“Not yet.” She laid her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes, feeling at home. “If not for your scent, I could easily mistake you for Chakotay. You’re built just like him.”

“I hope that doesn’t mean I smell bad.”

“Not at all. You smell like soap, a fruity soap. Chakotay smells spicier. It’s his aftershave.”

“That first day you were here, I came to see you. I was helping Amy rub lotion into the new skin on your arms when she was called away. You stirred a little and you thought I was him.”

Kathryn thought back through conversations. “I think I remember someone telling me that I mistook you for him, but the first part of the week is a little foggy.”

His hold became stronger. “I had come to see you because I couldn’t sleep. I’d been awake for, I don’t know, over 48 hours, but I had to see you with my own eyes.”

“Harry.” She wasn’t sure how to offer him comfort except by letting him hug her.

“It was after that video transmission. I couldn’t get the image out of my mind, and I couldn’t sleep until you were safe.” His voice cracked with emotion.

“What transmission?”

“The one that led us to you. The images of you in the cargo hold.”

She looked up slowly. “What? They sent pictures of me?”

“You didn’t know?”

She began to feel nauseous. “Who saw them?”

“It wasn’t individual pictures. It was three minutes of recorded video, sent to us two days before we found you. The two bridge crews saw them, and I believe that Young likely forwarded it to Khurma.”

Taking a deep breath, she asked, “So it wasn’t broadcast on the Fednews?”

“No!” he said quickly. “Absolutely not. God, no.”

She relaxed against his shoulders again, feeling a little better. “What were they doing to me?”

“Nothing. It was just you, in obvious pain and very sick. At first, we didn’t even recognize you. We thought you were a child.” His fingers splayed across her back. “I can’t believe how they mistreated you.”

“And supposedly just for profit.” She knew that he could feel how thin she was because his hands were on her protruding ribs. While it should’ve bothered her, she took comfort in the fact that he wasn’t disgusted. She was worried that she looked like a skeleton with skin.

Harry said, “There’s got to be some other reason besides profit, or they wouldn’t have hurt you so much. We poured through every ounce of research, but I know we’ve missed something. This was a much larger operation than any of those terrorist cells could’ve done by themselves. I don’t know. Maybe they joined together.”

“I think that’s what the culprit wants us to believe, but I’m still waiting for the other shoe to drop. This isn’t over, yet.”

He groaned and held her tightly again. “Don’t say that.”

“It’ll be okay, Harry.”

Looking at her, he asked, “Are you okay, Admiral? I mean really okay?”

“I’m not sure how to answer that.”

He was quiet for a moment. “I think that gives me my answer.”

“The support I’ve received this week has been incredible. I haven’t woken up once by myself, and not an hour goes by when a friendly face hasn’t stopped in to say hello. I’m sure you know that I wish Chakotay was here, but since he can’t be, you and the rest of my friends on this ship have made it easier to bear.”

Shaking his head, he said, “Please don’t think this is inappropriate, but I have to tell you how much you mean to me. I care about you, deeply. The whole time you were gone, I was terrified.”

“I know how you feel.”

“Do you? It’s not…” He sighed and threaded his fingers through his hair. “This is difficult to explain, and I’m afraid that I’m embarrassing myself.”

Tilting her head sympathetically, she asked, “Would you like me to make this easier for you?”

“I’m not sure you can.”

“Our Voyager family is a very special one, and within it, there are some bonds that are extremely unique. This,” she nodded between them, “is not exactly normal.”

“No, I don’t suppose it is.” He blushed. “I’m sorry if I’ve made you uncomfortable.”

“You haven’t. Even though I’m still your commanding officer, it’s different now that I’m not your captain. For one, this hug would never have happened on Voyager, nor would you have been helping me through my depression last summer.”

“I know.” He looked into her eyes. “Is that okay now? I’ve never known how to ask about that.”

She nodded. “It was caused by an angry and heated argument, by a severe lack of communication, and,” she tapped on her head, “by an imbalance. It wasn’t the first time, but you didn’t hear a word of that. Clear?”

“Crystal.”

Kathryn took a deep breath. “As I was saying, while our Voyager family is special, I feel like the bond between you and me is familial.”

“But it’s a little different than that, too.”

“Yes, but sometimes, you definitely feel like a son to me, and…” She cringed in pain as she tried to lift her hand.

“What?” he asked with alarm.

“Shoulder pain.” She sighed. “Sorry, I just wanted to pat your arm.”

Chewing on his lower lip impishly, he picked up her hand, and supporting the weight of her arm, put her fingers on his bicep. “There?”

Laughing, she said, “Close enough. I was going to say that I care deeply for you, too. I have since we almost lost you to the Ocampa.” She squeezed his arm.

“That seems like a lifetime ago,” he mused as he set her arm down. “My mother might have issues with you feeling maternal towards me.”

Kathryn's mouth curved playfully. "Mrs. Kim needs to stop forcing you to eat that pie or you'll start coming to my house for the holidays."

He laughed. "You might just be onto something there."

Looking at him with affection, she said, "Harry, I'm so thankful that you've been with me the last eight months. Your presence has helped me more than you can possibly know."

"You're welcome, and thank you." He took a deep breath and stepped back. "I suppose we should get you on your feet, or we're going to end up in a puddle of tears."

"Wouldn't be the first time this week."

Handing her the juice, he said, "Better drink so you don't collapse on me."

"Thanks." While she drank, she asked, "May I ask another huge favor of you today?"

"Definitely."

She hesitated. "I'm a little anxious about this one."

"Must be big."

"It is for me."

"You know I'd do anything for you."

Tipping her glass as if toasting him, she said, "Yes, thank you. Although, this particular one has a positive side affect for you."

"What's that?"

"You'll get to spend all night with Amy." She waggled her eyebrows and then added, "Unfortunately, it would be in here."

He put his hands on his hips and shook his head in amusement. "Funny. I hope you don't want to work on reports all night."

Taking a deep breath, she admitted, "Until yesterday, I was on a suppressant to keep nightmares at bay. A counselor from the Enterprise was with me last night."

His expression sobered and he nodded promptly. "There's no question. I'll be here, and I'll wake you at the first sign of distress."

“It’s not that easy to rouse me, and I usually don’t know where I am. The goal for tonight is to see if my heart can handle the stress of a nightmare without being brought off of it with medication. Hopefully, I won’t have one, but if I do, I’d appreciate having a friend.”

His face was set in determination. “Thank you for trusting me with this. I know this can’t be easy.”

She shrugged. “At least I won’t have to explain anything to you.”

“Do you know what aftershave Chakotay wears? I can put some on if it’ll help.”

Kathryn smiled. “I wish that’s all it took, but just smelling him didn’t help me a bit after we destroyed Unimatrix Zero.” At his gasp, she clicked her tongue. “You see? I don’t need to explain a thing. Shall we try walking now?”

He took her juice glass, set it down, and helped her slide off the bed. Once her feet were on the floor, he asked, “Feeling stable, Admiral?”

“Don’t let go.”

“Not a chance.”

She leaned toward him to center herself, positioning her feet so one was slightly in front of the other. “And, Harry, I think you need to stop using my title.”

“All right.” He took a small step back to give her space to move forward. “Shall I decide on a new title, then? ‘Madame President’ has a nice ring to it. Or perhaps ‘Senator’?”

“Cheeky – that’s what you are.” She eyed her feet warily. “I used to know how to walk, didn’t I?”

“Pretty sure you did, although it was more like a strut.”

“I do not strut,” she said emphatically as she picked up one foot and the other knee buckled. “Aaah!”

“I’ve got you!” Harry kept her upright. “Don’t worry, I was expecting that.”

Once both feet were firmly planted again, she looked up at him. “Do I strut?”

“No,” he smiled warmly. “Just ribbing you.”

She made a face and grumbled. “I don’t strut.”

“Try shifting your weight to your left leg before lifting your right.” He guided her center of gravity to one side. When she cautiously bent her right knee, he said, “That’s it, I’m not going to let you fall... too hard.”

“Gee, thanks.” She practiced lifting and replacing her right foot several times. “The muscles aren’t responding automatically. I have to make a concerted effort.”

“Do you have the same problem with your arms?”

“No, they move when I want them, they’re just weak and the pain is sharp. My legs, especially in my hips and knees, are very sore and don’t want to cooperate. Different injuries and different side affects.” She took a deep breath. “Okay, I’m going to try moving forward with it.”

“I’m ready.”

This time, after she lifted her foot off the floor, she leaned into him, and placed the foot between his. Once it was settled, she let him guide her forward and then she dragged her other leg up to join it. With an accomplished smile, she said, “Just like riding a bike.”

He laughed. “Maybe it would be easier to just wheel you out to the podium tomorrow. The plan is to have you in a hover chair up until the public can see you.”

“Not an option.” She looked at her feet, and then back at him. “Yet.”

“Let’s keep going, then.” He took a step back and then joked, “I could call you Mommy.”

She leveled a mock glare at him. “Now you sound like Q, Jr.”

He helped her shift her weight to her right leg. “So, not Mom, either?”

She stepped forward gingerly with her left leg. “My legs feel stronger than I expected, they’re just not cooperating. I’m not entirely sure that my knees are linked to my brain.”

“You’re doing fine.” He steadied her as she wobbled.

“I’d rather save ‘Mom’ for my children.”

“Really?” he asked with surprise.

“I’m not that old,” she pointed out and transferred her weight. “How about Kathryn? It’s not a bad name, and most of my friends think it suits me just fine.”

Harry chuckled. “It’s a beautiful name, but it’s going to take some getting used to. It feels so personal. Congratulations – two steps.”

“Thank you.” She smiled playfully. “And it is personal, but after what we’ve been through together, I’m quite sure that our friendship has become exactly that. Are you game?”

“I’m game. I’m honored, actually.” He stepped back again.

She shifted her weight back to her left side, tottering a little because she went too fast. “The only reason I didn’t ask you to drop my rank at the same time as I asked Tom and B’Elanna was because you were, and are, still working for me.”

Guiding her forward, he said, “I wasn’t offended because I assumed as much.”

“And I’m sure you’ll know when to throw in an Admiral here and there?” she asked as she transferred her weight.

“When we’re not alone, unless we’re with family. Voyager family, that is.”

“Right.” She smiled at him. “Four steps. Amy will be proud.”

Amy spoke from where she was leaning against the bulkhead watching. “I’m very proud.”

Part 17 - “Carry Me Home”

By Dawn

Rated R

Summary: Finally, Some TLC

Kathryn’s last morning in sickbay was a flurry of activity as she prepared to go home. Sue volunteered to do Kathryn’s hair and makeup since she didn’t have the strength to do it herself. Amy replicated a new uniform, and Kathryn cringed when she saw that it was a size zero and still hung loosely on her hips.

She and Harry had practiced walking throughout the evening prior, but each step still took a concentrated effort and someone had to be holding her at all times. Amy offered to put braces on her legs, but Kathryn adamantly refused.

Shortly before ten, Harry returned to sickbay, looking refreshed. “Are we about ready?”

Kathryn looked up at him with concern. “Were you able to get a couple hours of sleep this morning?”

“I’ll sleep when I get home,” he assured her. “I’m too excited about today.”

Worried, she said, “Amy told me that you sat up with me all night. I wish you’d tried to sleep.”

He glanced around to make sure no one else was close enough to hear him, and then whispered, “Having never watched you sleep, I didn’t know if it was normal for you to be so restless. As it turns out, I was right to be worried. Do you remember how many times you woke up?”

Kathryn’s stomach clenched. “Twice?” She really wasn’t sure, but she had vague recollections of being surprised when she discovered herself crying in his arms.

Harry drew her into a hug. “Four times, and I want to thank you for letting me help you through that.”

“You’re thanking me?” she asked incredulously as she held onto him. “No, I’m thanking you for staying with me. I would’ve been in sad shape today if you hadn’t been there.”

“You’re welcome.” He pulled back and gave her a warm smile. “It was a long night, but I told you we’d get through it, and here we are.”

She winked at him. “Yes, you did.”

Justin came up and asked, “Admiral, are you about ready?”

“Yes.” She took Harry’s hand to slide off the bed and then he lowered her into the hover chair that Patty had ready for her. “Chakotay knows I’ll be there, right?” She’d asked the question twice already of two other people, but she wanted to be sure that everyone was communicating and on the same page.

“That’s what Captain Young said.”

As Patty made her comfortable, Kathryn stated, “I don’t want him to be surprised when I show up. I was hoping he’d come up to the ship first.” She’d wanted to place the call to him herself, but Starfleet still had their ship on a communications block.

Sue said, “It’ll be a surprise for the press, not for him.”

Kathryn asked, “Do I look okay?”

“You like fine, Admiral,” Amy assured her. “Too thin and a bit pale, but fine.”

Harry said, “We don’t want you to look perfect. The Federation will think you’ve been on a three week vacation.”

“I can’t believe they’d think that,” she said with disbelief. Looking up at Patty, she said, “Are you sure you don’t mind coming home with me?”

“Of course not, Admiral.”

Amy asked, "Do you want to reconsider and go to Starfleet Medical?"

Kathryn frowned. "I really want to go home. I need to be with my family."

"I know you do, and that's the only reason I'm letting you go. Just promise that you'll listen to everything Patty says and follow her advice."

Patty said, "I'll be tough with her."

Harry nudged Amy with his elbow. "Chakotay will be there. Trust me when I say that he'll be on his toes about her care, too."

"Isn't that the truth," Kathryn added. "Patty, I fear that you'll be bored because he'll want to do most of the care."

"Don't worry. I like to read and I'll be as invisible as possible. A lot of healing can take place when being cared for by a loved one. All I'm going to do is help him and be there in case of emergency."

"Thank you, Patty."

A comm signal opened and they heard, "Transporter room to Admiral Janeway."

"Janeway here."

"Are you ready for transport?"

She did a visual check with the group around her and then said, "Yes, energize." She took a deep breath and held it as the beam took all of them.

When they coalesced, they were in a transporter room. The attendant said, "Welcome home, Admiral Janeway."

Kathryn nodded. "Thank you, Lieutenant."

He said, "If you'll follow me?"

Patty guided the hover chair as they were led down a short corridor and paused outside a closed door. The Lieutenant instructed, "Admiral Paris will receive you here and take you to the press room in a few minutes."

She forced her features into her disciplined command mask as they went inside. They had to round a corner before they saw anyone, and as soon as they did, Kathryn's schooled features crumbled. Chakotay was rapidly moving towards her from the other side of the room.

“Harry!” Kathryn said urgently. “Help me up!”

Harry, Patty, and Justin all helped her stand and not more than a second later; Chakotay took her into his arms. Everyone else moved away to give them a moment of privacy.

“Kathryn,” he said hoarsely. They were both trembling as they held onto each other for dear life. “My beautiful Kathryn.”

She was nestled in his protective embrace, her head tucked against his neck. His spicy scent was the most wonderful thing she’d ever smelled, and she knew it was a miracle that she was alive and able to take comfort in his arms. Memories of her thoughts during imprisonment came to mind and she declared, “I did it.”

“Did what, my love?” he whispered, holding her close and placing soft kisses along her temple.

A couple of tears fell down her cheeks as she answered, “Kept myself alive for you. I almost let go, but I kept thinking about this mo...” She choked up, unable to continue.

“Oh, Kathryn.” He squeezed her tighter and rubbed her back in firm, soothing circles. “I love you, so very much.”

“I love you, too.” She wanted nothing more than to stay right there forever. “I’m sorry that I didn’t run away fast enough. I was so close.”

“Shhhh, don’t apologize, not for one thing. You’re home, and we’re going to heal our broken hearts together.” He closed his eyes to fight off his own tears. “Just hold on tight so we can face this. Whatever happened, we’re going to be okay. You’re going to be okay.”

Hoarsely, she whispered, “That’s what I need to hear.”

A few minutes later someone nearby cleared his throat, and Chakotay looked up to see that the people in the room had gathered around them. His voice cracked as he told her, “There are a few people here who want to see you.”

She mumbled into his neck, “Tell them to go away, would you?”

Those standing around chuckled quietly. Chakotay said with amusement, “They heard that.”

She pulled her head back to look up at him. “I love you.”

His eyes were full of emotion as he said, “I love you, too.” He kissed her softly, touching the face he thought he’d never see again.

Kathryn gingerly scooted her feet back a little, but didn’t let go of him. She wiped her eyes before turning to the group. “I missed him.”

They chuckled quietly again as Admiral Paris stepped forward. “Katie.” He hugged her carefully, even though she was still holding onto Chakotay. “Welcome home.”

“It’s good to be here.”

“Admiral Khurma is making his statement now, explaining the round-up of the frauds that hindered our search for you. After your statement, he’ll go into more detail about those who are facing felony charges. You’re going to be a complete surprise to them, and every single one of those reporters seems to be gnashing their teeth, wondering when we’re going to get off our duffs and find you. So prepare for a bit of shock.”

“Does it have to be so theatrical?” She wobbled and instinctively reached for Owen’s arm, throwing herself off-balance. As her knees began to buckle, Patty lunged for her and Chakotay threw his arm around her waist. It took all three to keep her upright.

Paris asked, “Are you up to this, Katie?”

“Barely, but only this,” she said commandingly as Patty and Chakotay lowered her back into the hover chair. “No questions, no receptions, no shaking hands with anyone. Just a statement and then I’m going home. I don’t want to see any reporters or be called to any briefings until I’m ready.” She squeezed Chakotay’s arm and he gave her hand a gentle caress in return.

“As you wish, Admiral.” Paris raised his eyebrows as he used her title.

She quirked a smile at him. “I just want to make myself clear.”

“Crystal clear. I’m relieved that despite your appearance, you’re definitely still in command.” He patted her back and looked at a video monitor to check Khurma’s status. “It’s about that time.”

Chakotay looked down at her and said, “I’m afraid we smudged you a little.”

“Not to worry, Admiral,” Sue said as she held up a small bag. “I’m prepared.”

After Sue quickly fixed her up, Kathryn asked Chakotay, “When I get as far as I can with this chair, would you escort me the rest of the way?”

“Are you under the impression that I’m letting go of you anytime soon?”

She smiled. “All right, then. Harry’s going to have to help me, too, and we’ll need to take it slowly. My legs are being insubordinate.”

“You set the pace, love.”

They wheeled her into the next room where the press briefing was taking place and waited behind a curtain backdrop. Khurma was responding to a reporter’s question about how many of

the leads Starfleet had not yet been able to follow up on. “Every lead is worth pursuing because it might provide further evidence.”

The reporter angrily yelled, “Do you not care about Admiral Janeway’s welfare?! You continually evade our questions!”

“On the contrary, Mr. Gordon, I care a great deal about Admiral Janeway.” Khurma replied. “She’s not only a remarkable officer; she’s an inspiring woman and a truly great friend. I doubt that anyone who has met her will disagree.”

Kathryn looked up at Chakotay and whispered, “I’m not sure I can do this.”

“Just say the word, and Harry or I will make your statement for you.”

Harry said, “I’d be happy to, Admiral. I can get pretty impassioned about this.”

Khurma continued. “Please allow me to take a short break to let you hear from another Starfleet admiral who can provide you with further insight regarding the current status of the situation.”

Chakotay whispered, “Kathryn?”

She took a deep breath and made her decision. Looking straight ahead, she nodded. “Harry, you’re my backup. Let’s do it.”

Chakotay followed Harry’s lead on how to pick her up, and together, they eased her up out of the chair. Once she was stable, they walked out from behind the curtain to hear a collective gasp in the room. She teetered under the bright lights, but her escorts were right with her, holding her steady as she forced her legs to take each precarious step. The applause began slowly, but soon erupted into something akin to a force of nature – quite an achievement considering there were only about forty people in the room.

She greeted Khurma with a nod, unable to let go of Harry and Chakotay. He leaned in and gave her a quick, fatherly kiss on the cheek. “Welcome home, Kathryn.”

They helped her to the podium and each man stood behind one of her shoulders with their hands on her hips and back to give her a solid support. Harry discretely slipped a PADD in front of her that displayed his speech.

As soon as the press quieted down, she said, “Ladies and gentlemen, I understand that my presence here today is a surprise, because you’ve been led to believe that I was still missing.” She acknowledged the slight murmurs with an understanding smile. “Before I begin, I want to take a moment to thank everyone who has been keeping me and my family in their thoughts during this difficult time. I’ve been told that there are some who have gone so far as to keep a candlelight vigil since December 25th, and I want you to know that I was touched beyond words when I learned about it. Your caring thoughts as I continue to recover would be very much appreciated.”

The Press was completely quiet as they waited for her comments. “On December 16th, I was abducted as I was leaving a conference on Joria Prime. For seventeen days, I was held prisoner by a group of mercenaries who, as you can see by my physical appearance, did not follow acceptable standards for the treatment of prisoners. I would appreciate it if the media would not conjecture on what that treatment might have entailed.”

Kathryn paused as she felt both Chakotay and Harry tighten their grips ever so slightly. “On January 2nd, I was rescued by the Pioneer and the Enterprise, and I’ve been in the medical facility on one of those ships for the last five days. Admiral Khurma will give you more details in a few minutes regarding the individuals who detained me.”

She let that sink in for a moment before continuing, feeling emotionally bolstered by Chakotay’s steady presence. “I have no doubt that if members of the press were to ask me direct questions, they would center on how I feel or how this experience has affected me. So, let me be clear about my answer so that no one need ask. I am angry.” She paused as she felt a rush of adrenaline. “I’m angry at the injustice of it, I’m angry that I was made to suffer intolerable abuse, and I’m angry that the individuals involved resorted to a violent and personal attack against me.”

She stopped briefly, feeling lightheaded and drained from the energy surge. Since she knew Chakotay and Harry would catch her if she collapsed, she forced herself to keep going, although she was noticeably weaker and the ever present dull pain in her hips was escalating. “What I want to know in return is how does every member...” She blinked hard and continued her sentence. “...of the Federation feel about this? Are...” She felt her eyes start to roll and her body swayed. Immediately, she felt both men close in against her sides. Their movement startled her back into full consciousness.

Chakotay whispered anxiously, “Kathryn? Time to let Harry take over?”

Kathryn closed her eyes and breathed slowly. She whispered, “A moment.”

Harry spoke into the microphone, “Give her just a moment, please.”

Khurma placed a cup of water in her hand. “We can stop, Admiral. They’ve seen you.”

Ignoring how much her hand was shaking, she drank the cool water, letting it rejuvenate her. With determination, she whispered, “Get my chair. I want to get through this.”

Chakotay gave a nod to Patty who had come out onto the platform area. She understood and brought the chair over. The men lowered her into it as Khurma resituated the microphone and handed her the PADD.

Despite her physical discomforts, she faced her audience again. “Don’t panic if I faint, but I’m going to try to speak to you for a little longer before I begin a leave of absence. Commander Kim will finish for me if I can’t.” She was handed a cup of orange juice and gratefully drank some of it.

The sugar in the juice helped her to keep going. “I was asking if the members of the Federation are angry. I certainly hope that you are, because we have been working for seven months to develop mutual understanding and peaceful cooperation. Then, within a matter of weeks, dozens of individuals felt it necessary to use violence as a means for gaining power and control over us.” Her adrenaline had picked up again, helping Kathryn ignore her pain.

“The arrests over the last few days include those who were directly responsible for assaulting me and murdering a man who was both my security officer and a dear friend. These arrests also include many who claimed responsibility for this inexcusable act.”

“My message to the press is to write your stories, share my words with your readers and your viewers, but keep my message clear: The Federation will not tolerate violence, and we will NOT be coerced.” Kathryn nodded and the press erupted into wild applause. She gave it only a short moment and then said, “I want to add...” The applause was too exuberant for her to speak over.

Admiral Khurma stepped forward and held up both hands to quiet them down, which they did immediately out of respect for Kathryn’s condition.

She continued, “I apologize for curtailing your much appreciated enthusiasm, but I want to add one more thought for those who might become so angry about what has happened to me that you feel the need to do something drastic. Please, do not focus your energy on revenge. Violence, in any form, is intolerable. If you’re going to do something drastic, make a drastic difference in people’s lives. I’ve said it many times – we all need to focus our energy on the basic ideals of the Federation. Those ideals are what made us great, and when we let fear and anger control our actions, we forget about those ideals. Thank you, it’s good to be home.”

In the midst of an even stronger round of applause, she looked at Chakotay. “Take me home?”

“Absolutely.” He and Harry walked next to her as Patty operated the chair. Once they were away from the crowd, she reached for Chakotay’s hand and drew him close to her. He kneeled down and asked, “Are you okay?”

Before she could answer, Amy was running a tri-corder over her and said, “Captain Chakotay, I’m Dr. Murphy. Admiral Janeway has been under my care.”

“Thank you, Doctor.” He stood up to shake her hand. “I received your letter.”

“Her heart is weak, but it’s managing at the moment. She needs to get back to bed before she collapses.” Closing the scanning device, she said, “Did you receive instructions about her care?”

Kathryn was leaning her head against his thigh as she mumbled, “Want to go home.”

Chakotay stroked her hair. “Yes, we’ve made arrangements to have all of the necessary medical equipment at her mother’s home. I understand a nurse will be with us?”

She nodded to Patty. “This is Lieutenant Patty Fields. She has agreed to be the Admiral’s 24-hour home nurse.”

Accepting Patty’s handshake, he said, “Thank you. I was expecting a rotation of nurses.”

Patty said, “I’ve been tending to her needs all week and I’d like to stay with her full time to make it easier on her and you.”

Kathryn said, “Thank you, Patty.”

Amy said, “She has a three-day supply of medication and detailed instructions. The admiral needs a lot of rest and careful attention to what she eats to protect her renal system.”

“Understood.”

“I’ll transfer her care to a physician at Starfleet Medical, and he or she will most likely want to see her tomorrow as soon as she’s awake.”

Chakotay nodded. “Please consult with Dr. Zimmerman.”

Amy tilted her head. “Voyager’s EMH?”

“Yes.”

“The hologram?” She asked skeptically and glanced nervously at Harry.

“Yes, he’s a friend and he’s been caring for her for a long time.”

Harry said, “I’ll go with you and explain on the way.”

Amy looked unsure, but said, “Okay.”

Kathryn said, “Amy, he may be a hologram, but he’s real to us. Do you have an analgesic here?”

“Yes, are you in pain?”

Chakotay kneeled down again. “Where?”

Kathryn replied to Amy, “The usual places, and my knees and hips are throbbing.”

“If I give you that analgesic right now, it’s going to put you to sleep.”

Kathryn closed her eyes. “I just want to lie down.”

Chakotay whispered, “We’ll get you home as soon as we can, love.”

Amy scanned Kathryn again and told Patty, "Give her the analgesic as soon as she's in bed, and run the hemodialysis while she's asleep."

"Yes, Doctor."

Touching Kathryn's back, Amy added, "You'll sleep for a good four hours. Contact me in a few days and let me know how you're doing, would you?"

"I will. Thank you for everything."

"I won't say it was my pleasure, but it was definitely an honor to treat you." Amy then smiled at Harry. "Ready to go?"

"Just a moment." He bent over and whispered into Kathryn's ear. "I just want you to know that my respect and admiration for you has grown tenfold in the last twenty-four hours."

"Thank you, Harry."

He kissed the back of her hand and then looked at Chakotay's surprised face. "And Captain, if you need a break at any time, please don't hesitate to call me." He nodded towards Kathryn. "She'll explain how I can help."

When Harry and Amy left, Chakotay rubbed her back gently. "I assume you'll fill me in later?"

"Mmmhmm," she said as she laid her head on the head rest.

Chakotay touched his commbadge. "Contact Gretchen Janeway, Indiana 529."

Gretchen's voice answered urgently, "Do you have her?"

"Yes, she's right here."

Kathryn's voice shook as she said, "Mom."

"Oh, Katie."

Chakotay said, "Gretchen, she's been released into my care and we have a full-time nurse accompanying us. Are you ready?"

"You'd be in serious trouble if you took her anywhere else first."

"Of course," he chuckled. "We'll be there in a few minutes, and she'll need to lie down."

"Her bed is ready."

Admiral Khurma stepped up. “Captain Chakotay, I understand that you’re taking her directly to Indiana?”

“Yes, sir.”

“We have a security net placed around Mrs. Janeway’s home, and a rotating security detail is on duty outside.”

Kathryn looked up and said, “You don’t need to go to that extreme.”

Khurma said, “I’m not willing to take any chances, especially with you being so vulnerable.”

Frowning, she replied, “This is temporary. I won’t have my mother’s house locked up like that.”

Khurma shared a look with Chakotay and seemed to know better than to argue. “Of course, Kathryn. It’s a temporary measure until we’re sure that all threats have passed.”

“Thank you. How did it go out there after I left?”

“It was fine, and I’m sure you can watch it all on the evening news. But for now, you need to get home, and I want you to focus on recovering. Understood?”

“I have no other plans, sir.”

“Glad to hear it.” He patted her back gently and then addressed Chakotay. “Take care of her.”

“I have no other plans either, sir.”

As Khurma moved on to speak to someone else, Justin said, “I just received notice that a nurse from Starfleet Medical will be here in about ten minutes to escort you home and see that you have everything you need.”

Kathryn groaned. “We’ll manage without them. Let’s just go.”

“Lieutenant Fields, I assume you’re capable of doing whatever is needed?” Chakotay asked as he offered Kathryn some comfort by laying his hand on the side of her head.

“Yes, it’s probably just standard operating procedure.”

As they started moving, Kathryn shifted in her chair to try to get comfortable and take the pressure off her hips. She complained, “It feels like bone rubbing against bone.”

Justin explained to Chakotay, “She was still in sickbay this morning, and just started trying to walk yesterday.”

“I can’t believe the doctor approved her doing this press conference,” Chakotay said with serious concern as he saw a tear fall down her cheek. Taking over, he said, “Patty, get that hypo ready. Kathryn, we’re getting you some relief.”

“Just help me. I don’t care how.” She wrapped her arms protectively around her middle and started curling her body forward. As she did, she lost her balance and started to fall, causing everyone in the room to gasp. Only the quick reflexes of Justin and Chakotay kept her from toppling to the floor.

Chakotay leaned down to get a better hold on her. “Hang on, love. Let’s get you home.”

She groaned in pain as he easily lifted her into his arms. Snuggling against him, she felt something cold released into her neck and seconds later, the throbbing began to recede.

Patty apologized. “I’m sorry, sir. We can harness her in.”

“It’s all right. She’s not used to the chair and I don’t mind carrying her. Justin, could you get the door for us?”

“Aye, Captain,” he said, all business.

As Chakotay carried her past the dozen people who were still in the room, he noticed that they were all standing at attention. The emotional intensity of the moment tugged at his heart and he whispered to his precious bundle, “I’ve got you, my love.”

When they materialized in Indiana, two security officers were walking the perimeter of the house. They paused to stand at attention as Chakotay carried her up the steps, Justin, Sue, and Patty following close behind. Gretchen came running out to help, but wasn’t able to do anything but hold the door open and touch her daughter who was already asleep.

He carried her into the bedroom as if she were no heavier than a child. Setting her almost limp body on the turned-down covers, he said, “We’re home.” Chakotay, Gretchen, and Patty worked together to remove her boots and coat. Kathryn pulled at the zipper to her turtleneck so they helped her with that as well. She heard Chakotay gasp when he saw her bare arms.

She looked up at him and said, “I’ve lost a little more weight.”

“Dr. Murphy warned me, but it’s startling.” He was taken aback as he held her upper arm and was almost able to enclose its diameter between his thumb and second finger.

They laid her back down and Patty said, “We need to take her pants off, too.”

Kathryn mumbled, “They’re scratchy.”

“Sure,” Chakotay said as Gretchen pulled back the covers. They easily pulled her uniform slacks off and gave each other a troubled look because of the emaciated state of her legs and pelvis.

Patty said, "I'm going to attach a dialysis cuff to her thigh."

Kathryn groaned. "Do we have to do this now?"

"It'll be over before you wake up, Admiral, and with the amount of pain medication I just gave you, this won't hurt a bit." Patty easily found the vein and artery in her leg and attached the device that would filter the toxins out of her blood. Once done, she pulled up the covers to Kathryn's waist and said, "Now, I just need to stick these monitors on your chest, and then, Captain, you can tuck her in."

While the devices were being placed under Kathryn's shirt, she opened her eyes and saw her mother crying. "Would you hold me, Mom?"

Gretchen sobbed lightly and slipped her shoes off. She crawled in next to her daughter and held her close, gently stroking her hair as Chakotay pulled the blankets up around the two women.

Kathryn felt Chakotay caressing her lower legs as she dozed off to sleep, feeling safe and loved. This was what she'd forced herself to stay alive for.

As soon as she felt someone touch her face, Kathryn recoiled and tried frantically to break free from her bonds. "Nooooo!" It was dark and she didn't know where she was. Her arms felt like they were on fire and she couldn't get free.

"Kathryn, it's me."

She felt the bonds being lifted and was surprised that she was able to roll away from the intruder. Her breathing was ragged, her heart was pounding irregularly, and her eyes were wide as she tried to get a sense of where she was.

"Kathryn, you're safe," said a calm voice in the darkness. The owner of the voice moved away. "Close your eyes. I'm turning on the light."

The bright lamp assaulted her for a moment and then she saw who belonged to the voice. She cried out, "Chakotay!" and reached for him.

He lifted her into his caring embrace. "Shhhh... you're safe, love. You're okay," he said over and over again while he rocked her and calmed her anxiety.

Patty crept in and checked the monitors. Once done, she whispered, "She's stable. I'll leave you to it."

"Thanks," Chakotay whispered.

As her heart rate slowed down, the adrenaline faded and her body started to relax. "...’m sorry... disoriented."

"It's all right." He rubbed her back. "This isn't unexpected."

"I know." She relished his protective warmth and mumbled, "We should get a nightlight."

"We'll do that." He kissed her head. "I'm sorry that I woke you, but you've been asleep for about seven hours and you're due for some medication. Dr. Joe is here and wants to check on you. We also thought you should eat since you missed lunch."

"I am hungry, but I could use a little more of this, first. I could use a lot of this."

"Good news, then. This happens to be my favorite thing to do." He draped a blanket over her and resituated them to get a little more comfortable. "As far as I'm concerned, love, you can have anything and everything you want for as long as you want. I'm so relieved that you're home safe."

"Anything?" she asked.

"Anything."

"I want ice cream, and lots of it." She looked up at him and widened her eyes.

He chuckled. "I'll check your food schedule to see when we can slide it in."

"Not for a few days," she sighed. "I've been asking for it because my throat was sore from being sick and from the feeding tube."

"Feeding tube?" He cringed. "We'll see what we can do. I hope you don't mind, but we're going to stay here for the foreseeable future. Your mom has gone into overdrive and she's planning a feast for every meal until you're healthy again."

"Is she holding dinner for me? What time is it?"

"She's still cooking, and it's just after six o'clock."

She looked out the window at the night sky. "I forget how early it gets dark in the winter."

They were quiet for a long moment until he quietly asked, "Are you okay?"

She felt a lump in her throat. "No."

"Do you want to talk about it, yet?"

Resting her head on his shoulder, she said, “Do you remember a long time ago when I got the ‘Dear John’ letter from Mark?”

“Yes.”

“You said that I’d tell you I was fine if I’d had my legs torn off by a trachon beast. Do you remember?”

“I do. Are you going to try to tell me that you’re fine?”

“No, but if anyone else asked me how I was right now, I’d probably tell them that I am, or that I will be. But I can’t tell you that. Not after what we’ve been through, and not after letting you into my heart.”

His lips rested against her forehead. “Thank you for letting me set up residence.”

“It’s what kept me sane.” She tucked her head against him. “I don’t think I’m the same woman I was a month ago.”

He resumed his rocking and said, “Every experience, good and bad, shapes who we are. Neither of us will come out of this unchanged, and that’s okay. We have each other, we have our family, and we have our friends. We’ll figure out how it affects us one day at a time.”

She sighed, feeling both reassured by him and vulnerable because the time had arrived when she couldn’t keep tamping down her emotional responses. She admitted, “I’ve been craving this, and now that I’m here in your arms, I’m overwhelmed.”

He stroked the downy hair at the nape of her neck. “It’s just me. You don’t have to be afraid to let go.”

“I know. That’s why I’m overwhelmed, because I know its coming.” She closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath, loving the scent of him surrounding her. He was always willing to care for her and, at the moment, she was more than willing to accept it. “Thank you for the roses and the letter.”

“Roses? Did I send more than one?”

“A whole bouquet of them, but I knew that only one was from you, and I held that one for a long time. Your letter, though... You have no idea how much it meant to hear your voice and to know that you were okay. I listened to it over and over, and yes, it made me cry.”

“I really wanted to be there.” His voice shook.

She straightened up to look at him. “Everything was so complicated and secretive. You could’ve been followed and they were setting all kinds of traps.”

He touched her face as if trying to convince himself that she was real. “I was so sure that you’d...” He got choked up.

“I know.” She felt a surge of emotion and wiped away a few falling tears. “I almost did.”

“I love you so much, Kathryn. I don’t know what I would do without you. I was so afraid.” His eyes were brimming with tears, too.

“So was I. It was horrible.” They held each for a long moment, trying to regain control over their emotions. She tried to lighten the mood by asking, “So have I used up all nine of my cat lives, yet?”

He smiled and pushed a lock of hair away from her eyes. “I sure hope not, but you’re probably close.”

“Just don’t start calling me Kat.”

Smiling, he asked, “I’ve wanted to ask you if you’d like me to call you Katie? Since that’s what your family calls you.”

“No,” she shook her head. “I love the way you say my name. Besides, Katie was my name as a girl, and I’d much rather be a woman with you.”

He smiled and tugged at his ear. “Kathryn it is, then.”

She kissed him lightly. “We’d better get out there or they’re going to come looking for us.”

“You’re probably right.” Since he was still holding her, he set her down on the edge of the bed. “I asked Sue to get some of your casual clothes from the ship and your house, but she won’t be here until tomorrow. Do you have anything here or should we replicate something?”

“I should.” She experimented with putting some weight on her legs, but they protested and a wave of dizziness washed over her. She had to sit back down.

“Are you okay?” He put his hand on her back.

“Just dizzy.” She held still as it calmed. “There should be a pair of sweats in the middle drawer.”

He went to look and asked, “The blue ones or the purple?”

“I think the blue ones are smaller.”

She dropped the blanket and looked down at her emaciated body. The dialysis cuff was gone, but it had left a small bruise on her thigh. “I look so grotesque.”

“No, you just look ill.” He pulled the uniform tank off, first over her head and then down her arms. “You are beautiful, Kathryn.”

“Thank you.”

He pulled the neck of her sweatshirt over her head and stopped there to lift her hair through. “It’s grown a lot. I love it.”

She smiled happily. “I’m glad I didn’t let them cut it this week, then. Sue wanted to.” As she tried to lift her arms into the sleeves, she stopped and clenched her eyes in pain. “Hurts too much.”

“What does?” He kneeled in front of her.

Cradling her arms across her front, she said, “The muscles in my arms and shoulders will need regeneration once I build up enough proteins, but right now, the simplest movements hurt a lot. The doctors were concentrating on my legs so I could walk.”

With a concerned look, he asked, “Would it hurt less if I moved them for you?”

“Just don’t pull hard or raise them very high.”

“Okay.” He fed her arms carefully into the sleeves, watching her face for any indication that he was hurting her. When he was finished, he said, “Dr. Murphy’s letter didn’t mention anything about injuries to your limbs. Is it just from the starvation? Were they broken?”

Grazing her knuckles gently over his cheek, she whispered, “I don’t want to cause you pain.”

He caught her hand and kissed the backs of her fingers. “If I’m going to help you heal, I need to know what was caused by illness and neglect, and what was caused by physical assault. Please don’t hide anything just to protect me, because I can promise you that my imagination does not share your benevolence. I don’t want to spend my energy trying to figure out what happened. I’d much rather know so that I can help you face it.”

Kathryn studied his face, her focus switching back and forth between his eyes as she tried to form a response. “I want to be strong.”

“I know you do.” He cradled her jaw in his hand. “But you don’t have to be, and I’m going to help you rebuild your strength. I promise.”

Remembering that she’d told Deanna exactly that; she decided that it really was okay to tell him. She held her arm out under the lamp and pushed up her sleeve. “You see the pink lines?”

“Regenerated?” He supported her hand and touched the hairless skin.

“My arms were bound behind my back with a thin chain, from elbows to wrists.”

Distressed, he asked, “Is that physically possible?”

She tilted her head, a mournful expression on her face. “Maybe for a more limber person. It tore all the tendons at the front of my rotator cuffs and caused extensive nerve damage.”

He looked like he was going to be sick. “How long were you bound like that?”

Closing her eyes, she said, “I lost consciousness in the corridor on Joria, and when I woke up, I was bound. My arms were already numb. I didn’t feel them again until I woke up in sickbay.”

He asked tensely, “And your legs, too?”

“Calves, but I could feel them except for the numbing cold.” She stroked the soft, black hair on his downcast head. “I don’t want you to dwell on this. It’s over now, and I’d rather not be reminded. At this point, it’s going to hurt you more emotionally.”

Looking up at her with tears in his eyes, he nodded. “I imagined different scenarios for what you might have been going through, but this never occurred to me.” He caressed both of her arms tenderly.

“Good, because I would’ve hated it if you’d known what was happening, having no way to help me. It really was mostly neglect.”

He looked away, fighting his reaction.

After a moment, she held his shoulder. “Let’s get out there. I’m hungry.”

Barely making any sound, he stood up and mouthed, “Okay.”

She leaned over to pull the pants on and toppled forward.

“Kathryn!” He yelled as he caught her. “Take it slow,” he said as he got her back onto the bed, sitting down.

Her stomach lurched from the sudden movement and she was sure she was about to faint. “It’s my blood sugar.”

“Will you be okay for a minute while I get Patty and Joe?”

“Mmm hmm.” She hated feeling this weak and helpless.

He was only gone for a moment when the Doctor came in. “Admiral?”

“Hi, Joe.” She wasn’t ready to open her eyes, still not quite sure of her stability.

“Chakotay said you’re lightheaded?”

She heard his tri-corder click on and said, “No, I’m just waiting for the room to stop spinning.” She dared opening her eyes and saw that Chakotay was back, so she gave him a reassuring smile.

Joe’s eyes were serious as he studied the readings. “I see that Dr. Murphy’s analysis is on target.”

“You had doubts?” she asked as she accepted a glass of fruit juice from Patty. “Thank you.”

“Not doubts, exactly, but I’d hoped that your condition wasn’t as bad as she described.”

She took small sips, trying to avoid giving herself a stomach ache. “I think you’re being a little dramatic, Doctor.”

“May I assume its okay to discuss your condition in front of Chakotay?”

“Of course.” She opened her palm towards Chakotay and when he took her hand, she encouraged him to sit next to her on the bed.

“Dr. Murphy suggested another round of antibiotics, and I can see why. You still have residual infections throughout your body, including a nasty one in your heart. The myocardial damage is considerable, and until your blood pressure is back up to normal, we’ve got to keep a close eye on the arrhythmias. And you’re still suffering from severe anemia and renal failure, not to mention the hypoglycemia.”

“She and Dr. Crusher said it would return to normal with some weight gain.” She watched Chakotay slip her feet into the pants and draw them up to her thighs.

“That’s true, but with the damage to your colon, that’s going to take a long time. I’m really concerned about your low blood pressure in the meantime. Your heart is very weak.”

“So, I’ll take it slow and eat a lot. I’m not planning on doing anything except sleeping for awhile.” She added, “I’m counting on your expert care to catch any problems before they get too big.”

“I’ll do what I can,” he said fearfully.

Patty handed Joe a regenerator. “For her leg. I didn’t want to chance waking her when I detached the cuff.”

“Thank you,” Joe said as he healed the bruise. “Go ahead and administer a dose of analgesic.”

As Patty pressed the hypo against Kathryn’s neck, she rubbed it and said, “I needed that.”

Joe did a visual inspection of her thighs and sighed. “Admiral, I was so worried about you.”

“I hear that it was because of your quick thinking that they were able to find me. Thank you.” She patted his hand and then asked, “Would one of you help me to my feet? Without pulling,” she quickly added.

Joe and Patty supported her from her ribcage as they lifted her up, and once she was on her feet, said, “Now, I’ve got the three of you and my dear mother to take care of me, so I’m going to be fine.” She smiled as Chakotay pulled her pants up to her waist and straightened out her shirt. “Shall we go see what she’s cooking up? Joe, you’re more than welcome to stay and examine me more after dinner, but I’d really like to eat. I’m starving.”

Joe frowned, “Yes, you are, quite literally.”

Later that evening, the five of them sat around the viewing screen to watch the Federation news reports. Kathryn was snuggled into Chakotay’s arms, covered with a warm blanket, but still feeling chilled.

He chafed her arms to try to warm her up. “Would you like us to light the fire?”

“I don’t think it’ll help much, and it’ll just make you uncomfortably hot.”

Gretchen got up to light it. “If I get too hot, I’ll put on some shorts, but I want you to be comfortable, Katie.”

Patty asked, “Would you like another blanket, Admiral?”

“Not yet, but I might.”

Dr. Joe said, “Unfortunately, there’s not much I can do to warm you up.”

Kathryn winked and said, “No, but I bet Chakotay could find a way.”

Gretchen held up a hand and jokingly said, “I think I’ll wear earplugs tonight.” Looking at the fireplace controls, she asked, “Chakotay, if you can tear yourself away from her for a minute, I could use your help.”

“What’s the problem?” he asked as he untangled himself and followed her to the basement.

Kathryn looked after them wanting to help, but knew she had to let them handle it.

The Doctor tried to speak discretely by whispering. “I don’t think that’s such a good idea, Admiral.”

“What? The fire?” she asked.

“No, intimacy with Chakotay.”

“Oh, I was just joking. But why wouldn't it be?”

“Because of the hormone fluctuations associated with your weight loss, the affect of your birth control boosters has been negated. I highly discourage you from doing anything that could result in pregnancy until you're healthy again. Your uterus has not been fully repaired from the parasite damage.”

“Ah,” Kathryn nodded. “Chakotay's boosters should take care of that.”

“Unless he's seen another doctor in the last few months, he's not up to date.”

She sighed inwardly. “Thanks for the heads up, although I don't think I'll have the energy anyway.” Thinking for a moment, she wondered, “I wonder what the chances are that I'm actually ovulating in this condition.”

“Unlikely, but I'll let you know before I leave tonight. I could bring a booster for him tomorrow, but I don't think giving you one right now is going to work until your hormones balance out.”

Kathryn nodded her understanding, but didn't say anything else because Chakotay and her mom were coming up the stairs.

“All set,” Chakotay said as he turned the flames up and warmth began to spread through the room. He re-situated himself on the couch, turning so that Kathryn was almost fully reclined with her back against his chest.

Gretchen tucked a blanket around her and then touched her daughter's face. “Better?”

“Much, thank you.”

She sighed contently as she tried to focus on the news reports, but since it was all about her, she didn't care. Her mind was now occupied with whether or not she wanted to consider working on a family in the next year. It wasn't long before the warmth and Chakotay's soothing caresses eased her to sleep.

Kathryn felt content wrapped in her cocoon of warmth, lying securely tucked against Chakotay's chest. Under her, his loud and rhythmic heartbeat was music to her ears, and the slow rise and fall of his chest the metronome. She was safe here. Safe and loved, with no decisions to make, no lives to improve, no politicians to win over, no anger to placate, no suffering to bear, and no mysteries to solve. Most importantly, no one here wanted anything from her except her love and her presence.

Slowly opening her eyes, she saw the dancing flames of the fire casting a friendly glow throughout the room. Near the Christmas tree, her mom was chewing on the end of her stylus as she mused over lesson plans. Gretchen had changed into shorts and a summer tank top, the sight almost comical because she was wearing socks covered in a poinsettia design and was surrounded by holiday directions.

Kathryn's heart warmed thinking about her mom and Chakotay. These two wonderful people that she loved beyond measure would've been devastated if she hadn't returned. As she watched her mom work, Kathryn thought about her own job and how it affected her loved ones. She wondered how she could manage to accomplish her goals and protect her family's emotional well-being at the same time.

How could she protect herself, too? Could she really face going back out there again? She had recovered from worse, but never before had her suffering been so acute and so prolonged with so little hope for escape. Never before had she faced death without having chosen to die so that others might live. Never before had she wanted to live so desperately that she could feel her heart breaking as her body was dying.

Perhaps it was time to admit that if the Federation wanted saving, it would have to come to her. Maybe she'd already done enough to change the tide. Besides, if she was going to marry Chakotay, she was long overdue on making some concessions to him. Or rather, she needed to make some concessions to ensure a healthy marriage and a happy life. That thought warmed her heart and she snuggled against him, sighing contently.

He whispered, "Kathryn?"

Looking up into his sparkling brown eyes, she hummed happily. "HMMMM. Hi."

"I didn't realize that you were awake." He ran his fingers through her long, soft hair as it cascaded over her arm.

"Hi there, sleepyhead," her mom said as she got up and came across the room.

Kathryn smiled at her mom and said to Chakotay, "I thought you were asleep, too."

"No, just reading a PADD."

"How long have I been asleep?"

Gretchen said, "Almost two hours. It's almost ten."

"Just in time for bed." Kathryn touched Chakotay's hand. "Would you help me sit up?"

"Sure." He set the PADD down and eased her into a sitting position. "Are you comfortable?"

“Yes, but I need to use the bathroom.” She frowned. “I’m sorry to say that I can’t manage alone.”

Gretchen said, “Katie, dear, I changed your diapers. You have nothing to be embarrassed about.”

Chakotay added, “And since we’re in front of your mother, I won’t point out why you don’t need to be embarrassed for me to see you without your pants on.”

Gretchen playfully smacked his arm. “Just for that, you get to help her first.”

“Gladly.” Chakotay kissed Kathryn on the side of the head and then very carefully helped her to her feet.

“Where did Patty go?”

“She’s taking a shower,” Gretchen said. “Katie, would you like a snack?”

“Normally I wouldn’t want to trouble you, but that sounds really good. Some vegetable soup, maybe?”

“I’m happy to cook for you.” Gretchen jumped up and went into the kitchen, leaving the younger two to take care of the other situation.

Kathryn and Chakotay returned before Gretchen did and got resettled on the sofa. He said, “Dr. Joe had a message for you before he left, but I have no idea what it means. I hope you do.”

“Oh?”

“He said to tell you, ‘No, you’re not.’ Any ideas?”

“It means, ‘Yes, you are.’” She grinned at his confusion.

“I’m still lost.”

“He was checking to see if I’m ovulating because he doesn’t want us to chance getting pregnant.”

Chakotay’s jaw dropped, and then he blinked quickly to recover. “Okay.”

Gretchen came back in, so they didn’t pursue the topic, but she could tell that he wanted to. She happily took the cup of soup and dug in. The warm liquid soothed her dry throat. “Thank you, this is wonderful.”

“You’re welcome, dear.”

Kathryn asked, “Was it just my perception or was all the news about me tonight?”

Chakotay crossed his legs and angled his body towards her, watching over her as she ate. “You couldn’t have made that press conference more dramatic even if you had actually fainted.”

“We’ve been watching the news all day,” Gretchen said. “You stirred up quite a commotion and people are celebrating. It’s like Christmas has finally arrived.”

“It’s not just today, though. Everything’s been about you for the entire month,” Chakotay said. “Poor President Zife received barely a mention for his New Year’s Address.”

“Really? Poor man.” Kathryn rolled her eyes.

“All the speculation about your whereabouts has been dreadful,” Gretchen said with horror. “It was more than I could take.”

“I’m sorry, Mom.”

“It’s not your fault, dear. I didn’t want to hear the hypotheses. I just wanted to hear some answers.”

Chakotay added, “There were twenty-three parties who claimed to have you.”

“Probably only a dozen once the facts were sorted out. My memory is fuzzy, but I think there were only six who were actually negotiating for me.”

“Negotiating for you?”

“To buy me from my captors.” Seeing his shocked stare, she tentatively asked, “You didn’t know about that?”

“People were trying to buy you?”

Kathryn glanced at her mom’s worried face and then back at Chakotay and realized, too late, that she shouldn’t have told them this part. “I was under the impression that you were kept in the loop.”

Chakotay repositioned himself on the couch. “Just that there was a plan to apprehend those responsible. I don’t have any specifics.”

She took a deep breath, willing herself to finish the explanation in such a way as to not cause them any more pain. “My captors were negotiating to sell me to four or more parties, all of whom we can assume had very specific political agendas. I don’t know if my captors intended to complete the transactions or if they were paid in advance by another, unknown party to get me out of the picture.”

Chakotay listened to her carefully. “That’s why there were no firm demands for your release? I thought Owen was keeping information from me, but he really was chasing false leads.”

“Each party believed it was the only potential buyer and began to threaten the Federation prematurely without having any real proof or leverage. I suspect that things got out of hand when they started learning about each other. My captors got nervous and tipped their hand.”

Gretchen commented, “It doesn’t make sense. Why did they treat you so poorly?”

Chakotay answered, but kept his eyes focused on Kathryn. “They wanted her subdued and unable to fight. If their clients, or their backer, really hate her or what she’s doing, they would’ve enjoyed seeing her suffer.” He looked like he was about to be sick.

“Oh, Katie,” her mom said sadly.

Wrapping the blanket around herself, Kathryn tried to conclude the conversation by saying, “Anyway, after I was rescued, we planned an undercover sting, and four individuals were arrested. That’s all I know. I didn’t have the fortitude to read the reports, but my staff gave me a little information.”

“So we have all this security because there are still more people out there who want to do you harm?” Gretchen asked.

“Yes, most likely.” She set down the empty bowl and drew her knees to her chest, noticing that it was far too easy to fold up like this.

Chakotay asked, “Kathryn, how were you involved in the sting operation?”

She could see ire stirring in his eyes and assured him by saying, “They sent in a decoy – Sue.”

He drew in a deep, shaky breath. “Thank you.”

“I wasn’t happy about it. I thought it was too risky if they discovered she wasn’t me, and at the time, I didn’t think it would hurt me because I’d already survived it. I didn’t want Sue experiencing any part of what I suffered, even if it was only for a few hours. It really upset her.”

“I can believe it.” He rubbed his eyes tiredly. “I have someone to thank for not listening to you.”

She frowned, even though he was right. “Bernie shot my idea down the second I proposed it.”

“Good.” He picked up the PADD he’d been reading and attempted to focus his attention on it.

“And yes, it was an incredibly stupid idea for a multitude of reasons. But at the time, I was very medicated and not entirely coherent.”

He bit back a smile and muttered something about miracles never ceasing. She rolled her eyes and straightened her legs out so that her feet were in his lap. His smile showed off his dimples as he tossed the PADD aside and grabbed hold of her wriggling toes.

Kathryn glanced over at her mother whose eyes were closed in what looked like a silent prayer. “Well, you two will be glad to know that I’ll be pushing for a change regarding my assignment.”

“Oh?” Chakotay asked.

“If the Federation wants me to talk to people, they need to bring them to Earth, or at least to the Pioneer, for discussions. I have visited enough worlds now that I know what’s going on, so I shouldn’t need to travel. I’m too exposed on alien planets, and after this incident, everyone can’t help but acknowledge that.”

Chakotay didn’t even try to contain his grin. “Kathryn, that has got to be the best idea you’ve ever had.”

“I agree,” said Gretchen.

She narrowed her eyes at Chakotay. “Yes, another miracle. I’m saying that you were right.”

“No,” he shook his head. “I never said that. I was only concerned about you going down in specific situations, but I like this even better.”

Patty returned, now dressed in Starfleet-issue sweats instead of her uniform. “You’re awake,” she said happily.

“Did you find everything you need?” Kathryn asked, wanting to make sure the nurse felt at home.

“Oh, yes. Mrs. Janeway has been very hospitable. Thank you.”

Gretchen said, “Don’t mention it. We’re glad to have you here and want you to feel welcome.”

“I do, thank you.” She picked up her knitting needles and yarn.

While yawning, Kathryn thought more about the changes she wanted to make. “I hope that the Security Council likes my idea as much as you two do.”

“They might not like it, but they’ll find a way to live with it if they want your help.” Chakotay stifled his own yawn and then added, “Even if you have to go into space in special circumstances, you could still do a lot without exposing yourself. Think of the security precautions in place for the President. That’s what’s needed for you, too.”

“You two are tired,” Gretchen stated. “I think you need to take her to bed, Chakotay.”

He nodded and stuck his PADDs into his satchel. “Kathryn, would you like to sleep alone or shall I join you?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Is that a serious question?”

“I think you have your answer,” Gretchen said as she stood. “You go on. I’ll tidy up in the kitchen.”

“Thank you.” Chakotay stood up and turned off the fire. “Do you feel up to walking?”

“A little exercise just might wear me out enough to get back to sleep.” She snatched the cozy throw that she’d been wrapped up in and draped it around her shoulders.

Patty asked, “Would you like my help or should I go turn down the bed?”

Kathryn smiled warmly. “I think he can manage it, but thank you for offering.”

“I’m sure he can,” she said with genuine kindness. “I’ll go get things ready for you.”

He squatted in front of her and put his hands around her ribcage. “Is this a comfortable way to do this?”

“I’m not sure there is a comfortable way.”

Sadly, he said, “I just don’t want to hurt you.”

“I know.” She placed a simple kiss on his lips. “This is better than anything involving my arms, but let me try to support most of my weight on my legs.”

He adjusted his hold and said, “Instead of me lifting you by your waist, how about you lean towards me, get your footing, and then we’ll go up together?”

“Okay.” She rested her arms on his and did as he suggested. Once they were up, she smiled at him. “That wasn’t so bad.”

“I’m glad.” His hands still on her waist, he drew her close and gave her a short, warm kiss.

Chakotay took a quick shower while Patty got Kathryn’s monitors hooked up, administered medication, and took some readings that Joe had requested. After she left them alone, Chakotay asked, “Is it okay if I sleep in just my briefs and a t-shirt?”

“Of course. Anything more and you’re likely to get hot.”

He switched on the nightlight and turned off the overhead. “I just don’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

“Come on,” she patted the bed to invite him in. “Your bashfulness is charming, but I’m planning on staying in these very warm sweats, so you have nothing to worry about.”

“Bashful?” He tossed his slacks and shirt across a chair and climbed in. “I don’t think you’ve ever called me bashful before.”

She looped her arm through his and rested her head against his arm, sighing contently. “Not out loud, but last spring when you hadn’t yet kissed me, you were definitely bashful.”

He chuckled quietly. “I didn’t want you to think I was rushing back to you because that other... entanglement didn’t work out.” Turning his head to look at her, he said, “Right now, though, I’m being cautious because I don’t know enough about what happened to you. The last thing that I want to do is make you feel ill at ease near me.”

Threading her fingers through his, she said quietly, “You’re worried that I was sexually assaulted.”

“It’s...” He took a shuddering breath. “I...”

Seeing how distressed he was about it, she spoke for him. “The odds of that kind of assault would be high in this type of scenario.”

“So you understand my caution.”

“I do, but if that happened, or if that were to ever happen, your loving touch would never be unwelcome.”

He lifted their entwined fingers to his lips and kissed the tips of her fingers. “That statement alone tells me one of three things.”

Slightly amused, she asked, “Oh? What are they?”

“One – You weren’t assaulted in that manner. Two – You were, but it was bearable. Three – You were, but you’ve compartmentalized it, tucked it away, and you’re ignoring it.” He held her hand between both of his. “And just in case it’s number three, don’t tell me right now. We’ll deal with it when you’re ready. I love you.”

She arched her eyebrow, even though she knew he couldn’t see it. “It’s a damn good thing it’s not number three, or I’d be really ticked off right now that you just tricked me into admitting it.”

“How did I do that?” he asked defensively, but with clear amusement.

“Because if I said nothing, it would be clear that’s what it was. Otherwise, I’d put your mind at ease and tell you what happened.”

“Hmmm. I see your point.” He kissed her fingertips again and let their hands relax between them. “But that wasn’t my intention. You could just tell me number one and I wouldn’t be the wiser. I also know that you’re clever enough that you could be saying all this just to distract me, too.”

Sighing melodramatically, she said, “There you go again.”

He turned his head to look at her, encouraging her to meet his sincere gaze. “I love you, Kathryn, no matter what. I love every square centimeter of your body, every nook and cranny of your brilliant mind, and every facet of your loving spirit, regardless of their condition or any suffering they’ve endured. I love all of you.”

“Thank you. I know you feel that way, but it helps to hear you say it.”

“You’re welcome, and I really do understand that you might need some personal space while you cope.”

She shook her head. “No, if anything I need to be held, but bear with me for a moment, and I’ll try to get this out by making it impersonal. I’ll give you an official report.”

“You don’t have to do this, especially not tonight.”

She squeezed his fingers and then let go, detaching herself so she could give her report on the incident. Folding her arms across her chest, she stared at the ceiling. “One of the solicitors, or possibly the backer, used groping as a tactic for humiliation and coercion to gain information regarding plans to overthrow the president. The assault included the chest and groin, but did not penetrate. When an acceptable response was not achieved, he switched to the more traditional tactic of physical battery to the face, torso, abdomen, and legs. No information was exchanged, and that was the only assault that fits within the context of this conversation. I’d prefer not to speak of it again.”

She felt the bed dip as he turned onto his side, but she didn’t dare look at him. It was taking all of her willpower to keep the memories detached, but her trembling jaw was a clear outward signal that her emotions were betraying her. When she felt Chakotay’s fingers under her chin, she knew the battle was lost. The tears had already pooled in her eyes, and when he turned her face towards him, the warm liquid could no longer be contained.

His warm, caring eyes locked with hers while his fingertips caught the tears that fell upon her cheeks. “Don’t hold them back.”

“I won’t let what he did hurt me.” She bit her lips, trying to hold back the torrent.

Chakotay’s eyes were brimming as well. “He’ll never know.”

She cried out, "I'm stronger than this," and then covered her mouth.

Rising up to his knees, he then bent down and picked her up. "Let me hold you."

Her shoulders shook under the pressure of her restraint. "It was just a grope. It was nothing."

Settling back against the headboard and pillows, he cradled her on his lap, holding her against his chest as she began crying in earnest. "It was bad enough. He touched you without permission and violated the most intimate parts of your body while you couldn't defend yourself." He stroked her hair lovingly, giving her encouragement to let go.

"Want to be strong," she sobbed. "I'm strong." She thumped her fists against his chest.

"Yes, Kathryn, you are, and I'm so proud of your strength. You were strong when this happened because you had to be, but it's over." He tucked her close, and placed a kiss on her forehead. "You're safe with me, and you don't have to be strong right now. I've got you."

She stopped fighting and let the deluge begin. It wasn't just about the personal assault; it was about the whole thing. Now that the damn had broken, she let herself grieve for all of it.

After the flood passed, she lay quietly in his arms and asked, "Why did this have to happen to me? My whole life has been one horrible experience after another." The tears began anew and she wiped them away angrily.

"Would you like me to tell you about all the wonderful experiences in your life? All the wonderful people?"

"No," she barked. "I'm feeling miserable and I just want to feel miserable right now."

"Okay," he bit back a smile and placed another kiss on her forehead. "I can help with that, too. After all, misery loves company."

She thumped his chest. "Stop trying to cheer me up."

"I wasn't." Adjusting his hold on her, he tucked her head up under his chin. "Quite the opposite, really. I was crying right along with you for a little while."

"You were?" she mumbled into his neck.

"Mhmm." His hand glided over her back, offering a soothing touch to her raw emotions. "While we've got this going, is there anything else you want to tell me? Don't let me push you, but I know how difficult it is to open yourself up to feeling this much."

“I’m actually kind of numb right now.” She wiped her nose with a tissue and tossed it carelessly onto the floor. “I guess it’s as good a time as any to give you a quick rundown of what happened. I’m not sleepy yet.”

“Only if you want to. Have you written a report?”

“No, haven’t been asked for one.” Sighing, she said, “But I guess I need to since it’ll go to trial.”

“Okay, tell me what you’re comfortable with, and I’ll draft a report in the morning. You can look at it whenever you’re feeling up to it, even if it has to wait a week or two.”

She nodded against his chest. “Harry knows some of what happened, too, so he could add to it. So do Justin and Sue, of course. If you can all contribute, I won’t have to think about it as much.” Quickly, she added, “Not that I want them to read your draft.”

“Of course not.” He waited quietly, not wanting to rush her.

“Do you want a PADD to take notes?”

Gathering her long hair, he drew his hand up underneath to caress the back of her neck. “This isn’t a report, love. You’re just telling me what happened, and I’ll do the report part later.”

Shakily, she said, “Justin’s report will have the incident in the corridor.”

“I read it.”

“From my point of view…”

Later, when she had fallen asleep in his arms, his tears fell in silent rivulets, tumbling unheeded from his face down onto her shirt. It wasn’t the emotional release that he needed to quench his fury, but that would come later when his cherished Kathryn wasn’t tucked peacefully against him. The tears did, at least, offer an expression for his heartbreak over her merciless suffering.

Kathryn struggled against her bonds, unable to move her arms. Flashes of light blinded her and she turned her face to look away, only to have her head forced forward. “Open your eyes!” they demanded, kicking her until she complied. Laughter roared around her as pain burned through her abdomen. She tried to see past the light, tried to see who was laughing at her, but there was nothing but that light. She forced down the bile she felt in her throat. The blindfold was over her eyes again, wrapped too tight. Darkness surrounded her and she felt hands all over her, groping, pulling, pinching, hurting. She clamped her mouth shut to prevent the screams that threatened, but it became too much and she cried out in pain.

The scream transferred into another reality, one where she was hot and shivering violently, nausea overwhelming her and her heart pounding so hard that she felt breathless. Her stomach

was retching and there was someone trying to talk to her. Other voices arrived, but she couldn't see, afraid to open her eyes. There was too much pain, too much fear. She wanted it to stop, yelled for it to stop, pleaded with herself to make it stop. After struggling helplessly, her energy began to wane and she fell back, limp, still crying softly for it to stop.

She felt a cool cloth placed on her forehead and someone was gently stroking the back of her hand. She was drawn to that touch and turned her hand over to accept it. The gentle touch became slightly stronger and she cracked her eyes to try to see, but the bright lights were there again. She clamped down hard and turned her head away, trembling with fear that she'd be forced to turn back.

She heard someone whisper, "Dim the lights," and it was only a moment before her eyelids changed from pink to black and she felt relief, knowing she wouldn't be blinded this time.

"Kathryn, are you with me?" a familiar voice asked.

It was so familiar and gentle that she braved opening her eyes again. She saw soft brown, worried eyes looking down at her. Sensing someone else's presence, she looked quickly at another concerned face.

"Katie? Do you know where you are?"

She slowly looked right and left, trying to orient herself, and reality began to settle in. She was at her mom's house. She'd had a bad dream. A nurse was there with her, too. Looking back at Chakotay, she asked, "Nightmare?"

He nodded and replaced the fallen cloth on her forehead, calmly saying, "A big one."

Gretchen sat on the bed and took her hand. "Katie, you're safe."

"I know." She squeezed her mom's hand and then took the cloth off her forehead. "Help me up?"

Chakotay looked at Patty for direction and then told Kathryn, "Not just yet. Let's take it easy." He stroked her arm lovingly

She relaxed and closed her eyes. "I'm okay now."

He touched her cheeks with the cool, soothing cloth. "Give it a minute. Patty, should she should drink some fruit juice?"

"Wouldn't hurt."

Gretchen said, "I'll be right back."

Kathryn looked up at him and sighed, having severe déjà vu to waking up from nightmares two years prior. “I hate this.” She rested her hand on his thigh.

“I know.” He gently pushed the damp hair strands out of her face.

Patty said, “Your heart handled it fine, Admiral. The monitors didn’t pick up anything new that we didn’t record during your previous nightmares.”

Kathryn explained to Chakotay, “I did this four times last night. Harry was with me. A couple times the night before.” With authority, she stated, “From now on, there will be no more discussing my abduction right before I fall asleep.”

“Understood, Admiral.” He leaned down and gave her a simple kiss.

Her mom returned and they helped her sit up slowly and drink the juice. When they were sure she was fine, they helped her change into a loose pair of pajamas and settle back into bed. Patty and Gretchen left them alone, but her mom looked worried as she closed the door.

“I have to stop this,” Kathryn stated.

“Stop having bad dreams?” Chakotay asked as he crawled in next to her.

“Yes.”

He stretched out on his side facing her, propped up on his elbow. “Hmmm... let me know how that works, would you? I still have bad dreams from things that happened nine years ago.”

“Yeah, but there’s a big difference between a bad dream and uncontrollable terrors.” She sighed heavily. “Mind over matter.”

“It’s that easy, is it?”

She looked at the doubt in his expression. “Don’t look at me that way.”

He rolled forward and kissed her again. “Just give it some time. It’s still fresh in your mind. You know it took you months of these middle-of-the-night talks to recover from assimilation. Your nightmare tonight was reminiscent of those first couple of weeks.”

Looking into his deep, brown eyes, she felt immeasurable relief. “I wanted you so much the last two nights.”

He tilted his head in concern. “You said Harry was in sickbay with you?”

“Yes. For the first few days, I was given a neural suppressant because my heart couldn’t take the stress. Dr. Joe wasn’t kidding when he said it was weak.”

“So I gathered.” He lovingly caressed her hand.

“Then, night before last, the doctors wanted to see if my heart could handle the stress without the medication. The counselor from the Enterprise was with me. Next day, their ship was sent off on another mission so I asked Harry to stay with me. We’ve grown pretty close.”

“I sensed that.” Chakotay smiled warmly.

She took a cleansing breath and said, “Let’s talk about something other than nightmares.”

“All right, what would you like to talk about?”

She needed to get her mind on something else. “Miral. How was her birthday party?”

“It was okay. There were too many people there and she got a little overwhelmed, had to take a nap in the middle of it. On the whole, the party was a little subdued because her godmother wasn’t there. I won’t say why because we’re not talking about it.”

“Did you take a gift for me?”

“I took one from both of us. A big tangle of colorful wires with beads that she can scoot around.”

“Sounds complicated.” She frowned.

“Your mom said it was Katie’s favorite thing to play with when she was one.”

“I should call Phoebe tomorrow.”

“She’ll be here for lunch and they want to re-do Christmas. Your mom talked to her today after we arrived, and they cried a lot. We hadn’t disclosed to her that you’d been rescued.”

“We’re not talking about that,” she insisted.

“So many topics off-limits?”

She glanced at the clock. “After midnight, yes.”

“I have one, if you’re feeling awake.”

“Too awake. Go for it.”

“Joe checked to see if you were ovulating?”

She smiled guiltily. “When I jokingly said that you’d keep me warm, he got worried because my boosters are no longer active and yours aren’t up to date.”

“Ah... so he was giving us the go-ahead to have sex.” He blushed. “That’s great, just what I want him to think about.”

“Don’t worry about it.” She laced their fingers together. “My hormones are so messed up that it wouldn’t be an issue. Not that I’ll be strong enough to attempt it for awhile.”

“Well, I’ll get updated so we don’t have to be concerned.”

She was quiet for a moment, trying to decide whether to tell him what had been on her mind earlier that evening, and off and on during the past year.

“Penny for your thoughts?”

Her eyes found his as she nibbled on her lip. Deciding to come out with it, she said, “I’d like to discuss the possibility of not renewing our boosters.”

“You would?”

“If you’re willing,” she suggested hesitantly.

His smile slowly brightened his face. “You want to have a child?”

“Or two.” She looked away momentarily and then back to gauge his reaction, sure that her smile was giving her true feelings away.

“I can’t imagine anything I’d love more than to create a family with you.” He caressed her cheek with the back of his fingers.

“I have a confession.”

“What’s that?”

“There’s still a smart part about my trip with the Relativity that I haven’t shared with you, yet.”

“Did you encounter the ghost of Christmas future?”

She chuckled. “In a manner of speaking, yes. I met one of our descendants.”

“Descendants?” His forehead wrinkled. “You want to have children to protect the timeline?”

“Nooo,” she insisted immediately. “I’ve always wanted children, but gave up on the idea because of Voyager.” She attempted to explain. “Meeting our descendant was eye-opening because she existed only because you and I created that possibility. I thought I was too old, but there she was, a result of this timeline, so I knew it could happen.”

“You’ve been thinking about this since then?”

“In the back of my mind. I made a promise to my older self that I’d live my life to the fullest to make her sacrifice worthwhile. After almost losing my life last week, I don’t want to put it off anymore. I think having a family with you is about as full as I could make it.”

“Is this why you want to make your job safer?”

“Part of the reason. I’m worried that this experience, that we’re not going to talk about, has changed me, and I don’t know if I’ll be able to go back out there again.”

“It’s too soon to even begin considering the long-term effects.”

Kathryn nodded and took a shaky breath. “Regardless, it’s a wake-up call that I might actually be a mere mortal.”

“You? A mere mortal? How profound,” he joked. “But anything that encourages you to safeguard your life is a balm to my heart right now.”

She put her hand over his heart and rubbed his chest in soothing circles. “If I’m safer, it makes pregnancy viable. I wouldn’t consider putting a child, our child, in danger, and I highly doubt that anyone else would expect me to, either.”

“Okay then. If Admiral Khurma agrees to your stipulations, then as soon as Dr. Joe gives us the all-clear, let’s work on it.”

“If Khurma wants me, he has to agree.” She threaded their fingers together and looked at the way they intertwined so naturally. “However, there is one small thing we need to take care of before we consider starting a family.”

“What’s that?” He smiled as she caressed his thumb.

“A wedding.” She looked up at him. “If the offer still stands?”

He laughed. “Don’t go planning it, yet. I haven’t officially proposed.”

“I believe you said, ‘Marry me,’ or was I mistaken?”

“I’ve caught you on a technicality, Admiral. You said no, so now you have to wait for another proposal.”

She rolled her eyes. “How quaint. I could ask you.”

He took her hand and kissed the back of it. “But you won’t.”

“Hmph,” she said as she stretched her body gently. “We should try to sleep. Spoon me?”

He snuggled up behind her, carefully supporting her to avoid putting too much pressure on her shoulder. "I hope this conversation will give you more pleasant dreams."

"Me too," she sighed contently and relaxed against him. "If not, you'll be here, and I'll be okay."

"That's right, love. You will."

Part 18 - "A Heart Broken"

By Dawn

Summary: Just when things are looking up...

Rated PG-13

"Aunt Katie! Aunt Katie!" The boisterous five-year old jumped onto the couch, into Kathryn's arms, and just about strangled her with a tight hug around the neck. "I knew you'd find your way back!"

"Hi, sweetheart." Kathryn held her tightly, savoring the enthusiastic affection that only a small child could give.

"Katie!" Phoebe exclaimed as she came inside.

Kathryn couldn't turn her head to look at her sister because the little girl's hold was so tight. "She's okay, Phoebe." What Kathryn wasn't expecting was to be tackled by her sister at that exact moment. "Oomph!"

"Don't you ever scare me like that again!"

Kathryn muttered, "I guess your 'Katie' was for me, not her." Kathryn felt thoroughly squashed, and she loved it. She had one arm around Katie and one around Phoebe. It didn't matter that it hurt, she wanted to hold them.

Phoebe's husband, Mike, asked Gretchen, "I assume your prodigal daughter is under there somewhere?"

"She was there a few minutes ago." Gretchen laughed. "Phoebe? Katie? Can she breathe?"

Kathryn answered from under the pile-up, "Barely, but it's worth it."

Gretchen said, "Mike, Phoebe, I'd like you to meet Lieutenant Patty Fields, Katie's nurse."

“A pleasure to meet you, Lieutenant.” Mike shook her hand.

Patty said, “And you as well.”

“Thanks for taking care of my big sister,” Phoebe said as she relaxed her grip

“You’re welcome, Mrs. Richards.”

Phoebe smiled at Patty and then took a good look at Kathryn. “So, do you want the truth or do you want me to tell you how great you look?”

Kathryn laughed. “I’ll take the latter.” She peeled Katie’s arm from her neck so she could look at the little girl. “How is kindergarten, sweetie?”

“It’s vacation time. I don’t have school.” Katie stated as she looked her aunt over. “You look bad.”

“I forgot to eat while I was gone.”

“That’s silly.”

“Yes, it is very silly,” Kathryn hugged the little girl again. “You’ll have to make sure I eat all of my vegetables today.”

“Is Uncle Kotay coming over?”

“He’s already here, in the kitchen cooking our lunch,” Kathryn said happily. “When did you start calling him your uncle?”

“Mommy said he’s gonna be my uncle soon.” She argued, “I asked him and he said I could.”

“Well, of course you can call him that.” Kathryn reassured her by mussing up her hair. “I’ve really missed you. I think you must be an entire head taller.”

“I’m not a head taller! I’m almost a meter!”

Kathryn laughed, “Yes, you are.”

“Daddy?” She jumped up. “Can we find Uncle Kotay?”

“Sure. Let’s go see if he needs help with lunch.”

After they left, Phoebe said, “She’s precocious.”

“Yes, she is, and I wouldn’t want her any other way.” Kathryn hugged her sister again. “How are you doing?”

“Better than I was a couple days ago,” Phoebe looked at her mother with annoyance.

Kathryn looked between them. “You’re upset that Mom didn’t tell you I’d been rescued?”

“Got it one, sis.” Phoebe glared at Kathryn. “Nor did you, I might add.”

“You’re blaming me?” Kathryn asked with disbelief. “I was under a communication block-out and asleep most of the time.”

“Hmph.” Phoebe crossed her arms. “Do you have any idea how...?” She stopped when Gretchen looked severely at her. “Fine,” she said with resignation.

Kathryn said, “I’m really sorry about the need for secrecy, but it was a dangerous situation.”

“Don’t you think I know that?” Phoebe glared, “I mean look at you!”

“Hey, what happened to telling me how great I look?”

“I’d like to give someone a piece of my mind,” Phoebe muttered.

Kathryn pulled her sister into another hug. “As would I, sis.”

While hugging, Phoebe responded, “You did in that press conference yesterday. You looked like you were ready to spit nails. You know, right after you managed to avoid fainting.”

“Yes, well,” Kathryn shrugged. “Glad to know that I was clear.”

Mike came back into the room at that moment. “Kathryn, when do you ever not get your point across?”

Gretchen said, “He’s right, you know.”

“Ladies, lunch is served,” Mike announced.

Towards the end of lunch, Kathryn’s eyelids grew heavy and she began to nod off until she felt Chakotay’s arms around her. She whispered, “Sorry.”

“Shhh, let’s get you to bed,” he said as he scooped her up into his arms.

“Need some help?” Mike asked, getting up.

“I’ll let you get the door. Gretchen, could you get Patty?”

“Mommy, what’s wrong with Aunt Katie?”

Phoebe answered, “She’s just tired and wants to take a nap. Do you want one, too?”

Kathryn heard Katie answer, “I’m too old for naps,” as Chakotay carried her into the bedroom.

Mike said, “Let me pull back the covers.”

They got her tucked into bed and after Mike returned to the dining room, Chakotay started closing the window shade.

“Leave it open?” Kathryn asked.

He turned around, smiling. “I thought you were already asleep.”

“Just about,” she murmured. “I like the light. Too much time in darkness.”

Patty came in and got Kathryn’s medications out of the case.

Chakotay asked, “May I give them to her?”

“Of course,” she said with a smile and started taking Kathryn’s heart rate and blood pressure.

He sat on the edge of the bed and released a hypo into her neck. “This is the antibiotic.”

Kathryn rubbed the tingling spot. “You’re pretty good at taking care of me.”

“My life’s ambition. How’s the pain?”

“Moderate, but I don’t want to sleep all day.”

Chakotay asked Patty, “Do we have any other analgesics here?”

“No, and I can’t give her another kind with a doctor approving it.”

He tapped his commbadge. “Chakotay to Zimmerman, Starfleet Medical.”

“Zimmerman here. Everything okay, Captain?”

“Yes, just need medication advice.” He explained the situation.

“Lieutenant Fields, administer half a dose, and I’ll send you an alternative for later.”

“Thank you, Joe,” Kathryn said.

“You’re welcome, Admiral. Sleep well. Zimmerman out.”

Patty made the adjustment on the vial and handed it back to Chakotay. “Here you go. I’ll be in the sunroom if you need me.”

“Thanks.” He released the contents into her jugular vein and said, “I do like taking care of you. I hope you know that.”

Grinning sleepily, she said, “Even the trips to the bathroom?”

“Even those. Need one?”

She shook her head and then winked. “I think your favorite was giving me a bath this morning.”

A rosy blush tinged his cheeks. “Yes, I did enjoy that, and I suspect that you did, too.” He leaned down and gave her a lingering kiss, whispering against her lips, “Because you’re smiling.”

“Mmmhmmm. Again?” She moaned softly as the second, longer kiss warmed her lips.

“Time to sleep, love.”

“kay. Going to have sweet dreams after that.”

“I’m leaving a commbadge on the table. Call for me when you wake up.”

“Mmmhmmm. Don’t let me sleep all day.”

She felt a kiss on her forehead as she drifted off to sleep.

After her nap, she rejoined her family, feeling happy and content as she sat amongst them around the Christmas tree. She’d missed them all so much – not just during her ordeal, but for the entire four months that she’d been gone. And that was just one more reason to stay on Earth as much as possible.

She and Katie put together a puzzle and colored a few princess pictures out of a coloring book. Kathryn felt everyone’s eyes on her, but of course, Chakotay’s most often. At first, she was afraid that he was worried about her, but then she realized that he was just watching, almost as if mesmerized by her presence. She made a point of returning his gazes with a reassuring smile.

After dinner that evening, the promised Christmas re-enactment got into full swing. The family went so far as to rewrap all the presents and act completely surprised when they opened them for

the second time. The re-dramatization became hysterically funny as they overreacted to the simplest of gifts, and did the opposite with what had been their favorites.

After all the gifts had been re-opened, Phoebe picked up another large package and gave it to Kathryn. "I hope you don't mind that I got you a little something extra?"

Kathryn basked in delight as she received the gift. "Now why would I mind that?" She used her fingernail to slice through the tape and then peeled away the wrapping very carefully.

"Are you trying to draw this out?" Mike asked. "Just rip it open."

"That's funny considering you just opened the same presents two times." Kathryn pointed out, "I, however, am savoring the moment." She set the lid on the floor and peeled back the tissue paper. "Clothes?" she asked happily.

"Three new outfits," Phoebe announced. "Good for lounging around and sleeping in."

Kathryn lifted out the first top and fingered the fabric. "It's so soft," she held it against her cheek.

"I thought you might enjoy how silky they feel," Phoebe said. "They're size four, but the pants have drawstrings so you can cinch them up until you get your weight back."

"Thank you," Kathryn looked through them to see that all three were made from the same fabric, but in three different styles and three different colors. "They're perfect for what I have on my agenda."

"Which is what?" Mike asked.

Kathryn held one top against her chest to check for fit. "Sleeping," she announced. "Along with some eating, snuggling, reading, and more sleeping."

"While we're on the topic of snuggling," Chakotay said. "I also have one more gift for you."

She glanced up with interest. "Oh?"

He moved her clothes to the floor before presenting her with a small red box tied with a white satin ribbon. She had a really good hunch as to what it might be, and in response, a flock of butterflies flitted around in her stomach.

"You might want to savor this one, too," he suggested with a glimmer in his eyes.

"I intend to." The corner of her mouth twitched as she tried to contain her smile. The satin ribbon untied easily, and when she lifted the lid, she was rewarded with another box, a black velvet one with a brass hinge. As she lifted it out, her eyes flicked up to his and she saw that he was intently watching her face for a reaction. Smiling broadly, she opened the hinge and saw a

breathhtaking diamond ring. She really was surprised by the brilliance of it and gasped. “Chakotay, it’s beautiful!”

He took the ring out and set the box aside. Kneeling in front of her, he held her left hand and asked, “Kathryn, my love, would you spend the rest of your life with me? Will you marry me?”

She caressed his cheek as she answered, her eyes growing moist. “Yes, Chakotay, I would love to.”

“I had a feeling you’d say that.” He slid the ring easily onto her finger and locked eyes with her. Ever so slowly, he moved closer, cradled her face, and brought their lips together for a loving kiss.

His lips were warm and sensual as they drew a soft moan from deep within her. The intimate connection was intense; the long dormant sparks of passion igniting like a fire within her. If it hadn’t been for her family watching them, she would’ve wound her fingers into his hair and urged him to take it deeper.

When the kiss ended, their foreheads touched and his fingers caressed her flushed cheeks, cherishing the beautiful moment.

She whispered, “Can I have more of that later?”

“It would be my pleasure,” he whispered into her ear, letting his lips graze her cheek as he drew back.

She looked up at her family who was quietly beaming at them. “I assume you all knew about this?”

“Well, yes,” Gretchen admitted. “One of the many reasons we decided to recreate Christmas for you.”

Chakotay said, “I was going to ask you at the Voyager reunion, in front of the entire crew.”

Kathryn shook her head in amusement. “That would have been something, but this...” She gestured to all the detritus of Christmas around them, “is the setting I’ve dreamt about for the last few months.”

“I’m glad I could make your dream come true, then.” Chakotay kissed her again and then retook his seat beside her. “Now, we need to think about planning a dream of a wedding for you.”

“For us,” she corrected him.

Gretchen said, “I’ve been thinking about wedding plans ever since he told me that he was going to propose again two months ago.”

“Good,” Kathryn said. “I’d like to plan it for as soon as possible, but not until I have enough strength to keep from sleeping through it.”

He tucked a wayward strand of hair behind her ear. “Maybe in a month or two.”

“I’d like that.” She nestled against his chest. “I love you.”

Holding her close, he said, “I love you, too.”

She was comfortable, warm, content, and feeling very sleepy again. As people bustled around them cleaning up, she snuggled in for a little nap. The ring felt curious on her finger, making her want to toy with it as she began to doze off to sleep.

When Chakotay realized that she was settling in for the long haul, he gathered her up and scooted back so he could rest with her. Gretchen put pillows behind his back and made him blush as she ruffled his hair. He felt very at home with Kathryn’s family, soon to be his family. Phoebe tucked a blanket over them, Mike turned down the lights, and Gretchen ushered Katie into the kitchen.

A little while later, Kathryn felt kisses on her cheek as her family whispered goodbye. She had to smother a laugh when Katie whispered, “Goodbye,” about as loud as she could. Once they were out the door, Kathryn began to fall asleep again. Comfortably ensconced in Chakotay’s arms, she mumbled, “This is what I need. A whole lot of this.”

He whispered, “This is all yours, love.”

Chakotay woke up slowly the next morning as the early dawn’s sunlight from the bedroom window warmed his face. He’d left the shades open the night before so that Kathryn could be bathed in sunlight upon waking, per her request. Feeling content and lethargic, he turned on his side to watch Kathryn sleep. She was on her side, facing away from him, with her upper body propped with three pillows.

She’d had a really rough night with multiple nightmares, all of which seemed to revolve around fears of being trapped and beaten. Not that she was a fragile woman by any stretch of the imagination, but the thought of her being assaulted without being able to defend herself made his blood boil.

Each nightmare had drained her energy more than the last. All of them had left her short of breath, her heart racing to handle the adrenaline rush. She’d complained after the last one that her entire chest hurt from the exertion, and was finding it uncomfortable to draw in a full breath.

Patty had been in contact with Dr. Joe throughout the night and although they were concerned about her chest pain, Joe assured them that it wasn’t unexpected with the speed her heart was beating. They’d figured out that she was most comfortable being slightly elevated, and once

they had her situated, she fell asleep quickly and managed to sleep for several uninterrupted hours.

He fingered her hair as it cascaded down the sides of the pillows. Since her miraculous return, he couldn't get enough of holding her, watching her, and caring for her. He'd seen her in pretty bad shape in the past, but never had she been so frail and compliant. That alone was an indicator of just how bad she felt, or was a result of the psychological trauma that the incident had caused.

He very carefully added a pillow under his own head to raise his shoulders to her height and then moved closer so he could spoon her in his arms. She had told him once how much she loved being held like that, and he was more than happy to accommodate her. As he snuggled up close, he nuzzled his face against her hair. Seconds later, he lifted his head because something didn't sound right. Her breathing was uneven, shallow, and she was wheezing lightly with every inhalation.

"Kathryn?" He touched her back and felt the muscles around her ribcage working hard. Jumping into action, he pulled back the blankets and turned her onto her back. He'd been told that, in her condition, shortness of breath could be a sign of an impending stroke or heart attack.

"Kathryn," he said as he anxiously patted her heated, flushed cheeks. "Wake up. Come on, love. Wake up for me."

When she didn't respond, he scrambled off the bed and opened the door. "Patty! Gretchen!" Not waiting for their replies, he went back to Kathryn and tried waking her again.

"Kathryn!" He squeezed her hands, her arms, patted her face firmly. Nothing made her stir. "Wake up, love. Please, wake up."

"What is it?" Gretchen rushed in, followed immediately by Patty who started taking readings immediately.

"She's not waking up and her breathing is shallow and labored. Patty, do you have your commbadge? We might need to get her to Starfleet Med."

"Get her into a sitting position." Patty tapped her communicator. "Fields to Dr. Zimmerman, Starfleet Medical."

"Go ahead, Lieutenant," Joe responded.

As Patty explained the situation, Chakotay straddled Kathryn's legs and gathered her upper body in his arms to draw her up against his chest. He begged, "Kathryn, open your eyes. Come on, Kathryn. Can you hear me?"

Joe said, "Give her two cc's of the stimulant."

After Patty injected the medication, Kathryn gasped loudly and jerked her head back, but Chakotay was able to catch it before she strained her neck. “Easy,” he said as he looked at her frightened face. “I’m here, love.”

Her eyes had trouble focusing as she struggled to pull air in. “Hurts,” she gasped, trying to compensate with short, rapid pants.

“Try to slow down.” Chakotay breathed as he wanted her to, with slow, full breaths, but she wasn’t able to concentrate on him.

Patty reported, “Her arterial blood gas level is critically low and she’s unable to focus. She’s in pain – could be heart or lungs, I’m not sure.”

“Put an oxygen mask on her, get her shoulders back to open up her chest, and don’t let her panic. I’m on my way.”

“Kathryn?” Chakotay tried to catch her eyes, but they were clamped shut as she struggled to breathe. “Look at me, Kathryn.”

Patty struggled with Kathryn to place the mask over her nose and mouth. “Captain, hold her hands so she doesn’t push this off. Mrs. Janeway, climb in behind her.”

“What do you want me to do?” Gretchen asked as she tossed the pillows aside and got into position.

“Hold her up while the Captain talks to her. Scoot all the way back against the headboard and we’ll move her back against you.”

“Hang on, Kathryn.” Chakotay easily lifted her to get her as close to her mother as possible. She had drawn into herself and wasn’t communicating.

Patty said, “Good, now fold your arms around her and take her from him.”

Chakotay guided Kathryn’s head back onto her mother’s shoulder; startling Kathryn and making her open her eyes. “Shhh, you’re okay, love. Try to focus on your breathing.”

“Am,” she gasped. “It hurts!” Tears forming in her eyes, she cried, “Help me!”

“We are and you’re going to be okay.” He and Gretchen worked together to hold her up. “Kathryn, just get as much oxygen as you can. Joe’s on his way.”

“Sharp!” She curled forward against him to try to cope with the pain.

“I know it hurts, but you’re strong and it’ll be over soon.”

Patty said, “We need you to sit up, Admiral.”

She shook her head. “Help me, please!”

Patty said, “I know it’s painful, but you’ve got to sit up so the fluid in your lungs will settle to the bottom.”

“Nooo,” Kathryn moaned as Patty tried to push Kathryn’s chest back towards her mom. “Leave me alone!”

Chakotay supported her head as she curled up against his chest. “I want to help you, Kathryn, but you’ve got to sit up. I’ll hold you close so you can lean against me.”

Patty was clearly frustrated with Kathryn’s stubbornness. “Admiral, don’t fight us. You’re using too much energy.”

When Kathryn wouldn’t budge, Chakotay suggested, “Gretchen, let’s try to brace her chest open. Put your hands on the front of her shoulders.” He put them where he wanted them, and then laid his on top. “Okay, pull her tight against you. She’s going to resist.” Gretchen pulled and Chakotay pushed, and together, they forced Kathryn up and her shoulders back.

“Aaaaaah!” Kathryn cried out in pain, and then sucked in so she could yell, “Stop!”

“Careful!” Patty yelled.

“Ease off!” Chakotay realized too late that they’d hurt her shoulders. “I’m sorry, Kathryn.” He moved in closer so she could rest her head on his shoulder, sandwiching her between the two of them.

“It worked,” Patty said. “She’s getting more oxygen now, so keep holding her.”

Kathryn was still struggling to breathe, now worsened by the forced deep breath that had caused her to start coughing. She pulled air in between every word as she said, “Your...tech...nique... needs...” She couldn’t finish as she whimpered and grabbed at her chest.

“Needs work,” Chakotay finished for her as he tried to support her through the coughing spell. When he saw that she was coughing up a lot of pink-tinged mucus, he glanced worriedly at Patty who was removing the now dirty oxygen mask and cleaning off Kathryn’s hands. “What’s happening?”

Patty said quietly, “Blockage from her heart, but the Doctor will be able to treat it.”

Joe rushed in and immediately began scanning. “Any improvement?”

Tears were falling down Kathryn’s face as she gasped, “Not... nough....”

Chakotay moved out of Joe’s way and held Kathryn’s hand.

Patty reported, "A slight increase in ABG and she's dislodged some mucous."

"Is the pain focused in your heart or lungs?" Joe asked as he administered a hypospray.

"Both. Sharp... when...bre..." She couldn't finish as she started coughing.

"Kathryn?" Chakotay said worriedly.

"Lay her on her side. I've got to drain the fluid from her lungs."

Chakotay gathered her into his arms and laid her down, facing him, while Gretchen put a pillow under Kathryn's head. Her coughing worsened and she pulled her knees up in a futile attempt to protect herself.

"Hang on, Kathryn." He put his hands in hers so she could squeeze them. It was as much support as he knew how to give. "This will be over, soon."

Joe lifted the back of her shirt and placed an instrument between two ribs. He asked, "Lieutenant, there's a hypo of heparin in my bag."

Still coughing, Kathryn looked at Chakotay with blood-shot eyes. He caressed her cheek as he said, "I love you. It's going to be okay." He wished more than anything that he could take this pain away for her. He asked Joe, "Can you tell where the blockage is?"

"Mmmhmm," he said as he worked, replacing a cylinder on the instrument to gather more of the fluid. "She has a pulmonary arterial obstruction."

As he watched Patty inject the hypo, Chakotay asked, "Is it a blood clot?"

Joe replied, "No, a build up of the infection or a chunk of it has shaken loose and lodged in the valve. It's a very glutinous organism and adheres to itself and everything else. Her right ventricle is working hard to compensate, but not enough blood is getting to her lungs."

Kathryn's coughing had calmed as the fluid level went down. She croaked, "Stop... talking... like... I'm not... here."

"Sorry," Chakotay whispered and kissed her temple. "Does your chest still hurt?"

"Yes," she said definitively, although her body, now drained of energy, was mostly still and limp. She trembled some with every breath.

Joe turned off the instrument and scanned her. "Okay, that's got most of it. Lieutenant, give her 4 cc's of the cough suppressant and a double dose of the new analgesic I sent you yesterday."

"Yes, Doctor." Patty did as asked.

Joe said, "Admiral, I need you on your back, no pillow."

After they got her situated, Joe pulled another instrument out and directed it at her chest. "Admiral, hold as still as you can. Captain and Mrs. Janeway, help her by gently holding her arms and shoulders. I'm removing what I can of the obstruction. Lieutenant, would you assist me?"

As he worked, Kathryn croaked, "How are you going to get it out?"

Joe explained, "This device acts as a microscopic transporter."

"Can you get it all?" she asked.

"Unfortunately, no. I can't remove what's against the valves and artery walls or I risk removing part of that, too. Same goes for the organisms within your cardiac muscle."

They were all quiet while he worked until Kathryn said, "I hate this."

"I know, Kathryn." Chakotay took one of his hands away from her arm and stroked her head. "You're doing great, though. Just relax and let us do the work for you."

"Mmmhmm," she moved her face into his palm. A few moments later, she said, "Joe, I'm dizzy and my lungs are burning."

"Lieutenant, the oxygen mask?"

Patty handed the mask to Chakotay, and he put it on Kathryn. She didn't fight it this time and, once it was in place, she was able to relax into Chakotay's touch. They all remained quiet while Joe kept working, although Chakotay and Gretchen often exchanged worried looks.

When he was done, he took another scan and whispered, "She's asleep."

"Should we wake her?" Chakotay asked.

"Not just yet. We need to talk, and I don't want to alarm her."

Chakotay felt a sinking sensation in his gut. "What's the situation?"

Joe continued to treat her with various pieces of equipment as he talked. "The infection in her heart is spreading to the arteries and veins, causing the build-up of micro-organisms on the heart valves."

"Okay. What do we need to do?"

“That’s the problem. I haven’t found anything that will fight the infection, nor has anyone else on the cardiac or micro-biology teams at Starfleet Medical. The doctors who treated her last week tried every possible antibiotic, and while they were able to fight off the infections that are common, this one is impervious to everything we’ve tried. Also, I’ve just discovered a strain of it in her lungs, but it doesn’t look like it took hold of the lung tissue.” He held up the cylinder of fluid he’d taken. “It’s in here.”

Chakotay took a shuddering breath. “Options?”

“I’ve contacted the leading cardiac specialist in Starfleet, Dr. Pulaski. She’s stationed at a research institute near Vulcan, but this case has her intrigued. She’s on her way, and will arrive day after tomorrow. I’d like the Admiral to check into Starfleet Medical that morning so we can run tests.”

“Should she go there now?” Gretchen asked.

Joe rubbed his chin. “At this point, what she needs most is rest and nourishment. I’ve cleared all potential obstructions, and there’s nothing else I can do until Dr. Pulaski arrives. I think the Admiral will be more comfortable here.” He looked pointedly at Chakotay. “We all know how irritable she can get when confined to a medical facility, and she’ll rest better if she’s relaxed.”

“Okay,” Chakotay said shakily. “Although she’s been even-tempered about her medical needs. Perhaps not having a starship to command makes her a better patient.” He looked down at Kathryn and felt an overwhelming sense of anxiety.

“Admiral?” Joe asked as he rubbed her hand to rouse her.

“Mmmmm,” she responded, but didn’t open her eyes.

“I need you to wake up for a minute.”

She forced her eyes open. “Hmm?”

“Your chest will be sore for awhile, but most of the obstruction has been removed. I want you to rest today. Absolutely no physical activity, and eat regularly.”

“kay.” She closed her eyes again. “...tired.”

He told Patty, “Her blood sugar is very low. Get her to eat something as soon as possible.”

“We planned to have Tom and B’Elanna over for lunch. Will that be too much for her?” Chakotay asked.

“I’d postpone it until tomorrow, at least. Even then, don’t let her do anything that will get her heart rate up. That includes sitting on the floor with Miral or getting into a verbal sparring match with B’Elanna. If she can rest most of today, she should be strong enough.”

Patty asked, "Should I wait to give her the antibiotics and other medications?"

"Until after she eats, yes." He typed something into a PADD. "This is the approval code to replicate a medicated oxygen treatment. She should breathe it all day and into the night if her lungs are still burning."

Gretchen asked, "Should we keep her sitting up or lying down?"

"However she's most comfortable." Joe looked at all of them and said, "We'll figure something out. It's just going to take a lot of research and experimentation on our part."

"Thank you, Joe," Chakotay said as he walked with him to the front door.

"Have Lieutenant Fields call me if the Admiral is in a lot of pain. There shouldn't be anymore blockage issues for a few more days and by then, I plan to be in the middle of killing this organism."

After the doctor left, Chakotay went back into Kathryn's room to find Patty quietly working and Gretchen straightening out the bedcovers over her daughter. He asked Gretchen, "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she said quietly. "It's my daughter who isn't. If I fix her some breakfast, would you try to get her to eat it?"

"I'll do my best." He pulled Gretchen into a hug. "They've got the best people in the entire Federation working on this."

She nodded and left the room without saying anything.

Patty said, "I'll sit with the Admiral if you want to get dressed."

Chakotay sighed tiredly. "All right." He walked into the bathroom mumbling, "What a way to start the day."

By the time he finished, Gretchen was bringing in a tray. She said, "Sorry about..."

"Nothing to be sorry about. This isn't easy to deal with."

Gretchen forced a smile. "Let me know if you need anything else. There's enough for both you and Katie." Turning to the nurse, she said, "Patty, I thought he might have better luck getting her to eat. I hope you don't mind?"

"Of course not." Her reassuring smile was kind. "I think you're right."

Chakotay said, "Thank you."

Gretchen took a deep breath before announcing, "I'll be in the sunroom. I need a few minutes of quiet."

"I understand." He watched her go and then sat on the bed.

Patty laid three hyposprays on the nightstand and a nasal breathing tube on the pillow next to Kathryn. "For after she eats. I'll be in my room if you need help."

"Thanks, Patty." He waited until she left and then touched Kathryn's face. "Love, can you wake up?"

Getting no response, he loudly asked, "Kathryn?"

"Mmmmmmm."

"You need to eat something." He removed the mask.

"Sleepy."

"I know. You're sleepy because you need to eat."

"No," she replied matter-of-factly. "'cause I couldn't breathe."

He leaned forward and kissed her softly to draw a response out of her. As soon as she started moving her lips, he pulled away, smiling. "Now you're awake."

"Devious," she accused. Her eyes were still closed.

"Yes, I am." He smiled guiltily as he gathered her into his arms and propped her up on a small mountain of pillows.

Sleepily, she asked, "More kisses?"

"Not today, might make your heart rate go up."

"Mmmmmmm."

"Do you want me to feed you?" He was sure this would get her.

"Don't feel like eating. Too weak."

That wasn't the response he was expecting. He picked up the orange juice with the bendable straw and held it to her lips. "Take a sip."

She opened her eyes briefly and then closed them again as she let him put the straw in her mouth. After she drank a little, she let the straw go. "'s good."

"Are you in any pain?"

"Some. Wiped out."

He touched her lips with his finger so she knew that something was there. "A bite of eggs?" He was really surprised when she opened her mouth and accepted it. Her compliance was extremely unusual and concerned him gravely. The pattern of touching her lips and her accepting what he offered continued until she'd eaten about half of her portion of ham, eggs, and juice. She chewed slowly so she could breathe freely and eat at the same time, giving him the opportunity to eat his breakfast between her bites.

Towards the end of the meal, he had to wake her up for each bite and decided that she probably needed the sleep more than she needed the rest of the food. He injected a hypo into her neck, startling her awake. "Sorry about that."

She moaned and closed her eyes again. "'s okay."

"Two more," he warned.

Grimacing, she asked, "Can I sleep now?"

"Yes, but I need to put this on you." He waited until she opened her eyes before he held up the oxygen tube.

"kay." She helped him get the tube in her nose and looped around her ears.

"Joe said it's medicated and should help your lungs." Leaning forward, he kissed her cheek.

"Rest now. I'll be back in a few minutes to sit with you."

He took the tray to the kitchen and saw that Gretchen was sitting out in the sunroom, wrapped in a blanket, and staring at nothing. Going out to check on her, he asked, "Can I get you anything?"

"Hmmm?" She turned to him and then it registered what he asked. "Oh, no thank you."

"She ate more than I expected, although I had to feed it to her."

Gretchen raised an eyebrow in the typical Janeway fashion. "She LET you feed her?"

"I was surprised, too."

Sadly, she said, "That's not my Katie."

"I think it's just an indicator of how weak she feels."

“Or something’s not right with her.” With a tremble in her voice, she asked, “Did they break her spirit?”

His voice was quiet. “I hope not.”

“She gets depressed sometimes. Did you know that?”

“Yes, I do, but I don’t see that in her right now.”

“I’ve been worried about how to tell you without interfering.” Gretchen smiled sadly. “First time it happened, she was in high school. Then the summer she wrote her doctoral thesis. She almost didn’t finish it.”

“And after your husband and her first fiancé passed away.”

“Yes,” Gretchen’s eyes were compassionate as she looked at him. “Did it happen on Voyager?”

“Yes, but we got through it.” He chose not to tell her about last summer.

She looked at him for a long moment and then rubbed her eyes. “If it’s okay with you, I’m going to go into town today. I’ve been hiding in this house for a month.”

“I think that’s a great idea. Are you going to visit someone?”

Gretchen nodded absently. “Some friends. I missed all the Christmas and New Year’s parties. There’s a luncheon tomorrow that I wasn’t going to go to, but I might try to make it.”

“Take as much time as you need. We’ll be fine.”

“Thank you.” Before he went back into the house, she asked, “Contact me if anything...”

“I will.” He gave her a tender smile and then went into the study to place a comm call to Tom and B’Elanna.

Tom answered, “Hi, how is she today?”

“Not as good as we’d hoped. Could we delay our lunch plans until tomorrow?”

“Of course. Do you need anything?” he asked with concern.

Sighing, he said, “To start the last month over, would be nice. We could fake some kind of emergency to get her to come home early.”

“Hmm. Well, I can ask my lovely and talented wife to start working on a time travel invention.”

“That would be a great help. Thanks.”

“We’ll jump right on it.” Tom said with an understanding smile and then his expression became more serious. “You look like you could use a friend.”

Chakotay looked away before he embarrassed himself. “I could use my best friend healthy again. I’m not sure if anything else will do.”

Quietly, Tom asked, “She’s that sick?”

He took a deep breath and nodded. “She’s that sick. But…” He paused to put on a brave face. “She’s going to be fine. We’ll make sure of it.”

“That’s right. She will be,” he assured. “If you need to talk, one of us can be there in a flash.”

“Thanks, but I’ll be okay. It’s just hard when the woman you love is hurting. You’ve been there.”

“Yes, I have, and the last thing I wanted to do was talk about it, but I’m willing to listen if you need it.”

“Give me a few days, and I might.” He shrugged. “Or maybe just a beer.”

“Whatever you need. Call us in the morning if want me to bring some over. Otherwise, we’ll see you at eleven tomorrow?”

“Sounds good. Thanks, Tom.”

When he went back to their bedroom, he found Kathryn sound asleep. She looked so warm and cozy that he decided to crawl in next to her and rest his eyes. It had been a long night, followed by an even longer morning, and he was exhausted. Moments after his head hit the pillow, he was sleeping right along with her.

When he woke up, he saw that her eyes were open and that she was watching the snow falling outside the window. “Hello, beautiful,” he said affectionately.

She looked at him with a bright smile. “Beautiful?”

“Very beautiful.” He held her hand, weaving their fingers together.

“A new pet name? You usually call me ‘my love.’”

“You are both.” He kissed her fingers. “How are you feeling?”

“Better,” she said with a sigh. “Chest muscles hurt, and my lungs feel raw, but I can breathe.”

“Always a plus.” He re-tucked the oxygen tube behind her ear. “If you want stronger pain meds, we’ll ask Patty about something else. She gave you a double dose of the mild one.”

“Did you cancel Tom and Lanna?”

“Just postponed until tomorrow.”

“I’m looking forward to seeing them. And Miral, too. She must be really big now.”

“Well, bigger at least.” He winked. “Day after tomorrow, Joe wants you in for tests. A heart specialist is en route to have a look at you. A Dr. Pulaski.”

“Where from?”

“Somewhere near Vulcan. I’m not sure.”

She shrugged with her head, but didn’t move her shoulders. “He knows best.”

“Do you want to get out of bed?”

“No, but I should because I need to use the bathroom.”

“All right.” He started getting up until she stopped him.

“You don’t need to help me. Patty can.”

“I don’t mind.”

“I know, but I’m afraid that I’m wearing you out.”

He shook his head as he got up and came around to her side of the bed. “Taking care of you is helping me heal, and I would feel remiss if I weren’t your primary caregiver.”

“Okay,” she smiled warmly. “I certainly prefer you. Nothing against her, of course.”

“Of course not.” He pulled back the covers and slowly helped her sit up. “Any dizziness?”

“Ugh, yes.” She rested her head against his shoulder.

“Let’s give it a minute, then.”

“I’m afraid I’ll wet myself if we wait much longer.”

“All right then, I’ll carry you.” He gave her the small oxygen tank and lifted her up into his arms. “Okay?”

“Mmmhmm.” Her eyes were clamped shut.

When they got to the bathroom, he set her feet on the floor. “Can you stand on your own?”

“I think so.” She straightened her legs, but her knees buckled immediately. “Aaah!”

Holding her tight, he said, “I’ve got you, but I’m guessing that’s a no.”

They heard Patty call from the bedroom, “Do you need help?”

“Yes,” Kathryn replied, her face buried in Chakotay’s chest.

“Patty, I’ll hold her up if you can help with her pants.”

“No problem.” The two of them worked together to get her needs taken care of and back to bed.

Settled back under the covers, Kathryn said, “Thank you, Patty.”

“You’re more than welcome, Admiral.”

“Mmm. The last thing I feel like right now is an admiral.”

Patty smiled as she took some readings. “That may be, but you’ve earned that title. I can’t say the same for any other admirals I’ve met.”

“Thank you, I think.” Kathryn raised an eyebrow. “And I’m sorry about this morning. I was a real bear.”

“Ohh, don’t worry about that. Coping with pain and discomfort while scared is not easy, and I knew that at the time.”

“You’re very understanding.”

She replied with a lilt in her voice, “I’m a nurse.”

As Chakotay helped her resituate the pillows, Kathryn said, “Patty, I want to thank you again for staying with us.”

“You’re welcome, but I consider it an honor.”

“Thank you. I hope you’re not missing time with your own family?”

Patty became preoccupied with the monitor display. "I lost my family when the colony on Dezra was destroyed."

"Oh," Kathryn gasped. "I'm so sorry."

She shrugged dismissively. "A fact of war."

Sympathetically, Kathryn looked at Chakotay. "I've heard the same story too many times."

He squeezed her hand. "That's what was so great about Voyager. We created a new family out there."

Patty smiled at them. "And that's what is so enthralling about the Voyager crew. For all of us who lost too much during the war, it's really something to watch how you formed such a close community on that ship after losing your homes and loved ones."

Chakotay chuckled. "Well, if you keep spending time with us, you might have second thoughts about Voyager's crew. We're one nutty bunch."

Laughing, Patty replied, "Which makes you that much more appealing." Taking one last scan, she added, "If there's nothing else you need, I'll let you get some more rest."

"I think I'm as settled as I can be."

"All right. I'll be in the living room trying to remember how to knit."

Kathryn chuckled. "Maybe I can help you with that later."

"I'd like that."

After she left, Chakotay said, "I like her."

"Me, too."

"So, do you feel like sleeping more?"

"Not yet," she said with a grin.

"What?"

"Do you have Persuasion?"

He laughed. "Yes, would you like me to read to you?"

“If you don’t mind?” she asked with thinly veiled anticipation. “I want to hear more about Anne, and after the last chapter, I’ve been dreaming about what our house will be like. As soon as I’m healthy, we should start looking for one.”

Kissing her fingers again, he said, “I don’t mind at all. Tell me about this dream house of ours while I get the PADD.”

By lunch, Kathryn had gained enough strength to sit up and eat on her own. Then after a short nap, she moved to the sun room so she could have a better vantage point to watch the snow fall. As promised, she helped Patty re-learn how to knit and tried to do a little herself, but had to stop because it made her arms ache. Instead, Chakotay brought her a computer interface and they browsed through some real-estate listings.

Gretchen arrived home in time to cook dinner, full of information about local gossip, including what her friends thought about Kathryn’s situation. Throughout the meal, they listened to Gretchen talk on and on about everything she’d learned that day. Kathryn suspected that her mother was doing all she could to avoid discussing her daughter’s heart issue and to ignore the fact that she was carrying around an oxygen tank.

Dr. Joe paid her another visit that evening and made some changes to her medication. He instructed her to keep breathing the medicated oxygen all night, and told Patty to do another round of hemodialysis.

After a bath, Kathryn put on a comfortable nightshirt and was sitting up in bed when Patty came in to get her situated for the night. After their scare that morning, they all agreed that Kathryn should be connected to the monitor as she slept so that they’d hear an alarm if Kathryn’s heart or lung functions were in jeopardy.

Chakotay held Kathryn’s hand as the dialysis cuff was attached to the primary vein and artery in her thigh. It wasn’t overly painful, but the insertion of the catheters into her blood vessels was far from pleasant.

Patty said, “Just about finished. Usually this is placed in the arm where it’s not quite so painful.”

“I think I’ll ask Joe when I go to Starfleet Med if he can start regenerating the muscles in my arms. I’m tired of them being so useless.”

“I know, but it takes proteins for regeneration to work, and right now, your body needs those proteins for more important functions.”

Chakotay suggested, “Starting in the morning, we should do an all-protein diet.”

“No,” Patty said. “A balanced diet. She needs it all.”

Kathryn sighed. “Amazing that I spent so much time last fall watching what I ate. This makes me never want to diet again.”

“You won’t need to with your small intestines half gone.”

Groaning, Kathryn replied, “Could I possibly be any sicker?”

“Don’t ask that,” Patty said as she closed the cuff. “There we go. You’re all set for the night. I’m going to set an alarm so that I can check your readings every two hours.”

Kathryn clicked her tongue. “I doubt you’ll need the alarm if I have a repeat of last night.”

“Don’t think about it,” Chakotay said. “We’ll find something uplifting to talk about as you’re falling asleep.”

Patty covered her up and patted her ankle. “If your dreams become a problem for your heart tonight, we’ll see about a sedative. Now, get some sleep.”

After she left, Kathryn looked at Chakotay expectantly. “Okay, what should we talk about?”

He chuckled. “It’s kind of like saying ‘don’t think about cats’ isn’t it?”

“Yes. So let’s ‘not think’ about our wedding. Would you like it indoors or out?”

“Hmm.” Resting against the headboard next to her, he replied, “Mid-spring might be kind of risky for planning something outside.”

“But we could always have an indoor back-up plan.”

“How about a holosuite theater? We could have an outdoor wedding on a holodeck.”

She frowned. “Or not. I was thinking of a ballroom.”

“All right,” he said with a grin. “So, where outdoors?”

“If we find a house by then, we could do it there.”

“Sure, that sounds nice. You did say that you wanted a large property in a secluded location. We just have to secure it against unwanted photographers.”

“A large property with a lot of trees. Or on the beach. I’m not sure which I’d want more.”

“And a big house?”

Smiling, she said, “A place that will make me not want to leave. It should be inviting and warm. Lots of windows so we can see the sunshine, nice enough to entertain, and not so fancy that children won’t feel comfortable.”

“Maybe we should have one built to suit us.”

Kathryn fidgeted with the blanket. “A good idea if we don’t find what we’re looking for, although we’d be delayed a few months.”

“It would be worth it to get exactly what you want.”

She wove her fingers through his. “I hope it’s what you want, too.”

“It is, although I’d be happy just about anywhere as long as you’re there, too.”

Turning her head to look at him, she commented, “Oooh, that was nice. Very romantic.”

He shrugged to hide a blush. “What can I say? You bring out the mushiness in me.”

Leaning against his shoulder, she said, “I’m glad I do.”

“You know...” He tipped her face up to his. “I’ve never kissed a woman with a tube in her nose.”

“Never?”

“Never.”

“Wow, you’ve been missing out. These things are the new fashion, or they will be if someone takes a picture of me wearing it. Can you imagine?” She laughed.

“Kathryn?”

“Hmmm? Don’t you think so? I saw in a magazine that my hairstyle from a year ago is the new thing. Little do they know that I only cut my hair off to begin with because you stole some of it to light a fire. Now, that would be a fun story to tell the next time a fashion magazine wants an interview.”

He put a finger on her lips. “Shhhh.”

Brushing his finger away, she said, “Don’t do that. I can’t get a word in edgewise when you do. It’s like when you proposed the first...”

He silenced her with a soft, loving kiss. The warmth of it settled deep within her and she felt like she was going to melt.

“I love you, Kathryn,” he whispered against her lips.

“I love you, too, and that was more unfair than your finger.”

“But you seem to like it better.” He kissed her again.

“Yes, but you’re not supposed to do anything to get my heart rate up. Patty’s going to be breaking down that door any minute if you keep this up.”

Shaking his head in amusement, he settled back against the headboard again and said, “Okay, point taken. So, you were saying something about...” He wrinkled his forehead. “Lots of things.”

“The wedding. We were talking about the wedding.”

“Oh yes, now I remember. You want it outside.”

“Mmmhmm. I think we should have a gazebo or some kind of thing to stand under. Not an arch because that’s too cliché, but something to give us a backdrop. What do you think?”

“Sounds lovely.”

“I think all of that stuff can be rented. Chairs, tables, and all that. Should we hire a wedding coordinator?”

Nodding, he said, “Might be a good idea.”

She chattered on. “A coordinator could manage the renting of equipment and could deal with the caterer, florist, and whoever else we need to hire. I wonder what all we need. Oh! A photographer, musicians, security, of course.”

“Of course.”

“All those guests. We should draft up a guest list.”

“Mmmhmm.”

“The Voyagers, of course. Oh, if we reschedule the reunion, we should do it around the same time. Do you think people will come back?”

“Yes, I do.”

“I hope so; I really want to see everyone.”

He stifled a yawn. “And they want to see you, too.”

“You’re getting tired?”

“A little. I didn’t lie around sleeping all day like some people.” He winked at her.

“You could have slept with me. You did a little this morning. Oh... for our house... I definitely want to install a large bathtub.”

“I had no doubts.”

“And a study. We should have a big one so we can work together. I loved working side by side with you on Voyager.”

“With a place for all of your books.”

“Oh, yeah! Lots of shelves would be nice. Maybe you could build some and we can turn it into a little library. Would you like that?”

“Mmmhmm.” He fought another yawn. “Good thing I’m not working this semester.”

“At all? I thought you were just taking a little time off.”

“It’s not set in stone. We’ll just see how things go.” He squeezed her hand. “Aren’t you tired at all?”

“No, but if you are, I can go talk to Mom. She was talkative earlier.”

“You need to sleep.”

She waved it away. “I think I’ll pass tonight. Oh, it’s only eight in San Francisco. Maybe Lanna is still up.”

“You’re going to pass on sleep?”

“Too risky. Or, we could go sleep on the couch. I haven’t had nightmares there.”

He turned to face her. “Patty will be here in an instant if anything goes wrong.”

“But...” She held up a finger. “If I stay awake, then I’ll know if something is wrong before she does.”

“Lie down, Kathryn.”

“I don’t want to.” She pushed her lower lip out.

“You’re pouting? Admiral Kathryn Janeway is pouting?”

Exasperated, she sunk down onto the bed, and said, “There. Are you happy?”

“No. Turn on your side away from me.”

“You’re pushy.”

He stared at her until she turned.

“Fine. What are you going to do?”

“Scratch your back.”

“But that’ll put me to sleep.”

He leaned over her and turned off her light. “Not a chance. You’re far too stubborn to do anything you don’t wish to do.”

“You’re calling your future wife stubborn?”

“Yes.” Snuggling under the blankets with her, he began to lightly run his fingernails all over her back. “Does that feel good?”

“Yes,” she grumbled.

He kissed the back of her head. “Close your eyes, love. I’ll be right here.”

“Fine.” She was asleep within minutes.

When Kathryn woke up the next morning, Chakotay was still asleep. She watched him quietly for a long time, thinking about how she was going to wake up next to him every day for the rest of her life. He was very good for her, pushing when she needed a shove, listening when he knew she needed to talk, and loving her when she needed to feel loved.

He opened his eyes and smiled at her. “Good morning, beautiful.”

“Morning.”

“What are you thinking about?”

“You,” she said with a light laugh.

Smiling, he said, “We made it through until morning.”

“Yes, we did. Thank you for waking me up quickly from those nightmares.”

“You didn’t mind the cold cloth against your cheek?”

“Oh, I minded. It was damn cold, but thank you. I didn’t want..”

“I know.” He leaned forward and kissed her lips.

“Thank you.” Smiling playfully, she said, “Let’s go fix omelets. I’m famished!”

“You’re on!”

B’Elanna jumped onto the couch and hugged Kathryn almost as quickly as her sister had. “I almost dropped Miral when I saw you on the news.”

Holding tightly, Kathryn said, “I won’t break, Lanna.”

B’Elanna squeezed harder and asked, “Are you sure? You feel like you might.”

“I’m not brittle,” Kathryn said as B’Elanna pulled back to look at her. “Just thin.”

“That’s an understatement.” B’Elanna looked her over and then held her thumb and forefinger together. “We were this close to hijacking a ship.”

“I believe it.” Kathryn chuckled and looked up at Tom who was standing nearby holding a squirming Miral. “Although I’m glad you didn’t, it wouldn’t have been a complete surprise if the Voyagers pulled out all the stops to find me.”

Tom said, “We certainly dreamed up a lot of scenarios doing just that. No one takes our favorite person and gets away with it.” He noticed Patty sitting on the far side of the room and smiled graciously. “Hello, I don’t believe we’ve met. I’m Tom Paris, and this is my wife, B’Elanna Torres, and daughter, Miral.”

Chakotay introduced, “This is Lieutenant Patty Fields, Kathryn’s nurse. She was with her on the Pioneer and will be living with us for awhile.”

Patty replied, “It’s an honor to meet you. I’ve certainly read and heard a lot about the famous Voyager crew.”

Tom chuckled. “We may be famous, but we’re really just a band of oddballs.” He nodded towards Kathryn. “I hope she hasn’t given you too much trouble. I’ve had her as a patient and let me tell you, she can be a handful.”

“Mr. Paris,” Kathryn admonished. “You do realize that I still outrank you, don’t you?”

He winked at her. “Never doubted that for an instant.”

Kathryn told Patty, “Don’t listen to a word of it. I’m an excellent patient when I want to be.”

Tom laughed. “I’m not touching that one.”

After giving Tom a ‘drop it’ look, she said, “Patty, if you want to get out of the house for a couple hours, we’re fine. Tom is a capable medic should the need arise.”

“If you’re sure?” Patty asked.

“I’m sure.”

Patty looked at Chakotay skeptically and when he nodded approval, she thanked them and went to her room to change clothes.

Kathryn asked, “Lanna, would you help me stand up?”

“Sure!” She scooted off the sofa while Chakotay stepped on the other side of Kathryn.

He instructed, “Support gently from her ribcage, but let her bear her weight on her legs. Go slow.”

As they got her on her feet, Kathryn said, “I’m doing better once I get upright, but the transition takes a bit more strength than I have right now.”

Tom asked worriedly, “Do you have muscle damage?”

“Loss of muscle mass.” Kathryn said as she took a moment to let her equilibrium stabilize. “My body chemistry is out of kilter and my heart is having issues.”

“Joe can’t repair the damage?” B’Elanna asked, surprised.

Kathryn didn’t want to explain, but she knew that her friends wanted to know. “I’ve had eighteen treatments on my heart in the last week, but the doctors have had problems managing a troublesome infection. I’ve just got to take it slow until it all gets settled out.” She kept hold of Chakotay’s arm as she reached out to touch Miral’s bouncy curls. “Now, how is my little god-daughter?”

Tom said, “Boisterous and demanding.”

“Just like her mama,” Kathryn said as she tickled the baby’s cheek, eliciting a wonderful belly laugh. “Did you have a nice birthday?”

“She thought it was a little dull, actually,” Tom reported. He set Miral on his hip and leaned into Kathryn for a hug. “I’m so relieved that you’re home, safe.”

“So am I, Tom. So am I.” She lingered in the hug and then pulled back when Miral squealed. “Impatient, isn’t she? I wish I could hold her, but I don’t have the strength.”

Chakotay said, “She has a tendency to lunge unexpectedly and I’ve almost lost control of her more than once.”

“Well, come on, then,” Kathryn said. “There are toys out in the sunroom and Mom left us a nice lunch.”

“What just a sec,” said B’Elanna as she grabbed Kathryn’s left hand. “What’s this?”

Kathryn grinned. “Ask your husband. From what I understand, he already knows.”

“What?” B’Elanna yelled at Tom.

Tom told Chakotay, “I’m going to reconsider being your best man if you’re going to get me in trouble with my wife.”

“I’ve said nothing to your wife. Talk to Kathryn.”

B’Elanna crossed her arms in mock anger. “Could someone please explain?”

Kathryn took hold of B’Elanna’s arm. “Chakotay and I will be getting married this spring. Tom is the best man. Does that clear it up?”

“Congratulations!” B’Elanna threw her arms around Kathryn, and would have knocked her down if Chakotay hadn’t been on the other side to hold her up.

Over lunch in the sunroom, they caught Kathryn up on all that had happened with the Voyagers in her absence, including the pathetic excuse for an anniversary celebration that would be rescheduled so that she could attend.

After dessert, Kathryn watched B’Elanna play with Miral on the floor, wishing she could get down with them. Even without doctor’s orders, she knew she didn’t have enough strength, because she was growing more and more fatigued with each passing moment. She wasn’t entirely sure if she was getting enough oxygen and was finding it difficult to concentrate on the conversation.

“Kathryn?” Chakotay asked.

It took her a moment to register that he’d asked her a question. “Sorry, what were you saying?”

“Are you feeling okay?” He held her hand in such a way that he was discreetly checking her pulse.

“Just a little light-headed.” She smiled reassuringly at Tom and B’Elanna and then whispered to Chakotay. “I think oxygen will help.”

Chakotay studied her face for a moment before saying, “I’ll be right back.”

“Everything okay, Kathryn?” B’Elanna asked as Chakotay left the room.

Sighing, Kathryn said, “I’ve been breathing medicated oxygen, but decided to take a break while you were here. He’s gone to get it for me.”

Tom asked, “Are your lungs infected, too?”

“No.” She smiled to calm them. “At least not anymore. I did have pneumonia when they rescued me.”

“What was it…” B’Elanna trailed off mid-sentence.

“What was what?” Kathryn asked.

Shaking her head, B’Elanna said, “I don’t need to know. Pretend I didn’t say anything.”

Guessing, Kathryn asked the question for her. “What was it like?”

Hesitantly, B’Elanna responded, “Yes, to make you so sick?”

“Dirty, obviously. I don’t know how bad it was because I was blindfolded. Maybe that was a blessing.” She grimaced at the thought and then smiled as Chakotay returned and helped her get the oxygen tube in place.

He sat down and flipped open the medical tri-corder that he brought with him. “I’m not very good at using this thing. Tom, can you help?”

“Sure, what are you looking for?”

“Her pulse is unusually fast. Other than that, I don’t know.”

Kathryn waved away their concern. “It’ll be fine in a few minutes.”

Tom studied the readings and reported, “138 beats per minute. That’s extremely fast, and the problem is in the lower ventricles.”

She pushed away the tri-corder and said, “The oxygen will help because I’m probably just over-tired. Let’s move to the settee so I can doze a little.”

B’Elanna suggested, “We should go and let you rest.”

“No,” she implored. “I don’t want you to leave. Hearing your voices means so much to me, even if I don’t have the energy to participate.”

“She sleeps a lot, but still enjoys visitors,” Chakotay assured their guests as he led Kathryn over to the more comfortable sitting area.

They got her situated so that she could lie on her side, snuggled against Chakotay’s chest. He whispered, “Try to relax. If it doesn’t slow down soon, we’ll call for help. I can feel your heartbeat under my hand, so I’ll keep watch.”

Kathryn tried to follow the conversation for a few minutes, but then she became so tired and lightheaded that she gave up and closed her eyes. She attempted to enjoy the soothing way Chakotay was lightly rubbing her back, and let the sounds of the familiar voices comfort her.

She could feel her heart thudding in her chest. The beats were uncomfortably fast and irregular; a sure sign of exhaustion. It was so disconcerting that she was having trouble relaxing enough to fall asleep. Concentrating on her breathing, she counted slowly to two with each inhalation, and again to two with each exhalation, hoping the technique would calm her mind and body.

Tom interrupted her breathing pattern. “Kathryn? You don’t look at all comfortable.”

“Hmmm?” She opened her eyes and frowned. “Oh, I just can’t seem to relax.”

B’Elanna said, “We really should go because Miral will need her nap soon. We can come back in a few days and visit again.”

Chakotay helped her sit up so they could say goodbye to their guests, but the movement made her head spin. She leaned into his embrace and whispered, “I feel like I’m about to faint.” Before she’d realized that Tom had moved, he was kneeling in front of her.

Tom touched her forehead. “Are you feeling cold or hot?”

Shivering, she replied, “Cold. I’m always cold.” She touched her chest, trying to focus on slowing her heart. “I don’t feel well.”

Chakotay put a blanket around her back and said, “I’ll call Patty.”

“No,” she put a hand out to stop him. “It’s not that bad, and she’s finally getting a break.”

“It’s what she’s here for,” he replied as he tapped his commbadge. “Captain Chakotay to Lieutenant Fields.”

Patty replied, “Yes, Captain?”

“We need you. She’s not well and her pulse is very fast.”

“I’m on my way. Is she breathing the supplemental oxygen?”

“Yes, has been for about ten minutes.” He continued to rub Kathryn’s back comfortingly.

“Good, keep monitoring her pulse. Call Zimmerman if it suddenly drops, but I’ll be there in a few minutes. Fields out.”

Tom opened the tri-corder again and asked, “Have you felt like this before?”

“Yes and no,” she blinked slowly and tried to force away the dizziness. “Hard to isolate the symptoms of each problem.”

Chakotay asked, “Does it feel anything like yesterday morning?”

As she shook her head, Tom asked, “What happened then?”

Kathryn wrapped her arms around herself. “Obstruction in my pulmonary artery.”

Tom asked urgently, “Are you currently feeling any shortness of breath?”

“Some, but nothing like the yesterday.”

“Any pressure in your chest?” Tom scanned her again.

“My heart is pounding.”

Chakotay said, “Let’s just try to relax until she gets here. Tom, can you tell if there’s any fluid build up in her lungs?”

Tom shook his head. “None. It looks like the dizziness is because her heart is going so fast, the blood doesn’t have time to oxygenate. If you’ll tell me where a medkit is, I’ll administer tri-ox.”

“In the bedroom. Turn right before you get to the front door, and it’s the first room on the left.”

B’elanna jumped up. “I’ll get it.”

Miral screamed as soon as her mommy left the room. Tom set down the tri-corder and gave Miral her favorite blankie. “Shhh, little one. Mommy will be right back.”

“No Sh!” Miral wound her face up tight and let loose a howl.

Tom apologized, “I’m sorry. She’s ready for a nap.”

“It’s okay,” Chakotay said as he held Kathryn closer and tried to discretely cover her ears. “Concentrate on your breathing, love.”

B'Elanna ran back in, handed Tom the hypo, and picked up Miral. "Sorry. We'll go over here and rock."

Tom injected the hypo into Kathryn's neck. "That should help with the dizziness. Let me know if it doesn't."

Miral calmed down immediately once she got her milk and her mommy. Kathryn breathed a sigh of relief as her lightheadedness cleared some. She straightened up a little and let Chakotay help her rest against the back of the sofa.

Patty ran into the room and asked, "What can you tell me?"

Tom said, "I just gave her tri-ox. Her heart rate has increased from 138 to 162 in the last twenty minutes. The ventricles are pumping twice as fast as the atrium, creating an irregular pulse, and her blood pressure is 130/56. Shortness of breath, chest pain, chills, dizziness. Is this ventricular tachycardia?"

Patty took the tri-corder from Tom and studied the readings. "Sounds like it, but she's been arrhythmic since we got her back." She punched in a couple commands and then said, "I'm going to get a few things. Try carotid sinus massage while I'm gone."

After listening to them discuss her symptoms, Kathryn's anxiety increased tenfold. The dizziness came back worse than before and she felt sure that she was going to pass out. Grabbing Chakotay's arm for stability, she asked, "Tom? Please don't leave yet."

"I'm not going anywhere," he said calmly as he rubbed her arms, gently working his way up so he wouldn't alarm her. "Do they hurt?"

She forced her reply. "Hurt all the time...they were bound behind my back for three weeks."

B'Elanna gasped and Tom's eyes darkened as he found the large point in the artery that supplied blood to her brain. He massaged it gently to stimulate the nerve endings, hoping it would slow her heart rate. With his other hand, he began unbuttoning her shirt. "Patty took the tri-corder. Kathryn, may I touch your chest to see if this massage is affecting your heart rate?"

"Mmmhmm." As Tom laid his palm over her heart, Kathryn closed her eyes and whispered to Chakotay, "I'm scared."

He held her close. "We're right here with you, and Patty didn't seem alarmed."

Tom said, "If you're anxious, there's no reason we can't go straight to Starfleet Med right now."

"Let Patty try, but if this gets worse, take me in."

"We'll take care of you, love." Chakotay kissed her temple.

Patty returned and attached a cortical monitor. “Admiral, let’s get this on you so we can see where the problem is.”

Chakotay asked, “Tom, didn’t you say the problem was in the ventricles?”

Patty answered, “Yes, but the issue is that the infection is interfering with the electrical impulses that pace her heart. If we can find out where the hang-up is, we can deliver a low-voltage shock to that part of the heart.”

Kathryn’s eyes opened wide and she looked up at Chakotay. “This doesn’t sound good.”

“Give it a chance,” he said soothingly. “You’re in good hands.”

To lighten the mood, Tom nodded towards Kathryn’s chest and said, “You know, I always pictured you as a lace person.”

Kathryn laid her forehead against Chakotay’s cheek and replied almost too softly to be heard, “No, too scratchy.”

Chakotay shook his head at Tom, giving him a silent warning to discontinue the attempted humor.

“Sorry, Kathryn,” Tom said as he helped Patty connect the defibrillator.

“Hmm?” Kathryn wondered what Tom was apologizing for, but didn’t have the energy to pursue it. She was getting more anxious by the minute as she felt the defibrillator start to tingle and send electrical pulses into her chest. Moving her lips right up next to Chakotay’s ear, she said, “I’m really scared.”

“I am, too, but Patty is taking care of you.”

Her voice shook as she said, “Please, don’t let me die. I’m not ready.”

“Not a chance, love. You’re going to be okay. I’ll make sure of it.”

Kathryn cried out as a sudden, crushing chest pain gripped her. Grabbing her chest, she squeaked, “Heart!”

Patty’s eyes widened in alarm as she tapped her commbadge. “Fields to Dr. Zimmerman, Starfleet Medical.”

Joe responded, “Yes, Lieutenant?”

“We need emergency transport NOW! She’s in ventricular fibrillation.”

Kathryn grabbed for Chakotay. “Failing?”

He was right with her. “Don’t panic – slow, deep breaths.”

She tried to concentrate on what he was saying, but she couldn’t understand. The pain in her chest was excruciating. Darkness closed in and the only thing she could see was Chakotay’s worried face as she fell against him.

Tom caught Kathryn as she fell off the couch. “Doc! She’s arresting! We need transport now!”

Patty yelled, “Start CPR!”

“Stand by,” Joe said quickly.

“What?” Tom yelled as he and Chakotay laid an unconscious Kathryn on the floor. “Stand by? Is he kidding?”

“The security net has to come down first.” Chakotay hurriedly pushed back the coffee table and put his cheek over her mouth to see if she was breathing. He felt nothing.

Patty instructed, “Paris, chest compressions. Captain...”

“Got it!” Chakotay yelled as he tilted Kathryn’s head back and pinched her nose closed.

“Damn it, Doc!” Tom kicked the table back further and got into position. “We’re losing her! This can’t be happening!”

Fighting down his fear, Chakotay covered her mouth to blow life-saving air into her lungs. He stopped when Patty yelled, “Clear!” and she administered a defibrillating shock. They resumed CPR until Patty yelled again. “Clear!” There was no response, so they resumed their efforts a third time.

Patty yelled, “Doctor! My defibrillator isn’t strong enough!”

Chakotay concentrated on blowing into Kathryn’s lungs. He became dizzy from the effort, but there wasn’t a chance in hell that he was going to stop. As he listened to Tom count, he felt Kathryn’s body jerk in response to the compressions, and he prayed hard that she’d survive this.

Joe yelled, “Transporting now!” The beam took all four of them, still in motion.

When they were gone, B’Elanna felt cold chills run up and down her body. She hugged Miral close and cursed, “Ghuy’cha!”

The security guards found B’Elanna and one of them asked, “What happened?”

B’Elanna stood up with Miral. “Admiral Janeway has been transported to Starfleet Medical. She was in cardiac arrest.”

They all looked at each other in stunned silence.

Part 19 - "Rest Now, My Love"

By Dawn

Summary: Starfleet Medical

Rated PG-13

Kathryn fought against the heavy blanket of sleep that surrounded and protected her. She pushed open her eyes to see a soft brown ceiling above her. It didn't look familiar and she wondered where she was, but didn't have the energy to think much beyond that.

A few minutes later, she decided to learn more. She looked to the left and saw a comforting sight. Chakotay was fast asleep in a recliner. Although she had no idea where she was and what had happened, she felt safe because he was there. She was content just watching him sleep and didn't feel the need to wake him to find out where she was and why. He was there. She was safe, and that's all she needed to know. Feeling at peace, she soon fell asleep, too.

The sound of muffled voices brought her back to consciousness. She opened her eyes to try to figure out where they were coming from and who they belonged to.

"Kathryn?" Chakotay rushed to her side and picked up her hand. He brushed the back of his fingers across her cheek and gave her a warm smile. "Hi there, beautiful."

Her mouth was as dry as sandpaper, but she managed to say, "Hi." She looked past him to see people she didn't recognize. "Where are we?"

"Starfleet Medical."

Staring at him in disbelief, she said, "Can't be."

"Where do you think we are?" he asked gently.

She looked past him again and tried to get her bearings, but her mind was foggy. What she did see was many, many colorful flower arrangements. It confused her. "I don't know."

One of the other people in the room came closer and asked, "How are you feeling, Admiral?"

"Admiral?" she asked, blinking her eyes to try to clear the grit out of them.

Chakotay said, “She seems disoriented, Dr. Pulaski.” He leaned over her and kissed her forehead, whispering, “You’re in a safe place, Kathryn, surrounded by people who are here to help you.”

“Okay,” she said, believing him.

“Do you remember who I am?”

“Chakotay,” she answered.

The unfamiliar doctor said, “That’s a good sign. Are you in any pain?”

She wasn’t sure, so she took a mental inventory of her body. Her chest hurt, her arms hurt, and her whole body ached. She wondered why. Was she in an accident? She tried to remember. Looking back up at the people standing over her, she wondered why they were looking at her so expectantly. She felt nervous as she asked, “Did I say something wrong?”

Chakotay’s shoulders drooped and he pulled up a chair beside her. “No, love. We just want to know how to make you feel better.”

“You called me ‘love?’”

“Yes, I did.” He stroked the back of her wrist. “Do your arms hurt?”

“Yes.” She tried to remember why. “Did I burn them?”

He shook his head. “No. Does your chest hurt?”

Taking a deep breath, she attempted to find out, but as she exhaled, the pain she felt took precedence. She looked at Chakotay. “My chest hurts.”

He stroked the hair away from her face and asked Pulaski, “Is this normal?”

“The confusion suggests that not enough oxygenated blood is getting to her brain. I’ll be back with an analgesic, and we’ll adjust the settings on her pump and defibrillator.”

Kathryn watched the doctor leave the room and then looked back at Chakotay. “Where are we?”

He told her again as if they hadn’t been through this line of questions already. Her memory only lasted for about thirty seconds, but he was patient and answered her again and again. There wasn’t anything he wouldn’t do for her.

Chakotay looked up as Tom came into the hospital room.

“I’m alone because they wouldn’t let Miral come in. Children are germ factories, it seems.”

Nodding, Chakotay asked, “What time is it?”

Tom looked at the clock on the wall and reported, “Almost dinner time. How is she?”

He shrugged. “Not much has changed since very early this morning. She was awake for about thirty minutes, but very confused.”

“Why don’t you go get something to eat with B’Elanna? I’ll stay here.”

Chakotay shook his head. “I don’t want to leave her.”

“You’ve been in here for three days. You need to get out.”

“Did Gretchen send you?” He sighed, remembering how Kathryn’s mom had been trying so hard to get him home for a few hours.

Tom hmped. “No, but I could get B’Elanna to give you a shove.”

“Kathryn might not recognize anyone else. I don’t want her to be scared.”

“Give me some credit. I think there’s a good chance that she’ll know who I am.”

“That’s true,” Chakotay sighed. “After all, you have been a pain in her backside for many years.”

“I think you’re mistaken, old man. I’ve been a pain in your ass, not hers.”

Chakotay rubbed his face, realizing that Tom was probably right, and he had to admit that he was hungry. “Fine, but I’ll only be gone long enough to eat.”

“It’s a start.” Tom patted him on the back. “I’ll keep your seat warm.”

Chakotay stood with hesitation, really not wanting to leave his sleeping beauty. Caressing her face, he noticed how dark her freckles were in contrast to the pale, translucent skin beneath. She looked so fragile that he wanted to take her into his arms and protect her from everyone and everything that might ever cause her harm. It was an unrealistic desire, but at the moment, he couldn’t help but feel that way.

“B’Elanna’s in the waiting room by the lift,” Tom said, urging him to leave.

Chakotay let his hand linger on her cheek before quietly leaving the room.

Tom gave Kathryn a quick visual examination. She was pale and thin, but not much worse than she had been three days earlier when they had shared lunch. The Starfleet medical gown made her look pallid, but they always had. The feeding tube and oxygen support looked foreign on her face, like some sort of strange alien implants. He picked up a medical tri-corder and took a scan, noting that she was in a deep sleep and breathing steadily. Her blood pressure was on the low side, aided by a small pump that was attached to an intercostal artery. A second implant, a defibrillator, was delivering constant shocks to heart to keep it in a normal rhythm.

Dr. Joe came into the room and said, "Mr. Paris, I'm surprised to see you here."

"Expecting Chakotay?"

"I saw him leave with your lovely wife."

"I promised him that I'd keep vigil while he was gone."

"I've got a monitor on her that will alert us the moment she starts waking up. He need not stay."

Tom nodded, "Yes, I know, but try to tell him that."

"I have." He nodded towards the tri-corder as he came around to the opposite side of the bed.

"Any interest in continuing your medical studies?"

"Some. It sure came in handy with her."

"You did very well. The damage would have been significantly greater if you hadn't been there."

"Thanks, although I wish I hadn't broken all of her ribs."

"I have no doubt that she'll gladly take healed rib fractures over brain damage."

Tom nodded. "Chakotay tells us that you're planning on giving her a cardiac implant."

"It's one option, but it depends on how her heart responds to further treatment."

Tom thought back to what she'd told him, knowing the Doctor couldn't break confidentiality.

"She said she'd had eighteen or so procedures on her heart?"

"That's right," Joe nodded.

"If her heart were repairable, wouldn't that have taken care of it?"

"If her only ailment was a damaged cardiac muscle then, yes, it could've been completely regenerated."

Tom sighed and looked back at the indomitable woman he admired so much. “They really messed her up, didn’t they?”

“That’s putting it mildly.” Joe picked up a scanner and handed it to Tom. “She’s due for another treatment. Would you like to assist?”

“I’d love to.”

“You’ll notice that there are bacterial micro-organism colonies on her heart valves?”

He scanned it again and studied the readings. “Is that what those are?”

Joe said, “They’re blocking her arteries and disrupting her cardiac functions. We’re finding them impossible to get rid of. There are research teams here, on the Enterprise, and at the Federation Heart Institute all working on it.”

“So if you can’t get rid of them then you cut them out?”

“Exactly. We’re giving it another few days, and if she doesn’t show any sign of improvement, we’ll replace everything that they’ve touched. They’ve infiltrated all four chambers of her heart, causing cardiogenic shock. That led to the cardiac arrest.”

“Will she be strong enough to survive the surgery?”

“I’ll make sure of it.” Joe nodded to Kathryn’s head. “That’s why she has the feeding tube. We want her to gain as much weight as we can to correct her renal failure and balance her electrolytes before we make the attempt.”

Tom sighed. “She’s not out of the woods yet, at all.”

“Not by a long shot, but we have a plan.”

Kathryn’s eyes fluttered open to see Tom sitting next to her reading a book. He was so engrossed that he didn’t notice her movement. Her voice husky from lack of use, she asked, “What are you reading?”

He jumped. “Captain!”

Grinning at his instinctive use of her former rank, she said, “Didn’t mean to startle you.”

Putting the book down, he said, “I wasn’t expecting you to wake up. How are you feeling?” He held her hand.

“I’ve felt worse.” She tried to move her arms and discovered that she was extremely weak. Looking around the room, she asked, “Are we at Starfleet Medical?”

“Yes. You’ve been here for a little over seventy-two hours.”

“It looks like a flower shop in here.”

He looked around with her. “Yes, it does. Chakotay said most of them are from Voyagers.”

“They’re beautiful.”

“Do you remember what happened?”

“You and Lanna were having lunch with us?”

“That’s right. And then?”

She raised an eyebrow. “I believe Patty said something about ventricular fibrillation?”

“Do you know what that means?”

“Heart is failing.”

Tom looked at her with compassion. “Yes, and then Chakotay and I did CPR until you were transported here.”

She closed her eyes in concern. “Is he okay?”

“Worried about you, but we just managed to get him out of here to eat. He’ll be back soon.”

Joe came into the room. “Admiral?”

She crooked a smile at him. “Had to save my life again, did you?”

“I plan on being able to do that for many years.” He asked Tom, “Is she as aware as she seems?”

Tom nodded. “Remembers everything before the CPR.”

Kathryn asked, “Have I not been cognizant?”

“No, but your brain is getting the oxygen it needs now.” Joe touched her shoulder, “Are you in pain?”

“My chest hurts, but it’s tolerable.”

“If you decide you want more medication, let me know.”

“Thanks.” She took a slow, steady breath. “What’s in my nose?”

Tom answered, “Same thing Chakotay’s getting right now – a little fresh air and dinner.”

She groaned. “Again? I thought I was done with that.”

The Doctor filled her in on what was going on with her heart and finished by saying, “So you’ll be here for awhile.”

“If I get a say in this, I’d rather keep the heart I have.”

“That’s our second priority. The first is keeping you alive.”

She sighed, feeling sleepy from the exertion of being awake. “How long till Chakotay’s due back?”

Tom said, “He and B’Elanna have been gone for a little over an hour, but he needed the time away. It’s good that he didn’t rush through dinner to get back here.”

She didn’t want to bother him, but she was feeling the heavy blanket of sleep settle over her. “Can I contact him?”

“Sure,” Tom said. He touched his commbadge and opened the link.

Chakotay responded anxiously, “Tom? Is something wrong?”

“Not at all. There’s someone here who wants to talk to you.”

“Kathryn?”

Hearing the hopefulness in his voice, she grinned. “Hey there.”

“Thank heavens,” he said softly. “We’re on our way.”

She could hear in his voice that he was exerting himself to run back. “No, stay and enjoy whatever you’re doing. I just wanted you to know that I’m okay before I fall back to sleep.”

“I’ll see you in just a minute, Kathryn. Chakotay out.”

“I guess I shouldn’t have called.” She smiled tiredly at Tom and Joe.

“He would’ve been disappointed if he’d missed you,” Joe assured her. He opened his tri-corder and took a quick scan. “Looks like you’re fine to sleep through the night. If you need to call a nurse, just push that button, although I’m sure Chakotay will be right here with you.”

“Thanks,” she said softly.

“Mr. Paris, why don’t we take our leave so Chakotay can see her alone when he returns.”

Tom stood and kissed her hand. “Goodnight, Kathryn.”

“Goodnight.” As Tom started walking out, she said, “Don’t forget your book.”

“Oh.” He returned to pick it up off the side table. “Thank you.”

“What’s the title?” she asked. “You never answered my question.”

“It’s just a little light reading.” He blushed as he held it up for her to see. “Comparative Physiology of the Human Heart.”

She smiled in response. “Let me know if you find anything useful.”

“Will do.” He squeezed her hand. “Sleep well.”

Snuggling her head into the pillow, she let her sleepiness take hold. She didn’t know if a few seconds or a few minutes had passed when she felt Chakotay’s hand in hers and his light kiss on her lips. She murmured, “I love you.”

“I love you, too, Kathryn.”

She forced her eyes open to look at him and saw that a tear was running down his cheek. “You’re crying?”

Choked up, he said, “Just relieved.”

“I want to hug you, but I barely have enough strength to move my hands.”

“Let me help.” Without lifting her very far off the bed, he enfolded her in into his arms, carefully supporting her head as if she were an infant. Holding her close, he whispered, “We took care of you, just like I promised, but this ranks right up there with the most painful experiences of my life.”

“Are you okay?”

He laid her back down, but stayed close enough that their foreheads were touching. “I am right now, but it’s been...” He froze up, unable to finish. “I’m okay now.”

“I wish that I’d listened to Dr. Crusher and come straight here from the Pioneer. I’m sorry I put you through this.”

He shook his head. “Not even Dr. Joe thought this would happen. Dr. Crusher has been here, too, and she was equally surprised.”

“The Enterprise is back here already?”

Straightening up, Chakotay said, “Yes, and I’ll tell you about it later.”

“Handling me, are you?” She smiled sleepily.

“Yes, because you should rest. You said something earlier about falling asleep.”

“Okay. Will you sit with me for a few minutes?”

He tucked the covers up under her chin and arranged the pillow how she liked it. “I’ll be here with you all night, love.”

Eyes closed, she mumbled, “Thank you. I’m a little uneasy about being alone.”

Drawing his recliner right up to the bed, he sat on the edge of the seat and leaned his elbows on the mattress. He held her hand between both of his and placed a simple kiss on her curled fingers. “I promise that you’ll never be alone again.”

She felt reassured by his promise, even though it was one he couldn’t keep. Still, she knew that for the next few weeks, he’d keep it and that comforted her enough that she let sleep pull her away.

Hands grabbed her. Assimilation tubules pierced her neck. Flashes of images assaulted her mind. She was bound, helpless. Bony, Kazon knuckles backhanded her and she fell, fell out of the ship, sucked into the vacuum of space, down to a planet, down into a fiery river of hot molten lava. Hot, painful hands pulled her out and squeezed her breasts, burning through her chest and she screamed.

Nausea overwhelmed her as she stamped her broken leg on the ice. She shivered violently at the rotten stench of death. A foul sponge pushed into her mouth, filling her with acrid water, gagging her, making her vomit painfully.

Hands were on her, holding her over a precipice as she retched violently, heaving in unending painful gasps. At the bottom of the precipice, sudden death awaited, with a white tile floor and vomit-covered shoes. Her reality shifted as she heard alarms and people shouting. She couldn’t breathe. Her nose was full, her body felt hot. She shivered uncontrollably and her chest felt like it was caving in.

Someone was holding her on her side as she threw up on the floor. Someone else was on the bed behind her, holding her hair back and pulling at the tubes in her nose. When they came out, she

gagged, retching again, although there was nothing left to expel. She was exhausted, unable to pull anything but shallow, wheezing breaths as her heart cramped hard in her chest.

“Kathryn?” Chakotay cried out as he held her shoulders, making sure she didn’t fall off the bed. She watched the floor come in and out of focus, and her eyes were rolling back into her head as the dizziness of vertigo passed through her.

“I think she’s done,” Joe said with urgency. “Roll her back. Dr. Trent, two cc’s of aminozine. Nurse, where is Dr. Pulaski?”

Kathryn felt her body being moved and then heard the clicks and whines of medical equipment. She gasped in shallow, painful breaths, unable to do anything except suffer through the pain, nausea, and fear. The alarms of medical equipment were deafening. Her eyes searched for and found Chakotay’s, red with the tears that poured out of them. She knew they must match her own. She wanted nothing more than to reach up and touch his face, but her arms were too heavy and an unknown doctor had invaded the space between them.

She wondered if her luck had finally run out. Was this when she was going to die? She kept her eyes glued to Chakotay’s as the doctors shouted around her. His arms were crossed over his chest, one hand covering his mouth as more tears moistened his cheeks. His whole body was shaking and she yearned to hold him, to save him from his anguish. The sounds around her became muted as her chest seized again in tight, wrenching pain. Her vision grew clouded and darkened until all she could see was his worried face before there was nothing.

When Kathryn regained consciousness, she heard a female voice say, “Good work, everyone. She’s back. Nurses, get her cleaned up. Dr. Zimmerman, let’s meet in your office. We need to decide where we go from here.”

She forced her eyes open to see unknown people turning away and Chakotay stepping in. His eyes were swollen and there was a forced smile on his tear-stained face. Stroking the damp hair away from her cheeks, he said, “Welcome back.”

Her throat felt raw and her mouth was sticky and rancid. She croaked, “How long?”

“Just a few minutes,” he sniffed and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand.

“That was awful.” She felt completely limp and her chest hurt terribly.

He nodded, unable to comment.

A nurse said, “Captain, would you step outside, sir? We need to change her clothes.”

“No,” Kathryn said hoarsely. “Please, let him help.”

They worked together to take off her shirt, and Chakotay cleaned her face and neck with a warm, wet cloth.

As they untied the drawstring at her waist, Kathryn whispered, "Do we have to change all my clothes?"

Chakotay nodded solemnly. "Can you feel your legs?"

She concentrated as they were peeling her pants off and realized that they were warm and sticky. Cringing, she said, "Maybe they were right, Chakotay. You don't want to be in here."

"Shhh," he said. "Don't worry. I'm sure it's quite normal to lose control, and I don't want to be anywhere else but here, helping you."

"I hate this."

A nurse said, "Admiral, it's just a sign of how sick you are. There's nothing to be embarrassed about."

She closed her eyes and nodded, thinking if she could concentrate on something else, it wouldn't be so bad. As they ran the sonic cleaner over her, she admitted, "I had this problem while I was held captive, but I couldn't do anything about it."

Chakotay cupped her jaw and kissed her forehead. "You didn't have control this time, either." He whispered so only she could hear him, "If you want babies, I assume you'll want me to change diapers and clean-up after they're sick. This isn't really much different."

She smiled weakly up at him. "I love you."

His eyes widened with forced humor as he said, "I know." Taking the sonic cleaner from the nurse, he ran it over his hands and took off his tunic. He laid a towel on the floor and toed his shoes off. Stepping close to the bed, he ran the cleaner over her face and then through her hair, gently threading his fingers through the strands as he finished.

She melted under his touch, doing her best to ignore the fact that she was naked and three people were cleaning up around her and re-attaching tubes and monitors. She was sore, cold, weak, and just wanted to curl up under a blanket and sleep to forget this episode ever happened. She was pretty sure that her heart had stopped again, but she didn't want to ask Chakotay about it right now.

One of the nurses said, "Before we redress her, we need to change the bedding. I can call an orderly or, Captain, would you like to hold her while we do it?"

Kathryn opened her eyes to see Chakotay's affirmative nod. She tried to stiffen her body to make it easier to be picked up, but she had no strength. It didn't seem to matter, though, because he picked her up with ease and sat down in a nearby chair. He cradled her naked body against

his bare chest, tucking her head against his neck. A nurse brought a blanket and covered up both of them.

Chakotay whispered, "Are you comfortable?"

"Very." Her eyes were closed as she listened to the steady beat of his heart, so different from the irregular pumping of her own. Being held like this was a solace for her spirit. "Thank you for staying," she whispered hoarsely.

"I needed to." He kissed her temple, letting his lips linger as his arms squeezed her gently. "I need this."

"Me too," she croaked. "I was terrified. Mostly for you."

"Shhhh," he said, clearly not able to talk about it yet.

Accepting his request, she said nothing more as she let the blanket of peaceful sleep settle over her.

The nurse came over to Chakotay and whispered, "We're ready for her."

As quietly as he could, he replied, "She's asleep. I'll hold her a little longer."

"I need to put the feeding tube back in before I go," she whispered.

Chakotay frowned. "Can't it wait for a few hours? Are they planning on putting more food in her stomach already?"

"I don't know, but I have orders to reattach everything and get her settled in."

"Well, for now, your patient is officially refusing the feeding tube until further notice. Leave her clothes, and I'll put them on her later."

The nurse looked at the other one anxiously. "What do you think?"

"If Pulaski comes down on us..."

Chakotay closed his eyes in frustration. "Tell her that I wouldn't let you. She can yell at me." When the nurses looked a skeptical, he asked, "Have you attached all pertinent medical devices and scanners?"

"Yes, but..."

"Then you're done for now. I'll call if I need help."

As they picked up their equipment and left the room, Chakotay sighed. He felt completely drained. Looking down at his precious bundle, he thought about how dear and extraordinary she was. Having her in his life during the last eight years gave him much more than the peace he'd always been missing. She made him laugh, she made him think, and yes, at times, she even frustrated the hell out of him. He loved her more than he thought it was possible to love anyone.

The pain and torment she'd been through was heart-breaking, and he wished beyond measure that he could keep her safe and comfortable for the rest of their lives. He'd been half-tempted to tell the nurses to stick their feeding tube up Dr. Pulaski's behind, but was glad he hadn't voiced that idea. Pulaski was undoubtedly brilliant, but her bedside manner left a lot to be desired. He'd even heard one orderly comment that the head of hearts had no heart, at all. Still, she'd kept Kathryn alive tonight, and for that, he was eternally grateful.

He wanted to sleep, but only a doctor coming here and pulling her out of his arms would make him let go of her. And while he was holding her, he would stay awake. The need to keep vigil over her was stronger than ever after watching her night-terror transform into a real terror.

He'd tried desperately to wake her from her nightmare as he saw her face contort in agony. Alarms had begun going off at the same time she'd begun screaming, and there hadn't been a thing he could do. When he'd realized that her screams had transferred to retching, it had already been too late to stop her from aspirating her vomit. He had jumped into action by rolling her over just as the medical staff ran into the room.

Now, repositioning her with care, he hugged her close, tucking the blanket around her to keep the warmth in. He hoped that she wouldn't have another bad dream while he held her. If that worked, he'd hold her every night.

Dr. Joe came into the room about an hour later, took one look at the two of them, and sighed in exasperation.

Chakotay whispered, "They had to change the bedding and she fell asleep here."

Joe flipped open his medical tri-corder and took a reading. "She's fine, but we really should get her back to the bed."

Kathryn mumbled hoarsely, "You two talk too much."

Joe said, "We've merely uttered two sentences."

She sighed and snuggled against Chakotay's chest. "Move me if you must."

Chakotay reluctantly decided that it was probably the right thing to do. He nodded his agreement to Joe, and the doctor set his things down to lift her out of Chakotay's arms. Together, the two of them got her limp body dressed and settled back into bed where she fell asleep immediately.

Chakotay whispered, “Can the feeding tube wait until morning?”

“It’s not going back in. We’re planning surgery tomorrow, if she consents, and it will be safer with an empty stomach.”

“Transplant?”

Joe nodded solemnly as he crossed the room and opened a drawer. “We think it’s for the best.” He pulled out a blue medical tunic and tossed it to Chakotay. “Put this on before you make the female nurses swoon.”

Chakotay rolled his eyes, but did as he was asked. “She’ll want to know all of her options before surgery. Don’t hold anything back.”

“I do know my patient, as you may recall.”

“Yes, Joe, I just don’t want Pulaski railroading Kathryn into surgery without letting her come to a decision on her own.”

“Dr. Pulaski is not that bad once you get to know her. Took her a few days with me, but I believe I’ve made significant headway.”

“I don’t really care about her personality. I’m just worried about Kathryn.”

“I know,” Joe put a comforting hand on Chakotay’s back as they looked at Kathryn sleeping. “I’m worried about her, too. I don’t have to tell you how remarkable she is, and how countless individuals would be utterly devastated if anything happened to her.”

“I’m not talking about countless individuals, Joe. I’m talking about Kathryn’s peace of mind. She wants to have children, and I’m concerned that any choice will make that impossible.”

“Hmmm,” Joe thought. “I’ll see what I can come up with. She likes statistics.”

Chakotay nodded. “Good idea.”

“Get some rest, Captain. Tomorrow could be a long day.”

“I’ll try.” He sat back down in his usual spot, with every intention of staying awake, but his body had other ideas and he was asleep within minutes.

A hard, painful, irregular thudding in Kathryn’s chest woke her from her sleep. She felt like a vice had turned, twisted, and had its way with her heart. Breathing was difficult through the pain that made her eyes water. She gasped, “kotay?”

“Katie?” Gretchen asked as she touched the top of Kathryn’s head.

“Hurts bad,” she managed to say.

Gretchen pushed the call button and asked to see a doctor. “Help’s on the way, honey.”

Kathryn concentrated on finding a way to breathe that wouldn’t aggravate the discomfort, but wasn’t having any success. However, she could fix the hot stickiness in her mouth. “Water?”

“Ummm... I’m not sure.”

A nurse came in and asked, “What’s the problem?”

Gretchen said, “She’s in pain. Where’s Dr. Zimmerman?”

“He’s in a consultation.”

“Well, get someone,” Gretchen said urgently. “She’s hurting.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

Gretchen returned with a cup of water and held the bendable straw to Kathryn’s mouth. “Just wet your mouth, honey. I’m not sure if you’re supposed to have anything to drink.”

Kathryn gratefully sipped the water, but it didn’t help the bad taste. “I want to clean my teeth.”

“Oh, that’s something I can help with,” Gretchen said cheerfully as she put down the water and got the sonic teeth cleaner. She returned and asked, “I hope you don’t mind if I do this for you?”

Kathryn cracked open her eyes to see her mom looking down at her. Having someone do everything for her was not pleasant, but the fact was that she didn’t have the strength to do it herself. “Go ahead.”

It took Gretchen less than a minute, and by that time, Dr. Joe came into the room. Gretchen said, “She’s in a lot of pain.”

He immediately flipped open his tri-corder and ran it over her. “Is it in your chest?”

Kathryn said, “Yes. Why didn’t it hurt like this last night?”

“You were on a lot of pain medication, and it’s worn off.” He delivered some medication into her neck with a hypospray. “It doesn’t appear to be anything more than that.”

Within a minute, the pain lessened dramatically into a dull ache. “Thank you,” she said gratefully. “My heart is beating hard.”

“It’s doing the best it can.” Joe squeezed her shoulder in sympathy. “I’ll be back shortly. We need to talk.”

Kathryn frowned as he left the room. “That sounds ominous.”

Gretchen sat next to the bed and held Kathryn’s hand. “The doctors have been working hard this morning trying to figure out how to help you.”

“I bet he wants to do a transplant,” she said tiredly.

“Sounds like it.” Gretchen caressed Kathryn’s arm.

After resting her eyes for a couple minutes, Kathryn asked, “How did you get Chakotay out of here?”

“He’s cleaning up and getting some breakfast. He’ll be back soon.”

“He had a hard night.”

Gretchen said, “I heard. Although I think you were the one who had a rough time.”

Kathryn would have shrugged if she had the energy. “I merely had to endure it. He had to deal with the grief.”

“A toss-up.” Gretchen smoothed out the blankets and tucked them around her daughter. “He sure loves you.”

“I know. Too much.”

“Is that possible?”

Looking up at her mom, she said, “Only because of the pain it causes him. I’m afraid that my bad-luck with engagements has risen again. Chakotay is going to lose me.”

“No, honey,” Gretchen looked like she was about to cry. “These doctors are not going to let you die.”

Kathryn swallowed hard. “They may not have a choice. I’m not strong enough to survive this.”

“Oh, Katie,” Gretchen wiped away her tears. “Your spirit and determination are strong enough to survive anything. A silly little heart problem isn’t going to get you down.”

Chakotay came in as Kathryn responded to her mom, “No?”

“No,” Gretchen said. “It would take something as massive as the entire Borg collective to get you down.”

“Well, since they don’t exist anymore, that’s not saying much.”

Chakotay asked, “Who doesn’t exist?”

“The Borg,” Kathryn said before she realized her slip.

“I wish,” Chakotay said.

Kathryn bit her lip to avoid saying anything more.

Chakotay looked at her oddly and then put his hands on his hips and challenged, “Are you going to explain?”

Gretchen scolded, “Chakotay, relax. There’s no need for that today.”

Kathryn licked her lips and tried to hide her smile. Seeing the flash of Chakotay’s inquiring eyes as he took her to task even when she was on her deathbed was comforting in a very strange way. “He knows me too well, Mom.”

“Still, I don’t think this is the time or place,” she admonished.

Chakotay raised an eyebrow, obviously enjoying the battle of wills between them.

“If I don’t tell you now, it’ll give me a reason to survive this.”

“I’m going to hold you to that.” He leaned over and kissed her. “How are you feeling this morning?”

She felt a chill run through her at the intensity of the spark in his kiss. Each new moment felt like something to be treasured after yet another brush with death. “I’m peachy. Ready to run a marathon.”

“Is that so?” He chuckled. “I’ll race you to the beach.”

“You’re on.” She smiled as he kissed her again, even though it made her heart thud even louder.

Gretchen said, “I’d ask if you two want some privacy, but I’m not sure it would be safe.”

Chakotay was focused solely on Kathryn, but he shrugged his head towards Gretchen. “She’s probably right.”

Kathryn smiled mischievously and rested her eyes, happily enjoying the warmth that had spread through her.

Gretchen filled him in on what Kathryn's condition had been upon waking. He cradled Kathryn's cheek in the palm of his hand to offer comfort for what she had gone through, and she happily nestled into his warm touch.

The sound of the door opening made Kathryn open her eyes. Dr. Joe and Dr. Pulaski came into the room, looking somber. Kathryn felt an immediate sense of foreboding and wished she could just skip ahead to the "getting better" part.

Dr. Pulaski said, "Admiral, we have done most everything we can think of to kill the micro-organisms that are impeding your heart function."

Joe added, "In the meantime, the three heart incidents have damaged your heart to the extent that it will be impossible to completely heal it, even if we find a way to eliminate the infection."

Kathryn faced the problem with determination. "Have you tried nanoprobes?"

"Yes," Joe said. "Immediately after you arrived here. While they have a high success rate for restoring brain tissue, they didn't do anything for your heart and passed right over the bacterial colonies."

Kathryn said sarcastically, "But nanoprobes are the miracle cure."

"Not this time, Admiral," Joe said quietly.

"You said 'most everything'. What else can you try?"

Dr. Pulaski said, "Radiation, but we're not sure you could survive the amount that we've had to use to eradicate the biopsy samples. We're sure that it would also irreparably damage the surrounding tissue, including the valves and portions of your heart."

"So we'd be looking at a transplant, regardless?" Kathryn asked.

"Yes, Admiral."

Chakotay said, "She needs to know about the other case."

"What other case?" She looked expectantly at Chakotay.

"One of the men who abducted you was the carrier."

"Is he immune to it?" she asked.

"No. He died five days ago," Chakotay responded. "Massive heart attack."

"What was his name?"

“Pratin,” Chakotay answered.

“The ring leader.” Kathryn didn’t know whether to feel grieved or call it poetic justice that he was dead, especially considering he died from the illness that had caused her and her loved ones so much pain. “How contagious is this?”

Pulaski said, “It’s a blood borne pathogen. We assume it was transferred when he broke your skin by hitting you with a hand that had an open wound.”

Gretchen said, “I hate to ask this, but can it be sexually transmitted?”

“It wasn’t,” Kathryn stated clearly, staring at the ceiling. She had no interest in pursuing this line of questioning.

Chakotay held her hand in comfort as Joe explained, “He’d had the infection for some time, but he was strong enough that it went unnoticed until it was too late. Our research team has studied the results of the autopsy. The bacterial micro-organism colonies not only attacked his heart, but all of his abdominal organs, including the prostate. So, technically, yes, it can be, but if it had, then the infection would not have attacked your heart first.”

Kathryn implored, “Please, don’t discuss that type of transmission any further, but I need to know. Has it migrated from my heart?”

“Traces have been found in your lungs, but we’ve been able to extract them,” Pulaski responded. “Admiral, I know you want to keep your heart, but the safest option at this point is to move forward with a cardiac implant as soon as possible. We need to remove all traces of the organisms before they break free into your bloodstream.”

Nodding in agreement, Kathryn said, “Do it.”

Joe said, “We need to explain the risks.”

Kathryn was ready for this conversation to be over. “I know there are risks and I’m perfectly aware that I’m not in the best condition for surgery, but I have faith in your recommendation. Just do it.”

“Yes, Admiral. I’ll begin preparations.” Pulaski left the room.

Joe asked, “Mrs. Janeway, Chakotay, would you give me a moment alone with her?”

Chakotay leaned down and kissed her forehead. “I’ll be right outside.”

When they were gone, Kathryn asked, “Do you have more bad news?”

Joe touched her arm. “Chakotay tells me that you’re considering starting a family.”

“I guess this shoots a hole in that plan.” She was tired and wanted to sleep. She didn’t want to think about this anymore.

“Not entirely.”

“Pregnancy with a mechanical heart?”

Joe said, “I’ve researched all of the cases involving this cardiac implant, and none of the patients have had a pregnancy following. However, there’s always a first.”

Her chest felt heavier. “This is too much to think about right now.”

“Hear me out. I just want to put your mind at ease.”

She frowned, forcing herself to listen.

“We’ll do a lot of testing after the surgery and monitor you closely, but I see no reason that you couldn’t carry a child to term once we repair your uterus.”

“Thank you, Doctor. You’ve given me something to think about.” She hoped he would understand the dismissal.

“Is there anything else you want to discuss?”

“No,” she said abruptly and then felt bad. “I’m sorry, Joe. I’d just like to close my eyes for a few minutes. How long before the surgery begins?”

“A little less than an hour,” he said with understanding. “Before I go, I have one more thing to tell you.”

“Yes?” she asked, forcing herself not to look or sound impatient.

“Dr. Crusher received permission for me to tell you that if you want to talk to someone, contact Captain Picard. He’s on his second cardiac implant.”

That did surprise her. “Do I want to know what happened to his first?”

“Maintenance issues, but at that point, his heart was thirty-eight years old. Medical science had improved significantly by then, and the one he has now is twelve years old. According to Dr. Crusher, it is functioning perfectly.”

“She would know,” Kathryn sighed tiredly. “Thank you.”

“Get some rest. I’ll send Chakotay back in.”

Kathryn nodded and closed her eyes. She heard the door open and close twice, but didn't make the effort to see who had entered her room. She didn't need to. When he picked up her hand, she squeezed his fingers with the small amount of strength she had left.

He asked, "Are you tired of talking?"

"Yes." She smiled as he kissed her lips. When the mattress sagged with his weight, she opened her eyes to see what he was doing.

"I feel the need to hold you."

"You're not upset that I didn't consult with you?"

"No," he said as he picked her up and scooted her over. Cuddling up next to her, he said, "I think it's the right thing to do."

She nuzzled against him. "Before I fall asleep, I want to tell you one thing."

"Do I want to hear this?"

"Probably not, but I need to say it." She forced her eyes open again to look into his. "If the odds are against me, I want you to buy our house..."

"Kathryn, don't."

She placed her finger on his lips to silence him and continued despite his protest. "I want you to buy our house, and surround yourself with friends. There's enough room in your heart to love me and somebody else, too."

He closed his eyes, but the tears escaped anyway. "Kathryn."

"Promise me that you'll always be among friends, Chakotay. I can't do this unless I know you'll be okay." Her voice cracked with emotion and tears streamed down her cheeks.

"I'll be okay, for you," he promised. "But I'll be better if you're in that house with me."

She smiled through her tears. "I know. We have all those places to visit. Remember talking about them in Tuscany?"

"Of course I remember. We've got mountains to explore, autumn trees to see."

"And Hawaii. Where should we go for our honeymoon?" she asked sleepily.

"Anywhere that is quiet. I want to take you away for a long vacation."

“I’d like that, but if I don’t make it, promise you’ll go anyway? Take my ashes there. I don’t want to be buried in space.”

“Oh, Kathryn,” he choked. “This is too much.”

She stroked his cheek. “Please be strong for me.”

“I’m trying, but these tears keep leaking out.” He held her close.

She turned her face toward his neck to inhale his spicy scent. “I’ve known for weeks that my time might be up.”

“Shhhh...”

“Towards the end, on that awful ship, only escaping into memories of your love gave me the ability to cope. I don’t want to die, but I’m grateful that I’m here with you.”

He kissed her forehead. “I want to be your strength.”

“And I want to be yours.” She was really worried about him. “The other night, when you wanted to tell me about all the good things in my life?”

“Yes?”

“Would you remember those and forget everything else? I’m probably over-reacting to this, but I don’t want to take any chances, and I don’t want you to spend the rest of your life angry.”

“I understand, and I promise that I’ll try to keep the peace that you’ve brought to me.” Chakotay kissed her. “Rest now, my love. I’ll be right here.”

“You’ll be here when I wake up?”

“Always.”

Part 20 - “Don’t Let Me Go”

By Dawn

Summary: Recovery

Rated PG-13

Soon after Kathryn had fallen asleep, Dr. Joe and three nurses came into the room.

Joe asked, "Captain, would you stand up please?"

"She just fell asleep. Do we have to wake her already?"

"You won't wake her up. She's unconscious."

"Unconscious?" Chakotay carefully laid Kathryn onto the bed, suddenly worried that it might be their last moment together. "Then is it too risky to do the transplant now?"

"There are more risks associated with not doing it." Joe said as they watched the nurses fold up the sides of the bed and wheel their patient out of the room.

"Joe," he gasped, unable to breathe.

"Captain, I think the best thing for you to do right now is to get some fresh air. This is going to take several hours."

With barely a whisper, he said, "I feel so helpless."

"You know that I'll do everything in my power to save her, don't you?"

Chakotay nodded, but couldn't find his voice to respond otherwise.

Joe gave him a reassuring pat before leaving the room. Now alone, he stared at the tile floor where the bed had just been. The emptiness filled him, into the very core of his being. Unimaginable grief was lingering nearby, lying in wait to take over should the worst happen.

He didn't want to feel those emotions, didn't want to allow them inside his heart. He had to get out of the hospital, away from the anguish that threatened to overwhelm him. He ran out of the room, down the hall to the lift, and as soon as he pressed his palm on the down arrow, he heard B'Elanna calling his name. He froze in place, his head bowed against the wall.

"Chakotay?" The sound of her shoes clicking on the floor accompanied her concerned voice. "Are you okay?"

He didn't want to look up for fear that he'd lose his tenuous control over his emotions. "I need to get out of here."

"I understand, but we're all here to be with you."

The empty lift opened and he forced himself not to step inside. A sickening sensation rose from deep in his belly, and he had to swallow hard to force it back down. "I can't, B'Elanna. Not right now."

She was all but hugging him. "Be around people? You don't have to talk. We just don't want you to be alone."

“But I want to be alone. I keep thinking about what it’s going to feel like if she doesn’t survive this, and I…”

“If it happens, it’s going to hurt like hell, but your friends are going to see you through it.” She forcibly turned him around so that he was facing her. “Listen to me, Chakotay.”

“B’Elanna…,” he begged. For what, he wasn’t sure.

“Kathryn Janeway is the heroine in the story that is our lives, and the heroine doesn’t die in the middle of it. Now, come on. I know exactly what you need.”

“Besides Kathryn?”

“Come on.” She looped her arm through his and encouraged him to move back up the hallway a short distance. They entered a meeting room where at least a dozen of their closest friends were waiting expectantly.

Chakotay froze in the doorway, and would have backed out if not for the lock B’Elanna had on his arm. “I can’t.”

She either didn’t hear him or chose to ignore him. “All right, everyone. Kathryn is in surgery and will be for awhile. What we need is some food, some poker, and some distracting conversation.”

All of their friends started moving at once. Tables were rearranged, take-out was ordered, and a forced liveliness permeated the atmosphere. Not one person told him that everything would be okay, and there was absolutely no mention of Kathryn’s recent experiences.

As the day progressed, the group’s size grew until there were almost thirty people. Given Kathryn’s celebrity status, the hospital administration permitted them to have their impromptu reunion and even provided them with board games and access to a music database.

Late that afternoon, Chakotay’s anxiety continued to grow with each passing moment. The medical staff hadn’t said how long the surgery was supposed to take, but it had been over six hours since she’d fallen asleep in his arms. The urge to find her and protect her was growing ever stronger; even though the logical part of his brain told him that she was in good hands.

Tom cleared his throat and asked, “Chakotay? Need any cards?”

He stared blankly at the younger man for just a moment before he realized that he’d been asked a question. “Sorry. My mind is elsewhere.”

“That’s all right. Would you like us to keep avoiding the elephant or should we join you in watching the clock?”

Harry commented, "That has got to be the slowest clock I've ever seen. Something must be wrong with its ticker."

Chakotay replied absently, "The elephant needs a new ticker."

It took a moment, but everyone at the table started laughing. B'Elanna came over and asked, "What's so funny?"

"Oh, nothing," Harry said. "We're just a little punched."

"Punched?"

Tom corrected, "The term is punch-drunk, Harry."

"Oh. Yeah, that." He tossed his cards onto the table and leaned back to stretch. "This wait is maddening."

B'Elanna elbowed Harry in the side and then scowled at him.

Tom said, "It's all right, B'E. We're not completely ignoring the situation anymore."

Chakotay rattled the ice around in his glass. "Just don't ask why the surgery is taking so long. I don't think I could handle any speculation about what could be going wrong."

"Nothing is going wrong," B'Elanna insisted. "You want to hear my theory?"

All the men looked at her and said unanimously, "No."

"Too bad. I'm going to tell you anyway." She pinched the side of Tom's neck as she walked past him to sit in the empty chair. "Kathryn is an extremely complicated woman."

When nothing more was forthcoming, Harry asked, "What does that have to do with anything?"

Rolling her eyes, B'Elanna replied, "Well, the way I see it, her heart is what makes her so complicated, and since that's what they're messing with, I'm sure they're finding more neural thingies connected to it than they expected."

"Thingies?" Chakotay asked.

She shrugged. "A technical term."

Tom shook his head in amazement. "How is it that you can piece together a slipstream drive out of spare parts, but you can't remember a simple term like neural pathways?"

"Because slipstreams have nothing to do with medical science, that's why."

Harry asked Chakotay, "Should I mention the biological properties of gel packs?"

"I wouldn't," Tom mumbled.

The door opened and everyone's attention was immediately drawn to who had just walked through. Dr. Joe's expression did not contain any trace of the smugness that would've instantly set them at ease.

Joe immediately found Chakotay. Placing a caring hand on his back, he whispered, "Captain, may I speak with you alone?"

Chakotay was frozen to the spot as a wave of grief nearly crushed him. His voice trembled as he asked, "Doctor?"

Recognizing the fear in the room, Joe quickly held up his hands to placate everyone. "She's still with us."

Chakotay took a sip of water in an effort to wash away the acrid taste of bile that had suddenly jumped to the back of his throat. "If you'll tell us all at once, it'll save me from having to repeat it."

"Are you sure?"

Chakotay nodded, his eyes closed to brace for the anticipated bad news. When Harry and B'Elanna took hold of his hands, he felt bolstered by their support.

Joe spoke louder so that everyone in the room could hear him. "We finished the transplant, but because of Admiral Janeway's weakened condition, her body isn't accepting the new heart. Her vital organs are being externally sustained while we prepare to perform a second procedure in the next twenty-four hours with a different type of heart."

Tom asked, "Why would a different type of heart make a difference?"

"The artificial heart relies on the body's electrical impulses to keep it going. The one that we just placed in her is an extremely complicated piece of technology. If she were healthier, it would work perfectly, but at the moment, it's not sustaining itself."

"So..." Harry urged Joe to continue.

"So we're giving her body time to rest before we place a simpler piece of technology in her that will sustain her until she's strong enough to handle the heart that was designed for her."

They all looked at Chakotay, waiting for him to say something. When he didn't, Tom asked the difficult question, "What's the chance that she won't be strong enough to make it through a second procedure?"

Joe said, "I can't answer that, but suffice it to say, we're determined to keep her alive."

Total silence gripped the entire room until Chakotay shakily stated, "I want to see her."

"She's not conscious, Captain."

"I don't care. I need to be with her."

Joe nodded and began to escort Chakotay out of the room until B'Elanna stopped them.

"Chakotay? Do you want one of us to go with you?"

"No, I'd like to be alone with her. She..." He held his fist against his mouth to fight back the tears that threatened to overwhelm him.

Joe said, "Let's go see her, Captain."

Chakotay held up his hand to forestall Joe, while he spoke to the group. "She told me this morning that if she didn't survive, she wanted to die in my arms. So, if you'll excuse me, I need to make sure I'm there for her."

After he left the room, B'Elanna looked around and there wasn't a single dry eye amongst them. She stood abruptly and opened her mouth to say something, but no words came out. Finally, she shook her head and admitted, "I don't know what to do."

Matt Patterson said, "There's nothing you can do. It's not in our hands."

Owen added, "As much as we would all be devastated by her death, that man is going to need us to be strong for him."

Tom said, "They're engaged. Did you all know that?" Some nodded and all the others acted as if they weren't the least bit surprised.

"This..." Khurma shook his head. "I know the rest of you won't say this with me here, so I'm going to say it for you. What has happened to her is unforgivable."

"Keep going," B'Elanna demanded as anger boiled up inside of her. "Say the next part."

"Commander?"

"Say the part about how you're not going to rest until there's some justice."

The room was silent as Khurma looked intently at B'Elanna. "I'm not going to rest until there's justice. Unfortunately, that may take awhile."

Owen handed Khurma a cup of coffee. "You're going to need this."

“Thanks.”

Tom took the cue from his dad and said, “I think we all need to get some rest.”

B’Elanna shook her head. “We can’t leave Chakotay right now.”

Harry looked at Amy with an unspoken question. When she nodded in response, Harry said, “Amy and I will stay here. You all go home and we’ll send an update as soon as we know something.”

Most of the people stood and began to quietly tidy up the room and gather their coats. B’Elanna remained rooted to the spot, staring at the floor. Tom placed a kiss on her head and let her be alone with her thoughts for a few minutes while he said goodnight to those who had come.

When only four were left, B’Elanna said, “I need to check on Chakotay.”

“Harry will take care of him,” Tom said as he held her coat up.

She held up her hand and was about to snap at her husband, but stopped herself. Closing her fingers, she merely said, “I won’t be long unless he needs me,” as she walked out the door.

Not sure where to go, B’Elanna decided to go back to Kathryn’s room and was glad to find the security guards still stationed outside of it. They started to stop her until she glared them into submission.

When she walked into the room, she found Chakotay sitting next to the bed with his head bowed. “I don’t mean to interrupt,” she said hesitantly.

“You’re not.” He picked up Kathryn’s hand and brought it to his lips for a simple kiss. “She looks like she’s just sleeping, doesn’t she?”

“That’s all she is doing.” B’Elanna stood behind him and put her hands on his shoulders. “She’s just patiently waiting for the doctors to get it right.”

“Don’t, B’Elanna.”

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t make light of this. I know you’re trying to help, but, not now.”

Not sure what to say, she settled for hugging him from behind.

“This is it,” he said.

“This is what?”

He took a shuddering breath before he managed, "I'm going to lose her."

"No..."

"The doctors are grasping at straws. Kathryn knew she wasn't strong enough to survive this."

"You can't give up."

"That's not what this is."

"Then what is it?" B'Elanna asked.

"I've got to say goodbye and let her go."

"No, Chakotay, you can't."

"But don't you see? My frame of mind has no bearing on the outcome. If I refuse to acknowledge that she's dying, I'll miss my opportunity to say goodbye."

"Chakotay..." She ran her fingers through her hair and let them sit, still entangled, at the back of her neck. "Did she say goodbye to you?"

"Yes. She made me promise that I'd be okay, and she told me where to take her ashes."

"Oh, God." B'Elanna couldn't stop the tears from streaming down her face.

"So, I need your help." He turned to look at her, and only then did he notice that she was crying. Standing up, he pulled her into his arms and hugged her close. "I was in your place just this morning when she was saying all of this to me."

"I want to hit something."

"Me, too." Pulling back a little, he put a finger under her chin and lifted until she was looking at him. "I need you to do something."

"What?"

"If we lose her, nothing is going to make this better, but she made me promise that I will surround myself with friends. I need you to make sure I keep that promise. Can you do that for Kathryn?"

"I could do anything for her."

"Thank you." His eyes filled with tears, but his smile was full of empathy.

“I want you to do something for her, too, Old Man.”

“What’s that?”

Poking him hard in the chest, she all but yelled, “Don’t. Give. Up!”

He had to laugh as he rubbed the sore spot she’d just made. “Not that it’ll do any good, but all right. I just promised her something to that affect anyway.”

“What was it?”

“The promise?” he asked as he looked back at his sleeping beauty.

“Yeah.”

“I told her that I’d be strong as long as she’d do the same.”

B’Elanna pulled him into another hug. “Sounds like a good deal to me.”

After they held each other for a long moment, Chakotay asked, “Will you tell everyone that I’m not going back in there tonight? They should go on home.”

She stepped out of his arms and got a tissue to blow her nose. “They’ve all left already. Just Tom, Harry, and his girlfriend are left.”

“Amy?”

“Yeah.” B’Elanna rolled her eyes. “I don’t know if I like her.”

Chakotay motioned towards Kathryn. “She has taken Amy under her wing.”

“Another daughter figure?”

“Pretty much.”

“You two need to have kids, Chakotay, or you’re going to end up parenting every lost soul she comes across.”

With a pat on her cheek, he replied, “Amy is in good company.”

“Thanks, I think,” she said with a frown.

He took a drink of his water and said, “You all should go and get some rest. I’m fine.”

“Fine?”

“I’ll probably fall asleep soon, and even if I don’t, I doubt I’ll be very good company.”

B’Elanna shrugged. “Good company or not, Harry and Amy are staying for awhile. They’ll be in the lounge if you need to talk.”

“Thanks.” He escorted her towards the door, saying, “I’d like to promise that I’ll call if anything changes, but I have a feeling I’ll forget.”

“Don’t worry about it. We’ll check in, first thing in the morning.” She gave him a quick kiss and added, “You are loved by many, and you’re not alone.”

He groaned. “Oh, B’Elanna.”

“What?”

“It’s just that...” Shaking his head, he finished, “I’ve said that to her so many times that I can’t even count them all.”

She pulled him into a strong hug and said, “It goes for both of you.”

After B’Elanna left, Chakotay stepped into Kathryn’s bathroom and rinsed his face with cold water. He stared blankly at his reflection for a few minutes until he realized that he’d zoned out. Shaking it off, he dried his hands and went back and stood next to Kathryn’s bed.

“All right, love. I have orders from your favorite engineer not to give up, and just so you know, that goes for you, too. We’ve been in tough situations before. This is no different. Are you with me?”

He stared at her as if expecting a reply. When nothing was forthcoming, he nodded smartly. “All right, then. I’ll take your silence as agreement.” He pulled up the chair and took her hand in his. “Want to know why?”

After a short moment, he answered the question. “Because when you don’t agree with me, you tell me in no uncertain terms the way it’s going to be. Since you’re so quiet, you obviously have nothing to add. Either that, or I’m going a little crazy.”

Chakotay studied her too-thin fingers and noticed how rough her fingernails were. He didn’t recall having ever seen them in such bad shape. Although it was minor in the scheme of things, knowing that she hadn’t been able to care for something so small caused grief to well up inside him once more.

“Kathryn,” he whispered hoarsely. “What am I going to do without you? Don’t you know that you’re my life?”

He kissed each fingertip and said, “I wish I had a nail file... I tell you what, love, you just hang on and we’ll make you better. Whatever it takes, no matter how long it takes. We’re going to

move mountains to make sure you get to do all those things you want to do. You and I are going to travel to beautiful places, we're going to make this galaxy a better place, and we're going to have babies – as many as you want.”

“And if you don't...” He took a deep breath and pushed past his turbulent emotions. “If you don't make it, I'm going to do those things for you. I don't know how I'll have babies without you, but the rest... I'll finish your work for you. All right?” Tears were pouring down his cheeks. “This isn't the end of your story, but if you need to leave us, rest assured that I will...” He wiped his cheeks. “I will always love you and I will finish what you started.”

“But you listen to me, Kathryn. You will be strong and you will survive this, because I'm not talking to any reporters until this is decided one way or another.” He ran his fingers through his hair and bowed his head. “I'm sorry. I just don't know how I'm going to handle losing you. I just know that I have to find a way.”

He continued talking to her all through the night to make sure that she knew he was there. Knowing how stubborn she could be, he figured at some point she was going to sit up and start arguing with him. He tried saying things that he knew she'd disagree with, just to get her goat. He tried kissing her and talking about the family they'd have some day. While he hoped that he was getting through to her, he was afraid that he was making himself go mad in the process.

Just before dawn, Harry and Amy came into the room. “Chakotay, sorry for interrupting,” Harry said. “We just wanted to see how you two were doing.”

As Amy checked Kathryn's vitals, Chakotay said, “I'm great. Healthy as an ox. She, on the other hand...”

“...is stable,” Amy finished. “So long as she's connected to all of this equipment.”

Hopefully, Chakotay asked, “What do you know about the two hearts?”

“Not enough.” Amy placed her hand on Kathryn's sternum. “I keep thinking that if I'd known more...”

“No,” Harry stopped her. “You had Dr. Crusher advising you every step of the way. What's going on now is not your fault.”

“Still...”

“Stop,” Chakotay interrupted. “Dr. Murphy...”

“Please, call me Amy.”

“All right, Amy. I want you to listen to me carefully.”

“Yes, sir?”

“Kathryn has taken an interest in you, as she has many young officers.” He nodded at Harry.
“Him included.”

Hesitantly she said, “I’m honored to know that, sir.”

“If she were able to talk to you right now, she’d tell you that it does no good to second guess yourself. The more doubts you let affect you, the slower your response is in critical situations. Know that you did the best you could with the resources and information that were available to you at the time.”

Harry added, “And really, Amy, Dr. Crusher was with you every step of the way. You are not solely responsible for this.”

“I let her go home instead of to the hospital where she belonged.”

Chakotay pointed out, “Dr. Zimmerman let her stay at home.”

“Did she give the Doctor a choice?” Harry asked.

“Yes, she did. After a close call, she was ready to come here, but Joe assured her there was nothing that could be done here until they had more information.” Chakotay noticed that the young doctor had stopped listening to them. “Amy?”

“Shhh,” she said quickly as she re-opened her medical tri-corder. “I felt a change.”

“A good one?”

Intent on her readings, she barely shook her head. “Call her doctor. There’s a fluctuation in her breathing pattern.”

Chakotay slapped the call button on the panel beside the bed. “We need Zimmerman! NOW!”

Amy threw open the medical supply cabinet and pulled out a bag valve mask. “Captain, secure the mask over her mouth and nose. Get an air-tight seal.”

Chakotay did as instructed; holding Kathryn’s face firmly in his hands while whispering, “Stay with us, love.”

Amy pumped air with one hand while holding the tri-corder with the other.

Joe ran into the room with two nurses hot on his tail. “Report!”

“Agonal respiration, Doctor. She needs a ventilator.”

“That can’t be.” Joe took his own set of scans.

Anxiously, Chakotay asked, “What does that mean?”

Joe shook his head in dismay as he studied the readings. “It would indicate that she’s already past cardiac arrest, but the heart is still functioning.”

Amy pointed out, “But not optimally. Could her brain think she’s in cardiac arrest?”

“I suppose, if the heart isn’t sending the right impulses back to the brain, but if it’s functioning, it should be processing impulses correctly.”

Chakotay shouted, “Who’s the expert on this heart? Get them in here, now!”

“I am, Captain,” Joe informed him. “Nurses, get me the following...”

As Joe shouted commands, Chakotay bent over so that his lips were resting against Kathryn’s forehead. He whispered, “Hang on, my love. Don’t let go.”

After the medical team left, Chakotay felt completely numb from head to toe. Harry and Amy were still with him, as were Gretchen and Phoebe. He was standing away from the bed, near the window, watching Kathryn from across the room.

Gretchen asked, “Chakotay? Are you all right?”

His face slowly turned to look at her. “No, I’m not all right.”

Amy offered, “This ventilator will keep her alive.”

He clamped his eyes shut and said, “I feel like I’m going to be sick.”

Harry quickly crossed the room, grabbed the trash can, and guided Chakotay to a chair. “Sit down. Maybe it’ll pass.”

“This is not something that’s going to pass,” he shouted. “Look at her!”

“Chakotay,” Gretchen said softly. “Maybe you should get away from here. You’ve...”

“I can’t leave her.”

“I know how you feel.”

“Damn it! How could you possibly know how I feel?” As soon as he’d shouted at her, he felt guilty. “I’m sorry, Gretchen.”

She came over and took his hand. “You don’t need to apologize. As I said, I know how you feel. I lost Kathryn’s father because of his involvement with Starfleet.”

“I know.”

“And while the circumstances are different, I know the unbearable feelings of loss, emptiness, and loneliness that you’re feeling. It was the second most horrible thing I’ve ever experienced.”

“I’m afraid to ask what the first is.”

She motioned towards her daughter. “Losing my Katie, but she’s been given back to me over and over again.”

“Thought so,” he said with an exhausted sigh.

Everyone in the room was silent for a moment as they watched Kathryn sleep. The ventilator mask covered most of her face as it supplied the life-giving oxygen that she needed.

Harry asked, “Chakotay, did you sleep at all last night?”

“No.”

“And the night before?”

“A few hours.”

“I figured as much. You look awful.”

Unemotionally, he replied, “Thanks.”

“All right,” Harry said as he rubbed his hands together. “Here’s what we’re going to do. I’m going to organize a rotation of her family and friends to sit with her so that you don’t have to worry about her being alone. You’re going to go home and sleep. Can you handle that?”

“I can’t go.” Chakotay clutched at his chest. “If she starts to die, I need to be here.”

Amy said, “She’s not going to die while she’s on that ventilator and these other machines. They will sustain her life indefinitely.”

“But there’s a chance she may never wake up,” he pointed out.

Amy asked everyone in the room, “Who is designated as her power of attorney?”

Chakotay replied, “I am. She did that last August.”

“All right, then. The only way she’s going to die now is for you to take her off the machines.”

“Amy,” Harry warned.

“Hear me out. All I'm trying to say is that you, Chakotay, can go home and sleep because she will not die while you're away. She can only get better at this point, and you being here is not going to impact that one way or the other.”

Chakotay shook his head sadly. “I understand what you're saying, but I can't leave her. What if she wakes up while I'm gone? Last two times, I wasn't here. I don't want that to happen again.”

Amy said, “She's in a coma. There will be clear signs for at least an hour that she'll be coming out of it. Possibly an entire day or two.”

Phoebe said, “Trust us to watch over her, Chakotay. Go home and sleep for awhile. Your head will be clearer.”

Rubbing his face, he admitted, “I am exhausted.”

“Come on,” Gretchen said as she tugged on his arm. “Let's put you to bed.”

“Just a moment.” He went to Kathryn's side and stroked her hair back from her face. Placing a kiss on her forehead, he whispered, “I love you.”

Once they were gone, Amy said, “He's really in sad shape.”

“No, he's not,” Harry replied. “He's exhausted, but I think he's doing remarkably well, considering.”

“He's afraid that she'll die while he's not looking,” she pointed out.

“That's a very legitimate fear for him because she's come really close far too many times. I'm a little apprehensive about leaving her, too.”

“Well,” Amy said with a sigh. “There's nothing else really that can be done at this point. She'll either come out of this or she won't.”

Phoebe butted in. “How can you say that?”

Amy motioned towards the bed. “She's on life-support.”

“I'm aware of that, but how can you be so flippant about her condition?”

“I'm sorry if I offended you.”

“Look, I know that you’re a new doctor and all, but you’ve got to work on your bedside manner, hon.” Phoebe shook her head in dismay. “Or is this your way of coping? This ‘it is what it is’ attitude.”

“Well, it is how I cope. We’re taught in medical school to separate our personal feelings from our job as physician.”

Harry turned Amy towards him and gently held her arms. “Although you just saved her life, you’re not here as her physician. You’re here as her friend.”

“I’m both.”

He nodded. “I know, but a heavy dose of optimism will help regardless.”

“Weren’t we trying to get him to leave, though?”

“Yes, and while he’s very understanding, I don’t believe that this was the best time to broach the topic of his power to terminate her life support.”

Phoebe didn’t say anything, but she closed her eyes and clasped her hands together in front of her mouth.

“I was just trying to help ease his worries.”

He nodded and then turned to Phoebe. “Can you stay with her for awhile?”

“Absolutely, but I have to pick up my daughter at noon. Mom might be back by then.”

“Okay, when she gets back, have her contact me about how long she can stay, then I’ll find someone else to be here. I’m sure that Tom or B’Elanna would come right away.”

“Sure, Harry,” Phoebe went over to her sister’s bedside and picked up Kathryn’s hand. Looking down, she said, “Maybe I’ll work on her nails or something.”

“We’ve been here for about twenty-four hours and I think we could use some rest, too.” He stood on the other side of the bed and leaned over just as Chakotay had. While gently rubbing Kathryn’s shoulder, he whispered, “Don’t stay away too long. We miss you.”

Harry and Amy walked back to his apartment in near silence. Once they got inside, he asked, “Hungry?”

“Not really.” She hesitated before asking, “Should I beam back up to the Pioneer?”

“What for? Do you need something?” he asked absently as he took off his shoes.

“No, I just think perhaps I’ve overstayed my welcome here.”

Harry stopped and looked up at her. “Did I say something that made you feel that way?”

“Just... just the situation in the Admiral’s room.”

Realization dawned and he nodded with understanding. “If I hurt you, that certainly wasn’t my intention, but we should probably talk about it.”

“I should go.”

“No.” He stood and drew her into a hug. “Don’t leave because of that. I love you, Amy, and the last thing I want to do is offend or upset you.”

“It’s...” She shook her head and looked away. “I want to say all the right things and be the best doctor I can be, but I’m far from perfect.”

“How boring would the universe be if we were all perfect?” Harry put his fingers under her chin and drew her face back towards his. “The good news is that Phoebe seems like a very easygoing woman, and I know by Chakotay’s reaction that he was either too tired to comprehend what you said or that it wasn’t anything he hadn’t already thought about.”

“Can I crawl under a rock and come back out when she’s the President of the Federation or something?”

He chuckled and gave her a soft kiss. “No, but you can crawl under the covers with me. Shall we go to bed?”

“I’d like that.”

“Come on, then. Let’s sleep until someone wakes us.”

“Why don’t you just make arrangements with Tom or B’Elanna now, then no one will call.”

“Good idea.” Harry tapped his commbadge while walking down the hall to the bedroom. “Kim to Paris, San Francisco 477.”

“Harry!” Tom sounded almost startled. “Any news?”

“Are you both there?”

B’Elanna replied, “What’s wrong?”

“We got Chakotay to go home and sleep, but I promised him that we’d make sure someone was with Kathryn.”

“I’ll head that way,” she said quickly.

“No, no, no,” Harry called out. “Phoebe is there now, and I think Mrs. Janeway will be back after she makes sure Chakotay gets to bed. Will you go whenever they have to leave?”

“Will do,” Tom said. “How is Kathryn doing?”

“They put her on a ventilator early this morning so she’s on full life support.”

“That doesn’t sound good,” B’Elanna said.

“What’s good is that she’s still with us. Now, we all need to pitch in to take care of both her and Chakotay.”

Tom said, “I’m not sure which of them needs more from us.”

“For now, it’s Chakotay.” Harry sighed heavily. “We’re headed to bed. Would you check in with Phoebe at the hospital?”

“Will do, Harry,” Tom said. “Get some rest.”

Once the connection was closed, B’Elanna shook her head in disgust. “Sounds like she’s worse.”

“Or that they’re making sure she doesn’t get worse.” He pulled her into his arms. “Let’s try not to get upset so we can be there for Chakotay when he needs to talk. All right?”

“Fine,” she said as she pulled out of his arms.

“B’Elanna…”

“I want to be upset, if that’s all right with you?”

“Okay,” he said with understanding.

“Can you deal with your daughter while I go pound on the shower wall or something equally as pointless?”

“Will do. I’ll replicate some new ceramic tiles while I’m in the kitchen.” He tried not to smile as she slammed the bathroom door. Walking into the kitchen, he asked, “How’s that applesauce? Yummy, yummy?”

“Up-py!” Miral yelled as she raised her arms and dropped her spoon on the floor.

“You want up?” he asked as he took a damp towel and washed the sticky mess off of his daughter’s face and hands.

“Up-py!”

“Up we go,” he sang as he picked her up. “Let’s call the hospital, shall we?”

“Da!”

He smiled as he tapped his commbadge. “Paris to Phoebe Richards at Starfleet Medical.”

“Richards, here,” she replied.

“Phoebe, this is Tom Paris. Harry Kim asked me to contact you.”

“Oh, hi Tom. Mom is back and can stay with Katie all day and night.”

“She doesn’t need to do that.”

Gretchen spoke up, “But I want to be with my daughter, Tom.”

“Can we make a deal?”

“What’s that?”

“You save your energy so you can spend every morning with her and let us cover the rest of the time.”

“You’re assuming that Chakotay will leave once he gets caught up on his sleep.”

“Let’s just say that we’ll strongly encourage him to do so and hope for the best.”

“All right, Tom. But only because you badgered me into it,” she joked. “Come by at two or so?”

“I’ll send B’Elanna, but call us if you need anything before then. Harry has gone to sleep.”

“Thanks, Tom. We’ll be in touch,” Gretchen said.

After the signal closed, Phoebe asked, “Do you get the feeling that everyone she knows wants to sit here twenty-four hours a day?”

Gretchen straightened her daughter’s blankets as she said, “It’s because she’s such a charming conversationalist in this state.”

Phoebe took a deep breath and then sighed as she continued to work on her sister's fingernails. "Wow, her nails are in bad shape."

"I heard about a new product that will regenerate broken fingernails. Should I pick one up?"

"I'm not sure it matters that they aren't all the same length."

Gretchen looked at what Phoebe was doing. "A couple of them are split down into the nail beds, though. Looks like it hurts."

"I'm guessing it's pretty minor compared to all her other aches and pains."

As Joe came in, Gretchen said, "True, but if we can fix such a little problem as that, we might as well."

"What problem?" he asked.

"Her fingernails are in bad shape."

Joe examined them and said, "Hmm. I'll send a nurse in to fix them. We're also going to start therapy on her arms. We might as well get that done while we're waiting for her to wake up."

"Thanks," Phoebe said. "How's she doing?"

"As well as can be expected." Joe studied the readings on the display at the end of the bed. "Her blood oxygen level is high which means the new heart is doing its job and her lungs are getting the oxygen they need. We should expect several days with no change, but don't let that alarm you. No change indicates that she's stable."

Gretchen rubbed her eyes tiredly. "I don't know whether to feel angry or sad or relieved."

Phoebe replied, "All three, and I could add a few more to the list."

Joe said, "Even though I'm only a hologram, I understand how you feel. There's not an organic person that I care more about than the Admiral."

Gretchen and Phoebe shared a look but didn't say anything.

He asked, "Mrs. Janeway, if I have a nurse bring in some lotion, would you massage it into the Admiral's arms?"

"I'd be happy to. What's it for?"

"A protein infused formula that I developed. I'm hoping it will aid in the regeneration of her muscle mass." He shrugged. "If it doesn't work, the only side effect will be very healthy skin."

“Not a bad side affect, Doctor.”

“I’ll check in a little later.”

“Bye,” they both said as he walked out. When he was gone, Phoebe said, “Have you also noticed how everyone seems to think they know how everyone else feels?”

Gretchen sighed but didn’t comment because her personal communicator beeped. She pulled it out of her pocket and tapped the answer key. “This is Gretchen Janeway.”

“Gretchen?” Chakotay asked anxiously.

“You’re supposed to be asleep.”

“I think I’m having a panic attack. Is Kathryn all right?”

“She’s in the same condition that she was when you last saw her. I don’t know that I’d classify that as ‘all right.’”

“Maybe I was dreaming,” he admitted.

“It wouldn’t surprise me. Will you be okay or would you like us to send a friend to you?”

“I’ll be okay.”

“Yes, you will, but check in as often as you need to.”

He yawned and said, “Thanks.”

“Go back to sleep. We’ll call you if there is any status change, although her doctor said not to expect one for a couple of days.”

“M’kay.” He yawned again. “Thank you.”

Phoebe called out, “Have sweet dreams this time. Okay?”

“kay. Night.”

When he didn’t cut the comm line, Gretchen did it for him. “Poor dear.”

“He’s coping as best he can, I guess.”

Nodding, Gretchen said, “I think I would’ve had a nervous breakdown long before now if it weren’t for him. At some point, he’s bound to crash.”

“We’ll help him through,” Phoebe replied. “We’re his family now.”

Gretchen picked up Kathryn's arm and started caressing it. "Whether she makes it or not, we've got to keep Chakotay close. For Katie."

Phoebe's jaw trembled as she said, "It's what she'd want."

The next morning as Chakotay made his way from Kathryn's house in San Francisco to Starfleet Medical Center, he felt renewed. He always felt better after a good night's sleep, but it always seemed that when he needed it most, he forgot that small truth.

He'd been to the hospital the evening before to check on her, but there'd been no change in her condition. B'Elanna was there, and since Harry had arrived to spend the night, Chakotay had decided to take them up on their offer to watch over his sleeping beauty. Although now that he felt better, he planned to stay for the long haul.

Chakotay exited the transporter station near the medical center and was walking up the sidewalk when he noticed a huddle of suspicious looking bystanders up ahead. "Reporters," he grumbled. He'd run into more than he'd ever wanted to see while Kathryn had been missing, his last interaction being on Christmas Day less than a month before.

He ran his fingers through his hair, took a steadying breath, and marched on with the hopes that they wouldn't notice him. Less than ten steps later, he realized that he'd had no such luck.

"Captain Chakotay!"

Holding up his hand to signal for them to stop, he said, "I have no comments."

Several reporters shouted questions at him. "Captain, can you confirm that Admiral Janeway is a patient here at Starfleet Medical?" "Is it true that she was attacked in her home?" "Captain, what is Admiral Janeway's current condition?" "Can you give us any updates on the investigation surrounding Admiral Janeway's abduction?"

As the reporters surrounded him, he was forced to stop walking. Balling his hands into fists at his sides, he raised his chin and glared at the ones blocking his path. "Excuse me, please."

They ignored his request and continued to shout questions at him. He closed his eyes and counted to ten, willing them to go away. When they didn't, he raised his voice and commanded, "Back off."

One got in his face and asked, "Who is taking Admiral Janeway's position with Starfleet?"

"I don't give a damn about Kathryn's job at the moment. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to get inside."

“Is Admiral Janeway a patient here?”

“What do you think?” He raised his eyebrows and gave the young reporter a look that clearly indicated Chakotay’s opinion regarding the stupidity of the question.

Another reporter asked, “Is the Admiral dying, Captain?”

Chakotay snapped, “Wouldn’t that please the sons-of-bitches that had her tortured for three weeks straight?”

“Do you have any evidence as to who they are?”

“Rest assured that if I knew, I’d be beating down their door and Voyager’s entire crew would be falling in behind me.”

“Can you tell us about the Admiral’s current condition, sir?”

“No. Some things are not for public consumption.”

“Captain, the people of the Federation want to know if she’s all right.”

“All right?” he boomed. “Are you kidding me? Did you not see her at last week’s press conference? You tell me if she’s ‘all right!’ Now, get out of my way or I’m going to take some of you out. Which will it be?”

Chakotay decided that the two reporters standing directly in front of him were smarter than they looked because they immediately backed away. Pushing his way through the rest, he got himself into the hospital only to be confronted with Kathryn’s C.O. “Admiral,” he gasped in surprise.

“At ease, Captain. Is there a problem?”

He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “Reporters, and I wasn’t in the mood. I don’t think I said anything too disparaging, but I did have to threaten them to get them to move out of my way.”

Khurma looked over Chakotay’s shoulder with a raised eyebrow. “I’m sure you did fine, Captain. Even when they don’t get their answers, they thrive on a little bit of drama.”

“I think I gave them more than just a little,” Chakotay said with exasperation. “Have you been upstairs?”

“Just came from there,” he said with a nod. “She’s looked better.”

“That’s putting it mildly.”

“And so have you. I’m ashamed to admit that I’ve been so worried about her that I’ve overlooked how much this has affected you. Is there anything I can do?”

“Can you get reporters off my back?”

“Unfortunately, no.”

“Only other thing I can think of is to find the people who did this to her. I’d go after them myself if I didn’t need to be here with her.”

Khurma put his hand on Chakotay’s shoulder to pull him to aside so they could speak privately. “Captain, I hope you know how much I respect and care for Kathryn. I’m doing everything I can, but this is a complex situation and it will take some time to bring it to a proper closure.”

“I realize that, but surely with the entirety of Starfleet at your beck and call, there must be some actions that you can take?”

“Captain…” he said patiently.

“My apologies, sir, I don’t mean to be insubordinate.”

“But all of this is getting to you. I understand.” Khurma looked at him for a moment and then stepped in closer. “I can tell you that one of Pratin’s men started talking yesterday, and not the one who had talked to us before. It seems that this one is afraid that we were the cause of his boss’s death.”

“Did you learn anything?”

“Enough to sentence the entire group to life, most likely. We also got a list of the places they stopped while they had Kathryn aboard. We’re looking into them.”

“But nothing that would tell us who hired them?”

“I’m afraid that information died with Pratin. He didn’t tell any of his people.”

Chakotay felt a surge of desperation wash over him. He looked up at the ceiling to try to hide his reaction. “I don’t know how we can cope with such an undefined and dangerous threat with no conclusion in sight.”

Khurma nodded with understanding. “It’s an agonizing situation, but I’m doing everything in my power to get the evidence we need.”

“I’d like to help. I need something else to think about other than her lying up there like she is.”

“Would it help to give you something to do? Not related to Kathryn’s work, but to yours?”

“I don’t think I could handle a class this semester.”

“What about a few short-term seminars? I understand that you’re a gifted teacher, and I can’t help but wonder if getting you in front of the cadets would restore some of your equilibrium.”

“I fear they’d spend the entire class wanting to discuss Kathryn just like those reporters do.”

“You could lay down the ground rules at the beginning of the session.” He patted Chakotay on the back and said, “Think about it. Not today, but when you’re ready.”

“It will depend on how long she’s in a coma, sir.”

“I know it will.” Khurma smiled kindly. “Come see me if you need anything, anything at all. Will you do that?”

Chakotay nodded. “Thank you, sir.”

The men parted ways and Chakotay made his way up to Kathryn’s room. He nodded to the security guards who stood on each side of her door, and then went inside.

Gretchen looked up from where she and Phoebe were sitting. Warmly, she said, “Good morning, Chakotay. How are you feeling?”

Before he found an answer, his eyes were drawn to Kathryn’s deathly-still form. A sudden, overwhelming fear welled up inside of him and he felt his heart start beating frantically. Immediately, he turned around and walked back out, shutting the door behind him.

One of the guards asked, “Sir?”

He tried to reply, but couldn’t get any words past the lump in his throat. His hands were trembling and he felt like he could barely breathe.

Gretchen came out and put her hand on his back. “Chakotay?”

Holding his hand up, he managed to communicate, “Minute.”

“Let’s take a walk,” she suggested as she guided him down the corridor. Once they arrived at the nourishment room, she ushered him inside. “Are you having a panic attack?”

He nodded as he sat down and attempted to calm himself.

Gretchen grabbed a towel and dampened it with cool water. She placed it on the back of his neck, and then started rubbing his back. “A friend of mine has these episodes, often. She finds that it helps to count slowly.”

After a moment, he replied, "What would help me is for Kathryn to sit up and start arguing about something. Call me crazy, but I've always found that calming after she's been injured or sick."

"No doubt. When she's feisty, you know that she's got some life in her."

"Yes, and just so you know, I'm in love with that feisty daughter of yours."

Gretchen chuckled and sat down across from him. "So I've noticed. Want something to eat?"

He shook his head. "I feel a little queasy."

"Understandable." Gretchen looked him over carefully and asked, "What set you off?"

"I shouldn't be having panic attacks."

"And I doubt that anyone who has one thinks they should."

"Good point," he said as he took the towel off of his neck and held it against his cheek.

"However, I'm of the opinion that they're for the faint of heart or for someone who's been through a traumatic situation."

"And you don't think you fit that description?"

"No, not exactly. Kathryn has been through one trauma after another. Me? I'm just the one who is supposed to catch her when she falls apart."

She shrugged. "Oh, I don't know. I'd surmise that not many men would still be standing after watching their wives go through what yours has."

"My wife?" he asked with a slight smile.

"As far as I'm concerned."

"I like the sound of that." He rubbed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"Your trauma may not have been as severe, but you have certain expectations for yourself about how you're going to cope. After four months of not seeing her, she disappears without a trace, you get her back in almost unrecognizable condition, then you watch her go through three near-death episodes."

"And then the doctors tell me that she may or may not survive."

"Have they said that specifically?"

"Not in so many words. What they haven't said is that she'll be fine, and they haven't argued with me when I've mentioned her impending death."

Gretchen cringed. “Chakotay...”

“I’m just trying to prepare myself for the inevitable because I’m pretty sure I will break down.” He shook his head as his eyes filled with tears. “I don’t know that I’ll survive without her.”

“You will, because you’ll do it for her.” She reached over and held his hands. “I didn’t think I could live without my Edward. I felt like I’d been abandoned. I was even angry with him for awhile because he took himself, my daughter, and my future son-in-law into such a dangerous situation. I know you’ve felt the same way – angry with Katie for putting herself in danger?”

Chakotay’s tears tumbled down his cheeks, but he didn’t need to answer.

She continued, “Eventually I came to realize that it was not Edward’s choice to leave me. It was a horrific loss, and I still get angry that I’ve been cheated out of all these years of happiness with my husband. But then I have to force myself to remember that I had almost twenty-five years with him. The time we spent together wasn’t always perfect, but there was love. That’s not something I want to forget.”

“And you had your daughters.”

“Yes, but I tried not to depend on them for my happiness. It’s a good thing I didn’t because when Voyager disappeared, I was beside myself with grief. If I’d been dependent on Katie, I don’t know what I would’ve done.”

“You’ve had friends to support you?”

“Boy, howdy, have I ever.” She squeezed his arm with reassurance. “If the unthinkable happens, you’ll realize that you’re going to be okay. People embrace a widow or a widower, and they’ll embrace you in ways you’d never expect. I know that nothing will ever replace her, and I hope, more than anything, that they’ll be no reason for it, but know that you’ll always be a part of our family, and your Voyager family as well.”

“Thank you, Gretchen, but how is it that you’re holding up so well?”

“I’m a good actress, and I like distracting myself with taking care of someone else. You, for example.” She gave him a loving smile and then patted her legs. “Now, I have it on good authority that when men are presented with a problem, they like to fix it. So, how can we fix you?”

Chakotay couldn’t help but be amused. “I don’t think I’m fixable.”

“How about we get you a good shrink?” she asked, half jokingly.

“Who needs one when a perfectly good mother-in-law is around?”

She winked at him. “That might work in the short-term, but don’t disregard it completely.”

“I’ll take that under advisement.”

“In all seriousness, what set you off?”

He stood and poured himself a cup of water. After taking a sip, he confessed, “I keep having memory flashes of her dying. Seeing her there in the hospital bed is too much.”

“You need some time away.”

“Yes and no. I don’t want to be apart from her, but I’m dreading spending the foreseeable future looking at her comatose body.”

“I can understand that. Phoebe and I are presently giving her a spa treatment to make her look more perky.”

“A spa?” he asked, turning around to look at Gretchen inquisitively.

“Today, it’s her nails. Tomorrow, we plan to color her hair and give her a facial. That’s where we deep-clean her pores,” she said as she pointed to her own face.

“How can I help?”

“Dr. Joe gave us some cream that he wants rubbed into her arms. I did it for her yesterday, but you could do it today, if you’d like?”

Chakotay thought for a moment and then nodded. “I think I would.”

“And then, I think you should ask Harry Kim to keep finding people to sit with Katie if you don’t want her to be alone. While she’s asleep, you can catch up on your rest. Maybe even work on some of that sand art you do.”

“You’d make a good therapist, Gretchen. Maybe you missed your calling.”

She opened the door and motioned for him to walk out with her. “Oh, I don’t know. I think I would tire of other people’s problems. I much prefer math problems where the answers are black and white. All this ambiguity over love and loss can be exhausting.”

“Well, I’m glad you decided to solve my problems. I feel a lot better.”

“Good,” she said as she patted his back some. “I’ll save up my therapeutic energy for my family.”

Chakotay followed Gretchen's recommendations and spent only short amounts of time in the hospital for the next two days. True to their word, Phoebe and Gretchen had Kathryn looking quite beautiful despite the tubes in her nose and mouth.

The press mostly left Chakotay alone, but they managed to trap other Voyagers into short interviews. All of Kathryn's former crew told the press that Admiral Janeway merely needed their continued good thoughts for a speedy recovery and left it at that.

On the fifth morning after surgery, Chakotay was working with the physical therapist to exercise Kathryn's legs when Joe came into the room, looking gloomy.

"Good morning, Captain."

"Is it?" he asked, noticing that Joe's mannerisms were more subdued than usual.

"Will the Admiral's mother and sister be in this morning?"

"They've just gone downstairs for breakfast. They should be back, soon. Why?"

Joe nodded to the physical therapist. "Would you excuse us for a few minutes, please?"

She said, "Of course. Captain, continue what you're doing for ten more reps. I'll be back this afternoon."

After she was gone, Joe sat down and said, "We need to talk."

When he heard the door open, Chakotay didn't look up from where he was sitting at Kathryn's side. He was doing all he could to hold himself together.

Gretchen asked, "Chakotay? What's wrong?"

He found his voice, but it was shaky. "Phoebe, do you remember when Dr. Murphy said that only I could decide to take Kathryn off of life support?"

"Oh, God," Phoebe replied as she fell into a heap in the chair opposite Chakotay.

Gretchen said, "The doctors haven't said anything about Katie getting worse."

"Joe just gave me a status update. The problem isn't that she's getting worse; it's that she isn't getting better. He expected a modicum of improvement in four days, and there's been none."

"Surely, you're not considering..." Phoebe trailed off, unable to finish.

"No! But..." He rubbed his face in frustration.

Gretchen sat down next to him and took his hand. She encouraged, "Tell us what he said."

"He wants to try taking her off the ventilator. They'll monitor her breathing very closely, but there's a good chance it could fail again. If it does, we have to decide whether we want to sustain her life or let her go."

"Sustain it!" Phoebe yelled. "You can't possibly be considering anything else!"

"That's what my heart is telling me, but am I being unrealistic?"

Phoebe closed her eyes and said, "It has only been four days."

Gretchen asked, "Did the doctors have any suggestions for other treatment options? Things they haven't tried?"

"No, and it's not like our Dr. Joe to give up. That's the only reason I'm considering it."

"What did he say, exactly?"

He tapped his commbadge. "Chakotay to Zimmerman."

"Go ahead, Captain."

"When you have a moment, would you help me talk to her family?"

"I'll be right there."

Gretchen said, "We're with you, Chakotay. You're not alone in this decision."

"I appreciate that." He stood and leaned over Kathryn's body, getting close to her face. Giving her a soft kiss on her forehead, he asked, "What would you do?"

Joe had arrived in time to hear the question. He said, "Knowing her as well as I do, I think in this situation, she'd keep going."

Chakotay looked up. "Even though you told me there isn't anything else you can do?"

"The Kathryn Janeway I know would hold out for a miracle if it were your life on the line. It's my job to let you know that a miracle is what it's going to take."

"Then let's..." He took a shuddering breath as he realized he was about to use her standard line. "Let's do it, and be ready to put her back on the ventilator."

Joe called in two nurses to assist him. As he worked, he explained to Phoebe and Gretchen, "My hope is that this will tell us if there has been any improvement. When we began artificially

regulating her breathing, we couldn't explain why it was needed. As far as all of our scans showed, she should've been fine breathing on her own."

"And the readings are exactly the same?" Gretchen asked as she watched over her daughter from the foot of the bed.

Phoebe asked, "So what happens if she doesn't breathe?"

Joe nodded towards Chakotay. "We put her back on the ventilator and keep searching for the source of the problem. I don't know where to start, but maybe an option will present itself."

Chakotay asked, "Will I be in the way if I stay up here and talk to her?"

Joe pulled the bed away from the wall and directed Chakotay to stand above Kathryn's head. "The first thing we'll do is turn the ventilator off. I won't pull the tube out until we know if we'll need it again or not."

Phoebe asked, "Doctor, if we have to put her back on it, what's the chance she'll recover?"

He looked up at Chakotay and waited for him to nod before explaining, "Slim to none, because in her current condition, she won't survive another surgery."

"Why would she need surgery?"

Chakotay said, "Because the problem lies in the new heart, and it would need to be replaced."

"What does that mean?" Phoebe's voice rose. "If we hadn't done the transplant, she'd be okay?"

"No," Joe said. "If we hadn't removed her heart, we'd be transplanting all of her organs by now."

"Are we ready to try this?" Chakotay asked, trying not to show impatience. Now that he'd made a decision, he was ready to get on with it.

"Yes," Joe replied as he opened a tri-corder. "I'll be monitoring her respiration. Nurse Meed, discontinue the ventilator. Nurse Morgan, remove the pump from the endotracheal tube."

As the medical team worked, Chakotay placed his hands on Kathryn's head to stroke his fingers through her hair. He tuned out all the conversation that was happening in the room and concentrated on her physical appearance and involuntary movements.

Her face was extremely pale, her freckles had faded to almost non-existence. The bright blue strap that held the tube to her mouth looked strange and surreal. He saw that the nurse's actions with the ventilator had stirred up some drool, so he carefully wiped Kathryn's lips clean with his thumb. "Stay with us, Kathryn. We'll take care of you," he whispered.

Joe reported, "Her respiration is very shallow, but that is a side affect of being on a respirator for an extended period of time."

"Do we wait for it to deepen on its own?" Chakotay asked.

Nurse Morgan suggested, "A firm massage on her sternum might stimulate the lungs. Shall I try?"

Joe hesitated, but then nodded as he opened the neck of Kathryn's shirt. "Be careful along the superior border. The bone isn't as strong as I'd like."

"I won't use much pressure."

Chakotay watched as Morgan rubbed briskly just beneath the clavicles, but he was startled when Kathryn took a sudden, deep breath. "Is she waking?"

"No," Joe said. "That was just a response to the stimulus. Let's see if it lasts."

The nurse stopped and they all watched Kathryn's chest rise and fall with each breath. Gradually, the motion decreased until she was barely moving.

Morgan asked, "Shall I try again?"

Joe tapped some keys on his tri-corder and then said, "Go ahead. I'm going to take a scan of her brain activity this time."

In an effort to be doing something proactive, Chakotay massaged the muscles on the side of Kathryn's neck. Her eyelids fluttered and her arms jerked, startling everyone. "What caused that?"

"Nurse Meed, get me a neurogenic stimulator," Joe ordered. He set down his tri-corder and told Chakotay, "I'm going to hold her eyelids open, and I want you to gently turn her head to the side."

"Which side?"

"Doesn't matter. Towards me," he amended.

As Chakotay followed Joe's instructions, he asked, "You found something?"

"I think I did." He smiled at what he saw. "And this is good. This is very good."

Gretchen commented, "Her eyes didn't move."

"Precisely. Now," Joe said with a renewed energy. "Mrs. Janeway, pinch the nailbed on her big toe. Let's see if she has a reflex."

Gretchen peeled Kathryn's sock off and did as Joe asked. When nothing happened, Phoebe said, "When I was giving her a pedicure, her foot never moved at all."

Chakotay frowned. "I thought for sure she'd react."

Gretchen said, "That had to have hurt."

"Captain," Joe said. "Rub her neck just like you did a moment ago."

"Okay." Holding Kathryn's head steady, he massaged in circles the way it helped her sore neck most.

"Is that exactly what you were doing?" Joe asked.

"No, but she likes this best."

"I need you to make the exact same motion – lateral strokes near the basilar artery on the sides of her neck. While he's doing that, Mrs. Janeway, try pinching again."

Chakotay tried to mimic his motions as much as possible, and as soon as he got a good motion going, Kathryn made an incomprehensible sound, her eyelids fluttered, and she pulled her foot away. "What was that?"

"I would've never thought," Joe said in dismay. "Captain, if you hadn't decided to massage her neck, we wouldn't have figured this out." He looked up at Meed. "You have it?"

"Neurogenic stimulator," she said as she handed it over.

Joe turned the device on and directed it at the side of Kathryn's head. "What we've got is a communication breakdown between her medulla oblongata and the rest of her body. It's not the new heart that's malfunctioning."

"A brain injury?" Chakotay asked in surprise.

"It most likely happened during surgery, and was minor enough that we didn't detect it. Her comatose state and the respirator have camouflaged the symptoms, or rather, her lack of reflexes."

Gretchen asked, "So the fact that she doesn't have reflexes is a good thing?"

"It's a consistency that points to a very specific answer. Excuse me, Captain," he said as he nudged Chakotay's hands out of the way. "The medulla controls all autonomic functions – respiration, blood pressure, circulation, muscle tone, swallowing, reflexes, urination, and so forth. Her new heart is forcing some of those to continue despite any brain damage. The ventilator was forcing the respiration. The catheter was forcing the urination."

“Is it repairable?” Phoebe asked.

“That’s what I’m doing now.”

When Joe started humming, Chakotay nearly gasped in relief. “She’s going to be okay?”

“I believe so.” He stopped for just a moment and looked at Chakotay. “Now that I know what the problem is, I’ll make sure of it.”

Morgan said, “Her respiration rate is falling again.”

Joe asked, “Captain, would you massage her sternum?”

“Gladly.” He was doing his best not to cry with joy as he switched places with the nurse. “Tell me if I do this too hard.”

“You’ll be fine,” Morgan said. “Don’t press into the bone, just be vigorous with the soft tissues.”

As Chakotay worked, Gretchen moved up beside him and dotted his cheeks with a tissue. She whispered, “You take care of her, and I’ll get these runaway tears.”

“Thank you,” he said sincerely. “You’re doing better now, too?”

“Much better. Thank you for loving my daughter so much that you want to touch her all the time.”

Phoebe pointed out, “Not many future mother-in-laws would say that.”

“No, I suppose not,” Gretchen said with a grin. “But I have a very special future son-in-law.”

Nurse Morgan asked, “You’re getting married?” As soon as she said it, she clamped her mouth shut. “My apologies. I shouldn’t be asking that question.”

Chakotay winked at her. “I’ll trust you to keep our secret.”

Nurse Meed pointed out, “With the ring on the Admiral’s finger, I doubt it’s that much of a secret among the hospital staff.”

“I suppose not,” he said with a smile as he watched for Kathryn to respond to his massage. At first, nothing happened, but as his touch became firmer, her lungs inflated reflexively.

Joe spoke to the ceiling. “Zimmerman paging Orson to Room 547.”

“Who is Orson?” Chakotay asked.

“Chief of Neurology. I’d like her to take a look at this,” he said as he studied the scanner readout.

“Problem?” he asked worriedly.

“No, but I want to make sure I’m not missing something again.”

Phoebe’s personal communicator chimed. “Thornhill Elementary calling Phoebe Richards.”

Phoebe slammed her palm against her forehead. “Damn.” Tapping her communicator, she said, “Sorry, I’m on my way.”

“That’s all right, Mrs. Richards. Katie is happily looking at a book here with me.”

“Katie, honey, I’ll be right there,” Phoebe said as she gathered her things. “I’m with your Aunt.”

“Aunt Katie! Is she better?”

“A little, but she’s still sleeping. Would you like to visit her?”

“Yes! Yes! Yes!” Katie shouted excitedly.

“I’ll be there soon, honey. Richards out.” Phoebe looked apologetically at everyone. “Sorry, but I need to go.”

Chakotay smiled at her. “We’ll look forward to seeing Katie in a little while.”

“After lunch,” Phoebe waved as she walked out the door.

Not five seconds later, a middle-aged woman with black eyes came into the room. “Dr. Zimmerman?”

“Yes, Dr. Orson,” Joe replied. “If you have a few minutes, I’d like to have your opinion.”

She looked around the room and nodded in recognition. “This must be Admiral Janeway. I asked the computer for this room’s patient information and received a response that indicated a computer error.”

“Ah,” Joe nodded. “Must be a security precaution. If the computer had her listed as classified, it might give someone a clue that we have a VIP in here.”

“What seems to be the problem?” she asked as she pulled out her scanner.

As Joe explained, Chakotay concentrated on Kathryn. Her respiration remained steady, but he couldn’t tell if it was normal or still shallow.

Gretchen took his hands and pulled him to the side. “She’s breathing okay now. Let’s give the doctors room to work.”

“Was I in the way?”

Dr. Orson spoke, “Not at all, Captain. However, I'm betazoid and one drawback of that is that I'm finely attuned to the emotions of everyone in the room. If you could think relaxing thoughts, you would help me concentrate.”

Chakotay rubbed his face, nodding with understanding. “I had a betazoid crew member that I had to do the same with.” He tried to clear his mind and focus on his own breathing instead of Kathryn’s.

Gretchen reached up and pulled him into a hug, whispering, “Relax, son. She’s going to be okay now.”

“I hope so. I'm on edge that he summoned this neurologist.”

She pulled back and looked him in the eye. “Have you been listening to their conversation?”

“No, I was focused on your daughter.”

“Listen,” she encouraged.

Joe was midsentence as he asked, “...anything abnormal in the adjoining lobes?”

“The cerebellum and thalamus regions look healthy, but just to be sure, I’d like to run a scan of her brain wave activity when her body is clear of neural stimulants.”

“Ah, yes. I administered that in an attempt to diagnose the problem.”

“A good call, but to get an accurate mapping of the neurons, we should wait for about eight hours.”

“I’ll have that done this evening. Do you need to be present?”

She chuckled. “No, but I’d like to be. An opportunity to look at this woman’s brain is an event not to be missed.”

“I assure you that while she is a remarkable woman, her brain waves are nothing out of the ordinary.”

“Still, I’d like to be there,” she said as she straightened up and looked at Chakotay and Gretchen. “I don’t expect to find any problems, but I want to be sure.”

“We appreciate that.”

“Dr. Zimmerman, I’ll check in with you this afternoon,” she said before leaving the room.

Once gone, Gretchen asked, “What did she mean by a moderate coma state?”

“The Admiral has been in a severe coma, but the procedure we just did on her brain has brought her status up to moderate. I believe we can expect to see continued improvement over the next day or two.”

She commented, “I didn’t realize there were different levels.”

“Oh, yes,” Joe replied. “In response to painful stimuli, she is flexing muscles, opening her eyes, and making audible sounds. That shows significant improvement over where she was just an hour ago. As her strength improves, I hope to see more of that.”

Chakotay rubbed his neck as he watched Kathryn sleep. “So, now we wait?”

“Now we wait,” Joe confirmed. “I’ll be back a little later to check on her, but we’ve got her on monitors.”

After he left, Chakotay sat down in a chair, leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

“You okay?” Gretchen asked.

He hummed tiredly. “I’m not sure.”

“Why don’t you go home and rest?”

“I feel like I should be here.”

“In case she wakes?”

“Yeah. I promised her.”

She leaned down and squeezed his shoulders, placing a kiss on his head. “I’ll go get us some lunch.”

Chakotay opened his eyes and offered, “The gentlemanly thing to do would be for me to get that.”

“Stay here,” she said as she patted his arm. “Be back in a few minutes.”

Once alone, he got up to look at Kathryn again. The tube was out of her mouth now, but he thought her lips looked chapped, so he pulled a tube of lip balm out of his pocket and gently

rubbed some into the dry, reddened skin. “Got to make sure you’re kissable when you wake up, right?”

Her eyelids fluttered and her mouth twitched as he worked the balm in.

“You can feel that, can’t you?” He tucked her hair in place before giving her forehead a kiss. “I hope that means you know I’m here.”

Noticing that her gown was still lying open, he fastened it together. “Let’s make you a little less exposed, shall we? Don’t want you to get cold,” he said as he straightened up the covers around her. He carefully situated her arms so that they were at her sides and then he began to do some of the physical therapy exercises with one. “I know you’ll push yourself to get stronger once you’re out of here, so how about if I do some of the work for you now? You don’t mind, do you?”

He held her hand open and placed a kiss on her palm. “Thank you for staying with us. I…” Clamping his eyes shut, he continued, “…don’t think I could’ve made that decision.”

Late the next afternoon, Chakotay was still sitting with Kathryn, having sent home several who had come to be with her. His chin was having trouble staying up as he kept nodding off. When he went to sleep, he had nightmares about her nightmares. While he was awake, he was constantly tuned in to all of the movements and sounds that she was making in response to noises in the room.

He practically jumped out of his chair when the door opened, letting in the sound of someone talking too loud in the hall. Kathryn had a similar startled reaction, although hers was muted by unconsciousness. Regardless of her state of awareness, Chakotay felt the need to reassure her. “Shhhhh,” he whispered as he stroked her face.

“Sorry,” B’Elanna whispered as she and Matt Patterson came into the room.

“I didn’t realize she was awake,” Matt commented as he studied Kathryn.

“She’s not, Admiral,” Chakotay said as he stepped away from the bed to compose himself. “Just in some kind of partial coma state.”

B’Elanna looked at him strangely and then shook her head in dismay. “You look like hell, old man.”

“Don’t hold back, B’Elanna.” He sighed tiredly. “I keep thinking she’s going to wake up.”

“What does Joe say?”

“That she could wake up any day now.”

“Has he tried to send you away?”

“Mmm hmmm.” Chakotay blinked slowly and then shook his head to clear it. “Sorry, what did you ask?”

She and Matt shared a look and then Matt said, “If you’ll excuse me for a moment, I’ll be right back.”

Chakotay looked at the door closing, and then back at B’Elanna. “He okay?”

“Yeah, just wants to talk to someone.”

“He could’ve said something.”

B’Elanna walked up and gave Chakotay a hug. “He did. You’re beyond exhausted.”

“Mmmhmmm.” His head dropped sleepily, his chin colliding with her forehead.

She stepped back, holding onto his arms. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were drunk. You have to get to bed, Chakotay.”

Matt and Joe came into the room and Joe said, “Captain, when I said she’d wake up any day, I didn’t mean today.”

“Today?” He rubbed the grittiness out of his eyes and tried to focus on the conversation.

“Not today,” he repeated, and then looked at Matt. “There’s nothing I can do except admit him.”

B’Elanna said, “I don’t think that’s necessary. I’ll get him home.”

“Home?” Chakotay asked.

“Yes, home. That’s where you need to go, right now.”

“I can’t leave her. She might wake up, and I’ve got to be here.”

“Captain, you’ve been awake for almost thirty-six hours. You need to sleep.”

He waved off the concern. “I had to stay awake longer than that on Voyager.”

“Yeah, but you had adrenaline to keep you going,” B’Elanna pointed out. “Here, you don’t.”

Joe said, “Captain, why don’t you try to sleep in the recliner? I’m sure that B’Elanna or the Admiral here will keep watch and wake you if needed.”

He shook his head. "I can't sleep in this room. I've tried, but the memories of her last heart attack keep coming back to me."

"Do they bother you at home?" Matt asked.

"No," he said tiredly. "But I can hold out for a little longer. Maybe a little coffee would help. You said she should wake up today?"

"No, Captain, it won't happen today. At the rate she's coming out of this coma, it will be at least a day, if not two, before she enters a state where she'll need you here." He put his hand on Chakotay's back. "That will happen, though. Before she comes out of this completely, she'll get to a point where she's disoriented. She'll need you well rested to help her stay calm. Do you understand?"

"Will you be able to anticipate it?"

"Yes and no, but you're only a transporter call away, right?"

Chakotay looked at Kathryn. "Someone will be with her?"

Matt said, "Mr. Kim has a whole schedule worked out. I'm here until B'Elanna gets done with dinner, then your young Bajoran friend is going to spend the night."

"Celes?" the Doctor asked. When B'Elanna nodded, he said, "You know how attentive she is to the Admiral. I bet she'll stay wide awake listening to every sound all night long."

B'Elanna said, "And tomorrow morning, Mrs. Janeway is coming back. Tomorrow afternoon, Tom will be with her. Don't you have a project for your house or something you can do to keep yourself busy?"

"House," he whispered before looking at B'Elanna. "Yes, our house. I could do that."

"What about it?"

"I need to find a realtor – someone who can help me look at houses. Kathryn wants us to buy one out of town."

"I know just the woman for you," Matt said happily. "Go home, get some rest, and I'll leave a message on your comm. You can call her in the morning."

Chakotay looked back at Kathryn and then at the three who were waiting expectantly for him to make a move. "All right, but I'm trusting you to help me be here for her."

Joe nodded with understanding. "At her first intelligible sound, I will call you. Day or night."

“Thank you.” He gave Joe a slight smile and then turned to Kathryn. Tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, he said out loud to the others, “Hold her hand, if you would. She responds to touch.”

Matt patted his back firmly. “Go on, Captain. We’ll take good care of her. After all, I am her godfather.”

“You are?” Chakotay asked in surprise as he stepped out of Matt’s way. “I didn’t realize.”

“I’m not entirely sure Katie knows it, either. Something Ed and I talked about when she was about four or five years old.”

B’Elanna smiled. “What was she like at that age?”

“Precocious. There’s no other word for it.”

“Just like her niece,” Chakotay said with amusement. “Thank you, Admiral.”

Matt picked up Kathryn’s hand and pointed to her engagement ring. “I think you’d better start calling me Matt if you’re going to marry this one.”

With a slight chuckle, he nodded. “Thank you, Matt.”

B’Elanna put her arm around Chakotay’s shoulders and said, “Let’s go. She’s in good hands.”

Part 21 - “Recovering From A Nightmare”

By Dawn

Summary: Recovery

Rated PG-13

Kathryn felt the heavy lethargy of sleep weighing her down, but she knew that she must wake-up and face the music. She forced her eyes open and saw Chakotay leaning over her with a loving smile on his face, his eyes shining with unshed tears. She asked, “Is it time?”

“Time for what, love?” he asked affectionately as he brushed his fingertips through her hair.

“For the surgery?”

He kissed her head and remained close as he quietly said, “It’s over.”

“It is?” She was dumbfounded. “But I just fell asleep in your arms a few minutes ago.”

He shook his head. "That was over a week ago."

"A week?" she asked, taken aback.

He sat down on the edge of the bed, holding her hand. "It took your body awhile to adjust to the new heart."

Still a little foggy, it was a long moment before she registered what he'd said. "New heart," she repeated as she laid her free hand on her chest.

Laying his hand over hers, he asked, "How does it feel?"

She pressed her fingers against her sternum. "It's tender, but doesn't hurt like it did."

"Progress," he said sweetly and then nodded towards their clasped hands. "And your grip seems stronger."

The fog was starting to lift and she squeezed his hand in response. Remembering their conversation before she fell asleep, she said, "But I was supposed to die."

"Supposed to?" He frowned with worry. "Another premonition from the future?"

"No," she whispered, too emotional to speak. "Just resigned."

He drew her up to his chest where she snuggled against him, tears falling down her cheeks. Rubbing her back with broad, soothing strokes, he said, "Shhh... you're okay, love. We took care of you, and you're okay."

Chakotay held her for only a couple of minutes before she fell asleep in his arms. Very gently, he laid her back down, smoothed her hair back from her face, and tucked the blankets around her. He was watching her sleep when B'Elanna came up behind him and squeezed his shoulder.

"You okay?" she asked.

Chakotay nodded. "I'm glad Joe decided to call me when he did. I wouldn't have made it, otherwise"

"She's been stirring all afternoon, but she never got to that point where she seemed aware of her surroundings. He was waiting for that."

"I know. I've been worried that it hadn't happened yet. I thought it would be a couple days ago."

"Was she in pain? She seemed okay."

“She said her chest felt tender.”

B’Elanna hugged herself and rubbed her arms. “This whole ordeal has been a nightmare.”

“Let’s just pray that it’s over.” He stood up and looked out the window that overlooked the city. “Do you think everyone would be willing to continue the watch rotation, even though she’s awake now? Would Harry keep organizing it?”

“I’m sure he would, but don’t you want to be with her?”

“I do, but if she’s here much longer, I’ll go stir-crazy sitting in this room all day and night. Even now, it feels...” His throat tightened up, making it impossible for him to continue.

B’Elanna said, “I understand. I’ll talk to him, but I’m sure he’ll be happy to do it. He’s eager to help any way he can.”

Chakotay nodded absently. “I promised her that she wouldn’t be alone, but I...” He found himself unable to keep the emotions in check.

“Go. I’ll be here until ten, and Harry is planning to stay through the night.” B’Elanna asked, “Did you meet with the realtor? What was her name?”

Glad for the change in conversation, Chakotay took a deep breath and said, “Celia Brouillette. I’d just arrived at the house when I got the Doctor’s call that Kathryn was waking up.” He glanced back at Kathryn sleeping peacefully in the bed, and his heart felt heavy.

“So you saw the big house? Is it what you want?”

“The location is nice, but I didn’t see much. It’s peaceful – far away from everything that’s here.” That gave him an idea. “If you’re sure you can stay, I’ll call Celia back.”

“I’d planned on being here anyway. If she wakes up again, I’ll tell her that you needed fresh air and she’ll understand.”

“Thanks.” He wasn’t sure that leaving was the right thing to do, but as he looked down at Kathryn again, the memories of her dying assaulted his mind. He’d hoped that once she was on the path towards recovery, he wouldn’t need to keep forcing himself to be strong. Instead, it felt like his control was slipping. He needed to get out of there and he needed to be alone. He turned towards B’Elanna and said, “I’ll come back to visit after dinner, but if she seems sad that I’m not here, call me?”

“I will.” B’Elanna ushered him out the door.

When Chakotay got out into the hallway, he nodded to the two security guards and walked to the lift as fast as he could. He needed to get out of the hospital before he broke down.

He hurried to the transporter station, refusing to acknowledge anyone along the way for fear of running into a reporter. The transporter attendant immediately returned him to the location he'd just left – the front lawn of the vacant house that he'd been about to see. The house was set in the middle of a secluded forest, and seclusion was what he wanted most at the moment.

Chakotay ran into the dense woods until he felt like he couldn't breathe. He bent over, braced his hands on his knees, and let the emotional deluge begin. His entire body shook and tears rolled down his cheeks as relief, anger, worry, joy, fear, and love all fought for his attention. He'd been holding himself together for so long that, now that the dam had burst, he was powerless to stop it.

Even though she was safe, alive, and on the path towards recovery, the fear that he'd been afraid to acknowledge was washing over him in torrents. It had been six painfully long weeks since he'd learned that she was missing, and during that time, he'd been scared out of his mind, beset with grief for her probable death, and loving her so much that it caused a physical ache in his heart. He knew that his pain couldn't compare to hers, but there was no medication or surgery that would ease his.

He sat down with his back against a tree, his fist hitting the ground as he looked up at the sky through his watery eyes. "Why?!?" he yelled. "Why did she have to go through this?!? Why do the people I love have to suffer?!?"

His body continued to shake as he remembered her deathbed pleas. They'd nearly been his undoing as she'd cried out for help when he'd been unable to do anything except hold her. And now that she was awake, he was doing the last thing he'd ever expected – running away. But deep down, he knew that he had to remain strong for her, and having a breakdown at the hospital was not an option.

It took awhile, but Chakotay began to calm as he listened to the sound of the ocean waves crashing on the shore less than a kilometer away. The salt in the air complimented the now drying tears on his face. Although the emotional onslaught had purged much of his pent-up anguish, he was left feeling numb and exhausted. As he looked around him at the dense pine forest, he could definitely imagine himself living in such an earthy, natural, and peaceful place.

At Matt Patterson's suggestion, he'd decided to contact the realtor to get his mind out of the cycle of constant despair. She'd dropped everything to show him properties that fit his requests – a secluded wooded or ocean-front property.

He still had a hard time believing how much he and Kathryn were about to spend on a home. It would've been inconceivable in his tribe for a single family to amass the kind of wealth he now had at his fingertips, because theirs had been an agricultural society that invested everything back into the community. However, as he looked at the woods around him, he had to admit that it would be wonderful to live with Kathryn in such an extraordinary setting.

He got to his feet and returned to the house. Knowing it was empty, he walked around the outside to the back where he could see the Pacific Ocean. He leaned against the deck railing and

breathed in the moist sea air. Closing his eyes, he listened to the sounds of the waves crashing on the rocky shore below. “This is paradise.”

He remembered a moment on an alien planet long ago when he’d found Kathryn walking along a moonlit shore. She’d told him that she was homesick and hoped that hearing the sounds of an ocean would take her back, even if just for a few minutes. He’d desperately wanted to take her into his arms and kiss her that night, and even though he saw a longing in her eyes for him to do just that, he’d resisted. Later, he wanted to kick himself, thinking that if he ever got her alone on a beach again, he wouldn’t hesitate.

Tapping his commbadge, he said, “Captain Chakotay to Celia Brouillette, Pacific Northwest Realty.”

“Captain!” she responded with surprise. “I wasn’t expecting to hear from you.”

“I know. I’ve transported back to the house near Gold Beach. Do you have time to meet me?”

“Of course! I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

“Thank you. I’m on the back deck.” He looked down at the ocean, wondering if there was a place to walk in the moonlight. His thoughts took him back to that night again and this time, he imagined kissing her.

Chakotay could hear Celia’s footsteps on the deck and acknowledged her arrival with a nod, saying, “This view is incredible.”

“Yes, it is. It’s cloudy today, but I imagine when the sky is clear, the sunset will be breathtaking.” She waited patiently while he continued to look out over the ocean.

“Kathryn regained consciousness and we talked for a few minutes, but as soon as she fell asleep, I had to get some fresh air. I hope it’s okay that I came back here.”

“Of course, Captain.” She paused before asking, “Are you okay?”

Taking a deep breath to keep the surge of emotions at bay, he nodded. “I will be.” He pushed away from the railing and asked, “Shall we go inside? I want to see the rest of the house.”

Kathryn snuggled into the pillows, thinking how nice it felt to sleep. She loved sleep, even though she’d had a hard time with it during her life. Between nightmares and her restless mind, there’d been far too many nights when she’d lain awake staring at the stars. Right now, however, she had nothing to keep her mind busy, she knew that she was safe at the hospital, and that Chakotay was keeping watch.

Thinking about him made her want to open her eyes. She raised her head in surprise when she saw who was there. “Lanna.”

“Kathryn!” she exclaimed as her magazine fell to the floor. “How are you feeling?”

“Not too bad, I guess,” she said with surprise. “Which is good.”

“I’d say so,” B’Elanna said with a huge smile. “Can I get you anything? Water? Help with your pillow?”

“A sip of water sounds wonderful.”

“Coming right up.”

Kathryn took inventory of her body, and said, “Feels like I’m still hooked up to all manner of wires and tubes.”

Holding the water cup for her, B’Elanna said, “Well, you are a bionic woman now. I suppose some electrical wiring is required.”

“Not permanently, I hope.”

“I doubt it.” B’Elanna helped support Kathryn’s head as she drank. “Chakotay stepped out to get some fresh air. He hoped you wouldn’t be disappointed.”

“Of course not,” she said as she signaled that she was finished drinking. “I imagine this room has gotten pretty boring. How long have I been here now? I’ve lost track.”

“Fourteen days,” B’Elanna said as she sat back down. “He started getting a little stir crazy about four days ago, so a group of us have been sitting with you.”

Kathryn nodded tiredly. “Thank you. I appreciate that you were all taking care of him.”

“We’re Voyagers. It’s what we do.”

Smiling with her eyes closed, she agreed. “Amazing, isn’t it? I never thought I’d be so close to so many people.”

“It hasn’t been just Voyagers. Your mom and sister, Tom’s dad, Captain Young, Patterson.”

“All those people?”

“Several times each. I think Admiral Khurma wanted to sign up for a shift, but felt uncomfortable around all of us.”

“Really? My C.O.?”

“He came in to sit with us during your surgery, but spent most of the time talking to Owen and Admiral Patterson.”

“They were all here?”

B’Elanna nodded. “I hope you don’t mind, but we had quite the party in the lounge down the hall.”

Kathryn smiled as she tucked her hands under the blanket. “Hopefully to keep Chakotay distracted?”

“To keep us all distracted, but he was in pretty bad shape.” B’Elanna narrowed her eyes, and said in jest, “I have a bone to pick with you, by the way.”

Amused, Kathryn asked, “Why? Because I got sick?”

“No... even if you really believe you’re about to die, no more conversations about your ashes and him moving on. Ever.”

Her face fell. “B’Elanna.”

The younger woman sniffed and looked away. “Damn these emotions.”

“I had to tell him that I was okay with dying.”

“Were you?”

Kathryn took a deep breath while she thought about how to answer. “I was more okay with it after having the chance to say good bye and while being here with the people I love.”

“So you what? Tell the person you love the most that it’s okay to let you go? Do you have any idea how hard that was for him?”

Her voice thick with emotion, she replied, “Probably about as hard as it was for me to say. What’s worse? Being the one who leaves or being the one left?”

B’Elanna blew her nose and then rubbed her face hard. “God, we were so scared.”

Kathryn reached out and held B’Elanna’s hand. “So was I.”

“I’m sorry, Kathryn.” She looked away. “We really need to change the subject before I start crying.”

Kathryn gave B’Elanna’s hand another squeeze. “I don’t mind the tears – they tell me how much you care, and your friendship is something I never want to take for granted.”

Smiling through her watery eyes, B'Elanna replied, "We fought hard enough for it, didn't we?"

"Yes, we most certainly did. So... any fun stories about my visitors?"

It took B'Elanna a moment to switch gears, but then she laughed. "Dr. Murphy – you didn't warn me about them."

"Them?"

"Harry and Amy. She's sweet, but..." B'Elanna crossed her eyes.

"If you haven't had a chance to get to know her, I think you'll be surprised when you do."

"I'm sure that chance will come soon. They seem well suited for each other."

"Mmmm," Kathryn hummed and closed her eyes. "Yes, they're a good match."

"Are you sleepy?"

"Yes, but don't stop talking. It's nice." She lifted the blanket so she could try turning on her side, but found herself tangled up without having moved a centimeter.

B'Elanna stood up. "What can I do?"

"Not sure. I don't know what's binding."

Folding back the blankets, B'Elanna examined the situation. "Well, first of all, this gown is twisted around you. How did you manage that when you've only been on your back?"

"I have no idea." She relaxed as B'Elanna lifted her legs and shifted her clothes around. "I'm looking forward to having enough strength to do this myself."

"No doubt," she said as she worked. "I don't know what some of these wires do, but we'll assume they're all important."

"I didn't come with engineering schematics?"

"Not that I can see, but I think I've got it. Now, do you have the strength to roll or do you need help?"

Kathryn clenched down her abdominal muscles and rolled, relying on B'Elanna to keep her from going off the bed, but then she was stuck, unable to push up to scoot back to the center. "I hate this."

“Don’t worry,” B’Elanna said as she got her positioned. “You’ll be back to your old self in no time, kickin’ alien ass.”

Kathryn laughed, remembering the incident on Ktaria. “You saw that, did you?”

“The entire Federation saw it. It was awesome.” She pulled up the covers and then sat down. “Over too many beers one night, we decided that you were doing exactly that when you were missing.”

“I would’ve liked to.” Kathryn crooked a smile and then noticed her hands. “My fingernails are manicured.”

“Hmm?” B’Elanna looked at the white-tipped nails with her. “Oh, your sister did that. Your toes are done, too. Bright red.”

She chuckled and then nodded towards the magazine. “What are you reading?”

“Oh, nothing much. It was in the lounge,” she admitted guiltily. “I was reading the article titled, ‘Sexy Surprises He’ll Love’.”

Kathryn raised an eyebrow. “And what are they?”

“You sure you want me to read this?”

“Sounds like fun,” she said sleepily.

“Well, the article talks about how surprises give you a buzz. They’re kind of ridiculous.”

“Going to try any out on Tom?”

B’Elanna shrugged. “Maybe a couple.”

“Let’s have it, then.”

“All right, but you asked for it – whisper into his ear in French. You could do that, especially if you spend more time in Paris.”

“Just be sure the commbadges aren’t anywhere in sight.”

“Yeah, that would definitely ruin the effect.”

B’Elanna continued, “Run a bath for him and lather him all over.”

“Mmmm... a bath sounds wonderful.”

“Have a spontaneous food fight.”

“Could be fun, but do it before the bath, I suppose.”

“Don’t wear panties and be sure to inform him after you leave the house.”

“Oh, my.”

“Pinch him in the rear in public. Buy him gifts. Oh... this one is interesting... Wear an apron while you’re cooking dinner.”

“Why is that interesting?”

“That’s all you’re supposed to wear.”

“Oh, I see,” Kathryn laughed. “Be sure to pull the drapes and don’t fry bacon.”

“Mmhmm. Oh, and the next one is along the same line. Do a strip-tease.”

“Wouldn’t take much with only an apron. You know, I don’t think I even own an apron.”

“Get a bare-all waxing. Wear garters. Those two would work together.”

“Now, could you wear garters and an apron? Would that count?”

“I doubt there’s a final exam,” B’Elanna noted.

“Oh, I wouldn’t count on that.” They both laughed.

Chakotay came into the room and asked, “You two sound like you’re having fun in here.”

“We are,” B’Elanna said as she tucked the magazine out of sight.

Chakotay caught the movement and said, “I don’t even want to know what you’re reading.”

Kathryn said, “No, you don’t.” She held out a hand to him and asked, “Did you have a nice evening?”

“Actually, I did.” He widened his eyes with amusement as he kissed her hand.

Recognizing the look on his face, she asked, “What are you up to?”

“A surprise.”

B’Elanna snorted and then covered her mouth. The outburst made Kathryn laugh, too.

Chakotay shook his head in amusement. “You two are something else when you’re alone together.”

“Oooh!” B’Elanna exclaimed. “Can I throw you a bachelorette party?”

“I’d love it.” Kathryn said as Chakotay laughed.

“I’ve got to call Phoebe! I know just what we’ll do.” Now excited about making plans, she said, “I’m going to scope out more reading material in the lounge. Call me if you need me.”

“Thanks,” Chakotay hugged B’Elanna loosely and then took her place beside Kathryn’s bed.

“What kind of surprise?” Kathryn asked.

“Well, it wouldn’t be much of a surprise if I told you, now would it?”

“Not even a clue?”

“Nope,” he laughed at her frown. “But I promise that you’ll find out the moment you’re strong enough to walk out of here on your own.”

“Something to look forward to.” She sighed contently and closed her eyes.

“You seem to be feeling well.”

“I am. Tired and weak, but it’s not bad. My arms don’t hurt anymore.”

“They did a lot of therapy on them while you were asleep.” He caressed her hand. “I’m sorry that I wasn’t here tonight.”

“Don’t be.” She looked at him. “I completely understand your need to get out of this building, especially now that the crisis is over.”

“I want to be here with you, but this room is getting to me.”

Softly, she asked, “Are you okay?”

His voice cracked as he assured her, “I’m fine.”

“Chakotay?”

Their eyes locked, love passing between them. “What else can I say except that I’m fine? That’s what I need to be right now.”

She nodded. “I know what you mean. I’ve ‘been fine’ while all hell’s breaking loose many times in my life.”

“But you’re better now, and…”

“...and now all the anguish is catching up to you. Am I right?”

He looked down at their clasped hands and then back up at her bright blue eyes again. Hesitantly, he said, “I’m hoping that if I let it out, just a little at a time, I’ll be able to cope with it.”

“Sounds like a good plan.” She caressed his chin until she had his attention. “Just don’t hide it from me. I may not be physically strong, but I can still listen and comfort you.”

His eyes began to fill. “I love you, Kathryn.”

“That makes me a very lucky woman.” She laid her hand on his chest. “Would you lie down? Let me hold you?”

“I don’t want to disturb all of these wires,” he said as he lifted the sheet.

“Then move them out of the way. You’ll have to move me, too.”

He very carefully gathered her and all of her medical paraphernalia into his arms and scooted her over to the far edge of the bed. “I wanted to hold you so many times while you were sleeping.”

“I wouldn’t have minded.”

“No, but the medical staff would’ve.” He toed off his shoes and slowly stretched out next to her. “You’re sure this is okay?”

Kathryn motioned for him to scoot down a little so he could rest his head on her arm. “I’ll let you know if it hurts.”

Once he got settled, he closed his eyes and sighed as she drew her fingers through his hair. “I need this.”

“I’m here, and I’m going to be just fine.” She placed a kiss on his forehead and added, “I’m sorry for scaring you.”

“That…” He paused to clear his throat. “That is not something you need to apologize for.”

She cupped his jaw to bring his face up and said, “Kiss me.”

Their lips touched in a soft, warm kiss that spread a surprising chill through her body. Although simple, it felt like a confirmation of life.

Still close, Chakotay whispered, “This feels like a dream.”

“Want me to pinch you?”

His eyes dancing with joy, he replied, “No, I want you to marry me and live happily ever after.”

“You’ve got a deal.”

He gave her another soft kiss and then asked, “Will you be okay if I don’t stay here all night?”

“I’ll be fine,” she ran her fingers through his hair. “And so will you. Are you staying at your apartment?”

“Didn’t I tell you that I gave it up?”

“You did?” She tried to remember if he’d mentioned it.

“I moved into your house back in October.”

“Oh,” she recalled. “I knew that, but I didn’t put two and two together.”

“I hope you don’t mind that I gave away all that furniture you helped me pick out.”

She smiled while shaking her head. “Not at all. Who’d you give it to?”

“It’s still in the family. A group of Voyagers decided to get an apartment together.”

“Oh?”

“It’s ironic, really. After all their bickering on the ship about sharing quarters, Bristow, Chell, Rollins, and Vorik decided that they were used to each other.”

Kathryn laughed. “That’s great.”

“So anyway, I’ve been at your, I mean our, house the last few nights.”

“How is Mom doing?”

Chakotay closed his eyes. “Oh, no. I completely forgot to call her.”

“She’s been here though, right?”

He nodded and tapped his commbadge. “Chakotay to Gretchen Janeway, Indiana 529.”

“Chakotay?” Gretchen replied sleepily. “Are you all right?”

“I’ve got someone here who’d like to say hello.”

Gretchen gasped. “Katie?”

With a huge grin, she said, “Hi, mom.”

“Oh, sweetheart. It’s so good to hear your voice.”

“Sorry to worry you.”

“Never mind about that. How are you feeling? Would you like me to come up?”

“I’m feeling pretty good, actually. Weak and tired, of course.”

“Oh yes, of course you are. Did you just wake up?”

“A little earlier, but you don’t need to come down tonight. Maybe in the morning?”

“Absolutely. I was already planning on it.”

Kathryn gave Chakotay a wink. “Would you bring me something?”

“Anything.”

“Chakotay was reading me a book. It should be on the bedside table.”

“I know just the one.”

“And my knitting bag in case I feel like doing some stitches.”

“All right. I’ll throw a few other things in, too. Get some rest, sweetheart.”

“I will. Goodnight mom – I love you.”

“Love you too, Katie.”

When the signal closed, Kathryn sighed. “Thought I’d give her something to do. She likes that, you know.”

“Just like her daughter.” He brushed a few strands of hair away from her temple. “I should go so you’ll fall back to sleep.”

“Not just yet.” She felt like she was melting under his touch. “Can I call you honey?”

“Honey?”

She shrugged. “You call me your love and beautiful, and I feel like I need a name for you, but I can’t figure out what feels right.”

He chuckled lightly. “Don’t worry. You could call me ‘butthead,’ and I’d still want to sleep with you.”

Joining his laughter, she replied, “So next time we’re in the throes of passion, I should call out, ‘I love you, butthead?’”

“Well, when you put it that way, ‘honey’ has a nice ring to it.” He held her closer and they snuggled together quietly, each soaking up the physical presence of the other. After a long moment, he sighed with contentment. “I’m looking forward to taking you home and holding you like this every night.”

“Me too, but I don’t want to hurry home this time. I want to walk out of here healthy.”

“Even though I’m having trouble coping with it, I have to agree. I don’t want to take any more chances with your health, ever.”

She took hold of his hand and said, “Remind me about that next time I brush off a doctor’s appointment, would you?”

“I’ll carry you there myself if I have to.”

She groaned and then laughed tiredly. “The only place I’m ever going to let you carry me is to bed. That, and over the threshold after I marry you.”

“I’ll do that.” Kissing her fingers he said, “You really should get back to sleep. Your body needs it.”

“You’re probably right.”

“If you want me back later, I’m only a com call away. Joe said you’d be on a suppressant to keep nightmares away for awhile, so we don’t need to worry about that.”

“That’s a relief.”

“Harry will be here in an hour to sit with you, just in case you need someone to distract you.”

“He doesn’t need to come up.”

“I’ve already talked to him, and he’s looking forward to it. I’ll feel better knowing that someone is here looking after you.”

“Because the entire hospital staff isn’t capable?”

“Forgive me for being over-protective.”

“Don’t stop. I’m feeling the need for it.”

He caressed her hip lovingly.

“You want tell me something,” she observed.

“Am I that transparent?”

“Not always.” She placed another kiss on his forehead. “What is it?”

“I’m struggling with whether to tell you that I hope you remain convinced that you should stay on Earth more, if not permanently. I know this isn’t the time, but I’ve been thinking about it a lot.”

The worry in his eyes was as clear as day. She traced his tattoo as she said, “I should’ve explained the reasoning behind that decision more clearly. If I had, you wouldn’t be looking at me like that.”

He remained quiet, closing his eyes under her touch.

“When I’m not so sleepy, I’ll tell you how I think it’ll work, and you can help me work out the kinks.”

“Thank you.”

She put her hand on his. “Get some rest. I’ll call you if I need you.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure. Send B’Elanna back in. She can read me to sleep and I bet I won’t wake until morning.”

Chakotay stood and helped her get resituated on the bed. As he pulled the covers up around her, he gave her a soft kiss, and said, “I love you.”

“I love you too, honey.”

“That has a nice ring to it.”

“Yeah, it does.” She opened her eyes for just a moment and then said, “Sleep in tomorrow. I’ll be fine.”

“It might be the first night since mid-December that I’ll be able to sleep soundly.” He caressed her leg one last time before leaving. “Good night, Kathryn.”

“Goodnight.” She was asleep before B’Elanna returned.

They developed a pattern over the next week and a half. He would come to visit for a couple hours every morning and stay through lunch, then return in the evening for a goodnight kiss. She had physical therapy twice a day and got into a good cycle of sleeping.

Although she missed Chakotay when he wasn’t there, she was glad that he was taking care of himself and recovering a little of his equilibrium. The many friends and family members that sat with her gave her someone new to talk to every time she woke up. She mused that she wasn’t getting the least bit bored being in the hospital.

Most of her keepers, as she’d begun calling them, vacated to the lounge when Chakotay arrived up for his nightly visits. On the fifth evening of this pattern, she and Tom were playing cards when Chakotay arrived.

“Good evening, beautiful,” he said as he kissed her. “I’m glad to see that you’re sitting up on your own.”

“Without being propped up, even,” Tom noted.

“I’m anxious to get out of here,” she said. “That surprise you mentioned is niggling at me.”

“Surprise?” Tom asked as he folded his cards.

“Don’t play coy, Tom,” Kathryn said as she showed him what would have been a losing hand. “I’m sure you know all about it.”

“No one knows *all* about it.” Chakotay said as he pulled up a chair beside the bed. “But speaking of surprises, I brought you one.” He held out a bag for her.

“Ooooh. What is it?” She took it from him and peeked inside. Her eyes popped open wide. “Is this what I think it is?”

“I checked with Dr. Joe and he said it was fine, but I did have to get the smallest one.”

“What is it?” Tom asked.

She pulled out the small cup and peeled off the lid. “Mocha fudge ice cream,” she said with pure delight.

Chakotay took the lid and exchanged it for a spoon. “Enjoy.”

Tom said, “That must mean your kidneys are back to normal.”

The first bite was heavenly. It was soft and melty the moment it hit her tongue.
“Mmmmmmm.” She laid back against the pillows so she could concentrate on savoring every bite.

“You definitely know the way to her heart,” Tom said. “Can we still say that now that she doesn’t have one?”

“Sure we can. She’s got a state-of-the-art-heart. Fully equipped with bioneural circuitry.”

“Awe, that’s perfect! A little piece of Voyager tucked inside her heart forever.”

As he watched her savor the dessert, Chakotay said, “And she’s oblivious.”

“Mmm mmm,” she shook her head. “Blissful.”

Tom asked, “Care for a hand while she’s savoring?”

“Sure. What’s the game?”

“Five card draw. Deuces wild.”

As they played, Tom asked, “So, what have you been up to this week?”

“Catching up on sleep at first, but yesterday and today, I taught two tactics seminars.”

“I thought you were taking the semester off.”

“I was, but the students were disappointed, so I agreed to teach a seminar here and there. Personally, I think they just want to meet me.”

“Well, you are famous.”

“We all are,” Chakotay said.

“Not like you two. She and I were watching the newsfeed earlier. They’re still speculating on her status.”

Kathryn came out of her ice-cream induced trance long enough to ask, “How did they find out I was here?”

Chakotay answered, “Reporters noticed the Voyagers coming and going. They got me one day and my body language gave it away.”

Tom said, “It’s not like you’d want to mislead them.”

“No,” Chakotay sighed with irritation, “but I didn’t want to talk to them about it, either.”

“Are they still following you?” she asked.

“Yes, but my glower keeps them at bay.”

Concerned with his obvious irritation, Kathryn frowned. “Your glower?”

“It keeps them from bothering me. As long as they think there’s no status change, they don’t ask.”

Tom suggested, “Maybe some good news would cheer everyone up. Yourself included.”

Chakotay shrugged. “Feel free to tell them.”

Kathryn was surprised by Chakotay’s reaction to the press. She’d have to talk to him about it later.

Tom suggested, “Maybe Starfleet can issue an official statement once you’re released.”

“Perhaps,” Kathryn said. “I could make an appearance, too. Reassure everyone.”

“Dad is here tomorrow afternoon. Ask him about it.”

“I will. Who’s my keeper overnight?”

“Captain Young,” Tom said.

“Really?” Kathryn appreciated the gesture. “But he’s a newlywed.”

“That was six months ago,” Chakotay noted.

“Still, I’ll be fine.”

“Let him do it,” Tom said. “Everyone wants to be here for you, and I think it’s helping all of us heal.”

Still eating her ice cream, she agreed. “I suppose. Although, it would probably be a good idea to have someone here tonight.”

“Why’s that?” Chakotay asked nervously.

“I might be awake for awhile. Dr. Joe wants me to try sleeping without being medicated.”

“Would you like me to stay?”

“I’d love for you to, but you’re leading that discussion in the morning.” She said reassuringly, “I’ll be okay with Bernie. He’s very easy to talk to.”

“Okay,” he said with uncertainty.

Dr. Joe came into the room, “Good evening. How was the ice cream, Admiral?”

“Delicious,” she said happily.

He scanned her carefully and then closed the tri-corder, a triumphant grin on his face. “Congratulations, Admiral. Your electrolytes and kidneys are officially stable, and your pancreas is much improved. You may eat whatever you want, whenever you want it, as long as you keep sugars and simple carbs in small amounts.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” she said with a smirk. “I just knew your exemplary care would sort me out.”

“Me and a few dozen others. However, I suggest small meals often, and keep trying to gain weight.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” She winked.

When Joe left, the three of them began to play cards again. Kathryn noticed that Chakotay’s thoughts were somewhere else and she couldn’t help but wonder what was going on with him.

“So, Kathryn?” Tom asked while surreptitiously glancing at Chakotay. “What are you going to have for your first unrestricted meal?”

“Hmmm. That’s a good question. Italian food, perhaps.” She noticed Tom trying to attract Chakotay’s attention back to the conversation. That meant that she wasn’t the only one who realized that he was acting strangely.

“What kind of Italian?” Tom asked a little too loudly, realizing that she was aware of what he was doing.

Kathryn bumped into Chakotay’s cards seemingly accidentally, jarring him back into the conversation. “Oh, excuse me.” She looked at Tom, “To answer your question, Tom, I have so many good memories of Italian food that I’m not sure which would be best.”

“Italian food?” Chakotay asked. “At this hour?”

Tom said, “Nah, maybe tomorrow. What do you think, Kathryn?”

“What was the name of that restaurant you ordered from that night you were painting your bedroom, Tom?”

“Luigi’s,” Chakotay replied.

“But then there’s Billy’s uncle’s place. That’s good, too.”

Tom suggested, “Maybe we should have him cater the Voyager reunion redo.”

Chakotay nodded. “Good idea.”

“Luigi’s then. I love the cannelloni.”

When Chakotay said nothing, Tom asked, “Chakotay, do you have time to pick some up for her lunch tomorrow? I could, but I’m due at Utopia at thirteen hundred for a test flight.”

“Sure. What would you like?” He glanced up at Kathryn.

“You don’t mind?”

“Of course not. After all, it’s your first un-restricted meal.”

Kathryn bit back a smile. He really hadn’t been listening. “I’d love the cannelloni. And bruschetta. Would you share it with me?”

“Sounds delicious.” He was focused back on her now. “Do you want to keep playing cards or call it a night? Are you getting tired?”

“A little tired.” Although she wasn’t feeling the least bit sleepy, she realized that he needed an excuse to leave. “Tom, would you give us a moment? I’d like to kiss him goodnight.”

“Of course. I’ll be right outside.”

Chakotay picked up the cards and placed them on the side table.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Me? I’m fine.” He tossed her ice cream container in the trash bin. “Why do you ask?”

“I know you don’t like being in this room, but you seem more distracted than usual. Are you worried about tomorrow?”

He sat on the edge of her bed. “Not really. Tomorrow will be fine. It’s just a seminar for some officer training. We’re discussing first contacts that went badly.”

“Sounds like fun,” she grinned. “Will you tell me about it over lunch?”

“You want to know how many of Voyager’s contacts come up?”

She waved that away. "I know how those turned out. I want to hear about the others, or any funny anecdotes. I'm always game for a laugh."

Taking her hands, he said, "I'm sorry if I was preoccupied. Nothing to worry about."

"Is it the media? Have they been harassing you?"

"I'm fine," he dismissed. "It's in the past."

"I can be a fairly good listener, you know." She put a finger under his chin to get him to look her in the eye. "At least that's what it says on my curriculum vitae under diplomat."

He leaned in and gave her a quick kiss. "It's not important."

Before he backed away, she caught his face between her hands to make sure he stayed close. "Hey," she said softly. "If it's important to you, it's important to me."

Taking a shaky breath, he said, "I don't want to burden you with what's going on in my head right now."

"You are never a burden," she stroked her fingers through his thick, black hair. Sympathetic to his frustrations, she said, "I imagine that the last thing you've wanted during all of this is to have your emotions broadcast all over the Federation."

He smiled guiltily, amused with her keen perception. "Got it in one."

"I'll ask Owen to make a statement tomorrow. That should get them off your back."

"You don't need to do that." He shook his head. "They have to respect your privacy."

"I don't mind everyone knowing, especially now that I'm on the mend. Maybe it'll spark some hope. And I bet that soon, they'll forget all about whatever media confrontation is troubling you."

With a sigh, he said, "I'm not sure that I'll ever be comfortable in the public spotlight."

"You don't need to be. Leave it to me to be the extrovert."

"Gladly." He leaned forward so that their foreheads were touching. "I love you, Kathryn."

"Lucky me," she smiled against his cheek. "I love you, too."

"I'm worried about leaving you tonight." He drew her into a hug.

Melting into his embrace, she said, "I'd change rooms if it wouldn't be a lot of trouble."

“I don’t think it’ll matter what room you’re in. You’re still lying in a hospital bed.”

Looking up at him, she asked with concern, “Are you having nightmares?”

“Not that I know of, but I haven’t been sleeping well.” He caressed her arm. “It’s what haunts me while I’m awake that bothers me.”

“I should be out of here soon, and then…” She said with excitement, “I get a surprise!”

He laughed. “Yes, you do.”

“Are you building me another bathtub?”

“Would you like one?”

“Only if you’re in it, honey,” she said with a mischievous smirk.

“That can be arranged.” Taking her face between his hands, he kissed her softly. “Goodnight, love.”

With a happy smile, she said, “Yes, it has been a good night. Ice cream AND kisses.”

He gave her another lingering kiss before saying goodbye. After he left, Tom played cards with her for another hour until Bernie arrived. At first, Kathryn was nervous about talking to him because she hadn’t seen him since leaving the Pioneer. However, his easy spirit and friendly demeanor quickly put her at ease. It was no wonder that he was such a good diplomat. They talked for over an hour before she finally drifted off to sleep.

Kathryn walked along the empty corridors of Voyager, wondering where everyone had gone. There wasn’t a soul in sight, and every room she checked was empty. The messhall was dark, not even the open flame on the stove lit her path. Only the reflected glow coming through the viewports allowed her to see her hands in front of her face.

Where was the crew? Could she make out some figures in the corner? She called out, “Hello? Who’s there?”

Suddenly, Neelix appeared out of nowhere and turned to the still figures. “They’re right there. Don’t you see them?” And then she did, her best friends, all dead. She screamed. She was going to die alone.

The images around her transformed into the same, haunted corridors, now glowing red with emergency lighting. Pink, noxious gas hissed as it poured from the air ducts to suffocate her. She yelled out for help, but no one was there. Her lungs burned and then there was nothing.

The burning pain in her lungs seized her chest. She clawed at herself, screaming against the pain of electric volts that attempted to restart her dead heart. The tight, intense pain of her heart forced the air from her lungs as she screamed again, afraid to die.

The pain spread through her veins like wildfire, the heat focused on her hand where she'd been pierced by the fangs of a snake. The venom pulled her down, away from life, into the darkness of something beyond.

Her arms were being pulled, tightly, bound behind her. Someone was shaking her, but she couldn't see who it was. Did she hear her name? It was Chakotay, holding her, she was dying in his arms. Already dead. He was crying for her, begging her to stay with him, but there was nothing he could do. She watched as her limp body, tucked against his chest, faded away into the oblivion of an unknown planet in an unknown space.

She felt a sting on her cheek. Someone hit her. Borg-green lights invaded the darkness around her. She screamed out as tubules pierced her neck. She yelled out, "Nooooo! Help me!"

"Kathryn!"

The voice returned. He was there, fighting against the hands that held her down. When the phaser blast hit her square in the chest, he was there, but he didn't catch her. She fell down to the bottom of the precipice, screaming for her life.

She was shaken again. The Doctor was waking her. His cold, inhuman eyes seemed to mock her as he erected a force field and told her it was time. She would die now to save everyone else from the pain of her suffering. Her voice became hoarse as she yelled out, begging someone to help her.

"Kathryn! Wake up!"

She was pulled up, firm arms wrapping around her. The room was dark and she was afraid to open her eyes. Afraid to confront another death, she yelled, "NOOOO! LET! ME! GO!!"

"Kathryn! You're safe! You're safe." The arms around her pulled away and held her face. She reeled back from the touch, afraid of what the strange man would do to her.

"Noooo!" she cried, begging, "Let me go!"

"Kathryn, you're okay," the voice softened. "It's just a nightmare. You're safe."

The word nightmare triggered a memory. She floundered around, looking for a safe haven. "Chakotay?" she asked.

"Shhh... you're safe, Kathryn." The voice was calm and reassuring now. "You're safe."

She braved opening her eyes so she could find out who was talking, hoping there was light enough that she could see. Chakotay would be there. It was his hands that held her. The dark blue eyes that greeted her startled her and she instantly recoiled.

“It’s me, Bernie. Do you know me?” He pulled his hands back when she looked down at them in fear. “You’re safe.”

Looking around, she tried to figure out where she was, tried to figure out who this man was. She asked for her love, “Chakotay?”

He asked quietly, “Would you like me to call him?”

“Yes,” she gasped as she wrapped her arms protectively around herself. She knew Chakotay would be able to help her.

Bernie tapped his commbadge. “Captain Young to Captain Chakotay, San Francisco.”

A hoarse, but anxious voice answered, “Bernie? What’s wrong?”

“She’s asking for you. Terrible nightmare and she’s frightened and disoriented – doesn’t know me.”

“On my way!”

The conversation gave her long enough to get her bearings and realize what had happened. She whispered hoarsely, “Bernie.”

“That’s right,” he said as he braved moving towards her, but not touching her. “Do you know where you are, Kathryn?”

“Starfleet Medical.” Embarrassment flooded over her and she held her knees close to her chest. Bowing her head, she said, “I’m so sorry.”

“No, no, nooo, please, don’t be. I’m your friend and I care about you. Don’t be embarrassed.”

Suddenly feeling cold, she pulled the blankets up that had been tossed away in her terror. “You called Chakotay?”

“He’s on his way.” He touched the bed near her. “Can I get you anything?”

She shook her head, not comfortable enough to make eye contact. She desperately wanted Chakotay, but she knew her pain would upset him. He was already far too sad, and if she’d had her wits about her, she wouldn’t have sent for him. The chilly air made her shiver and she wrapped her arms tighter around her legs.

Bernie laid a blanket over her shoulders. “Does that help?”

“Yes, thank you,” she said quickly. She didn’t want to hurt him, but she needed him to go away and for Chakotay to hold her. The need for his arms around her was so strong that it made her shudder.

The door opened and Chakotay charged to her bedside, breathless from running. “Kathryn?”

Unable to stop herself, she flew into his arms. “Chakotay!”

“I’m here. Shhh.” He sat on the bed and held her close, rocking her side to side, her face buried against his neck.

“Oh, God,” she cried.

“Shhhh, shhhh.” His hand made gentle circles on her back, soothing her trembles into slow, even breaths.

She hated feeling this weak and needy, but the images of dying over and over again affected her deeply. “I need you,” she sobbed.

The slow rocking motion accompanied his soft voice. “I’m here, love. I’m here.”

Bernie whispered, “I’ll wait outside.”

Kathryn pulled back, startled. She hadn’t realized that he was still there.

Chakotay drew her close again, sheltering her from her loss of composure. He asked Bernie, “How long did it last?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe three or four minutes, ten if you count agitated REM. I tried everything I could think of to wake her up. I was about to call a doctor.”

Kathryn asked shakily, “How long do they usually last?”

“Not that long.” Chakotay kissed her forehead. “Thanks for calling me.”

“She wasn’t herself, very disoriented.”

Chakotay replied, “She usually is. They’re always bad after a trauma. Started after a run-in with the Borg.”

Kathryn shook her head against his chest. “After Dad and Justin died.”

“Justin?” Bernie asked with genuine concern.

Chakotay closed his eyes, obviously not realizing how long these bad nightmares had terrorized her.

Kathryn answered, "My first fiancé." She and Bernie had become close enough friends that sharing personal details wasn't unnatural. Having an uncontrollable night-terror in front of him was another matter entirely.

Dr. Joe peeked into the room. "I came to check on our patient."

"I'm here," she said, muffled against Chakotay's chest.

"She had a nightmare," Bernie stated.

"I could tell. I was watching the cortical monitor readout," he said as he scanned her with a tri-corder.

"And you didn't help?" Chakotay asked with disbelief.

"There was no medical reason to intervene, and studies show that waking someone from a nightmare could add to their fright."

Kathryn sighed, but didn't look up. "Joe, program a nightmare for yourself sometime and then ask yourself if you'd like to be woken up from it."

"That would be an interesting case study. I'll consider it."

She could feel that Chakotay had tensed and was fighting against giving Joe a tongue-lashing. She asked, "Bernie? Doctor? Could you give us a moment alone?"

"Before I go," Dr. Joe said. "I want to tell you that your new heart handled the fright remarkably well."

"Thank you, Doctor," she said with barely contained exasperation as he left. There were times when he still was oblivious to the human nature of a situation, and this was definitely one of them.

Chakotay asked, "Bernie? If it's okay with you, I'll stay with her for the rest of the night."

"Of course, I think that's a good idea. I'll say goodnight and leave you be." He patted Kathryn's arm and left.

When they were alone, she looked up at Chakotay sadly. "I'm sorry, honey."

"No, love, I'm sorry." He drew her close again. "I should have stayed with you. I had a feeling."

The frightening images were fading as his warmth comforted her. “You make me feel better,” she admitted.

He began rocking her again. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Her eyes clamped shut. She was afraid to tell him, afraid to add to his heartache. It took a lot for her to admit, “I think I should see a counselor – the one from the Enterprise. I feel comfortable with her.”

“That’s probably a good idea.” He held her tightly. “Is there anything that I can do? Would it make you feel better to tell me?”

She struggled against her desire to tell him.

“Kathryn?”

“I... I don’t want to add to your pain.”

“Oh, Kathryn.” His embrace shifted to draw his arm around her shoulders. “We’re in a fix, because I don’t want to burden you with what’s in my thoughts, either.”

“Sounds like we both need professional help.”

“I think we do.” He kissed her temple. “Although I’m guessing there’s a good chance that we’re upset about the same thing.”

She pulled back to look him in the eyes. “My death?”

Caressing her cheek, he nodded solemnly. “I’m afraid so.”

“The nightmare was flashes of all the times I’ve faced death. How can I be so afraid of something that I’ve coped with so many times?”

He shrugged. “Each time, we’ve had to consider that it might be the end. Maybe it has a cumulative effect.”

“You’ve given this a lot of thought.”

“Too many sleepless nights,” he said sadly.

She looked away before saying, “I was wondering if death would be easier to accept if I had some kind of terminal illness, rather than just bad luck.”

“Nothing would make it easy, but I think it’s high time we changed your luck.”

“I wouldn’t mind,” she smiled weakly. “If only it were possible.”

He hugged her again. “For now, let’s just hold each other. What do you think?”

Melting into his embrace, she said, “I think you’re on to something.” His clothes caught her attention. “You came here in your pajamas?”

“I didn’t take time to get dressed.”

Kathryn lifted the blankets. “Well, come on in here, then. You’re ready for bed.”

“I’d love to.” He stood to toe off his shoes. “Do you think there’s room?”

“I plan to hold on tight.” She scooted over, relishing the ability to do it herself.

“Sounds perfect.” After getting situated, they quickly fell asleep in a loving embrace.

“Are you ready?” Chakotay asked as Kathryn wrapped the deep blue pashmina around her shoulders.

Glad to be finally leaving the hospital, she said, “Very ready. How many reporters are gathered?”

Owen answered, “About a dozen. We limited it to the primary Fednews agencies only.”

She nodded and then turned to Chakotay. “You don’t have to come with me.”

“Yes, I do.” He stood close and gently held her upper arms. “Besides, what are you going to tell them when they ask you what you’ll be doing over the next couple of months?”

The corner of her mouth tugged upwards. “You want me to make an announcement?”

“It’s as good a time as any.”

Affectionately, she replied, “As you wish.”

When they emerged from the hospital room, the busy medical staff stopped what they were doing. Kathryn didn’t know if they were concerned for her or if they were just trying to catch a glimpse of the celebrity in their midst.

In the lift, she caught Chakotay’s eye and winked at him. “Nervous?”

“Only about your reaction to my surprise.”

She laughed. “I’m looking forward to it.”

Owen said, "I have no doubt she'll love it."

"You know about it?" Kathryn asked.

"Of course. We're providing security."

Kathryn furrowed her eyebrows, wondering what Chakotay could be up to. She didn't think long, however, since the lift soon deposited them on the main floor of the building. A security escort, including Justin Jarvin, accompanied her to a meeting room that was acting as a temporary press room.

When she entered, she was greeted with a round of applause. It made her feel more like a performer than a military diplomat, but it seemed to make them happy, so she accepted it gracefully.

Chakotay and Owen remained next to the wall as Kathryn took position at the lectern, smiling at the gathered press as they continued to clap for her. The cameras were a bit daunting, considering she hadn't taken much effort with her hair, but then again, what could they expect of a patient leaving a hospital? She certainly had to look better than last time they saw her.

When the applause died down, she said, "Thank you for that generous welcome. I'm addressing you today because of the concern regarding my health during the last month while I've been a patient here at Starfleet Medical." She paused to glance at Chakotay who was listening intently. His mouth twitched into a contained smile when he realized she was looking at him.

"While I hope that you'll respect my privacy by not asking specific questions about my health, I would like to assure you that I am well on my way to a full recovery. The last four weeks," she stopped to correct herself. "The last eight weeks have been difficult, and I appreciate the care and concern of all those who have been keeping me and my loved ones in your thoughts." She paused before saying, "I'll answer a few questions."

"Admiral, is the rumor true that you were transported here in emergency? If so, can you tell us whether you were assaulted at that time?"

Kathryn was surprised that people were thinking along those lines. "Yes, it was a medical emergency due to complications that arose from an illness I contracted while held captive. No, I have not been assaulted since my rescue a month ago."

"Admiral Janeway, how critical did your illness become while you were a patient here?"

She took a deep breath to give herself a moment to decide how to answer. Since her hesitation likely gave it away, she was straightforward. "As critical as it gets."

The room was silent for only a moment before another reporter asked, "Admiral, does your illness affect your ability to continue as Federation Security Council Envoy?"

“I will be physically capable of continuing after a full recovery.”

Another asked, “Admiral, you said you would be capable, but you didn’t say whether you would be willing. Are you?”

With her strongest command presence, she stated, “I gave my commitment that I would work towards re-uniting the Federation. I’m not going to let a few bullies undermine what we’ve accomplished in the last six months, but I will have to make some changes regarding my accessibility and personal safety to ensure that I’m around long enough to make a difference.”

Much to her surprise, she received a round of applause in response. She glanced at Chakotay to gauge his reaction and he was applauding right along with everyone else. The glimmer in his eyes was apparent from halfway across the room. When the applause died down, she said with a grin, “It appears that you agree.” After giving those gathered in the room a moment to chuckle, she asked, “Next question?”

“How long do you expect your recovery to take?”

She smiled. “The doctors would like me to take six months off, but I’m not one who likes to be idle. However, I will probably not be returning to work until May.”

“Admiral, do you have any special plans during your leave?”

Kathryn glanced at Chakotay and received a nod in return. “Yes, I do. Captain Chakotay and I will be getting married next month on March 30th.” She didn’t know what she expected the response to that statement to be, but it wasn’t the quietly pleased expressions on everyone’s faces.

“Do you have any details about the wedding that you’d like to tell us, Admiral?”

She laughed quietly. “No, nothing to report, other than the announcement itself. We’ll be keeping the event private.” They hadn’t discussed that, but she had no doubt that it would be best. “I’ll take one more question.”

“Admiral, as you begin your leave of absence, is there any message that you’d like us to convey on your behalf?”

Thinking for only a moment, she replied, “Yes, there is.” Turning her focus to the group of cameras, she said, “I want to ask every member of the Federation to keep a positive state of mind about the strength of our alliances. Negativity feeds on itself, and it’s not healthy for us. We’ve made significant progress and that progress will continue. My staff is carrying on in my absence so that all we have accomplished will not be in vain. In the meantime, you can do something for me – encourage our young people across the Alpha Quadrant to take a stand for what is right. Make sure your leaders hear your voices to work towards a positive, cooperative, and peaceful future for our worlds.”

She took a moment to acknowledge the renewed round of applause before stepping away and taking the arm that Chakotay offered her.

Once they stepped out of the room into the quiet hall, he kissed her cheek and said, “You are inspirational.”

“I’m afraid I went a bit overboard. Maybe Mike was right when he said I should just become a motivational speaker.”

Owen agreed, “You’d be good at it. While we wait for security to make arrangements, I’d like to ask you if we can set up a time to talk about some developments.”

“I’m not ready to work, yet.”

“I know, but I want to make you aware of a few things. You can decide if you want to become involved, unofficially.”

“Sounds intriguing. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Enough shop talk,” Chakotay stated.

“You’re right,” Kathryn said, redirecting her attention back to him. “So, this surprise – is it a vacation of some kind? Are we going away?”

“Only for an hour or two. Your mom is expecting us for dinner.”

“Hmmm.” She had no idea what he was going to show her. She’d been guessing a vacation getaway since he first mentioned it. Then she thought maybe he’d done a project at her house, or maybe built something at her mom’s house. “I know what it is!”

“You do?” Chakotay asked with amusement.

“Voyager. You’re taking me to see her!”

He laughed, but said nothing.

Owen received communication that they were ready on the other end. He said, “Off you go. I’ll look forward to hearing about her reaction.”

“Close your eyes, Kathryn.”

She did as instructed and gripped Chakotay’s arm tighter as the transporter beam took them.

When they were deposited at their destination, Chakotay turned her, saying, “Keep your eyes closed.”

It was chilly and she could tell that she was standing on grass. Her ears began to tune in to the sounds around her. “Do I hear the ocean?”

“Okay, love. Open your eyes.”

She opened them to see a large, yellow house. They were standing on an expansive green lawn surrounded by a dense thicket of forest. “Where are we? Whose house is this?”

“It’s our house, if you want it.”

“What?” It took a moment for what he was saying to soak in. “You bought a house?”

“Not yet, but all it needs is your approval. The building inspection is finished, security and mechanical upgrades are ready to begin, and all the legal documents are in order.”

She looked again, this time studying the house in greater detail. It was three levels high, with the uppermost rooms inside a high, arched roof. The house was similar to an old Victorian era home with bay windows and a large porch, but with definite traces of current architecture and design. The entire home was pale yellow with blue and white accents, and there were many, many windows.

“First impression?” Chakotay asked.

“I’m trying to take it all in. It’s a beautiful house. Where are we?” She turned to look around and then stopped when she realized that a security team was standing in a semi-circle behind her, on full alert with tri-corders scanning the perimeter. She knew they’d be here, but she wasn’t expecting them to be so vigilant. There was also another woman that she didn’t recognize standing not too far away.

“We’re in Oregon.” He waved the woman over. “Kathryn, I’d like you to meet Celia Brouillette, our realtor.”

Kathryn apprised the woman quickly, noticing how blonde and beautiful she was. Dismissing those thoughts, she graciously extended her hand to receive Celia’s. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Admiral Janeway, the pleasure is all mine. I’m honored.”

The young woman’s smile was infectious. Kathryn asked, “Where in Oregon are we?”

“Near Gold Beach, at the southern end of the coast. If you’ll follow me, I’ll show you.”

Kathryn took Chakotay’s hand as they followed Celia around to the side yard. They walked up a few wooden steps to a stone path that wove through a neglected flower garden full of overgrown

rose bushes. She wondered if Chakotay knew they were roses. Kathryn glanced at him and saw that he was watching her for a reaction.

The sound of the ocean was growing louder as they rounded the corner of the house. Kathryn was surprised at the immense size of the home. It looked modest from the front, but that was deceiving. She found it hard to imagine owning a home this large, but couldn't help but be captivated with the beauty of the architecture.

“Kathryn?”

“Hmm?” She asked Chakotay.

“Stop looking at the house, and look over there.” He pointed past Celia.

Kathryn followed his finger and gasped. “Oh!” The Pacific Ocean in all its glory was spread out before her. “Chakotay!”

“Come here.” He tugged on her hand to bring her to the edge of the deck so she could look out over the railing. The home was situated high on a cliff overlooking a rocky cove. “This reminds me of that rocky beach we walked on in the moonlight a few years ago. Do you remember?”

“On Corius?”

“I'd forgotten the name.”

“I almost kissed you that night.”

He laughed. “And all this time, I thought it was I who almost kissed you.”

The chilly February air sent a shiver through her and she wrapped the pashmina tighter around her shoulders.

“You're getting cold.” He rubbed her arms for warmth.

“A bit, but this view is spectacular.” Looking at Celia, she asked, “Are there other homes along the beach?”

“Some, but this property runs about a half kilometer in each direction.” She pointed towards the north edge of the cove. “The guest cottage is just around that bend.”

“Guest cottage? How large is this property?”

“Four acres.”

Startled, she looked at Chakotay. “How much does all of this cost?”

“It’s at the maximum end of what we talked about, so we might want to consider selling your townhouse in San Francisco.” He smiled happily. “Celia, can we show her the inside?”

“Of course! We can go in through the back here.”

They were only a few meters into the great room when Kathryn said, “This is home.”

“You like it?” Chakotay asked.

“Oh, yes.” She looked up at the vaulted ceiling, the cozy stone fireplace that was in the center of the home, and the floor to ceiling windows that allowed a magnificent view of the ocean. To her right was a sitting area covered with a plush carpet, and to her left was an eating area and a very large kitchen. “It’s all so warm and inviting, even without furniture.”

Celia said, “Come see the rest of it.”

They walked through the open kitchen and into a formal dining room on the front of the house. “I love how much daylight comes in,” Kathryn said as she looked at the tall bay windows that almost surrounded the area where the table would be.

“Look in here, Kathryn.” He led her through a living room large enough to easily seat over a dozen people, and then across a spacious foyer with a beautiful, grand staircase that led upstairs, and into another room. It was long and narrow, extending across the entire side of the house, with a bay window on the front, and a picture window with a view of the ocean on the back. Every available wall space was lined with golden oak bookshelves, and there was a door at the far end that led back around to the great room. Chakotay said, “A joint study and plenty of room for your books. We’ll both be able to work from home some.”

She spun around, looking at the beautiful woodwork. “I wouldn’t ever want to go to San Francisco.”

He wrapped his arms around her from behind and whispered into her ear, “That’s what I’d hoped you’d say.”

She laughed. “We might have to entertain alien diplomats, but in a home like this, we could certainly manage it.”

Celia asked, “Would you like to show her the upstairs?”

“Sure,” Chakotay said.

Kathryn went in front of him up the wide open staircase in the foyer, but was finding it difficult to make it all the way up.

“Are you okay?” he asked when she stopped just over halfway.

Nodding, she said, “Just a little out of breath.”

Celia offered, “We can finish the tour another day.”

“No,” Kathryn shook her head. “Just give me a moment.”

Chakotay took her free hand and pointed to the second story window that was above the front door. “This is the perfect vantage point for seeing that window.”

A smile tugged on her lips. “Is that another way of saying ‘look on the bright side’?”

“Something like that.” He looked at her with compassion. “This is a lot for one day.”

“A press conference, a tour, and a celebratory meal? Pretty normal day, actually.”

“Except for the fact that you were also released from a medical center.”

“Minor detail,” she said with a wink. “Andiamo,” she said as she restarted the ascent.

After taking another break at the top of the stairs, Celia gave them a quick tour of three standard bedrooms. “I won’t take you up to the next level right now, but it has one more bedroom, a bathroom, and a large recreation room.”

“So, a place for children to relax while we’re entertaining downstairs.”

“Sounds like a good use for it,” Celia said with a laugh. “Ready to see the master bedroom suite?”

“Suite?”

“Yes,” Chakotay said. “It’s not much smaller than my apartment was.”

“Wow.” Kathryn stood at the entrance to the room, amazed by the spaciousness and the detail of the woodwork. “There’s room in here for both a king-sized bed and a sitting area.”

“Perfect for your insomnia,” Chakotay said with a grin. “You could be on the other side of the room reading without worrying about waking me.”

“I love the carpet,” she said as she walked on the plush, white fibers. “And these windows are beautiful.”

Celia opened one of the floor-to-ceiling windows and said, “They’re French doors, Admiral, and there’s a balcony out here.”

“Really?” Kathryn asked with excitement. She stepped outside and sighed happily. “I can’t imagine any house being more perfect than this.”

Chakotay said to Celia, "I think she likes it."

"What's not to like?" Kathryn asked as she looked down from the balcony that had a great view over the deck below and the ocean beyond.

"You haven't seen the bathtub yet," Chakotay said.

"Oooh! Show me!" She went back inside and into the master bathroom. Her eyes widened as she saw it. "That's a full-size jacuzzi!"

"Yes, it is," Celia said. "And, it has a heater, too."

Kathryn said, "Ms. Brouillette, you've just sold a house."

Part 22 - "Sorting Through the Issues"

By Dawn

Summary: Figuring out what happens next

Rated PG

When Kathryn heard someone open the front door, she looked up from where she was sitting on her mother's living room floor, surrounded by a large array of fabric samples, pamphlets, lists, drawings, magazines, and PADDs. She'd only been home from the hospital for five days, but she'd received mountains of things to look at and think about.

Phoebe asked, "What are you doing, Katie?"

"Resting?" she suggested, since those were the instructions received from her mother a couple hours earlier.

"Looks like it." Phoebe cleared a small area and plopped down in the midst of the piles.

Kathryn turned to the nurse that was with her. "Ensign Walters..."

The young woman hopped up. "Unless there's anything you need, I'll let you visit with your sister."

With a chuckle, Kathryn said, "You read my mind. I'll call you if I need you."

After Walters left the room, Phoebe asked, "What happened to the nurse that was here before?"

“Patty? She’s only here at night. I thought it too much for her to be here twenty-four hours a day.”

“Ah,” Phoebe nodded. “Well, Mom asked me to stop by and check on you since it’s her first day back to work.”

“I’m sorting all of this stuff and making lists of what needs to be done.”

Phoebe picked up a pile of pamphlets and asked, “What are these?”

“Honeymoon destinations, but they’re all touristy. They aren’t safe for me – too high a chance I’ll be recognized.”

“Want to go back to Aspen?”

“Maybe. Or I was thinking Tuscany, but I don’t think April is a good time to go there.”

“Ooooh... some friends of ours went to this great little island in the Mediterranean. Want me to look into it for you? They say it has some terrific secluded villas.”

“I’d love it. Would you send the information to Chakotay, too? He’s coordinating with ‘fleet security because they have to approve.”

“Sure. They’re really treating you like a VIP with all this security, aren’t they?” Phoebe nodded towards the officers on duty outside.

“Normally, I would hate it, but right now, I find it reassuring.”

“Is there still a threat?” Phoebe asked.

Kathryn shifted one of the piles around. She didn’t want to tell her sister that if someone had hired her abductors, that person was still at large. “There could be, if someone wants to take advantage of my vulnerability.”

“We have to go through a full identity check every time we see you.”

“Sorry about that,” Kathryn frowned and then brightened up. “I guess you’ll have to visit more often so the entire rotation of personnel gets to know you.”

“I’ll do that, and it’s no trouble. You’re worth it.” Phoebe bit back a smile as she added, “Or so they say.”

Kathryn glanced at her sideways. “Then I’ve successfully pulled the wool over everyone’s eyes. Any day now they’re going to discover my secret.”

“And what’s that?”

Kathryn whispered, "That I have no idea what I'm doing."

Smiling, Phoebe replied, "If that's true, then you're an expert at blowing smoke, because it sure sounds like you're on top of things."

"Oh, I know how to be a diplomat, and I know how to deliver motivating speeches, but the situation in the Federation is so complicated and full of hidden agendas that I'm not entirely sure where all of this is headed. I'm sort of figuring it out as I go, I guess you could say."

"I think that's to be expected. After all, these problems weren't created overnight."

Kathryn leaned back against the front of the couch and crossed her hands in her lap. "Would you tell me something, honestly?"

"Sure."

"In all the interviews and speeches, do I appear arrogant or patronizing?"

"No." Phoebe questioned, "Why do you ask?"

She picked at a piece of lint on her pants. "After my last press conference, the one at the hospital, I started wondering if I'm becoming too political. Or if I'm carrying it too far because of my fame."

"I won't deny that you're turning into a politician, but I think that's what we need. I wasn't joking when I suggested that you run for office some day."

"I don't know about that." Kathryn looked outside the window to see a patrol officer walk by. "The price of fame is high."

"Can I ask you what might be a difficult question, Katie?"

"Sure," she replied, guarded.

"When you were abducted, was there any way they could have anticipated that?"

"You want to know if it could've been prevented?"

"Yes, if it's not too hard to talk about."

Kathryn crossed her arms. "Hindsight is always 20/20, but we had no reason to think there was a threat of that significance. We all assumed that if someone wanted me, it would've been a hostage situation and that would've been resolved more quickly."

"How was this different?"

“There were no demands and therefore, no transmissions that Starfleet could track. It’s a pretty resourceful organization, and from what I understand, every possible resource was focused on finding me. When my captors finally communicated with Starfleet, I was extracted within twenty-four hours.” Kathryn felt a chill course through her.

“But I’m talking about when they actually grabbed you and Doyle died. They say he was trying to save your life.”

Kathryn had tried not to think about Scott too much because it was painful, remembering the way he’d told her to keep going, no matter what. “He was a good man, and protected me fiercely time and time again.” She wiped away tears that were forming. “I had four guards that afternoon, and they all would’ve died to protect me. While the other three were covering us, Scott and I took off running, trying to escape. Needless to say, all five of us were phasered.”

“I’m sorry, Katie. I didn’t mean to make you feel sad.”

“It’s all right,” Kathryn shook her head. “I don’t believe they intended to kill anyone that day, but even phaser stuns can be deadly in some circumstances. To answer your question, yes, we could have taken more precautions.” She nodded out the window. “Which is what they’re doing now. They’re on constant alert, and they secure every step I take before I take it. If I remain a public figure, it’s likely that this amount of security will continue indefinitely.” She watched another patrol officer walk by and a recollection about her exit plan on Joria struck her.

“Are you thinking about changing jobs?”

“Hmmm?” she asked, now distracted.

Phoebe followed her sightline. “What are you looking at?”

“The patrol officer. Something just occurred to me.” Feeling unsettled, Kathryn tapped her commbadge. “Janeway to the Pioneer, do you read me?”

Ral answered with concerned surprise. “Yes, Admiral. Do you require assistance?”

“I’m fine, Commander, thank you. I’m calling to find out if you’re in orbit and if Captain Young is available to make a social call later today.”

“We’re docked at McKinley Station until we receive further orders. Captain Young is planet-side, at his home. I can relay the message, if you’d like.”

Kathryn thought for just a moment before replying, “Yes, please, if you don’t mind. He needn’t rush over. I just have a thought that I want to run by him regarding a personal matter.”

“I’ll let him know. Do you have a time preference, ma’am?”

“Late this afternoon if he’s free, but I’ll contact him in a little while to arrange details. Thank you, Commander.”

“You’re more than welcome, Admiral. If there’s anything else I can do, please don’t hesitate to ask. We’re not busy.”

Kathryn took advantage of the offer to disguise a request. “You always do a great job keeping an eye on me, and I will definitely let you know if I need you.”

Ral hesitated only a second, but caught on immediately. “Aye, Admiral. Keep your commbadge close, then, just in case you think of something. Unfortunately, it would take an effort to get through security to see you in person, but you can always call us.”

“I will, thank you. Janeway out.” She looked apologetically at Phoebe. “I apologize for interrupting.”

“Don’t be,” she said with a smile. “I love watching you work. I had just asked if you were thinking about changing jobs.”

“Not exactly. Just about whether I should tone it down or go into seclusion so that I’m not in the spotlight quite so much.”

“Have you talked to Chakotay?”

“Yes and no,” Kathryn sighed. “It’s complicated.”

“I’m sure.” Phoebe got up on her knees and reached over to hug her sister. “I love you, Katie, and I’m very proud of you.” She pulled back to look at her. “What you did with Voyager is unbelievable, and what you’re doing for the Federation is so important. I know it’s difficult, but if you can bear with having all this security and try to stay on Earth more, I don’t think you should stop.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.” She wiped at her eyes again. “I’m just a little shaken after all this.”

“Understandably.” Phoebe looked down at the largest pile of stuff. “So, what’s all this fabric for?”

Glad for the change in conversation, Kathryn said, “Upholstery samples. They go with these.” She handed her some books on interior design.

“For the new house?” Phoebe sat back and leafed through a book.

“I’m starting from scratch because I’m leaving my townhouse furnished. I’m going to lease it to a couple from Voyager.”

“Not entirely from scratch. You have some beautiful artwork to focus the design.”

Kathryn smiled lovingly at her sister. “Yes, but I can’t decide which pieces to put where, and how formal to make the rooms. I’m torn because I want everything to be comfortable, but if I want to entertain, I should lean towards formal.”

“I don’t agree. A good hostess offers a relaxed atmosphere.” Phoebe showed her a page out of the book. “Look at this collection, for example. It looks really comfortable, but that’s really classy. I bet that in a soft green would accentuate your collection of vases. Throw in some blue accents, and it’d be striking.”

“And those colors would be a nice compliment to the ocean.”

“There you go. Have you thought about hiring a designer?”

“No. I’d like to make it my own, and since I’m not doing much right now, I think I can manage it.” Kathryn had an inspiration. “Would you like to help me?”

“I would LOVE to help you. That house is incredible and it would be a dream to design an interior for it. Maybe I’ll even paint you a piece for one of the rooms. Oooh... a little bit of Indiana would make the dining room feel like home.”

“That would make me very happy, Phobes.”

Her sister glanced up from the book and said, “Good. I want you to be happy. You deserve it.”

Kathryn felt goosebumps from the intensity behind her sister’s words. “Thank you.”

“Let’s plan a trip out there tomorrow to take some measurements. Are you up for it?”

“Definitely. I’ll make arrangements. You take Katie to school at 8:30?”

“Yes, and I can be here at 9:00.”

“This is exciting. We want to move there in early March to get settled in before the Voyager reunion and wedding.”

“That gives us a little less than a month to plan, decorate, and furnish. No problem!”

Kathryn laughed. “Meanwhile, ‘fleet security is already there, hard at work. Do you want to look through these books at home tonight?”

“Sure,” Phoebe said. “What’s the rest of this?”

“The wedding coordinator dropped these books off yesterday, but I haven’t gone through them. I’m inclined to ask her to come up with a design to include peace roses, and leave all the little decisions to her.”

“Oh!” Her eyes widened in excitement. “Did I tell you that B’Elanna and I talked?”

“About a bachelorette party?”

“That, and we want to ask you about having three attendants.”

“Three? You, B’Elanna, and?”

“Sekaya.”

Kathryn’s mouth popped open in surprise. She hadn’t even considered that. “What a wonderful idea.”

“So you’re game?”

“I’m game. Add your Mike and Steven as groomsmen?”

“If that’s who Chakotay wants.”

“Maybe,” Kathryn said. “He might want to ask Mike Ayala. Regardless, it sounds like fun. I wish we could go shopping for a dress this weekend.”

“Can you?” Phoebe asked. “Get out and shop, I mean?”

Deflated, Kathryn admitted, “No, I shouldn’t because of the security needs and because it’s cold and flu season.”

“I bet that if we find an upscale bridal boutique, we could schedule a private fitting and transport you directly there, security and all.”

“I’d like that.” Kathryn picked up a bridal magazine and showed Phoebe a picture of a long sheath dress with a beaded jacket. “I was looking at this one.”

Phoebe raised an eyebrow. “No.”

“No?” Kathryn laughed. Rarely did anyone tell her ‘no.’

“It looks matronly. You should be daring. Go backless.”

“Backless?” Kathryn coughed. “But I’ll be standing up in front of everyone.”

“I know. Exciting, isn’t it?”

“It sounds rather audacious. I'm not that brazen.”

“You? Not brazen?” Phoebe rolled her eyes. “Maybe not with your clothing, but your very presence radiates bold confidence. I think that with this svelte figure you have right now, you might as well take advantage of it.”

“Svelte? More like bony.”

“It’s all in your perception. With your current size, you could get away with a dress that’s incredibly sexy.” Phoebe leafed through a bridal magazine and then handed it to Kathryn. “Like this.”

One look at it, and Kathryn said obstinately, “Oh... no, no, no, no, nooooo. I'm way too old to wear that! There’s no back at all and you can practically see the sides of her breasts, not to mention the top of her rear-end.”

Phoebe laughed. “Think about it.” Standing up, she said, “I need to go get Katie. Want us to come back here and look through magazines or do you need a nap?”

“If you have time, come eat lunch with me. We can talk more and I’d love to see her.”

“Will do. I’ll be back in about thirty minutes.” Phoebe hugged her before she left.

Looking around at the piles of stuff, Kathryn felt a renewed sense of energy. She glanced at the shameless wedding dress and smiled to herself. Chakotay’s eyes might not stay in their sockets if she wore something like that. She bit her lip nervously, just thinking about it.

Chakotay was angry and more than a little exasperated by the time he got to the front door of Gretchen’s house that evening. He went on an immediate search for Kathryn so he could find out what she was up to and put a stop to it. More importantly, he wanted to know why she was putting herself at risk again and why she hadn’t called him to discuss whatever she was planning.

He found her at the kitchen table, pouring over a civilian-style PADD, while Gretchen prepared dinner around her. Ready to lay into her, he opened his mouth to speak when she looked up and gave him one of the brightest, most loving smiles that he’d ever seen.

“Hi, honey.” She beamed as she picked up another PADD and handed it to him. “You’re going to love this!”

Biting his tongue, he took the PADD and saw that it was a possible honeymoon destination in the Mediterranean. “Looks nice.”

“Nice?” With excitement, she launched into details about the exclusivity of the island and all of its amenities.

His anger deflated considerably as he listened to her enthusiasm. While she was talking, he looked at the table to see what she was working on. He expected to see reports and her computer terminal, but there wasn’t a Starfleet-related item in sight. Instead, the table was covered with a dizzying array of books lying open to pictures of flower arrangements.

“You haven’t heard a word I’ve said.”

“Hmmm?” He looked up at her and then blinked. “Sorry. The island sounds great.”

She nodded to the pictures. “I’m trying to decide which of these arrangements might look best with peace roses, although I have a feeling that the florist will do whatever she thinks is best.”

“Peace roses? For our wedding?”

“Don’t you like the idea?”

He was taken aback. “I love it. Can’t think of a more perfect flower for us.”

Kathryn’s face instantly transformed into another bright smile. “Me, either.”

His irritation had all but melted away, but he wouldn’t be deterred from getting answers. Coming around the table, he leaned down to kiss her cheek and asked, “Could I have a word with you?”

She turned her head slowly to look at him, a knit in her brow. “Sure,” she said hesitantly. “Everything okay?”

“In private?”

Still a bit wobbly, she let him steady her as she stood up. “Mom, Patty, we’ll be back.”

“Take your time, lovebirds,” Gretchen winked at Patty as she happily chopped vegetables.

Once they were in the living room, Kathryn commented, “They think we’re off for a quick romp in the bedroom.”

“That’s where we’re headed, but a romp is not on my agenda.”

“You have an agenda?” She looked at him quizzically.

“Mmmhmmm, because you, my dear, have had a very busy day.” He ushered her inside and closed the door behind him. Sighing heavily, he handed her the bag he’d been carrying. “Please explain why Justin gave this to me?”

Slightly amused at his probing reaction to her security precautions, she took the bag and peeked inside. “He worked quickly.” She dumped the contents onto the bed and picked up the tri-corder that was in the mix. “I asked Bernie to get these, but I wasn’t expecting it to happen today.”

Chakotay sorted through the items. “Two of everything, I see. Tri-corders, security sweepers, hand held and mini phasers, dampening field generators, and transport inhibitors. Plus a site-to-site transporter and a med-kit.”

“You sound a little envious, honey, but I plan to share them with you.” She gave him a wink.

“Why do ‘we’ have them?” he asked as he sat down near the closet to take his shoes off.

“In case we get bored?” she suggested as she tossed him the tri-corder.

He easily caught it and, with a lowered voice, warned, “Kathryn.”

Resting her elbows on her knees, she fiddled with the settings on a sweeper. “I had a hunch today, and I felt the need to do something about it. All of these,” she gestured towards the articles on the bed, “are merely for my peace of mind.”

Crossing his arms, he demanded, “What are you planning?”

Kathryn’s eyebrow shot up in irritation, and then her expression immediately transformed into understanding. “Chakotay, I’m not planning anything. The last thing I would do right now is put myself at greater risk.” She held up the other tri-corder and said flirtatiously, “You know how much I like to scan. I wanted my toys.”

“I didn’t realize that phasers could be used as a scanner, or are you planning to develop some new technology during your time off?”

She eyed the items thoughtfully. “An all-in-one ‘scan and defend’ tool. Not a bad idea.”

Rolling his eyes, he began to change out of his uniform. He could tell by her mannerisms that she was being straight with him, so he relaxed a little. However, she hadn’t really explained and was avoiding his questions, so he knew something was wrong.

As he hung his jacket up, he said, “I ran into Bernie at Headquarters as I was leaving. He said that you were looking well, and that he was glad to see that you got a little of your spunk back. He also wanted me to know that the Pioneer had their eye on you, as you requested; and that he and Judy had come up with an approach that they want to run by you.”

“Already? He just left here two hours ago.”

Chakotay looked at her askance as he sat on a chair and took off his shoes. “An approach to what?”

“To getting some information that isn’t readily accessible.”

“Readily accessible?”

“Confidential.” She held up a hand. “Before you get worked up again, I have no intentions of directly involving myself in the follow-through. I just want to look at some records, and asked Bernie to think of a way to get our hands on them.”

Eyes narrowed, he asked, “What’s your hunch? You’re spooked and I want to know why.”

“You’re irritated that I didn’t call you before taking action.”

“Yes and no. You don’t need my approval, but if something was alarming enough for you to go to these lengths, I would’ve hoped that you’d have thought to contact me. What’s going on?”

She sat up straight and tossed the tri-corder onto the bed. “It occurred to me this morning that we had a security breach on December 16th.”

Scratching his neck, he asked, “That ‘just’ occurred to you this morning?”

Kathryn waved her hand in the air dismissively. “Of course we had a security problem, but I’m talking about a breach. My exit plan was to leave through the main lobby of the building, and both Starfleet and Jorian security teams were to have the path clear. That has been our standard operating procedure since day one. The only excuse for ‘fleet security not having done their jobs is if they didn’t receive word that I was on the move, or if they received alternative orders. That’s why I wanted to talk to Bernie.”

“Okay, but wouldn’t they have gone over that within hours after your abduction?”

“Yes, but all five of us that were witness to the change in exit plans weren’t available. As a matter of fact, no other Starfleet personnel were even still on the planet besides us. Since the incident on Ktaria, we’ve consistently had a second team within fifty meters of my location. Bernie was mystified today when I asked for his assessment because they hadn’t addressed it. I put a call in to Khurma to ask if it was under investigation.”

“Is it?”

“It is now.” She pinched the bridge of her nose. “This part of the analysis fell through the cracks. Everyone assumed it had already been investigated.”

Disbelieving, he asked, “How is that possible? A miscommunication that caused you to divert from your secured path should’ve sent up multiple red flags and been dissected at length.”

“And my teams have always secured two paths. I haven’t spoken to Justin, yet, because I don’t want to upset him until I have more information, but he should’ve communicated with the forward team at each exit point before we started moving. He always has.”

“Why didn’t you go out the front?”

“I wanted to get off the planet. I’d already been detained for an hour by the Maoian delegates who brought up a last minute issue, and the entire lobby was congested with civilians and reporters. Was I on the news that night?”

“Yes.” He took a shaky breath. “I watched it over and over again, hoping I’d see a signal from you not to worry.”

She carefully stood up, walked over to where he was sitting, and ran her fingers through his hair. “I’m sorry, but I didn’t think I needed to give you one. I had thought that I’d be talking to you before that interview would’ve reached Earth’s broadcasts.”

“I know.” He put his arm around her legs and held her close. “So, you want evidence that we’ve got a security breach inside Starfleet?”

“I think the breach originates in the office of the President, so I want to learn as much as I can about the people who work for him and what connections they have.”

Chakotay looked up at her and shook his head. “Fleet security already investigated him and found nothing.”

“What?” Kathryn took a step back. “How recently?”

“While you were in the hospital.” Rubbing his eyes, he continued, “I meant to tell you about it, but I simply forgot.”

She sat down on the bed again. “That’s all right. Go on.”

“Picard dropped by to pay you a visit, and he filled me on what he could. This was before the transplant, and after Pratin died.”

“I thought that the Enterprise was going to Ktaria. That would’ve been an awfully short trip.”

“They went. Do you know why?”

“Picard was going in Khurma’s place to officially welcome Ktaria back into the Federation. What I didn’t understand was why President Zife wasn’t the one going. That would’ve been exactly the kind of press he would’ve wanted.”

“Harry thinks it’s because Zife doesn’t believe the membership will last. Evidently, Zife mentioned that Ktaria is a fickle friend in a closed meeting.”

Kathryn frowned. "Not a smart thing to say."

"No, but Judy said there's no love lost between Bolius and Ktaria. They've had a lot of trouble in recent years, especially because the two planets are in adjacent sectors. When Ktaria left the Federation, Bolius and its neighboring systems became more vulnerable to attack."

"I suppose," she said as she rubbed her chin. "Without Ktaria, Bolius would be on the edge of Federation space, but not in the line of fire from the Beta quadrant."

"No, but there are many who want to play the part of the victim and few who will go to the effort of trying to be a hero."

Kathryn shook her head. "I don't agree. There are many who want to be heroes, they just need the confidence that they won't be hung out to dry. Actually, I believe that most of the planets who left the Federation were extremely brave for doing so."

"Most would say they left out of fear."

"Maybe a couple, but to stand on your own... that takes guts."

"Much like a brave woman I love." He gave her a wink.

"Thank you," she said with a chuckle. "So, what does this have to do with investigating the president?"

"It doesn't, but on the way out to Ktaria, the Enterprise dropped Riker off to do some undercover reconnaissance, following a lead they got from one of your supposed buyers."

"And?"

"I don't have a name, but this buyer was planning to use you as a hostage to blackmail Zife."

"To do what?"

"To include his planet in the illegal money-making operations that the entire quadrant suspects."

"Did he have proof?"

"No, but it did launch an investigation into the Office of the President, and they found nothing."

"Well, of course they wouldn't find anything during an official investigation. What I want is a covert one, even if it has to be me pulling the strings to make it happen."

"That's dangerous."

“I know, honey.” She motioned for him to join her on the bed. Once he sat down, she said, “We have to be smart about it. That’s why I’ve asked Bernie to come up with a plan.”

“I hope he has access to what Picard told me.”

“You know, I think I should give Bernie a call to thank him for my new toys.”

Chakotay drew her into his arms and place a kiss on her temple. “Since you’re bound to upset the same people who we already suspect are after you, I guess there’s no harm in seeing what we can find.”

“My thoughts, exactly.” She looked up into his eyes. “And I won’t be putting myself into the line of fire, not for this. Zife is going down eventually, and my involvement will only speed up the process or make the fall significantly harder.”

“You’ve already made a lot of progress towards both. Zife practically signed his impeachment papers when he hired you.”

She laughed. “What a sweet thing to say. That ranks right up there with telling me how beautiful I am.”

Chakotay brushed her lips with his own. “My beautiful, brazen, and brilliant...”

When he paused, she asked, “What?”

“I was about to say wife.”

“You could say that.”

“How about I just kiss you?”

Winding her fingers up into his hair, she whispered, “Is that a phaser in your pocket, Captain?”

He looked down and then laughed as he picked up the phaser that was poking her leg and tossed it aside. “So it seems.”

A few days later, Chakotay opened the front door of Gretchen’s home to see Admiral Khurma waiting on the porch. “Good evening, Admiral.”

“Good evening, Captain. May I come in?”

“Of course.” He stood back and let the older gentlemen inside.

“I apologize for the late hour. Is Kathryn still available?”

“Yes, I’ll let her know that you’re here.”

“Thank you, Captain.”

Although Kathryn had established a good relationship with her C.O., Chakotay wasn’t sure how he felt about the man, yet. This after-hours meeting gave him a strange feeling because Khurma had been vague when he’d called earlier to see if she was up to it.

Chakotay went into the sun room where she and her mother were pouring through catalogues of bedroom furniture. “Kathryn, Admiral Khurma is here.”

“All right,” she said as she stood.

Gretchen commented dryly, “Seems like he could’ve come at a more respectable hour.”

“Did he mention why he’s here?”

Chakotay replied, “No, but if you don’t feel up to this…”

She touched his arm. “I’ll be fine. Would you help me with the steps?”

Chakotay stabilized Kathryn as she walked up into the house. Her equilibrium was still not quite what it should be and she’d stumbled and fallen a few times since she’d been at home. She didn’t let go of his hand as they walked through the kitchen, giving him a silent request to stay with her.

When Khurma was in sight, Kathryn asked, “Admiral, how are you this evening?”

“I’m well, Kathryn, it’s good to see you.”

She let go of Chakotay to accept a hug from the older gentleman.

“Tell me, honestly, how are you feeling?”

“Not as strong as I’d like to be, but I’m on the mend,” she said as she smiled warmly. “Would you join us for coffee?”

“I’d love to.”

Kathryn took Chakotay’s arm again to walk into the living room. “Let’s sit in here. I’ve always loved this room.”

Khurma said, “I would like to offer my congratulations to both of you on your upcoming marriage, and thank you for the invitation to attend the wedding.”

“I hope you can join us,” Chakotay said.

“I would love to. My wife, Samia, will send our reply.”

Kathryn said, “Chakotay has already spoken to Owen about arranging security for the wedding and the honeymoon.”

“I received the notice. The Mediterranean location looks quite peaceful, and I'm glad to see that you'll be taking a full month there. We'll make the security as inconspicuous as possible.”

“We appreciate that.”

“Your popularity has only grown since your abduction, and my concern is not just about those who may wish to cause you harm. We continue to be challenged in our efforts to keep the media and your fans away from this house.”

“I didn't realize,” Kathryn responded in sympathy.

“We think most are just trying to catch a glimpse of you, but it has kept the security teams on their toes. They're not getting bored.”

Chakotay said, “I hope that doesn't mean they're getting lax.”

“On the contrary, I've never seen a more dedicated security team. They're as vigilant as they'd be if they were protecting the President himself.”

“I really don't understand why the public is so interested in me. Recognition is a useful tool, of course, but it's not like I'm a famous actress.”

Chakotay shook his head in amusement. “Unlike with an actress, they adore you and celebrate your accomplishments, not a role you've played.”

Khurma unsuccessfully bit back a smile. “Everyone loves a hero, and one as charming and gracious as you engenders strong loyalty.”

“Well, thank you, gentlemen,” she said, blushing. “Although I wasn't fishing for compliments.”

Chakotay asked, “How do you like your coffee, sir?”

“Black, please,” Khurma said. “Thank you, Captain.”

As Chakotay left to get the drinks, he heard Kathryn ask what brought the Admiral by. Before he was out of earshot, he heard Khurma say that he wanted to check in on her. Not wanting to miss any of the conversation, he hurried back in with the coffee service.

Khurma nodded his thanks and asked, “Care to join us, Captain?”

“If you’d like,” he said, glancing at Kathryn to see her nod in approval.

“Captain, I was just telling Kathryn that I came by to touch base with her. I hope you’ll forgive the intrusion?”

“It’s no intrusion,” Chakotay said as he poured everyone coffee.

Kathryn took the drink gratefully. “To answer your question, Admiral, I haven’t decided how long I’d like to remain on leave.”

“I certainly don’t expect you to return to active duty for a few months, but your statement to the press last week caused me to wonder if you have a plan in mind.”

“Not exactly. I was attempting to reassure the public, but I apologize for not discussing it with you, first.”

“Oh, no, no. Don’t worry about that. I was pleasantly surprised that you’d want to come back at all.” Khurma took a sip of coffee. “I certainly wouldn’t blame you if you wanted to retire.”

Kathryn tapped her coffee cup. “Are you asking me to?”

“No! Heavens no!” He leaned forward in his chair. “As a friend, I would like to see you leave all of this behind and enjoy a quiet, happy life. However, as your C.O, I have to tell you that, because of your popularity, we have a unique opportunity to positively affect the future of the Federation, and it won’t work without you.”

Chakotay asked, “Has anything been learned about a possible security breach?”

“Nothing conclusive. However, we’ve instituted checks and balances within the security team assigned to you. They are as tamper-resistant as we can make it.”

Kathryn stated, “I’d like to familiarize myself with their procedures, and I want to meet the officers in command.”

“Of course.” Khurma took another sip. “I have something that should renew your spirits a little.”

“Oh?”

“President Nakmyre of Joria feels terrible that the incident occurred right under his nose, and contacted me this afternoon to inquire about your health. He is quite captivated with you.”

Kathryn rolled her eyes. “Yes, I know. Quite the charmer.”

Chakotay remembered how Kathryn described the president's attempts to find reasons to spend as much time with her as possible. "What did he have to say?"

"Your statements last week convinced him that you were someone worth believing in."

She raised an eyebrow. "Because I said I wasn't giving up?"

"That's right. He's been tracking all of your press coverage and has come to the conclusion that someone who is so beloved has to be one who keeps her promises. Because you've managed to beat the odds many times over, he thinks you can do it again."

"No pressure," Kathryn grimaced. "What does he want?"

"He wants you to keep your promise. What I want to know is what did you promise?"

She leaned back in her chair and chewed on her lip in thought. "Did you ask Commander Kim for the notes of the conference?"

"No, but I will."

"You don't remember?" Chakotay asked.

"I don't remember saying anything out of the ordinary."

"What do you ordinarily promise?" Khurma asked.

"Just the usual benefits of Federation membership. If I recall, he said he didn't believe the Federation was capable of upholding those principles, but that's not unusual."

"Well, if that's it, then I don't foresee a problem. He's planning to reinstate Joria's membership, and he's bringing his five-planet coalition with him."

"And they're all willing?"

"They seem to be. I'm sending the Enterprise to meet with them next week, but I'd like Jean-Luc to talk to you before he leaves, if you're agreeable."

"I am, but I'd like to read a copy of the transcript first."

Chakotay suggested, "Don't overdo it, Kathryn."

"I won't," she touched his arm reassuringly. "I've just put it so far out of my mind that I don't recall most of what we talked about. All the conferences are running together."

Khurma said solemnly, "There is another issue that I'd like to talk to you both about. Are you up to it or should I come back tomorrow?"

Chakotay sat up a little straighter. “What kind of issue?”

Kathryn glanced at him with a mild warning to let her handle the conversation.

“The trial begins next week for the men who abducted you.”

With a controlled voice, she asked, “Do you need me to testify?”

“No,” Khurma said. “I wouldn’t do that. The evidence is indisputable. However, you’d mentioned the possibility of immunity for the man you called Norval. We didn’t promise it to him, but I would like you to reiterate why you thought he deserved it.”

“I see.” Kathryn pinched the bridge of her nose and then rubbed her thumb and forefinger across her closed eyelids. “I’m trying to recall what’s in my report, but I honestly don’t know.”

“Kathryn,” Chakotay said hesitantly. “Perhaps it would be better to think about it in the morning.”

Khurma placed his hand on his chest. “Please, accept my apology for bringing it up.”

“Gentlemen, I appreciate your concern for my welfare, but I can handle a brief conversation. Admiral, can we start with submitting my report as evidence?”

“It already is, but if there is anything you left out that could affect the outcome of his trial, now is the time to bring it forward.”

“I’m going to have to read the report. What did I say about him?”

“Nothing. I have a report from Bernie saying that you mentioned the young man, but that’s it.”

Growing more reserved, she said, “My apologies, Admiral. I guess I wasn’t as thorough as I should’ve been.”

“Oh, that’s not what I’m asking, Kathryn. One could hardly expect absolute recall from a situation such as this. However, if you want to add an addendum, now would be a good time.”

“I…” Kathryn’s complexion blanched, but she tried to cover her reaction. “I’ll see what I can do. Tomorrow probably.”

“Kathryn?” Chakotay asked worriedly.

Khurma said quietly, “We’d like you to meet with him. He may have information.”

“No, absolutely not,” Chakotay said vehemently. “It’s out of the question. I don’t care what information he has.”

“Kathryn?” Khurma asked. “Are you okay?”

“Hmm?” She stared at him blankly for just a moment, and then blinked to shake it off. “I’m sorry, what did you say?”

Gently, he repeated, “I asked if you were feeling okay.”

“Oh. I’m fine,” she waved off his concern. “I’d like to give it some thought, Admiral. Can I let you know tomorrow?”

“Of course.” He stood, looking distressed at Kathryn’s reaction. “Please, accept my apology for having to bring up this unpleasant topic.”

“There’s no need to apologize. It’s a situation that needs to be addressed.”

“I’ll instruct Ms. Randolph to put you through as soon as you call tomorrow.”

Absently, she replied, “I’d appreciate that.”

Chakotay stood. “Admiral, I’ll see you out.” As he walked past Kathryn, he gave her arm a quick rub.

When he returned a few minutes later, she was sitting in the same position, staring at nothing. She looked small in the large arm chair with her head bowed and her mouth covered by her hand. He kneeled in front of her. “Kathryn, I’m worried about you.”

Her gaze found his eyes, but it was a moment before she spoke. “I suspect that I’m going to be difficult to be married to.”

“Why’s that?”

“It must be difficult to know when I need to be cosseted and when I need to rely on my own strength of will.”

“I’ll admit that right now, it’s not easy to know, nor is it easy to switch back and forth, but normally, the word cosseted wouldn’t be one I would ever connect with you.”

She took a deep breath and licked her lips. “That was my commanding officer, Chakotay.”

Gently, he replied, “Who knows that you’re not yourself.”

“How can I become myself again if you don’t let me speak?”

“Kathryn,” he said carefully. “This isn’t worth fighting over. If I’m still overprotective in six months, then I give you permission to deck me.”

Raising one eyebrow, she tried to keep her mouth from twitching. “You’ve been overprotective for the last eight years. What makes you think you can change in six months?”

He leaned in closer and gave her a simple kiss. “Permission to fuss over you for just a couple minutes?”

Impishly, she replied, “You’ll have to earn the right.”

“What must I do, ma’am?”

“Kiss me again... thoroughly this time.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He did as instructed and gave her a slow, leisurely kiss.

When he pulled away, she said, “I’m impressed, Chakotay.”

“With the kiss?”

“No,” she said and then quickly caught herself. With a slight blush, she corrected, “Yes, a very impressive kiss, but that’s not what I’m talking about. How difficult was it for you to avoid fighting just now?”

“Ah,” he said with understanding. “It wasn’t difficult at all, because keeping our relationship peaceful and you happy is much important than having the last word or being right.”

“You think you were in the right?”

He shook his head. “Try as you might, I’m not fighting with you.”

Waving her hand, she said, “All right then, you have two minutes for mollycoddling.”

“I’ll take it.” He cupped her jaw with his fingers. “You don’t need to talk to this man.”

“I might.” Taking his hand to her mouth, she kissed his palm. “There will be personal ramifications to deal with. I’ll probably backslide a little with the nightmares, but I know you’ll be there to catch me. Are you okay with me depending on you like that?”

“Absolutely,” he said with firm conviction.

“I’d like to work towards regaining my emotional equilibrium, so unless I’m in obvious distress, would you let me handle my affairs?”

“May I continue with my coddling for just another minute before I say yes?”

She smirked. “Carry on.”

“Why do you need to talk to him?”

Shrugging, she looked out the darkened window, and said, “If there’s something I can do to help him, I should try.”

“Help him? Why?” he asked with disbelief.

“I didn’t put it my report.” She looked at him sadly. “I didn’t tell you or Harry about this young man, and so it didn’t make it in.”

“What about him?”

She leaned forward and rested her chin on her hands. “He helped me. A couple times, he saved his dinner and fed it to me.” She cringed. “Of course, I vomited it back up, but it was the thought that counts, right?”

“I guess,” he said incredulously. “If he’d really wanted to help you, he would’ve made it possible for Starfleet to find you.”

“He tried, or at least he said he did. He reported that he told a Starfleet officer that I was on his ship, but they didn’t believe him. This had to have been within a week of me being there, because I was coherent enough to ask him to try.”

Chakotay bowed his head. “Even if he had, it would have been one of the hundreds of sightings that had been reported.”

“When Owen spoke to me on Tuesday about the developments he’d alluded to last week, one of the issues was this young man. Norval had spoken with Bernie and offered to give him information as a plea bargain. At that time, Khurma had refused, but Bernie was planning to talk with Khurma about how I’d suggested offering him immunity. I only suggested it to get him to talk in the first place, and until tonight, it completely escaped me that his help didn’t make it into my report.”

“What kind of information does he have?”

“We have no idea. Owen said that Norval is very young and scared. We all suspect that he was working for Pratin under duress. The psychological assessment indicates that he may not be fit to stand trial, and it could be that Khurma is looking for a reason not to put him through it.”

“Do you have knowledge that could help?”

“Only my recollection of one conversation he had with another, and at the time, I was struggling with delirium. The other times we interacted, we were alone, and so my testimony might not make a difference.”

“But you want to meet him, don’t you?”

“I want to forget the whole thing, actually. But there’s a young man out there in an impossible situation, and I want to know his motives for getting involved with Pratin in the first place. I might not be able to keep him out of prison, but maybe I can help him find some peace.”

“I’m going with you.”

“Do you think that’s a good idea?”

“Not much better than you going, but I don’t want you to face this alone.”

She rubbed the back of his hands with her thumbs. “I would appreciate your support. Knowing you’ll be there to catch me if I fall apart does help.”

He stood and pulled her into his arms. “I’m really worried about how this will affect you.”

Still embracing him, she kissed his cheek. “As long as you’re with me, I’ll be okay.”

“So long as I let you do the talking. I understand.”

With a big squeeze, she said, “However, when we’re alone, I rather enjoy the way you pamper me. It makes me feel loved.”

“You are definitely loved.”

She tapped his chest. “And you, mister, are going to have to fight with me at some point so we can blow off steam.”

Chuckling, he replied, “I promised that I wouldn’t, but if you’d like to, let’s try fighting over something innocuous.”

“Like what?”

He shrugged. “Bedroom furniture. That’s what you were looking at, right?”

“Right,” she said hesitantly.

“Show me what you like and I promise that I’ll disagree at first. Eventually, you’ll talk me into it, because you are so good at swaying my opinion. I’ll love it because any bed is the perfect place to *really* blow off some steam, if you catch my drift?”

“You could trap Voyager in a drift that big.”

Kissing behind her ear, he whispered, “It’s not Voyager I want to trap. It’s her captain.”

When Gretchen showed him into the living room, Picard extended both of his hands towards Kathryn. “Admiral Janeway, it’s a pleasure to see you again, and looking so well.”

“Please, call me Kathryn,” she said as she accepted the kind, but reserved hug.

“No, no, I mustn’t. You’ve more than earned that title, and I intend to use it.”

Smiling graciously, she said, “Thank you, Captain. Please have a seat.”

“This is a lovely home, Admiral.”

“Thank you. I’ll accept your compliment on my mother’s behalf. She just left to go teach a class.”

He accepted a cup of tea. “Beverly tells me that you’re getting married soon, and that I am to escort her to your wedding.”

“Chakotay and I would be thrilled to have you. I would have addressed the invitation to you as well, but Beverly has never said for certain if you were the man she was involved with.”

“Ah, I see. That comes from years of self-enforced discretion, although I’m sure I don’t need to explain that to you. After all, you’re marrying your former first officer.”

“Yes,” Kathryn smiled. “But since we weren’t a couple on the ship, discretion was less of an issue than was developing evasive maneuvers to avoid the need for it.”

He paused lifting his cup halfway to his mouth. “You weren’t involved?”

“Not romantically. I had enough to worry about just staying alive and keeping the ship flying. More often than not, at the end of the day there wasn’t enough time or energy to think about myself.”

“I see.” He followed through on the sip, but didn’t look convinced. “How are you feeling, if I may ask?”

“Significantly better than last time we spoke.”

“I certainly hope so.” He wrinkled his forehead. “At that point, we’d only had you back for less than two days and you barely had the strength to keep your eyes open.”

“I must have looked like death warmed over.” She sighed. “I’d say that I’m doing quite well considering how many miracles it took to keep me alive.”

“Do you believe in miracles, Admiral?”

She pondered the question for a moment. “I didn’t used to, but the last eight years have challenged my beliefs. I prefer to think that miracles have brought me to this point as opposed to just dumb luck, because I have no idea if I can call it good luck to have survived, or if it’s really bad luck that I ended up in some of the situations to begin with.”

“Perhaps both, but don’t discount hard work, intelligence, and perseverance. I have no doubt that all are key factors in your miracles.”

“Thank you. I like to believe that I empowered my crew with the freedom to think creatively out there. They are each a significant factor in our success.”

“Speaking of your crew, may I ask about one of them?”

“Of course. Which one?”

“Commander Kim. He’s an impressive young man.”

“Yes, he is. It’s hard to believe that he’s only eight years out of the Academy, but he was thrown into the deep end on Voyager and came up swimming.”

“I hope I’m not being too forward, but how vital is he to your team?”

Kathryn raised her chin a little as she realized where Picard was leading. “He has been extremely vital, and while I’m on leave, he’s taking the reigns.”

“The last thing I want to do is upset your staff, but I’m very interested in offering him a posting.”

“In what capacity?” She asked, anxious at the thought of losing him.

“Operations officer, bridge crew. I’ll be losing Commander Riker later this year, and plan to promote Commander Data to first officer.”

“Wow.” Her eyes widened in surprised. “That would be quite an offer.”

“One that I’m hoping he wouldn’t turn down, but I understand that he declined a similar offer to work for you.”

“That other offer didn’t hold a candle to the Federation flagship, but he didn’t turn it down because of the position itself. He wanted to work for me, and I have a strong feeling that he wouldn’t want to leave right now, even if I urged him to.”

“I understand, considering the circumstances. What I’d like to have is some overlap during the next six months so that my bridge crew can train their replacements.” Picard dipped his chin. “Much less work for me, you see.”

“Oh, I know exactly what you mean.” Sighing, she said, “The truth is that I can’t go back to work yet, and he’s the only one who sat in on every meeting with me.”

“I’ll hold off, but I’m not going to look any further. He did some very impressive work while we were searching for you. I haven’t seen that kind of talent in a long time.”

She nodded. “I agree. He’s quite gifted, and what he’s doing for me doesn’t even begin to use his best skills.”

“However,” Picard tapped a finger against his chin. “Since we’re headed out to do some work on your behalf, maybe I should ask him to join us.”

“I was going to suggest that. Please tell him that I asked him to go.”

“All right. Is there anyone else from your team that should go?”

“No,” Kathryn thought about them. “I’d like to have Commander Young to stay on top of things at my office, and while Lieutenant Jarvin was also present at a lot of those meetings, he needs to be here monitoring my security.”

“Agreed. So, about President Nakmyre, I read the summary of your discussions. What else do I need to know?”

“You have the facts, but what isn’t in the official reports is what he wants in exchange for convincing his coalition to rejoin.”

“Must be something dubious for you to have omitted it.”

Kathryn took a sip of coffee as she formulated a way to respond. “What is your opinion of the efficacy of the Federation Council?”

“Hmmm.” He set down his teacup and crossed his arms in thought. “That issue is discussed at length among the media and bantered about in social settings, but never does it arise within conversations that are to be reported.”

“No, it doesn’t. I trust that you’ll keep what I’m going to say out of any reports?”

“Absolutely, as I’m sure you’ll return the gesture in kind?”

“Agreed.” Kathryn said. “Nakmyre, as well as most of the dignitaries I’ve spoken to this year, all want basically the same thing.”

“A new administration?”

“Yes. Nakmyre has a specific plan to protect the Council from the influence of the President, and he wants an open acknowledgement from the Federation that the Council has shown favoritism in regards to trade agreements.”

“That’s not going to happen any time soon.”

Kathryn said, “I believe it will take a new President and an official investigation into the Council’s business dealings.”

“An investigation that would likely ruin many careers and cause a different group of planets to cede membership.”

“That depends entirely how it’s handled. It’s my hope that we can pursue an investigation quietly so that we can protect innocent people from slander. I don’t want anyone pointing fingers until we’re sure where, exactly, the problem lies.”

“Admiral,” he shook his head. “You’re talking about a significant weeding out of corrupt politicians. I’m not sure that’s possible without a complete turnover.”

“That may be. For now, we cannot let Nakmyre push these agenda items yet.” She clasped her hands. “He indicated to Admiral Khurma that he has faith in my ability to beat the odds. Play that up when you meet with him.”

“That puts a lot of pressure on you to make something happen that is likely impossible.”

“Yes, but I’d much rather he pressure me than to start attacking the President. He’s not the only leader who wants to see me take over.” She clicked her tongue. “To clarify, I have no intention of running for office, but as long as they believe that I can make a change, they’re focusing on a positive outcome, giving us the freedom to pursue an investigation quietly. If the tide changes and people start demanding results, we lose that flexibility to maneuver discreetly. Those fingers will start pointing faster than we’ll be able to control.”

“I see your point.” He nodded slowly as he pondered what she’d said. “So, I will convince Nakmyre that we need him to sing your praises as a distraction.”

“He strikes me as the type who would love to be part of a little conspiracy.”

“Should be an interesting conversation,” he said as he refreshed Kathryn’s coffee. When finished, he asked, “I understand that you’d like to speak to me about something personal?”

“Thank you,” she indicated the coffee. “Yes, about your heart transplant.”

“What would you like to know?”

“You were young when you received it, correct?”

“I was twenty, and I got stabbed in a bar fight.”

Cringing, she said, “Oooh.”

“Painful, yes, but at least it was quick. It distresses me that you suffered through that ghastly ordeal and then were faced with such a devastating illness.”

“I question the fairness of it myself. Given the choice, I would have declined both experiences.” Leaning towards the arm of her chair, she said, “In regards to the new heart, what I'm anxious about is the intuition that I associate with increased heart rate. With a computer pumping for me, I'm not entirely sure that I'm going to feel a physical response to anxiety.”

“Surely you've felt some fluctuations in your heart rate during the last few weeks?”

“Yes,” she nodded. “The doctors tell me that it responds to brain impulses. I just wonder how much of my intuition is in my brain, and how much is in my heart, so to speak. Do you feel your heart hammering in tense situations?”

“Not hammering, per se. I vaguely recall that sensation, but when my heart rate increases, I feel it as increased energy.”

“I see.” She was eager to learn as much as she could. “You probably don't have a basis for comparison because your body was younger and healthier than mine at the time of your transplant, but I wonder if I'll need to take things easier. Be more cautious with physical exertion and try to keep a lid on stress levels.”

“I wouldn't think so. I haven't exactly taken it easy on my heart during my adult life, and it's even survived a short bout of Cardassian torture methods.”

She gasped in concern. “Oh, I didn't know!”

“Not many do, and I'm telling you so that you'll feel confident that your heart can likely handle a lot more than your body can. However, I suspect the doctors can do a controlled stress test with you.”

“That's what I've been told. I suppose it doesn't hurt to confide in you that I'm considering a family. The cardiac team wants to do a series of stress tests when I'm stronger to make sure it can cope, although I suspect they're just offering the tests to appease me.”

“A family?” Picard smiled. “I'm delighted that you're considering that, Admiral. I dare say that you deserve some personal happiness. In fact, this news gives me a bit of peace for I've been rather upset over all that's happened to you.”

“Thank you.” She inhaled deeply. “I haven't told anyone except Chakotay and the doctors about my hopes, and I have no idea why I told you, but I really appreciate your positive reaction.”

“Family is very important, and there are times when I wish I had made different choices in order to have children. But, as you know, things don’t always work out like you plan.”

“No, they don’t. They definitely don’t.”

“The more I learn about you, Admiral, the more surprised I am about how much we have in common.”

“Oh?” She smiled. “Such as?”

“I understand that we’ve both been partially assimilated.”

“Cheery topic, but yes. However, I didn’t ever become part of the hive mind.”

He took a cleansing breath. “But that is another conversation for another time, should we need it. In other matters, we both seem to be a subject of interest for Q, and have an unfortunate tendency to travel through time.”

“Time?” she asked in surprise.

“Although I don’t know the specifics about your experiences, Commander Kim told us that the implant we used to locate you was to prevent you from temporal incursions.”

Kathryn groaned. “Yes. Temporal paradoxes are their own sort of nightmare, aren’t they?”

“That they are.” Picard patted the arm of his chair. “I have taken enough of your time, dear Admiral, although if I may ask?”

“You needn’t hurry to leave, and yes, what would you like to know?”

He leaned closer to conspire. “I don’t want to presume to interfere with counselor/patient confidentiality, but I received a request from Counselor Troi to remain on Earth while we go on this little excursion. Now, don’t get me wrong, I adore the Counselor, but sometimes, I need a few weeks to process things on my own. As a friend, I want to ask you if I should give her permission to stay behind.”

Kathryn laughed. “I appreciate your consideration, but if you don’t need her and if she would like to stay, I wouldn’t mind continuing our in-person conversations. She’s remarkable, isn’t she?”

“Yes, she is. I’m not looking forward to losing either her or Will. They are my family, and Deanna is quite extraordinary. It took me years before I let her counsel me on personal matters because I had no interest in what I thought would be forming a dependent relationship with a psychologist, not to mention a member of my senior staff. I was strong enough to handle my

own issues, thank you very much.” He winked. “But for me, she has a knack for making the conversations seem like a chat between friends, and I have never once felt ‘counseled.’”

Kathryn smiled. “I’m glad to hear that, because I sometimes wonder when we’re going to get to the ‘counseling’ part. Then later when I reflect on our conversations, I can feel a sense of resolve although I have no idea where it might have come from.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” he said with a chuckle. “Deanna will be thrilled about staying here. She wants to use the time to plan her wedding in Alaska, and since she’ll be here and I’ll have Commander Kim and Beverly, I have no choice but to return by late March to attend your wedding.”

“I hope this trip to Joria won’t take that long.”

“No, but you never know.” Picard stood up to go. “Beverly wants to see you before we leave tomorrow. Are you free?”

“If she brings the ice cream, absolutely,” Kathryn smiled. “I’ll contact her.”

“Good, please do. I think she wants your opinion on whether to bring the young doctor from the Pioneer onto her staff.”

“I’ll look forward to discussing it with her.” She stood to walk him out, but a wave of vertigo made her stumble back and she nearly fell over the chair she’d been sitting in.

“Admiral!” Picard grabbed her arms to keep her from falling and then put his arm around her shoulders to steady her. “Perhaps we should call Beverly right now.”

She tried to push away the lightheadedness. “I’m fine, although a little embarrassed.”

“There’s no need to feel embarrassed.”

“Unfortunately, vertigo is a common occurrence. Means that I need to eat and sleep.”

“And that is exactly the reason why I’m doing this errand to Joria for you.” He held her a little longer, closely watching her eyes until they cleared. “Okay, you seem to have regained stability now. Will you be okay if I let go?”

“Yes, thank you. I believe I can manage.”

“I’m a little anxious about leaving you alone.”

Squeezing his arm, she said, “I appreciate your concern, but I’ll be fine. It’s the sudden change from sitting to standing that gets me.”

“All right.” He stepped back a bit and watched her walk a few steps toward him before he was convinced that she was stable. Relaxing as they walked into the foyer, he said, “Tell me something, now that we’ve moved into what I think is the beginning of a lovely friendship…”

She smiled genuinely. “What’s that?”

“You’re marrying your former first officer and yet you don’t admit to being involved with him when you were thousands of light years away from Starfleet’s code of conduct? I really don’t believe you.”

One eyebrow lifted, she replied, “Engaging in a distracting love affair wasn’t exactly high on my priority list.”

He dropped his chin and stared at her. “That is the dumbest excuse I have ever heard for not seeking physical companionship. You were too busy?!?”

Laughing out loud, she said, “Thank you, Captain. In retrospect, I’ve wondered about that myself.”

“Please, call me Jean-Luc.”

“Are you going to call me Kathryn?”

Holding her shoulders, he placed a chaste kiss on her cheek. “Absolutely not, my dear Admiral. Now, go rest and I’ll see myself out.”

As she watched him leave, Kathryn reflected on how unexpected his friendship was. Unexpected, but definitely appreciated. They really did have a lot in common, and she hoped that her friendship with Beverly would provide frequent opportunities to speak with him as well.

After eating a snack, Kathryn decided to place a call to the Enterprise. She keyed up the connection and contacted Deanna first.

“Kathryn, I wasn’t expecting to hear from you this afternoon.”

“I know,” she smiled. “Captain Picard just left here. I assume that he probably hasn’t spoken to you yet?”

“No, what about?”

“You requested to stay on Earth?”

“Oh, yes. I should have asked you, first. I apologize.”

“Not necessary,” Kathryn said kindly. “Since the Enterprise is leaving tomorrow, I thought you might like to postpone our appointment this evening.”

“That’s very thoughtful, but I really think we should do a little preparation before you talk to Norval tomorrow morning.”

“I’ll be okay,” Kathryn said with assurance.

Deanna frowned. “He may be innocuous, but that doesn’t mean the situation is going to be un-stressful. I have no doubts that you will handle it just fine. It’s what happens after it’s over that I’m worried about.”

“By then, the Enterprise will be heading out, and you and I can talk until the cows come home.”

“Cows come home?”

Kathryn chuckled. “An expression. On a farm, cows are the last of the animals to ramble in at night.”

“All right,” Deanna acquiesced. “But you’ll make time tomorrow afternoon?”

“I promise. Now, while you’re spending time with Will, I’d like to ask Beverly to join me for dessert tonight.”

“Now we get to the bottom of it,” she said with exaggeration. “You’re standing me up for ice cream.”

“I’ll be more than happy to have some again tomorrow afternoon.” Kathryn grinned.

“If it’s chocolate, I’ll be there.” She laughed, too. “Stand by while I transfer you to Beverly. Good luck tomorrow, and call me at any time if you need me.”

“I won’t be interrupting you tonight,” she replied as Deanna put the comm on hold.

Beverly’s image replaced the Federation logo within a minute. “Ice cream you say?”

“If you’re interested?”

“Sounds delicious, however, since Deanna just cancelled dinner plans with me, would you care to have more than ice cream? I’d be happy to bring something in.”

Kathryn laughed. “I’d love to have you join us. My mother is out for the evening, but Chakotay will be here.”

“Then I’d just love to treat you both to dinner from my favorite restaurant in San Francisco. I’ll pick it up and then be at your mother’s home in about an hour?”

“That sounds wonderful. Thank you.”

After they said their goodbyes, Kathryn decided that she ought to shower and change before dinner. The challenge was that she was spooked by the idea of being alone, especially without her commbadge. She had an idea, and stepped out on the front porch.

“Admiral!” The security officer patrolling the porch stopped and stood at attention. “May I help you with anything, ma’am?”

Waving her hand, she said, “At ease, Lieutenant. I was wondering if there is a female security officer on duty here right now?”

He thought for just a moment and then shook his head. “No ma’am. We can call for one immediately, however.”

“No, no.” She dismissed the idea. “That’s too much trouble. Forget I asked.”

“Are you sure, ma’am? It’s no trouble and if you’d like someone inside with you, it can definitely be arranged.”

Feeling silly, she said, “I’m sure I’ll be fine. Captain Chakotay will be home within thirty minutes. Thank you, Lieutenant.”

“You’re welcome, Admiral.”

She went back inside and sighed forcefully as she muttered to herself, “You’re going nuts, Katie.”

Stomping into the bedroom, she stripped off her clothes and tossed them onto the bed. “It’s just a shower. One simple shower. You’ve taken thousands of them.” She faced the shower stall with courage and determination, stepped inside, and turned on the water.

“Good evening, Captain,” Lieutenant Moller said to Chakotay as he stepped up to Gretchen’s porch.

“Lieutenant,” he nodded, finding it unusual that the house patrol officer would stop to address him. “Everything in order tonight?”

“Yes, sir. Forgive me if I’m overstepping, but Admiral Janeway came out here about twenty-five minutes ago.”

“For what?”

“She requested a female security officer, but there are none on duty. I would have called one, but the Admiral asked me not to pursue it.”

Chakotay angled his head, wondering if he was hearing correctly. “Did she say what for?”

“No, sir, but I heard the water turn on inside the house five minutes later, and it’s still running.”

“Thank you,” Chakotay said distractedly. “I’ll go check on her.”

“Aye, Captain.”

He dropped his things on a chair and made his way to their bedroom as quickly as he could. Her clothes were on the bed and the shower was running, so he relaxed. She was just taking a long shower, and wanted someone nearby because of her recent anxiety about being alone. He was relieved that she’d obviously gotten over that fear and was enjoying the water.

Toeing off his shoes, he decided that he’d join her, perhaps wash her back. After standing under the heat of the water for so long, she was probably very relaxed. He unzipped his jacket as he went to let her know that he was home.

The sight that greeted him when he stepped into the bathroom was the last thing he expected. “Kathryn!” She was curled up on the floor, outside of the shower stall with the door still open.

In a flash, he knelt down next to her shivering, naked body. Her arms were wrapped tightly around her knees and she was leaning up against the cold, tiled wall. Her eyes were closed and her breathing was fast and shallow. “Kathryn?”

He pulled a towel off the rack and wrapped it around her shoulders, and grabbed a second one to dry her slightly damp hair. “Kathryn, love, are you okay?”

She shook her head. “Something’s wrong with my heart.”

“It’s going to be okay. Try to slow down your breathing and we’ll check your pulse,” he said calmly as he placed his fingers around her wrist. “Can you let go of your leg?”

She loosened her grip and let him hold her arm. After fifteen seconds, he reported, “It’s fast, but steady.”

Her breathing still rapid, she said, “My chest hurts.”

“Can you breathe with me?” He used his hand to make forward and back motions to follow his slow breathing pattern. When she began to work with him, he said, “Better, but you’re freezing. Let’s get you warmed up and see if that helps.”

“I fell in the shower and can’t walk.” She closed her eyes and continued to concentrate on her breathing by blowing air through pursed lips.

“Okay, let me turn off the water and then we’ll get you off this cold floor.” He rose up and reached for the handle, jerking his hand back when he encountered the icy cold spray. “Damn that’s cold!”

“Scared me,” Kathryn said.

He gasped as he stuck his hand in and turned the water off as quickly as he could. After grabbing a towel to dry his hand, he kneeled back down. “What scared you?”

“The water,” she stuttered. “It was so cold. They cleaned me with cold water.”

“I remember you telling me about that.” He laid his hand on her back and asked, “Where are you hurt?”

“My leg.” Touching her right knee, she added, “There, and up here.” She motioned to her hip. “The water startled me and I fell. Adrenaline got me out here, but then it felt like I was having another heart attack.”

As he examined her knee and leg, he said, “Lieutenant Moller said the water has been running for about twenty minutes, so if it was similar to a heart attack, my guess is that the danger has passed.”

She winced under his touch. “I don’t think anything is broken.”

“Probably not fractured, but we’ll be careful.” Putting his arms under her knees and behind her back, he said, “Tell me if it hurts.”

As he lifted, she grimaced in pain. Through gritted teeth, she said, “It’s okay!”

“Why don’t I believe you?” he asked as he carried her into the bedroom and laid her on the bed.

“It’s not horrible,” she said, still shivering.

He made sure she was completely toweled off and then pulled the comforter around her. “Let’s call Joe.”

“What time is it?”

“Almost five. Why?”

“Beverly will be here soon. You don’t need to call Joe.”

“Dr. Crusher?”

“Yes, she’s bringing dinner over. I wanted to shower before she got here.”

“Is Troi coming too?”

“No, I cancelled the appointment so she could spend the time with her fiancé. Deanna is staying here while the Enterprise goes back to Joria.”

“All right.” He tapped his commbadge. “Captain Chakotay to Lieutenant Moller.”

“Moller here, Captain,” he replied urgently.

“Dr. Crusher will be arriving soon. Would you let her in and direct her to the Admiral’s bedroom?”

“Yes, sir. Is there anything else I can do, sir?”

“Not at the moment, but thank you for asking. Chakotay out.”

Kathryn closed her eyes and sighed. “I was hoping to spend the evening with Beverly as a friend, not as a patient.”

Placing a kiss on her forehead, he said, “Hopefully, she’ll fix you right up and you’ll get to do both.”

“Or she’s going to take one look at my heart and I’ll be checking in at Starfleet Medical.”

“If that’s the case, then we’ll take some cards and we can still have a nice evening.”

She smiled up at him. “You’re good for me, you know.”

“I try to be.” He caressed her cheek. “Let’s get you dressed.”

After gathering her undergarments and one of the outfits that Phoebe had given her, he returned to her side and lifted back the comforter over her legs. “I’m going to slide your panties up. I’ll be careful with your knee.”

“Mmm hmm.”

He was very gentle as he put them on her, doing a visual check of her leg as he did so. “I see a bruise forming on your hip, but your knee doesn’t appear to be swelling.”

“Feels like it should be.”

Re-covering her legs, he said, “I’ll leave your pants off for now so she can look at it.”

“kay.”

“Do you want to wear a bra?”

“Probably should.” She took the bra from him and pushed the comforter back. “Can you help me sit up?”

“Sure.” Leaning over her, he put his hands under her back and lifted her up to his chest, giving her enough space to put it on. As he watched her fasten it in back, he commented, “Your arms and shoulders are doing great now, aren’t they?”

“A little stiff and weak, but they don’t hurt. The shirt, please?”

He reached out and picked it up, intending to put it on her, but she snatched it away from him and did it herself. Biting back a smile, he said, “I think you’re doing better, now.”

“A little, but I still think something went wrong when I got scared. It shouldn’t hurt like that.” Once she pulled the shirt down over her waist, she snuggled up against him. “When the cold water hit me, I was terrified that someone was about to grab me, and then my arms got all tingly and I felt that awful clamping in my chest. That scared me even more.”

He tucked her hair behind her ear and smoothed out the long tresses. “Sounds like one of your nightmares.”

“Mmmhmm.” She tucked her hands in between them and sighed. “You’re warm.”

They heard the front door open and quick footsteps come down the hall. Beverly rushed in, asking, “Is she okay?”

Chakotay said, “Not sure. There’s a medkit on the dresser.”

Beverly grabbed it and popped it open. “What happened?”

“She twisted her knee, and I suspect she had a panic attack.”

Kathryn lifted her head and looked at him. “I don’t panic.”

Beverly smiled at her reassuringly as she turned on the medical tri-corder. “Of course not, Admiral. Perhaps you should tell me since he’s obviously mistaken.” She winked as she jerked her thumb at Chakotay.

Rolling her eyes, Kathryn explained the situation and then asked, “What do your scans show?”

“That your new heart is doing exactly what it should.” Beverly keyed something in and did a second scan. “All I see are the typical levels associated with the aftermath of fight-or-flight response.”

“But there was pain in my chest as if it were malfunctioning. Perhaps the bio-neural circuitry has a short in it from all the tweaking the doctors did to it.”

Beverly frowned. “Have you read about this new heart of yours yet?”

“I’m embarrassed to say that I haven’t taken the time.”

“Well, first of all, there’s nothing that could cause a short. And second, it’s supposed to mimic exactly what a real heart would do, including cause you pain when a real heart would.”

“Cause pain?”

“They were going for realistic.” Beverly chewed on her lip and cast a sideways look at Chakotay. Then she leaned close to Kathryn and whispered, “He was right.”

Chakotay stifled a laugh, causing it to sound like an undignified snort.

Kathryn threw him a mock glare and then asked Beverly, “When I spoke to your captain this afternoon, he implied that he doesn’t feel much of anything from the implant.”

“Jean-Luc’s heart is almost an antique as far as medical science goes. I think if he were to get one of these fancy new models like you’ve got, he wouldn’t know how to react. It’s been a long time since he felt the sensations of the real thing.”

She clicked her tongue. “Guess I ought to take a look at that manual.”

“It all checks out fine,” she said as she squeezed Kathryn’s hand.

Chakotay said, “Let me move out of the way so you can check her knee.”

“You said it twisted?” Beverly asked.

“Yes, and I landed on my hip.” Kathryn pulled back the comforter.

“Hmmm.” Beverly took a quick scan, and asked, “Captain, would you hand me the rest of the kit, please?”

“Sure, but please, call me Chakotay.”

“I’ve been looking forward to getting to know you.” Beverly took the regenerator out of the kit. “Except for that one time when I was at the hospital with Jean-Luc, you were always asleep when I saw you.”

Kathryn added, “When you came to visit me after the transplant, he was off buying a house.”

“That’s right,” Beverly said as she healed on the bruised hip. “I hope you have pictures to show me.”

“A few.” Kathryn watched Beverly work. “But you’ll see it when you come for the wedding.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

Chakotay asked, “How does her knee look?”

“The correct answer for you should always be that all parts of her legs look fantastic. However, to me, I see that she has an overstretched tendon and a contusion.” Beverly picked up another tool and directed it at her knee. “We’ll have it fixed in just a moment, and then we can dig into dinner.”

“Will you two be okay if I go set the table?”

Kathryn smiled at him. “I think we can manage. Thank you.”

After he left, Beverly picked up another tool and directed it at her hip. “He’s incredibly handsome up close, isn’t he?”

Laughing, Kathryn responded, “His pictures don’t even begin to do him justice.”

“That should do it.” She stood back and suggested, “Give it a flex and see.”

Kathryn tested her leg out and turned so she could set her feet on the floor. “Feels fine. Would you help me stand?”

“Sure.” Beverly put her arm around Kathryn and helped her up. “How’s that?”

After moving it around for a few seconds, she said, “Good as new. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now, do you need help with your pants?”

“I won’t turn it down.” Kathryn sat back down and let Beverly help slide them on. “I really had a panic attack?”

“That’s what it looks like. Do you want socks?”

“I’ve got slippers in the closet.”

As Beverly returned with the slippers, she asked, “Have you experienced post-traumatic stress before?”

Kathryn stared at her blankly for a moment and then pleaded with her friend. “Beverly, please don’t put that in my medical file.”

“I wasn’t going to, but it’s nothing to be ashamed of. Almost everyone who just lived through the war is experiencing it to some extent.”

“I just don’t want to be labeled as having a psychological illness.”

Beverly sat down and laid her hand on Kathryn’s back. “Your medical file is as confidential as they get. Only a doctor who has level ten clearance, or who is actively treating you, can access it. Not even the Fleet Admiral can look at it.”

“I trust that Deanna hasn’t discussed anything with you.”

“Absolutely not. I’ve asked her how you’re doing, and she gives me answers like ‘feeling stronger,’ and ‘busy planning her wedding.’ A psychological assessment of you has not shown up on your medical file, and since her services were not mandated, there’s no reason for her to write one.”

“Thank you. That makes me feel a little better, even though it would be expected that I’d need some time to heal psychologically after this.”

“Without a doubt. I hope that no one has made you feel like you should be able to let this roll off your back.”

“No,” Kathryn shook her head. “It has been quite the opposite, and there are only a handful of people who know just how bad it was. All of them, including you, haven’t made me feel the slightest bit uncomfortable, even when I had nightmares in front of them.”

“How many saw that?”

“You, Deanna, and Amy, of course. Captain Young, Harry Kim, and too many nurses to count.”

“And Chakotay.”

“Yes, both he and my mother, but they’re family. I’ve had terrible nightmares for years, but this panic attack tonight was caused by the first flashback I’ve had while awake. Post-traumatic stress disorder is something I’ve fought hard against since my father died. I’ve been determined to keep my sanity while awake, even though I can’t control it while asleep.”

Beverly said, “Well, you’ve certainly had more than your fair share of traumatic events, and I don’t even know the half of them, I’m sure. But flashbacks, nightmares, and panic attacks aren’t the only symptoms.”

“I know, but they’re the primary ones. One can’t be a Starfleet captain, or admiral, and be prone to panic attacks.”

“One can learn how to cope with them. Remember that tonight, after you had the initial rush of panic, you probably would’ve gotten past it if you hadn’t immediately felt like you were having a heart attack. Which, I might add, living through three of them would certainly trigger the disorder.”

“All right,” Kathryn agreed. “You’ve got me there.”

“The other symptoms can be just as debilitating if not addressed.” She held up a hand in protest. “Not that I’m suggesting you’ve had or will have any of these, but since the war we’ve seen some pretty major cases of survivor’s guilt. When linked with this disorder, it manifests either as irrational anger or looks exactly like classic depression.”

Kathryn sighed heavily and stretched her tense neck muscles. “Survivor’s guilt. Sounds like I have something to talk to Deanna about.”

Patting her on the back, Beverly said, “At least you don’t seem to be exhibiting any signs of depression or not being able to forge relationships with people. Not only are you getting married, but you seem to have developed quite a few new friendships. I, for one, am very happy about that.”

“Thank you.” Kathryn gave her friend a weak smile. “But Jean-Luc pointed out earlier today that he couldn’t believe that Chakotay and I weren’t involved in the delta quadrant. I think, perhaps, you just hit the nail on the head as to the reason why – guilt.”

Beverly shook her head. “I’m sure it’s a lot more complicated than that. I know from experience how difficult it is to get romantically involved with a commanding officer, so you don’t have to explain it to me.”

“Yes, but...,” Kathryn sighed. “You know what? Our dinner is getting cold.”

“And we’re not going to solve this tonight, so let’s go enjoy each other’s company and eat some of that ice cream you’re craving.” Beverly helped her stand up.

“I appreciate your insight and your medical assistance. You’ve given me something to think about.”

Beverly stopped in the hallway, and said, “I want to tell you one more thing, if I may?”

“Go ahead,” Kathryn nodded.

“Please contact me if you ever think you might be sinking into depression, no questions asked. I’ve seen it happen far too often recently, and because most of it is trauma-related, there are some very simple medications that can turn it around within a matter of days.”

Kathryn stared at her for a moment before she worked up the courage to ask, “Isn’t depression caused by a drop in neurotransmitter levels?”

“Yes, and that drop can be triggered by trauma. Or it may show up unexpectedly months or years later simply because someone becomes overwhelmed with guilt, or because they’ve had a falling out with a friend.”

After closing her eyes and taking a steadying breath, Kathryn managed to ask, “Just a falling out with a friend can trigger this?”

“Sure,” Beverly said softly. “Especially if that friend has been a confidant while dealing with the trauma. I’m sure you can imagine that it might feel like the proverbial rug has been pulled out from under your feet.”

“Sounds like I need to do some reading on this disorder.”

Laying a hand on Kathryn’s shoulder, Beverly said, “I just don’t want you to have to deal with some of these emotional problems when I, or any other doctor, can fix it. I’m not saying that you will have problems, but if you do, I’m only a comm call away. I bet your Dr. Zimmerman would help you, too.”

Pursing her lips to avoid getting overly emotional, Kathryn merely nodded.

“Come on, let’s go eat.”

When they walked into the kitchen, Chakotay was sitting at the table reading a PADD. He looked up and smiled. “The food is in the oven keeping warm.”

“Thank you,” Beverly said happily and took over the preparations.

Kathryn locked eyes with Chakotay, and she knew instantly that he could tell she was upset. With Beverly busy making noise in the cooking area, Kathryn felt comfortable saying, “There’s nothing to worry about. I’ve just learned something about myself that is both troubling and a relief.”

He moved closer and gently held her arm. “What’s that?”

Looking deep into his concerned eyes, she had no doubts that he’d help her figure this out, so she forced herself to admit, “Post-traumatic stress can cause debilitating episodes of depression that can be triggered by something as simple as a falling out with a close friend.”

His eyes widened slightly and then he composed himself because of their guest. “I see. Well...” He took a deep breath, rubbed her arm, and then nodded. “Okay. Now we know.”

She put her hand on his chest to draw strength from him. “Now we know.”

Part 23 - "Demons, Dresses, and Desires"

By Dawn

Summary:

Rated NC-17

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

"Kathryn?" Chakotay asked.

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

"You okay?"

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

"Your heart?" he asked with concern.

"It's thumping hard. I've been worried that I'd never feel that again."

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

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

"What does your intuition tell you about today?"

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

"Kathryn?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Are you up to this?" he asked.

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

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

That surprised her. "Why not?"

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

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

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

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

He nodded. "I'll watch for it."

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

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

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

He eyed the young man warily. "I'll stay close, Admiral."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You... you... you heard that?" He looked sideways at her.

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

"I... I wanted... them to stop. They were killing you."

Her eyes softened with understanding. "I know."

"Benjolen." He tentatively took a step closer. "That's who I was talking to."

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

"He's..." Jared cringed. "I hate him."

"I'm not a fan, myself." Kathryn nodded towards the chair across from her. "Please, sit down."

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

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

"Not until after you were rescued. I knew you were Starfleet and Terran, but I didn't know who you were."

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

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

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

"No. I had no idea." He looked very afraid.

"Did the others know my identity?"

"I don't know. Maybe, but they didn't include me in their meetings."

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

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

“How did you get involved with this group?”

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

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

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

“And you didn’t question his motives?”

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

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

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

She asked him questions about the ship’s engines, to see if he was telling the truth about his knowledge. He was opening up to her more, happy to be talking about something he was comfortable with. He surprised her when he expressed frustration in his lack of ability to correctly align the manifold system, the very thing that had made her realize she’d been onboard a poorly functioning ship.

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

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

“What would you have done?”

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

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

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

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

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

“Did you remember what he looked like?”

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

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

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

“Do you know if he saw me?”

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

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

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

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

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

“Do you understand the importance of this observation?”

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

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

“Can you ask Pratin?”

She clicked her tongue. “He’s dead.”

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

“Why do you ask?”

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

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

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

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

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

“What didn’t you know?”

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

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

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

“Yes, I’m aware of that.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“How do you know this?”

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

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

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

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

“Nothing about the bombings,” he said quickly.

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

“I don’t have friends.”

“How do you know them?”

He looked away in refusal.

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

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

“Do you have names?”

“Can you protect me from them?”

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

“By sending me to prison?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It was contagious?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What kind of records?”

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

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

“One of my jobs was to take notes for the executive of the mining company. He met a lot with Starfleet people right after the war was over, both for his operation and because he was

representing other mines in nearby sectors. I hated Starfleet so much at the time that I thought I'd keep this information and use it against them someday. So, unless you want to use this against your own organization, it probably isn't that useful," he said dejectedly.

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

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

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

"You."

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

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

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

"Admiral?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you for talking to me. I'm relieved to see that you've recovered."

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

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

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

"Can we transport directly from here?"

"No, ma'am. We have to be in the main lobby of the headquarters building because of the reinforced security."

Chakotay and Khurma came around the corner. "Kathryn?" Chakotay asked.

Khurma said, "That was impressive."

She lifted her head and extended a hand for Chakotay to take as she spoke to Khurma. “Can you have Bernie come talk to him?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Not that I’m aware of, but Mr. Norvellen hasn’t been forthcoming regarding his involvement.”

“Today’s conversation might change that.”

Paris said, “I’ll look into it.”

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

“Absolutely,” he said with curiosity.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She moaned, “I’m exhausted.”

“Come on, let’s get out of these uniforms and see about a nice, long nap.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“A little. I’ll doze for a bit.”

“Love you,” she murmured.

He kissed her forehead. “I love you, too, Kathryn.”

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

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

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

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

“How can a wedding dress be audacious?” Chakotay asked.

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

He subconsciously licked his lips. “I see.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh, nothing important.”

Gretchen and Phoebe exchanged looks, not believing her.

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

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

“Let’s go, then.” Gretchen said.

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

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

Gretchen asked, “Tell us what you want, dear.”

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

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

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

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

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

“You should be picky. This is your wedding dress,” B’Elanna said.

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

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

“That’s right, Katie,” Gretchen said. “Otherwise, you could have gotten married six months ago.”

“Who’s giving you away?” Phoebe asked.

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

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

“Are you in your office, free to talk?”

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

“I’m trying on wedding dresses.”

“I see. No uniforms then?”

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

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

“I will. Thank you, Matt.”

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

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

She laughed. “So it seems.”

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

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

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

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

“I understand, dear.” Susan helped her out of it and then said, “I can’t even begin to imagine what you’ve been through, but I’m tickled pink that you’re getting married.” She continued

talking as she helped Kathryn. “Your fiancé seems like such a charming man. A little rugged, but in a good way. So dedicated to the important things, too.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh yes. Do you like the fabric?”

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

“Of course!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“That would be lovely,” Susan said.

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

“So shall we go with this one?” Susan asked.

“Yes, in ivory.”

Gretchen said, “It’s beautiful, Katie. Chakotay will love it.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

B’Elanna helped Kathryn change clothes again. “Are you holding up, Kathryn?”

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

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

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

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

Kathryn chuckled. “And what was your response?”

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

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

“The dress is beautiful. If you can make a smaller version in ivory, it’ll be perfect.”

Gretchen said, “And a chiffon wrap.”

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

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

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

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

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

Susan answered for her, “She’s anxious about her shoulder blades attracting attention. She’s so thin right now.”

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

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

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

Phoebe said, “I don’t know, but Monsieur Alexandre is going to love it.”

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

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

“Hmmm?”

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

“Mmmm,” was her only response.

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

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

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

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

“Oh?”

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

He frowned. “Are you okay with that?”

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

“But the wedding is only a month away.”

She sighed and snuggled against him. “Remind me again why I didn’t want a Starfleet ceremony?”

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

She punched his arm.

“Owe! What was that for?”

“For being cheeky.”

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

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

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

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

She sighed contently. “We haven’t done this since I’ve been back.”

He whispered, “Now that you’re getting stronger, we’ll have to correct that.”

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

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

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

“Resolved sexual tension?”

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

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

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

She winked. “My secret.”

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

“And you love it,” she said huskily.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Shuddering under her touch, he closed his eyes to enjoy the sensations she was bringing to his body. All of the tingling she was eliciting from his nipples seemed to coalesce in his groin,

making him feel hard and ready to imbed himself within her. He had to maintain focus, though, and make sure she was ready for him. Holding his weight off of her with his arms, he dipped down to capture her lips again. As he plundered her mouth, her hands roamed over his body, leaving a warm trail wherever they touched.

“Relax,” she whispered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He covered as much of her breast with his mouth as he could, and lovingly stroked his tongue across her sumptuous breasts, rejoicing in the way she shuddered under his ministrations. His hands slipped under her back to lift her to him, the slightness of her body making it easy to hold her close.

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

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

“Pleeeeee... ohhhhh...”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Part 24 - “A Reunion of Friends”

By Dawn

Summary: Voyager Reunion

Rated: PG

Kathryn was packing things at her house in San Francisco when Captain Young contacted her. She set a picture frame back onto her nightstand and tapped her combadge. “Captain, I didn’t realize that you were back from Sarcusia.”

“We just returned this morning, Admiral. Are you free for coffee this afternoon? I see that you’re in San Francisco.”

“I’ll be glad to make some time, but this house has a lot of traffic today. A handful of my former crew members are here packing for us.”

“If you don’t mind taking a break for a few minutes, perhaps there’s a room in your house that’s off the beaten path?”

She smiled. “I’ll see what I can do. Stop by any time.”

Kathryn went downstairs to find Chakotay in the living room, carefully wrapping and packing her knick-knacks. She leaned against the doorjamb to watch him scrutinize each item.

Looking up, he flashed his dimples at her. “Supervising again?”

“No,” she said, admiring his gorgeous smile. “It just struck me that it was exactly one year ago that you were standing in that same spot, pulling those very trinkets out of a box, and I bet you were wondering why I had so many of them then, too.”

“You love to keep mementos of everything,” he said affectionately. “I was just thinking about that day last spring. I came here hoping to win back your friendship.”

“You never lost it.”

“Only because you are a gracious and forgiving woman.”

She casually walked over to help him. “We’d been through too much to let a little argument come between us, and you’d forgiven me for significantly worse transgressions.”

Placing his hand on hers, he stopped her from wrapping a ceramic bowl. “Kathryn,” he said as he leaned over the box to give her a light, but lingering kiss. “Thank you for letting me back into your life.” With an intense gaze, he added, “Both a year ago, and six months ago.”

“I let you back in because I couldn’t be without you. In case you don’t realize it, I’m in love with you.” She lifted the bowl and said, “Back when you unwrapped this, I loved you so much that I was determined to make you fall in love with me again, and last August, I let myself continue loving you when you refused to let me go.”

Barely able to get the words out, he managed to whisper, “Thank you.”

“That night you massaged my shoulders, I realized that I was extremely important to you.”

“You’re important to everyone.”

She shook her head. “Not like I am to you. You know everything about me, you’ve seen me at my worst, and yet you were still fighting tooth and nail to keep me. There’s something to be said for sharing my life with someone who loves me, no matter what. Someone who knows every nuance and mundane detail about my likes, dislikes, hopes, and fears. And someone that I know everything about in return. We have that, even if we’ve forgotten a few times.” She placed her hand on his cheek, drawing him towards her for an intimate kiss. The warmth of his lips was just starting to have an affect on her when someone cleared his throat behind them.

Chakotay broke the kiss and looked past her. “Yes, Tom?”

“I’m sorry to interrupt, but Captain Young is here and he wishes to speak with you, Kathryn. He said you were expecting him.”

She smoothed out her shirt before turning toward the doorway. “Thank you, Tom. Would you let him know that we’ll be right there?”

“Of course, and I’m sorry for intruding.”

Waving her hand, she said, “Don’t worry about it.”

When he was gone, Chakotay asked, “We? Do you want me to join you?”

“Yes, that’s what I came down here to ask you. Would you have coffee with us? I believe he has some news, and I’d like your help deciding how to proceed.”

“Thank you. I’d love to.” He took the bowl from her and set it carefully into the box. “Where should we go to talk?”

“We’ll kick B’Elanna and Sue out of the study.” She extended her hand for him to hold as they walked out of the room. “We didn’t bring the dampening field generators here, but Justin can take care of that for us.”

Once they got settled, Bernie said, “We had absolutely no trouble finding Mr. Norvellen’s storage locker, but because we had to breach security and reveal that it had been broken into, we retrieved all of his things. I didn’t want to leave any clues that might indicate whose locker it was.”

Kathryn passed the sugar to Chakotay. “I’m sure he’ll be thankful that his things are safe. Was there much?”

“Not really, a little over a dozen boxes. I assume the trial is over?”

“Yes,” Chakotay replied. “Norvellen was acquitted of all felony charges, but he’s being held in protective custody in New Zealand pending a psychological evaluation.”

Kathryn added, “And for his safety until all of this settles out. He went willingly.”

“I went to see him a couple days ago,” Chakotay explained. “And he’s adjusting well. He’s apprehensive about his safety should he be released, so I suggested that, if and when that happens, he might want to consider staying and working at the penal colony. That seemed to assuage his fears.”

“Good. What about the others, if I may ask?”

“You haven’t read the report?” Kathryn asked.

“No, it’s classified level twelve.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize that.” She frowned. “I haven’t actually read it, either. I just know what Khurma told me. All of them were sentenced to life terms at the penal colony on Tantalus V. Even if rehabilitated, they’ll have to find a way to contribute to society from inside the Colony.”

Chakotay asked, “So, what did you find?”

“Quite a lot, actually.” Bernie handed Kathryn an alien data padd. “This is what you sent me to retrieve. I didn’t make a copy.”

Surprised, Kathryn asked, “Did you look at it?”

“Yes, but I didn’t want to upload it to the Pioneer’s main computer, so I wasn’t able to compare this data with our main database.”

“You don’t want an official record that we have this?” Chakotay asked.

“No, and my reports indicate that we found a damaged and unusable data storage device. That was Admiral Khurma’s suggestion before I left.”

Kathryn nodded. “All right. I’ll see what I can do with it.”

“If I may make a suggestion, Kathryn?” Bernie asked.

“Of course.”

“Judy could be given a leave of absence once Harry Kim returns. During that leave, she wouldn’t be required to report on her activities and could do this research on a personal computer.”

Chakotay told Kathryn, “That sounds much better than your taking time to do this right now.”

“Have you spoken to Judy about it, yet?”

“Yes,” Bernie nodded. “She’s chomping at the bit to take a look at it, but I didn’t risk sending it to her.”

“All right, but I want to make one copy for myself, first.” She grinned when Chakotay fished a civilian data storage device out of her desk drawer. Handing him Norvellan’s data padd, she said, “Make sure that doesn’t get packed up today.”

“I’ll put your copy in my pocket, and Bernie, you can take the original home with you.”

“Thank you, we’ll keep it safe.” He tucked the alien padd inside his coat. “Kathryn, did you read my report on my conversation with Norvellan?”

“We both did. He gave you a lot of information. Some of it, I didn’t understand.”

“The leads he gave us on the terrorist activities of his former co-workers were surprisingly accurate.”

“Oh?” Chakotay asked.

“We took advantage of our visit there to place some of our people undercover.”

Kathryn’s eyes widened in surprise. “Does Khurma know?”

“Unofficially.”

On the edge of her seat, she asked, “So, what happened?”

“It was remarkably easy to infiltrate the organization that Norvellen led us to. They call themselves ‘Broken Circle,’ and from what we understand, they have almost a hundred members from eleven different species, all young adults.”

“Broken Circle,” Chakotay frowned. “Odd name for a terrorist organization.”

“That’s what it translates as. I’m not sure what the original language was, but the recruiting speech indicated that they’re taking actions that will force the Federation to notice that their worlds are suffering.”

“To what end?”

“Protection. They’re trying to get Starfleet there.” Bernie leaned forward in his chair. “Kathryn, they are huge supporters of your efforts.”

“Really,” she said with thought. “I wonder how we could work that in our favor.”

Chakotay said, “That seems obvious.”

“It does?” both Kathryn and Bernie asked simultaneously.

“They’re after publicity. Give them some.”

Bernie held up a hand. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea. They claim responsibility for twenty-seven terrorist activities over the last two years.”

“What!?” Kathryn yelled.

“This Broken Circle group appears to be responsible for the bombings on nine planets. They’ve caused a lot of physical damage and injury, but they claim to have done everything in their power to avoid the loss of life.”

Chakotay rubbed his face with worry. “That’s easier said than done. I know from experience.”

“Yes, but I fear that if we publicize what they’ve done, we’ll create more problems than we’ll solve. I agree that we need to use this information to our advantage, but we have to proceed cautiously.”

Kathryn looked at Chakotay. “I think we could really use your advice on this. It sounds like the beginnings of…”

“The Maquis,” he finished for her. “Agreed. We don’t want this blown out of proportion. Bernie, we need a clear picture of every situation they’ve been involved in, from both perspectives. Then the three of us should sit down with Admiral Khurma as soon as possible so we can develop a strategy.”

“Does anyone else know about this?” Kathryn asked.

“My senior officers, plus the three who are working undercover.”

“All right.” She glanced at Chakotay anxiously, and then asked Bernie, “Do we know if they were responsible for the incidents on Sirius IX or the Ktarian homeworld?”

“We know, and the answer is no.” Bernie looked at both of them in curiosity over the tension that just emerged. “The Ktarian authorities apprehended those individuals immediately, and they were part of an organization from Ktaria. The Sirius IX incident last summer was, we believe, a copycat crime.”

Chakotay clasped Kathryn’s fingers. “How can you be sure?”

“When our undercover operatives made contact, they did so in a bar by loudly singing your praises, Kathryn, and while speaking out against the Federation. Once they were introduced to the leaders of the Broken Circle, our people made it clear that they refused to be part of anything that jeopardized the lives of Starfleet personnel, you specifically.”

“And?” Chakotay asked.

“Broken Circle assured our people that they would never do anything that would destroy the Federation’s only hope. That’s you, Kathryn.”

She took a deep breath. “No pressure.”

“How do we know that they weren’t saying that to placate our people?” Chakotay asked.

“We don’t, but it’s not like we’re going to put Kathryn in a vulnerable position, nor will we suggest that she communicate with them.”

Firmly, Chakotay replied, “No, we aren’t. I refuse to let her get involved in this directly.”

Kathryn gave them a fake smile. “Gentlemen, I do believe that you’re coddling me again.” When they both gave her a pointed look in response, she shrugged. “I’m just pointing that out, not that I don’t agree with you.”

“I’m afraid that I will have tendencies to get worked up about your safety for awhile,” Chakotay said.

“I expected that, but...” She looked sternly at both of them. “When I’m sitting right here, I’d rather you not speak about me as if I’m not present. The last thing I’m going to do is put myself at risk right now, and I would appreciate it if you’d operate under that assumption.”

“Of course, Admiral,” Bernie said.

“I’m not pulling rank, Bernie.” She gestured towards Chakotay. “That would get me into a little more hot water than I’d like, considering I’m about to marry him.”

Chakotay squeezed her hand. “My apologies, Kathryn.”

She caressed his fingers while speaking to Bernie. “Could you arrange this discussion with Khurma within the next two weeks? As of the Voyager Reunion on March 27th, we won’t be available outside of an emergency until May.”

“Of course. I’ll contact him this afternoon to ask how he’d like to proceed. We’ll try to take as little of your time as we have to.”

“Thank you.” She turned to Chakotay. “Do you have time to give this some thought before we meet with Khurma? It would be fine with me if the two of you hashed out a proposal in advance.”

“Of course. I don’t have any more lectures scheduled until mid-May.”

“Great.” She clapped her hands on her legs. “I’m glad we’ve made some headway on this situation. Do you have anything else for us, Bernie?”

“No,” he said, hesitantly glancing at Chakotay.

Chakotay pointed out, “I know that you’re trying to get her information on the President, Bernie.”

He relaxed. “Oh, okay. You didn’t seem to know when I first mentioned it.”

“I didn’t, but she filled me in as soon as I saw her.”

Kathryn avoided pointing out, again, that she was still in the room. “So do you have anything on that?”

“Not yet, but now that we’re in proximity of Earth again, we can put the plan into action. We may not have anything before you leave on your honeymoon.”

“What’s the plan?” Chakotay asked.

Bernie said, “One of our crewmembers has a childhood friend that works in the Federation building in Paris. That friend has an acquaintance that works in the administrative pool for the President, a friend who is ready for a change in leadership.”

Kathryn said, “I apologize for not telling you about that, Chakotay. It is such a simple plan that I didn’t think to run it by you.”

“Sounds simple to me, too. I hope it comes off without a hitch, but it shouldn’t be rushed.”

“That’s true,” she said to Bernie. “When you have it, would you get the information to Lieutenant Jarvin? He’ll see that it gets to us.”

“Yes, I will.” He stood up. “I should be getting back to the Pioneer, and I still want to drop by your office to see my wife before I beam back up. Would you excuse me?”

“Of course,” she said with a smile. “Tell Judy not to stay up all night working on that data you’ve got. I doubt it contains anything we don’t already know.”

“But it will give us proof should we need it.” Bernie bowed his head slightly. “Have a good evening.”

Chakotay stood up, too. “I’ll walk you out.”

After they were gone, Kathryn turned on the PADD that Chakotay had copied for her and was immediately absorbed in reading it. When Chakotay returned and closed the door behind him, she looked up and smiled. “Thanks for helping us with this new group.”

“I’m eager to get involved.” He sat down across from her. “It would be best to avoid acknowledging an organized terrorist group, for everyone’s sake. I fear that it would not only force Starfleet’s hand to bring these young people into custody, but it would also undermine your efforts to positively change the Federation’s attitude.”

“You’re right. They’d immediately be associated with all of the incidents, including the ones involving me.”

“Especially since the identities of your abductors were kept secret.” He looked down at his hands and then back up at her. “Kathryn, first of all, I want to apologize again for being over-protective.”

“I understand your desire to watch over me, but I'm capable of making decisions myself. My body may still be weak, but my mind is clear, and I'm quite aware of my importance not only to you, but to the Federation. I know that I've still got to convince you that my eight years of risk-taking has ended.”

“No, you don't. You are true to your word, and I have no reason to doubt you.” He folded his hands together and said, “Second, I noticed that you were nervous about discussing Sirius IX around me. You don't need to be.”

“All right,” she said quietly.

Shaking his head, he said, “Please don't feel like you have to withdraw from me when that incident comes up. I'm still grieving over the pain I caused you, and I don't want anything to be a taboo subject between us.”

“I don't either, but like Deanna told us last week, knowing that my depression was made worse by the traumatic stress disorder should help.”

He nodded slowly, still looking down. “It should help, and it does a little, but I still feel like I hurt you more than all your other traumatic experiences combined.”

“You can't compare them.” She got up and crossed the short distance to sit on his lap. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she said, “You told me less than an hour ago that I was a gracious and forgiving woman, did you not?”

“Yes, I did.” His eyes were closed as he rested his head against her arm.

Kathryn put her fingers under his chin until he was looking at her. “Then please accept my forgiveness. I already know that you've forgiven me for the pain I caused you, because you wouldn't have asked me to marry you if you hadn't.”

Smiling, he said, “And I suppose you wouldn't be sitting here now if you hadn't put this behind you.”

“That's right.” She kissed his forehead. “I've always loved you, despite our arguments, but I wouldn't be marrying you if I didn't know, without a doubt, that you would *never* knowingly hurt me.”

“Thank you, Kathryn,” he said earnestly. “I don't deserve it, but thank you.”

Snuggling against him, she said, “I've done many things that don't deserve your forgiveness, but lucky me, I just keep winning your heart back, over and over and over and over and over...”

He tickled her in response, making her squeal with laughter. “Now who's being cheeky?”

Laughing, she said, “I'd never!”

He hugged her close to his body and said, “By the way, thank you for trusting me with this Broken Circle situation.”

“I can’t think of anyone better suited for strategizing how to use this information.”

“I appreciate your vote of confidence, and, if Khurma agrees, I'm eager to guide their actions indirectly. Would you be upset if I kept tabs on the situation during our honeymoon?”

Chuckling, she said, “No. Just so long as I don’t have to think about it, and as long as you remember the reason we’ll be in the Mediterranean.”

“Which is what again?” he asked with a grin.

Saucily, she whispered into his ear, “To keep your new wife humming with pleasure.”

The kiss he gave her in response had her humming for the rest of the day.

A few days later, Kathryn was dismayed as she stood in the middle of her new kitchen, looking at all the stuff that needed to be put away.

“You look lost,” Gretchen said as she came into the room.

“Mom!” Kathryn felt her disposition improve immediately. “I'm so glad you’re here!”

Shaking her head, Gretchen said, “Oh, no, no, no. I know that look in your eyes, and I'm telling you now, this is your kitchen and you need to organize it to suit you.”

“I don’t cook.”

“So?”

“You know that the first time you use this kitchen, you’re going to be reorganizing it anyway, so why not just make it user-friendly from the start.”

“Well, if you think about logically, it will be user friendly.”

Kathryn pointed out, “It takes a *user* to know how to make it *user* friendly.”

“Then have that dear man of yours do it.”

“He, Tom, and B’Elanna are upstairs assembling furniture in all the bedrooms.”

“All right.” Gretchen said with a sigh as she ushered her daughter out of the kitchen. “Go organize your study or your bathroom or something.”

“Thanks Mom! You’re the best!”

“Yeah, yeah,” Gretchen mumbled as she put the pots and pans in the large cabinet below the cook top.

“Kathryn, it has been a pleasure talking with you this afternoon,” Admiral Khurma said as he and Captain Young were about to leave. “I’m thrilled to see you looking so healthy and energized.”

“Thank you, Admiral.” She accepted a friendly hug from her C.O.

Bernie said, “And really, Kathryn, this house is amazing. I look forward to seeing it all done up for the wedding.”

“Chakotay found a real gem here, didn’t he? I love it, too.” As she walked out onto the porch with them, she described how they planned to set up the front yard for the wedding. “We’ll have the center aisle come right off these steps, and a trellis will be set up for the ceremony over there, in front of the tree line.”

“How many guests are you expecting?” Bernie asked.

She hesitated before saying, “Actually, I’m not sure. The wedding coordinator is dealing with those details.”

“You’re expecting 172.” Khurma explained, “I got the security report this morning.”

“Oh,” she said with a chuckle. “I guess dealing with all of this is quite an undertaking.”

“Yes, but it’s good to challenge our security teams every once in awhile. They’re used to doing major events.”

Bernie looked right and left and then asked, “So, where are you doing the reception? It doesn’t look like there’s enough room here for both.”

“Follow me.” Kathryn stepped down the stairs and went around to the left side of the house to the rose garden. “It’s not in bloom, yet, but there will be flowers arrangements delivered. We’re putting the cake and beverage tables in here, and the dinner seating will extend from here out towards the front. The wedding coordinator assures me that it will fit, and since I’m not fussing over the details, I’m choosing to believe her.”

Khurma said, “I’m sure it will be perfect.”

“I hope so,” Kathryn said with optimism. “It’s been a long time coming.”

“It’s been quite a year, hasn’t it?”

She sighed heavily. “Yes, it has. Eight years, actually.”

“That, too,” Khurma said with understanding. “Well, we should go and let you rest up for tomorrow. Enjoy yourself at the reunion.”

“Oh, I plan to.” Her eyes widened with excitement. “Thank you for coming all the way out here.”

“Our pleasure,” Bernie patted her on the back.

After they transported away, Kathryn went back into the house and plopped down near Chakotay on their new sofa. She slipped off her shoes and stretched out, wiggling her toes up under Chakotay’s arm so that her feet were in his lap. He lifted the PADD he was reading to make room and grabbed hold of one set of wriggling toes.

Closing her eyes, she snuggled into the squishy throw pillows. “I love this sofa. It’s soft and comfy and perfect for naps.”

“Are you settling in for one?”

“Mmmm,” she smiled sleepily. “Sounds nice. I think unpacking has worn me out. I’ve been so tired the last couple of days.”

“It takes more energy than one would expect,” he said while massaging her foot.

“You going to sit here for awhile?”

He spread the afghan out on top of her and rested his hand on her legs. “I can if you’d like.”

“Up to you. Are you still tinkering with the timeline?”

“Yes, because it seems to me that if our people offer too many suggestions too quickly, it will look fishy.”

“Or they could appear to be full of energy and ideas. They’d be a real boon to the Circle’s efforts.”

He shrugged. “Depends on the personality of whoever is commanding their efforts. He or she might feel threatened.”

“Lieutenant Chambers is a fantastic poker player, never gives a thing away. I believe that he has enough tact to know when to use discretion.”

“Well,” Chakotay said with a sigh. “I hope that the Circle takes our people’s suggestions to heart. They’re not making progress with violence, and if they really do support you as much as we think, they’ll have listened to your call for peaceful demonstrations.”

“Have you noticed that we can’t link any of the terrorist activities of the past eight months to them?”

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean they haven’t done any of them.”

“I know, but if they’ve really heard what I was trying to convey in my speeches, then perhaps they’ve already ceased violent activities for the time being. Maybe they’re waiting to see what I do before attempting anything else.”

“If that’s true, then what have they been doing all this time? Rallying their troops?”

Kathryn said, “That would be an excellent piece of intelligence for our people to gather. Add it to your list.”

“It’s already there.” He rubbed her leg. “I’m looking forward to watching the Fednews reports next week to see if they use our first suggestion.”

“A march to publicize the social injustices of the last four years on the sixth anniversary of the President’s Inauguration.” She clicked her tongue. “I still can’t believe Khurma is going along with that. Zife is going to be furious.”

“A march is better than a bombing, and despite what Paris and Patterson think, your C.O. is definitely not under the President’s thumb.”

“I know, but if it’s made public that the four of us are the think-tank behind the Broken Circle, there’s going to be some serious repercussions.”

Chakotay shook his head and held up his PADD. “If this plays out like we hope, Zife won’t be in office long enough to learn about our involvement. Once the circle has accomplished their main goal, we can encourage them to disband.”

As she walked down the stairs of their new home, Kathryn smiled at Chakotay who was waiting for her at the bottom. “Do I look okay?”

“You look beautiful.” He studied her pantsuit and asked, “Have I seen that outfit before?”

“Not the jacket. I bought it last spring in Europe. It’s a bit more vibrant than what I’d usually wear, but I thought the color would make me appear more energetic.”

“It works. You look striking.”

When she made the final step onto the marble entry floor, she was immediately drawn into his arms for a tender embrace. Nuzzling against his neck, she sighed happily as she enjoyed the warmth of his body and the spiciness of his scent.

“Kathryn, I don’t think I can remember a time when I’ve felt happier than I do right now.”

“Just wait until Saturday.”

Hugging her even tighter, he said, “That hasn’t happened yet, so it doesn’t count.”

“What has you in such a reflective mood?”

“You do.” He pulled back a little to look at her. “Or rather, your presence does. When we had this reunion three months ago, you’d been missing for twelve days and I was losing hope. It was a rainy, dreary day, and…”

“Shhhh,” she said as she placed her finger on his lips to quiet him. “I love the rain, and if you keep talking about that, you’re going to lose your happiness.” She replaced her finger with a soft kiss. “Just tell me that you’re happy I’m here.”

“I’m extremely happy that you’re here. Euphoric would be a better description.” He returned her kiss with another. “And I was only offering a contrast to illustrate how remarkable it is that we’re standing in our new home, heading to this reunion, and getting married in three days.”

Smiling brightly, she said, “I have no doubt that this trumps what I was doing during the last reunion. Unless,” she smiled even wider. “I was dreaming of being held by you at the time. I bet that’s what it was, although actually being held by you is much nicer.”

Without replying, he wrapped his arms all the way around her in the snuggest of bear hugs.

When he didn’t let go after a long minute, she whispered, “Chakotay? Are you okay?”

He nodded against the side of her head, and with a lot of emotion in his voice, said, “I am now, because you’re okay.”

Rubbing his back, she said, “You are definitely in a reflective mood. Reunions will do that to you if you’re not careful, you know?”

“Reunions, weddings, and acknowledging how grateful one can be in the aftermath of tragedy.”

She gave him another squeeze and pulled her head back. “We should go before you have us standing here in a puddle of tears.”

“All right,” he conceded. “But don’t be surprised if I can’t keep my eyes off of you all day.”

As they stepped out of their front door, she said, “That wouldn’t surprise me in the least. After all, you’ve been unable to do that for more than eight years running.”

He laughed and walked her outside. Several minutes later, they arrived outside the same banquet hall at Starfleet Headquarters that held the last reunion.

Owen Paris greeted them by giving Kathryn a quick hug. “Welcome back to San Francisco, Katie, Chakotay.”

“Thank you, Owen.” She could tell by his demeanor that something was up. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes and no,” he grimaced. “The press has found out about this reunion and they’re chomping at the bit downstairs to speak to you.”

Kathryn closed her eyes and sighed. “Well, it wouldn’t be a day in San Francisco if they weren’t on my trail.”

Chakotay said, “You don’t have to talk to them.”

“I know.” She looked at Owen. “What issues are they clamoring about?”

“Everything under the sun. We should’ve planned a press conference earlier this week in anticipation of this reunion and your wedding.”

“Perhaps so, but I’m not about to hold one today. Or tomorrow,” she added with emphasis. A second later she said, “I have an idea. Give me a minute and have security prepare for my arrival downstairs.”

“All right,” Owen said hesitantly as he tapped his commbadge and started making arrangements.

Chakotay asked, “What’s your idea?”

She winked at him and said, “If they want to hear about the Voyager reunion, then I’m going to bring them some Voyagers.”

He laughed and opened the door to the banquet hall for her. As soon as she walked in, the noisy chatter in the room became suddenly quiet, and then erupted again in an enthusiastic round of applause, punctuated by whistles and whoops of triumph. She put her hands on her hips and shook her head in amusement. For some reason, this only encouraged the raucous behavior.

She glanced at Chakotay for help with quieting them, but he was a substantial contributor to the mayhem. Realizing that she was on her own, she held up her hands to get them to stop, which only encouraged them to kick the volume up by a notch.

Conceding that she'd lost the battle, she smiled gratefully and mouthed, "Thank you," to all of them. After that, it only took a moment for them to finally quiet down. She motioned for everyone to gather around her, saying, "Come closer so I can talk to you."

When most of her former crew members were within earshot, she said, "Thank you for that enthusiastic welcome. I'm eager to see and talk to every one of you, but Admiral Paris has just informed me that a gaggle of reporters is downstairs clamoring for me to give a spontaneous press conference. But today is about Voyager, and so I'd like a few volunteers to accompany me downstairs. Is anyone willing?"

They all raised their hands and then laughed together.

"Thank you," she said with a smile. "But we all won't fit on the front steps of this building. Is there anyone who hasn't been interviewed by the press in the last year?" When about a dozen tentatively raised their hands, she asked, "Well, now's your chance if you want it. Follow me."

Not waiting to see who tagged along, she turned and walked through the door that Justin held open for her. When the security detail directed her to stop at the bottom of the stairs, she addressed the five Voyagers who had accompanied her. "Thanks for your help. I'm going to answer a few of their questions, and then..." She contemplated who might be the best speaker before continuing, "And then, Mr. Yosa, I'll turn to you and ask about your favorite memory from Voyager. Once you've started talking, I'm going to make my exit. Are you comfortable with that?"

"Yes, Ma'am," Mark nodded succinctly. "I'll keep them going for a few minutes and I have an idea on how to bring all of us in on discussing Voyager."

"Great!" She turned back to Justin and asked, "Ready?"

"Not quite yet, Admiral. They're still doing a perimeter scan for possible snipers."

She did a double take and asked with disbelief, "Snipers?" Sighing, she said, "I didn't need to know that, Lieutenant."

"My apologies, ma'am, but once they've done the scan and locked down a protective shield over the area, it won't be an issue."

Mark said, "I'm sure they're just trying to cover every contingency."

"Oh, I know they are," Kathryn said wearily. "The need for all of this security can be a little unsettling at times. But on the other hand," she patted Justin's shoulder. "It's reassuring to know that I'm as protected as I can be."

Justin received notice in his earpiece and then said, "Ready to move."

When they stepped out the front doors of the building, the gathered reporters immediately started calling out questions to her, so many that she couldn't make out a single word. Annoyed, she clasped her hands in front of her and raised both eyebrows in a show of vexation. Eventually, they realized that she wasn't responding to them and they quieted down.

Taking the microphone that was offered, she said, "Ladies and Gentlemen of the press, I know that it's been awhile since I've addressed you outside of an organized press conference, and some of you may not have had a chance to interview me before. So, let me share one request. I prefer to hear one question at a time."

She pointed to the one reporter she'd seen back off immediately when all the clamoring began. "What question do you have for me?"

The reporter perked up and asked, "Admiral Janeway, it has been almost eight weeks since you were released from Starfleet Medical. How are you feeling?"

Pleased with the question, Kathryn smiled sincerely. "Thank you for asking. I'm doing very well, and slowly, but surely, I'm regaining much of my former strength and stamina. Next question?" she asked of another.

"What is your opinion about the Jorian coalition rejoining the Federation in light of your abduction from that planet?"

"One has nothing to do with the other," she said with finality. "I am delighted that President Nakmyre and the other leaders of the coalition have given us the honor of their allegiance to the Federation. It is a remarkable act of faith in the ideals and principles that we believe in, and as soon as I'm back at work, I look forward to discussing the many opportunities that this union brings for all involved."

Another reporter asked, "Speaking of unions, do you still have a wedding planned for this Saturday?"

"Yes, Captain Chakotay and I will be married in a private ceremony at our new home."

"Can you give us any details about the wedding?"

Amused, Kathryn glanced at the Voyagers standing around her before responding with a brush-off. "None at the moment, because today is about Voyager. We've been home for over a year and we're here to celebrate the many changes in our lives, as well as the deep friendships that were formed while in the Delta Quadrant." She turned to Mark and announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to introduce you to one of Voyager's former security officers, Lieutenant Mark Yosa. Lieutenant, what is your favorite memory from Voyager?"

As Mark replied, Kathryn stepped back to let him speak directly to the press. She waited until he was finished and had asked one of the others a question before going back inside. As she walked up the stairs, she said to Justin, "See, no snipers."

“Yes, Admiral.” He bit back a smile.

When they returned to the ballroom, she joined Chakotay as they watched the newsfeed on the monitors. He put his arm around her back and said, “That has to have been the shortest interview you’ve ever given.”

“I didn’t have much to say.” She put her arm around his waist and noticed his look of disbelief. “I know, hard to imagine.”

He squeezed her shoulders as he nodded towards the interview still taking place downstairs. “You did a good thing there. The press is giving them a lot of attention.”

Tom overhead and joined the conversation. “Yes, but the press is asking about their experiences with you, Admiral.”

Shrugging, she said, “They seem to be enjoying it.”

Tom asked, “So, are you all settled into the new house now? Got everything unpacked?”

“More or less,” Chakotay said. “We’ve ordered some exercise equipment for Kathryn, but we have no idea how we’re going to get it up to the third floor.”

“You could always transport it in,” Tom suggested.

Kathryn said, “I suggested that he get in some of his own exercise by hauling it up there himself, but he balked.”

“There will be a lot of weights, love.”

She stretched up on her toes and kissed him soundly on the lips. “Yes, and you’re a big, strapping, hunk of a man.”

Tilting his head with amusement, he said, “It’s a good thing you see me through rose-colored lenses.”

Tom said, “Admiral, William McKenzie and Lydia Anderson asked if they could speak to you as soon as you arrived. Is this a good time?”

“As good as any. Do you know what about?”

“Yes, but I’ll let them tell you.” He led Kathryn away and whispered, “Lydia is very nervous about talking to you.”

“Why?”

“She’s always been nervous around you, but I know you’ll put her at ease.”

When they were near enough, Kathryn reached out to shake William’s hand. “Lieutenant McKenzie, how are you today?”

“Doing well, Admiral. Thank you.”

She held Lydia’s hand longer than necessary. “Ensign, you’re looking well. I trust that life on the east coast is enjoyable?”

“Yes, ma’am, although I’ve put in a transfer request to move here.”

“Oh? Is that why you wanted to see me? What can I do to help?”

“No, ma’am. I mean, yes, ma’am, I would appreciate any leads you could give me, but that’s not why we wanted to speak with you.”

“All right,” Kathryn said amiably. “What can I do for you, then?”

William said, “We realize this is a lot to ask, but we just had the idea yesterday, and it seems like the perfect time with most of the Voyagers here...”

“Yes?”

“Would you marry us today, Admiral?”

Kathryn’s face broke into a wide grin. “Marry you?”

Lydia stumbled through her words. “Well, not marry us, no, but officiate a wedding for us this afternoon.”

She took one of each of their hands and said, “It would be an honor. I’d love to.”

Both of them relaxed as William said, “Thank you, Admiral. You don’t know how much this means to us.”

“Oh, I think I do,” she said with a wink. “After all, my wedding is only three days away and we planned this reunion so that most of the Voyagers could be here for both events. It’s nice to celebrate these occasions with our special family, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is,” Lydia said with a smile. “Is there anything we need to do before this afternoon?”

Kathryn asked Tom, “I assume there’s time in the day’s schedule?”

“Of course,” he said with a relaxed smile. “It’s already been arranged.”

Amused, she looked back to the couple and said, “As long as you have the rings and two witnesses, I see no problems with performing the ceremony today. You’ll need to take care of some legal formalities tomorrow.” Turning to Tom she asked, “Would you ask your father to assist them with that part? He owes me a favor after that press situation downstairs.”

“No problem.”

“You’re sure it’s no trouble?” William asked. “We were hesitant to ask, not knowing how you’d be feeling.”

“It’s no trouble at all, and I’m feeling better than I have in months.”

Tom commented, “That’s not saying much.”

She jokingly elbowed Tom in the side as she told William and Lydia, “Don’t listen to him. I’m fine,” she said as she rubbed her arms. “Oh...we’re not in uniform. Would you like us to be?”

“No!” Lydia said quickly, and then softened her tone. “No, civilian clothes will be just fine. We’d prefer it to be casual.”

Nodding, Kathryn said, “Now we really have something to celebrate today.”

William said, “We’re celebrating you, Admiral. And without you, Lydia and I wouldn’t have met.”

“Thank you.” Kathryn squeezed both of their hands and added, “I’m glad you found each other, too.”

Tom asked, “Admiral, may I take you to meet Lieutenant Jenkins’ 14-year old niece? She’s on pins and needles waiting to meet you.”

“Of course.” She waved goodbye to the newly engaged couple and left with Tom.

Lydia took a deep breath and said, “Wow. I can’t believe she agreed.”

“I can,” McKenzie replied. “She’s very gracious if you’d just relax and get to know her a little.”

“It’s a little difficult. She’s always been larger than life, and recent events haven’t exactly changed that.”

Harry joined the conversation. “Larger than life? Must be talking about our favorite Admiral.”

“Isn’t everyone?” he asked.

“Yes.” Harry surveyed the room. “It’s not just the Voyagers, either. I would’ve thought that eight weeks without a public appearance or any news would have quelled the public’s appetite, but that doesn’t seem to be the case.”

Lydia announced, “She just agreed to marry us this afternoon.”

“Really?” Harry beamed as he shook William’s hand and hugged Lydia. “That’s great news! Congratulations!”

William said, “We were concerned about whether she’d have the energy to stay here all day.”

“I doubt she’ll be having drinks with us after dinner, but I bet she’ll stick around as long as she can. Are you attending their wedding on Saturday?”

“No,” Lydia said apologetically. “We’re starting our honeymoon on Friday. Do you think she’ll be hurt?”

“Not at all. I suspect she’ll barely even notice who’s there and who’s not.”

Lydia relaxed. “That’s true. She’ll be focused on Captain Chakotay, I’m sure.”

“As she should be.” Harry extended a hand as Amy joined them. “Amy, I’d like to introduce you to two members of Voyager’s operations team – Lieutenant William McKenzie and Ensign Lydia Anderson.”

On the other side of the room, Chakotay said to B’Elanna, “I think your husband has taken possession of my fiancée.”

“Joe gave him strict orders to organize the schedule to avoid wearing her out, and before you got here, Tom told everyone not to swamp her. He’s escorting her around to those that have a need to see her or want to tell her something.”

“She’ll want time to circulate on her own, too.”

“Yes, but Joe thought it would be best to get her around the room before she loses energy.” B’Elanna nodded to McKenzie and Anderson. “Kathryn is doing their wedding right after lunch.”

“So I hear. That’s great news.”

“Lydia spent years trying to work up the courage to ask him out. Ended up that they got together on Quarra and then they kept it going afterwards.”

Chakotay shivered at the memory. “Sometimes I wonder if Kathryn and I would’ve gotten together if I’d been abducted with the rest of the crew.”

“It’s good that you weren’t. First, so that you could save our butts; and second, it would’ve made it harder to keep your distance afterwards. Although I’m still not sure why you two thought that was important.”

“Several reasons,” he stated as an end to the topic. “Have you met Celes’s new friend?”

“No, I don’t think I have.” B’Elanna scanned the crowd until she found them, and then her mouth dropped open. “Wow. He’s gorgeous!”

Chakotay laughed. “I suppose. His name is Charles Hannon, and he’s a doctoral student in tactics. Back in early February, he and I were talking outside my office when she stopped to ask about Kathryn. They went out that night and they’ve really hit it off.”

“Impressive.” B’Elanna leaned in to ask, “And he doesn’t mind that she’s not, well, you know... a tactical thinker?”

“Not everyone considers ship design schematics an exciting topic for a romantic evening.”

B’Elanna offered, “You should try it. Thruster design can be an effective aphrodisiac if you have a dirty mind.”

He rolled his eyes. “And yours is definitely full of engine grease.”

“You’ll enjoy my dirty mind when you see the gifts Phoebe and I are giving your fiancée at her bachelorette party tomorrow night.”

“You’re not going to embarrass her are you? Her mother will be there.”

“I suspect her mother has had sex before,” B’Elanna whispered before she walked away.

Chakotay smirked and went to talk to Tuvok, who was standing back, quietly observing as his wife spoke with Vorik. They shook hands in greeting, and Chakotay asked, “How was the trip from Vulcan?”

“It was without incident.”

“Glad to hear it. Have you spoken to Kathryn, yet?”

“My scheduled moment will not take place for another half hour.”

Chakotay rubbed his chin. “Sorry about that. I just learned of the plan myself.” He winced slightly before adding, “If Kathryn catches on, she might not be very happy that she’s being handled.”

“I believe that she figured it out by the third interaction. However, she seems to be taking it in stride.”

Watching his bride for a moment, he saw that she had a bemused expression as Tom escorted her to the next interaction. “I think you’re right. Maybe she’s used to it with her new career as a diplomat.”

“Perhaps.” Tuvok looked directly at Chakotay. “How is her health? I’ve been... concerned.”

Sighing, he replied, “This really took a toll on her. I assume you read on the Voyager blog that she received a heart transplant?”

“Yes, that was quite alarming.”

“To say the least.” Chakotay watched Kathryn as he said, “The good news is that all traces of infection are gone, and the only major issues are rebuilding her muscle strength and getting her up to a healthier weight so that the residual issues diminish.”

“Thank you, that eases my concerns.” Tuvok paused for a moment and then asked, “How is she managing the psychological trauma of the experience?”

“If you can believe it, she’s grown very cautious about the need for security.”

“That is surprising. She’s faced death many times, but this experience must have affected her differently. What was the intent of her captors? Coercion? Hostage situation?”

“Neither. It appears they merely wanted her to suffer and eventually die. They hoped to sell her to the highest bidder just before she passed away.”

Tuvok subtly shifted of his jaw, the only outward sign that he was fighting to maintain emotional control. “That disturbs me.”

“It’s extremely disturbing.” Chakotay fisted his hands, forcing himself to remain calm as he concentrated on the progress she’d made. “Overall, she has handled the psychological hurdles with unbelievable grace. I’ve never been prouder of her as I have been in the last three months.”

“I’m pleased that she had your support to rely on.”

Chakotay nodded thoughtfully. “I am too. I don’t think either one of us would’ve been able to manage this alone.”

“Thank you for your willingness to discuss the details of the situation with me.”

As T’Pel returned to her husband, Chakotay said, “Kathryn would want you to know what happened, Tuvok. You are one of her closest friends and you know her better than anyone.”

“While that may have been true at one time, I believe that you are in error,” he said as he linked arms with his wife. “You, Captain, have stepped into that role.”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right,” he replied with a smile and then acknowledged Tuvok’s wife.
“T’Pel, it is good to see you again.”

“And you as well, Captain. I look forward to witnessing your bonding ceremony with Admiral Janeway.”

Chakotay smiled. “Thank you, I’m looking forward to it myself.”

“Are there any tasks that we can assist you with?”

“I think everything is under control, as Kathryn’s mother and sister have handled most of the details. At this point, Kathryn and I are merely participants.”

“Very well then,” she said politely.

Tuvok asked, “If the Admiral has a moment before Saturday, I would like to have tea.”

“I think we can arrange that.” Chakotay scanned the crowd until he found Tom and Kathryn.
“When your scheduled moment with her arrives, let her know that I’ve extended an invitation to both of you to visit our home tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Captain.”

“You’re welcome. If you’ll excuse me, I’d like to say hello to Mariah Henley.”

“Of course,” Tuvok nodded his approval and then spoke to his wife. “I had an enlightening conversation with the Captain.”

“Does it put your concerns at ease, my husband?”

“Somewhat. I am reassured that the Admiral is in good hands. She has been traveling a difficult path towards recovery.”

T’Pel nodded. “They are a good match. Their auras blend into a striking shade of gold, full of joy and contentment. It’s a sight to behold.”

“I’ve always believed that each one grew stronger as an individual when they became companions.”

On the other side of the room, Kathryn said, “Tom, it’s really not necessary to escort me around. I do know most of these people.”

“Yes, but I want to make sure you have a chance to talk with those who have exciting news.”

She clicked her tongue. “Or maybe it’s that these individuals want to make sure they have a chance to talk to me?”

“That too,” Tom said with a wink. “But since everyone wants to speak with you, we thought it might be easier on you to prioritize.”

“I see.” She stopped and turned to him. “I appreciate your efforts, but I’m not really enjoying being shuffled around like this.”

“My apologies, Kathryn. We were just worried that everyone might flock to you all at once and overwhelm you. How can I make this more enjoyable?”

“Slow down a little? Give me a few names and let me go at my own pace?”

“Okay, Naomi wants to ask you for help with a school project, Annika and Tuvok would like to say hello, and Mark Yosa asked for a moment to speak with you alone.”

Putting her hand on Tom’s arm, Kathryn said, “Except for Mark, those are all people that I would’ve talked to anyway. Who else?”

“That’s it. I think everyone else is concerned about over-taxing you.”

“They shouldn’t be, but I’ll go talk to Mark, and then let me be free to mingle? I’ll do my best to make it around to everyone.”

“You ask as if I’d ever tell you no.” He jerked his head towards Chakotay. “I’ll go see how he’s doing.”

“I’m sure you have all that bachelor-party stuff to discuss.” She started to walk away, but then stopped. “Tom?”

“Yes?”

“I meant to ask you and B’Elanna. Did either of you hire inappropriate entertainment for our parties tomorrow evening?”

“No, we didn’t. First of all, security wouldn’t clear it, and second, your future husband was adamant that there be nothing salacious at either event.”

She caught Chakotay’s eyes, and smiled at him. “Thank you, Tom. Both for following his request, and for helping me today. Now, go and enjoy the party.”

“As you wish.”

She found her next “appointment” and said, “Mark, thank you for accompanying me downstairs this morning.”

“I was happy to, Admiral.”

“I understand that you want to speak with me?”

“Yes,” he cleared his throat. “I would like to work for you, ma’am.”

“Oh? What do you have in mind?”

“To continue for Scott Doyle. I want to provide your personal protection, Admiral.”

She closed her eyes to try to cope with the grief that washed over her.

“I didn’t mean to upset you.”

Fighting her emotional response, she said, “Mark, I don’t think I could bear losing another friend like that. I’m still a target because someone wants me out of the picture. Being my body guard could cost you your life.”

“I’m aware of the risks, Admiral, and I would willingly sacrifice my life to protect yours.” More quietly, he said, “And I know Scott felt the same way.”

Moved by his sincerity and compassion, she shuddered through a long breath before replying, “Thank you, but I’m not willing to let you do that.”

“Admiral, only someone who cares for you as much as we do,” he said as he indicated those in the room, “would tackle this responsibility as if his own life depended on it. I’ve been trained to do whatever is necessary to protect my commanding officer, but in protecting you, I would be willing to go far beyond my duty, Admiral.”

“I appreciate what you’re trying to say, Mark, but...”

“Ma’am,” he interrupted. “When Chakotay brought me aboard the Liberty, he gave me something I’d never had, a purpose and a sense of belonging to something that was greater than myself. That increased tenfold during our years aboard Voyager because of our close community and your leadership.”

“Mark...” She wanted to stop him, but he pushed on.

“There is nothing that I wouldn’t have done out there to keep both you and Chakotay safe. Now that we’re home, I can’t think of anything that would give me more purpose than protecting you. Not just because of what you’re trying to achieve politically, but because your safety is a gift I want to offer to Chakotay because of what he did for me.”

She closed her eyes for a moment and sighed deeply. “Mark, you’re making it difficult for me to tell you no.”

“That’s my intention, Admiral.”

Mulling it over, she asked, “Will you promise to protect your own life as well?”

“That would be my fourth priority, ma’am, after you, Chakotay, and your family.”

“How can I argue with that?” She gave up trying to dissuade him and extended her hand.

“Welcome to the team. You’ll have your hands full on Saturday, but the upside is that you get to spend the next month in a Mediterranean paradise.”

“Thank you, Admiral. I won’t disappoint you.”

“I have no doubts in your abilities, just fears for your and Mr. Jarvin’s safety.”

“We’ll watch out for each other, ma’am.”

Nodding, she said, “Good. Your first assignment is to let the rest of my staff know you’re on board. Harry is in command at the moment, and he and Sue will take care of all the details to get you reassigned.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

She patted his back as she walked away, feeling both humbled by his respect and concerned about the responsibility he’d just accepted. Taking a moment to order her emotions, she scanned the room and decided that a lighthearted conversation with Naomi would be a wonderful diversion from her anxiety.

Across the room, Chakotay had been watching Kathryn’s reaction to her conversation with Yosa. When Tom joined him, he said, “I was wondering how long she’d put up with your escort services.”

“Longer than I expected.” He took a long drink and then added, “Maybe it was because I kept taking her to people who only had good news.”

“What did Yosa want to talk to her about? She was tense and looked a little upset.”

“He wants to take Doyle’s place.”

“I see.” Chakotay wasn’t sure what to think about that, yet. “What are you drinking?”

“This?” Tom held up his glass. “It’s a party. What do you think I’m drinking?”

Chakotay sniffed the clear liquid, but didn’t detect anything. Concerned, he said, “It’s eleven in the morning, Tom.”

“Yes, it is. Almost lunch time.” Offering the glass to Chakotay he said, “Try it.”

Hesitantly, Chakotay took a sip and when he discovered what it was, he rolled his eyes and thrust it back at the younger man. “You had me going.”

“So I noticed,” Tom laughed and held up the glass. “Ice cold water.”

At a nearby table, B’Elanna sat down with Harry, Amy, and Marla Gilmore. “May I join you?”

“Please do,” Harry said. “We were just talking about how great the Admiral looks.”

“Great?” B’Elanna glanced at Kathryn who was talking to the Wildmans. “She still looks fragile and mal-nourished. A stiff breeze would knock her over.”

Amy pointed out, “But she’s happy and is getting around much better than last time we saw her.”

“I’m not saying there’s no improvement. I’m just saying that she doesn’t look ‘great.’”

Marla asked, “How bad was she?”

The other three exchanged looks and B’Elanna answered, “Let’s put it this way. I watched her die while Tom and Chakotay performed CPR.”

Harry added, “The entire ordeal, from start to finish, was a nightmare. After we rescued her, she was unrecognizable. It’s a miracle that she’s alive.”

Amy clasped her hands together, saying, “I can’t say anything due to doctor/patient confidentiality.”

“That’s all right,” Marla said. “I’m relieved that she survived. The galaxy is a better place with her in it, and I didn’t always think that.”

“We know, and it’s okay,” Harry said. “No one said she was a saint, just a dynamic, commanding, intelligent leader that people want to follow, wherever she may be going.”

Not too far away, Kathryn made plans to be interviewed by Naomi for her school paper and then spoke to Tuvok for a few minutes, deciding to continue their conversation in private the next day. That left only Annika to speak with before her itinerary was complete.

Finding her sitting at a table amongst a large group, Kathryn came up to them and said, “Hello, everyone. Enjoying yourselves?”

Joe said, “We’re just re-telling some of the great Voyager stories.”

“For some reason, they’re funnier now than they used to be,” Ashmore remarked.

Kathryn said with a smile, "It's easier to laugh at ourselves when we're not in the heat of the moment."

"How are you feeling, Admiral?" Swinn asked. "Don't give us the standard, 'I'm fine,' but the real answer."

Touched by their concern, she replied, "I'm working towards fine, but I've already come a long way in the last two months. So in comparison, I feel much better, although I wish I was as strong as I used to be."

"I wouldn't worry about that too much," Lang replied. "The Federation isn't following you because of your physical strength."

"Thank you, Deborah. I appreciate your faith in me." Kathryn patted her shoulder.

Swinn offered, "If there is anything that we can do to help you, I think I can speak for everyone here, and say we'd jump at the chance."

"I know you would," Kathryn placed her hand over her heart. "I'm grateful for your support, but for the time being, I'm just enjoying seeing all of you, looking forward to my wedding, and ready for the month-long vacation that Chakotay has arranged."

Ashmore asked, "Where will the honeymoon be?"

"The Mediterranean. It'll be a bit cold to swim in the sea, but regardless, I'm more than ready for some sunshine. It's been a long winter."

"That sounds wonderful. I know you'll have a great time," Lang smiled warmly at her former captain.

Kathryn said, "I don't want to interrupt your conversation, but, Annika, I would like to chat with you for a moment. Is this a good time?"

Standing, Annika said, "Of course, Admiral."

Addressing the whole table, Kathryn said, "I'll see you all a bit later. Enjoy yourselves."

"Could we speak privately in another room?" Annika asked when they were out of earshot.

"I don't think that would be a good idea. People, namely Chakotay and my security team, get a little worried when they can't see me." Looking around, Kathryn said, "Let's go stand by those windows over there. We'll be away from everyone and have some privacy." She caught Chakotay's eyes to make sure he knew where she was headed. Although she wouldn't admit it to Annika, she was just as uncomfortable about being out of his sightline as he was about not being able to see her.

When they arrived in their secluded location, Annika said, “I don’t recall you being so accommodating to your security crew.”

“A lot has happened in the last year,” Kathryn said without further explanation. “How are you enjoying the Daystrom Institute?”

“I’ve decided to concentrate in the field of astrophysics.”

“An excellent choice for your gifts, but that doesn’t answer my question. Are you enjoying yourself?”

“I find the research challenging, and the individuals are competent. It is a pleasant environment.”

Smiling brightly, Kathryn said, “I’m glad. What else is happening in your life? Anything outside of the Institute?”

“There is not much else to do on the station, but I have been seeing another scientist after work on regular basis.”

“Oh?”

“His name is Rich, Dr. Richard Holmes to be exact. I find that conversation with him is enjoyable – we have similar interests and he has encouraged me to partake in new experiences.” Annika looked nervously towards a group of Voyagers who walked by.

Kathryn picked up on Annika’s anxiety. “Is this new relationship what you wanted to speak with me about?”

“Yes,” she said quietly. “We have not kissed yet and I’m uncertain about my ability to do it correctly in light of your relationship with Chakotay.”

“Annika, your experience with Chakotay has nothing to do with this new relationship with Dr. Holmes.”

“I disagree.” She crossed her arms. “I believed that Chakotay was incapable of invoking a physical response in a woman. I assume you would not be marrying him if that were the case, or are you overlooking that issue because he’s a friend?”

Kathryn pursed her lips to avoid saying what she really wanted. Instead, she took the high road and was completely honest. “Chakotay and I have always felt a spark of arousal when in close proximity because we have chemistry. That appears not to have been the case between you and him. And for that, I am eternally grateful because I’ve been in love with him for a long time.”

“Why, then, were you not dating?”

“Because I was his commanding officer. Whether or not that should’ve been a factor is up for debate, but at the time, I had to do what I felt was right.”

“You didn’t tell me this when I came to speak to you about him.”

“No,” she said clearly. “You came to me for advice about intimacy. While the object of your affection happened to be the same as mine, that didn’t mean that your concerns weren’t justified. I believe that you would’ve come to me regardless of who you were interested in.”

“Perhaps, but my intention was to compare our experiences with him.”

With a forced smile, Kathryn said, “I realize that, but if you’ll remember, I didn’t give you a description of mine.”

“I believed that was because you had nothing to report.”

Kathryn rubbed her hand across her mouth in an effort to keep her comments restrained. “I think we’re getting off topic here. The answer to your question then, and now, is yes, my soon-to-be-husband is more than capable. Just because you did not have chemistry with him, doesn’t mean that you won’t with Dr. Holmes.” The increase in her heart rate was making her feel a little light-headed.

“I see.” Annika looked out the window at the grounds of Starfleet Academy.

Putting her hand on the younger woman’s arm, Kathryn said, “Have you felt a connection while you’ve spent time with Dr. Holmes?”

“As I said, we have a lot in common.”

“Not a conversational connection, a physical one. Do you wish for his leg to brush up against yours under the table? Do your fingers crave touching his? Do you long to kiss him? Do you feel anxiety when you think he might be considering kissing you?”

“Those are favorable responses?” she asked honestly.

Kathryn put her hand on the window frame to steady herself. “Yes, very favorable. Have you touched at all, in any way?”

“Yes, just as you said. His leg often touches mine and he continually brushes his hand against my arm. I thought him to be clumsy.”

Smiling now, she replied, “Not likely. He’s letting you know that he’s interested in you without being blatant in case you don’t return his feelings. That’s a game that Chakotay and I mastered because we could never come out and say directly how we felt.”

“I feel uncomfortable with my lack of experience in these matters.”

“Don’t be. If there’s anyone that’s going to understand and be accepting of your life experiences, it’s going to be someone at the Institute. He knows you well, has spent time with you already, and he’s still interested. That should tell you that he’ll be open to discussing your anxiety.”

“I have discovered that most humans do not appreciate my bluntness.”

Kathryn shrugged. “Depends on the situation. My advice is to let him hold your hand the next time he brushes up against it. When his leg touches yours, don’t move away. See what happens. You just might feel a spark of your own.”

Annika nodded and looked directly at Kathryn. “Thank you, Admiral. I apologize if I caused you pain a year ago.”

Shaking her head gently, Kathryn said, “No apology necessary because you didn’t know.” She smiled as she whispered, “Besides, it worked out. I am marrying him in three days.”

After a pause, Annika asked, “Are you feeling unwell?”

She sighed. “My explanation at the table back there wasn’t convincing?”

“It was, but I was referring to right now. Your skin color has become pallid.”

“Oh, that,” she said as she touched her face. “I’m just starting to feel a little tired. If you need to talk more, please contact me and we’ll find a time. Okay?”

“I will. Thank you.”

They moved back toward the rest of the group as Kathryn said, “I’ll let you get back to your conversation. Do you see Tom anywhere?”

Annika called out, “Commander Paris.”

Sighing, Kathryn said, “Thank you.”

Tom came directly to them. “Yes, Annika?”

“The Admiral wishes to speak with you.” To Kathryn she said, “I will be in contact to give you a report.”

“I’ll look forward to it,” she said as Annika was walking away. Feeling faint, she grabbed Tom’s arm for balance.

“Kathryn?” Tom asked. “Are you okay?”

“I’ve completed my list, and I hope you don’t have anyone else to add to it.”

“None that were pre-arranged, although I’m sure others would like to talk to you. Do you want to sit down?”

“The heat is getting to me, I think. Would you help me find Chakotay?”

“Sure.” Tom looped her arm through his elbow and guided her through the crowd. “He’s not far, likes to keep one eye on you at all times.”

“So I’ve…” As a wave of dizziness washed over her, she closed her eyes and breathed slowly.

Tom shifted to put his arm around her waist and whispered, “Do you want me to get Doc?”

“No, I don’t want to make a scene. I’m just a little woozy. It’s hot in here and I’ve been on my feet all morning.”

Chakotay joined them mid-way. “How are you holding up, Kathryn?”

Tom said, “She’s not doing so well. I think she needs to sit down.” He transferred his charge into Chakotay’s arms.

Kathryn said, “It started when my blood pressure rose a little while talking to Annika.”

Chakotay took a good look at her and asked Tom, “Would you discretely get her a glass of fruit juice?”

“I’m on it.” Before heading to the adjoining kitchen, he whispered something into Harry’s ear.

Kathryn said to Chakotay, “It’s not bad, just been a long morning.”

“With more physical activity than you’ve had in awhile.” He held her close. “You’re pale and your cheeks are flushed. A sure sign that you’re blood sugar has dropped.”

Harry came up to them and asked, “Would you like to join us? We’ve pulled up some extra chairs to our table.”

Kathryn said, “Thank you. That would be nice.”

“Right over here,” Harry said as he pulled her chair out for her.

Chakotay held onto her until she was seated and then whispered into her ear, “Feeling stable?”

She turned her face to his and caught his lips with a quick kiss. “Stable enough.”

When Chakotay was seated next to her, Harry asked, “Have you finished your rounds yet, Admiral?”

One eyebrow lifted, she asked, “Are you suggesting that I ‘get around,’ Harry?”

“Only in the diplomatic sense, of course. I was merely referring to Tom’s schedule for those who needed to talk to you.”

“Yes, I know.” She winked. “I spoke to almost a dozen people, I think. Does that sound about right?”

“I think so.”

Tom set a coffee mug down in front of her and Kathryn looked at it questioningly until she tipped it and saw that it was indeed juice. He patted her back and said, “You have to keep up appearances, you know. Your coffee habit is legendary.”

She took a sip and said, “Thank you, Tom. I appreciate the sentiment.”

“You’re welcome. I’m going to check on the status of lunch.”

After he was gone, B’Elanna commented, “I think he missed his true calling – party planning.”

“A man of many talents,” Kathryn said.

Amy asked, “Are you feeling ill, Admiral?”

“Not really. I’m just losing energy quickly, but I’ll blame you and Dr. Crusher,” she said with a smile.

“Oh? Why’s that?”

“Because instead of waving a magic wand over me, you took half of my insides out. Magic would have been so much nicer in the long run,” she joked.

Amy laughed good-naturedly. “I’ll see about adding a magic course to my continuing education studies.”

“Fantastic idea.” Kathryn noticed that Marla looked confused, and explained, “The doctors had to remove some of my GI tract because of irreparable damage. Nothing too traumatic.”

Marla nodded with understanding. “I see. You had me a little worried.”

Harry said, “You wouldn’t be the only one.”

Kathryn waved her hand in front of her face. “Enough about me. Tell me what’s going on in your lives. Marla, what are you doing these days?”

She nodded towards B’Elanna. “Working for her on designing an engine for a new shuttle prototype, but as a civilian.”

Chakotay said, “I hope Torres isn’t being too hard on you.”

After kicking him under the table, B’Elanna said, “I treat her just the same as any other officer. In my book, she still has her commission.”

“Thanks, B’Elanna, but I’m actually enjoying not having the responsibility,” Marla replied.

Billy Telfer walked up to the table with a plate of food. “Admiral, my uncle is trying out some new recipes and would love to have your opinion on these appetizers.” He set the plate down in front of her. “Would you care to offer a taste test?”

Kathryn crooked a smile and asked, “Did Tom tell you to make up an excuse to bring some food to me?”

“Of course not, Admiral.” Billy watched as she took a bite of the bruschetta. “Tom merely asked if there was anything you could pretend to sample for us.”

The others chuckled as Kathryn hummed over the delicious blend of flavors in her mouth. “This is wonderful Billy! I think these tomatoes have got to be the sweetest I’ve ever tasted.”

Billy straightened up with pride. “You’ve had them before. They’re Talaxian tomatoes.”

“Really?” Kathryn asked with surprise.

“Neelix had a knack for disguising their natural flavor. He didn’t care for it.”

Kathryn pushed the last bite into Chakotay’s mouth. “Try this.”

He hummed affirmatively, and she replied for him. “He loves it, too.”

Billy added, “Of course, natural sunshine makes them better than the hydroponics bay did. Try the stuffed mushrooms. They’re my favorite.”

She ate one and nodded, “Very good. Tell your Uncle that I love his cooking, would you?”

“I will. Let me know if you need anything else. Appetizers for everyone else will be out within twenty minutes.”

Kathryn ate another mushroom and offered the plate to everyone else. “I feel ill-mannered to be eating in front of you.”

They all declined, and B'Elanna said, "You need the calories, we don't. And, if you'll remember, I have a snug bridesmaid dress to wear in a few days."

"Oh, I remember." With a frown she said, "Come to think of it, I hope my dress still fits. I've gained a kilo since the last fitting."

"An entire kilo?" Harry asked with sarcasm, making everyone else laugh.

"As small as I am, that makes a big difference."

Chakotay said, "I see it in your face. You look healthier."

"Thanks," she said as she accepted another quick kiss.

B'Elanna said, "Come on you two. Save it for the wedding night. Poor Harry is going to need therapy because it's like watching his parents."

Kathryn reached for Harry's forearm and gave it a squeeze. "No need to worry, Lanna."

"Yea," he told B'Elanna. "You should be nicer to me. What happened to missing me and welcoming me home after being away?"

Kathryn asked, "When did you get back?"

"Late last night. I was afraid we wouldn't make it, but we didn't even have to push the speed barrier inside the Sol System."

"How was being on the Enterprise?" Chakotay picked up a piece of bruschetta and handed it to Kathryn, encouraging her to keep eating.

"Different," Harry said with certainty. "Where Voyager was like a small village, the Enterprise is like a traveling city. Eight times the number of people, and the resources at our disposal are amazing."

Nodding, Kathryn asked, "Didn't you augment their systems back in December?"

"Somewhat. I fitted their scanners with the enhanced optical nodes to extend the long-range capability. That's what we used to find you, actually, because I did the same thing to the Pioneer."

B'Elanna noted, "Old technology to us, but new to the Federation. We're running into that a lot."

"Yes," Marla replied, "But it's fun to be able to teach it to others."

Harry said, "True. I spent a lot of time over the last month teaching the Enterprise engineers how the nodes work, because when I installed them, I didn't have time to explain more than how to read the results."

"Did they catch on?" Kathryn asked.

"Pretty quickly, and then we started working on specs for deflector adjustments that would increase the quality of long-range communications." Harry looked at B'Elanna. "Not to say anything against your Voyager team, but the engineers on the Enterprise are incredibly bright. It was like working in a think-tank."

"You sound like you enjoyed it." Kathryn finished her juice.

"Oh, I did." He held up his hands, palms out, "Not to worry though, boss. I'm not leaving your team."

"Yet," Kathryn said with a wink.

Amy said, "I like having him on your staff, Admiral. It means I get to see him more."

"How long are you assigned to the Pioneer, Amy?" Chakotay asked.

"Another two months. Then I'll have completed my first year of residency. I'm not sure where I'll go after that."

Harry said, "Don't worry. We'll figure it out."

Kathryn exchanged a knowing look with Chakotay, but before she could say anything, Billy stepped up to the microphone and announced that lunch was served.

Tom raised his glass of champagne to offer a toast. "To William and Lydia, may your marriage be a happy one, and may your travels never take you far from your Voyager family. Here's to you." Everyone applauded the newly married couple.

William stood in front of everyone, holding Lydia's hand. "Thank you, everyone, for allowing us to make our wedding a part of today's celebration." Looking at Kathryn, he said, "And even more thanks to you, Admiral Janeway, for performing the ceremony."

"My pleasure," she replied with a bow of her head.

"We don't want to detract from the real reason we've gathered here today, and that's to celebrate you, Admiral."

She shook her head and, with a smile, waved his comment away.

He continued, despite her protest. “When you were unable to attend the reunion we held in December, we agreed that we’d do this again when you could be here. I’ve been asked to speak for everyone, and we want you to know that your ordeal affected us deeply. We know that the sorrow we felt can’t compare to your suffering, but we want you to know that every minute you were gone, all of us were thinking about you and hoping for your safe return.”

Kathryn shifted her jaw, trying to stop the tears that had sprung to her eyes. When she felt Chakotay’s arms come around her from behind, she leaned against him, drawing strength from his presence. Shakily, she replied, “Thank you, William.”

He lowered the microphone so that only she and Chakotay could hear him ask, “Do you feel up to speaking to everyone?”

“I think I can manage it,” she said as she accepted the microphone from him and a handkerchief from Lydia. “Thank you.” As she blotted her eyes, William and Lydia sat down at a table in front of the gathered Voyagers.

Chakotay whispered, “Do you want me to stay up here?”

“Yes, please.” She took his hand and lifted the microphone to speak to her former crew. “No words can adequately describe how I’m feeling right now. Your loyalty and steadfast support mean more to me than you can possibly imagine. We’ve been through a hell of a lot together. Knowing that all of you continue to stand with me, despite our past hardships, gives me the confidence to keep forging ahead.

“When we returned home over a year ago, I certainly didn’t expect that I’d be doing the job I’m doing now, but I know that no matter what happens, I’ve got one hundred and forty-six friends to come home to.” Smiling at the group, she added, “Although our numbers continue to grow as we draw more people into our family.”

Kathryn took a deep breath and stepped away from Chakotay. “We lost one member of our family last year, Scott Doyle. I understand that you had a memorial service for him in December, but I’d like to take a moment to say a few words.” She dabbed at her eyes with the handkerchief before continuing. “Scott was a remarkable young man who served and protected every single one of us. On the Liberty, I understand that he fought valiantly to protect the lives of his fellow crewmen. On Voyager, he did nothing less as he patrolled the ship, watched over us during away missions, and guarded us from the security station on the bridge as we slept.”

With a shaky breath, she said, “Many of you know that his quick thinking kept me and many others alive last summer on Sirius IX. What you don’t know is what happened when he died.”

She closed her eyes to stay off the emotions that were near the surface. “Mr. Jarvin?” she asked, knowing he was behind her.

“Yes, Admiral?”

Kathryn extended her hand to take his and brought him to her side. “Justin, Scott, and two others were escorting me out of the conference center when we came under fire. Justin ordered Scott to get me out of the building while he and the others covered us.” Taking a deep breath, she continued, “Scott was behind me, and his last words were, ‘No matter what, keep running. I won’t let them get you.’” Tears leaked out of her eyes and she saw that many others were wiping at their eyes, too. “He was behind me until the very last moment. He gave his life...” She struggled to get the last words out, “for me.”

She lowered the microphone, unable to say anything else. Justin took it from her and Chakotay drew her into his arms. She wasn’t sure what Justin told everyone, but they applauded and Chakotay squeezed her tighter.

Tom got up on the stage and said, “We will hold Scott’s memory in our hearts, as we do every one of our fallen comrades.” He paused before saying, “Please continue to enjoy the reception, and at three o’clock, we’ll see a hologic slide show that Dr. Joe put together for us. However,” he glanced at Kathryn and Chakotay, “I have one secret to tell you about our favorite command team before I turn it over to Harry and the Kim-tones.”

Kathryn and Chakotay looked at each other in bewilderment, having no idea what Tom was about to say.

Tom grinned at them as he explained, “Chakotay confided in me that he had planned on proposing to Admiral Janeway in front of all of us in December. Now, I’m sure that would’ve been a sight to behold, but I think you’ll all agree with me that we’re glad he didn’t wait until now to pop the question.”

The whole group applauded and whistled, but Tom held up his hands for them to stop. “Most of us will be at the wedding on Saturday, but for those that are unable to attend, I’ve had a request for you to rehearse the final moment of the wedding. Chakotay, this is your chance to kiss your bride like you wish you could at the wedding.”

Everyone laughed and whistled as Chakotay took the microphone from Tom and asked, “Just how many requests did you receive to watch us kiss?”

He made a show of counting with his fingers and then replied with satisfaction, “One hundred and forty-three.”

As Tom took the mic away, Kathryn put her hands on her hips and looked up at Chakotay, finding the merriment a welcome distraction from her grief.

He whispered to her, “Are you comfortable with a little public display of affection?”

Licking her lips, she said, “I think they want more than a little. Are you game to show them what we don’t want the cameras to see?”

“Absolutely.” His smile was bright as he threaded his fingers up into her hair, tilted her head ever so slightly, and lowered his lips to hers.

Kathryn felt the warmth begin to build immediately as she concentrated on the feel of his body next to hers and the way his soft, warm lips coaxed her mouth into an open kiss. She could hear the applause begin as his tongue discretely touched hers. When he adjusted his hands to wrap around her back and head, she should have known what was coming, but she was too intoxicated with his touch to pay attention. Seconds later, she found herself being dipped low, so as to hide their faces from the Voyagers. The action was enough to make their audience kick it up a notch by whistling and whooping at them.

Chakotay lightened his kiss while still in the dip and smiled against her lips. He whispered, “I love you.”

“I...” She held onto him as a wave of vertigo passed over her. Alarmed, she strained to say, “Chakotay! Bring me up!”

He righted her slowly and held her close, hiding her face from the audience. “Are you okay, love?”

“Don’t let go.”

“I’ve got you,” he whispered, although with all the whooping and hollering, no one would’ve heard them anyway.

“Dizzy,” she explained, resting her head on his shoulder.

He rubbed her back gently, “I’ll hold you until it passes. Just tell me when.”

“Don’t drop me if I faint.”

“Not a chance,” he said as his arms wrapped tighter. He looked past her at Tom and raised his eyebrows like he planned to say something.

Tom stepped close and asked, “Yes?”

“She’s dizzy. Distract them so we can get off the stage.”

“I’m on it.” He waved to Harry to start the music and said, “Please, enjoy yourselves.”

Part 25 - “Sacred Circle of Life”

By Dawn

Summary: Wedding Bells

Rated: PG

Kathryn woke the next morning feeling drained. She turned to look at Chakotay sleeping next to her and reached out to rest her hand on his shoulder, loving the feel of his strong muscles underneath the soft fabric of his shirt.

He opened his eyes and smiled. "Good morning, love."

Tiredly, she said, "I'm not so sure."

"Sure of what? That I love you or that it's morning?"

Smiling at his questions, she answered, "That it's good."

His eyebrows furrowed. "What's wrong?"

"Just don't feel so great. I hope yesterday didn't set me back."

Sitting up, he felt her forehead. "You do look pale. Do you think you're getting sick?"

"Not sure." She closed her eyes. "I don't have a sore throat or congestion, just feel drained and listless."

"Maybe you're dehydrated and hungry because you didn't have your usual evening snack last night. I'll bring you some breakfast, and we'll take it from there."

As he got up, she said, "I don't remember going to bed."

"I carried you up here. You fell asleep on the couch as soon as we got home."

"And you don't think you could carry exercise equipment upstairs?"

After he pulled on his robe, he leaned over and gave her a kiss. "You weigh considerably less, love. I'll be back in a few minutes."

While he was gone, she looked at what she was wearing and was impressed that he'd managed to change her into a nightshirt without waking her up. Stretching her legs, she luxuriated in the feel of the warm bed. It was cozy and made her want to snuggle down deeper into it. She was about to drift off to sleep again when she heard him come back into the room.

"Oatmeal, cantaloupe, and orange juice." He set the tray down on the bed.

Opening her eyes, she said, “That cantaloupe is for the bachelorette party tonight. Mom delivered the groceries yesterday and is coming back this afternoon to cook.”

“I don’t think anyone will mind if they’re missing a few slices.” He helped her sit up.

“You’re probably right, but you,” she pointed a forkful of melon at him, “get to explain to mom.”

“Gladly.” He sat down next to her and started eating his own oatmeal. “I was a little worried when you crashed as soon as we got home. You slept for almost fourteen hours.”

“I think it was the after-dinner debate with Harren that wore me out. Not a smart thing to do.”

Chuckling, he said, “Yeah, Owen came in while you were in the midst of that and asked if there was an arm-wrestling match going on.”

“Really?”

“Mmmhmm. The way everyone was crowded around your table and cheering you on was something.”

She smiled at the memory. “He’s gotten better at debating this year. I had to stay on my toes.”

“It was just like old times, the two of you arguing in the messhall and none of us understanding a word you were saying.”

“I don’t think many were following us yesterday, either. Their response was timed exactly with the expression changes on our faces.”

“Who won?”

She gave him a blank stare. “Do you really need to ask?”

Laughing, he said, “I suppose not.”

Poking another piece of fruit with her fork, she muttered, “I think he let me win.”

“For old times’ sake? Harren isn’t that nice.”

“Maybe he was feeling charitable, considering my weakened condition.” She took a drink.

“Still, I feel bad that I didn’t have more energy for our last night together before the wedding.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. It just builds the sexual tension for the honeymoon.”

Glancing at him, she replied, “If I don’t sleep through the first couple of days to recover from the wedding.”

“If you do, you do. I’ll be ready for you when you wake up.” He winked at her.

Warmth spread through her from the flirtatious look in his eyes. “Or we could have a go after breakfast here.”

Laughing, he said, “Wish we could, but we’re expecting company in an hour.”

She looked at the clock. “Who is coming at ten?”

“Tuvok and T’Pel, for morning tea.”

“Hmmm... tough choice. Tea with vulcans or a romp in bed with my soon-to-be-husband?”

“Duty calls, unfortunately.” He studied her face and asked, “Feeling better?”

“Yes. I think you were right about the dehydration. I’d better drink a lot today if I’m going to make it through the party tonight.”

“I’m a little worried about leaving you for the next two nights. Should we ask Phoebe or B’Elanna to stay with you?”

“Not with their girls at home.”

“Katie is old enough to do without her mom, and Miral is spending the night with Owen and Marilyn.”

Kathryn sighed. “If the ladies get drunk, they may want to stay here overnight and that’ll take care of it.”

“Not a bad idea, especially for B’Elanna. She might not want to come home to a house full of intoxicated men. We’re all planning on crashing there.”

“Do you have detox hypos? I don’t want you all to be sick tomorrow.”

“Yes, and you?”

“Got ‘em, although I don’t think I’ll have anything besides a glass of wine.”

He stacked their dishes onto the tray. “For Friday night, I’ll have Mark or Justin sleep inside the house.”

Shaking her head, she said, “I need to get over this fear of being alone. It’s not exactly becoming of a decorated Starfleet officer.”

“Yes, but not on the night before your wedding. Let’s worry about that later.” He gave her a quick kiss and said, “Rest while I take a shower, and then I’ll help you if you need it.”

“I have a better idea. Would you run a bath for me so I can relax while you get ready?”

“I’d be happy to.”

The next evening after the rehearsal dinner, Kathryn walked through the empty house, tidying up the clean rooms. Her family had made sure everything was immaculate, but Kathryn was a little anxious about going to bed and was delaying it as long as possible.

When she couldn’t think of anything else to do, she went upstairs and made sure Justin was set for the night in the guest room.

He said, “I’ve got everything I need. Thank you, Admiral.”

“All right. Good night, Justin.”

“Good night. Yell if you need me.”

“I will. Thank you.” She closed the guest room door and walked down the hall to the master bedroom. Before going in, she looked down over the dark great room and felt an eerie chill run through her. Shivering, she thought, “Katie, get a hold of yourself.”

She went inside and closed the door firmly, asking, “Should I lock it? No, if I need him, he won’t be able to get in.” Laughing, she added, “And now, I’m talking to myself. If anyone heard me, they’d think I’m nuts.”

Kathryn checked her bags one more time to make sure she’d packed everything she wanted for the honeymoon. Then she put on a knit outfit to sleep in. She wasn’t about to wear one of her nightgowns with Justin in the house. She made sure all the windows and the French doors were closed and secure, even though there were forcefields outside all of them and the glass was treated with a polaron energy barrier. “It never hurts to be sure.”

Holding her arms across her chest, she backed towards the bed, taking a visual inventory of the room before she turned the lights out, thinking that the room seemed much larger than before.

When darkness enveloped the room, her heart started fluttering in her chest. She was momentarily alarmed, but then realized that her heart was fine and reminded herself that she was simply nervous.

“A nightlight will calm my nerves.” She turned on the bedside lamp and opened the nightstand drawer to retrieve some of the ‘toys’ that she had procured. After sticking a phaser in her pocket, she climbed onto the bed and powered up a tri-corder to scan for life-signs in the vicinity.

Seconds later, Justin knocked on the door. “Admiral? Are you okay?”

“Damn.” She clicked off the tri-corder and ran to open the door. “Yes, I’m fine.”

“We detected...”

“I know,” she sighed and handed him the device. “I’m just spooked.”

He holstered his phaser and looked at her with understanding. “I could sleep on one of the couches in there with you.”

She looked at the sitting area behind her and suddenly felt very foolish. Clicking her tongue, she turned back and asked, “Wasn’t I the captain who bravely brought Voyager across seventy thousand light years?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said with a smile.

“Then it stands to reason that I should be able to sleep by myself in my own bedroom, wouldn’t you think? Especially knowing that there are a dozen able-bodied security officers patrolling the grounds, and this house is locked down tighter than Starfleet headquarters?”

“A lot has happened to you, Admiral, and it’s perfectly reasonable to feel ill-at-ease.”

“Thank you, Justin, but I’m going to try to get a grip and make it through the night.”

“I’ll be right down here, and I’ll leave my door open.” He handed the tri-corder back to her and said, “Or turn this on and I’ll be here in a flash.”

“Okay,” she nodded with certainty and started to close the door, but stopped. “I think I’ll leave mine open, too.”

“That’s a good idea, and don’t worry, I don’t snore too loudly,” he said jokingly.

Chuckling, she said, “Thank you, and again, goodnight.”

He nodded and went back down the hall.

Taking a deep breath, she climbed back into bed and grimaced when the phaser dug into her side. Annoyed with herself, she took it out of her pocket and started to put it away before deciding to just stick it under Chakotay’s pillow.

After fifteen minutes, she’d worked herself up into a state of near panic again. She was sitting up in bed with her arms wrapped around her knees. Her eyes continually scanned the room, stopping on every shadow to study it for signs of movement. She knew she was being irrational, but she couldn’t stop the fear from bubbling up inside her.

The facts were that someone wanted her dead and even when she'd been guarded by four armed men and a starship, they'd still managed to abduct her. Yes, she had more protection at home, but if someone really wanted her, chances were that no amount of security would be able to stop them.

If she was taken right now, no one would know that she was even gone until they looked for her tomorrow unless, of course, security was monitoring her life signs. They probably were, so there was nothing to worry about. Except that they could easily falsify those readings.

Her lungs shuddered as she took a deep breath, and she thought that perhaps she should call Chakotay. "No," she whispered loudly. "I don't need someone with me constantly. I'm a capable, competent Starfleet officer."

Justin cleared his throat in the hallway and then stepped into the room. "Did you say something, Admiral?"

"Sorry, talking to myself." Embarrassment warmed her cheeks.

"No problem."

"Quick question. Is my life-sign being monitored at all times?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She squinted. "If there's so much as a blip, someone will notice?"

"Yes, in much the same way that I was notified that there was a power fluctuation in here when you activated the scanner."

"Okay. Thank you, Justin."

"You're welcome, ma'am."

Taking a deep breath, she said, "I think I might call Chakotay, just to check in."

"That sounds like a good idea. Goodnight, Admiral."

"Good night." After he was gone, she rolled her eyes in annoyance with herself and whispered, "Again."

She retrieved her computer interface and shut the door before she crawled back into bed again. Looking at the clock, she saw that it was a little after ten. Miral would be asleep, but the others probably weren't. She began to key in the connection and then stopped. "This is ridiculous, Katie."

Setting the computer aside, she slumped down into the bed and pulled the covers up. It wasn't that she was really afraid, it was that she was letting her imagination get the best of her. "Happy thoughts, Katie. Happy thoughts." She visualized the wedding ceremony, imagining herself walking down the aisle amid all their friends and loved ones. Nothing could happen there. The entire scene played out beautifully in her mind with peace roses, beautiful dresses, handsome men... and then she heard weapons fire and cried out, "Nooooo!" as she imagined herself a victim of a sniper.

Justin ran into the room, phaser drawn. "Admiral! What is it?"

She covered her mouth in shock. "I'm sorry, Justin."

"Did you see something?"

"No," she shook her head. "I'm a mess, I'm so sorry."

Relaxing, he holstered his phaser. "No need to apologize, Admiral."

"My imagination is getting to me."

"Did you contact Chakotay?"

"No, I was trying to convince myself that I can do this."

"Considering the circumstances, I'm sure that it would be okay for him to sleep here."

"It's bad luck for the groom to see the bride on the wedding day."

Justin shook his head. "I think you can put aside that superstition so you don't have a sleep-deprived bride who's on edge because of her imagination."

She nodded, but couldn't decide what action to take.

"Would you like me to call Sue? I'm sure she'd be happy to spend the night in here with you. She enjoyed last night."

"So we can both deal with the trauma of my abduction together?"

"No, and she shouldn't have told you that she was still having nightmares from her experience as your decoy."

Kathryn took a deep breath. "If I can't get to sleep by eleven, let's call her."

"All right." He held up a hand, "Don't say goodnight."

She cocked her head, eyebrow raised, and glared at him.

Smiling, he said, “Now that’s a classic Janeway look. I just need to make you annoyed with me to get your mind on something else.”

“Go.” She pointed to the door, biting back a smile as he waved behind him. Slumping down again, she muttered, “Make me annoyed? I’ll show you annoyed if you keep that up, mister.”

Grabbing Chakotay’s pillow, she hugged it close and imagined being safe in his arms, just as she had been every night for the last two months. Truth be told, except for the one incident with the panic attack, she hadn’t been by herself since she was rescued. She definitely needed to work on this with Deanna, unless she planned to have a personal assistant with her at all times for the rest of her life.

Kathryn concentrated on her breathing, thinking that would lull her to sleep without letting her thoughts run rampant about shootings, abductions, and... “Damn.” She sat up in bed again. “This is infuriating.” Looking at the clock, she saw that it was 10:36. She wouldn’t count this as insomnia until after 1:00, and she had until midnight before it would be bad luck to call Chakotay.

Hoping it would put her to sleep, she picked up her book of poetry and relaxed back into the pillows. All was going well until she thought she saw movement in the bathroom. She reached under Chakotay’s pillow and picked up her phaser. Creeping up to the doorframe, she used the wall to protect her body as she reached around the door to turn on the lights. When nothing happened, she peeked inside, letting the phaser lead.

What she saw moving made her feel really dumb. “A plant.” She turned off the bathroom light and crawled back into bed with her book. “Stupid plant. Who puts a plant in front of an air vent? Me, that’s who.” She grumbled and opened to the last page she’d been reading.

When her eyelids started feeling droopy, she set the book down and closed her eyes, content that she’d finally be able to fall asleep. The heaviness of slumber washed over her.

She sat up with a gasp. Her heart was racing and she felt hot. Hands shaking, she covered her face and tried to get her breathing under control. She looked at the clock and tried not to cry when she saw that it was only 11:18. She’d only been asleep for half an hour. Picking up the computer from the end of the bed, she keyed in the code to the Paris house.

B’Elanna answered, “Kathryn? Are you okay?”

“Can I talk to Chakotay? Is he asleep yet?”

“He just went to bed. I’ll be right back.”

He arrived less than a minute later looking worried. “Kathryn?”

“I’m sorry to bother you.”

Touching the screen, he said, “You’re never a bother. What’s wrong?”

“I just...” She laid her hands on her flushed cheeks, willing herself to be calm.

“Do you need me to come home?”

Shaking her head, she forced the emotions down.

“Are you worried about tomorrow?”

“No, I’m just having trouble getting past my fears. It’s ridiculous really. I’m capable of doing this. I really am, and I want to.”

“Fears about getting married?” he asked worriedly.

“No!” She touched the image of his face. “No. Sleeping without someone here.”

He relaxed. “Oh. Isn’t Justin with you?”

“Yes, but in another room. He offered to sleep on the couch in here, but that didn’t feel right.” She rubbed her forehead. “I’m sorry, Chakotay. I fell asleep, but then had a nightmare about getting shot. Before that, my imagination was all over the place. Poor Justin has been in here half a dozen times.”

“I’m coming home.”

“No, I just needed to talk to you.”

“Kathryn, you don’t have to get over these fears tonight. I’m worried about you.”

“Maybe you could take a computer to bed with you and we can keep this line open all night.”

He smiled softly. “Like when I watched you sleep when you were on the Pioneer?”

“That was nice.”

“Only because I couldn’t physically get to you. I can be there in five minutes.”

“I’ll be okay.” She took a deep, shuddering breath. “I’m stronger than this.”

“Yes, you are, but that doesn’t mean the fears aren’t real to you right now.”

“They are real because there are people out there who want me dead. I can’t stop thinking about that, regardless of how much security I have. What’s absurd is that this is no different than when the Hirogen or the Kazon were hunting us down. I slept fine through that.”

“Because they were known enemies and we knew when they were coming at us. You also hadn’t been subjected to torture under their hands.”

She looked away. “We shouldn’t be talking about this right now.”

“I know, but I’m trying to convince you that it is perfectly acceptable for you to feel afraid. You don’t need to be ashamed by it, and you don’t have to fight it. Acknowledge that you’re scared and then come up with strategies to deal with it.”

“That’s not easy to do.”

“I never said it was, but I did say that you don’t have to deal with it tonight.”

“Okay. I’ll read myself to sleep again and if I can’t cope, I’ll let Justin sleep on the couch in here.”

“Are you sure that you don’t want me?”

Tilting her head, she said sadly, “I want you desperately, but I want to be strong. And I want the first time you see me tomorrow to be when I’m walking down the aisle.”

“I could sleep with an eye mask on,” he offered.

“I love you.”

“I love you, too, Kathryn. I’m taking my commbadge to bed. Call me for any reason, okay?”

She nodded. “I will. Thank you for loving me when I’m a mess.”

Giving her a tender smile, he said, “I love you no matter what. And tomorrow, I’m going to vow to keep doing exactly that for the rest of my life.”

Touching the screen, she said, “I’m looking forward to it. Good night.”

“Good night, my love.” He met her fingers on the screen as they closed the communication.

Kathryn put the computer on her nightstand and turned out the light. Feeling warmed by his love, she closed her eyes and snuggled down into the bed, trying to think about nothing but him.

Not more than a few minutes went by when she heard a knock at the door. She sat up and asked, “Yes, Justin?”

The door opened and B’Elanna stepped in, wearing her pajamas. “Not Justin.”

“Lanna?”

Without explaining, she crossed the room and crawled into bed. “Goodnight, Kathryn.”

“Chakotay sent you?”

“Tom was starting to snore and I slept really well downstairs last night. I think the ocean air agrees with me.”

Kathryn put her head back down on the pillow, facing B’Elanna. “There’s ocean air in San Francisco.”

B’Elanna frowned and fished under the pillow. “A phaser?” She held it up in the moonlight.

“Self-defense,” she explained.

“Your nightstand or mine?”

Kathryn took it from her and put it back in the drawer where she got it. Settling back down, she asked, “You don’t think it’s odd to be sleeping in my bed?”

“It’s a great bed, plenty of room. And if you’ll remember, I did help assemble it.”

“So you’re claiming part-ownership?”

“Sure.” She stuck her face in the pillow and said, “This smells like Chakotay. I’ve always thought he has a great smell.”

“Yes, he does.”

“Want to trade?”

“Sure.” Kathryn handed her pillow to B’Elanna and took Chakotay’s in exchange.

“Now I smell you.”

“Is that bad?”

“Not at all. You smell like soap and some kind of flower. I don’t know which.”

“Sweet pea.”

“That flower needs a different name.”

Kathryn chuckled. “Too girlie?”

“Too cutesy.” After a long moment of silence, B’Elanna asked, “Are you okay?”

“I am a counselor’s nightmare, but thank you for coming.”

“You’re welcome.” She gave Kathryn’s hand a quick squeeze. “One of the many duties of a bridesmaid is making sure the bride is well rested.”

“I owe you one.”

“No, you don’t. You’ve already given me everything that makes me happy.”

“Thank you,” Kathryn clasped her fingers around B’Elanna’s. “I’ll share the credit with your husband, though.”

“He’d appreciate that, but…” She whispered as if it was a secret, “If not for you, I wouldn’t have him, either.”

Pride swelled up inside Kathryn for the woman that B’Elanna had become. She thought about how close their friendship had become over the past year, and found it difficult to remember how angry and full of hatred the young Klingon used to be. She held B’Elanna’s hand more securely and said, “Good night, Lanna.”

“night.”

A moment later, Kathryn reached over to her nightstand and grabbed her commbadge. “Janeway to Chakotay.”

B’Elanna sat up. “Kathryn?”

She held up her hand to assure the younger woman that she was fine while they waited for Chakotay to respond.

“Chakotay here. Did B’Elanna arrive?”

“She’s here. I just wanted to say thank you for sending her.”

He took a deep breath before replying, “You’re welcome. I was hoping you wouldn’t be annoyed.”

“Not in the least.” Kathryn squeezed B’Elanna’s fingers.

“Good. Think you can sleep now?”

“Yes. Goodnight, honey.”

“Goodnight, my bride. I love you.”

Once they were settled back into bed, B'Elanna asked, "You and he have come a long way in six months."

"A complete turnaround."

"Nah, I'd say you've just figured out how to be a couple despite your crazy life."

"Perhaps so." She held B'Elanna's hand again and echoed their earlier conversation. "If not for you, I wouldn't have him."

"You would've figured it out eventually, but I'm glad that I could help. Now, get some sleep."

"Aye, Commander."

B'Elanna laughed and gave Kathryn's hand a light squeeze.

Kathryn stood at the kitchen counter and poured herself a cup of hot, steaming coffee. She was full of excitement and anticipation for the day ahead, and more than ready to marry her best friend. Her bath was done, hair washed, and all of her things were ready for transport to the Mediterranean.

The morning had started off rough because she'd been listless and shaky again, but after she'd eaten the breakfast B'Elanna had made for her, she'd felt much better. Now, it was a little after noon and she wanted a nice cup of coffee and a sandwich before her attendants arrived.

Standing at the sink, she could see the workers outside putting up tents over all the decks in the back and knew that the front yard looked about the same. Rain was expected, but that wouldn't deter them from their wedding plans. She hoped that the drizzle would subside by three when the guests were expected to start arriving.

Kathryn was pulling bread out of the cabinet when the doorbell rang. Drawing her robe tightly around her, she walked through the dining and living rooms to answer it. Before she was able to get there, her guests had already let themselves in.

Smiling graciously, she told Gretchen, Phoebe, and the stylist they brought with them, "Hi, did you have any problems getting through security?"

Phoebe was annoyed and nodded towards the stylist. "They didn't want to let her through. You forgot to put her on the guest list, Katie."

"Oh, sorry. The thought never crossed my mind."

"We're here now," Phoebe said. "Ready to get started?"

“Go on up to the master bathroom. I was just making a sandwich.”

“No, no, no... we should get started right away,” the stylist implored.

“I need to eat, first,” Kathryn explained. “I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name?”

“Veronica Strahm.”

Phoebe added, “It took longer than we expected to get here, Katie. We’ve got to get started or your hair won’t be ready by the time the photographer gets here at three.”

“It’s going to take two and a half hours to do my hair? And aren’t we posing for pictures after the wedding?”

“That was the plan,” Phoebe said as she began ascending the stairs with Veronica. “But with the rain, you need to be ready for whenever there’s a dry moment.”

Gretchen ushered Kathryn up the stairs to follow them. “Go on up, Katie, I’ll bring a tray of food.”

Kathryn was really hungry, but knew that she was outnumbered. “All right. Bring my coffee, would you? It’s on the counter.” Gretchen was already out of sight by the time Kathryn finished her sentence.

She followed her sister up, taking it slow to avoid getting dizzy, but she picked up the pace when Phoebe said, “Come on, Katie.”

Kathryn sat down in the chair she was assigned, and as Veronica began twisting and spraying her hair, she decided that she should’ve chosen to tie her hair up in a simple bun. The promised relaxing makeover seemed more like the manufacturing of a disguise for an undercover operation.

Gretchen brought up the tray of food, but got distracted before she brought any over to Kathryn.

“Could we take a break while I eat?” Kathryn asked.

“No, I’ve got to get these sprayed and curled so they’ll have time to set.”

“Ms. Strahm, I need to eat. Either give me something or I’m getting up myself.”

Exasperated, the stylist replied and reached over to pick up an apple. “Here you go.”

Kathryn bristled as she said, “Thanks.” An apple wasn’t exactly what she had in mind, but it would do. She couldn’t help but wonder how this afternoon had become less about her comforts than about posing for pictures. It was after 1:00, and all of her attendants had arrived and were

busy readying each other and their children. Her mother was outside directing the tentmakers, caterers, and florists.

An hour later, Kathryn's hair still wasn't done. She asked the stylist, "Could I have a moment to fix a sandwich?"

"Most brides don't want to eat. They're too nervous."

"I don't get nervous, but I do get hungry."

"Just a moment, this is tricky," Veronica said as she concentrated on something she was doing to the back of Kathryn's head. Five minutes later, it was obvious that she'd forgotten.

Kathryn wished she'd grabbed a book before sitting down, because she was bored. Indulging in a little self-pity, she sulked at the irony of being ignored on what should be the most wonderful day of her life. It wouldn't have been so bad if her stomach weren't rumbling so loud.

About forty-five minutes later, her attendants returned, all admiring her hair. Kathryn had to admit that it looked nice. All the ringlets had been pulled back and cascaded down her neck. Since her bridal party was gathered around her now, she asked, "Lanna, could I ask a favor? Would you make me a sandwich?"

"Sure, what would you like on it?"

Veronica said, "Let me fix something, first. But I need you to be quick because we need to do your makeup."

Kathryn wondered why this woman was impervious to her death glare. She thought maybe it lost some of its power when reflected in a mirror. "Just give me something to eat. Please."

"All right," the woman stepped back and said. "Done. What do you think?"

"It's curly, thank you." Kathryn didn't feel the need to be overly complimentary. Luckily, all the women gathered around oooh'd and aahh'd on her behalf. Determined to take care of her own needs, she quickly stood up from the chair. As her body instantly warmed all over, she knew she had a problem. Her vision tunneled and dizziness washed over her. "Help," she mumbled as she lost consciousness.

"Katie!" Gretchen shouted as she saw her daughter fall. With the chair in the way, she was prevented from doing anything as Kathryn's head hit the floor with a sickening thud.

"Oh my God!" Phoebe screamed and came around the chair. "Katie!" She kneeled down on the floor and touched Kathryn's face.

B'Elanna shouted, "I'll get the doctor!" as she ran out the door. She hurried down the stairs and saw Harry and Amy first. "Where's Joe?"

“Out front. Why?”

She ran out the door, scanning the gathered crowd quickly. The sun was breaking through the clouds and the glare off the top of his head told her where to go. “Doctor!”

“B’Elanna? Is something wrong?”

Chakotay had been standing nearby and came over when he saw her running.

She paused for only a second to catch her breath. “It’s Kathryn. She collapsed.”

“Collapsed?” Chakotay was already on his way inside when Joe asked where she was.

The guests became quiet as they saw the men run into the house with B’Elanna.

Chakotay got to the master bathroom first and saw her on the floor. Phoebe moved out of the way as he knelt down and took her hand. “Kathryn?” He touched her neck and found a slow, steady pulse.

Joe knelt on the other side, and tapped his commbadge. “Dr. Zimmerman to Starfleet Medical. Transport an emergency medkit to my coordinates.” Within seconds, it arrived and he snapped it open to retrieve a medical tricorder.

“Is it her heart?” Chakotay asked, his own heart aching at the sight of her so pale.

“No,” Joe said. He asked the gathered ladies, “What has she eaten today?”

The women looked at each other in confusion. Gretchen said, “I brought up a tray of food.”

“Did she eat any of it?” he asked.

“I assume so, but I’ve been outside,” Gretchen replied.

Chakotay looked up at the only woman in the room he didn’t know. She looked frightened. “Have you been with her?”

She nodded, terrified. “I gave her an apple over an hour ago. I’m so sorry.”

Beverly Crusher and Amy Murphy rushed into the room. Beverly asked, “Do you need help, Doctor?”

“I don’t believe so, but take a look.” Joe handed Beverly the tri-corder as he tapped his commbadge again, “Zimmerman to Starfleet Medical. I need the following...” He listed off medications and medical tools that appeared instantly by his side. As he administered the

hyposprays, Joe assured Chakotay. “She’ll be okay. She has a concussion and she’s hypoglycemic. Her liver isn’t catabolising enough glycogen.”

“Doctor?” Beverly asked as she studied the tri-corder.

Joe looked at what Beverly was pointing to. “Yes, let’s hold off on that until she has regained consciousness.”

Gretchen said, “Her head hit the floor when she fainted.”

Cringing, Chakotay asked quietly, “Why didn’t she eat?”

Veronica said, “I’m so sorry. She asked several times, but I... I’m so sorry.”

“She asked for food and you didn’t give her any?” Chakotay glared at the woman.

Phoebe said, “It’s not completely her fault. Katie was about to eat lunch when we arrived, but I told her we had to get started and one thing led to another, and...” She blanched, unable to continue.

Chakotay directed his attention back to Kathryn. Her color was beginning to return and she was moving her lips.

“She’s coming around,” Joe reported. “Dr. Crusher, would you check her hemoglobin levels?”

“Sure,” Beverly said.

“I suspect they’re not what they should be.”

“You’re right, she’s anemic. Do you have an iron infusion?”

“Kathryn? Can you hear me?” Chakotay touched her forehead. “She’s so warm.”

“That’s to be expected,” Joe said as he gave Kathryn the needed iron and shook his head in dismay. “I should’ve scheduled a check-up before today.”

Gretchen handed Chakotay a damp washcloth. “It might help bring her around.”

As he placed it on her forehead, he heard the stylist gasp. He looked up to see the woman flinching, and asked, “What?”

“That’s going to mess up her hair.”

Chakotay blinked slowly, unable to fathom that being a concern at a time like this. “Her hair?” The woman backed away and got out of his sightline.

Kathryn moaned softly and her eyes fluttered open. She looked at Chakotay for a second and then closed them again.

Joe spoke to her loudly. “Admiral? We need you to wake up.”

She squinted and asked, “Where are we?”

“In the bathroom,” Chakotay answered. “You fainted.”

“Mmmmmmm.” She closed her eyes again. “Head hurts.”

Joe replied, “You have a concussion, Admiral. We need you to wake up.”

Kathryn squeezed Chakotay’s hand and then released it. She touched the back of her head and then suddenly retracted it, her fingertips covered in blood. Everyone gasped.

Beverly handed the tri-corder back. “Doctor, I did a cranial scan.”

With an overly gentle bedside manner, Joe said, “It’s a minor cut, Admiral, but you nicked a vein.” He pulled a towel off the nearby bar and folded it up. “Captain, help me turn her onto her side.” As they moved her, Joe put the towel under her head to give it support. “We’ll have this fixed up in no time.”

Chakotay rubbed his face as the tension of the situation began to recede. Whether it was Dr. Joe’s calm voice or seeing her awake, he wasn’t sure. He was on the verge of anger at all the women who were supposed to be taking care of her, but as he looked around at their worried faces, the intensity faded.

“There we go, Admiral. Cut is healed and I’ve reduced the swelling. Let’s have you sit up,” Joe said. “Captain, would you support her?”

Chakotay sat on the floor with his back against the wall and let Beverly and Joe lift Kathryn up to rest against him. Someone stuck a towel in between him and Kathryn’s head to protect his tuxedo from the blood, but they were unable to save his boutonniere before she squished it.

She clutched at his lapel saying, “Dizzy.”

Beverly placed a cup of grapes in Kathryn’s hand. “You’ll feel better if you eat something.”

After she ate one, she looked up and realization dawned. “Oh, no.” Her shoulders slumped. “Wedding.”

“It’s okay, love.” Chakotay squeezed her gently.

She ate another couple of grapes and then gasped. “My hair!” She touched her head again. “It’s ruined.”

“It can be fixed,” he assured her, not really understanding the issue with the hair. Whatever they’d been doing to it, it was stiff and loopy and looked very strange on her.

“It’ll take too long,” she said sadly. “What time is it?”

“A little after three,” Gretchen said. “We’ll figure something out. Don’t worry, Katie.”

Chakotay kissed her temple. “We’ll make time.” If it was important to her to have all these odd curls in her hair, then it was important to him.

“You weren’t supposed to see me,” Kathryn said sadly.

Joe asked, “B’Elanna, Mrs. Janeway, would you go down and assure the guests that everything is okay, but the wedding will be delayed slightly? Everyone else, could you give us a moment of privacy?”

They all dissipated without complaint. Chakotay asked, “Do you want me to stay or go?”

“Stay,” Joe said as he got up to close the door behind Sekaya and Kolopak. He quickly made Kathryn a ham sandwich, delivered it, and then sat down on the edge of the bathtub. “We have a problem. Dr. Crusher and I found something when we scanned you.”

Chakotay’s heart fell. “What is it?”

“Admiral, you’re pregnant.”

Kathryn and Chakotay stared at him and then slowly turned to stare at each other for a long moment. She fought a smile as she said, “Oops.”

Joe interjected, “Big oops. Captain, didn’t you take the short-term booster that I gave you a few weeks ago?”

“Yes,” he said with a cough and then cleared his throat. The collar of his shirt suddenly felt a little snug.

Kathryn came to his defense. “We weren’t completely forthcoming with you at that appointment, Joe. The afternoon before, we…”

Joe held up a hand. “I get the picture.” He stood up and paced across the bathroom. “I hate to put a damper on your honeymoon, but we have a couple of options that will need to be addressed as soon as possible.”

Chakotay frowned. “Options?”

“The likelihood that this embryo will survive the first trimester is slim. If we put it in stasis, or find a surrogate...”

“No,” Kathryn said emphatically. “You’re not taking it.”

“I’m not suggesting that we terminate the pregnancy, Admiral. Just that we postpone or relocate the embryo.”

She shook her head again. “No. That’s too risky, and I know it. Until it’s clear that the child or I am in acute danger, it’s staying put.”

“It’s very clear to me that you’re not strong enough for this.”

“I’ll find the strength.”

Chakotay looked at Kathryn, his love for her fortitude growing exponentially as she argued to save the child they’d only known about for two minutes.

“Admiral, you missed one meal today and you fainted. The strain of pregnancy on your body will be tenfold.”

“Then I won’t miss a meal.”

Joe implored, “Captain, you can’t let her do this.”

Chakotay studied the fierce determination in his bride’s gray-blue eyes. He shook his head slowly as he turned back to Joe. “I’m with her on this one. This baby is a precious gift and we wouldn’t want to do anything to harm it.”

“But the chances that it will survive are slim to none, and meanwhile, the strain on you...”

Kathryn stopped him. “Joe, please accept our wishes. I’ll do whatever it takes to carry this child as long as I can.”

“Even if that means being continuously medicated and staying in bed for six months? Because that’s what it might take.”

Kathryn said, “We’ll figure it out when we come to that point. But right now, we have a wedding to get ready for. If there’s no immediate danger, than I’d like to suspend this discussion for three days. You can come and check on me Tuesday.”

Joe packed up his tools. “Far be it for me...”

“Stop.” Kathryn said sternly. “Don’t say anything else.”

“Joe,” Chakotay started to explain, but stopped when Kathryn put her hand on his arm. He understood that she wanted to handle it.

“Joe, I know how much you care about me, and that you’re trying to protect me both emotionally and physically. But for now, I just want to enjoy the happiness of knowing that I have a life growing inside me. Especially today, as we become a family.” She reached out to him, but he didn’t take her hand. “Please, Joe. I want you to be happy today, too, because if it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t even be alive right now.”

“Admiral, I only want to keep you healthy.”

“I know,” she said earnestly. “Thank you.”

He nodded solemnly and left them alone.

When he was gone, Kathryn cuddled up into Chakotay’s arms, resting her head on his chest. She said, “Well, this certainly makes my ruined hairdo pale in comparison, and explains my recent energy drain.”

“Yes, it does.” He kissed the top of her head. “I love you. I hope you realize just how much.”

“Oh, I do.” She looked up at him. “I see it in your eyes, feel it in your touch... am I getting too mushy?”

“No,” he smiled. “I assume you want to keep this a secret?”

“That might be best. We don’t want to worry anyone, and if it doesn’t...”

He touched her lips to silence her. “I understand.”

They let the quiet moment linger until they heard voices in the next room. She asked, “Help me up?”

“Of course, but slowly.”

“So, tell me, how many people saw you run in here?”

“Only about half of the guests had arrived. Maybe a hundred people.” He guided her to sit in the chair she’d been stuck in for the last couple hours so she could eat the sandwich Joe had given her.

“Do I dare ask what you were thinking? Who told you?”

“B’Elanna. I wasn’t really thinking, I was running.” He stood behind her and touched her curls. “What is all this junk in your hair?”

She raised an eyebrow. “It’s supposed to make me look beautiful.”

“Hmmm.” He studied it. “The blood offsets it nicely. It’s very Klingon.”

Reaching up to touch her hair, she asked, “Could you help me take the hairpins out?”

“Sure.” It took a moment for him to figure out where to start. “Ah, I see.”

As she watched her hair come down, she asked, “How inappropriate would it be for the groom to take a shower with the bride an hour before the wedding?”

“We might not make it down the aisle,” he winked. “But I can help you get in and stand by in case you need me.”

“I’d like that, but you should probably go back downstairs. I have three attendants. It’s about time they stopped ignoring me and did something useful,” she said as she finished her last bite.

“I might have scared away your hair stylist,” he admitted as he helped her walk over to the shower stall. “I wasn’t very kind to her.”

“That doesn’t upset me in the least.” She hung her robe up as he turned on the water for her. “I’m sure I can manage my hair myself. If she’s still here, would you send her on her way?”

“Gladly.” He licked his lips as he looked at her nude body. “Didn’t we say that it’s bad luck for me to see you before the wedding?”

She laughed. “Let’s amend that and say it’s bad luck for you to see me in the dress. Clearly, I’m not wearing it.”

“That’s crystal clear.” He kissed her softly and then asked, “Are you feeling okay now?”

“A little unsettled, but not faint or nauseous.”

Rubbing his thumbs across her knuckles, he said, “If you can, try not to worry about the baby today.”

“Because Joe is usually overly cautious with me, I take his warnings with a grain of salt. He’s only done a preliminary scan, so I don’t think either one of should worry until we know exactly what the problems will be.”

“Trying to convince you or me?”

“Both. This day just hasn’t gone like I’d hoped.”

“The important part hasn’t happened, yet.”

“I know,” she said with a warm smile. “And as long as we end up married at the end of the day, I’ll be fine.”

He caressed her cheek tenderly before helping her step under the water. “I’ll see you soon, my bride.”

“Yes, you will.” As she closed the shower door behind her, she said, “Get someone to find you a new boutonniere, would you?”

“Aye, Admiral,” he joked as he left the bathroom. He stopped briefly to speak to her attendants who were milling around the bedroom nervously. “Ladies, she’s fine. She’s taking a shower.”

“A shower!” Victoria exclaimed.

Chakotay pursed his lips. “I didn’t get your name?”

“Veronica Strahm.”

“Ms. Strahm, your services will no longer be required.”

“But...”

He held up a hand. “Any items in there that belong to you will be delivered later. One of the security guards will assist you in transporting home.”

“Sir, I apologize, but her hair...”

B’Elanna stepped up and saved the woman from hearing what he really thought. “I’ll walk you out.”

He took a deep breath and turned to Phoebe. “Kathryn could use help getting out of the shower. How long will it take to get her ready?”

Gretchen said, “Let’s delay the start time for thirty minutes. It shouldn’t take long with all four of us working on her. Pictures can wait until after the ceremony.”

“All right. Give her more to eat in about twenty minutes. Sekaya, do you need help with Kol?”

“Sure, brother.” She handed him the squirming child. “Watch your flower, he likes to grab them.”

“Not to worry.” He smiled as a slobbery Kol lunged straight at his lapel. “I need a new one anyway.”

As he walked down the stairs, he cuddled the baby close, a secret smile on his face knowing that he’d have one of his own in less than a year. “Come on, Kol, let’s go find your daddy.”

B'Elanna met him halfway. "She's gone. I'm really sorry for not checking on Kathryn earlier."

"Let it go. We all get a little busy and it's hard to remember that she's not her usual strong self right now."

"I keep expecting her to be, but after last night, I should've found her as soon as I got here." She smiled at the baby he was holding. "You're a natural."

"Think so?" he grinned happily and kissed the baby's downy head. "I love this little guy."

"I can tell." She pointed downstairs. "Tom has Miral in the great room, and I think I saw Steven nearby. Katie was outside last time I saw her."

"Thanks, they'll probably need your help upstairs."

"We'll take care of her." B'Elanna continued up.

He felt a little lift in his steps as he walked, whispering to Kol, "Can you keep a secret?"

Kol looked up at him and said, "Da."

"Yes? Well, I don't believe you." He laughed. "You'd tell everyone!"

When he walked into the crowded room, everyone became silent. He smiled reassuringly as he said, "There's nothing to worry about."

Tom said, "Mrs. Janeway said Kathryn isn't feeling well."

"She fainted, but she's fine now. They just got too busy with all the preparations and she didn't get lunch. I'm sure she'd appreciate it if we all went on with business as usual and didn't make a fuss over her."

Owen said, "No doubt."

"The wedding will begin at 4:30. If you could pass the word, I'd be grateful."

Tom stood and said, "Let your best man take care of it. I'll go tell everyone who needs to know."

"And I'll take this little bundle off your hands," Steven said as he took Kol.

"Thanks." Everyone started to talk again and Samantha came up and unpinned his boutonniere.

"Captain, I'm afraid this is the third casualty due to your nephew's fixation with flowers."

Chakotay decided not to share the entire story behind its demise. “Any chance we can find a new one?”

“No problem. The replicator has already been programmed to make them.” She added, “And I’ll get something to de-slobber you, too.”

After Samantha finished with him, he milled around with the guests, finding it amusing that almost everyone said something about Kathryn’s secret being safe with them. If only they knew what the real secret was.

Gayle Struthers, the woman who had begun the publicity buzz about Kathryn asked him, “Captain Chakotay, how are you faring today?”

He accepted her handshake. “Very well, thank you for asking.”

“Thank you for inviting me to cover this event. It’s a real honor, although it does feel odd to be the only reporter in sight.”

“I’m confident that you’ll write a wonderful story.”

“I’ll do my best. And don’t worry; I wouldn’t want to give any hint that the Federation’s favorite heroine is anything but happy and healthy today.”

“Thank you for understanding.”

“I do. I’m behind her one hundred percent on the need to convey positive and encouraging ideas, and I can’t think of a better occasion than this to celebrate that dawn will arrive, even after the darkest night.”

“I agree.” He said, “Enjoy the ceremony.”

He continued to welcome more guests as they arrived. They were expecting almost two hundred people, so security was challenged to get everyone screened before transport. Delaying the start time by thirty minutes turned out to be a blessing to the frazzled nerves of those who were afraid they’d arrived too late.

B’Elanna found him at 4:10 to announce, “She’s ready.”

Taking a cleansing breath, he said, “Good. How is she feeling?”

“Surprisingly good, considering. I expected her to be irritated with things so off-schedule, but she’s really quiet. Peaceful and content would be a good description.”

Hearing that made his heart soar. He took a black box out of his pocket. “Would you give this to her now?”

“She’s going to love it.” B’Elanna hugged him. “I’m so happy for you, Chakotay.”

“Thank you, B’Elanna.” He sent her back upstairs saying, “I’ll send Admiral Patterson up in a few minutes.” Chakotay felt nearly ecstatic that the time was getting near. He’d been waiting for this for a very long time.

Tom said, “The guests are taking their seats. How are you doing?”

“I’m happy, very happy.”

“Is she really okay?”

“She is,” he said assuredly. “Just fainted because of low blood-sugar.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Now, go take your place and I’ll let the wedding coordinator know that we’re just about ready. Enjoy this.”

“I will, Tom. Thanks.”

Kathryn turned away from the window to see B’Elanna coming into the room. She’d been captivated by the ocean waves crashing on the rocks below.

B’Elanna handed her a long, black box. “I told you he didn’t forget.”

All the ladies came to stand around her. “I thought perhaps with all the excitement of the day, it had slipped his mind, but I should’ve known better.” She opened the hinged box to see a silver filigree necklace in the shape of an eagle’s wing.

“It matches his tattoo,” Phoebe pointed out.

Kathryn fingered the delicate, thin metal. “The craftsmanship is extraordinary.”

Sekaya said, “It’s customary for a bride to wear the symbol of her new husband’s family. Usually on a sash.”

Smiling, Kathryn took it out of the box and held it in the palm of her hand. “I wonder what kind of stone this is.” There was a small, iridescent oval at the base of the wing that changed colors with the angle of the light.

B’Elanna said, “He found it on Ordaran, at an outdoor market.”

“Ohhhh... he went back for it!” She laid her hand over her heart, remembering how they’d walked through that market together. “This was a stone used in a lot of the jewelry there. He’d

managed to get me off the ship for dinner, and then we walked around as the sun set. The light reflecting off these stones was extraordinary.”

“Let’s put it on you,” Gretchen said as she took the necklace and stood behind her daughter. “The chain is absolutely beautiful, too. So dainty and intricate.”

“There are earrings in there that match,” B’Elanna said.

Kathryn picked up the box again to see the dangle earrings. “Two more of the stones. They’re so translucent that I barely noticed them.” She put them on and went to stand in front of the long mirror. The filigree pattern at the top was similar to the necklace and the small stones dropped below her ears.

“You look beautiful, sis.”

She studied her image, and had to agree. “I feel beautiful.” The ivory gown was perfect. It was sleeveless with a deeply cut cowl in both front and back that made her feel daring. The beautifully draped fabric outlined her open back, dipping as low as discretion allowed, but attracted the attention away from the fact that her backside was barely covered.

The loose fabric along the neckline made her chest appear fuller, and from a distance showed only a hint of her breasts. However, anyone standing near would be able to see the almost indiscrete amount of cleavage – certainly more than she’d ever shown in public. It was elegant and made her feel sexy.

The floor-length skirt was full and dotted sparingly with iridescent pearls. She wondered fleetingly if Chakotay had told the dress designer about the jewelry because they matched so well.

They’d done her hair up in an elegant twist with curled wisps framing her face. Phoebe had talked her out of her usual make-up colors, and the soft pinks gave her a more youthful and feminine appearance.

Kathryn touched the necklace and smiled, “Maybe I should get a tattoo of this.”

Gretchen’s mouth dropped open. “On your face?”

“No, of course not. Somewhere that only he’d see.” She absently touched her hip.

Phoebe laughed. “Now that would be something.”

“I’m not so sure that it would be appropriate to put the wing on your derriere,” Sekaya offered helpfully.

“Navel?” B’Elanna suggested.

Phoebe offered, “Breast?”

Gretchen shook her head and held up a hand in protest. “All right, girls. I’ll leave you to figure this one out yourselves.” She hugged Kathryn carefully to avoid wrinkling her dress and kissed her on the cheek. “Savor every moment of today... the rest of the day at least. I love you, Katie.”

“I love you, too, Mom.”

As she left, Admiral Patterson arrived, bringing their discussion to an end. “Katie, my dear,” he said as came towards her with outstretched arms. “You are radiant.”

“Thank you, Matt.” She accepted another kiss on the cheek.

“Are you feeling well now? I understand there was a little trouble earlier?”

She purposely frowned. “You weren’t supposed to notice.”

“Hard to miss when the groom, a bridesmaid, and a couple of doctors run into the house with panic written all over their faces.”

“I’m fine,” she assured him. “But don’t be alarmed if I hold your arm a little tighter than necessary.”

“You just hold onto me as tightly as you need.” Mischievously, he asked, “Do you remember when you were a little girl, about four or five years old, and you came to the office with your father?”

“I brought my toy starships and I distinctly recall one of them flying right into your knee.”

“That’s right,” Matt laughed. “You crashed them far too often for your father’s liking.”

Kathryn smiled brightly. “Good thing I’ve never crashed a real one.”

“No, just lost one.”

“I never lost it. I knew exactly where it was.” She held up a finger and added, “Except for that one time.”

“Only one?” B’Elanna asked, trying to contain her laugh. “Try three.”

Kathryn waved her hand towards B’Elanna. “Semantics.”

Matt smiled joyfully. “Your father used to tell us all how proud he was of his daughters. If he were here today, I have no doubt that he’d be so very proud of you now, too. Especially proud of the brilliant woman you’ve become.” He kissed the back of her hand.

“Thank you, Matt.”

He held her hand between his. “I only wish I could’ve kept you safe for him, but trouble does seem to find you.”

“That it does.” She couldn’t help but agree.

“When you were about five years old, your father asked me something.”

The serious tone in his voice gave her pause. “What was that?”

“It was never formalized, but he asked me to watch over you and your sister if anything should ever happen to him.”

Phoebe asked, “Is that why you come to all of my art shows?”

“Yes, it is. That, and your paintings are extraordinary. I have one of your first paintings from college, framed right next to the one I bought two years ago. Every time I look at them, I think how your father would’ve been so proud of you, Phoebe.”

Kathryn nodded, smiling happily at her little sister’s awed reaction. She looked back at Matt before stating, “You sponsored me to go to Starfleet Academy.”

“Yes, I did. Edward was still around, but you have always held a special place right in here,” he patted his chest. “Since you crashed that little toy into my knee.”

Laughing, she replied, “Who knew you’d have your work cut out for you with me?”

“Chakotay’s in for a challenge keeping you safe.”

“He’s had his hands full for over eight years with that. Plenty of practice.”

Phoebe handed her the bouquet. “Are you feeling all right? Do you want one last cup of juice or a piece of fruit?”

“If I eat one more thing, I won’t be able to fit into this dress anymore.”

Katie ran into the room, “Aunt Katie!”

Kathryn kneeled down to catch a hug from her niece. “How’s my favorite flower girl?”

“I’m very, very excited! You are pretty!”

“Thank you, Katie. You look very pretty, too.”

“Sis, you shouldn’t bend down like that. You’ll wrinkle the dress.”

Kathryn gave the little girl one last kiss and then stood up, letting Matt assist her. She asked Katie, “Are you ready for this? Got your flowers?”

“Yes! All here in my basket.” Katie was practically bouncing in her little white mary-janes.

The wedding coordinator arrived and told them it was time. Sekaya and B’Elanna left first, Phoebe held Katie’s hand, and Matt offered his arm to Kathryn. “Ready?”

“Yes,” she beamed as she held onto him. They walked slowly down the stairs and waited just inside the front door. Once all the bridesmaids had made their entrance and Katie had gone to toss her flower petals, Kathryn grabbed Matt’s arm tighter.

“Doing okay, there?” He covered her hand with his.

“Doesn’t make much sense, but I’m a little nervous.”

“Cold feet?”

“No,” she shook her head. “Absolutely not.”

“Well, if you want some advice from a wise, old man…”

She laughed. “You’re not old.”

“Once this door opens, look straight at the goal, hold onto me, and smile.”

“Good advice.”

“I wish your father were here to offer it to you.”

She smiled sadly. “He is, in spirit, and he’d tell me the exact same thing. Thank you.”

The doors opened and he whispered, “Eyes on the goal.”

Kathryn had no problem following that suggestion. Her eyes were focused solely on the groom, whose eyes were bright, happy, and full of love.

When she arrived at the front, Chakotay whispered, “You are beautiful.”

The officiate said, “We are gathered here today to witness and celebrate the joining together of Chakotay and Kathryn Janeway in marriage.”

“I ask you now to declare your intention to enter into union with one another. Kathryn, will you have Chakotay to be your husband? Will you love him, comfort him, honor and keep him, in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others, be faithful to him as long as you both shall live?”

Kathryn was overjoyed as she said, “I will.”

“Chakotay, will you have Kathryn to be your wife? Will you love her, comfort her, honor and keep her, in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others, be faithful to her as long as you both shall live?”

“I will,” he responded.

“The marriage of Chakotay and Kathryn unites their families and creates a new one. They ask for your blessing. Will all of you do everything in your power to uphold and care for these two people in their marriage?”

Most of the people gathered were listening closely enough that they said, “We will.”

“Love,” the officiate said, “is a friendship that has caught fire. It is quiet understanding, mutual confidence, sharing and forgiving. Love is content with the present. It hopes for the future, and it doesn’t brood over the past. If you have love in your life, you are truly blessed.

“Treat each other with respect, remind yourselves often what brought you together, and more importantly, remember what keeps you together. The connection between you deserves tenderness, patience, and kindness. When difficulties threaten your relationship, remember to focus on what is right between you. In this way, you can ride out the storms when clouds hide the sun in your lives, remembering that even if you lose sight of it for a moment, the sun is still there. By keeping what is important close to your hearts, your life together will be marked by abundance and delight.”

“Chakotay, your vows,” the officiate said.

Chakotay took her hands and said, “My beautiful Kathryn, I want to tell you a story.”

She shook her head in amusement, knowing that the angry warrior legend was coming.

Looking like the cat that got the cream, he continued. “There are many ancient legends among my people that tell of the ‘Heart of Heaven,’ the trinitarian spirits of the skies. When their land was invaded, the Heart of Heaven told the people to believe in them and they’d never be alone, that nothing bad would ever happen to them. The spirits would be with them by day and by night, by means of the air, by means of the clouds, the moon, and the stars, and by means of the thunder of the volcanoes and the roar of the ocean. As the people went about their daily lives, they touched the air.” Chakotay extended a hand to simulate the movement and continued, “And asked the Heart to accompany them in their sorrows and in their happiness.

“I cannot promise that we will never suffer, because we already know the pain of suffering through the unthinkable. Nor can I promise that nothing bad will ever happen to us again. But I can promise that I will be with you,” he said as he placed a hand on his chest, “that I will give you my heart to make certain that you are never alone in your joy or in your sorrows.

“Should I leave this world before you, I want you to look for my heart in the beauty of the stars where we met, and in the sounds of the ocean where we now call home. I pledge to you, Kathryn, as my wife, all of my love and devotion.”

Her lips trembled and she couldn't stop the tears that tumbled down her cheeks. Phoebe came to her rescue and laid a handkerchief on Kathryn's shoulder.

The officiate asked, “Kathryn, you have also prepared vows to Chakotay?”

She nodded, still overcome with emotion from his words. Feeling the eyes of everyone upon her, she attempted a deep breath to regain her composure. However, one look at Chakotay's concerned eyes undid all that and the tears returned anew.

“Kathryn?” he asked as he drew her into an embrace.

She held onto him, embarrassed to have this emotional moment while standing in front of everyone she knew. She whispered, “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

Kathryn looked over his shoulder and saw Tom standing behind him. He looked at her with so much kindness and compassion that she suddenly had the feeling that all two hundred plus people were looking at her in the exact same way.

She pulled herself out of Chakotay's arms and dotted her eyes with the handkerchief. Knowing that many could hear, she said, “Okay, now I'm ready.”

Quiet laughter came from all those gathered around. She glanced out and saw a sea of happy, caring faces that were all very dear to her. Taking a cleansing breath, she looked back at him and held his hands. “Chakotay.”

She paused to finish collecting herself. “Dante begins his greatest work saying, ‘Halfway along the journey of our life, I awoke to find myself in a dark wood.’ I've awoken in that dark wood far too many times, but since you came into my life, I've had a reason and a means to pull out of it.” Her throat felt tight as she said, “Your vows are a testimony to that.

“We came together over eight years ago, and within moments, we began to lay the foundation of an unbreakable friendship that is a gift beyond measure. We have already experienced what feels like a lifetime of both laughter and grief, yet this day marks the beginning. My vow to you, from this day forward, is to walk beside you, nurturing our love and our friendship every day of

our lives. May our love only grow stronger, our laughter grow more frequent, and our friendships more abundant.”

Chakotay whispered, “Thank you, Kathryn.”

The officiate asked, “May I have the rings, please?” Tom and Phoebe handed him the rings. “These rings are the outward and visible sign of your love that has no beginning and no end. They are a symbol of the sacred circle of life.”

He gave Kathryn the first ring which she placed on Chakotay’s finger. “Chakotay, I give you this ring as a sign of my vow, and with all that I am, and all that I have, I honor you.”

Placing her ring, Chakotay said, “Kathryn, I give you this ring as a sign of my vow, and with all that I am, and all that I have, I honor you.”

The officiate wrapped a white cloth around their joined hands. “In the tradition of the Great Spirit, white is the color of warmth, peace and happiness. I now invite Chakotay’s cousin, Robert Huracan, to come forward.”

Robert spoke loudly to those who had gathered. “As his oldest living relative, and therefore, the eldest of his tribe, the honor falls to me to sing for Chakotay and Kathryn, a traditional blessing in our native language. It translates:

Now you will feel no rain, for you will be shelter to each other.

Now you will feel no cold, for each of you will be warmth to the other.

Now there is no more loneliness, for each of you will be companion to the other.

Now you are two bodies, but there is only one life before you.

Go now to your dwelling place to enter into the days of your togetherness, and

May your days be good and long upon the earth.”

As he sang, Kathryn looked up at Chakotay. Everything around them blended together and became muted as she focused on his face. His deep brown eyes sparkled as he smiled down at her, creating a powerful moment that she wanted to remember forever.

When the song ended, the officiate removed the cloth from their hands and set it aside. “You have declared your consent and made your vows to each other before this body of witnesses. May your bond grow with each passing day, and may your love remain fervent and true.” He then spoke to everyone. “Now that Chakotay and Kathryn have given themselves to each other by solemn vows, with the joining of hands, and the giving and receiving of rings, I announce to you that they are husband and wife.”

The surreal quality of the moment intensified as Chakotay drew her close and laid a tender hand upon her jaw. His kiss was soft, warm, and delicate, stirring up goose bumps all along her skin as the sound of applause filled her ears.

He whispered, “My wife,” against her lips before offering his arm to escort her back down the aisle. When they arrived inside their house, they went into the study by themselves, and he kissed her again, a deeper kiss that was only for her, not an audience.

Breathless, she said, “We’re married.”

“So I’ve heard.” Tenderly touching her cheek with the backs of his fingers, he asked, “How are you feeling?”

She hummed and leaned into his touch. “I’ve never been happier than I am right now. I’ve got you, I’ve got a baby... I can’t imagine anything better.”

Chakotay drew her into an embrace, and then realized that he was touching bare skin on her back. He pulled away and turned her slightly so he could see the back of her dress. Letting out a low whistle, he said, “Wow.” He stood back to get a good look at her. “That’s quite a dress, Kathryn.”

She turned a full circle and said, “I feel like a little girl saying this, but it makes me feel pretty. I love the way it turned out.”

“You’re so much more than pretty, and beautiful doesn’t even begin to describe it.” He reached out and touched a soft, springy curl behind her ear. “Your hair looks much better. This is more like you. A soft, romantic you.”

“Thank you. I like it, too.” She touched her necklace. “And thank you for this. It’s remarkable.”

“You’re welcome.” There was a knock at the door. “Later, I’ll tell you the story behind it.”

Rising up onto her toes, she asked, “One more kiss?”

He happily indulged her in a very deep, very sensual kiss.

By the time they finished posing for their photos, the front lawn had been transformed for the reception. The guests were already seated, talking quietly as they waited for the wedding party to join them. Kathryn wanted to circulate and greet everyone, but Chakotay insisted that she sit and enjoy the delicious food that had been prepared.

As they ate, they listened to Phoebe talk about Kathryn’s teenage romances. Sekaya returned the favor by telling the wedding party about Chakotay’s first crush on a twenty-year old when he

was only twelve. Then, Tom and B'Elanna enjoyed recounting both Kathryn's and Chakotay's dalliances in the Delta Quadrant. All the anecdotes were told in good fun, and the entire time, Chakotay remained completely focused on his bride, making sure she was enjoying the stories just as much as everyone else.

As dinner came to a close, dusk had settled in. The candles in the centerpieces cast a soft glow on each table, strings of lights over their heads filled the yard with light, and torch lamps throughout the property were set ablaze. A jazz ensemble began to play love ballads, adding to the romantic atmosphere of the event. Without any grand announcements, Chakotay and Kathryn gracefully took the floor for the first dance.

Holding her close and swaying to the music, Chakotay asked, "Are you enjoying yourself?"

"Can't you tell?"

"You're a very good actress. I want to make sure."

Kathryn rose up on her toes and kissed his cheek. "I'm having a wonderful time. Thank you for all of this."

"You're thanking me?"

She shrugged innocently as she looked around at all the people watching them dance. "I have to thank someone for this beautiful wedding. Might as well be the man I married."

"I see your logic, but if I may make a suggestion?"

"Yes?"

"Thank the wedding coordinator, your mother, and Phoebe for the wedding. Thank me for being insane enough to ask you to marry me."

Her mouth dropped open in shock until she recalled his first proposal. "Oh, I remember. I thought you needed to be carted off to the funny farm when you first asked."

Laughing, he said, "We'll tell our kids about that some day, that you were trying to break up with me when I proposed."

Suddenly serious, she said, "Thank you for that, then. For being so sure of us that you wouldn't let me throw it away."

He started to say something and then closed his mouth, spinning them a little on the dance floor.

"What?"

Shaking his head, he replied, “I was going to argue that you wouldn’t have been ready to throw it away if not for me, but that’s not really the best thing to say on our wedding day.”

“I disagree. You can say anything you want because we just vowed to stand by each other, no matter what life throws at us. Unlike most newlyweds, our relationship has been tested time and time again. I believe that our life experiences make our vows mean that much more.”

“I like the way you think.”

Raising an eyebrow, she added, “Most of the time.”

Shaking his head in amusement, he carefully spun her in time with the music, and then took a more formal dance posture. “What do you say we attempt to actually dance?”

“We haven’t done this in almost two years,” Kathryn said as she tried to remember the steps to the foxtrot.

“Guess we should’ve practiced.” His eyes scanned the crowd and added, “But they all look happy as clams, so we’re either funny to watch or we look like we’re having fun.”

“I’ll settle for both.”

“And I’ll settle for anything that gets you in my arms.”

They remained on the floor for three songs until Tom and Phoebe cut in to have a dance, encouraging the other guests to join them. Chakotay then danced with Gretchen while Kathryn took a few moments to rest.

She found the four guests from the Enterprise sitting at a table near the dance floor. Will and Jean-Luc both stood as Will asked, “Kathryn, would you care to join us?”

“I would love to.”

Jean-Luc pulled out a chair out for her and when she moved to sit down, he gave her a chaste kiss on the cheek. “You look stunning this evening, my dear Admiral.”

“Thank you. I feel it.” As the men sat down, Kathryn looked around the table at her new friends. “Did you enjoy dinner?”

“It was delicious,” Deanna said. “Although I have my eyes on the groom’s cake over there.”

Will joked, “Of course. It’s chocolate.”

“Chocolate cheesecake, actually.” Kathryn smiled.

“Even better!” Deanna said with a laugh. “We’ll have to add a chocolate cake to the menu at one of our wedding receptions.”

Will asked, “Kathryn, would you and Chakotay like to join us in August for our wedding in Alaska?”

“We’d love to,” she replied, beaming.

Beverly said, “Better Alaska than Betazed. At least you’ll get to keep your clothes on.”

“And we get to attend both,” Jean-Luc said. “I’m already feeling the need to spend more time in the gym.”

“You’ve been saying that for months, but you’ve only been there once,” Beverly chided him good-naturedly.

Amused, he replied, “Beverly, you weren’t supposed to have noticed that.”

Deanna added, “And none of you need to be concerned.”

“You can say that because you’re young and beautiful, Deanna.” Jean-Luc gave his counselor a meaningful look and then turned to Kathryn. “Speaking of beautiful women, how are you feeling? Can I get you anything?”

Beverly interrupted with, “And Jean-Luc, you weren’t supposed to have noticed Kathryn’s situation this afternoon.”

Kathryn said, “Don’t worry, Beverly. I’m pretty sure it’s common knowledge that I fainted today.” She shook her head embarrassingly. “But thank you for asking, Jean-Luc. If you wouldn’t mind, I’d love a glass of iced tea.”

“It would be my pleasure.” He picked up Beverly’s glass and asked, “Anything for the rest of you?”

Will stood and took his and Deanna’s glasses. “I’ll come with you.”

After the men left, Beverly said, “Your new home is incredible, Kathryn. The pictures don’t do it justice.”

Kathryn looked up at the house and smiled. “It’s more house than we’ll ever need, but after living on a starship for most of our lives, we love the large rooms and the privacy.”

“And you can’t beat this location. It’s enchanting,” Deanna said. “Where are we, exactly?”

“South edge of the Oregon coast.” Kathryn leaned closer and whispered, “Gold Beach, Oregon.”

“I understand the need to keep this location private, but it’s discomforting to be transported somewhere without knowing where you’re going.”

“I apologize for that, but it’s a necessary safety measure for my security.”

Beverly said, “I’m sure that everyone here understands.”

“That reminds me, Deanna. I know we agreed to take a month off during my honeymoon, but I’m having second thoughts about that.”

“Oh?”

“Can I call you later this week?” Kathryn was anxious and knew that Deanna could read her emotions, so she willed herself to relax.

“Of course,” Deanna replied with concern. “The Enterprise is leaving orbit again on Tuesday, but I’d love to keep talking. Is everything okay?”

“In most circumstances,” she said with assurance as the men returned. She accepted the tea from Jean-Luc and said, “Thank you.”

“You’re most welcome, Admiral.”

Kathryn’s eyes caught both Deanna’s and Beverly’s to see that they were looking at her with open concern. When the men began talking about the quality of the beer, the women smiled kindly at her in an offering of unspoken support and friendship.

A few minutes later, Chakotay came up behind her and put his hand on her shoulder. When she looked up at him, he asked, “Are you feeling up to another dance?”

“I’d love to.” She took another sip of her tea and asked the table, “Would you excuse me?”

“Of course,” Jean-Luc replied for all of them, but they were all smiling happily at her.

As she was walking away, Will asked, “It really is astonishing to see her so happy and healthy, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Jean-Luc nodded. “Hard to believe that’s the same woman we rescued three months ago.”

“It seems like it’s been longer than that,” Beverly said.

Will took Deanna’s hand as he replied, “Probably because of her health issues. I can’t imagine the emotional pain of what she’s had to endure.”

Focused on sensing Kathryn’s emotions, Deanna merely nodded in response.

“Is she as happy as she seems?” Will asked.

Directing her attention back to her fiancé, Deanna nodded. “When she’s with Captain Chakotay, yes. She’s content and at peace.”

A few meters away on the dance floor, Kathryn looked up at Chakotay and stated, “I have a husband.”

He chuckled. “Yes, you do.”

“It feels a bit surreal to say that.” She smiled as he led her gently around the dance floor to the slow waltz.

“But does it feel surreal to be dancing with me?”

Shaking her head, she beamed at him. “Not in the least. It feels perfect and very comfortable.”

“I’ve got you right where I want you, then.” Showing off his dimples, he said, “My next move, by the way, is to make you feel deliciously uncomfortable.”

Laughing fully, she stepped in closer to him. “Here? In front of everyone?”

His right hand settled low on her back, right along the top edge of her backless dress. There, on that area of exposed skin, his fingertips moved in tiny, slow circles. She hummed in response, pressing her body against his.

He whispered, “This spot back here was clearly apparent when you were walking away from me earlier. It’s that sensuous little area that makes you turn to putty in my hands.”

“Mmmm hmmm,” she moaned ever so softly and laid her head on his shoulder. “One of many.”

“Have you any idea how unbelievably sexy you look tonight?”

“A little.” She lifted her head just enough so that they were dancing cheek-to-cheek. “I feel it when I’m in your arms.”

“I’m certainly pleased to hear that,” he whispered into her ear. “Because that’s where you’re going to spend the next month.”

“How about I stay there for the rest of my life?”

“I think that can be arranged.”

His mildly spicy cologne filled her senses, making her a little weak in the knees. “I can’t tell whether I’m intoxicated by you or if I’m starting to feel a little faint again.”

“Should I hold you or help you sit down?”

“Hold me.” She listened as the music changed from the slow waltz to a more languid love song. More couples joined them on the dance floor, hiding them from the admiring gazes of those sitting around the open space. “This is nice.”

“Yes, it is.” He placed her right hand on his shoulder, encouraging her to hug him around his neck so that both of his hands could settle on her hips. Swaying to the music, he asked, “Do you know what’s nice about this?”

A husky sigh came from deep within her chest. “I have to pick just one thing?”

“Of course not, but I’m referring to the fact that this is forever, love. We are dancing here, at our wedding, knowing that we don’t ever have to say goodnight to each other again.”

Smiling against his cheek, her lips pressed a simple kiss near his ear. “Does that mean we get to travel with each other, everywhere we go?”

“Considering what you’ve got growing inside you, I’ll say yes. I don’t know that I’ll ever be able to let you go away without me.”

“Hmmm,” she hummed with amusement. “I think you just might be enabling my co-dependency with that statement, honey. But I understand what you mean. There is no more waiting to be together, no more preparing for our life, and no more uncertainties. It begins now.”

“This is quite the philosophical conversation we’re having here on the dance floor.”

Lifting her head to look at his dark chocolate eyes, she said, “Well, I did quote Dante in my vows.”

“Which were beautiful, by the way. Thank you.”

“And yours had me in tears. You really took my breath away.”

He smiled lovingly at her and gave her back a gentle nudge forward, silently encouraging her to meet him for a kiss. Her body warmed all over as his lips tenderly caressed hers, his tongue joining the sensuous touch that was making her feel weightless, anchored only to him.

Feeling more than a little dreamy and euphoric, she whispered against his lips, “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” His hands stroked up and down her back, slowly bringing her back to earth. “Kathryn? The Kimtones are taking the stage.”

Opening her eyes, she straightened up her posture slightly and smiled at him. “Time to acknowledge that we’re not here alone?”

He smiled and took one of her hands from his neck and placed it between both of his. “It might be best, considering that we did invite all these people.”

“Okay,” she said with reticence and then demanded, “but you’d better make me feel that wonderful again before bed tonight.”

“Yes, my wife,” he said with amusement. “It’ll be my pleasure.”

“Mine, too,” she smirked and then turned to join the round of applause that welcomed Harry and the Kimtones to the stage area.

They’d asked the ensemble to play all the music, but with Harry having been gone for the last month, they didn’t have time to prepare the repertoire that would be needed for such an extended performance. However, they’d promised to play her two favorite songs.

When they finished, Dr. Joe and Annika also performed, singing a duet that they’d rehearsed for the occasion, Gershwin’s “Someone to Watch Over Me.”

After slow dancing through the romantic ballad, Kathryn said, “I’d like to mingle a little, if that’s okay with you?”

“Of course.” He led her off the dance floor where they were immediately surrounded by friends who wanted to wish them well. Chakotay extracted himself long enough to bring Kathryn a glass of sparkling cider, which she accepted with gratitude. He saw that an old friend was talking her ear off.

Just by her expression alone, Chakotay understood Kathryn’s need for the conversation to end, so he put his arm around her and made up an excuse. “Pardon the interruption, Kathryn, but Beverly asked to speak with you if you have a moment.”

“Oh?” She touched the friend’s hand and said, “It’s been so lovely to talk to you. Please, enjoy the party.” As Kathryn walked away, she said to Chakotay, “Thank you. It’s not that I don’t want to hear about her pets...”

“But, you really don’t want to hear about her pets. I know.”

Kathryn touched Beverly’s back, encouraging her to turn around. “Beverly, you asked to speak with me?”

“I did?” she asked, confused. “Not that I don’t want to...”

Chakotay explained, “Doctor, I used you as an excuse to help her end another conversation.”

“Oh,” Kathryn said with a laugh. “Well, then. Are you enjoying yourself, Beverly?”

“Absolutely, although I wish I knew more people.” She looked between Kathryn and Chakotay and then asked, “Actually, Kathryn, could I speak to you for a few minutes, somewhere a bit more private?”

“Of course. How about we go look at the trellis from the ceremony?”

“That sounds lovely.”

Kathryn asked her new husband, “Honey, you can still see me there, right?”

He hugged her shoulders and whispered into her ear, “You’re safe tonight, love.”

“How do you read my mind?”

“Years of practice,” he said with a wink. “Go talk. I’ll see you in a few minutes.”

As the two women walked away from the crowd, Kathryn said, “I didn’t intend to make you and Deanna worried earlier. I just feel a little unsettled about something, and I don’t want to wait a month before talking to her about it.”

“I understand.” Beverly stopped and turned to face her. “Kathryn, I don’t know if you’re aware that I was in the bathroom with you this afternoon.”

“I knew you were there, although I can’t recall that you said anything to me.”

“I didn’t, but I scanned you, and so I know what’s troubling you. I have no doubts that Dr. Zimmerman will offer excellent care, but if you want to talk to another mother, I’m here for you.”

“Thank you. And no, I didn’t realize that you knew. Does anyone else?”

“Only if they were reading the tri-corder over my shoulder and could correctly interpret the readings to see an elevated level of HCG hormones.”

“I’m sure my mother and sister would have said something if they knew. It’s not like them to keep quiet.”

“What I meant to imply is that it’s possible that Dr. Murphy knows.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize she was there.” Kathryn scratched her forehead with her ring finger. “But she’ll be bound by doctor/patient confidentiality, so I won’t worry about it.”

Beverly placed her hand on Kathryn’s arm. “I’m glad that you’re going to talk to Deanna, but if you need to talk to me, call me any time.”

“That isn’t the issue that I want to discuss with Deanna.”

“It’s not?” she asked in surprise and then waved her hand in front of her face. “I’m sorry. It’s none of my business.”

Kathryn gave Beverly’s hand a quick squeeze. “Beverly, I consider you a friend, so please, don’t worry so much about stepping into this sacrosanct area of my non-counseling sessions. If you’re concerned about something, just ask me. I’d love to talk to you more often.”

“I’d like that a lot, too.” Beverly smiled warmly.

“What’s troubling me is the same issue that instigated that panic attack you walked in on last month, my anxiety about being alone.”

“Did you have another attack?”

“Not to that extreme, but I feel the need to punt this problem as soon as possible. It’s damned annoying.”

Beverly tilted her head with compassion. “Kathryn, it’s only been three months. You’ve made a remarkable improvement in that time, especially considering the problems you’ve had with your health.”

“I realize that, but if I’m going to put this behind me, enjoy my marriage, and be able to cope with this pregnancy, then I need to deal with this. Eventually, I also need to get back to work.”

“Just don’t push yourself. Enjoy your honeymoon and that gorgeous new husband of yours. The Federation can wait.”

“That’s very good advice, and I’m sure Chakotay would agree with you.”

“How are you feeling? Any headache?”

“I haven’t really paid attention to it, but I’ll ask Joe about an analgesic for later.”

Beverly put her hand on the back of Kathryn’s neck to feel for tension. “That’s a good idea. You might feel a lot of pressure when you lie down, and I doubt that you’ll want to deal with that on your wedding night.”

“No, I’d rather not. Do you feel anything?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary, which is a good sign. I’d touch the injury directly, but I’d mess up your hair. Is your abdomen hurting you at all?”

Kathryn touched her belly. “No, should it?”

“Up here,” Beverly said as she raised Kathryn’s hand above her waist. “Any discomfort?”

“Oh...” She took a deep breath and shook her head. “Not really. Feels a little tight, but it’s been a long day.”

“Yes, I’m sure it has been.” She motioned towards the reception area. “We should get back before someone notices that the guest of honor is missing.”

They started walking leisurely as Kathryn said, “I have no doubts that at least a dozen of them have their eyes on us. They get a little concerned when I wander off.”

“Kathryn, I want to tell you something, but I’m not really sure that this is the right time or place.”

She stopped. “Go ahead. You’ll have me wondering about it if you don’t.”

“I want you to know that I came to respect Dr. Zimmerman a great deal during your hospitalization. The lengths he went to in order to keep you alive were truly extraordinary, not that I wouldn’t have done the same. But if I didn’t know better, I would’ve said that he was driven by a human need to save the life of a beloved friend.”

“Then you saw a glimpse of why the Voyagers think he’s so special.”

“Yes, but I also saw a doctor who will protect your life at any cost.” Beverly’s eyes flicked down to Kathryn’s stomach before repeating her words. “At *any* cost. I spoke to him after he came downstairs this afternoon and he wasn’t happy.”

Kathryn grimaced. “What did he tell you? Not that I wouldn’t want you to know.”

“Nothing that breached confidentiality. He only said that you weren’t listening to reason.”

“I just said that I didn’t want to talk about options today and that I want to keep this,” she pointed to her stomach, “where it is for as long as possible.”

Beverly placed a comforting hand on Kathryn’s arm. “I understand. I really do.”

She looked away towards the dense thicket of trees. “I don’t want to think about the potential complications, yet. Not today, of all days.”

“I know, and that’s why I was hesitant to mention it.” Beverly moved the side to try to catch Kathryn’s sightline again. “I’m not trying to interfere, but if you want to talk through the options he gives you, please call me.”

“I will. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Sometimes it just helps to be able to talk to another woman.”

Nodding quietly, Kathryn reined in her emotions before she spoke again. "I haven't had many close relationships with women in my life, but I can see how, in this case, it will be a near-necessity."

"Yes, and I believe it'll help to talk to someone who has felt what it's like to have a life growing inside of her and understands your medical needs." Beverly took Kathryn's hand. "Don't worry about it for a few days, though. As much as Dr. Zimmerman wants to protect you, he'll also respect your choices. Whatever you decide, I'm sure that he'll do everything in his power to keep you both healthy."

"I know." Kathryn looked up at Beverly and felt comforted by the compassion in her friend's eyes. She hesitated for only a moment before drawing Beverly into a hug. "Thank you."

Beverly held her even tighter. "Let me be the first to tell you congratulations, Kathryn. I'm really happy for you and Chakotay, and I'm looking forward to what I hope will be a lifelong friendship with you."

Unable to form words without losing her shaky control, she only nodded and hugged Beverly longer.

They broke apart when they heard someone clearing his voice behind them. Beverly looked over Kathryn's shoulder to see who it was and to give her a moment to compose herself. "Kathryn, there's a handsome groom behind you."

Kathryn bowed her head and took deep breaths.

Beverly said, "Chakotay, I think she could use a hug from you, too. I'll leave her in your capable hands."

He came around in front of his wife and held her arms. "What is it, love?"

"Well," she looked up at him with eyes full of unshed tears. "Since you became my husband tonight, I guess I needed someone else to fill the 'best friend' role. Seems that I just got one."

Drawing her into his arms, he said, "I wasn't planning on giving up that spot, you know."

"Are you willing to share it?"

"Absolutely, and I'd be honored to share it with Beverly." He kissed her temple before saying, "Whenever you feel composed, it's time to cut the cake."

Kathryn took one more moment of comfort before pulling herself together. She straightened up, carefully wiped her eyes, took his hand, and nodded. "Let's do it."

"Aye, wife."

She punched him playfully in the arm and said, “Cheeky.”

The wedding party gathered around the beautifully decorated rose garden where Kathryn and Chakotay stood behind the cascading tiers of the wedding cake, glasses of champagne in their hands.

Phoebe took the microphone first. “For my dear big sister and this exceptional man she has just married, I want to offer an Irish wedding blessing:

May your home always be too small to hold all your friends.”

She extended her hand up towards the new house. “Katie, you might want to consider downsizing.”

As everyone laughed, Kathryn said, “Well, most of our friends are here right now, and as you know, I'm a scientist at heart. Should we test the hypothesis?”

Amidst even more laughter, Phoebe shook her head. “I have an even better idea. Allow me to offer an alternative Irish blessing. This one is a tradition for many Irish families, ours included:

May the road rise to meet you,
May the wind be always at your back.
May the sun shine warm upon your face,
The rains fall soft upon your fields.
And, until we meet again,
May God hold you in the palm of his hand.

May the light of friendship guide your paths together,
May the laughter of children grace the halls of your home.
May the joy of living for one another trip a smile from your lips,
A twinkle from your eye.
Wherever you go and whatever you do,
May the luck of the Irish be there with you.”

Phoebe raised her glass and said, “May your hearts be forever joined in love.”

Chakotay put his arm around Kathryn and brought her close to his side, whispering in her ear, “That means more than your sister knows.”

Kathryn gave him a wink before nestling against his side.

Tom stepped up and asked, “Chakotay and Kathryn, are you ready to embark on a journey?”

She replied, “Haven't we already been on one?”

“Without a doubt,” he said with a huge grin. “When Chakotay asked me to his best man, I must tell you that I was stunned. For those of you who don’t know, we didn’t start out as the best of friends. One could actually say we were enemies. However, you could say that about him and his wife, too.” He paused while everyone laughed quietly.

“Kathryn has told us in speech after speech after speech after speech...” He let everyone chortle for a moment before continuing. “She’s spoken about how tight-knit the Voyager family became. That’s old news. But what she’s never mentioned is how incredible that accomplishment really is.

“All of us on Voyager started out as adversaries, one group sent to capture the other, but yet, the strongest, most extraordinary friendships have grown out of our journey. This wedding celebrates the embodiment of what we became – a united family brought together under the most challenging of circumstances. We’ve been through some rough times, but one thing has always rung true: Chakotay’s and Kathryn’s resilient, unwavering connection.”

He addressed the newly married couple. “I don’t know if your crew saw your love before you did, but I’ll wager that every single one of us knew that from day one – together, you two could accomplish anything. We know that your love for each other, even when you ignored it, kept you both strong, focused, and most importantly, happy while we were out there.”

Raising his glass, he offered, “May your love keep your path steady and full of joy as you continue on your journey as husband and wife.”

Everyone shouted, “Here, here!” and drank to them.

Chakotay took the microphone, smiling at Kathryn’s look of surprise. “Before we cut this beautiful cake, we want to thank all of you for being here with us to celebrate this very special occasion. We are truly honored to have you as guests at our new home.”

He looked at his bride. “Tom is absolutely right that Kathryn and I began falling in love with each other from the first moment I showed up on her bridge pointing a weapon at her. I’m sure it won’t come as a surprise to any of you that she walked right up to me and stole both my heart... and my phaser rifle.” As everyone chuckled, he winked at her.

She cleared her throat and commented, “Funny, that’s not exactly how I remember it.”

Bowing to everyone, he said, “Forgive me, I stand corrected. She let me keep my gun.” After everyone laughed again, he added, “But since that day, she has had my heart.” He took her hand and said, “Kathryn, there’s not a person here tonight who doesn’t love you. In fact, I’m sure that at least half of them would follow you to the other side of the galaxy and back.”

After a round of applause and whistles, he continued, “Sounds like they’re ready to go again. I include myself among them.”

“Thank you, but I'm sure that every one of you would reconsider just as soon as the first crop of leola root was harvested.”

He shook his head in amusement. “Both Tom and Phoebe talked about the strength of friendship, and I couldn't agree more, for today I have married my best friend. Kathryn, I consider myself a very, very lucky man because you have blessed me with your love.” He picked up his glass and raised it. “Please join me in toasting this truly extraordinary woman.”

“Chakotay,” she touched her lips and then placed her hand on her chest.

He smiled lovingly, as he said, “Kathryn, may your strength continue to bring peace not just to my heart, but to the hearts of every person that is touched by your compassion, your integrity, and your love.”

After drinking to the toast, everyone began applauding them, quietly at first, but it soon grew into a full roar. She knew tears were falling down her cheeks as she wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him tightly.

When the applause began to die down, he whispered, “Are you okay, Kathryn?”

She pulled back and nodded. Taking his microphone, she said to everyone, “It may be hard to believe, but I'm at a loss for words. Phoebe, Tom, and Chakotay, thank you so much. I'm the one who is blessed tonight to have so many friends and loved ones here to celebrate with.” She took Chakotay's hand and said, “Now, my dear husband, let's cut this cake.”

Part 26 - “Bent, Not Broken”

By Dawn

Summary: Honeymoon

Rated: NC-17

B'Elanna sat down at the table with Kathryn's family and had to stifle her laughter.

Gretchen asked, “What's so funny?”

She nodded at Kathryn who was asleep in her mother's arms. “The woman who made dozens of delta quadrant aliens turn tail and run is asleep in her mother's arms. It's a sight to behold.”

Looking down at her daughter, Gretchen said, “There are many facets to her personality.”

“That there are.”

Kathryn's Aunt Martha said, "I'll tell you one thing, B'Elanna. Seeing our dear Katie as happy as she was tonight, and content enough to fall asleep like this... it's nothing short of a miracle."

Chakotay came up to the table and leaned on the back of a chair, smiling at the sight of his wife asleep. "I've only been gone for a few minutes."

"About twenty," Phoebe said. "She just couldn't stay awake."

Gretchen kissed the top of her daughter's head. "I don't want to let her go, but my son, I think you should take her to bed."

Tom arrived next. "The last of the guests are gone, so it's just us left." When he realized that Kathryn was asleep, he spoke softer. "Sorry, man, but it looks like we wore out your bride."

"Nah." Phoebe waved away his concern. "She's just resting up for the wedding night."

Everyone laughed, but Chakotay said, "Not to worry, she warned me that after all this excitement, she might sleep through the first half of the honeymoon."

Gretchen asked, "Do you want help getting her upstairs?"

"No, I'll be fine. This won't be the first time I've put her to bed."

"All right, but leave all of this mess. There's a whole team of people coming to clean this up in the morning after you leave."

Phoebe vacated her seat to let Chakotay sit down next to his new wife. He stroked her cheek with the backs of his fingers. "Kathryn?"

She hummed sleepily, but didn't wake up.

Looking around at the wedding party, he asked, "Would you see yourselves out?"

"Of course," Tom replied. "We'll see you both in about a month. Enjoy your time away."

"Thank you, we will." He put one arm under Kathryn's knees, one around her back, and carefully lifted her into his arms.

Gretchen stood with him and gently placed her daughter's head on his shoulder. "Take good care of her."

"Always."

"I know you will." She patted her new son on the back and then cleared a path for him to take his bride inside.

Justin opened the front door for him. "I'll lock down the house and turn off the lights."

"Thank you." Chakotay carried her up to their bedroom and carefully laid her down on the bed.

She sighed with a sleepy moan and her eyes fluttered open to see where she was. "Honey? Our bedroom?"

"I carried you over the threshold, but you slept through it." He sat down and caressed her leg through the soft fabric of her dress.

Putting her hands on her face, she asked, "Did I really fall asleep at the reception?"

"Yes, it was very sweet." He drew one of her hands away from her face.

"Admirals are not supposed to be sweet."

Kissing her fingers, he said, "On their wedding day when they fall asleep in their mother's arms, yes, they are very sweet."

"Oh, no. How many people saw that?"

"Only your family, Tom, and B'Elanna. Your reputation is mostly safe."

"Well, I blew my cover with them a long time ago. And if my insecurity last night didn't do it, holding Lanna's hand while we slept sealed the deal."

He lifted her other hand away from her eyes and leaned forward to give her a soft, warm kiss. He whispered against her lips, "Would you mind holding mine tonight?"

"I'd like that, but I'd like to hold all of you even more." She cradled his face between her hands and pressed her lips to his. The kiss was gentle at first, but as the heat of his tongue swept through her mouth, it grew more intense and passionate. Their lips moved against each other, mouths open, savoring the feel and taste of each other.

When he broke the kiss, she stretched her body dreamily. "Mmmm... that was nice."

"Yes, it was," he whispered against her lips and then gave her a simple kiss. "I'm going to turn out the lights, but I'll be right back."

"M'kay."

He made a quick check outside their room to make sure that all was quiet downstairs. The lights were off and he could see out through the front windows that the lights in the yard were going out. Even though they were alone, he closed the bedroom door just so they'd feel more secluded. He turned down the lights, and was toeing his shoes off when Kathryn slipped her arms around him from behind. "Hi there," he said as he felt her press against him.

Huskily, she replied, “Hello husband.” She hugged him close, laying her head on the back of his tuxedo jacket. “Do you know how much I love you?”

“I have a pretty good idea.” He chuckled as her fingers began working at the studs on his shirt. Because she was fumbling a little with the old-fashioned links, he helped her by guiding the one she was working on through the button hole.

She lightly slapped his hands away. “I can unwrap my wedding present myself, thank you very much.”

He looked over his shoulder and asked, “Do I get to unwrap mine, too? Or did you do that while I wasn’t looking?”

“Not to worry, husband. I’m still fully dressed.” She was getting the hang of unfastening his shirt and just about had all the links open.

“I’m not sure that gown counts as fully dressed, but it definitely highlights some of the more provocative features of my gift.” As she pulled his shirt and undershirt out of his slacks, he had a hard time resisting the temptation to turn around and start unwrapping her.

She hummed with disapproval as she loosened his tie. “The dress was supposed to conceal those kinds of attributes.”

“Ah, but your perception is much different than mine, love.” He unfastened the link in his collar for her.

“How so?” She rested her head on his back again as her hands moved up and down over the soft undershirt, feeling the hard muscles underneath.

Holding her hands in place, he said, “I’ll show you if you’ll let me turn around.”

“Not yet.” She pulled her hands out from under his so she could slip them under his shirt. “I’m not done, and I’m rather enjoying myself.”

“I’d enjoy it more if we were both unwrapped.” His breath caught as she traced the curves of his pectorals, her thumbs skimming across his hardening nipples. With a deep rumble in his voice, he cautioned, “Kathryn.”

“If I remember correctly,” she said as she gave each little nub a light pinch. “You had me in a similar position not too long ago.”

“Mmmhmm.” He closed his eyes to concentrate on the way her fingers toyed with him. “I seem to recall that you enjoyed being touched like this quite a bit.”

“And you don’t?” she asked with disbelief. While one of her hands continued toying with his chest, the other slowly slid down to his waist and then continued over the front of his slacks. When she found what she was looking for, she chortled in triumph, “Seems the feeling is mutual, my dear husband.”

He groaned as her fingers slid up and down his erection. “Like what you found?”

“Oh, yes.” She gave him a reprieve as she let go in order to slide his shirt and jacket off his shoulders. When he turned around to face her, she slid her hands back underneath his shirt to lift it over his head. “I like it a lot.” She placed kisses on his bare chest while he pulled the pins out of her hair.

“I’m glad to hear that.” He ran his fingers through the long, wavy tresses, but froze when she flinched in discomfort. “Your head?”

“It’s fine.” She continued to kiss his chest. “I’m ignoring it.”

He stepped back a little so he could bend down and pick up his discarded jacket. “Joe gave me something for you.”

“I meant to talk to him before he left.”

He fished a hypospray out of his pocket and showed it to her. “Enough to keep you pain-free until he sees you on Tuesday.”

Smiling gratefully, she said, “I’ll have to thank him.”

Chakotay walked over to the bathroom so he could use its light to load one dose. “Beverly and Amy also checked in with me to make sure you had something if you needed it.” He came back and administered the medication into her bloodstream.

“Thank you.” She rubbed the tingly spot on her neck.

After setting the hypo on a nearby dresser, he carefully threaded his fingers through her hair to feel the back of her head. “He said to call him if it started to swell, but he didn’t think it would.”

Her fingers joined his to check the tender spot. “I don’t think there’s a bump. It’s just sore to the touch.”

He pulled her gently into his arms. “I’m really sorry that happened today.”

“Not your fault.” She sighed against his warm skin. “Just another example of how I don’t seem to be myself. Can you imagine that I would have let that hairdresser ramrod me that way a year ago?”

“Yes and no.”

“Go on,” she said with mock annoyance as her arms went around his waist.

“Well, after reading the report on that incident when Joe impersonated you and several others...”

“While I was being held hostage by numbskulls, yes.”

“You let him fly the shuttle that day to avoid hurting his feelings.”

“I wanted him to get experience.”

He gave her a knowing look.

“All right, fine. So sometimes I let people put me in a bad spot.”

Kissing her forehead, he said, “I love you... Everything about you.”

“Hmmm... I suppose that I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“Absolutely.” He caressed her cheek and looked into her eyes to gauge how she was doing.

“Feeling better?”

“The throbbing has faded to a mild pressure.” Her finger traced along his collarbone as an idea came to her. “Dance with me.”

“I’d love to.” He settled his hands low on her back, just as he had earlier that evening.

She pressed her body against him and slid her arms up around his neck. “What song was playing when you made me feel so wonderful tonight?”

“I don’t know. We’ll have to ask the band.” His fingers caressed the soft skin all the way down her back.

“We were dancing cheek-to-cheek.” Her lips brushed against the slight roughness of his jaw. “I felt intoxicated, loving the scent of your cologne, loving the way your hands touched me, loving the way your body felt against mine.”

“And how does my body feel now?”

“Strong, solid.” She melted as he kissed behind her ear. “Loving, protective.”

His fingers made tiny circles on the sensitive area right above her tailbone once more. “What else?”

“Mmmmm... warm. You feel very warm and so very, very sexy.”

His lips traveled lower and began trailing across her neck, leaving little kisses of moisture along the sensitive skin. He whispered, "I don't think you've ever told me that before."

She stretched her neck to give him better access, and her mouth fell open with a whimper as the kisses continued down to the hollow of her throat. "Told... you..." She had to pause until the word came to her. "What?"

"That I'm sexy." His breath was warm against the damp kisses he'd left on her throat.

"Yes," she said breathlessly as his mouth kept descending. Instinctively, she arched into his kisses, lifting her chest towards his hot mouth.

"This dress is something else, Kathryn." He kissed the soft, forbidden skin in the valley between her breasts. "I've wanted to do this all night."

She couldn't form coherent words as he kissed down to the bottom of the plunging neckline. Her breasts were separated in such a way that the plump, inside curve was fully open and available to his lips. He tormented her by kissing and licking only what was exposed, ignoring her hardened nipples that were clearly pushing against the fabric of her bodice.

Her entire body shuddered as his tongue drew a wet line up between her breasts. She was panting with soft puffs as she begged, "Kiss me, please."

"It would be my pleasure," he said as he wrapped her tightly in his arms and lowered his mouth to hers.

She moaned as his tongue edged its way into her mouth, one small lick at a time until he was stroking sheer pleasure out of her. One of his hands dropped to fondle the rise of her bottom, a delightful blend of hard muscle under supple curves that fit perfectly in the palm of his hand. As she moaned and rocked her pelvis towards him, his hand came around and slid up to cup her breast, his thumb stroking along the exposed skin of her cleavage.

Their mouths came apart for only a moment as they looked into each other's eyes, each seeing their one, true love – the best friend and lover that would be theirs, and only theirs, for the rest of their lives. She nipped at his lower lip, her tongue licking with each gentle bite, while her hands roamed over his bare chest and neck.

His hands explored her dress, looking for a zipper or a clasp that would free his bride from her beautiful wrapping. When he found none, he lowered one strap over her shoulder so that he could hold and manipulate her naked breast.

She moaned into his mouth as his fingers found her hardened nipple. A surge of arousal shot straight down to her core and spurred her into action. Her hands slid down his abdomen to the closure of his slacks. She had them open within seconds, her fingers sliding inside the waist band and around to the back so she could squeeze the taut muscles of his buttocks.

She opened her eyes to ask him, “Honey? What are you wearing under here?”

“Like them?” He kicked his pants off so she could get a better look at his black silk briefs.

“Ummm... yeah.” Walking all the way around him, she touched everywhere – his rear, hips, and finally came to rest on the front where she studied the way the skin-tight underwear clung to its not-so-hidden contents. “What’s not to like?”

“I’m glad, because I got several pair for you to enjoy over the next few weeks.”

She looked up at him and licked her lips. “You took my request to heart, didn’t you?”

He lowered her other strap, peeling the rest of the bodice away to expose both of her breasts. “What request was that?”

“To keep me humming with pleasure all month.”

“Oh... that one.” He rubbed his thumbs across her nipples, eliciting a deep sound that was somewhere between a moan and a gasp. “How am I doing so far?”

She pressed up against his body, trapping his hands between them as she clutched his rear, “I’m definitely humming, and if you don’t get to my own little undergarment surprise soon, they’ll be drenched.”

Growling with unrestrained lust, his hands searched her dress. “Where’s the zipper?”

Smiling, she asked, “Is that what’s been holding you back?”

“I’ve been looking,” he turned her around to inspect the back of the gown more closely.

She looked over her shoulder and said, “There isn’t one. Just peel it off over my head.”

His hands stroked down her legs to her ankles and then back up under her dress. He paused when he discovered satiny ribbon and bare skin halfway up her thighs. “What have we here?”

Replying innocently, she said, “Just a little something to hold up my stockings.”

“Just a little something, huh?” His fingers rose higher until they encountered her panty-covered derriere.

She gasped and arched her back as he stroked the narrow piece of dewy fabric between her legs.

Standing up behind her fully, he left one hand under her dress, and wrapped his other arm around her waist. “You’re dripping, my lovely bride.”

She whimpered as his fingers snuck inside her panties to dip into her well of moisture. Her head fell back onto his shoulder as her exposed breasts heaved with her quick, deep breaths.

His voice rumbled in her ear as he asked, "Instead of humming, how about I keep you writhing in pleasure instead?"

"Touch me, please," she begged.

"You didn't answer my question."

"Wha...?" She gasped, her body trembling as a single finger stroked lightly through her folds with the slowest of movements.

"What's your preference, love? Humming or writhing?"

Her stomach was clenched tight as she tried to position his fingers where she wanted them, but he moved with her, not letting her have what she wanted. "Ei... ther. Both," she gasped, wanting his touch so badly that she could barely stand it.

"Your wish is my command." He withdrew his fingers and deftly peeled the dress off over her head, leaving her in nothing but her panties and stockings.

She turned to him, still panting, "You stopped!"

He immediately tugged her back into his arms and smoothed his hands down her back, pressing her nearly naked body into him. "If I give you release, you won't be humming and writhing anymore."

"So you're just going to leave me like this?" Her body was shaking with arousal.

"That's the general idea, yes."

"For how long?" She gasped as he slipped his hands inside the back of her panties and clutched both buttocks.

"Oh...I don't know. An hour? Two?" His mouth caught hers and he drove his tongue inside in one smooth stroke, his kiss reverberating through her.

She arched into him as he spread her bottom apart and pushed his fingers into her wetness from behind. "Ommmmmm," she moaned as she tried to push back so his fingers would touch where she wanted them.

"Tsk ts, my love. You're not being patient." He dropped his hands until he had a firm hold on her thighs and lifted her off the floor. She wrapped her legs around him, grinding her mons against his hard penis.

“I don’t want to be patient. I want you, inside me, now.”

He whispered into her ear, “Comfortable?”

“Absolutely not,” she replied, wriggling her bottom to try to get him to touch her.

“Hold on tight.” He carefully let go of her legs, making sure she wasn’t going to slide down, before he slid his hands up to the apex of her thighs again. Pushing aside the soft panties, his fingers delved again into her moisture.

“Ah,” she panted. “Chakotay…”

“Are you ready for me?” His breath was hot against her ear.

She whimpered before she was able to reply, “I thought I’d married an intelligent man.”

Grinning as he carried them to their bed, he said, “Hold onto me while I turn down the covers.”

“Don’t let go.”

“I won’t.” He braced her with one hand and used the other to pull back the bedding. After straightening back up, he folded both arms around her and looked into her eyes. In awe, he said, “You are glowing right now. So beautiful.”

“You’re just saying that because you’re about to make love to me.”

“No.” He shook his head, a huge smile on his face. “You just are. I love you, Kathryn.”

She cupped his cheek and placed a chaste kiss on his lips. “Thank you. I love you, too.”

Gently, he lowered her to the bed, and as soon as she felt the mattress beneath her, she let go of him and relaxed. Very slowly, he peeled her panties, garter, and stockings from her thin, but shapely legs. Once she was naked, he put his thumbs in his waistband and asked, “Shall I, or do you want the honors?”

“I’ll enjoy watching, but take your socks off, first.”

He gave her a wink and bent over to do as she asked. “As you wish, my wife.”

Kathryn pushed the covers down further on the bed and scooted to the middle. She watched him studiously as he slowly peeled off his briefs, revealing a semi-erect penis. “Looks like I’ve got some work to do.”

Kneeling over her, he placed a gentle kiss on her lips. “I don’t think that’ll be a problem, not with you in my bed.”

She reached out to run her hands over his body as he stretched out along side her. He cupped her breast lovingly and took a nipple into his mouth, sending currents of desire all the way down to her toes.

A soft moan of approval came from him as her hands threaded through his hair to hold him in place. He slid his hand down her body, caressing her hips, stroking her thighs, and stimulating her arousal with a few strokes through her wet folds. His hand came to rest on her belly where he rubbed slowly back and forth, his lips leaving her breast to travel downward to join his hands.

Kathryn watched him kiss and caress her stomach, “It’s hard to believe there’s a baby in there, isn’t it?”

“He’s a miracle, really.”

“He?”

“I think so.” Chakotay’s fingers continued to circle her belly, every so often dipping down through her folds to keep her humming in a high state of arousal. “It hasn’t quite sunk in, yet.”

“I keep wondering if I’m dreaming.”

He kissed down a little further along the edge of her damp curls.

She arched her pelvis forward and closed her eyes to enjoy the sensations he was stirring within her. “I need you.”

“You’ve got me. Forever.” He spread her labia and, with a flat tongue, licked once across her aching nub.

Fireworks shot through her and she decided that she couldn’t take any more of his teasing. She sat up and took matters into her own hands, holding his face and kissing him deeply. Her intention was to mount him, but he reacted too quickly and lowered her back down to the bed, knelt between her legs, and pushed himself inside with one, smooth thrust.

A low moan came from deep within her throat as she adjusted to the wonderful sensation of being completely filled. “You were right,” she rasped as she folded her legs around him to draw him in deeper.

“About what?” He nibbled on her neck, just below her ear.

She shuddered as he withdrew and plunged into her again. “You’re hard.”

“You noticed that, did you?” Buried deep inside her, he lowered himself to his elbows and placed hot kisses on her breasts.

Lost in the sensations, she arched her chest and attempted to meet his thrust for thrust. The pressure of his pelvis was perfect against her clitoris, his every movement stirring her higher and higher. She clung to his shoulders, trying to get as close to him as possible, needing to be one with him.

He lifted his head and stopped his thrusting to delve his tongue into her panting mouth. Imbedded deep inside her, he pressed upwards and slowly rotated his pelvis, putting pressure on her hardened nub.

His mouth melded with hers, leaving her breathless as she writhed in the pleasure of the intense, erotic stimulation. She was in complete bliss, unable to think, unable to do anything except cling to him and let the powerful feeling build within her.

He whispered into her ear, "Don't come, yet, love."

"I can't stop it," she gasped.

"Make it last." He backed off from the pressure and began sliding in and out of her. "Hold onto it, Kathryn."

"Oh," she panted over and over as he filled her, trying to hold out for him, sensation piling on top of sensation.

"Shhhhh." He withdrew partway and moved with shallow strokes in and out of her, leaving her shivering with the need to come, but unfulfilled on the edge of wonderful. "Don't come until I tell you to."

Gasping loudly, she groaned, "Out... rank... you," as she tried to lift her pelvis to meet his, but he wouldn't let her have it. "Please," she begged, shaking with an arousal more extreme that she'd ever imagined.

"You're glowing. So beautiful, so sexy." He was having trouble holding back himself, but the intensity of their connection, the heat of their arousal was so seductive a lure that he desired nothing except to make it last. As her breathing calmed, he chose that moment to thrust powerfully into her, so deep that he was pushing against her cervix.

"Cha..... ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh," she groaned as he brought her even closer to the precipice.

As her body trembled on the verge of climax, he grew harder with every deep stroke into her core. When his sac tightened, he pressed his body against her clitoris, and rocked against her. "Now, love. Come for me."

It took only the sensation of his hot semen filling her for her to let go. Her entire body seized in pleasure, coming so hard that she felt the climax burning everywhere, washing over her like a volcanic eruption before she convulsed, her body jerking uncontrollably over and over again. Their eyes locked, communicating the deep love they had for each other, the depth of which

couldn't be broken by anything within the far reaches of the galaxy. They knew it without any doubt, because they'd been there... and back.

An unwanted chill crept over Chakotay, causing him to stir in his sleep. He reached for Kathryn and spooned against her bare back to snuggle up next to her warmth.

She murmured, " 'm cold."

He reached down to pull up the covers, but groaned sleepily when he didn't find any. The light hitting his eyelids told him that morning had arrived, and he figured that they must have kicked the covers off during the night. He wanted to fall back to sleep, but the chill was getting uncomfortable enough that he opened his eyes to assess the blanket situation.

In his sleepy haze, their surroundings confused him. The room was unfamiliar, yet he didn't feel alarmed. Kathryn was still lying naked in his arms, a vision as she slept. Tearing his eyes away from her, he looked out the window and realization dawned on him.

Kathryn grumbled, "You stole the covers again."

"No, I don't think you can blame me for this one."

"Hmmm?"

"I'm just saying that it's not our covers that have disappeared. It seems to have been us."

She opened her eyes and looked around. They were lying on top of a bed that wasn't theirs, in a room that wasn't theirs. She twisted her head and shoulders around to look at her new husband. "Are we where I think we are?"

"I think so." He edged off the bed and lifted the turned-down covers. "Scoot under."

She groaned a little as she sat up and let him draw the covers down. "I think I overtaxed my abs last night, but damn, that was good sex."

"I aim to please, ma'am," he said with a wink.

The fluffy white bedding on the large, iron bed almost swallowed her small form. "Whose idea was it to transport us in our sleep?"

"I'll give you three guesses and the first two don't count," he said as he cuddled in behind her and tucked the blankets around them.

"Your less-than-best man."

He snuffled his nose into her hair and held her close. "I'm guessing there's probably a note, but I don't feel up to looking for it right now."

She wiggled her bottom against him. "That can be fixed."

Groaning, he said, "You're a wicked woman."

She chuckled and pressed her back into his chest. "Yes, I am, and now that you've married me, I don't have to hide it anymore."

"As if you ever did." He sighed tiredly and rubbed her arms to warm her up. "Let's try to sleep more."

"If you insist." After a quiet moment, she commented, "I hope they transported our clothes, too."

"You don't need to wear any on my account."

"You do realize that there are at least a dozen security officers watching us all the time?"

He sensually rubbed her tummy in slow, soothing circles. "Feel like engaging in a bit of exhibitionism?"

"Mmmmmm... could be kinky, but since they all work for me, no."

"Party pooper." He kissed the back of her neck, lingering there because he knew how much it turned her on.

She murmured, "You keep doing that and you're not going to get that sleep you wanted."

He didn't stop.

After making love in their un-familiar surroundings, they dozed for awhile until Chakotay's stomach started growling. He said, "I think it's time to get out of bed and explore."

She mumbled, "Too." Shaking her head slightly, she moaned softly. "Seeeeepy."

Concerned about her slurred speech, Chakotay sat up to look at her. The freckles dotting her nose and neck were unusually dark in comparison to her very pale skin, a sure sign that she needed to eat immediately. He kissed her cheek and whispered, "I'll be right back. Don't try to get up."

" 'kay."

He climbed out of bed, found the bathroom, threw on a robe, and then padded out to the main living area of their small cabin. In the adjacent kitchen, he found a cooler that was fully stocked and poured a glass of orange juice. He smiled when he saw a container of bendable straws and instantly knew that Gretchen had helped set this up.

Back in the bedroom, he sat down next to Kathryn and placed the straw against her lips. “Can you drink?”

She took a sip of the cold juice, finding it refreshing in her warm, sticky mouth. Chakotay’s fingers brushed tenderly through her hair as her body adjusted to the badly needed glucose.

After a few minutes, he noticed her pallor was closer to normal and asked, “Better?”

“Mmm hmmm. This seems to be getting worse.”

He laid his hand on her belly and caressed it tenderly. “I think he’s already draining your energy.”

Although still drowsy, she opened her eyes. “I don’t think *she* had much to do with sapping my strength, Mr. ‘I want more sleep.’”

“Guilty as charged,” he said with a huge grin as he leaned down to kiss her. “Do you think you can drink more while I fix us breakfast, or a snack, or... dinner? I actually have no idea what time it is here.”

She let him help her into a sitting position, resting her back against the headboard. Her body was still sore from the night before, so she stretched to ease the discomfort. “There’s a nine hour time difference, so how about we kill two birds with one stone and have omelets for dinner? Do we have food?”

“We’ve got plenty. I’ll get started, and when you feel up to it, come join me.”

“Thank you.” She reached for his arm as he got up. When he turned back to look at her, she added, “For taking care of me.”

“It’s my pleasure, love.” With a wink, he said, “Besides, just yesterday I vowed to do that sickness and health thing. Might as well start now.”

She laughed, holding her aching middle. “You started about eight years ago.”

“You’re probably right.” He placed a kiss on top of her head and said, “Come when you’re ready.”

As he walked out, she yelled after him, “You didn’t let me come when I was ready last night.”

He hollered back, “Great, wasn’t it?”

About an hour later, Kathryn was slipping on a light jacket when Chakotay walked into the cabin from the back door.

“Ready to explore our little paradise?” he asked.

“Yes, I think a little activity will help relieve some of my soreness. Who’s on duty?”

“Mark Yosa and the beta team. We’re secure along the coastline for a half kilometer in each direction.”

“Let’s do it.”

He bit back a grin as he opened the back door for her. “Yes, ma’am.”

“What are you laughing at?” she asked as she walked past him to go outside.

“Your use of ‘let’s do it.’ We should engrave that on a plaque and put it up in your office.”

She elbowed him gently in the ribs as he put an arm around her shoulders. “Cheeky.”

“I seem to recall that you’re rather fond of my cheeks.”

When the coastline of the Mediterranean Sea came into view, she forgot all about his impertinence. “Wow.”

“I agree. This is incredible.”

She wrapped her arm around his waist. “This moment, alone, is worth our trek across the galaxy.”

Squeezing her close to his side, he said, “I think it takes a close second to being able to love you openly.”

Kathryn tore her eyes away from the view to look up at her husband. She turned in his arms to face him and gently laid her hands on his chest. “I’ve been asking myself why we refused to acknowledge this out there. It really would’ve been a lot less difficult than ignoring it.”

“A myriad of reasons, none of which I can think of at the moment.”

“Hmmm... I think you just nailed one. I distract you.”

He laughed lightly. “Yes, but this is nothing new. I got really good at thinking about two things at once.”

A wicked glint shone in her eyes. “Tell me, ‘Commander,’ if you would, what is it that I do on the bridge that is the most distracting?”

“Well, ‘Captain.’” He paused to clear his throat. “If you want your first officer to stay focused on the task at hand, you should refrain from leaning on the command deck railing while you’re looking at the viewscreen.”

“Really?” She laughed with surprise. “So, when I was focused on whatever the problem of the day was, your brain was focused on my ass?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I’ll take note and try to improve my posture, ‘Commander.’” She slid her hand down and pinched his rear. “Your ass, by the way, looks *really* good in uniform.”

It was his turn to laugh. “And you say that you weren’t distracted?”

As she walked away, she tossed over her shoulder, “I never said anything of the kind.”

Joy filled his heart as he watched her move towards the beach with a definite sway in her hips. She was sounding more like herself than she had in a long time – enjoying life, awestruck by nature, flirting with him, and her sharp wit was shining through all of it. He followed her to the edge of the sea where they both took off their shoes so they could wade in the warm water.

Kathryn asked, “Do you know what part of the Mediterranean this is? It occurs to me that I have no idea where we are.”

“Eastern part. We’re on an island off the coast of Greece in the Aegean.”

“The water is such an amazing shade of blue.”

“Yes, it is.” He took her hand in his. “Would you like to walk a little?”

“Sure.” They walked along quietly for a few minutes until Kathryn broke the silence. “I love the feeling of the sand between my toes.”

“So do I. We need to explore the coast along our property sometime.”

“I didn’t think it was possible to get down there.”

“Not directly from the house, but on the north side of the guest cabin, there’s a trail that goes down to the ocean.”

“Have you been there?”

“No, but Justin told me about it. He said it’s a pretty steep hike.”

“This summer when the Pacific warms up, I’d like to try it.”

Chakotay laughed a little. “By then, your balance might be off a bit.”

“Oh yeah.” She placed her hand on her stomach. “I have to keep reminding myself.”

“Did you tell anyone?”

“No, but Beverly knows, and she thinks Amy might.”

“Then it’s no wonder that they were both so worried about you.”

“They were?”

“Beverly more so, but Amy asked me several times if there was anything she could do for you.”

Kathryn asked, “What did Beverly say?”

“She was hesitant to leave the reception, and told me to keep a close eye on you, to make sure you eat a lot of small meals. Captain Picard finally urged her to leave, but she made me promise that you’d call her before making any decisions. She said it so emphatically that it took me back a little.”

“She’s worried that Joe is going to try to talk us into something we don’t want to do.”

“Then she doesn’t know you as well as she thinks she does.”

“You’re right. All she really knows is who I’ve been these last couple of months. We’d only met briefly last summer, so she doesn’t know the ‘real’ me.”

“You haven’t been that different. Physically weakened and emotionally upset, but not once have you let anyone force you into making a decision.”

“That’s true.” She nodded and put her hands on her sore ribs. The movement triggered her memory. “Oh…”

“What is it?”

“Oh, nothing,” she said in dismissal. “It’s just a strange coincidence.”

“What’s that?”

“Beverly asked if my abdomen hurt up here, and now it does.”

Chakotay looked at where her hands were touching. “Is it more on your right?”

“Yes. I think I overtaxed a muscle is all.”

He nodded in agreement. “I think she’s worried about your liver. Joe mentioned something, but I wasn’t tracking.”

“If there was a problem, I’m sure Joe would have told us.”

“That’s true. He can be a bit of an alarmist.”

They walked along quietly for a few minutes until Chakotay asked, “Do you feel a change, yet?”

“What kind of change? In my body?”

“No, in respect to you being more yourself.”

“My demeanor?”

“Yes, because outwardly, you definitely appear to have regained your footing in the last couple of weeks, except when alone.”

“Some, I suppose. Being around so many people has forced me to put on my game face. I didn’t want anyone to think I’d been broken.”

“You haven’t been. Just bent a little.”

She smiled. “That’s right, and I have you to thank for straightening me back out.”

“Speaking of strong women, I had a long conversation with your Aunt Martha. She’s a piece of work.”

Laughing, Kathryn asked, “What did you talk about?”

“I didn’t do much of the talking.”

“I bet not. She never takes a breath.”

He chuckled. “And when she does breathe, it’s timed so that you can’t say anything because it would be an obvious interruption to her train of thought.”

“A train without a caboose.”

“Mostly, she told me how Janeway women like to be treated, as if I didn’t already know.”

“Oh? And how’s that?”

“She said they need to be challenged in life. You come from a strong line of women, and, according to your aunt, you’re the strongest of them all. I’ve been instructed not to turn you into a docile woman that will see to my every whim.”

“What makes her think that I would *let* you turn me into anything?”

“I thought the same thing.”

She gave him an incredulous look.

“Really, I did. I just decided not to voice it because that would’ve only prolonged the conversation.”

“What else did she enlighten you with?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“Out with it,” she demanded.

“All right, but you asked for it.” He licked his lips. “Janeway women like an adventurous man in the bedroom.”

“She didn’t.”

“Oh yes, she definitely did. I’ve been directed to always see to your needs before my own and to make sure I keep it interesting so you don’t get bored.”

Kathryn groaned. “I’ll have to ask Mike if he got the same talk when he married Phoebe.”

“He did. He warned me at the bachelor party.”

“In front of everyone?”

“No, he pulled me aside. He promised that if he saw your aunt corner me, he’d come to my rescue.”

“Did he?”

“Not soon enough, but yes. He sent your sister to ask me to dance in typical Phoebe fashion. I kept her at a respectable distance, but it wasn’t easy.”

“And who saved you from her?”

“Your mother, who then asked me what her sister-in-law talked to me about.”

“Did you tell her?”

“Only that I’d better treat you as you deserve or else I’d have Martha to deal with.”

“And mom’s response?”

“She assured me that she couldn’t have asked for a better husband for you.”

“Awwww. Did she really?”

“Yes. I was flattered, but then again, your mom and I’ve become pretty good friends since last fall.”

“I’ve noticed.” She squeezed his fingers. “I don’t think I’ve ever told you how much I appreciate you moving in with her that week before I got home. There aren’t many men who’d be willing to console their future mother-in-law like that.”

“Under the circumstances, it was the best thing for both of us, and it reminded me a lot of the way you and I held each other up when things got tough on Voyager.”

“I hope not to that extent,” Kathryn joked. “Did you give my mom foot massages and put her to bed when she was so exhausted that she couldn’t see straight?”

“No, but I did hug her and let her cry on my shoulder.”

“Good. I’m sure you both needed it.” She leaned her head on his arm as they continued walking. “I suspect that I’ll need your shoulder a lot before this baby arrives.”

Hesitantly, he asked, “How do you feel about being pregnant?”

“Hasn’t really sunk in, yet, but I’ve always wanted children.”

“I tried not to think about it until you mentioned it last summer. You know, after Sekaya asked if she could name her son Kolopak.”

She stopped to pick up a seashell. “I suspect that I already know the answer, but why didn’t you want to think about it?”

“What do you suspect?”

“That you gave up the dream of home and family when you joined the Maquis and then, like me, you didn’t think Voyager was exactly a playground for children.”

“It wasn’t so much that our ship was unsafe, but that having us as parents would be very difficult on a child.”

Kathryn thought about that as she started walking again. “It’s still going to be difficult unless my popularity wanes a great deal.”

“But I think that’s a different issue than what I’m talking about. On Voyager, your life and mine were constantly at risk, there was an almost unbearable amount of pressure on us, we were always poised for a red alert, and I wasn’t sure we’d have enough energy at the end of the day to give a child what he or she would need.”

She nodded and looked out at the deep, blue sea. “Those are the very reasons why I didn’t think I could be in a relationship with you.”

“And why I didn’t push.” He put his hand on her back and rubbed it gently as they walked. “The difficulty that our children will face now is that they’ll be famous, but we can do our best to isolate them.”

Kathryn studied the details of the seashell in her hands for a few minutes before taking a deep breath. Because the movement caused an ache in her ribs, she rubbed her right side as she spoke. “I have to admit that I’m a little anxious.”

“Anxious about pregnancy or about being a parent?”

“Both.”

“So am I.” He stopped to get a piece of broken shell out from between his toes. “Do you know how many?”

“How many children?”

“Yes, I thought you might know from your temporal adventure.”

“Oh, no, I don’t. I only know that we have descendants.”

“So how many do you want to have?”

Shrugging, she said, “I’d like to get through this pregnancy before deciding if I want to try it again. And if there is a next time, I’d like to be a lot healthier.”

He splashed the water a little with his feet. “I keep thinking about what Dr. Joe is going to tell us.”

I’m hoping he can sort out this blood sugar issue on Tuesday. He’s probably just concerned about my weight... and I suppose my liver, if that’s a problem.”

“And your lack of intestinal fortitude.”

She shook her head in amusement. “You might be the first person who has ever told me that I don’t have guts.”

His smile joined hers. “I meant it in the literal sense, of course. You really are missing intestines.”

“Yes, I know.” Feeling a little woozy, she slid her hand into the crook of his arm to walk closer to him. “But I do hope that I have the stamina to see this through.”

“How about if I lend you some of mine?”

“You might have to if I’m bedridden. Not only will you have to take care of me, but I’ll likely be in a rotten...” She paused to clear her suddenly blurry vision. “...mood.”

“Are you okay?”

“Just a little light-headed, but I don’t know why. We just ate.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a few hard butterscotch candies. “For you.”

“How’d you know to bring those?” she asked with a smile as she unwrapped one and popped it into her mouth.

“I told you last night. You married an intelligent man.” He gave her a wink and started walking again, but slowly. “Let me know if that doesn’t help.”

“Thanks.” She squeezed his arm and asked, “What was I saying? Oh... I’ll be grouchy if I’m stuck in a bed.”

“And I’ll understand why. Just don’t be surprised when I try to cheer you up.”

“I won’t, but I’d love lots of massages. That worked wonders last time I was in a funk.”

“I’ll remember that.” He put his arm around her back and held her close, remembering sadly her depression last summer.

They stopped walking when they felt the energy of a forcefield prickle at their skin. She said, “I guess this is how far we go.”

“Feels like it.” He looked around and then pointed to the cliff. “There’s the shield generator.”

“How far out to sea do you think it extends?”

“Two kilometers. There are several Starfleet Navy ships out there to complete the perimeter.”

Her voice was low as she said, “I’m glad that we can’t see them. It would ruin the view.”

“They’re doing their best to be discreet, but I also want you to feel safe.”

She sighed. “I’m vacillating between feeling safe and feeling like a prisoner.”

“I can see how you’d feel that way, but I doubt any judge would sentence someone to serve time in a place as beautiful as this.” He stretched his arm out as he spun around to take in the view.

“No, but that doesn’t make me feel any less trapped.”

Trying to lighten her mood, he offered, “At least you get a full-time conjugal visit.”

She gave him a look. “While that does have certain benefits, it makes you just as confined as I am.”

“And there’s no one I’d rather be confined with than you.” He nudged her playfully. “Kathryn, I really don’t mind, and it means that I can focus on you rather than on your safety.”

She turned to face him and stated forcefully, “We need to talk about this.”

He frowned. “What do you mean by ‘this?’ Did I say something wrong?”

“No! Not at all.” She waved her arm in the air. “I’m referring to all this security and why it’s here.”

“Okaaay,” he said slowly. He was relieved, but didn’t understand her statement. “You don’t know?”

“Of course I know,” she put her hands on her hips. “But I’m tired of it and I’m tired of feeling terrified that someone is going to kidnap me in the middle of the night, or that a sniper is going to shoot me in broad daylight. The threat needs to go away because I can’t keep going like this.”

“I agree, but that’s not something that you and I can solve by ourselves, and it’s not going to be solved while we’re here.”

She popped another candy in her mouth and started pacing. “I realize that, but if we put our heads together and go over what we know, maybe we can find an answer. At the very least, you and I should draft a strategy to bring this to closure. We have at least one starship, if not two, at our disposal, and a couple hundred friends, some in very high places, who would help us at the drop of a hat.”

“Yes, but…” Chakotay scratched his head. “You really want to work on this here?”

She stopped pacing and her shoulders fell. “I…”

Coming up behind her, he tucked a few loose strands of hair behind her ear. “Kathryn, I’m happy to help you do whatever you think is best, but this is only the first day of our honeymoon. It just might be that what you need right now is to let all of this go and relax.”

Her voice husky with emotion, she said, “I don’t want to get depressed about this forced isolation, and the only way I can think of snapping out of it is to take action.”

“You’re not depressed, love.”

She wiped at her eyes and asked, “Then what is all this? My moods are all over the place, and I can’t seem to control them. It’s damned irritating.”

“I’m going to take a wild guess and suggest that it could have something to do with hormonal changes. Oh, and there’s the fact that you just went through a very exhausting and emotional week, during which you made your first public appearance in months, you were reunited with people you hadn’t seen for a year, and you made a life-altering commitment.”

Staring out at the darkening sea, she had one hand on her hip and the other hand pressing below her eye to stem the flow of tears. “I hate feeling this way.”

His tugged on her fingers to draw her into his arms. “Kathryn, we’ll figure it out.”

“I want to eliminate the threat against me, and I want my life back.” She rested her head on his shoulder. “Being around everyone this week made me miss working. And I miss doing something as simple as walking down the street.”

“We should do that, then. Find a way to get out and see some sights.”

“I’d like that, but it’s more than that. Our friends can’t know where we live, we can’t tell anyone where we are, there’s an entire security force watching us 24/7, and if that isn’t enough, now our child is in danger because of what’s happened. I’m angry that those three horrible weeks cost us so much.”

“I know, love.” He hugged her tightly. “The price is definitely too high, but what they didn’t manage to take was your life. For that, I’m extremely grateful, and I’m willing to do whatever it takes to keep you safe.”

“I want more than safety. I want justice, and I want this baby.”

His heart ached for her, for both of them. “I want this baby, too, so much that it hurts. We’re going to do everything in our power to give him the best chance he could possibly have at life.”

“I hope its enough.”

“It will be enough. It has to be.” He held her close, offering what physical support he could. “As for justice, if we move too quickly on our suspicions, we’ll have no concrete evidence and they’ll walk.” Rubbing her back soothingly, he asked, “You know what?”

“What?” she mumbled against his neck.

“This anger is a sign that you’re not broken.”

“Bent.”

He winked at her. “I think you should latch on to your anger and get really, really mad, livid, outraged, whatever you want to call it. It could be the healthiest thing you could do right now.”

She looked up at him. “That’s what Deanna told me. She suggested that I ought to throw things or hit something.”

“Good advice.” He held her beautiful face in his hands and gave her a simple kiss. “We’ll look for something that you can do. Maybe throw rocks in the water.”

“No, I need to hear or feel the impact. Maybe you can teach me to box, or I could take up pottery so I can take my aggression out on a lump of clay.”

“Either one.” Smoothing her hair back, he said. “You’re going to be fine, Kathryn, and you’re going to come out of this stronger than ever, out of spite if nothing else.”

“They’ve messed with the wrong woman.”

He smiled at her response. “And then you’re going to bring the walls crashing down around Zife and his puppeteers. You’ll see your justice that day.”

She nodded with confidence. “Damn right.”

Pride swelled up inside him. “You’re a phenomenal woman, Kathryn. I know you’ve heard it a hundred times this week, but I don’t care because you need to know.”

“Thank you.” She gave him a simple kiss and pulled out of his arms. “It means a lot coming from you, especially when you say it with such conviction.”

“I think you can trust my judgment. Even if I’m a little biased, I know you better than anyone else.”

She looked into his eyes for a moment, deep in thought. “Remember my first night back?”

“Every moment.”

Her head tilted in sympathy. “You promised me that you’d help me get my strength back. I want that, now. I’m ready to fight for it.”

“You’re not as far away from it as you think you are, but yes, we’ll keep moving in that direction. Even if it means working while we’re here.”

“You’re sure?”

“Absolutely.”

“Good.” She picked up a rock and threw it out into the water. “First things, first. I need something to hit. That can be you or a lump of clay. Your choice.”

“All right,” he said with a laugh.

As she started walking back towards their cabin, she popped her last butterscotch into her mouth. “We’d better get back before it gets dark. I need something to eat besides candy, and then we need to make three lists.”

“Of what?”

“Verifiable facts, suppositions, and evidence needed.”

“It shouldn’t be difficult to get a copy of the trial records and of Jared’s statements.”

“No, but Khurma might not give them to me since I’m supposed to be on vacation. We might need to go through Harry or Bernie.”

“I’m sure they’d be glad to do whatever we ask.”

“Right.” Her pace quickened as she talked. “Then I want that data I asked Bernie to get, the information about the people who work for Zife. I also want to know who the movers and shakers of the Bolian government are. We should find out who was involved in getting Zife elected, and who stands to gain the most from his success. I doubt that it’s obvious or this would’ve been sorted out long ago.”

Chakotay rubbed his hand over his mouth to try to hide his smile.

“What?” she asked with mild irritation.

He chewed on his lip before admitting, “I love seeing you with your hackles up. It’s energizing.”

“Love? You actually enjoy it when I’m ticked off?”

“Of course not, but I love watching you gather your forces, so to speak. When your targeting sensors are locked, the universe had better stand back.”

She rolled her eyes and kept on walking at a fast clip, trying her best to contain her amusement.

“It’s adorable, really.”

Instantly, she stopped and rounded on him, one hand on her waist. “Adorable?”

He winked at her and laughed. “Yes, but only to me.”

She threw her hand up and stomped away from him, muttering, “I’ll show him ‘adorable.’”

“I’m looking forward to it,” he called out from several paces back.

Kathryn froze, turned on her heel, and pointed her finger at him. She fought back a smile as she said, “Look here, mister. I will not tol...” She couldn’t finish and keep from laughing at the same time.

He took control of the moment and took her into his arms. Pressing his mouth to hers in a demanding kiss, he wanted to consume her as she opened up for him, soft and pliant as she accepted the sweep of his tongue. He groaned as her wet heat and sweet, butterscotch flavor burst across his senses.

She threw her arms around his neck and pressed her body close, her breasts crushing against his chest until he swore that he felt the beating of her new heart, a strong and sure life-force sustaining her, protecting her. A soft moan escaped from her as she matched his passion, her tongue dueling with his in a fervent dance.

When he eased his lips away from hers, she clung to him in protest and whimpered for more. He whispered against her cheek, “If we weren’t being monitored, I’d lay you down right here.”

She nibbled along his jaw. “The sun has already set; maybe we’d blend into the shadows.”

He groaned as she pressed her pelvis against his straining erection. Finding the strength to touch his commbadge, he said, “Mark, would you transport us back to the house? The Admiral is getting fatigued.”

“Yes, sir. Stand by.”

Kathryn pulled her head away and raised an eyebrow at him as the blue tingle of the transport beam took them away. When they re-coalesced, she remarked, “I’m not the least bit tired.”

He took no time before backing her towards the bedroom, grabbing a banana for her on the way. “Yes you are, because you’re going to bed.”

She nodded towards the fruit he was unpeeling. “That’s a rather suggestive snack you have there.”

“You have a choice, Kathryn.”

“Oh?” she asked as he handed it to her.

“You can put the banana in your mouth, or you put me in your mouth.” When her knees hit the mattress, he pressed her down onto the bed.

As she finished her first bite, she asked, “Can’t I have both?”

“I think that can be arranged.” He pulled her pants off of her, not caring that sand was getting all over the floor.

“Is this how you plan to get more adventurous in the bedroom?”

“How’s that?” He quickly unzipped her jacket, pushed her shirt up, and exposed her breasts.

A gasp escaped her lips as he devoured her hardened nipple, almost making her choke on the bite she was eating. Once she swallowed, she said, “By taking control. You’re more aggressive than usual.”

He dropped his hands to her hips to hold her in place as she began to squirm under the insistence of his tongue on her nipple. One of his hands continued downward and pressed firmly against her mound, finding it warm and very wet through the thin fabric of her underwear. He smiled against her chest as she groaned in pleasure. “You seem to be enjoying it.”

“The command deck is yours, Captain, just as soon as I finish my little snack.”

“I feel good, honey. Really, really good.” Kathryn breathed in the fresh air and looked at the entrance to the outdoor market.

“I’m glad, and you look great in sunglasses. Have I ever told you that before?”

She lowered them on her nose to look at him directly. “Because I’m more mysterious?”

“Yes.” Chakotay put his own glasses on and adjusted his hat. He asked Mark and Kathryn, “Are you sure this covers the tattoo?”

“I can’t see it at all,” Mark replied. “All three of us look like stereotypical tourists. We’re out of place, but no more so than all the other tourists walking around.”

Kathryn held her hat. “Just so long as this doesn’t blow off.”

Chakotay said, "Even if it does, your hair wouldn't be recognizable with the artificial color you put in it today."

"Mark, thank you for arranging this." She took Chakotay's hand and started walking towards the entrance.

"You're welcome. There are six other officers blending into the crowd, and I'll stick right with you."

"I feel perfectly safe," she touched his arm in appreciation. "Now, let's go explore!"

Both men smiled at her exuberance, and followed her lead. The small village was on another island, but it was a common destination point for tourists throughout the area. They meandered through a few shops before stopping at an outdoor Greek restaurant for a lunch of stuffed grape leaves, shish kabobs, and hummus. Because Mark sat and ate with them, they had a wonderful opportunity to learn more about him and what he'd been doing during the previous year.

After lunch, Kathryn looked at the map, and said, "I'd like to browse through the textile shops, if you two don't mind."

Chakotay placed his hand on the small of her back. "Not at all. Looking for anything special?"

"Not necessarily, but I'd like to look at upholstery fabrics to see if anything would look nice in the house."

Mark tapped the commbadge that was hidden inside his jacket lapel. "We're moving to the textile market."

Kathryn was in heaven as she walked around touching and looking at all the different fabrics. Her sunglasses were a minor inconvenience, but she got around it by lifting them slightly so she could look down without revealing her eyes.

"Have you seen anything you want to purchase?" Mark asked, careful not to use her title.

"Yes, although I'm not sure how to do it without revealing my identity. I'll just take some notes and ask my sister to place an order later."

Mark said, "Don't let that stop you. When you said you wanted to shop, we set up an account under an alias. Just tell me what you want and I'll take care of it for you."

She touched Mark's shoulder. "I knew there was a good reason I asked you to be on my team."

"Asked me?" He laughed. "Absolutely, A....aunt... Sue." He grimaced and rubbed his mouth. "Sorry for the slip."

"That's all right, Mark. I've always liked that name."

Chakotay asked, "While you two shop, would you excuse me for a few minutes to find a restroom?"

Mark pressed his badge discretely. "Davis, we're splitting up."

"I don't need an escort."

Kathryn tapped his arm. "Let them help so they don't get too bored."

"Remember that next time you protest." When Davis arrived, he winked at Kathryn playfully and said, "Be back in a few minutes."

"Okay, Mark, let's go back to that last vendor. I'd like that light green damask to reupholster the breakfast room chairs." She set down the fabric she'd been holding during their conversation.

The vendor that had been watching her, said, "Madame, are you going to purchase that fine piece of silk you've been touching at length?"

"Oh," she paused and patted the fabric. "It's beautiful, but not what I'm looking for. Thank you."

"Madame," he said more insistently. "You should not soil the fabric unless you plan to purchase it. I do not have these items out just so that you may ruin them."

"My apologies, sir. I didn't realize..."

"Of course you do not realize!" He raised his voice. "You tourists are all quite rude!"

Mark stepped in. "We aren't interested. Good day, sir." He led Kathryn away.

The vendor yelled, "Rude! Rude! Rude!"

Kathryn cringed at the scene he was making and walked back to the booth, despite Mark's protest. Having dealt with more than a few heated tempers, she approached him calmly. "Sir, please accept my apology. If I have ruined the fabric, then I will compensate you for it, but I assure you that my hands are clean."

"Pompous tourist! Get away from me!" He shoved her away with his forearm. "You come here and..."

"Hands off!" Mark edged between them, glaring at the vendor.

Kathryn was about to try to get everyone to calm down when she felt a hand on her back. She nearly jumped out of her skin when she saw that it was someone she didn't recognize.

The stranger said, “Ma’am, please come with me to a more secure location.”

“Your name is?”

He flashed his commbadge and guided her away with a hand on her elbow. “Reynolds, ma’am, security.”

Once they were away from the scene, she said, “It was just a simple dispute really. I think he was just trying to coerce me into making a purchase.”

Quickly leading her through another door, he said, “Yes, ma’am, but we don’t want to attract attention.”

“I seem to have a knack for it,” she grumbled and then nodded towards Reynolds’ commbadge. “Aren’t you going to let the others know where we are?”

In the restroom with Chakotay, Davis touched his earpiece and his eyes widened in alarm.

“What is it?” Chakotay asked as he tossed a towel into the recycler.

“We need to go. She has disappeared.”

“WHAT!?”

The two men hurried back to the textile market as fast as they could without attracting too much attention. Chakotay’s heart was in his throat when he saw Mark Yosa without Kathryn anywhere in sight.

Mark made eye contact with his former Captain, and shook his head remorsefully. “I’m sorry, sir.”

His heart beating heavily, Chakotay ordered, “Let’s just concentrate on finding her. Has Command been notified?”

“Yes, sir, and the head of security said they’d initiate a scan for the alloy, but I don’t know what that means.”

Chakotay nodded. “She has a traceable medical implant. Tell me exactly what happened.”

Davis informed them, “I’m joining the others to extend the perimeter search.”

Mark told Chakotay, “She was having a minor dispute with a vendor, and I stepped in to get him to back off. When I turned around, she was gone and no one on the team saw her leave.”

“How could they not notice?” he asked with disbelief, his anger simmering under the surface. “What about her commbadge?”

“It was found discarded in the courtyard on the east end of this group of buildings. Rogers and Watson are focusing on that area of the search.”

Chakotay demanded, “Let’s go.”

“Sir, my orders are to remain here with you.”

“If you’re staying with me, then try to keep up,” Chakotay said as he headed out of the market as fast as he could without breaking into an actual run. He whispered to himself, “Hold on, Kathryn. We’re coming.”

“Sir!” Lieutenant Watson looked up from his tri-corder as Chakotay entered the vacant courtyard. “Don’t come any closer. We’re scanning the area for evidence.”

Ignoring the young man, Chakotay spun in a circle, his eyes focusing on every detail of the scene. A broken flower pot caught his attention. “Watson, scan that for residual DNA.”

He did as ordered and nodded. “I’m picking up traces of the Admiral’s genetic markers, sir. It’s highly concentrated along the edge. She must have cut herself.”

Chakotay studied the fragment he was pointing at and saw fresh blood. He studied how the pottery fragments had fallen and nodded in that direction. “Look for her blood on that doorway. Scan for it, both of you.”

“Here!” Mark yelled as he started scanning a dark spot on a wooden fence. “It’s hers. This way!”

All three men moved swiftly, coming to a halt when they found themselves in a dead-end alley between two bright-white stucco buildings. Chakotay’s eyes were immediately drawn to a dark smudge on the wall at the far end of the alley. He ran towards it and found a walkway that they hadn’t seen at first glance. “Over here!” he yelled as he took off without worrying whether the other two were following him.

Halfway down the cluttered passage, he tripped over something and looked down. “Her sunglasses.”

Watson said, “If the assailant planned this well enough to snatch her right out from under our noses, why would they be leaving all of these obvious clues? This could be a false trail.”

Mark shook his head. “It’s the Admiral, not the assailant. She’s done this before. Do you remember a few years ago when she left that trail of breadcrumbs for us?”

“That planet in the Nobian system.” The memories flooded back to the forefront of Chakotay’s mind. She’d been taken on a tour by an ambassador who’d had a personal agenda with her, and she’d counted on Chakotay’s tracking skills to find her before she had to destroy their trade agreement by declining his advances. “Look for a concealed door, some kind of exit point in the immediate vicinity.”

As their tri-corders were scanning, Chakotay’s commbadge crackled with static. Freezing, he tapped it and said, “Chakotay here. You’re not coming in clear.”

The commbadge crackled again and he nodded towards Watson. “Try yours.”

Watson tapped his commbadge. “Mediterranean Squad Command, Captain Chakotay’s badge is picking up static from an unknown source. Can you track it?”

The reply was clear. “Sir, we’ve intercepted it, but it’s garbled. The signal isn’t strong enough to be ‘fleet. It must be a civilian communicator in a heavily obstructed area.”

Yosa’s badge started crackling, too. “Now it’s on mine. Can you detect if it’s from the same source?”

“They’re on the same frequency modulation.”

“Any report from Command about the alloy scan?” Chakotay asked gruffly.

“No, sir. Whatever the composition of that alloy is, the ships in orbit have to reconfigure their sensors to scan for it.”

“Damn it!” Chakotay redoubled his efforts to find where Kathryn was trying to lead them.

“Yosa, it’s the same poly-deutonic alloy as in the mobile holographic emitter. Do you detect it?”

“Sir, these tri-corders aren’t programmed for that,” Yosa called from a few meters up the abandoned walkway.

“Why the hell not?” His anger and fear were mounting every minute that she was gone.

Yosa yelled, “Here! There’s a trap in the floor!”

As Chakotay helped him pull the door open, his commbadge came to life again with intermittent static. He slapped it hard, “Receiving static. If you can hear me, boost the gain.”

Only a moment later, Kathryn’s voice came through. “Janeway to Chakotay, can you read me?”

Although she sounded winded and tired, her voice was music to his ears. “Yes, thank God. Where are you?”

After a moment of static, she said, “I’m not sure. A cellar or basement of some kind.”

Over Watson's commbadge, Squad Command told them, "We've put a trace on it. Stand by."

"Kathryn?" Chakotay asked as he lowered himself through the hole in the floor. "We're coming down through a trap door. Are you hurt?"

"Not severely. I'll try to retrace our steps. I don't think you're far."

"Stay where you are, Admiral," Mark instructed as he followed.

As soon as Chakotay's feet hit the ground below him, he heard a loud creak and swung around, ready to defend himself. He wasn't prepared for the overwhelming relief that washed over him when he saw his wife. Before he had time to think about it, he was holding her as tightly as he could. "You're okay, Kathryn. You're okay."

She whispered hoarsely, "Yes, honey. I'm okay."

Mark jumped to the floor and tapped his commbadge. "Yosa to Squad Command, we've got her. Have the team converge at my location."

"Lieutenant," she said to Mark over Chakotay's shoulder. "Back there. He's out cold. Take him into custody for questioning. He has a hell of a lot of explaining to do."

Chakotay pulled his head back to look at her. "Who is he? Any demands?"

"I've never seen him before, and I don't know if he's in Starfleet or not. Regardless, Starfleet security has to have been compromised since he knew where and when to find me. Not that we didn't already suspect that."

He noticed that her complexion was a little ashen, so he unwrapped a candy and gave it to her. "Did he lure you away under the guise of your security team?"

As she nodded, Davis came down the ladder asking, "Which direction did Yosa head?"

Chakotay jerked his head back in the direction Kathryn had come from, but didn't take his eyes off of his wife.

When they were alone again, she took a shaky breath. "I realized that I was in trouble as soon as we left the market, but I couldn't get the upper hand until just a few minutes ago."

"Did he hurt you?" Taking a visual assessment of her body, he saw that she was favoring her right side and was holding her bloodied left hand close to her waist. He turned her hand over to see a large, jagged cut that looked incredibly painful. "Oh, Kathryn. I was worried when I saw how much blood you'd left."

"I did this to myself. He only hit me in retaliation after I broke his nose."

Chakotay cradled her face with both of his hands, studying it for any sign of injury. “Your right cheekbone?”

She touched it cautiously. “It feels huge.”

“Just a little swollen, but the skin isn’t broken.” He glanced up to see Watson coming down the ladder. Not wanting to share their precious secret, he laid his hand gently on her hip. “Any injury down here?”

“I protected it best I could.” She leaned her forehead against his and whispered, “More than anything, I’m exhausted, but I finally found something to hit, and it felt damn good.”

He held her close, rubbing her back with comforting strokes as he whispered into her ear, “I love you, Kathryn, so much.”

“I love you, too.” Watson was standing back to give them a moment of privacy, so she felt free to tell Chakotay, “I think I just came up from my first deep sea dive again, and it feels great.”

“What do you mean?” he asked without breaking their embrace.

“Just that I was confronted with one of my biggest fears. I didn’t panic, and I’m going to be okay.”

“Yes, you are.” He gently rocked them from side to side.

After a moment of enjoying his comfort, she asked, “Can we go home? I’m fading fast.”

Chakotay made eye contact with Watson. “What’s the situation up there?”

“Clark and Rogers are keeping guard until our cavalry arrives. The local authorities have gotten involved, and we’re trying to keep your identity secret.”

Chakotay called up, “Clark? Can you transport us out of here or send down a medkit?”

Justin came down the ladder. “I can do you one better than that. I was with Tom when I got the call, and he came with me.”

Tom appeared next, carrying a medkit. “I heard there was a little excitement so I tagged along to see if I could help.”

“It’s good to see you both.” Kathryn managed a small, but tired smile.

Tom took one look at her and frowned. “You need to sit down before you fall down.”

"I'm fine," she insisted as the men guided her towards a sturdy crate so she and Chakotay could sit.

Justin said, "I'm relieved to see that you're okay, Admiral. You had me worried."

She raised her eyebrows. "When do I not have you worried?"

"Good point." He gave her a quick once over and said, "I'll leave you in their capable hands while I asses the situation down the hall."

"I made a big mess in there, got his blood all over the place."

"So I hear," Justin said proudly and left the room.

Tom opened the medkit and asked, "Have I ever bought that 'I'm fine' line before?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, you have, but I'm glad you're here." She held out her left hand to show him the cut. "This is the worst of my injuries. Do you think the dermal regenerator will be sufficient enough to heal it?"

Tom glanced worriedly at her as he scanned it. "How did this happen?"

Chakotay said, "A broken clay pot fragment."

Kathryn gave in to her fatigue and laid her head against Chakotay's chest. "If I fall asleep, wake me up when I need to give a report."

He kissed the top of her head and held her close. "Rest for now. We'll take care of it."

"Mhmm." Sleepily, she closed her eyes and said, "Next time you have to pee, I'm coming with you."

Tom gave them a questioning look as he finished closing up the wound on her palm and wrist.

Chakotay whispered, "Doesn't she always find trouble when we least expect it?"

Not opening her eyes, she stated clearly, "Paris, you'd be wise not to answer that."

"Yes, ma'am." He winked at Chakotay and pulled out his tri-corder to scan the rest of her.

Chakotay waited to see if Tom would discover her pregnancy before mentioning it. When Tom's eyes bugged out in surprise, Chakotay held a finger up to his lips and shook his head.

Tom pointed to Kathryn and mouthed, "Does she know?"

Chakotay nodded and then flicked his eyes to Watson who was standing nearby. He whispered, "You're the fifth person, including us and two doctors."

Kathryn opened her eyes to look at the two men, and then closed them again, sighing tiredly. "I suspect that you'll tell your wife, but it stops there. Understood?"

"Aye, Admiral," he replied and set about healing her face. "Keep your eyes closed."

Justin came back in and kneeled next to them. "How's she doing?"

Eyes still closed, Kathryn answered, "She's ready to go home."

"Yes, Ma'am. Does that mean to an island or back to North America?"

"Island," she murmured as Chakotay felt her relax into sleep.

"Tom," Justin asked. "Does she need medical attention?"

"Ummm," he glanced up at Chakotay and asked, "Are you scheduled to see the Doc soon?"

"First thing tomorrow morning."

"Does she have any pain meds?"

Chakotay nodded. "Metorapan."

Tom answered Justin, "It can wait until morning."

"She really did a number on that guy in there," Justin said in amazement. "Reminds me of the way she kicked ass last fall on Ktaria."

Chakotay couldn't help but smile as he rubbed his chin on her soft hair. "Do you need a report from her now or can it wait?"

"It can wait for a few hours." Justin stood up and pulled out his tri-corder. "We just got the dampening field down, so we'll be ready to transport momentarily. I'm going to take some quick scans in the vicinity before we go. I'd like to make sure no one else is hiding out down here."

"Thanks," Chakotay said before asking Tom, "What needs medical attention?"

Tom sighed. "I haven't the slightest idea how to interpret these readings. Her medical needs are out of my league, but I can confirm that her vitals are strong, and obviously, she's low on blood sugar."

Justin cleared his throat, causing Chakotay and Tom to look up at him. He had his tri-corder aimed at them, and by the sounds it was emitting, it was clearly detecting lifesigns.

Chakotay asked, "Lieutenant Watson, would you excuse us for a moment?"

The request woke Kathryn and she opened her eyes to see the three men staring at each other. "What is it?"

When they were alone, Justin held up his tri-corder and asked, "I assume since you asked Watson to leave, you know what I've just found?"

Kathryn groaned tiredly and closed her eyes again. "Sixth person to know."

"Do you want me to report my findings, Admiral?"

She straightened up and arched her back in a simple stretch, wincing as the movement caused pain in her ribs. Her eyelids were heavy, but her eyebrows were furrowed in deep thought. Looking at Chakotay, she asked, "Your opinion?"

"It's up to you, but I'd suggest telling your C.O. before he reads it in a report."

Shaking her head, she said, "I'm not ready for him to know yet. Justin, we've only known ourselves for two days, so let's keep it on a need to know basis."

Mark walked into the room at that moment. "Are we ready to go?" When everyone looked at him blankly, he asked, "Is there a problem?"

They all shifted their focus to Kathryn for an answer. She blinked slowly and scratched her forehead. "Mark, scan me with your tri-corder."

Tom and Justin stepped out of his way, both of them not giving anything away when Mark looked at them inquisitively. He flipped it open and then did a double take when he saw the readings. They all watched as he scanned in a complete circle before settling back on Kathryn again. "There's a life-sign inside you, Admiral."

"Right. Now that all of you and my doctors know, let's keep the lid on it, shall we?"

"Of course, Admiral," Mark nodded, although he kept looking down at his tri-corder to check the readings.

With Chakotay's help, she got to her feet and said, "Tom, thank you for coming to my rescue today. However, next time I see you, we need to have a conversation about transporting people while they're sleeping." Without missing a beat, she spoke to Justin. "Ready when you are, Lieutenant."

"Aye, Admiral... and congratulations."

A smile tugged at her lips as Justin instructed the squad command leader to energize the transporter.

After they re-materialized inside their cabin, Kathryn put her hands on her hips and looked down at the floor.

“What’s on your mind?”

She re-focused on Chakotay, concentration and fatigue etched on her face. “Today didn’t quite turn out like I’d hoped.”

“Good, because if you’d hoped that you were going to be abducted again, I’d see about having your head examined.”

Amused, she yawned and shook her head. “That’s not quite what I meant.”

“Okay, what then?” he asked as he put his arm around her back to guide her towards the bedroom.

“For starters, I wanted to get some clay, maybe find some artwork for our house, and as you know, I had my eye on some fabric.”

“We can have someone get you any art supplies you’d like or we’ll replicate them. And if you know what fabric you want, maybe Mark could go back and get it. Or we could have some samples brought here.”

“I know.” She sighed tiredly as she kicked her shoes off and sat down on the edge of the bed. “This is just frustrating because I haven’t had a chance to walk down a city street in over six months, and I’m tired of being confined. This idiot really messed up my day.”

He sat next to her and smiled sadly. “Mine, too, but I’ll take ‘messed up’ over ‘devastated’ any day.”

“Honey,” she said as she put her arms around him. “I’m sorry that I walked off with him. I assumed that I hadn’t met everyone on the team, yet.”

“I thought as much and I’m not upset with you in the slightest. I’m just…” He shook his head and closed his eyes, unable to talk for fear of losing control over his emotions.

She held onto him, letting him take comfort in her embrace as much as she was taking it in his. “You know what the best part of being married is?”

“I have a general idea.”

She wove her fingers through his short hair, watching as the dark hair curled slightly around the tips of her fingers. "I liked knowing that you'd pick up on my clues because you know me so well; and I was glad that I was free to hug you when it was over."

"Those clues are something we've had far too much practice with over the years."

She nodded; her eyes were growing heavier with each passing moment. She put her fingers under his chin and brought him forward for a light kiss. "I'd also hoped that today would end with a romantic dinner at one of the restaurants we walked by."

"It's only mid-afternoon. Why don't you rest and I'll see what I can do about that." He helped her take off her dirty shirt and pulled back the covers.

After lying down, she helped him slide her pants off. "We can't go out again knowing that security has been breached."

"Maybe not today, but I promise you that before this honeymoon is over, we'll have that dinner."

"Even if it takes clearing an entire restaurant?"

"If that's what it takes, then yes." He covered her with the fluffy bed covers. "I'm only going to let you sleep for a couple hours so you can eat again, soon."

"Okay," she said tiredly. "Don't suppose you'd be interested in holding me, would you?"

"I'd love to." He slipped off his shoes and crawled into bed next to her, taking her into his arms. "Are you really okay?" he asked quietly.

She snuggled against him. "I really am. Hitting him did wonders."

"You said you broke his nose?"

"Mmmhmm." She shaped her hand as if she was doing it again. "Just like Tuvok taught us last August. Worked great, but it was messy."

Chakotay curled his fingers around her clenched fist and brought it to his mouth for a kiss. "What else did you try?"

"Diplomacy first, of course." She stretched her legs and then relaxed them, trying to get comfortable.

"Of course. I wouldn't expect anything else."

"While we were walking, but once I realized that we'd gone as far as we were going, I struck."

"A 'now or never' situation."

“Mmmhmm.” Her voice husky with sleep, she told him, “He turned his back to me, and I kicked him so hard that his chin ricocheted off the wall.”

“Good one,” Chakotay patted her leg. “But he really turned his back on you?”

She murmured, “Don’t think he’s Starfleet.”

“I’d say not. That was a dumb mistake, but I’m glad he made it.”

“Then I took him down with a leg swipe. Buckled his knee.”

“You’ve used that move on me. Then what?”

Her eyes opened to look up at him. “That ticked him off and he came at me, so I popped him in the nose. I was so excited that it worked, that I didn’t see his fist coming when he punched me in the face.”

Chakotay caressed her cheek with the backs of his fingers. “Any residual pain?”

“Not much.”

“So how’d you knock him out?”

Kathryn smiled at his eagerness. “I kicked him in the gut, and while he was vomiting, I clocked him in the head with my elbow.”

With mock admonishment, Chakotay replied, “He could have choked.”

“Can’t say that I cared, but I made sure he was breathing before I left.”

“Very thoughtful of you.”

She yawned. “I figured it would be easier to get answers out of him if he were alive.”

“Good point.”

Settling in, she said, “I’m sleepy.”

“Then I’ll stop asking questions.” He kissed her and whispered, “I love you.”

“Love you, too.” After a moment of quiet, she asked, “Would you call Khurma before he breaks down our door to check on me?”

“Sure.”

“Tell him I got some fire back.”

“I will, and yes, you most certainly did.” He tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, silently watching her as she fell asleep.

Part 27 - “We Can Do This”

By Dawn

Summary: Honeymoon part 2

Rated: NC-17

The next morning, Kathryn looked up from where she was lying on the couch as Joe materialized in their cabin’s living room. Not feeling well, she was relieved to see him. “Hi, Joe.”

He immediately pulled out his tri-corder and started scanning her. “Admiral, you’re extremely pale. Are you nauseous?”

“Yes, but nothing’s come of it, yet.”

Chakotay had come into the room from the kitchen. “She’s been experiencing increased upper abdominal pain over the last three days. At first, we attributed it to tired muscles, but you mentioned something about her liver the other day.”

“Yes, it was starting to swell,” Joe said as he studied both the tri-corder data and her physical appearance. “What other symptoms are you feeling right now?”

“Mostly headache and my fingers are a little numb. Maybe my neck is out of alignment.”

Joe scanned her neck and nodded. “Yes, it is, but there’s a lot more going on here than that. You’ve lost almost a kilogram since Saturday.” He gave her a quick neck adjustment and went back to scanning her.

“Lost a kilogram?” Kathryn frowned. “I thought I’d gained some.”

“It’s edema. You’re swelling.”

Chakotay squatted down near Kathryn’s head. “She felt completely wiped out last night, and was listless when she woke up this morning. That’s been the norm for the past week, but she has been bouncing back quicker than she did today.”

Frowning, Joe said, “You should have contacted me, especially after your experience yesterday. Mr. Paris gave me a report.”

“I haven’t been awake that long, and we knew you’d be here soon.”

He shook his head in dismay. “Your body’s metabolism is severely out of balance, causing your heart’s neural interface to receive mixed messages. In response, it has increased your blood pressure to make sure your body is getting enough oxygen.”

Feeling light headed, Kathryn forced a deep, shaky breath. “Should I expect this often?”

“Yes and no. I’ll be able to treat the symptoms, but while you’re pregnant, we can’t address the underlying cause.”

“Which is what?”

“Your body just isn’t ready to carry a child,” he said sadly. “We need to discuss your options and give you time to think about them before deciding what to do.”

“About the pregnancy?”

Joe took a deep breath and nodded. “Yes, I have concerns about your liver and pancreas because the pregnancy is exacerbating the residual problems in your body. I fault myself for not examining you over the last month.”

Kathryn rubbed her forehead in frustration. “Joe, there is no decision to make regarding the baby.”

“Admiral, if you would just listen to reason. I don’t think you understand how dangerous this is for you, and how unlikely it is that the embryo will survive.”

Chakotay started to say something, but then stopped.

“What?” she asked.

He shook his head, and with barely contained annoyance at Joe, said, “I’m trying to let you handle this conversation.”

Taking his hand, she said, “This is your child, too.”

“Fine then.” Chakotay’s chin rose defiantly as he spoke. “There are risks no matter what we do at this point, but the fact remains that a life was created naturally and we intend to let nature take its course.”

“Let nature take its course? That’s your plan?” Joe looked away in frustration. “I hope you realize that both of you would be dead right now if I’d let nature ‘take its course’ over the years that I’ve been treating you.”

“Doctor, you’re crossing the line,” Chakotay warned.

“I’m sorry that you don’t care for my bedside manner, but the decision to continue with this pregnancy is a mistake.”

Kathryn glared at him. “This pregnancy may not have been planned, but it is *not* a mistake. Have I made myself clear?”

“Yes, Admiral, but you’re wrong. Not only has your uterus suffered damage that we can’t repair now that there’s an embryo inside, but you’ll grow continually weaker and be unable to defend yourself should you be attacked again.”

“I’m wrong?” she asked, blinking slowly. “If you have any chance, whatsoever, of swaying my opinion, you’re going to have to give me another option besides terminating this pregnancy. I won’t do it.”

“I didn’t say terminate. I said delay or relocate. The options are to find a surrogate or put the embryo in stasis until your body is healthy enough to receive it.”

Chakotay asked, “In either scenario, what are the baby’s chances of survival at this stage if we moved it?”

“What?” Kathryn looked at him in shock. “Chakotay?”

He picked up her hand and held it between both of his. “It’s a question that I would like him to answer.”

Joe blew out a deep, photonic breath. “Slim. Implantation has already occurred.”

Chakotay rubbed his thumb across the back of Kathryn’s hand. “That’s what we assumed. It’s too dangerous.”

“The embryo’s chances are negligible either way, but brain development hasn’t begun, yet. You could try again in a matter of months.”

Chakotay shook his head, refusing to break eye contact with Joe. “No. I don’t care what the stages of development are. This child is real to us, and we will do whatever we can to give it a chance at life.”

Joe looked back and forth at both of them, and upon seeing their resolve, his shoulders dropped in defeat. “The only way this child is going to survive is with constant vigilance to protect your health.”

“Fine,” Kathryn said. “Give us something to work with and we’ll take steps to make it happen.”

As she attacked this problem like she did any other, scientifically, a glimmer of hope crept up on Chakotay. “What’s involved in treating her?”

Joe hesitated for only a second and then nodded in resigned acceptance. “I’ll talk you through it as we do the exam, but I think we should move to your bedroom.”

“Would you like me to carry you?” Chakotay asked Kathryn.

She shook her head. “No, but you can help me up.”

Once she got settled on the bed, Joe said, “If you’ll excuse me for just a moment, I’m going to contact Starfleet Medical for some additional supplies.”

Chakotay acknowledged him with an absent nod, but his thoughts were elsewhere.

Kathryn asked, “What are you thinking about?”

“Hmm?” His eyes focused on her, but it took a moment until her question sank in. “Oh, just that I’d like to consider having a larger team of doctors treating you if it’s as dire as he’s predicting.”

In their unique gesture of unconditional support, she laced their fingers together and gave him a sympathetic smile. “It’s too soon to lose hope, and we still have Beverly to rely on.”

“You’re right.” He studied their hands for a moment, reminding himself that they’d overcome impossible obstacles before. “Besides, you excel when the deck is stacked against you.”

Joe came back and sat down on the far side of the bed. “As I mentioned earlier, your metabolism is out of balance. I’m going to have to adjust that weekly, possibly more often because your liver, pancreas, and kidneys are still suffering from the affects of your low bodyweight. They’d be fine under normal circumstances, but the added stress of the pregnancy...”

Kathryn interrupted, “I understand. We’ll do what we need to do.”

He turned on a device and directed it at the bottom of her chest. “Your liver is the crux of the problem. It has increased in size significantly since I scanned you on Saturday, and is therefore causing the abdominal pain.”

Chakotay asked, “Why is it enlarged?”

“Normally when there is a drop in blood sugar, the liver releases glucose into the blood stream. As your activity is increasing, I’m seeing a trend that the liver isn’t functioning as it should. Instead, it’s holding onto all the sugar you’ve been consuming, growing larger and larger.”

Chakotay rubbed her leg in long, soothing strokes. “So the hypoglycemia isn’t completely related to her lack of food absorption?”

“Not completely, no.” Joe opened his tri-corder again as he explained, “Your liver is partly responsible for releasing enzymes that absorb the essential minerals and vitamins from food.”

“Is this a new development?”

“Yes, because of the added pregnancy hormones. They’re doing exactly what they’re supposed to be doing, encouraging your body to store energy.”

Chakotay asked quizzically, “So the pregnancy is making the inflammation worse and the inflammation is jeopardizing the pregnancy?”

“That’s exactly right,” Joe said as he finished up with her liver and took out another device. “I’m going to check on you every few days until we get you stabilized again.”

“Not a bad idea,” Kathryn said as she stretched her neck and sighed. “I’m tired of feeling weak, and I’d like to do whatever it takes to nip any problems in the bud.”

Joe’s expression was more sympathetic than it had been all day. “What I think would cheer you up is to hear your baby’s heartbeat. Would you like to?”

Chakotay looked up quickly, surprised at Joe’s suggestion. “Is that possible at this stage?”

“Barely, the heart has formed in just the last couple of days.”

Kathryn tuned out the men’s conversation as she laid her hands on her belly, almost reverently, imagining the life inside her womb. She wanted to listen to the heartbeat, but was worried that it might make the baby all the more real to her. She felt a hand on her arm and gasped in surprise.

“Kathryn?” Chakotay looked at her with concern. “Are you okay?”

“Yes.” The short answer was all she offered in response.

His eyebrows furrowed as he tried to interpret her body language. “Do you want to hear the heartbeat?”

“Yes?”

He gave her a warm, comforting, smile and lifted her hands away from her abdomen. “He needs direct access.”

Joe placed an ultrasound scanner against her lower abdomen. When he found the right setting, he looked up and asked, “Ready?”

The sound of a rapid pulse filled the room. Kathryn knew her lips were trembling as she felt the emotional weight of the moment surround and envelop her. Reaching for her husband's hand, she squeezed it hard, determined to enjoy every aspect, to seize the moment, and to relish it for all it was worth.

Chakotay drew in a shaky breath. "It's amazing."

"Yes, it is." She wiped away a tear as it tumbled down her cheek.

"That's our baby," he pointed out.

"It really is."

He kissed the top of her head. "I love you, Kathryn."

"I love you, too." She looked up at him and said with her husky voice, "I think this has got to be the most captivating sound I've ever heard."

"And it will be until we hear his first cry."

She smiled. "'He' again?"

With a shrug, he winked at her.

Joe interrupted the moment by pressing a hypospray against Kathryn's neck. "You should be feeling better now. After your honeymoon, I'd like you to spend an afternoon with me at Starfleet Medical to run a few tests."

"All right," Kathryn replied anxiously.

"I'd also like to get some biopsies of your liver and pancreas," he said as he packed up his tools.

She flexed her fingers into fists and relaxed them again. "Anything else we should be aware of?"

"While you're pregnant, my goal is to keep you comfortable by forcing these organs to do what they're supposed to do. If that ceases to work, we will have to do a transplant or deliver the baby prematurely. Regardless, we need to plan for a premature birth due to the damaged tissues in your uterine wall. We'll have to watch the placenta carefully."

She closed her eyes. "Understood."

While Joe put the last of his things away, he addressed Chakotay, "Captain, you'll need to stay on top of her glucose levels. I'll leave you with a scanner, and I'd like you to keep a log of her diet, daily activities, and I want a blood glucose reading at four hour intervals. If the level drops below seventy, she's hypoglycemic and needs to eat."

“Thank you, Doctor.” As Chakotay listened to Joe’s instructions, he glanced at his wife several times.

Joe said, “I’ll return on Thursday to check on you. Call me if there’s any problem.” When he didn’t receive any response from her, he said to Chakotay, “Would you walk me to the door? I need to contact Lieutenant Jarvin about transporting back to Starfleet Medical.”

Once alone, Kathryn stewed in frustration for a moment before she decided that she was tired of being in bed. She went into the bathroom, shut the door firmly behind her, and hoped that Chakotay would interpret that she wanted privacy.

After she’d done what she needed to do in the bathroom, she remained secluded, using the time to study her reflection in the mirror. She definitely looked healthier than she had that morning, but what she didn’t feel was sick enough to require something as drastic as another transplant.

She lifted up her shirt and lowered her waistband to look at her belly in the mirror. It was far too early for a bump, but she couldn’t help but wonder if there were any noticeable changes. Turning to the side, she examined her body’s profile, but gave up when she saw nothing except the distinct outline of her hip bones and ribs. It looked awful to her, but she was glad that Chakotay found her beautiful regardless. She smiled, remembering how after all that time she’d spent dieting last fall, he’d told her that he’d fatten her up.

Now that she was calmer, she made a mental checklist of calls she wanted to make and research she wanted to do before she saw Joe again. Deciding that Chakotay would be intruding upon her solace soon if she didn’t get a move on, she took one last good look at her reflection and then opened the door.

The state of the bedroom took her by surprise. The bed was made, their clothes put away, quilt folded, and all the dirty dishes from breakfast that morning had been removed. Although she would have been peeved to know that he’d been hovering a few minutes ago, it now made her smile that he’d stayed nearby, keeping busy while waiting for her to emerge.

She walked through the door to the living room and stopped short when she saw that he’d moved one of the recliners close to the bedroom door and was sitting in it, his back to her. Walking around to the front of the chair, she caught his eyes and said, “Thanks for straightening up in there.”

“You’re welcome.” He closed his book and set it on the floor.

“You don’t have to stop reading.”

“I wasn’t absorbing much. My thoughts are elsewhere.”

She motioned towards his lap. “Is this seat taken?”

“Not, yet.” Holding open his arms, he asked, “Interested in testing out its comfort and compatibility?”

“Oh, no need for a test run,” she said as she slid into his arms. “I’m fully acquainted with its best features.”

“Do tell,” he encouraged as he reached up to turn off the floor lamp above their heads and tapped the chair’s controls to make it fully recline.

She snuggled against him as she described, “For starters, it’s warm, loving, and is definitely on the top of my list as one of the most comfortable laps in the entire galaxy.”

“Sounds like you’ve done a lot of comparisons.” He gathered her hair and laid it over her shoulder.

“No... no comparing. I’ve just dreamt about being held by you in many, many places throughout a couple quadrants.”

He wrapped his arms snugly around her and rested his cheek on the top of her head. They sat quietly for a long time until he asked, “Are you okay?”

Sighing quietly, she said, “Depends on who you ask.”

“I’m asking you.”

She took a long moment before answering. “I firmly believe that I’m not as sick as Joe thinks I am, and I’m really annoyed that I can’t convince him otherwise.”

“And what’s your plan for proving him wrong?”

“Haven’t quite figured that out, yet. However, I want to call Beverly this afternoon.”

“I was going to suggest that.”

Kathryn touched her stomach. “With all that has happened to me, I didn’t think we’d be able to have children.”

Chakotay rubbed her arm with a firm, comforting touch. “Yes, a lot has happened to you, but because of your strength and your will to survive, you’ve always pulled through – most of the time with flying colors. You’ve beaten death more times than I can count. You’ve made it home twice, three times, maybe four, when the odds were against you. Now, you have the beginnings of the family you’ve always dreamed of having. This is your time, and don’t let anyone take that away from you. We can do this, Kathryn.”

“It’s been said that you and I can do anything we set our minds to, hasn’t it?”

“So I’ve heard.” He gave her a firm squeeze. “We’ll get through this. The odds are against this little fella.” He paused, waiting for her reaction to calling the baby a boy again. “But we’re going to do everything we can to give him a fighting chance. No matter the outcome, we’ll still have each other, and we’ll need to remind ourselves that we gave the baby our best.”

“Even if our best isn’t enough?”

“Even then. We know that this is risky, but you and I... we’re risk-takers.”

“Yes, we are.” She nuzzled against his neck. “Would you hold me for a little while?”

“I’ll hold you forever.” He kissed the top of her head. “Or at least until we get hungry.”

“Just so long as you resume the holding at every possible opportunity.”

“My top priority.”

“Kathryn!” Beverly’s image came up on the comm terminal, smiling brightly. “I didn’t expect to hear from you so soon.”

“You just left orbit this morning, right?”

“Yesterday, according to our ship’s clock, but yes, we’re almost out of the Sol system. How are you feeling?”

Kathryn tilted her head and grimaced. “Not well, actually. If you have time, I need to talk.”

“I have nothing pressing at the moment.” Beverly set down a PADD and leaned closer to the terminal. “What’s bothering you?”

“I convinced Dr. Zimmerman that we’re keeping this baby where it’s at, but he is still predicting a premature birth and a significant risk to my health. I think I want assurance and a second opinion.”

She smiled with understanding. “Well, from what I saw on Saturday, you aren’t as healthy as we’d like to see while pregnant, but as long as you stay on top of things and take it easy, I think you’ll be able to carry the child almost to term. I wouldn’t be surprised if you went on bed rest for the latter part of the pregnancy.”

Kathryn nodded. “That’s what he said, but he’s also concerned that at some point, we’ll need to do a liver transplant.”

“What!?” Beverly’s mouth dropped open. “But I just scanned you four days ago.”

Kathryn nodded. "I know. At the time, did you detect any major problems?"

"A few, but nothing that would warrant a transplant. Although..." Beverly scratched her chin while she was thinking. "Your liver was enlarged because it wasn't releasing glucose. That was why you passed out."

"Dr. Zimmerman spent the morning here, balancing my metabolism. He said my pancreas wasn't producing the insulin it was supposed to. There was something about digestive enzymes, too, but I don't recall exactly what he said."

"Hmmm." Beverly typed something into another terminal. "Permission to access your medical file?"

"Yes, but will he know you accessed it?"

"He will, but there's nothing wrong with your seeking a second opinion, especially in this case. I don't suppose I have to tell you that doing any transplant during a pregnancy is dangerous."

"That's why I called. I need your advice, because I just don't feel like I'm sick enough to warrant such drastic measures."

"And you don't want to do anything to put the baby in jeopardy." She gave Kathryn a compassionate smile before turning her attention towards the medical record. "Dr. Zimmerman has already updated your file with results from today's visit. I can tell you, without any doubt, that nothing on your scans warrants emergency surgery. He treated the symptoms, and that can continue for awhile if need be, especially if you plan to remain within transporter range of Starfleet Medical for the next nine months." Beverly looked at her pointedly.

Kathryn held up her hands in surrender. "Absolutely. I have no plans to go off planet, and won't make any until this medical issue is resolved." She added, "Unless I'm with you on the Enterprise."

Beverly smiled as she studied the medical file further. "I'd like that a lot, but I'd rather you stay out of harm's way for the time being."

"Wouldn't everyone?" Kathryn rubbed her neck. "Don't know how confidential this is, but there was an attempted abduction yesterday."

"What!" Beverly's mouth dropped open again. "Of who? Not you, I hope."

She clicked her tongue. "Yes, of me. But you'll be happy to know that when I walked away from him, he was bleeding heavily and all I had was a bruised cheekbone."

"To have been a fly on the wall..." Beverly shook her head in astonishment. "I bet he had no clue you'd be so strong."

“Strength had nothing to do with it. I seized an opportunity and I knew where to hit.”

“Amazing,” Beverly said, beaming with pride. “May I tell Deanna?”

“Yes, but so that she doesn’t worry, also tell her that I’m not having a setback because of it. If anything, it was liberating to go through it and be able to defend myself.”

“I’m glad to hear it, and she will be, too.” Beverly held up a finger. “And yes, I will maintain confidentiality.”

Kathryn groaned. “I appreciate that. If it gets out that someone was even partially successful in reaching me, I’d be more at risk.”

“That’s the last thing you need.” Beverly nodded in understanding. “Let’s get back to your medical situation. Do you have a medical tri-corder there?”

“There’s an emergency med-kit in the kitchen. Let me get it.”

“Sure.”

When Kathryn went into the kitchen, Chakotay was there getting a glass of tea. He offered it to her. “Care for one?”

“Thank you, but I’ll wait until I’m finished talking with Beverly.”

“Oh, she’s still on?” He frowned when he saw what she was getting. “Med-kit?”

“I think she wants me to scan myself. I feel one hundred percent more hopeful, and she hasn’t even told me that Joe is wrong.”

“Good,” he said with a big smile as she walked back out.

Kathryn sat down and flipped open the case. “You want a scan of something?”

“Yes. Program this code...” Beverly told her what settings to use and waited while Kathryn ran the scan.

“I have no idea how to read this.”

Beverly smiled as she said, “Luckily, one of us has a medical degree. Upload the results, if you would.”

As Kathryn was doing that, Chakotay came in and asked, “Anything I can do to help?”

“I read that Dr. Zimmerman gave you a glucose scanner?” Beverly asked as she studied the new data.

“It’s right here on the desk.”

“Take a reading, please. I’d like to know her current level.”

“Sure.” Chakotay frowned when he saw the results. “Seventy-eight. I’ll get her a snack.”

“Hold on just a minute.” Beverly sent them a code. “Enter this into your replicator.”

Chakotay left and Kathryn asked, “What do you see?”

“The scan you just took was of your pancreas. Dr. Zimmerman didn’t try giving you glucagon this morning. It’s a very simple test that he must have dismissed based on other data, but I want to rule it out, nonetheless.”

“All right.” She looked up when Chakotay returned.

“I assume you want this loaded into a hypo?” he asked.

“Yes, and give her the full dose. It’s not much.”

Kathryn extended her neck to accept it. “Joe said something about glucagon, but I don’t remember what.”

“Your liver isn’t completing the process that begins with glucagons and ends with glucose entering your blood stream. Your file says nothing about whether your pancreas is initiating the process.”

“Oh.” Kathryn glanced at Chakotay and then back at the screen. “So all of this could stem from just the pancreas?”

“My diplomatic answer is that some of your liver problems could be traced back to the pancreas, but without being there, I can’t know for sure.”

All of a sudden, Kathryn felt her body sway with vertigo and she heard Beverly call out, “Catch her!”

“What’s wrong?” he asked in alarm as he kept her from falling out of the chair.

“Kathryn? Are you with us?” Beverly asked with undisguised worry.

“Mmmhmm.” She pressed her hand against her cheek. “Dizzy.”

“Chakotay, take another glucose reading.”

He struggled to operate the scanner and hold Kathryn at the same time, but he managed. “162. Is that high?”

“Not too high, but it isn’t what she’s used to. The change was too sudden.” Beverly tucked her hair behind her ear and concentrated on the data she was looking at. “I need another scan with the tri-corder. It’s already programmed to the right setting.”

While waiting for the reading, Beverly said, “You’re doing fine, Kathryn. Give your body a few minutes to adjust.”

Chakotay uploaded the data. “Thanks for doing this, Beverly.”

“I’m glad I can help. I just wish I was still there.”

Kathryn mumbled, “Duty calls.”

“Yes, unfortunately, it does.” Beverly said distractedly as she studied the information. “Okay, this tells me what I wanted to know. I’m going to write up a report and recommendation for Dr. Zimmerman, and so that he doesn’t get irked that I did this test without his permission, I’ll phrase it in a way not to wound his ego.”

“I appreciate that,” Kathryn said, more alert now. “I take it the glucagon worked?”

“Extremely well. I’m not going to counter his diagnosis, but I think it’s safe to offer you some advice. Unless something changes, you don’t need a liver transplant. Your uterus isn’t in great condition, and there is definitely something going on with your pancreas. Whether it can be treated without replacing it is unknown at this point. You’ll need to undergo further tests at Starfleet Medical.”

Chakotay breathed a sigh of relief. “It’s something, at least. Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome, but you will both need to be very pro-active about regulating her body’s metabolism and watching her blood pressure throughout the entire pregnancy.” She studied her patient intently. “Kathryn, how are you feeling now?”

“Better, but still shaky.”

“Your blood sugar is normal right now, but it’s high for you. Sit or lie down for a little while, maybe an hour, in a chair that will hold you up if you get dizzy again.”

“I will. Thank you.”

Beverly smiled at her. “I’m glad you called, Kathryn. I’ll let you know if I learn anything else, either from research or from Dr. Zimmerman.”

“I’ll do the same. Talk to you soon.”

“Take care of her, Chakotay.”

“Absolutely.” He turned of the comm terminal and helped Kathryn to the recliner. “You’re steadier on your feet than I expected.”

“I’ll follow her suggestion, but I’m not sure I need to sit here for an entire hour.” She sat down in the comfortable chair and sighed with contentment. “Although, now that I’m here, closing my eyes for a few minutes doesn’t sound all bad.”

He adjusted the controls so that she was lying back. “Okay if you sit in this all by yourself while I start making dinner?”

“It won’t be as cozy.”

Putting a blanket over her, he said, “This should help. Do you want that tea?”

“A small sip sounds good.”

“Coming right up.” He quickly fetched it from the kitchen.

“Thanks.” She took it from him and drank greedily. “I’m thirstier than I thought.”

“I’m anxious to see how Dr. Joe responds to Beverly’s recommendations.”

“I just hope his ego isn’t too damaged.”

Chakotay took the glass from her and set it on the side table. Leaning over to give her a soft kiss, he said, “I’ll wake you when dinner is ready.”

“Thanks.” Her lips felt warmed by his kiss, bringing a smile to her face as she happily drifted off to sleep.

A couple of days later, Kathryn stepped out of the shower feeling relaxed, refreshed, and surprisingly sexy. She’d used a special epilator that her sister had given her at the bachelorette party and removed every follicle of hair below her neck. The result left her feeling very sensitive to every sensation, especially the towel as she dried herself off. She’d told Chakotay that she wanted to fix their lunch and had a plan to give him a meal he’d never forget.

She opened the bathroom door to let some of the steam out and heard him call her name.

“Kathryn?”

Not ready to spoil the surprise, she quickly put on her robe before replying, “Yes?”

He leaned against the bathroom door jamb and watched while she applied her moisturizer. “Khurma called while you were in the shower.”

“Oh? Do I need to call him back?”

“You can if you’d like, but he wanted us to know that the security breach has been closed.”

She met his eyes in the reflection of the mirror and then turned to look at him directly. “Where was the breach?”

“Your assailant doesn’t know who hired him, but the M.O. is identical to the way Pratin was hired.”

“Do they suspect the Bolians?”

Chakotay shook his head. “He didn’t specify, but said that the Federation Council Public Affairs office knew specific details about your conference on Joria and our trip to the market, but they haven’t been in the loop on anything else in between. He’s certain the leak is there.”

“But they don’t know who?”

“No.”

“Then how, exactly, is that sealing the breach?”

“Your schedule is no longer available to anyone outside of a very select group at Starfleet.”

She frowned. “Why did the public affairs office need to know about our shopping trip?”

“They didn’t, but last fall, they were included in all plans pertaining to you. The trip to the main island wasn’t handled with the same diligence as our wedding, for example, so they fell back to the previous method for arranging your security. Starfleet has launched an investigation.”

Kathryn yanked the towel off her head and grabbed a comb. “That is... that is... completely unacceptable!”

“You’re going to pull your hair out if you’re not careful.”

She gave him the evil eye as she roughly pulled the comb through her hair. “I want a full review of security protocols, and I want it done yesterday!”

Stepping up behind her, he patiently took the comb out of her hand and proceeded to do the job for her. “Already taken care of.”

“What is?”

Chakotay gently worked the tangles out of her hair as he spoke. “As soon as I got off the comm with your C.O., I called Justin in and demanded a full review of protocols. He has already started.”

“I see,” she said, her shoulders relaxing. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He ran the comb through her hair from her forehead all the way through to the ends in the back. “Justin said that the director of Starfleet Security has just completed a review, but assured me that he’d double and triple check everything.”

She angled her neck to the side and closed her eyes, enjoying the feel of his touch on her hair. “That’s nice.”

“The review?”

“No, the comb. It feels good.”

He chuckled and moved the hair away from the back of her neck where he laid a kiss. “You feel good.”

Smiling, she pushed him away. “You keep doing that and lunch is going to be late.”

“I can live with that.”

“Maybe so, but I’m hungry.” She ushered him out of the bathroom. “Now, let me get ready so I can cook for you.”

“I don’t mind doing all the cooking, you know.”

“Yes, but you’ve been taking care of me and I want to do this.”

He shook his head in amusement as he left the bedroom. “All right. I’ll just catch up on some reading.”

Kathryn couldn’t help but smile at her reflection as she dried her hair.

About ten minutes later, Kathryn confidently walked to the kitchen wearing her new yellow apron. It was a full apron made of a sheer fabric and had a low neckline that showed off an ample amount of cleavage. As she pulled sandwich fixings out of the cooler, she counted to herself and had only made it to four when she heard Chakotay clear his throat.

“Need something?” she asked innocently.

He licked his lips as his eyes traveled down her body and back up again. “You, uh, got a new apron.”

“Like it?” she asked, twirling around to show it off. “It was a bachelorette party gift.”

“From who?”

“Lanna.”

“I see.” He tilted his head and asked, “Did, uh, she mention that it’s supposed to be worn with clothes?”

“Nope.” Kathryn set out four slices of bread on two plates. “Want to help?”

“I’m quite happy to just watch.”

She shrugged as she spread mustard on two of the slices. “Suit yourself, but you may find that I don’t make it to your liking.”

“I suspect that anything you make while wearing that will be to my liking.”

“An apron makes that much of a difference in my cooking abilities?” she asked as she placed a slice of cheese on each sandwich.

“Absolutely. I might just have to keep you in the kitchen.”

“Hmmm.” She gave him a wry look as she took out some turkey slices. “You think the infamous Admiral Janeway’s place is in the kitchen, cooking for you?”

“Infamous?” he said with a laugh. “I don’t know about that, but she’d definitely heat things up.”

“And burn them, most likely.”

Mischievously, he replied, “When you play with fire...”

Amused, she asked, “Do you want pickles? I didn’t see any in the cooler.”

He stared at her for just a moment and then asked, “Is that a serious question?”

Looking at him oddly, she replied, “Of course it is. Why wouldn’t it be?”

Moving from his spot by the door, he came up behind her and set his hands on the counter, one on each side of her. He placed a kiss behind her ear and whispered, “In all the years we’ve been eating together, have you ever seen me eat a pickle?”

A chill spread through her from his proximity and the delightful tickle of his breath on her neck. “You eat tuna salad and it has relish in it.”

“It’s disguised.” He looked over her shoulder at her front. “The only thing I want to relish is you.”

“Is that…” She was caught off-guard when she felt his erection pushing against her bottom.

“Is what?” he asked as he placed soft, wet kisses on her bare shoulder.

Her neck extended as he moved her hair to the side. “I forgot what I was going to say.”

Pressing her into the counter with his body, he said, “I’ve got a pickle you can eat.”

“I am getting a little hungry.”

He rolled up a slice of turkey and held it to her lips. “Or would you prefer some meat?”

Taking a bite, she moaned huskily, “I do enjoy good meat.”

“Any type of meat, in particular?” He asked as he continued to feed her while kissing the side of her neck.

“Mmmm,” she hummed as she chewed, fully enjoying the delicious sensations he was provoking in her body. “Sausage?”

He paused for only a second before smiling against her freshly washed skin. “Did you plan this when you woke up this morning?”

“Yesterday. I remembered this apron when I was fondling you while you were grilling.”

His hands went around her waist and then moved up, gently caressing the underside of her breasts. “And, why, exactly, did B’Elanna give you an apron?”

“We were, uhm…” She arched her chest into his hands as he cupped her breasts. “Mmm… reading an article back in the hospital about ways to make one’s love life more exciting.”

“Is our love life not exciting?” he asked as he gently pinched her nipples.

“It’s… quite nice, actually. And you’ve been getting more assertive lately. I really like that.”

“Assertive?”

“You know, aggressive. Insistent.”

“Yes,” he confirmed as he tweaked her nipples a little harder. “I’ve noticed how you respond favorably when I get demanding. Tell me something…”

She gasped as he teased her breasts, alternating between a firm pinch and a feathery touch. “What’s that?”

“If I’d been a little more authoritative with you on Voyager, sexually speaking of course…”

“Of course.”

“Would you have submitted to me?”

“Hmmm…” she said with a laugh. “One of the nice things about being Captain is that…”

“You can keep some things to yourself?”

“Something like that.” She turned her face to look at him. “I had fun imagining it, though.”

“And what did you imagine?”

“Specifically?”

He gathered up her hair and guided her head back to lay on his shoulder. Holding her jaw with one hand and securing her body against him with the other, he gave her a kiss that was anything but tentative. “Be explicit.”

“Well, I uh, imagined you making love to me in many ways.”

“I’m not talking about making love. I’m talking about me being sexually aggressive.”

She swallowed hard as he ran his hand down over her hip and grabbed firm handful of her ass. “I think my favorite one to imagine was you coming into my quarters before duty shift and ordering me to wear sexy underwear and some sort of device that would keep me humming all day, perhaps you would have let me come mid-afternoon in the ready room.”

With a deep rumble, he asked, “Device?”

“There are certain contraptions which can be replicated with enough credits.”

“What do these contraptions do?”

“Keep a woman on the edge. I imagined that under your control, you’d keep me on a precipice – kind of like what you did on our wedding night.”

“Did you ever wear sexy underwear while in uniform, my love?” he asked as his hand moved around to the front of her body.

“Yes.” When he cupped her pubis, her mouth dropped open and she gasped.

“What do we have here?” He turned her around and lifted up the apron to see her hairless body. “Someone’s been busy this morning.”

“Do you like it?”

“Yes, I believe I do. Not all the time, but this definitely has some advantages.”

Squirring under his touch, she said, “I feel very exposed.”

“And do you like feeling exposed?” He cleared away the countertop behind her.

“Only to you.”

Chakotay licked his lips and grinned. “Good answer.” He easily lifted her up and set her on the counter.

“We prepare food on this counter, you know.”

“Mmmhmm, and you look good enough to eat.” Pulling up a chair, he sat down and folded her knees so that her feet were on the counter, too.

She felt incredibly exposed and deliciously uncomfortable. “This isn’t exactly what I had planned.”

“Good.” He spread her nether lips so that her hard little clitoris protruded between the folds, her juices glistening as they poured out of her. “One thing you need to learn is that you’re not in control here.”

“Is that so?” Taking a deep breath, she tried to relax in preparation for what he was about to do.

“Mmmhmm. I’m the captain now. What I say goes.”

“All right,” she said, playing along.

He looked up at her beautiful and very dilated eyes. “When speaking to your captain, it’s appropriate to say, ‘yes, sir.’”

Rolling her eyes, she replied, “Yes, sir.”

“Very good. I won’t have to punish you.”

She snorted. “Punish me?”

Shrugging, he replied, “Seemed like the right thing to say.”

“How would you punish me?”

He leaned forward and drew one long lick up her folds to her clitoris, eliciting a deep, throaty moan out of her. “By not letting you come.”

“I’ll...” Breathing very shallow, she huskily replied, “I’ll remember that... sir.”

“See that you do,” he said with a wink, clearly enjoying their little game. Diving back in, he gave her another long lick and then tormented her tight bud until she was strung up so tight he could tell that she was about to erupt. He suddenly pulled back and licked his lips.

“You stopped!” she exclaimed, panting so heavily that her chest was heaving.

“Lunch is far from over, my love.”

She started to put her legs down and he stopped her.

“I didn’t give you permission to do that.”

“Sorry... sir.” She fought a smile and put her feet back where they were.

He went to the cooler and pulled out a short cucumber.

As he washed it off with soap and water, she asked, “What are you doing?”

“I’m going to have to do some research on these devices you mentioned. Meanwhile, since we’ve got a food theme going here with this apron, I’m going to use a substitute.”

Her eyes widened as he sat down in front of her again with the cucumber. “You’re not...”

“Oh, but I am.” Winking at her, he said, “Try to relax.”

Kathryn just about jumped off the counter when the cold vegetable touched her clitoris. “Oh!”

“Hold still, my love.”

“That’s cold!” She spread her legs to give him access and then let out an uncontrollable moan as he rubbed the slightly rough end of the cucumber against her sensitive bud. “Oh my.”

“Don’t come, my love.”

“Then you’d better stop doing that!”

He grinned wickedly as he continued. “Didn’t I tell you that you don’t give the orders around here?”

Throwing her head back against the cupboard, she concentrated hard on not coming, but the torture was exquisitely pleasurable. She took deep breaths and thought of reading dull reports, cleaning out plasma manifolds, and a certain long, thick penis. “Damn!”

Chuckling, he took pity on her and stopped tormenting her clit. He scooted back and said, “On your feet, Kathryn.”

Carefully, she slid off the counter and stood in front of him.

“Spread your feet apart and bend your knees.”

She did as he ordered, curious if he was going to do what she suspected. When he pressed the cucumber into her opening, she gasped and said, “I don’t think that’s going to fit.”

“It may be bigger around than me, but I’m sure you can take it.” He pushed until it was all the way in.

Rotating her hips, she clenched and released her inner muscles until they grew accustomed to it. “I guess you’re right.”

“Now tell me, do any of these devices you mentioned have double penetration?”

Kathryn’s eyes bugged out. “You are NOT sticking a vegetable up my ass.”

He laughed loudly. “All right, I’ll concede on that one. Especially considering what I have planned for you.”

“Which is what?”

“Hold it in.” Taking her hand, he led her to the kitchen chair. “I want you to sit down and eat your lunch.”

“With this thing inside me?” Very carefully, she sat down and realized that she had to keep her posture nearly perfect for it to be comfortable.

“Yes, with that inside you.” He brought her plate over and put it in front of her. “Eat quickly.”

“Yes, sir,” she replied sarcastically. Kathryn ate as she watched him pour their drinks and sit down across from her.

“Comfortable?” he asked.

“No,” she stated very emphatically.

“What does it feel like?”

“Like I'm juicing all over this chair.”

“So erotic, then?”

She moved her hips a little and moaned. “God, yes. I feel very full.”

Licking his lips between bites, he grinned. “Is that the kind of device you would've worn? A pretend penis?”

Shaking her head, she said, “No, the ones I looked at stimulate several spots via remote.”

“Did anyone at your bachelorette party give you one?”

“Nope.”

“Do you own one?”

“I thought about it, but I was afraid Voyager would run into trouble and I'd end up in sickbay having to explain it to the Doctor.”

He laughed and then watched her for while they ate, thoroughly enjoying her obvious discomfort. “Still aroused?”

“Not as much, but yes.”

His eyes narrowed for a second and then went to retrieve something out of the cooler.

“What are you doing now?”

“Chocolate syrup.” He came up behind her and untied the neck straps of her apron.

“Oh, my.” She took a deep breath to prepare herself, but when the cold syrup hit her left nipple, she still yelped. “Damn! That's cold!”

“So it seems,” he said with a chuckle as he dripped it on the right one, too. “How's that feel?”

“Like my entire focus is on my nipples.” Looking down at her chocolaty chest, she said, “I'm going to need another shower.”

“I'll clean it off in a little bit.”

Furrowing her eyebrows she said, “I guess I should say, ‘Thanks?’”

He sat down again and watched her eat, her attention continually drawn down to her sticky breasts. She also kept clenching her vaginal muscles and was squirming in her chair.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

After taking her last bite, she said, “Wet and sticky.”

“That’s all?”

She cleared her throat and added, “Continually wet.”

“Oh, good. I hope you’re enjoying this.”

“It’s... different.” Taking a drink, she added, “And very erotic.”

“All right, then.” He stood up and took their plates. “Wipe off the table, please.”

She did as he asked and then put her hands on her hips. “Now what, sir?”

“Your tone is getting a little saucy, my love,” he said as he came back over and pulled her against his body.

“And your shirt is getting a little sticky.”

“It’ll wash,” he said as he dove in for a punishing kiss.

At first, she braced her hands on his shoulders for balance, but then relaxed as his pressure softened into a forcefully erotic play of tongues; tangling, stroking, and thrusting in her mouth. He held her by the hair with one hand and with the other, squeezed her bottom, pressing her against his erection.

She squirmed under his hands, the stimulation of his hard member against her aching nub was nearly too much while she was full of the penetrating vegetable. It felt almost like two men were involved, but she was sure that unless one was holographic, this would be the only way she’d ever want to share her man.

He grabbed hold of her and lifted her up onto the table. Once she was in place, his kisses dropped from her mouth, nibbling down her neck until he encountered the chocolate. He spent a lot of time licking her nipple clean, driving her crazy with arousal.

His fingers found the cucumber and guided it out of her. “Very good, Kathryn.”

“Hmmm?” she asked as if in a trance as she watched him throw the vegetable in the trash.

“For keeping it inside you. I was attempting to patronize you.”

“Oh,” she replied absently as she reached for him and pulled his mouth down for another kiss.

He chuckled against her lips and untied her apron, tossing it to the floor. Kissing down her body again, he went to the other breast and took his time licking the sweetness off of her.

Kathryn thrust her chest out, fully enjoying the pleasure of his warm, wet tongue licking the syrup off her breasts.

Once they were mostly clean, he helped her lie back and brought her bottom forward to the edge of the table. Guiding her hands to grip the edge, he instructed, “Don’t let go.”

“Why not?”

As he started undoing his pants, he paused to say, “Because I told you not to.”

“Am I going to fall?”

“No,” he replied with amusement.

“I just thought there might be a reason why I have to hold it.”

“There is – to see if you’ll continue to be submissive.”

“Oh,” she said as she grabbed the edge like she was instructed. “If you insist.”

As he kicked off his pants, he said, “I think the dominance game might lose some of its power when you question me.”

“Sorry... sir,” she quickly added. “I’ll try to be better at pretending in the future.”

He spread her legs and blew air across her very wet labia, causing her to shudder. “See that you do.”

“Mmmmm,” she moaned as he rubbed the tip of his penis through her wet folds. “I was wondering if I needed to work on arousing you.”

“You weren’t the only one aroused while you ate, my love. I’ve been stiff since the moment you walked through the house wearing that damned apron.”

Laughing, she replied, “It has served its purpose, then.”

“Are you ready for this?”

“Do I get a choice?” she mused.

His eyes narrowed playfully as he thrust hard and fast into her. When she moaned in response, he asked, “Better than a cucumber?”

“Oh, yeah. For one, you’re warm. And two, you move.”

Lifting her legs, he maneuvered her until he had her at the exact angle that turned her body to gelatin. When she went nearly limp and curled into the sensation, he knew he had her just where he wanted her. Keeping her on the plateau of ecstasy was his only goal for the next fifteen minutes. He varied the speed of his thrusts, alternated the pressure, and toyed with the depth as he guided her arousal into a state of bliss.

He could tell that she was flying high when she stopped communicating and spoke to him only through the reactions of her body. It was when she was nearly shaking with arousal that he set one leg down so he could lightly stroke her clitoris. She responded immediately, her body becoming both stiff and totally pliable at the same time. Watching her writhe in ecstasy was an incredible sight to behold. He kept it going as long as he could until he couldn’t take anymore and ejaculated in powerful, hot bursts. Seconds later, he lightly pinched her clitoris and sent her over the edge in a powerful and body-shaking orgasm.

Once her body stopped twitching, he whispered, “Kathryn?”

“Mmmmm.”

She was limp as he set her legs down. “Are you okay?”

“Mmmmmmm...azing.”

He grinned as he carefully picked her up, one arm under her legs and one around her back. “I’ve got you,” he whispered as she curled up against him.

“Mmm... sleepy.”

Kissing her head, he replied, “Let’s get you to bed.”

“Sticky.”

He walked through the house and laid her on the bed, maneuvering her and the bed covers until she was lying on top of the fitted sheet. “Don’t move. I’ll be right back.”

Kathryn wanted to turn and curl up into the pillow, but she was very aware of the stickiness on her body. She opened her eyes when she felt the bed dip with Chakotay’s weight.

“May I?” he asked as he showed her the washcloth.

She reached up to touch it and when she felt that it was warm, nodded. “Mmmhmm.”

Chuckling as he cleaned her chest, he asked, “Did you think it would be cold?”

“Wouldn’t put it past you,” she said with a smile. “You’re mean when you’re bossy.”

“You seemed to enjoy it quite a bit,” he mused as he folded the washcloth and used it to wipe between her legs. Smiling as it made her twitch, he studied her hairless pubis. “Is this more stimulating bare?”

“Mmmhmmm. Very sensitive and every time our bodies came together, I felt more pleasure.”

“Then you’ll have to do this every now again.” He patted her right on the mons, making her twitch again.

Groaning, she said, “Stop that.”

He covered her up and placed a kiss on her lips. “I think you like it.”

“Incorrigible.”

Running his fingers through her hair, he whispered, “And you wouldn’t have me any other way.”

“Hmmm,” she hummed with a smile as she curled up under the covers. “Love you.”

Smiling at his beautiful wife, he softly said, “I love you, too, Kathryn.”

A couple days later, Kathryn looked up from her book to see Chakotay come out onto the deck looking rushed. “You okay?” she asked.

“Bernie just called. The Broken Circle is on the Fed News. Want to watch?”

“You bet I do.” She snapped her book closed and let him help her stand. As soon as they got inside, Chakotay clicked on the vid screen.

They caught a reporter in mid-sentence. “...anniversary of Federation President Min Zife’s inauguration. The rally you see behind me is a call for President Zife to step down from office. This is the first such demonstration of its kind, and while we expect no response from the President’s office, it is clear that these protestors want to send him a message.”

Kathryn rubbed her mouth as she sat down to listen to the interviews.

The reporter held her microphone for two young men. One of them said, “It’s time to stop Zife, and get him out of office. He’s not a leader.”

A young woman said, “He’s dragging the Federation into a hole. His actions are inappropriate, and his inactions are appalling. People are suffering and he’s getting wealthier every day.”

The camera cut back to the reporter. “Hundreds of people are gathered here today to give voice to their concerns about the state of the United Federation of Planets.”

An older gentleman waved his arms vehemently as he said, “I am absolutely outraged that we have these criminals running this Federation. I deeply believe in what it stands for, and I am pained that it’s in shambles. Admiral Janeway is the best thing that’s happened in the last decade, and even she has suffered at the hands of Zife’s immoral conduct. If this moment, I learned that Zife and his cronies somehow disappeared, I would celebrate.”

Chakotay glanced at his wife and asked, “Have you heard any mention in the press that he was responsible for your abduction?”

“No,” she said as she shook her head. “And I’ve been watching a lot of it in the last two months.”

A middle-aged woman was speaking on the Fednews. “What people need to understand is that these people in this administration need to go, now. I hope to make a difference by coming here today and saying, ‘Don’t give up, have hope for our future.’”

Kathryn blew out a breath. “I don’t know if I want Zife to see this, or not. He’s going to be hot.”

As the reporter reminded the viewers what was going on, Chakotay commented, “It’s not possible to stir people up for change without shedding light on some issues. It might get uncomfortable for awhile, but this is what we need to have happen.”

“I wish they’d leave my name out of it, though.”

He shook his head. “That won’t happen, because you’re their hero.”

Sighing heavily, she merely nodded and continued to watch.

Chakotay looked out the window of their cabin at the deep blue sea. They’d been in the idyllic paradise for well over a week, and he was starting to get cabin fever, not that he’d admit that to his new wife. They knew that fatigue was common during the first trimester, but nonetheless, he was itching to go outside and do something, maybe sailing within their protected zone, or further out if their naval security could move with them.

The last week had been quiet, much to his relief after the excitement of the first few days. Joe and Beverly were now working together on Kathryn’s health issues, and had concluded that the pancreas was the crux of the problem. Whether she needed a pancreatic transplant was still up

for debate, but at least now they knew what the problem was and how to address it with medication and diet.

He glanced up at the clock and saw that it was after nine, much later than Kathryn usually slept. Deciding to check on her, he picked up the blood glucose scanner and headed towards the bedroom. As he neared, he heard her retching and moved fast. Pushing the door open, he saw that she was sitting on the floor, throwing up into a trash can, barely able to keep her head up.

“Kathryn!” he gasped as he kneeled down next to her, helping to support her head.

“Awful,” she managed to say.

“It’s okay. Let it out.”

Her body heaved again and she gagged, bringing up a small amount of bile.

“You’re okay, love.” He pulled her hair back, tucking the damp strands behind her ear. Trying to reassure her, he said, “I’m so sorry, Kathryn. It’ll be over soon.”

After a couple more heaves, Chakotay touched his commbadge. “Security, we need Dr. Zimmerman.”

Mark Yosa replied, “I’m on it. Is it an emergency?”

“No, she’s just not feeling well.”

Seconds later, Joe appeared in a transporter beam and walked quickly to the bed. “What’s the problem?”

“Looks like morning sickness has hit. Can we do anything to help her?”

“I wouldn’t call morning sickness an emergency medical situation, but since I’ve probably got the two of you paranoid about her help, I understand why you called.” Joe flipped open his tricorder. “Has she eaten anything this morning?”

“No, I don’t believe so.”

Kathryn croaked, “Don’t talk about food.”

“Sorry,” Joe said as he popped open his medkit and pulled out a hypo. “Admiral, I’m giving you an anti-nausea medication. It should help.”

She sat back against the side of the bed and wiped her mouth with a tissue. “Ugh.”

Chakotay patted her arm and said, “Let me grab a washcloth,” as he went into the bathroom.

“Mmhhh.” She said to Joe, “I fell out of bed. Did I hurt anything?”

“Are you in any pain?”

“No, just worried about baby.”

He scanned her with his tri-corder again and patiently said, “Everything looks fine. Your blood sugar is low, but I think you’re handling it well considering you haven’t eaten yet.”

Chakotay returned with a towel, a wet washcloth, and a glass of water. As he tried to lay the damp cloth on her forehead, she took it from him and wiped her mouth. “Water?”

“Right here,” he said as he handed the glass to her. While she drank, he moved the waste basket away and set the towel on her lap.

Joe said, “Once your stomach is calm, we should be able to get some food in you.”

“Thanks, Joe.” Chakotay relaxed some and took a deep breath. “I wasn’t sure what to do.”

“I’ll go prepare some food for her. Be right back.”

After he left the room, Kathryn handed him the water glass, her hand shaking. “Sorry.”

“Shhhhh...,” he said soothingly. “There’s nothing to be sorry for.” He took her washcloth and blotted her nightgown where it had gotten dirty. “We need some of that classic Janeway determination right now.”

“Misplaced it.”

Smiling, he replied, “Well, I’m sure it’s around here somewhere. Maybe we left it outside on the beach yesterday.”

“Mmhm,” she hummed.

Joe came back in with a plate. “Has your stomach settled, Admiral?”

“No,” she grimaced.

“You should try to eat. It’ll make you feel better.” Joe handed the plate to Chakotay.

He picked up a piece of bread and held it up. “It’s peanut butter toast, Kathryn.”

“With a little honey mixed in,” Joe added.

Although she didn’t want it, she took it and forced it down. “Dry.”

Chakotay picked her water up again and helped her hold it since she was still shaky. “I promise that as soon as you feel up to it, you can stuff as much food in my mouth as you want.”

She snorted. “Somehow, I doubt that.”

Chakotay set the glass down and asked, “Ready for this gourmet breakfast?”

A smile crooked her lips. “Mmmhmm.”

He handed her the toast. “It’s not every day that you get this kind of breakfast service.”

Joe did a full medical scan while she ate, humming as he used various medical devices on her.

By the time half the toast was gone, her heart rate had slowed and she was more herself. She glanced at the plate Chakotay was holding and asked, “Is that a banana?”

“Want it?” Chakotay held it up.

“Yes, please.” When he had the peel back, she reached for it with a very shaky hand.

She took a bite and asked, “Remember last week when we were walking on the beach and I said I felt really, really good?”

“I do.”

“Strike that.”

“Your sense of humor proves otherwise.”

She rolled her eyes. “Humor has nothing to do with feeling rotten.”

After Kathryn got the rest of the banana eaten, Joe said, “All right, you’re not in any danger, but we need to decide how best to keep you that way.”

“Impeachment,” she suggested.

“Not that kind of danger,” Joe said with an amused expression. “I suggest that if you wake in the middle of the night, you eat something high in protein. And, I want you to add an anti-nausea medication for the next month.”

Kathryn nodded. “All right.”

As he packed up his med-kit, he continued giving her instructions. “I want you to try eating continuously today to stay ahead of this morning sickness. Proteins and vegetables would be best. Try to avoid un-natural sugar and spread out your fruit intake.”

She was clearly glum, but nodded in agreement. “Thanks, Joe.”

“You’re welcome. Chakotay, later today, I’d like to give you a crash course in monitoring her vitals. I think it would be a good idea.”

“I’d like that.”

“Good, I’ll contact you in a few hours.” He tapped his commbadge and transported away.

Chakotay leaned towards her and kissed her temple. “I love you.”

“I do not like being sick.”

“Who does?”

“I know, but I feel bad that you have to take care of me like this. You didn’t sign up to be my nurse when you asked me to marry you.”

He took her free hand in his and threaded their fingers together. “I’m going to be completely honest with you, so you don’t have to worry about how I’m feeling.”

“Please do. I want to know.”

“Like you, I’m angry that you were hurt so severely, frustrated that a miracle cure isn’t available, and sad that you feel so rotten.” He let go of her hand to use his thumb to wipe a smudge of peanut butter off her cheek. “But I also know what kind of inner strength you have, and that you can handle just about anything that life dishes out. I promised you a long time ago that I’d do whatever was in my power to ease your burden. Taking care of you while you’re sick definitely qualifies.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, but I want to be clear. I don’t see this as a duty of marriage, nor is it the result of me keeping a promise. I *want* to be the one who helps you, as long as I’m able to do it competently.”

“I can’t imagine that you like holding my head while I vomit.”

He folded their fingers together again and shook his head. “No, but I want to be the one you reach for without any reservations or any feelings of embarrassment whatsoever.”

She cupped his cheek with the palm of her hand. “You are.”

“I’m glad,” he said with a smile, and then changed the subject. “And since we’re on the subject of total honesty, I have to tell you that I’m getting cabin fever. Can we sit outside on the deck while you pig out all day?”

Laughing, she nodded. “Absolutely, but first, I want a bath. I feel disgusting.”

He got to his feet and helped her stand up. “One bath, coming up. While you’re in there, I’ll change the bedding and start preparing your buffet. We’ll spend the day having a continuous party out on the deck. This will give me an excuse to experiment with marinades so we can take full advantage of that fantastic grill.”

“Sounds good. We should get you a grill when we get home, a fancy one with all the bells and whistles.”

Later that afternoon, Kathryn went out to the deck with a fresh tray of hors d’oeuvres, smiling as she saw Chakotay fully stretched out in his chair with his eyes closed. After setting the tray down quietly on the table, she threaded her fingers through his dark hair.

“Mmmmm.” He sighed under her touch. “That feels good.”

“Then, I’ll just keep doing it.” She used her other hand to search for any knots in his neck. “Any tension?”

“No, my brain is just tired from thinking hard. Joe was thorough.”

Amused, she leaned down and kissed him. “Have a bite to eat and then you can tell me what you absorbed.”

He cracked an eye open. “A quiz already, professor? I just got the syllabus.”

“Befitting of the term ‘crash course.’” She scooted the tray closer to them and made herself comfortable on his lap. “Are you brave enough to try these stuffed mushrooms?”

“Depends. What ingredients did you use?” He smiled as he wrapped his arms around her.

“Mushrooms, for one.” She held one to his lips and said, “You did say I could stuff food in your mouth, did you not?”

“Good thing I’ve been decorated for bravery.” He opened his mouth and took a bite.

Watching him chew, she asked, “How is it?”

“Not bad. A little dry.”

She ate the other half and shrugged. “Too bad I can’t have wine to wash it down.”

“Milk?” he suggested.

“No thanks.” She made a sour face and picked up another to feed to him. “Tell me something.”

“Sure,” he said around a mouthful.

Examining another mushroom, she asked, “When I speak to a replicator and say, ‘Stuffed mushroom appetizer,’ why is the resulting creation significantly different than when you say the same thing?”

“Because I don’t say the same thing.” He bit back a smile before adding, “I say, ‘please.’”

She stuffed the entire piece in his mouth without giving him a chance to take just a bite. “Cheeky,” she said as she pinched his full cheek.

He winked at her, and when he swallowed, said, “It’s because I wouldn’t replicate stuffed mushrooms in their final form. I’d replicate the ingredients, or I’d find some appetizer that the replicator is less likely to mess up.”

“All right, since you’re so smart, tell me what you learned today.” She sipped at her iced tea while looking at him expectantly.

“You were sitting right here. Weren’t you listening?”

“Of course I was, but what I heard and what you heard were probably on two different planes of universal understanding.”

“Give me some credit, love.” He tickled her ribs.

“I will! Stop!” She was struggling not to spill her tea. “This is going to be awfully cold going down your shirt if you don’t stop.”

“All right, shhhh.” Taking her drink, he set it down on the table and picked up the PADD that Joe had left. He flipped it on and looked at it with her. “My list. The first thing I’m to do in the morning, whether or not you’re awake, is to take readings of your glucose level, pulse rate, blood gas, blood pressure, respiratory rate, hydration, and weight. Then I take junior’s vitals as well.”

“Junior?”

“Shall we stop my exam and decide on a name?”

“Junior it is.” She rolled her eyes.

“The tri-corder is set to notify me if any of the readings are out of range. If they are, I have another set of instructions for what actions to take. I upload all of the data and send it to Joe so he can analyze it to his photonic heart’s content.”

In jest, she scowled. “Hey there, watch it with those comments about unnatural hearts.”

He patted her hip. “The organ may be unnatural, but the heart of your soul is anything but.”

“If you keep saying things that sickly sweet, I won’t have a problem with an errant pancreas.”

Tapping the PADD against his cheek, he nodded. “Now there’s a thought.”

She thwacked him gently with the back of her hand. “Continue, please.”

Winking, he said, “Then I take the same readings every two hours until I get the hang of it. After that, I take the readings every four hours unless there’s a problem or after you exert yourself.”

“I have no doubt that you can follow a schedule, my dear former XO, but tell me what blood gas is.”

“Arterial blood gas level tells me the levels of oxygen, carbon dioxide, hemoglobins, electrolytes, and a bunch of other stuff that is probably important to someone, miss smarty pants.”

“That’s ‘Mrs.’ Smarty Pants to you.” She raised her nose in the air as she reached for a piece of cheese to snack on.

Grabbing her around the waist, he adjusted her position on his lap so that her back was to him. He picked up the tri-corder and said, “Now, relax against me so I can practice.”

She did as he asked, but said, “I’m not sure you’ll get an accurate reading with me so close to you.”

“Well, I do have to learn how to differentiate between your levels and junior’s.”

“So, why not add a third to the mix?” She shrugged and nibbled on her cheese. “See what happens.”

“Your confidence in me is profound, my dear wife.”

“You, yes. Your skills with a medical tri-corder, not so much.” She watched the read-out with him as he scanned her.

“Hmmm.” Something caught his eye, so he keyed in a setting change and took another scan.

“What do you see?”

“Your pulse is elevated.”

“Sure you’re not looking at the baby’s? The heart rate is a lot faster.”

He pointed to the display. “Yes, almost twice as fast, but I'm not looking at that one, I'm looking at the one on the bottom. That's you.”

“Well, look at where I'm sitting. Your proximity leaves me breathless, dear husband.”

“Only when you're aroused, love, and you aren't at the moment.”

She did a double take. “You can measure arousal with that?”

“I have ways of measuring that without any need for technology.”

She squirmed against his lap, and said, “You're right. Your measuring ‘stick’ doesn't seem to be detecting anything.”

He laughed. “I didn't say anything about my arousal. I was talking about yours.”

“Then what are your so-called methods of measurement?”

“That's easy. When you're aroused, your face gets pinker, your lips part, your breathing slows and gets shallower, you smell different, and your body softens.”

She turned her head to look at him questioningly. “I smell different?”

“Yes, you do, and not just down there.” He pointed between her legs. “Your whole body has a spicier scent, a little like maple syrup.”

Trying not to laugh out right, she snorted. “Then how come you don't crave pancakes?”

“Who says I don't?” He winked at her and then nodded to the tri-corder. “Humor me and try to slow down your heart rate. See if it changes.”

“Just slow it down?” She raised an eyebrow. “It might be artificial, but it doesn't have a dial.”

He set the tri-corder down and took her napkin and cheese away from her.

“You're not supposed to be taking away my food.”

“Shhhhh.” Putting his hands on her waist, he adjusted her body a little. “Let your head rest on my shoulder and relax against me.”

“If I do that, I am going to get aroused, you know.”

“Fine with me as long as you relax.” He gathered her hair at the base of her neck and said, “Lay back, love.”

She did as he asked and he let her hair drop over the front of her shoulder. “I don’t know if I can relax in this position.”

“Do you need my legs higher or lower?”

“Higher, so I don’t have to brace my feet to keep from sliding off.”

He adjusted his position by squaring off his knees and sinking down into the chair. “How’s that?”

“Better.” She situated her feet so they were flat on the deck and folded her hands to rest on her middle.

“Now breathe slowly in and out. Count to four with each inhalation.”

Bad memories assaulted her and she cringed. “Last time I tried that technique to slow my heart, I ended up with a new one.”

“Last time you tried to relax?”

“Just before it failed the first time in Mom’s sunroom, I was trying to slow it down by breathing like this.”

“Oh.” He laid his hands over her arms and kissed her temple. “I’m sorry, love.”

“ ‘s all right. If you’ll breathe slowly, I’ll try to match you without counting.”

“I wish we had some music.”

“Who needs music when we have the waves lapping at the shore?” She turned her face towards him so that her forehead was tucked against his neck. “Let’s stop talking if we’re going to do this.”

He held her hands, whispering, “I love you.”

The ardor behind his declaration made her feel warm all over. It wasn’t sexual arousal, but a stirring from deep within that made her flush with the intensity of his love. Fully aware of his body’s rhythms, she imagined herself connected to him, his heart beating for both of them, his lungs directing the tempo for hers, and the protection of his embrace enough to keep her safe for as long as she stayed there.

After several minutes, he picked up the tri-corder and scanned her again.

“Any better?” she asked.

“A little,” he whispered.

“Enough?”

He kissed her temple. “Your blood pressure, oxygen level, and glucose are fine, so I don’t think the problem is medical. Are you stressed?”

“Now, what could I possibly have to be stressed about?”

“I’m not about to create a list. I don’t think that would be very calming.”

She remained quiet for a long moment until she found something to say. “I’m just a little anxious about everything.”

Setting the tri-corder down, he enveloped her in his arms, his lips lingering on her cheek. “Everything?”

“Seems like an apt term.”

“Okay then, are you worried about the weather?”

She chuckled. “No.”

“Worried about having enough to eat today?”

“Hardly.”

“Hmmm...” With humor in his voice, he said, “Then you must be worried about whether or not you married the right guy.”

“Not a chance,” she said with a smile.

“I’m going out on a limb here, so correct me if I’m wrong, but are you perhaps worried about the future of the federation and staying safe while trying to manage a high-risk pregnancy that may incapacitate you and cause our child to be born prematurely?”

Her tone remained light, but she felt her stomach muscles clench with anxiety. “You say that like you’re reading off nothing more than a grocery list.”

Kissing her cheek softly, he whispered, “I understand why you’re anxious, but you have set enough in motion that the Federation will be fine. You’re safe, and you told me yourself that we have two starships and a whole boatload of people who are ready to do your bidding just as soon as you say the word go.”

“I know,” she said quietly.

“And how can you be worried about your health when you’ve got my expert medical care?” He rubbed his lips lightly against her hair, just above her ear. “Hmmm?”

Leaning into his kiss, she said, “Just promise me that if it gets too overwhelming, ask for help. I love having you take care of me, but I’d be fine with Patty around, too.”

“I promise.” He squeezed her tightly. “However, as we’ve proven just now, some of these health issues are aggravated by stress, and I believe that having this time alone to come to terms with everything that’s happened is one of the healthiest things we can do for you.”

Her voice was a hoarse whisper, “It’s as if you know me or something.”

Lifting his hand, he cupped her cheek and tenderly held her face close to his. “Deep breaths, love. There’s nothing to be done today except to enjoy each other, so clear your mind and concentrate on feeling content and at peace.”

She breathed slowly with him, focusing on the feel of his body and relaxing her tense muscles. This quiet moment was one to be treasured, and she tried to memorize everything about it – the sounds of the sea, the birds, the breeze rustling in the trees; the feel of his hands, his warm breath on her forehead, his solid strength beneath her; the salty smell of the sea, the earthy scent of the foliage around them, the spicy scent of her husband. It was perfect.

Part 28 - “Taking off the Gloves”

By Dawn

Summary: Back to Work

Rated PG

After being back in Oregon for a week and getting used to the Pacific Time zone again, Kathryn was ready to go back to work. Harry had sent her a brief status report on each planet they’d been in contact with, and now she was itching to find some resolution to the less-troubled situations so that her team could concentrate their efforts where tensions were still running high.

Kathryn walked into their kitchen and found Chakotay leaning against the counter and reading a PADD while finishing his coffee. “Hi there, handsome.”

“Handsome?”

After depositing her empty cup in the sink, she insinuated herself between her husband and his reading material. “Yes, very handsome,” she said as she wrapped her arms around his waist.

“Hope you don’t say that to all the men you see today.”

“Only the ones in my kitchen drinking *my* coffee.” She raised her eyebrows.

“Your coffee?”

She looked into his cup and then back at him. “Yes, my coffee. You don’t usually drink it in the morning.”

“I do when I’ve got a hundred eager commanders-in-training waiting to hang onto my every word.”

“I’d be eager to listen to you, too, if I didn’t already have first-hand knowledge of all tactical strategies developed while in the delta quadrant.”

“You never know. You might learn something.”

“Think so, huh?” She rose up onto her toes and kissed him.

“Speaking of Delta Quadrant tactics, you never did tell me what you meant when you said the Borg don’t exist.”

Frowning, she said, “When did I say that?”

“Right before your heart transplant. You said you’d explain later.”

“Ah.” She tried to extricate herself from his arms, but he wouldn’t let her go.

“Kathryn?”

Sighing in defeat, she said, “I slipped. No one is supposed to know.”

“No one?”

“Not for a few hundred years.”

“Time travel.” He gave her a pointed look.

“Yes, the Borg were the primary reason why the Federation was near-extinguished by the 29th century in the other timeline.”

“And you believe that threat is gone?”

“Yes,” she said simply, and then glared at him. “Don’t you dare lighten up on anything you’re going to teach those commanders about Borg tactics.”

“Aye, Admiral.” His mouth twitched with a smile.

She let the tension in her shoulders drop and looked at him with barely concealed joy. “I was thrilled when they told me. Shocked, but thrilled. When my older self took out Unimatrix Zero, that explosion traveled through all the transwarp conduits and destroyed the other hubs as well. The rest of the Borg will eventually be overcome.”

“Wow,” he said with complete surprise. “I figured that you were referring to them being destroyed at some point in the future, but I didn’t think... Wow. You destroyed the Borg, Kathryn.”

She shrugged casually. “Took two of me, a virus, and countless battles.”

“Yeah, but...” He was speechless.

“I know. Too bad I can’t tell anyone, although I’m not sure I could handle any more fame.”

“Why can’t you tell anyone? It would allay a lot of fears.”

“They said we’d need the tactics developed for the Borg to destroy another enemy.”

He nodded. “I can see that.”

“So, there you have it. You know all of my secrets.”

“Are you sure?”

Laughing, she said, “Well, if there are any more, I’ve forgotten about them at the moment.”

He was beaming as he looked at her. “I’m very proud of you, Kathryn.”

“Because of the Borg?”

“Because of everything.” Taking a step back, he held her arms out to admire her in uniform. “You look great. Are you ready to face the Federation again?”

“Yes,” she said with determination. “It’s time to take out the garbage and set things right.”

“And you’re just the woman to do it, too.”

“Trying to stroke my ego?”

“Trying to give you confidence, but I doubt that the woman who defeated the Borg needs it. If she can do that, she can do anything.”

She shook her head in amusement. “That was pure luck.”

“No, if not for your determination and your unwillingness to take the easy way out, we wouldn’t have found a way to have our cake and eat it, too.”

“Funny... that’s the same thing that I told my older self back on Voyager.”

“Sounds like something you’d say.” He turned and picked up a satchel for her. “Your snacks, lunch, medication, medical tri-corder, and glucose level scanner.”

“You know, I have a perfectly good replicator in my office.”

“You had one on Voyager, too, but that didn’t mean you remembered to use it for anything other than coffee. I’m hoping with this sitting on your desk, you’ll remember to keep eating.”

“Thank you.” She wanted to be irritated with him, but couldn’t since he was doing his best to look out for her.

“I also included instructions for Justin. You’ll see that he gets them?”

“You already explained everything to him.”

“I wasn’t sure he understood it all, so I wrote it down.” He wrapped his arms around her again and kissed her softly.

“Thank you,” she said with a happy smile.

“If I kiss you like I want to, neither of us would make it to work on time.”

“Mmmmmmm. Something to look forward to.”

He let her go and then lightly smacked her rear-end. “Remember that if you find any handsome men drinking coffee today.”

“As if I need a reminder.”

When she and Justin materialized in the reception area of Kathryn’s office suite, she was immediately greeted with applause. “What’s all this?” she asked as she looked around at all the people gathered.

“A welcome back party, Katie.” Owen stepped forward and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

Harry said, “An event worthy of a celebration.”

Kathryn smiled at her staff and friends. “Well, thank you.” She accepted a plate of fresh fruit and miniature muffins from Sue. “I’m delighted that you feel that way, because I’m loaded for bear regarding our docket.”

“That’s not all bad,” Bernie pointed out. “We’re more than ready to start attacking our to-do list.”

“Glad to hear it,” she said as she picked up a bite of pineapple to eat. “This is wonderful, everyone. I really appreciate it.”

Khurma came over and gave her a careful hug. “You look great, Kathryn. I trust that you enjoyed your time in Greece?”

“Most of it,” she said so quietly that he was the only one who heard her.

“Greece?” Bernie asked. “Is that where you were off to?”

“Yes, on our own little island in the Mediterranean.”

Justin nodded in appreciation. “Definitely one of the most beautiful places I’ve ever seen.”

Judy asked, “Did you get to see any of the sites?”

“A couple,” she replied carefully. “But for the most part, we just enjoyed the quiet beauty of the area around our cabin.”

“In my opinion,” Mark noted, “the view from her beachfront was more picturesque than anything I saw while we were out there.”

She playfully elbowed his arm. “You’re just saying that because we didn’t get to see as much as we would’ve liked.”

“No, it’s true. There wasn’t one piece of civilization that could be seen from your vantage point. That’s hard to find.”

“You’ve got a good point.”

Harry asked, “Is Chakotay back at work today, too?”

“Yes,” she said after taking a sip of the deliciously rich coffee that Bernie had poured for her. “Although he’s been at work for a couple days already to prepare for the seminar he’s teaching at command school this week.”

“What was that topic again?” Khurma asked. “It had a catchy title.”

“Tactics: By the Book, On the Fly, and By the Seat of Your Pants.”

“That’s right.” He was clearly amused. “I hear it’s standing room only.”

Justin said, “I wouldn’t doubt it.”

The gathered group chatted for a little while longer before Khurma pulled her aside and said, “Kathryn, I’m very glad that you’re back with us, but promise me that you won’t overdo it. I’ll make sure that you have any resources that you need, so don’t hesitate to let me know how I can help.”

“I will. Thank you.” She set down her almost empty plate on Sue’s desk. “Do you have some time to talk today?”

“For you, I’ll make time. Is there something specific I can help you with?”

“I’m sure there will be a lot you can help with, but what I’d like to discuss is of a personal nature.”

He tilted his head. “Now you’ve got me curious. Would you like to talk right now?”

“Sure.” She faced the group and said loudly, “Thank you, everyone, for this lovely gathering. Please continue to enjoy the wonderful food, but I need to excuse myself.”

They responded with a chorus of ‘welcome backs.’

Once inside her office, she looked around and said, “Feels strange to be back here.”

“It’s been about eight months. That’s a long time to be away.”

“Too long,” she said with a sigh and then directed him towards her sitting area. “Join me, please?”

“Of course.”

Once seated, she asked, “Do you have anything for my agenda?”

“Not yet. I thought it would be best to let you ease back into work at your own pace. I’ve forwarded a list of requests for your time to Lieutenant Brooks, but don’t feel that you have to follow up on all of them. I noted which ones I thought took priority and what they want to discuss.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that.”

After a pause, he asked, “What do you want to talk about, Kathryn?”

“I’m trying to decide how best to tell you.”

An immediate look of understanding crossed his features. “You’re thinking about retiring, aren’t you?”

“No, but I might need a leave of absence.” She held up a hand. “Strike that. I *will* need a leave of absence, although I don’t know for how long.”

“Anything you need,” he said with sincerity. “When would you like to begin?”

“I don’t know, and I probably won’t in advance.” She took a deep breath, and quickly said, “I’m expecting a baby.”

He started to nod, but then, as what she said sunk in, he leaned a little closer. “You’re pregnant?”

“Yes. Almost three months.”

His eyes widened. “Oh, Kathryn. If you hadn’t gotten yourself out of that situation in Greece…” He shook his head, unable to finish.

“I wasn’t about to let that happen, and I can tell you that if Pratin and his men had given me an opening like this one did, that incident wouldn’t have happened either.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Maternal instinct is powerful.”

“This had nothing to do with instinct, Admiral. I was furious.” She sat back and crossed her legs, resting her hands neatly in her lap. “What did we learn from the assailant?”

“You got my message that he was hired in much the same way as Pratin – by way of an unknown source.”

She nodded. “And that the security breach is through the Federation Public Affairs office. Where are we on that?”

“These things need to be handled delicately, Kathryn.”

Narrowing her eyes, she said, “I need a better explanation than that.”

He raised his eyebrows. “I like that you’re getting more comfortable with me, but perhaps we could watch the insubordination? Just a little?”

Taking a deep breath, she apologized. “Sorry, sir. It just feels like you’re purposely keeping me in the dark about my own security, and I don’t like it.”

“That’s certainly not my intention. As you know, we’re fully aware that there are high-ranking officials within the Federation government who are not making the most ethical decisions.”

She nodded, wanting to comment, but held her tongue.

“And we’re not completely certain who the ring leader is.”

“It’s the President,” she pointed out.

“No, it’s not.”

Kathryn rolled her eyes and then held up a hand and said, “Again, my apologies. I should respect your opinions.”

He smiled with understanding. “I know why you believe that President Zife is behind the corruption, but he is merely the public face, or the puppet, rather. I’ve gotten to know him pretty well over the last three years, and I just don’t believe that he has the intelligence and savvy to pull any of this off.”

Clicking her tongue, she nodded. “All right, I can concede that point.”

“I will tell you that there are persons on the council under investigation, but we must go about this quietly or we won’t get the proof we need to go to trial.”

“And you don’t think I can be trusted with that information?”

“I trust you, Kathryn. I really do, but I also need you to trust me. There are a lot of moving parts that I need to control as much as I possibly can.”

She opened her mouth to comment, but then closed it again. “I see.”

“I need you to continue what you’ve been doing – talking to the council, getting people to trust you, and trying to get to the bottom of the issues. We have learned which council members we can trust because they talk to you. I have no idea how you do it, but your honest search for the truth engenders their loyalty.”

“It’s only because I listen to them. I’ve never given anyone a reason to doubt my integrity.”

“No, you haven’t. What I’m worried about is that if I tell you which council members we suspect are corrupt, you may lose your objectivity. And, Kathryn, we *really* need that from you.”

“I’m a very good actress, Admiral, and I’d rather not be kept in the dark.”

“But you know that in some situations, the people involved have to be unaware of the details in order to react properly.”

Kathryn strummed her fingers on her arm. "I understand where you're coming from, but you must realize that my personal safety is at stake here."

"I'm painfully aware of that, especially now that you're pregnant."

She studied his face for a moment before asking, "You're sure the breach has been sealed?"

Nodding, he replied, "We didn't know until this second kidnapping attempt that the breach was in the public affairs office. They haven't had knowledge of any of your movements since Joria, and now that we know they can't be trusted, we've cut them out of the loop. Every person in that office is now under surveillance and we're hoping to find our mole by giving them false information about you."

"All right, I'm going to continue trusting you, but I need to make you aware of certain limitations regarding what I can do."

"What sort of limitations?"

"There are some health issues for both me and the baby."

"Health risks?" he asked with alarm. "Should you be coming back to work?"

She was taken aback by his question and it took her a moment to respond. "I'm still capable of performing my duties, and would like the opportunity to do so."

"Kathryn, you misunderstand. I have no doubt that you're capable of doing anything you set your mind to, and while we really need you right now, my first and foremost concern is your health. The strains of this position might not be the best thing considering the circumstances."

"The strains as they were last fall would be too much, you're right about that. But now that I've made almost all of my initial contacts, the next step is to convince the Federation Council to make the changes that are needed. I can do that without over-taxing myself physically, as long as we can compromise on when and where the meetings will take place."

"Yes, I agree." He leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. "Tell me about these health risks. How will that affect what you can or can't do?"

"I need to stay on Earth, within transporter range of Starfleet Medical. If off-world travel is absolutely necessary, I'd either like to take Dr. Zimmerman on the Pioneer, or I'd like to request the Enterprise as my flag-ship. Dr. Crusher is one of my primary physicians and will know how to treat me in an emergency."

"That, I can do. I'm leery of sending you off-planet, but if I had to at this point, Jean-Luc would be the first person I would trust to protect you."

Her mouth twitched in response.

“What?”

“I’m fighting the urge to tell you that you’re over-protecting me.”

“Can you blame me?”

She shook her head. “I suppose not. However, at some point, perhaps after I return from maternity leave, I hope you’ll no longer feel the need.”

He held up a hand in surrender. “Point taken, but I need you to bear with me for now, especially in the light of this newest development. I know I’m just your commanding officer, but I’m feeling a little fatherly.”

“A common affliction amongst the admiralty.”

“For you, yes.”

“Chakotay and I didn’t plan this, but I wouldn’t change it for the world.”

“I understand. When Samia told me that she was expecting our first son, it really threw me for a loop. I thought we were too young, that my career was too dangerous for me to be a parent, and I didn’t want to raise children on a starship. But it doesn’t take long for a baby to wheedle its way into your heart, does it?”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“Congratulations, Kathryn.”

“Thank you.” She smiled sincerely. “I don’t want my pregnancy to become public knowledge and take attention away from the issues.”

“Agreed. Who knows?”

“Doctors Zimmerman and Crusher, Counselor Troi, Commanders Paris and Torres, Lieutenant Jarvin, and Lieutenant Yosa.”

“Are you going to tell the rest of your staff?”

“Yes, and Bernie because his wife will know.” Kathryn raised her chin. “My primary health concerns are a failing pancreas and my inability to absorb calories due to an injury I received during my captivity. We have it under control with constant monitoring and medication to regulate my metabolism, but I can’t go without food for more than two hours or I’ll begin to go into hypoglycemic shock.”

“Is that why you fainted before the wedding?”

“That’s correct.” She picked up her coffee and took a drink. “So, if you’re agreeable, I’m going to let Bernie and his wife travel on my behalf.”

“I’d prefer that, too. We can also continue to use Jean-Luc if the Enterprise is available.”

“In that case I’d like Harry Kim to tag along, depending on the situation.”

“A good idea, although you know Jean-Luc wants to steal him, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do,” she said with a smile. “But I’ve convinced him to wait until the end of the summer before he makes Harry an offer.”

“I have high hopes that most of this will be wrapped up by then.” He patted his legs. “Why don’t we make that our goal? In a couple days, when you get settled in, we’ll brainstorm a strategy for how to do that.”

“I’d like that.” She stood with him and they walked towards her office door. “Thank you, Admiral. I appreciate your support.”

“You’re welcome, and I really do understand.” He gave her another hug. “I’m thrilled for you. Worried, but thrilled.”

“Join the club.”

A few hours later, Kathryn and Justin walked into her conference room where the rest of the staff had already gathered. She smiled at everyone as she took her seat at the head of the table. “It’s good to be back.”

Sue said, “The feeling is mutual, Admiral.”

“Thank you.” She looked around the table and asked, “Captain and Commander Young, I assume you’ve met Lieutenant Mark Yosa?”

“Yes, ma’am, we have,” Judy replied. “We were with him when he was initiated.”

“Initiated?” Kathryn asked with a quirked eyebrow.

Mark replied, “We all went out to lunch together last week and the press noticed.”

“Ah,” Kathryn nodded. “Yes, I saw that on the newscast. My kudos to those of you who spoke to the reporters. You evaded questions like the pros.”

“We learned from the best.” Harry said with a wide grin on his face.

She rolled her eyes and went on to say, “Speaking of the press, I want to inform you about a personal situation that I do not want any reporters to know about. I don’t want anyone that I haven’t directly told to learn of it, either.”

Mark and Justin exchanged a look, but didn’t give anything away. Everyone else sat up a little straighter in their seats.

She forced a serious expression. “Sometime this fall, we’ll be adding one more to our ranks.”

“To do what?” Harry asked.

Kathryn scratched her eyebrow in an effort not to laugh. “Eating, sleeping, and calling the shots.”

Justin burst out laughing and then quickly covered it up while Mark struggled not to join him.

“Gentlemen,” Kathryn scolded her security officers playfully. She looked at the other four people at the table and sighed at their very confused expressions. “Let me be a little clearer about what I will be expecting this individual to contribute to the team. In addition to the aforementioned duties, he or she will also be messing diapers, cooing, and hopefully, not spitting up too much.”

Harry’s eyes bugged out. “You’re having... expecting...?”

“Yes, by mid-November, but he or she will likely arrive sooner.”

“Sooner?” Harry asked with open concern.

“Not to worry, Harry.” She patted his arm and then barreled on into her agenda for the meeting. “What this means is that by the end of the summer, I want as much of our current agenda wrapped up as possible. Captain Young, I won’t be traveling unless absolutely necessary, but I will continue to send the Pioneer and the Enterprise to meet with planetary governments as needed.”

“As you wish, Admiral,” Bernie said quietly.

“Judy, if you don’t mind, I’d like you to represent our staff on the Pioneer when necessary.”

She shared a glance with her husband and then nodded with carefully contained enthusiasm. “I’d be happy to.”

“I thought you might.” She turned to her left. “Harry, if the Enterprise’s flight plan allows, I’d like you to be on board to represent this office.”

“Yes, ma’am.” His sparkling eyes gave away his excitement about the prospect of being on the fleet’s flagship again.

“Sue, while they’re gone, I’m going to need you to fill in for them. If it looks like they’ll be gone often, we’ll see about bringing in someone else to help so that you can attend meetings with me.”

“May I suggest Anderson, Admiral?” Sue asked.

Harry jumped in, “That’s a great idea!”

Kathryn smiled at their excitement, but held up a hand to forestall them. “Let’s see what our needs are, first.”

Judy said, “Admiral, if even one of us is away, it would help to have another person.”

Noticing that her staff members were acting a little too eager, she pointed out, “All three of you are looking at me like you want me to grant you permission to build a new shuttle.”

Sue said, “We could really use the help. Two more people might be even better.”

Kathryn took a moment to look carefully at the people around the table. Her three support staff members were visibly anxious about wanting more help. Bernie was sitting back, not making eye contact with anyone, and although her security team members were looking at her, they weren’t relaxed. She sat back in her chair and asked, “What’s going on?”

When no one answered immediately, she said, “I know I’ve been gone for a few months, but my communication style hasn’t changed. If there’s a problem and you all know about it, let’s get it out on the table.”

Harry said, “Admiral, we’ve been working the last couple of weeks to streamline our efforts and get all of our ducks in a row, so to speak.”

“That’s good. I always appreciate orderly ducks,” she said in hopes to lighten the tension she was feeling in the room.

Harry cracked a smile and rubbed his hands together to relax. “I wanted to speak with you about this privately, but you’re right, everyone knows. We want help so that we can keep your workload as light as possible. Since you’ve suggested the possibility of two of us traveling, I believe it’s essential that we find more people.”

She frowned and asked, “That’s it?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Harry replied.

Looking at Sue and Judy, Kathryn asked them, “That’s what you were nervous about discussing with me? That we need more people so that I don’t get overwhelmed?”

Sue spoke quietly, “We didn’t want it to seem like we doubted your ability to juggle fifteen balls at once.”

Kathryn looked around the table and, as she made eye contact with each person, they nodded their agreement. She scratched the back of her neck and sighed. “Would I be correct in assuming that, while I’m trying to get back to business as usual as if those three weeks never happened, you are all worried that I’ll never be the same again?”

Harry looked almost stricken. “Our apologies, ma’am. It wasn’t our intention to bring back unpleasant memories.”

She nodded thoughtfully. “I realize that the incident affected everyone deeply, and I appreciate the support that all of you have given me, but it’s time to put that behind us. As my staff, I expect you to be straightforward with me. There is no reason to handle me with kid-gloves.”

A chorus of “Yes, ma’ams,” was given in response.

“That being said, yes, I would appreciate any suggestions for keeping my workload light. Just don’t be afraid to tell me what they are.” She focused her attention on Sue. “Please collect everyone’s recommendations for additional positions, what their jobs would entail, and suggestions for who could best fill those needs. If you’re sure that Lydia Anderson would be an asset to our team, then set up an appointment for me to speak with her.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” Sue brightened up.

As Kathryn looked at her PADD to see what was on her agenda next, she said, “I have no doubt that my juggling abilities will continue to decline as this baby grows.” When she heard all of them titter in response, she moved on. “All right, the first thing on our agenda is to prioritize the issues. Harry and Judy, I want recommendations for what should be taken to the Federation Council.”

“That’s done. Would you like us to talk about it now?”

Pleasantly surprised, she replied, “Go ahead.”

Harry nodded towards Judy. “It was your idea.”

As Judy prepared to speak, Kathryn was overjoyed with this turn of events. Harry was giving another the chance to shine, and that showed real command maturity. In addition, Judy having come up with an idea that had Harry’s blessing was a first. She felt a significant amount of motherly pride in both of them.

“Admiral, I believe that since our public message has been focused on the underdog, we should take care of them, first.”

Offering encouragement, Kathryn said, “I like the way you think. How do you propose we do that?”

“The problems we’re trying to fix started when the council made the inequitable agreements. If they’ll acknowledge that mistakes were made, they’d be taking the first step towards reconciliation.”

“That sounds simple, but...”

“But it’s not, of course,” Judy interjected. “It’s nearly impossible to get politicians to admit that they were wrong.”

Harry added, “And if they were coerced or blackmailed into those decisions in the first place, they may be afraid to come clean.”

“We’re speaking as if any coercion is in the past, but I think we should proceed with the assumption that it’s in the present as well.” Kathryn sat back and thought about it for a moment, taking a glance around the table as she did so. Justin and Mark were very interested, but didn’t appear to have anything to add. Sue was busy taking notes on her PADD, and Bernie was trying to catch Judy’s eye. When he did, he nodded with encouragement.

Kathryn asked, “Judy, did you find something in those reports?”

Judy glanced nervously at Sue’s PADD and then placed her hand over the screen to stop her from recording. “Can we officially acknowledge that?”

“Good thinking,” Kathryn agreed. “Just in case, let’s not record this part of the conversation.”

Sue put down her PADD.

Judy reported, “I cross referenced Norvellan’s logs with the Federation Council’s logs, and identified a pattern.”

“Go on,” Kathryn said as she sat forward again.

“Just before the mineral agreements were signed, some key votes were changed to support the President’s plan for post-war restoration. There were several options on the docket with some pretty heated discussions over which was the best way to proceed.” Judy glanced at Bernie before addressing Kathryn again. “Admiral, if you’re feeling up to it, my idea is that you could use your special ability to get information we need to pinpoint the source of the coercion.”

She dipped her chin as she asked, “Special ability?”

Harry said, “The savoir-faire you’ve used in every diplomatic conversation I’ve observed. You make people feel like you’re the best friend they never had and then they tell you everything.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” Kathryn used her ring finger to scratch an itch at her hairline as she considered it, but quickly put her hand down because she realized it was shaking. “Sounds like we’ve got some wining and dining to do.”

Bernie added, “Under the guise that you’re trying to sway votes. There’s absolutely nothing wrong with being a lobbyist and doing some aggressive campaigning.”

“All right, let’s do it,” she said definitively, but blinked slowly at the sudden light-headedness she was feeling. “Now, we need to figure out what I want the council to vote on and why votes would need to be swayed.”

Harry said, “You want the Council to forgive all the unfulfilled contracts so that the worlds involved can be in good standing with the Federation again.”

Sue said, “Sounds like peace, love, and happiness to me.”

“The underdogs will love it,” Judy said as they watched Justin stand and fetch something out of a satchel.

Kathryn shook her head. “No, they’ll think it’s a band-aid, but if any of them ask me about it, I can ask them to give me time to flush out the problem. They’ll understand.”

Justin came back over, scanned her, and handed her a sandwich. “Sure they will, because you’re their best friend.”

That night, Kathryn was curled up on the end of the large couch in the great room, her eyes feeling heavy as she read through Judy’s analysis of the Norvellan data. She was waiting for Chakotay to get home, but having trouble staying awake. Periodically, the words blurred and her head would drop seconds before she jerked it back up again to try to focus.

Chakotay knelt down in front of her and took the PADD. “Bedtime, love.”

She was surprised at first because she hadn’t heard him come in. However, she merely raised her eyebrows in response. “Practicing for parenthood?”

“Sure,” he said with a smirk as he tugged on her hand until she was standing and in his arms. “You’re falling asleep, and I don’t think I have the energy to carry you upstairs tonight.”

Hugging him close, she asked, “All those commanders-in-training wear you out?”

“Yes. I’ve never seen a more energetic class in my life. What about you? How was the first day back?”

“Tiring, but it felt good. I missed you.”

He pulled back to look at her. “How did it work to have Justin monitoring you?”

“He did fine. He was unobtrusive and timely, although he’s not as good of a cook as you are.”

As they walked toward the stairs, Chakotay asked, “Did he eat dinner with you?”

“He and Sue both. It was nice.”

“Good.” He helped her negotiate the steps because she was so tired. “I would’ve preferred to be here rather than eating with the tactical teaching staff, but they wanted to talk before the evening session.”

“So, what was today? ‘By the book’ or ‘On the fly?’” she asked as she went into the bedroom to begin undressing.

“Both,” he chuckled as he took her clothes to put them away. Holding up her slacks, he added, “Even ‘By the seat of your pants.’ We looked at each incident and categorized it.”

“I’ll be right back,” she said with a yawn as she went into the bathroom.

“Okay. Do you need a snack before bed?”

She shook her head. “No, just want to sleep.” A few minutes later when she returned, Chakotay was waiting with a glass of water and hypos of her medications. With a sigh, she asked, “You sure we don’t need a nurse to deal with all of this?”

“I’m sure.” Patting the bed next to him, he added, “Perhaps I missed my calling in the medical field. I find this interesting.”

“Hmmm.” She rolled her eyes and smiled. “I’m glad you do.”

After administering the hypos, he helped her get settled into bed and said, “Your name came up several times today.”

“I assumed it would. After all, you were discussing delta quadrant tactics. The captain might’ve had something to do with them.”

“Well, yes, but I mean besides that. After the morning break, they asked if I would give them an update on your condition before we got started again. They were very courteous.”

“Didn’t feel like reporters harassing you, I hope.”

“Not at all,” he said as he sat up next to her on the bed so that his back was resting against the headboard.

She snuggled against his leg, sighing as he ran his fingers through her hair. “What did they want to know?”

“How you were feeling, when you’d be returning to work. They were pleasantly surprised to hear you were back at it today.”

“Mmmhmm. We’re doing a press conference on Friday, once I figure out what to say.”

“Any new developments?”

“My staff wants me to wine and dine the Federation Council, get them to divulge their secrets.”

“Not a bad idea. Harry’s?”

She shook her head. “Judy’s. I was impressed.”

“Did you tell them our news?”

“Mmmhmm. Khurma, too. They’re all worried, of course, but they took it well. Also, I had a long conversation with Khurma about the security breach – I’m not the least bit happy.”

“Why? What did he say?”

“He wouldn’t tell me who he suspects because he wants me to play a part – said that I have to be unaware of the details in order to react properly. That really ticks me off.”

Chakotay smothered a grin. “Do I need to remind you that you did the same thing to me?”

She looked up at him. “When?”

“With the Paris situation, when you were trying to flesh out our spy.”

“Oh.” With a sigh, she said, “Well, your life wasn’t at risk. Mine is.”

“No, but my reputation with the crew was on the line. Not to mention the way it made me feel for you not to trust me.”

“I trusted you,” she said defensively.

“And Khurma trusts you – I’m sure of it.”

She chewed on this information for a moment and then admitted, “Well, I was an idiot.” When he didn’t reply, she looked up at him and saw that he was biting his tongue. “Out with it.”

“I want to disagree with you. I really do.”

Pinching his stomach, she changed the subject. “So anyway, I told Harry and Judy they’d be traveling for me, and the whole group wants to add more staff members.”

He whispered, “Thank you.”

“Welcome.” She smoothed away the spot where she’d inflicted pain. “I’m not ready to go out there again.”

Catching her hand, he kissed her fingers. “I know, but when you are, we’ll have to help each other through it.”

“I love you.”

Winking at her, he said, “I love you, too.”

She smiled and snuggled down against his leg again. “So, what else did you tell everyone about me today?”

“Well, they wanted to know if you and I ever fought.”

With a huge grin, she said, “Nah.”

“I told them that we never disagreed over tactics unless a plan put the other’s life in danger.”

“Mostly true.”

“We might have disagreed over other tactics, but we didn’t fight about them. Also, they wanted to know if it helped to have a crew that was so tight-knit. I said that while it sounds great, the truth is that it makes tactical decisions that much more difficult because of how much we cared for one another.”

“Never fun to have to risk the life of a friend.”

He was quiet for a moment while he continued to caress her hair. Full of emotion, he finally said, “Something I never want to face again.”

With a loving pat on his leg, she whispered, “Be sure to tell them that I said they’ll find the strength even when they think there’s none left. I told your sister that last May when she was in labor, and I’m living proof of that truth.”

“I will.”

Kathryn didn’t want to pull her concentration away from her analysis when Sue buzzed her com signal. “Yes, Lieutenant?”

“Admiral Khurma is here to see you.”

“Send him in.” She took a long swig of her coffee and closed the document she was working on.

As he walked in, he asked, “Kathryn, how are you feeling this afternoon?”

Fighting against giving him a teasingly sarcastic retort, she said, “Fine. How are you feeling?”

“Hmm?” he asked, puzzled, and then realized what she was implying. Chuckling, he replied, “Oh, I’m fine, but then again, I’m not the one who just had a heart transplant. I’m afraid that you’re going to have to resign yourself to indulging my desire to fuss over you.”

Shaking her head in amusement, she replied, “So it seems, but I could’ve come up to your office.”

He waved away her concern. “Got me away from my charming receptionist for a few minutes. I came to see how you were doing and if you need anything.”

Clicking her tongue, she commented, “All right, I’ll indulge you. Let me pull up my list.”

“You needed to make a list?”

“I’ve got so many ideas running around in my head that I thought it would behoove me to organize them.” She tapped her computer screen. “First off, my staff has decided that we need four additional people. Do you have any qualms with that?”

“Of course not. What would they be doing and do you have people in mind?”

“While Commanders Kim and Young are traveling, I’d like Lieutenant Brooks to attend meetings with me, so I need to replace her and Judy. The other two are for research. We want to track the voting records of every council member to see if we can find any patterns that would help us identify problem areas.”

“I have no problems with additional staff, but it’s not up to us to clean up the Federation Council.”

“No, of course not, but with a little diplomatic pressure in the right places, perhaps we can affect some changes in legislation that will appease the vacillating Federation members.”

“What changes, exactly?”

Kathryn picked up a PADD to read her list. “Pardoning undeliverable war-time agreements, instituting a system within the council to safeguard members against coercion tactics, creating a council oversight committee to monitor any agreements forged by the Office of the President, allocating additional resources for scientific and medical research, offering Federation members

assistance with space exploration, instituting practices that safeguard the independence of our members, establish egalitarian policies to ensure that all members receive equal opportunity to bid on government contracts, and re-opening the sponsorship program for students to attend Starfleet Academy.”

Scratching his neck, he asked, “Is that all?”

“Those are the common issues that have been brought to my attention. Harry and Judy are working on an outline for each, and I’ll bring them to you for prioritizing.”

“All right,” he said with a deep sigh. “Get the people you need, but I want all of these issues kept quiet until we’ve had a chance to discuss them. Some of these changes will appear to be nothing more than a cover to hide bigger problems.”

“True, but if we can start with some small changes, we could generate some good will. It wouldn’t take much to help with space exploration, redo the bidding process, and expand the Academy sponsorship program. We could even make it look like those ideas belong to a few individual council members in return for their cooperation.”

“Agreed. What else is on your list to discuss with me?”

“I’d like to host a press conference on Friday to let the Federation know that I’m back at work and what I plan on doing. Of course, we need to decide what that is. Do you have time tomorrow?”

“I have time, but let’s not jump the gun before talking with the Council Chairman.”

Kathryn nodded in understanding. “Perhaps we can make some general statements to give the feel that we’re working towards something, without giving away what that something actually is.”

“Yes, absolutely. I’m sure between you and Commander Kim, you’ll find the perfect the thing to say. However, I’d like to read it first to prevent inadvertently rubbing someone the wrong way.”

“Of course, Admiral.”

“Good. Anything else I can help you with?”

She stretched her neck muscles. “Not at the moment, but if you’d like to touch base daily, could we set up a time so that I’m more prepared?”

“Sure, Kathryn.” He stood and made his way to the door. “Have Brooks call my receptionist if you’d like me to stop by.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“No, Kathryn. Thank you.” He gave her a wave before he left.

As soon as he was gone, Sue buzzed her again. “Yes, Lieutenant?”

“Lydia Anderson is here for her appointment. Is this a good time?”

“Early. I like that. Send her in.”

When the door opened, Kathryn had to bite back a smile as she heard Sue say, “...be fine. She doesn't bite.”

“Admiral?” Lydia said hesitantly as she stepped inside.

Kathryn stood up and came around the desk. “Lydia! Come on in.”

“I don't mind waiting for my appointment time.”

“I appreciate that, but now is perfectly fine. Admiral Khurma just left, so my train of thought was already derailed.” She put her hand on Lydia's back and guided her toward the sitting area. “Can I get you anything to drink?”

“No, no thank you.”

“Sure? I'm going to have a snack while we talk if that's all right?”

“Of course it is.” She swallowed hard and asked, “Perhaps some ice water?”

With a gracious smile, Kathryn said, “Coming right up. Have a seat wherever you like.”

After they both got settled, Kathryn continued to speak. “So, tell me. How is married life?”

“Oh, it's wonderful.”

“I agree. So many people have asked me that question lately. It feels satisfying to ask someone else.”

Lydia grimaced. “I apologize for not making it to your wedding, Admiral, but we decided to start our honeymoon instead.”

“No need to apologize for that. Honestly, I wouldn't have even known if you hadn't mentioned it. There was a sea of people and I really just had my eyes on the groom.”

“I can understand that,” she said with a relieved sigh.

“Where are you and William living?”

“He prefers to go by Bill,” she said and then gasped. “Oh, I shouldn’t have corrected you! I’m sorry, Admiral.”

Softly, Kathryn urged, “Lydia, relax. I love to know little details like that. Unfortunately, I didn’t have a chance to get to know every member of Voyager’s crew as well as I would’ve liked.”

“I’m sure you had more important things to worry about.”

“Not more important, just more demanding,” she said kindly. “Where are you and Bill living? Here in San Francisco?”

“We have a small house in Oakland, not far from Jack London Square on the waterfront.”

“Sounds lovely. And you haven’t found a position here, yet?”

“I was still transporting to my post in Virginia until two weeks ago, and I haven’t looked here because Har... Commander Kim suggested that I speak to you. I hope I’m not imposing, but he insisted.”

“Harry believes you’d be an asset to this staff, and it’s not an imposition at all. My door is always open to anyone from Voyager, especially if you want to work for me.” Kathryn took a long sip of her iced tea before asking, “Do you?”

“Want to work for you?” she asked nervously. When Kathryn nodded, Lydia continued, “I think so. I mean, yes, I do, but I’m not sure what I could do. It would be exciting if there was something you needed help with, although I can’t imagine what I could do that Harry isn’t already doing.”

“I realize that your area of expertise is ship operations, but none of what I’m working on has anything to do with that.”

“Then...” She stopped, a little flustered. “I’m sorry.”

Kathryn set her drink down. “I’m adding four people to my staff, and if you’d like to work for me, I’d love to have you. Harry and Sue both think you’d be good at taking Sue’s position as my personal assistant.”

“Personal assistant?”

“She keeps my calendar, answers my calls, things like that. However, I’m wondering if you might be more interested in one of the other positions. We’ve got a lot of research to do on tracking Federation Council votes and their publicized opinions. I need two people for that, and it may only be until the end of the summer. The other spot is what Commander Judy Young has been doing. She stays current on the press releases issued quadrant wide, and keeps her eye on

what the Federation Council is doing. Does either position sound like something you'd like to do?"

"Oh," she said with surprise. "Surely there are other people who would be better at that kind of research."

Kathryn shrugged. "More experienced, probably, but what I'm looking for is someone who is extremely attentive to details, reads quickly, can identify patterns, and most importantly, someone I can trust. Because of security concerns, I can't let just anyone work for me, and I know without any doubts that my crew from Voyager fits that last criteria."

Lydia nodded thoughtfully. "Are Sue and Commander Young leaving?"

"No, I'm re-arranging my staff so some can travel on my behalf."

"So, I wouldn't travel?"

Kathryn shook her head. "No, not unless I do. If that happens, it won't be much. Is that a problem?"

"Not at all!" she said quickly. "I'd prefer to stay on Earth. That's why it was so hard to give up my job in Virginia because there were so few opportunities planet-side in operations."

"That's true."

"There's..." Lydia paused and tucked her hair behind her ear. "There's something else I should tell you, but I hope it doesn't make you change your mind about me."

The anxiety in Lydia's voice concerned Kathryn, so she took the chance to reach out and touch the younger woman's hand. "Is everything all right, Lydia?"

"Yes, it's..." She looked out the window and blinked rapidly. "It's just that I'm not sure if I want to work or not."

"It's okay if you don't, but why?"

Lydia looked up at Kathryn and took a deep breath. "I just found out yesterday that Bill and I are going to have a baby."

"That's wonderful!"

She nodded anxiously, adding, "Yes, but I miscarried twice with my first husband, and I'm a little scared about doing too much. Do you remember him? He was on Voyager when the Caretaker pulled us out there, and died with the others who were in engineering at the time."

"Oh, Lydia," she said compassionately. "I didn't realize. Were you pregnant on Voyager?"

“No, but we were trying again when we both got assigned to your ship.”

“That’s heart-breaking.”

“It is, but he was Sirian, and the Doctor assures me that the problem was genetic.” She closed her eyes. “You don’t want to hear all of this.”

“On the contrary, I do. You see, you’ll be in good company around here.”

“I will?”

Kathryn nodded. “I’m in the same boat, and just as anxious about miscarriage.”

“Really?” Her mouth dropped open in surprise. “You’re pregnant?!?”

“I am, which is why we won’t be traveling much. That, and concerns about my security.”

Lydia closed her eyes in relief. “Bill and I were really worried about me working for you because it might put me at risk.”

Kathryn took a shaky breath. “I can understand. That’s a valid fear.”

“Did I upset you by saying that?”

“It takes a lot more than that to upset me.” Kathryn smiled. “So, what do you think? Would you like to work for me?”

“I would love one of the research positions.”

“Perfect. When would you like to start?”

She shrugged. “When would you need me?”

“Immediately. You could talk with Judy this afternoon if you’d like to see which area of research interests you the most. And then, I wouldn’t mind if you’d put your head together with the rest of my staff to think about who we might ask to fill the other positions.”

“I’d love to. May I contact Bill first?”

“Yes, but mum’s the word on my pregnancy. Only my staff and my doctors know.”

“Understood, Cap...Admiral.” She cringed apologetically.

Kathryn waved off her concern and stood up. “Harry does that all the time.”

“Still?”

“When he’s distracted.” Holding her hand out for a handshake, she said, “Welcome to the team.”

“Thank you, Admiral.”

A week later, Kathryn had spent the day at home getting ready for a reception she would be hosting for the chairpersons of the ten primary agencies and sub-councils of the Federation Council. She’d slept in to preserve her energy, had Sue come to the house to direct the cleaning and catering crews, and had spent the afternoon going over the notes that her staff had prepared.

Now dressed in a formal pantsuit, she was pacing nervously while waiting for the guests to arrive.

Chakotay said, “Kathryn, sit down before you wear yourself out.”

She rubbed her hands together and looked at the very comfortable sofa in front of her. “I always pace when I’m getting ready for something like this.”

“I’m aware of that.”

“It keeps my energy up. Besides, if I sat on our couch right now, I might fall asleep.”

He inclined his head towards the breakfast table. “I didn’t say you needed to sit somewhere comfortable.”

Sue came into the room and asked, “Admiral, are you sure you wouldn’t like to eat some of this food before anyone arrives?”

“I don’t want to be caught with spinach in my teeth.”

“Which is why you should eat now when we still have the opportunity to hand you a toothpick.” Sue set a plate down on the table. “Eat.”

Kathryn frowned at her assistant. “When did you start bossing me around?”

“The moment I realized I could.”

With an overstated sigh, Kathryn sat and did as she was told, mumbling, “First, it was Chakotay, then Harry, now Sue.”

She replied, “And we all have the same goal of your continued wellbeing.”

Kathryn stabbed her fork in the air towards her former assistant. “Don’t you go telling your replacement that he can start bossing me around.”

Chakotay said, “Crewman Foster is far too enamored with you to boss you around.”

“Weren’t you all at one time?”

“Absolutely,” he replied as he sat down next to her with the med-kit. “Just a quick scan.”

She gave a non-committal hum as she chewed her spanakopita.

When all of the guests had arrived approximately thirty minutes later, Kathryn tapped the side of her glass with a spoon to gather everyone’s attention. “First of all, I want to thank each of you for coming here tonight. I realize that it’s extremely early in the morning for some, so we asked the chef to prepare some dishes that could pass as breakfast.”

After they all chuckled in response, she continued. “I know this is a first, for a Starfleet Admiral to host an event like this, but I could think of no better way to have an informal dialogue with this distinguished group. My hope for tonight is to start some conversations on the initiatives that have been requested by the governments I have visited with last year.”

The Secretary-General, Representative Dooha, asked, “Admiral, we appreciate your invitation and are delighted to be here, but how can we know what to discuss without first looking at the petitions?”

“At the risk of sounding like a professor...” She winked at Chakotay and took his hand. “I thought I might throw out a couple of the broader initiatives and invite you to share your thoughts with others as you mingle. Nothing formal need come out of tonight, but it could be a starting place for our upcoming meetings.”

“Very well,” Dooha replied. “It’s a creative approach, and I’d like to encourage all of us to converse without bringing our own political agendas to the forefront tonight.”

“Thank you, Mr. Secretary.” Kathryn bowed her head graciously. “I won’t give you a speech because I’m sure you’ve had your fill of them via the media.”

They laughed as another representative said, “And they were very motivating, all of them.”

“Thank you for indulging me,” she said good-naturedly and held up her wine glass in gratitude. “My primary goal continues to be opening communication between the Council and the troubled members and former members. I’ve said this from the very beginning and I’ll re-iterate it now. It is my belief that what everyone wants most is to regain trust in the basic principles of the Federation, and in order to do so, they need their five most basic needs met: environmental

resources, safety, belonging to something greater than ourselves, the search for knowledge, and personal fulfillment. Are we in agreement about that?”

Most everyone nodded and those that didn't made some kind of non-committal shrug.

“Regardless, the topics that Admiral Khurma and I would like to throw out tonight shouldn't cause too much uproar. They are the allocation of additional resources for scientific and medical research, offering Federation members assistance with space exploration, and re-opening the sponsorship program for students to attend Starfleet Academy.”

The room was completely silent until Secretary-General Dooha asked, “That's it?”

Kathryn turned to her C.O., giving him the opportunity to speak.

Khurma said, “Well, of course there are other petitions to bring to the table next week, but this is a party.”

Dooha shook his head in amusement. “Come now, give us one that will liven up our discussions. We love a good debate.”

“Kathryn,” Khurma said. “Perhaps we should introduce the petition you plan to bring to the table first.”

She shrugged. “It's pretty tame. We'd like to discuss pardoning undeliverable war-time agreements for raw materials. It doesn't make any difference to us since they aren't going to be filled, but it will be a visible sign that the Council recognizes that the problem exists.”

A representative said, “While that may be tame, Admiral, it brings with it several more volatile issues.”

“Yes, it does.”

No one spoke until Kathryn motioned towards Harry. “I assume you all know my senior aide, Commander Harry Kim?”

He came to her side and acknowledged the council members' nods with one of his own.

“Commander, you wrote the synopsis for one of the volatile issues that we're all trying not to speak about.”

“Yes, ma'am. Egalitarianism.”

“Correct. Do you recall your opening statement?”

He cleared his throat gently. “You'd like me to break the ice with that one?”

“Yes, Commander,” she said, giving him an encouraging smile.

“Very well. The initiative is for the establishment of egalitarian, unrestricted policies to ensure that all Federation members receive equal opportunity to bid on government contracts.” He turned to Kathryn. “If I may say more, Admiral?”

She nodded, trusting him completely.

“This was one of the primary issues with every world we visited. Without discussing past agreements, perhaps we could brainstorm ideas for how to construct an open and fair system. There are numerous examples in the histories of every world that could be compared and contrasted in a non-volatile manner.”

Dooha said, “Well done, Commander. Let us now enjoy this wonderful buffet and see what we can come up with.”

Kathryn mingled amongst her guests, most of whom turned to innocuous conversation the moment she walked up. The fourth such small group was one she felt more comfortable with than the others, and as she stepped up to them, she asked, “Are you afraid I’ll get on a soapbox if you talk about this in front of me?”

One chuckled and said, “No, Admiral. We’re just not used to discussing matters so openly with someone who’s not on the council. Perhaps you should petition Earth’s president to appoint you as a member at large?”

She shook her head. “As much as I’d probably enjoy that, I fear it would be a conflict of interest at this point. Perhaps someday.”

“Think about it. We’d love to have you.”

“Maybe when the current political climate changes.”

Another said, “There will always be political controversy, Admiral. You cannot escape from it by waiting a few years.”

“Agreed, but there will likely be a new set of controversies that haven’t been stirred up by my prolific speech-giving.”

“Touché, Admiral.”

While there was a pause in the conversation, Kathryn noticed that all three of them glanced at each other as if they wanted to be discussing something else. She said, “If you’d like me to mingle elsewhere, that can be arranged.”

“Of course not, dear,” said Representative Gardi, an elderly gentleman who represented one of Earth’s colonies. “But perhaps you would tell me more about this piece of art in the dining room. It’s quite lovely.”

“Ah, yes,” Kathryn nodded as she saw which painting he was referring to. As they walked over, she said, “This was painted by my sister as a house-warming gift. It depicts the landscape outside the kitchen window of our childhood home.”

“The colors she used are quite striking in this room.”

“We designed the room around the painting. I like to think of it as a piece of home away from home.”

He turned to her and said, “I could speak in metaphors, but I'm going to be straight with you, dear.”

“Please do.”

“Most of us are delighted to have been invited to your home, and we treasure the opportunity to speak openly about the issues you have set forth. However, there are some who feel quite the opposite.”

“I would be surprised if every leader on the Council supported my involvement.”

Gardi took a sip of wine and nodded. “The irony is that the President appointed you to this position, and it’s the President’s supporters who don’t want you meddling.”

Kathryn looked towards the wall closest to the kitchen. “May I show you this painting? My sister did it as well.”

“Tell me about it,” he said as they walked over.

“One of her first pieces that she did as a college student. It’s a flower arrangement that used to sit on my parents’ dining room table.” She absently straightened the frame. “I don’t think the President was well informed when he appointed me.”

“Is that so?” he encouraged.

“I believe that he or his advisors saw my popularity as a means for boosting his ratings. What I don’t think they counted on was that I take my jobs very seriously.”

“That fact would be hard to miss, considering Voyager’s accomplishments.”

She shrugged. “I would’ve thought so, but I welcomed the opportunity to use my popularity to benefit the Federation.”

“Do you still? After all that’s happened to you?”

“Yes,” she said instantly. “Because of all that’s happened, my popularity has increased four-fold. That’s a valuable tool that I intend to use while it lasts. I’m well aware that the people could change their minds about me overnight.”

“How, if I may ask?” He clarified, “You’ve got all of this backing in the press and with the people, and now you’re here to ask us to make some changes. What happens if the Council doesn’t budge? Will you use your power against us?”

She quietly clicked her tongue and tilted her head to the side. “I hope that I’ve never given anyone cause to doubt my integrity or question my principles.”

“I can’t think of any instance, but you didn’t answer my question.”

Her eyes widened perceptively. “I know.”

Studying her, Gardi crossed his arms and rested his chin in his hand. “You really would make a gifted politician, Admiral.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” she said with a chuckle. “Not to worry, though. As a Starfleet officer, I’m sworn to uphold the Articles and the Federation Council. However, what would be a significant boon to the popularity of the Council, is for you, as a whole, to take a serious look at the initiatives and do whatever is in your power to be fair, generous where possible, and open about your intentions. This group,” she said as she waved around the room. “Sets the tone for the rest of the Council.”

“You are absolutely correct. However, there are some in attendance tonight who, despite your best intentions, will sabotage your efforts.”

Kathryn’s chin rose slightly. “Would you recommend that my staff look carefully at the voting patterns of everyone here?”

“Very carefully, Admiral. You will find some inconsistencies, and when you do, take care as you decide what to do with that information. Many of us think very highly of you and, while we want you to succeed, we also want you to survive.”

“Which is more important to you, Mr. Gardi?”

He took a deep breath and said, “If I were a braver man, I wouldn’t have let things get this bad, but I was comfortable where I was sitting. I don’t want to ask anything of you that I wouldn’t do myself.”

“I’m willing to be uncomfortable, and I’m a brave woman.”

“That you are, and I believe, without any doubt, that you are not out for power or influence.”

“I’m out for justice, sir. For myself and for the Federation.”

“Please, tread carefully as you seek it, my dear. Those whom I do not agree with will stop at nothing to get what they want, and you are more important to this Federation than are any defunct contracts that should be reconciled.”

“I understand, but we’ve got to start somewhere. I believe that the problems we’re facing will snowball out of control unless we work together to stop the avalanche, and my ultimate goal has nothing to do with removing anyone from a position of power. I am completely focused on preserving the Federation.”

“Of that I have no doubt.”

She took a sip of her sparkling cider and asked, “Can you find a way to tell me who can be trusted?”

“That’s hard to gauge. While many people’s hearts are in the right place, their minds can be changed for them.”

“Still, I would appreciate any insight that would improve my chances of success.”

He nodded thoughtfully and then seemed to come to a decision. “You know, dear, you are a very inspiring woman.”

“I’ve heard that before, but I prefer to think of it as having spirited integrity.”

“Well said,” he smiled with amusement. “But what I mean to imply is that you’ve inspired me. I’ve been comfortable long enough and perhaps it’s time to do something to benefit the people who don’t have representation among this group. I’ll risk my comfort to help you, and I’m not going to ask for anything in return because I don’t want this to seem like a play for power or influence.”

“I appreciate that a great deal.”

“Good. Now that that’s settled, I’m going to see about legislation to get the ball rolling on more medical research as soon as I return to my office later this morning. After all, I am the chair of the Federal Health Organization, am I not?”

“Yes, sir, you are.”

“Let’s see if we can affect some change while preserving our own health, shall we?”

“Thank you, sir. I appreciate your willingness to get the ball rolling.”

He winked at her. "I'm hoping to ride on the coattails of your popularity, as well. Now, run along before they think we're up to something."

"Understood," she said with a smile as Gardi walked away.

Before she had a chance to leave the room, the chair of the Federation Security Council came up to her. "Admiral," he said with a nod.

"Can I get you another drink, Representative Fager?"

"No, no, no, I'm just fine." He nodded towards the pictures. "I'm not a student of art. Is there a lot to discuss about this painting?"

"The artist is my sister, and this is one of her earliest works."

His eyes shifted away from the painting back to Kathryn. "I'm wary of the extended conversation you just had."

"Ah," she said with a nod. "I suppose that suspicion is one failing of this type of environment."

"I want to be on your side, Admiral, but you can't be granting favors to help certain council members' agendas."

"Agreed, and I assure you I haven't. What agenda item are you concerned about?"

"The FHO wishes to create a database of every communicable disease on every planet that could possibly come in contact with a Federation world."

Kathryn raised an eyebrow. "And that's a problem because?"

"It presents an enormous security risk to take FHO agents to the planets that are hostile towards the Federation."

"People have been going into tense situations to provide better healthcare for centuries."

"True, but the difference is that these planets don't need better healthcare. They'll think the Federation is up to something deceitful."

"Ah," she said with understanding. "Well, I'm going to let you debate that issue directly with Mr. Gardi's agency. He didn't mention it to me."

"What, then, did he want you to help him with?"

"Nothing. He wanted to help me. I don't know his specific agenda, but he's going to address the issue of expanding medical research to Federation members. We didn't discuss any details."

Fager's mouth opened slightly and then he abruptly closed it. "I see. Perhaps you were right. Suspicion has become all too prevalent within the Council."

"I'm sure that mistrust derives from a perception of dishonesty in recent history, but perhaps now is the time to be more open about our discussions so that trust can be re-established."

He nodded. "A well-intentioned notion, Admiral, but it's my job as Director of the Security Council to watch for fraud."

"A very important job. How long have you had it?"

"Seven months. Enough time to see what really goes on behind closed doors."

"Tell me something, if you would. What has been the average tenure of the Security Director over the last six years?"

"It's a difficult job. Not many can handle it."

"I'm relieved that you're up to the task, then, because several of my initiatives will come straight to you."

"They're security related?" he asked in surprise.

She blinked slowly. "Yes, sir, they are. Both internal and external."

"I'll be interested to speak with you, then. When we get started next week, let's set up an appointment."

"I'd like that, but I'd also like to speak with several of your agency's members together. Perhaps you, Admiral Khurma, Secretary-General Dooha, and I can work on a list of the best persons to be in on that conversation?"

His chest lifted slightly with importance. "I would be happy to discuss that with you at any time."

"Thank you. I appreciate your desire to give my concerns attention." Kathryn graciously bowed out of the rest of the conversation and found herself face to face with her C.O. "Admiral," she said with relief.

"Everything okay, Kathryn?"

She nodded as she took a drink. "Yes, but I think I'm a bit rusty on my diplomatic skills. The last two conversations wore me out."

Putting his hand on her back, he directed her towards the food table. "Have you tried these canapés?"

“Yes, but I’ll be happy to try them again.”

Once she got a few bites on her plate, he commented, “I think this is going remarkably well considering the shaky start and the composition of the guest list.”

“You had concerns about the guest list?”

Nodding, he said, “Many concerns, but it’s not like we could invite only a select few to play in our sandbox.”

“Hard to do any weeding if you don’t go into the garden... or something like that.” She grimaced at her own attempt to be clever. “My wit seems to be lacking.”

He chuckled. “Not in the least. In my book, recognizing that a joke doesn’t make sense takes a certain amount of intelligence.”

Kathryn asked, “What do you know about the Security Council Director?”

“That’s what I love about you, Kathryn. There’s no beating around the bush.”

With a shrug, she replied, “Never know when we’ll be interrupted.”

“Fager is new and inexperienced.”

“I can’t tell where his deficiencies lay. Intelligence, charm, or both?”

Khurma widened his eyes to communicate that she might be on to something. “The good news is that he doesn’t seem to be a victim of coercion, yet. It’s quite possible that he’s being ignored and/or being led on wild goose chases.”

“The latter, I’m thinking,” she said with an amused grin. As she reached for a piece of cheese, her ears picked up on a nearby voice that gave her pause.

“Kathryn?” Khurma asked.

She held her finger to her lips and cocked her head to the side to show that she was focused on eavesdropping. The conversation was between two council members that she couldn’t identify without looking at them, but one of the voices was disconcerting.

“Well, I’ve seen enough for one lifetime. Oh, how the mighty have fallen.”

Kathryn immediately blanched and felt like she was going to faint until Khurma took her arm and began walking her to the kitchen.

Once there, he helped her lean against the island countertop. “Are you ill?”

She shook her head while contradicting herself with, “Maybe.”

Chakotay crossed the great room into the kitchen. “Kathryn?”

Khurma said, “I fear that she’s ill.”

She held up a hand to forestall both men, but Chakotay was not deterred and pulled out the medkit. After a quick examination, he said, “Blood pressure is high, but not dangerously so.” He filled up a glass of ice water and handed it to her.

After taking a sip, she held her fist against her lips to hold down the nausea. “Who was I listening to?”

Khurma replied, “Representative Liyal of Dolsia and Representative Jorl of Moroppa. Why do you ask?”

Chakotay commented, “Both of those planets are near the Bolus system.”

She took another sip of water and grabbed a tissue to dab at the perspiration on her forehead. “We can’t talk about it here, but I want to know if one of them has a special relationship with the President. Are either of them under suspicion?”

“There’s some history there,” Khurma replied.

“Which one said the final statement I heard? Do you know?”

“What statement was that?”

Kathryn shuddered as she said, “About how the mighty have fallen.”

“Liyal. He tends to use grandiose language and likes to gloat.”

Squaring her shoulders, Kathryn addressed her C.O. “He needs to be under investigation. From voice recognition, I believe that he saw me when I was being held captive.”

Chakotay’s eyes widened into saucers. “And he’s in our house?”

“Kathryn, could you be jumping to conclusions?”

“That was a very distinctive voice, and he said that exact phrase about me. ‘Oh how the mighty have fallen.’ I’ve had recurring nightmares about that statement and that voice.”

“All right, I’ll look into it, but we’re not accusing anyone tonight.”

“Admiral,” Chakotay pleaded. “That’s not enough for you to arrest him? He’s in our house!”

“Lower your voice, Captain. He may be here, but he has no idea where this home is.”

Kathryn said, “Stay calm, please.”

“Fine, but I'm not letting him out of my sight,” he replied with anger.

“NO!” Kathryn and Khurma both almost shouted.

She continued, “Admiral Khurma is right. If they suspect we're suspicious, it will show our hand.”

Khurma said, “We have no proof that the President was behind your abduction, Kathryn.”

“We do in my book,” she said. “Norvellen gave us proof.”

“There's a difference between the President and his associates.”

Getting angry, she replied, “Admiral, this is not to be taken lightly. Whoever hired Pratin is still out there and still wants me dead.”

“I realize that,” he said coolly. “But if we're going to uncover all the players in this scheme, it's going to take time and careful strategizing. If we start arresting people close to the President based on circumstantial evidence, we'll be shooting ourselves in the foot.”

“I didn't ask you to arrest him,” she said flatly. “I asked you to investigate him. I want both of those men watched like hawks, twenty-four hours a day.”

“They already are.” He touched her back. “Kathryn, I have full confidence in your intuition, but we have to proceed with caution. For now, just know that you're safe.”

“Hmph. I have to disagree with you on that one, Admiral,” she said as he left the room.

Chakotay asked, “What do you want to do about this?”

“Got a phaser rifle?”

With a bemused grin, he pulled her into his arms for a comforting embrace. “If it wouldn't land us both in prison, I'd grab two.”

After indulging in his arms for a long moment, she said, “We should get back to the party.”

“Okay,” he said quietly, letting her go.

“But stick close to me, would you?”

“Like glue.”

Kathryn held his hand, put on her game face, and went back into her formal living room. When she arrived, several heads turned to acknowledge her before going back to their conversations.

Secretary-General Dooha came over to them and held out his hand to Chakotay. “Captain, I don’t believe we’ve been formally introduced.”

“It’s an honor to meet you, sir,” Chakotay said.

“I feel that the honor is mine, Captain. You may not know my history, but I was born on…”

“Niveh, yes. My condolences to you for the hardships that colony faced.”

“I appreciate that, Captain, but I want to offer my thanks to you, as a representative of the Maquis, for protecting that colony. Even though my family relocated to Tarshus when I was still a child to seek a more peaceful life, we had family friends on Niveh. Tell me, did you have anything to do with the Maquis efforts in that region?”

“Yes, sir, I did. Being in the Demilitarized Zone, Niveh was one of the primary protectorates of the Maquis.”

Dooha shook his head in dismay. “I am relieved those days are over.”

“Are they?” Kathryn asked.

He inclined his head towards her. “What do you mean, Admiral?”

“Niveh continues to struggle in the aftermath of the war, as most of their buildings were destroyed. As I’m sure you know, a large grant from a private enterprise on Earth built that colony, and the colonists simply don’t have the infrastructure to acquire the materials they need to rebuild. They’ve made numerous requests for aide, but from their point of view, their appeals fall on deaf ears.”

Dooha rubbed his hands together as he tried to figure out how to respond. “There are limited resources available, Admiral. The Federation Council certainly can’t afford to rebuild every planet that was devastated during the war.”

“Of course not, but from Niveh’s point of view, Betazed and Earth have the resources to rebuild themselves while the colonies such as theirs do not.” She held up her hands to stay off his retort. “I’m not the one to decide how the Council allocates funds, but I urge you to keep that in mind when the next round of projects is on the table.”

Representative Liyal interrupted the conversation, the timbre of his voice grating on Kathryn. “Admiral, I didn’t realize that you’ve appointed yourself to the appropriations sub-council.”

Forcing herself not to react to his presence, she replied, "I would say that my job lends itself to a certain amount of input."

"And how did you arrive at that presumption?" he asked as the room quieted.

Kathryn felt Chakotay move so that he was standing just behind her left shoulder, much like he did on Voyager when situations became overly tense. "My task is to facilitate open communication between the Council and Federation members, both current and past. How do you propose I do that without taking concerns to the appropriate sub-councils and then sharing the Council's response with the Federation?"

Eyes narrowed and voice tight, he replied, "We have our own method of telling the Federation what we want them to know, Admiral."

She clicked her tongue and then slowly shook her head. "An alarming attitude, Representative... I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name?"

His chin lifted as he asked, "You don't know who I am?"

Pretending to think for a moment, she shook her head again. "No, I don't believe so, but if you'll tell me, we can correct that slight oversight."

"Liyal of Dolsia, Admiral. To use one of your human phrases, does that ring a bell?"

"Hmmm," she said as she scratched her chin. "No, I'm afraid not. Are you new to your position?"

With a knowing laugh, he said, "No, Admiral. President Zife appointed me his first week in office."

"Oh? Are you friends with the President?"

"I have the distinct pleasure of being a long-time friend and supporter of his."

"Odd," she said with a shrug. "He never mentioned you when we've met. What sub-council are you chair of?"

"Appropriations, Admiral. The sub-council you seem to have taken issue with."

She waved away his concern. "Oh, no, no, no. It's not my issue, it's the colonists and former members of the Federation that have taken issue. They believe appropriations are not..." Pretending to search for a word, she ended with, "appropriate."

Stepping closer, he said, "You're crossing the line, Admiral. May I remind you that you are merely a Starfleet officer?"

Not one to back down when threatened, she met him halfway and was nearly in his face. “A Starfleet officer appointed by the President to clean up the mess that is the Federation, Representative.”

“Who do you think advised the President to appoint you? You were to listen to the colonies whine about their problems and keep them quiet. That’s it. Do I make myself clear?”

“Is that so?” she asked coolly. “You’d like me to tell that to the people of the Federation?”

“You do, and you’ll find yourself out of a job.”

Dooha stepped forward, “Liyal, Admiral, let’s table this discussion, shall we?”

Liyal put his arm across Dooha’s chest and moved as if to clear a path. “Not necessary. Janeway and I have a lot to discuss. Don’t we, Kathryn?”

“I didn’t realize we were on a first name basis…” She asked Dooha, “What’s his first name?”

Dooha shook his head. “Admiral, I think perhaps this is getting out of hand.”

“You’re right. I wouldn’t have this job right now if things weren’t out of hand.” She turned to Liyal. “Tell me, Mr. Liyal, what is the policy of the Appropriations Sub-Council for prioritizing rebuilding efforts?”

“There’s a lot more to appropriations than catering to the sniveling and pathetic whines of a dozen minor colonies.”

She looked around to see that everyone else was listening intently. Aware of the danger she was in, Kathryn simply repeated his words. “Sniveling and pathetic whines?”

“How dare you,” he seethed.

She shrugged. “I’m just repeating what you said, but do tell us, because we are all very curious. What, exactly, is most important when it comes to appropriations if it isn’t the well-being of our colonies?”

“I’ll explain it to you since you obviously have no understanding of economics.”

Glancing at Chakotay, she said, “That’s probably true. We didn’t have any big businesses supporting us in the delta quadrant. We had to rely on our own wiles and the generosity of others. Go on, Mr. Liyal.”

His eyes were no more than slits. “It’s very simple. Growing the strength of the business community will enable the growth of the infrastructure that you seem so concerned about.”

“Oh,” she said with mock realization. “So, the strength of the businesses helps the people of those communities rebuild and thrive.”

“Precisely, over time.”

“They will use their profits to ‘grow the infrastructure.’”

“See, even you can understand.”

“Oh, yes. Your point of view is quite clear. One question, if I may?”

He rolled his eyes and nodded. “To help the less educated, sure.”

“Less educated?” she asked with surprise. “I guess I need a third doctorate, but we’re getting off track. My question is, which Earth and Betazed communities are growing from the council’s appropriations to the Bolian, Dolsian, and Moroppan businesses that have been contracted for the rebuilding?”

“You forget that we live in a quadrant-wide community, Admiral.”

“Did I? Funny,” she pretended to chuckle at herself. “I thought you were the one who’d forgotten that. A good reminder for us both.”

“I don’t need anything from you, Janeway.”

“Then why’d you advise the President to give me this job?” She looked around the room as if expecting someone else to answer the question. Directing her attention back to Liyal, she said, “At least tell me what the approved message of the Appropriations Sub-Council is so that I can convey that on your behalf.”

“You need not worry that pretty little head about our message. We can convey our own messages if and when we decide it is necessary.”

She opened her arms in acceptance. “Very well, then. I’ll simply tell the media that the chair of the Federation Appropriations Sub-Council, Representative Liyal, long-time friend of President Zife, refuses to comment about past, current, and future decisions regarding the allocations of the Federation’s resources.”

He got back in her face. “Watch it, Janeway. You seem to forget that you’re very lucky to be alive, and that you’re merely a pawn in a much larger game that’s being played by much more influential people.”

Ignoring the first part of his comment, she asked sweetly, “You don’t think I’m influential?”

“Tell me... what was it like to be silenced? I rather enjoyed a couple months without hearing any of your pandering speeches.”

“Really? From what I understand, all one had to do was turn on a viewscreen and I was all over it.”

“And who do you think was responsible for that? You have no idea who you’re dealing with.”

Feeling victorious, she replied, “Oh, but I do. You just told me and everyone else in this room.”

“What are you getting at?”

Khurma stepped between them and with his very commanding voice, said, “Enough. The issue of appropriations will not be resolved tonight, and we have yet to formally bring this petition before the Council at large.”

Kathryn said, “What I’m getting at, Representative, is that the people of the Federation have empowered me to bring to the light of day the wrongs that have been made in recent history. I work for them.”

“You just keep believing that, Janeway.”

“Admiral!” Khurma commanded, using only a look to clearly communicate that she should not respond.

After everyone except Starfleet personnel had left, Chakotay said, “Kathryn, I need to see you in the kitchen, now.”

“I’m fine, Chakotay.”

“Please, Kathryn. You’ve been ignoring my efforts to get you in there for an hour.”

As she walked through the house, she said, “If I weren’t fine, don’t you think I would’ve fainted by now?”

Khurma asked from the breakfast table, “Is that supposed to make us feel better?”

“Yes, actually, it is.” She sat down next to him with a huff. “I suppose you’re going to rake me over the coals now?”

“For not following your husband’s orders?”

“No, for losing my cool with Liyal.”

He slowly shook his head as he typed on his PADD. “I thought you did a remarkable job keeping your cool.”

“Really?” She glanced up at Chakotay as he scanned her with the medical tri-corder, and smiled when he winked at her.

Khurma continued, “As you are well aware, the issues that we’re dealing with in the Federation don’t come without tension. Someone had to break the ice.”

“Liyal is a jerk.”

“Undoubtedly, but he is also what he accused you of being, a pawn.”

“A self-righteous, arrogant, pawn.”

Khurma added, “Don’t forget devious and manipulative.”

“Kathryn,” Chakotay interrupted.

“Hmmm?”

“We need you to concentrate on lowering your blood pressure.”

Khurma looked up. “Is that possible? To do it by willing it to happen, I mean.”

She replied, “Supposedly, if I do some restorative breathing and try to relax.”

“Ah, well,” he said as he stood up. “That’s my cue to get the rest of these people out of your house.”

“I’ve got too much adrenaline to sleep right now.”

Chakotay placed a hypo against her neck and released the contents. “Then I suggest you take a relaxing bath or read a book.”

“Or both,” Sue said as she walked by. “Go on, Admiral. I’ll take care of getting this all cleaned up.”

Harry came in, and announced, “That was amazing!”

Kathryn smiled brightly. “The whole reception? Has Judy left?”

“She just did, and she’s thrilled beyond belief. But I’m talking about you and that creep. It was just like old times on Voyager.”

Justin commented, “I think that was better than anything I ever saw you do on Voyager.”

“You might be right,” Harry said. “Although there were a few that rank up there with tonight.”

Khurma motioned towards the door. "It's time for us to go. The Admiral's 'pretty little head' needs her beauty rest." He turned to Kathryn, and asked, "How did you resist knocking his lights out when he made that comment?"

"Because that's what he wanted me to do." She got up to say goodnight to her guests. "Thank you, everyone. I think we got off to a really interesting start."

"Don't come in tomorrow, Kathryn," Khurma said. "I'll contact you if anything interesting happens."

"I might take you up on that, but we'll see how I'm feeling in the morning."

As they walked towards the door, Harry asked, "Chakotay, I meant to ask you... What was Representative Chial talking about you going to Magadan?"

Chakotay waved his hand and shook his head. "Nothing."

Khurma said, "They'd love to have you, Captain."

Kathryn asked, "Magadan?"

"I'll tell you about it later," he replied and then addressed all of their guests. "Thank you again, everyone."

Once they were gone, Kathryn turned towards her husband with her hands on her hips. "What's on Magadan?"

He took her hands off of her hips and held them. "Another Command School training center. They want me to repeat the 'By the book' seminar."

"That's great!" She tilted her head in an attempt to read his reaction. "Isn't it?"

"I'm not going."

Putting her fingers under his chin, she lifted it until he was looking at her. "Why not?"

His shoulders dropped. "Do you really need to ask me that?"

She studied him for a long moment before asking, "Did the invitation come tonight?"

"On the second day of the seminar."

"Two weeks ago?" A sensation of sadness washed over her, although she couldn't explain it. Putting her arms around him, she said, "I'm doing fine being alone."

“I know, but I’d be worried about you the entire time.”

“We’ve got to get on with our careers at some point.”

“Yes, but not now.” He put a hand on her stomach. “Not with him being so vulnerable.”

Sue walked in and gasped. “Oh! I’m sorry.”

“That’s all right,” Kathryn said as she pulled away from Chakotay. “I didn’t realize you were still here.”

“I’ve put away the food, but left everything else. A cleaning crew is coming tomorrow to take care of the furniture, floors, and the caterer’s supplies.”

Kathryn pulled Sue into a hug. “Thank you for everything, even bossing me around.”

“You’re welcome, Admiral.” Sue held her for a little longer than necessary before letting go. “Get some rest, and we’ll see you on Thursday.”

“All right.” She opened the door for Sue and said, “Good night.”

Once she was gone, Chakotay said, “Let’s get you to bed.”

“I still want that bath,” she pointed out as she walked up the stairs. “You promised.”

Following her, he said, “It was merely a suggestion.”

Once in her bedroom, Kathryn began taking off her clothes as Chakotay started the bathwater. She went into the bathroom and said, “I want you to go.”

“What?” he asked, sure that he misunderstood.

“To Magadan. I don’t mean to imply that I want to be away from you, but I think I’ll feel better knowing that you’re not putting your career on hold for me.”

He helped her into the bathtub, kneeling down to situate her bath pillow. “My career isn’t on hold. I’m still teaching seminars here on Earth, and besides, I’m doing it for both of you.”

“I could go with you.”

“No, it’s too high a security risk.”

“When is it?”

“Week after next.”

“I’ll spend the week in Paris. It’ll be perfect timing because I was worried about staying on the same schedule as you.”

He leaned his arms on the bathtub and watched her for a few minutes before deciding to say, “I have some conditions.”

“Let me guess. I have to stay out of trouble?”

With a chuckle, he said, “That’s true whether I’m here or not. My conditions are that you have Justin and Sue with you every minute.”

“Every minute?” She motioned towards herself lying naked in the bathwater.

Frowning, he said, “You know what I mean. Also, even though you’ll be on Paris time, I think you should sleep here. Our home is more secure than any hotel could be.”

“All right.”

“And, if you feel the slightest bit exhausted or fuzzy, you have to call Joe.”

“I promise.”

He leaned over the side of the tub and gave her a kiss. “Thank you. I’ll call Chial in the morning.”

“He’s on Paris time. Go call him now.”

Chakotay sighed with amusement. “You’re bossy.”

“Yeah, well? What do you expect? I was your captain for seven years, and now I’m both a vice-admiral and your ball-and-chain.”

He pushed against the tub to get to his feet. “Good point. I’ll be back.”

“What? You’re not going to argue with me?” she called after him.

“I know better. Don’t fall asleep in there.”

“Hmph,” she said with a sigh as she laid her head back. Next thing she knew, Chakotay was lifting her out of the water. “Hey... what are you doing?”

“Putting you to bed.”

“But I just got in,” she said grumpily as he laid her on the bed and began to towel her off. “Weren’t you going to call Chial?”

“That was thirty minutes ago.”

She sighed. “I fell asleep.”

“Yep.”

“But I didn’t wash.”

He helped her pull a nightgown over her head. “I washed you, but you slept through it.”

“You did?”

“More or less, but I didn’t do your hair,” he said as he tucked her in and gave her a kiss. “Sleep now.”

“M’kay.”

Caressing her cheek, he said, “And just for the record, I think you have the prettiest head I’ve ever seen.”

She smiled as she fell asleep.

Part 29 - “Ready to Fight”

By Dawn

Summary: Preparing to go to Paris

Rated R

Kathryn was hunched over her computer terminal when she saw a flash of light that nearly startled her out of her socks.

“Why Kathy, I never thought of you as skittish.”

She closed her eyes and tried to slow her racing heart. “Well, Q, a lot has happened to me since you saw me last.”

“That’s putting it mildly. What would a human say to offer sympathy? It seems somehow appropriate that I express feelings of pity.”

“You don’t exactly strike me as the sympathetic type.”

“Oh, but when it comes to you, my dear Kathy, I am.” He snapped his fingers and she found herself sitting next to him on her couch with a cup of vegetable broth in hand.

Taking a sip, she said, “Thank you.”

“I thought I’d drop in, just for old times’ sake. You seemed to be getting a little discouraged.”

“Discouraged?” She raised an eyebrow. “Hardly. I thought I was making progress on that speech I was working on.”

“Speech, smeech. I was talking in more universal terms.”

She frowned. “Tell me something, Q.”

“You want to know why I’m here.”

“Yes and no,” she said with a tilt of her head. “Why do you show up when I don’t need you, yet you fail to come to my rescue when I desperately need a miracle?”

“Who says you don’t need me? I know for a fact that you need me a great deal.”

Blinking slowly, she asked, “Care to enlighten me?”

“Nothing would please me more.” He crossed his legs and put his hands in his lap to mimic her posture. “Just so you know, Kathy, I wanted to help you when you needed that miracle. I’ve never wanted something so much in my eternal existence.”

In disbelief, she asked, “What, were you held back by some Q law that you decided to uphold?”

“When have I ever let the law of Q hold me back?”

“That’s what I thought.”

“My dear little human friend, I can see the bigger picture of the universe, all things at all times. To pull you from that horrible situation early wouldn’t have helped you with your ultimate achievements.”

“So, something happened while I was held captive that will help me? A clue to solving some mystery?”

“There are some things that your limited, humanoid brain must figure out on its own.”

Sighing, she asked, “What can you tell me, Q?”

“You’re worried that your knowledge of the future has affected your decisions.”

“If that’s what you’re here to point out, you needn’t have made the trip.”

Exasperated, he said, “Try to wrap your minuscule understanding of temporal mechanics around this... Yes, your knowledge of the future has affected your decisions, but it was supposed to. The timeline that you’re preserving included you knowing the outcome. Don’t you see?”

“So, the bomb on Sirius, my abduction, my new heart, this risky pregnancy – all of those happened in Timeline B?”

“Yes, of course they did, as well as your bout with the blues. The end result is that your marriage to Chuckles is stronger; your courage and your compassion are greater, and that new heart of yours will save your life again someday.”

Kathryn felt a lump in her throat, but still managed to say, “Thank you. I know you didn’t have to tell me all of that, but it helps to know.”

“Whether you realize it or not, Kathy, I do care for you a great deal. I have no idea why,” he shrugged it off. “Maybe it’s because Junior likes you.”

Looking askance, she asked, “I don’t suppose you’d tell me when this heart will save my life, would you?”

“Where’s the fun in that?”

She took a deep breath and put her cup down. “What are you here to tell me?”

Off-hand he said, “I merely thought you needed some reassurance.”

“That doesn’t sound like you.”

“What can I say?” he said with a shrug. “I miss our little adventures in the Delta Quadrant.”

“I don’t think I’ll be going on any adventures for awhile.”

“Thanks to the little multicellular diploid eukaryote in your womb,” he said as he laid his head on her lap. “Hellooooo in there.” Looking up at her, he said, “It says hello back and wants you not to worry. It’s rather cozy in there.”

“Are you sure there’s not something else you’re here for? Something to do with Romulus? We never did learn more about the Romulan you sent me to meet with.”

“Our friend will call you. Try not to worry.”

“How do I stop worrying?”

He sat up and threw his hands in the air. “All right, all right. You can be such a pest.”

“Out with it.”

“As I said, I’m here because you need encouragement. Maybe not right now, but in a few weeks. Stick to your guns, Kathy. You’re in the position you’re in for a reason.”

She pursed her lips. “I suppose that will make sense at some point.”

“Yes, it will.” He continued, “Call me a softy, but before I go, you should know that in this version of Timeline B, I was with you during your imprisonment.”

“You were?”

“I like you, Kathy, and I don’t want to see you suffer unnecessarily.”

“And you didn’t think I was suffering?”

“Yes, but not as much as you would’ve been.” He twirled his hand in the air, “I might’ve put you to sleep every now and again.”

She furrowed her eyebrows. “Put me to sleep?”

“That, and I think your arms are rather handy. I thought you might like to keep them this time around, not that your prosthetics weren’t lovely. It’s amazing to me that humanoids go to the effort of creating such life-like artificial body parts.”

With a flash of light, he was gone, leaving Kathryn utterly shocked. She looked down at her arms, and couldn’t help the tears that fell upon them. Tapping her commbadge, she said, “Janeway to Chakotay, Oregon 477.”

“Chakotay here.”

Trying to control the shakiness in her voice, she asked, “Where’s here? Where are you?”

“Are you okay?”

“Yes,” was all she could manage to say before her jaw started trembling.

“I’m at home. I’ll be there in two minutes.”

“ ‘kay.”

True to his word, not two minutes later, he came into her office saying, “I asked Sue to hold your calls.” One look at her face and he was sitting next to her, pulling her into his arms. “What’s wrong?”

Taking comfort in his embrace, she said, “Q was just here.”

He groaned. “Don’t tell me he wants something else from you?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head and trying to put a rein on her emotions. “Well, nothing new.”

“Then what’s all this?” he asked as he wiped away her tears and handed her a tissue.

She blew her nose and tossed the tissue in the wastebasket. “He told me that everything that’s happened to me was supposed to. I’ve been worried that I messed up the timeline somewhere along the way.”

Holding her close, he said, “You haven’t messed up anything.”

“Well, *now* I know that, but I didn’t.” She ran her fingers through her hair. “Damn, this is stressful.”

“So that’s what you’re upset about? Maybe this is just pregnancy hormones.”

She blew her nose again. “If that wasn’t a part of it, I’d have you on the deck for saying that.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he said as he kissed her forehead.

“The thing that set this off.” She motioned towards her face. “Was when I asked him why he let me suffer. You know what he told me?”

“What?”

“He said he was there, helping me sleep through a lot of it, and that he kept me from losing these.” She rubbed her elbows. “In another version of this timeline, I lost my arms.”

Chakotay closed his eyes and swallowed hard, holding her closer. “Oh, Kathryn.”

“I was just so shocked.”

“I would be, too. I am.” He caressed up and down the backs of her arms. “Let’s take you home.”

“I can’t. I’m meeting with Khurma in an hour to discuss next week’s agenda.”

“Do you need to prepare?”

“I’m ready, I think.”

“All right. Then indulge me for just a moment. Computer, lights out,” he said as he resituated himself to get more comfortable. “Let’s hold each other for a few minutes, okay?”

“I’d love to.” She wiped her eyes again and said, “I can’t believe that I’m crying.”

“Who wouldn’t be in your shoes?”

She nodded against his chest and took comfort in his arms. “I’m glad that I can let go with you like this. Thanks for coming.”

“Thanks for calling me.” Rubbing her back and placing a kiss on her hair, he whispered, “Times like these are when I want to be here for you the most. Don’t ever hesitate to call me.”

“I didn’t.”

“You know what I love most about loving you?”

“What’s that?”

“That I get to see the full gamut of who you are – everything from a normal, emotional and loving woman, all the way to the incredible spitfire that was playing that jerk like a violin last week.”

“I don’t let just anyone see that normal part.”

He gave her a squeeze. “Yes, I know. But I think that in the last year, you’ve been a little more willing to be this part of yourself.”

“Well, yeah. I don’t have to command a lost ship 24/7.”

“Although I loathe giving Q credit, I’m so grateful that he could ease your suffering, even if just a little.”

“Me, too. I’ve often wondered how I survived three weeks of that nightmare.” She snuggled in closer to his warmth and whispered, “I love you, honey.”

“I love you, too.”

Two days later, Kathryn was in her office, studying her notes and looking for correlations in council decisions that her staff might’ve missed. She’d already found two, but was hoping for more. It had been a long day, her heart was pounding with exhaustion, and it was only fifteen-hundred. Knowing Justin would be in to check on her soon, she decided to close her eyes and try to relax.

As had become his habit, Harry walked into Kathryn’s office without announcing himself. One look at her and he dropped his PADD in a rush to get to her side. “Captain?!?”

She slowly opened her eyes, not the least bit ruffled by Harry's panic. "Was relaxing."

"Damn..." He laid his hand on his chest, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. "If you wouldn't mind, could you not look so... relaxed when you do that?"

"I'll see what I can do," she said tiredly as she tapped her commbadge. "Janeway to Jarvin."

"What can I do for you, Admiral?"

"Need you."

"On my..." The door opened as he said, "...way."

Harry said, "I thought she was unconscious."

Justin pulled out the medical tri-corder and asked, "Are you feeling ill?"

"Faint. Not sure Harry could take that."

"Oh, it's not so bad, Harry. Just so long as you catch her."

"Good gravy." He shook his head. "Are you sure you want me to leave on the Enterprise next week?"

Justin said, "She needs food. Would you replicate a sandwich for her?"

"That, I can do. Turkey?"

"Mmhmm," she hummed.

Justin held a hypospray to her neck and released the contents. "Tri-ox. You seem worse than usual, Admiral. Would you like me to call the Doc or Chakotay?"

She shook her head. "Chakotay's worried 'nough."

Harry returned and helped her hold the sandwich. "He has a right to be worried."

"I know, but he doesn't know that I know..." She frowned. "...or something."

"I don't think it's much of a secret, Admiral." Justin pressed the hypo to her neck again. "Just a little glucagon."

Harry asked, "What's that for?"

She replied, "Pancreas is on strike."

“Justin, when did you become so knowledgeable about medicine?” Harry asked.

“Since Chakotay and the Doc gave me hours and hours and hours of instruction on how to monitor her blood sugar.”

She rolled her eyes and mumbled, “Not that bad.”

As he helped her eat, Harry asked, “Justin, how much worse is she? I mean, she’s as weak as she was when…”

“She’s not weak, she’s listless. But she’s coming around now,” he said as he watched the tri-corder readout.

Kathryn took the rest of her sandwich out of Harry’s hand and reprimanded, “I’m sitting right here, gentlemen.”

Harry asked her, “And if I hadn’t come in, would you have fallen to the floor by now?”

“Probably just on the desk.”

He shook his head in dismay.

After eating another bite, she said to Justin, “While Chakotay’s gone, I’ll need you to keep an even closer eye on me so that I don’t have a problem. If I do, he’s likely to never leave again.”

“I’ll do that. Actually, Sue and I were wondering if we could set up camp at your house for the week.”

“Camp?” she smirked. “I do have several guest bedrooms. There’s no need to bring a tent.”

“As I recall, very nice rooms.” With a grin, he asked, “So, what do you say? Want some house guests?”

“Will you make your lasagna?”

“If you’d like.”

“Then you’re more than welcome. By the way, I was just thinking about Paris. We’ll be sleeping in Oregon, but would you look into a day room of some kind? It would be nice to have a place locally to lie down for a few minutes and change clothes.”

“Good idea.” He scanned her again. “Looks like you’re back to normal. Okay if I get back to work?”

“Mmmhmm,” she said with a yawn. “But I think we’d better call it a day soon.”

“Let me know.” Justin closed up the medkit and left her office.

Kathryn asked Harry, “Could I impose upon you to get me a glass of ice water?”

“Coming right up.” While walking to the replicator, he said, “You’ve got me worried, you know.”

After finishing the last bite of her sandwich, she asked, “When do I not?”

“Good question.” He set the glass in front of her and then went to retrieve the PADD he’d dropped earlier. “Is this really the time for me to be going out into space? Sue will do a great job taking notes for you, I’m sure, but…”

“But you’re concerned that I’ll need your help to stay focused like I did last summer?”

Sitting down in front of her desk, he replied, “Yes and no. Permission to speak freely?”

“Always… usually,” she added.

“I feel that you rely on me pretty heavily.”

“Yes, I do. That’s why I’m sending you out in my place.”

He hesitated before continuing, “What I mean to say is that I’m worried you won’t have all of the information you need.”

“I’ve got the basic gist of what the entire quadrant wants to change. Luckily, there’s a pattern.”

“Yes, but if I’m with you, I could slip you notes to remind you what to discuss.”

She shrugged. “While that’s very helpful, I have this great excuse of just having gone through a traumatic experience.”

“But wouldn’t it be better to have that excuse and still be able to pull out all the stops?”

“Oh, I don’t think I do half bad in that area.”

He held up his hand in apology, “Kathryn, that’s not what I meant.”

“Harry, I’m going to be fine.”

“You’re a survivor, I know that. But what if you get overwhelmed? Do you think Sue can step in?”

“I know what you’re trying to not to say.” She leaned forward and rested her elbows on her desk. “But I’m not depressed.”

“Are you sure?”

“Why do you think I am?”

“Well,” he hedged. “You’re very tired all the time, and I’m sorry, but I couldn’t help but notice that you called Chakotay to come here last week. When you two left, it looked like you’d been crying. Is it okay for me to be mentioning this?”

With a sigh, she said, “I suppose so, considering how much you and I have been through together.”

“It’s just that I don’t think I should leave at the same time as Chakotay, and I’m not sure I should be gone while you’re in these council meetings.”

“I appreciate your concerns. I really do.” She took a drink of her water. “Two things.”

“Yes?”

“One,” she said while holding up her index finger. “Ask Amy about the primary symptoms of pregnancy in the first tri-mester.”

“Okay,” he said hesitantly.

“Fatigue. It’s a doozy.”

“Oh. Really?”

“Mood swings, too. The second thing I want to discuss is something we talked about before you took this job.”

“What’s that?”

“You can’t stay in this position forever. It’s not good for your career.”

“Kath... Admiral?”

She waved away his concern. “Kathryn is fine. Captain Picard wants you on his senior staff.”

“What?!”

“You heard me.”

“But... now?”

“End of the summer.”

“About the time you’ll be taking a leave of absence?”

She nodded. “I think this is an excellent opportunity for you, and I want you to take this time on the Enterprise to decide if that’s where you want to be.”

“But…” Rubbing his face, he said, “I know this may sound like a ridiculous excuse, but Amy is trying to get a posting on Earth because we want to be together. You know her, there’s no way she’d get a posting on the Federation flagship.”

Kathryn raised her eyebrows and shifted her eyes away. “I wouldn’t be so sure.”

His mouth dropped open. “Did you arrange that?”

“No, and I expect you to keep this completely confidential. Dr. Crusher wants to take Amy under her wing.”

“Wow. That would be so great for her.” He took a shaky breath. “Should I tell Amy? Should I talk to Picard?”

Kathryn smiled warmly. “I think you should definitely talk to Picard. Let him know that I’ve told you about his interest, and be open with him about your concerns. Be confident and don’t let him intimidate you. He’s a good man.”

“Oh, I know. He’s an amazing man.”

“Regarding Amy, it would be best if she heard about it from Dr. Crusher first. If you talk to her about your pending offer, encourage her to apply to the Enterprise.”

“She’d never believe that she’d be accepted.”

“Then suggest she talk to Dr. Crusher about career advice. That should be less daunting.”

“Good idea.” He looked up at her again. “But are you sure you want me to go?”

“No,” she said with a shake of her head. “I absolutely don’t want you to go, but I also know that this could be the very best thing for you. That, and I’m leaning towards taking a significant amount of time off to be a mother. That’s a chance that only comes by once.”

He nodded with understanding. “All right, but that doesn’t deal with the issue of next week. The Enterprise is going to the Danoba system. That doesn’t seem high on our priority list.”

“There are a handful of colonies in that direction that could use some attention, including Sirius IX. I believe it will make a much greater impact if someone who survived that explosion is there.”

“I can see that, plus I was a witness to that conference when you turned their attitudes around.”

She nodded in encouragement. “And you can remind them about that. I have to weigh the pros and cons of having you here and having you do my job out there. Honestly, there’s no one I trust more to represent me than you.”

“Thank you,” he said earnestly.

With an understanding smile, she said, “I’ll be fine.”

“Whether you like it or not, right?”

“Right.” She straightened up and stacked her PADDs into a satchel. “I’ll try to give you and Judy daily reports, but I expect the same from you. Understood?”

“Aye, Admiral,” he said with a small laugh.

Justin walked into the house and stopped in the foyer to take a comprehensive scan. He held his hand up to the open door and instructed, “Stand by, Admiral.”

Chakotay came in from the study when he heard the voice. “Hello Justin, I wasn’t expecting you two so early.”

Before he had a chance to respond, Kathryn walked in and asked, “Do we really need to go through this whole process when Chakotay is already here?”

Justin replied, “I’d rather not take any shortcuts with the security plan we have in place.”

“Fine,” she waved him further into the house. “Proceed. Make yourself at home.”

“Would you indulge me by remaining here while I make the rounds?”

She nodded with resignation. “Check for lasagna ingredients while you’re in the kitchen.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Once he was gone, Chakotay welcomed Kathryn into his arms. “Lasagna? He’s cooking for us tonight?”

“Not a chance.” She rose up on her toes and gave her husband a kiss. “Tonight is just for us.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“He and Sue will be ‘camping’ here next week.”

“Camping?” He furrowed his eyebrows. “Outside?”

Shrugging, she said, “That was the phrase he used. They feel the need to keep me company while you’re gone.”

“Ohhh,” he chuckled. “Good thing you’re so accommodating to ‘their’ needs.”

“I thought so,” she said with a wink.

He ran his fingers up the back of her neck and massaged it. “Feeling okay? You look a little pale.”

“Once Justin is finished, I’d really like to take a nap.”

“I think that can be arranged.” He reached up further and removed the clip that was holding her hair. As the strands cascaded down her back, he asked, “Alone or with a friend?”

“I’ll most likely be asleep before you can even crawl in beside me, but I would love to be held. Need to get my fill before you leave tomorrow.”

“Your fill? Does that work?” He gently guided her head until she had it resting on his shoulder and then continued his massage of her scalp.

“Mmmm, gonna fall asleep standing up if you keep doing that.”

“Go ahead,” he whispered as he held her tighter. “I’ve got you.”

“Can I change my mind about you going?”

“Sure, but I still have to go.”

“I outrank you.”

“True, but I promised.” He kissed the side of her head. “Besides, you’ll be busy changing the hearts of over a hundred council members.”

She lifted her head to look at him. “You’d better not be changing any hearts next week, mister.”

Laughing, he shook his head. “My heart is permanently yours, love.”

“Better be,” she joked, giving him a mock glare.

“What about you? Should I be worried with all those good-looking councilmen?”

She nearly guffawed. “Even if I wasn’t in love with you, they’re all aliens.”

“Hasn’t stopped you before,” he goaded.

“You’re bringing up Kashyk? Again?” With an overly-exaggerated sigh, she turned and started up the stairs. “Tell Justin that I’m going to bed.”

“Kathryn?”

Trying to hide her smile, she turned around, looked to make sure Justin was out of ear shot, and whispered, “After dinner, I’ll show you exactly what kind of man I want in my bed.”

Trying not to laugh, he asked, “Not Kashyk?”

She shuddered and acted as if she were sick to her stomach. “Why did you ever let me kiss him?”

“Let you?”

Poking the air towards him, she said, “Your fault. You and that plan of yours.”

Justin came in and said, “You’re secure, but you need garlic.”

“Why? Will garlic ward off unwanted aliens?” she asked.

Chakotay laughed. “Only if you plan on kissing them.”

Stretching her body like a lazy cat, Kathryn lay completely satiated in her bed. She turned her head towards her husband, a satisfied smile on her face. “You make me feel exquisite.”

He propped himself up on his side facing her. “I’m certainly glad to hear that.”

“I bet,” she laughed. “If you keep your woman satisfied, you get to keep her in your bed.”

“Is that a quote?”

“No, but it would’ve been really clever if I had thought of one.”

He smiled at her, clearly amused. “It’s not exactly an insult that you’re unable to be clever after what I’ve just done to you.”

“Good point.” She hummed as she arched her back and moved a little closer to him. “Do you have to leave in the morning? It’s only a two-day trip. You could still make it if you waited until Saturday.”

“Yes, but the Dean asked me to take some appointments with prospective cadets this weekend.” He grabbed a tri-corder off the nightstand and turned it on to scan her. “How are you feeling?”

“Cozy.” Kathryn frowned at the device and almost pushed it away until she heard the beeps indicating that he was taking a blood gas reading. “Do I still look pale?”

“A little. I’m transmitting these readings to Dr. Joe. He’ll let us know if there’s anything to worry about.” Chakotay studied the read-out, tapped something in, and then nodded. “The good news is that your blood sugar is fine.”

“It ought to be after that delicious dinner. You outdid yourself.”

“Thank you,” he said as he reached behind him for a hypospray. “Your metabolism is a little off...”

Chakotay’s commbadge chirped, interrupting their conversation. “And there he is.” Since his jacket was on a nearby chair, he called out, “Open channel. Chakotay here.”

Joe spoke, “Captain, I got the readings. Do you have a dose of tri-ox available?”

“I was just about to give it to her.”

“Then by all means, proceed.” He continued speaking as Chakotay followed his instructions. “Captain, in the morning, I’d like to pay you a house call. Will you be available?”

“Sure. Anything wrong?”

“Nothing that can’t wait until morning. I want to re-balance your metabolism.”

She grimaced. “You make it sound as if I’m a piece of machinery that needs adjusting.”

“A very complex machine, Admiral. You’ll be fine if you keep your activity level down for the rest of the evening.”

“Darn. I was hoping to run a marathon,” she joked.

“I’m trying not to be indelicate, Admiral.”

Chakotay replied, “Understood, Doctor. Anything else?”

“No, not at the moment. However, if you happen to wake during the night, take another scan for me.”

“Will do. Good night, Doctor.”

“Goodnight. Safe travels, Captain.”

When the comm channel closed, Kathryn sighed. “That hologram knows far too much about our sex life.”

“He only has your best interest at heart.”

“Yes, well...”

“You’re doing a lot better. Did you know that you’ve gained six kilos since the wedding?”

“How many women would think it a good thing to have gained that much weight after two months of marriage?”

He gave her a simple kiss before putting the medical equipment back on the nightstand. “Personally, I think it’s wonderful. Even if you didn’t need the weight for your health, I would consider it a compliment to my cooking and care.”

Shaking her head, she looked up at him with enjoyment. “I think you’re just saying that to get on my good side.”

“I’m not already there?”

She glanced away from him and then back. With a shrug, she said, “One side seems as good as the other.”

He chuckled as he drew the sheet down to her legs. “Let’s see what we’ve got here.”

“What? You didn’t take note twenty minutes ago when you were licking me?”

“I was a little pre-occupied.”

“You seemed quite intent...” She dropped her mouth open in pleasure as his hand wafted over her mons. “How much tri-ox do we have?”

With a huge grin, his hand drifted across her tummy and over her hips. “Back on Voyager, I often imagined how soft the curves of your body must’ve been.”

Eyebrows furrowed, she asked, “You thought I was soft? That’s not exactly a compliment.”

“Oh, but it is. You’re certainly not a ‘soft’ commander by any means.” He glanced at her eyes to gauge her reaction before his fingers ran along the side of her hip. “But this curve here, it was more pronounced then.”

“Towards the latter years, it was entirely too pronounced.”

He shook his head as he leaned over her. “I disagree. I fantasized about how nice it would be to grab your hips and pull you against me for a deep kiss.”

“Where did this fantasy kiss take place?” She pulled him down to lie on top of her.

“Many places.” He touched his lips to hers for a soft, gentle kiss. “In the turbolift, I would’ve pressed you against the wall.” Their lips drifted together again, this time holding the intimacy a little longer. “In your ready room, perhaps I would’ve had you sitting on top of your desk.” His mouth hovered over hers. “Or against the railing.”

“I fantasized about that, too,” she whispered.

“Did you now?” He nibbled on her lower lip as her eyes drifted close.

“Mmmhmm. On my desk, after you got angry with me about something.”

He chuckled. “Did you ever instigate a fight with the hopes I’d end it with a kiss?”

“No, but I dreamed about it at night.”

Nuzzling her nose, he whispered, “When I dreamed about silencing you with a kiss, it was usually in the briefing room.”

“With the staff present?” She ran her fingers through his hair, coming to rest on the back of his neck.

“Noooo,” he admonished. “Afterwards, I would’ve stuck around to give you a piece of my mind, and then you would’ve tried to argue back, but wouldn’t have been able to.”

“Show me.”

He closed his lips against hers, leaving their mouths parted so his tongue could dive inside and stifle any protest she might give.

A low moan rose from her throat as his kiss deepened and re-ignited the embers of their recent love-making.

He tucked his hands down between her bottom and the mattress, curving his fingers around the soft, bare skin before he broke the kiss. “Then I would’ve held your womanly, sexy derriere.”

“I would’ve liked that.” Her chin rose as his kisses moved down her throat.

“Would you have thrown me in the brig if I had run my hands all over your body?” He moved to stretch out along side her so he could caress down her legs and back up again.

“Probably, but it would’ve been worth it.”

He laughed softly. “I think I would’ve had you pressed up against the bulkhead, and then I would’ve left you wanting more.”

“Tease.”

“My hope would’ve been that you would’ve crawled into my bed later that night.”

“How deliciously improper that would’ve been,” she said with a deep, husky laugh.

“Very, but as the old saying goes... If I’d known then what I know now, I would’ve changed a few things.”

“You would’ve kissed me?”

“Daily.” He drew his hand down over her breast, eliciting a gasp, and then settled on her stomach. “And I would’ve touched you more. I would’ve made you feel beautiful with all your luscious curves.”

As she watched him caress her belly, she said, “It’s a common perception that men prefer women who are very slender with flat stomachs.”

“A common mis-perception. I can’t recall even one conversation with a man who has said, ‘What I really like is for a woman to have zero body fat.’”

She frowned. “Seriously?”

“What? You don’t believe me?”

“I’m not going to mention names, but there was a female on Voyager who many of the male crew ogled over, and she had zero body fat.”

He rolled his eyes. “When that much body is put on display like that, it’s hard not to notice. And I’d like to point out that most women with zero body fat have no breasts. The female in question is an oddity.”

“Whatever you say, dear.”

Glancing up at her, he shook his head. “Let me just tell you what I like, shall I?”

“By all means. The floor is yours.”

“I much prefer to have you soft and supple.” He cupped her breast and squeezed it gently.

Kathryn arched her back, thrusting her breast into his hand.

“And natural, malleable.” Much to his delight, her nipple hardened under his touch. “And responsive. Did you ever notice that the other female in question didn’t show hardened nipples?”

“Can’t say that I cared.”

He smirked as his hand drifted back down to her belly. “More here means more to snuggle against, more warmth, and more to connect with when our bodies are joined.”

“I see,” she said with a laugh.

His hand moved to her thighs. “Down here, I like a well-muscled, strong leg. I noticed the first time we made love just how powerful your thighs were.”

Kathryn pulled her knees up so she could look at her legs with him. They appeared thin and shapely, but not anywhere as strong and muscular as they used to be. “I lost those.”

“They’ll be back,” he said with assurance as he lightly massaged the long muscles. Drifting back to her stomach, he whispered, “We’ll work on it together after this little one arrives.”

“Are you ready for fatherhood?”

He smiled sheepishly and ducked his chin. “I believe I am.”

“I believe it, too. You’re going to make a wonderful father.”

“Thank you.”

“I can picture you walking around the house with a tiny baby nestled on your shoulder, making bottles, changing diapers, singing lullabies.”

A beautiful smile graced his lips. “I’m really looking forward to this. We should start working on the nursery.”

“We should tell Mom first, but I still think it’s best to wait until I’m showing. Just in case.”

“Yeah.” Chakotay looked down at her tummy again. “Seems like that should be soon.”

“I’d rather delay it as long as possible.”

“I know.” He leaned over her and kissed the soft, fleshy part of her stomach. “Take care of your Mommy while I’m gone. Okay?”

“Only ten days.”

“Just in time for your birthday.”

“I’m looking forward to it already.”

After saying an emotional goodbye to her husband, then letting Dr. Joe tend to her medical needs, Kathryn spent her Friday morning at the office tying up loose ends. Before lunch, she gave an interview to a reporter from the Fednews Journal for an article that would be published on Sunday. The questions were primarily directed towards her health, her marriage, and how she was adjusting to being back at work. She didn’t mind because she knew it would keep up her celebrity status, a tool she needed to continue her work.

As she walked the reporter out of her office, she saw Beverly Crusher waiting for her. A huge smile lit her face, but when the reporter turned to say good bye, Kathryn was all business again.

“Thank you for your time, Admiral. Would you like to see a copy of the article before it’s published?”

“That would be nice, thank you. Forward it to Lieutenant Brooks and she’ll see that it gets to me.”

“Enjoy your weekend,” he said as he walked out.

When he was gone, Beverly stood up and pulled Kathryn into a hug. “It’s so good to see you, and you look wonderful!”

“Thank you,” Kathryn said as she pulled back to look at her friend. “What brings you down to Earth?”

“You, of course. Brooks penciled me in so we could have lunch. Are you game?”

“Absolutely, I’d love to.” She put her hand on her chest apologetically. “Although, I’m afraid we’ll have to eat in.”

Justin said, “Actually, Admiral, we made arrangements for you and Dr. Crusher to go to Luigi’s.”

Kathryn’s lips parted in surprise and then she looked at Beverly. “Well, this is a surprise. I haven’t been out in public much since last summer.”

“Shall we go, then?”

“Andiamo!”

Justin said, “We’re going to transport you to the sidewalk in front of the restaurant. The building has been scanned for…”

“I don’t need to know,” she cut him off. “I don’t want any nightmares about it.”

“All right,” he said with a smile. “Just don’t speak about anything confidential, and the customers in the restaurant don’t know you’re coming.”

“Sounds like an adventure,” Beverly said, her eyes wide with excitement.

The two women walked slowly down the corridor to the transporter room, arm in arm, talking like school girls.

Beverly asked, “How is married life?”

“I highly recommend it. Think you’ll ever give it another go?”

“Maybe,” she said with a small grin. “When the personnel changes start happening on the Enterprise, I might suggest it to Jean-Luc.”

“In the middle of upheaval?”

“When you put it that way, maybe I should wait.”

“Or suggest it now so that he can get used to the idea before he has to get used to new people.”

“That definitely has some merit. We’ve just been keeping status quo for so long.” Beverly shook her head in amusement. “We’re set in our routines. How would we manage living together? Sharing a bathroom alone could be a nightmare.”

“Well, sharing quarters comes with its own set of fringe benefits that make sharing a bathroom pale in comparison.”

“True,” she said with a laugh. “And those benefits sure make him a better captain!”

“Men,” Kathryn mused as they arrived at the transporter room.

Beverly asked, “Are you ready for this?”

“I hope you don’t mind being at the center of attention.”

“I won’t be. I’ll just be sitting next to her.”

Justin communicated with the security team on location and then stepped on the platform with Kathryn and Beverly. The two women let go of each other just before Justin said, “Energize.”

When they rematerialized, the people on the street stopped to look at the commotion, and then gasped in surprise when they saw who it was. Kathryn smiled graciously at everyone, waved, and then went into the restaurant with Beverly.

The host greeted them immediately. “Admiral Janeway, Dr. Crusher, it’s a true honor to welcome you to Luigi’s. Would you follow me to your table?”

“Thank you,” Kathryn said as she looked around the now-quiet restaurant. Everyone had stopped talking the instant they saw her. She smiled at the diners in the same manner she had greeted those outside.

After they were seated, Beverly said, “That went much smoother than I expected.”

“What did you expect?”

“The media, I suppose. You’re on the Fednews so often that I assumed they followed you everywhere.”

“They used to. Don’t be surprised if there’s a media flurry outside when we leave.”

“Are you okay with that?”

“You know, I think I am. The public hasn’t seen me in awhile. This might generate a little commotion that would be good going into next week.”

The waiter came over and offered a bottle of wine. “The finest we have for our honored guests.”

Kathryn inclined her head in appreciation. “I really appreciate your generosity, but I have to return to work after lunch. Perhaps just a glass of iced tea?”

“Very well, and for you signora?” he asked Beverly.

“I would love a glass of white wine, but your house variety will be fine. Save that bottle for a special occasion.”

“As you wish.”

When he was gone, Kathryn frowned. “I just hate turning people down.”

“When do you think you’ll announce your news?”

Kathryn put down the menu and sighed. “When it’s obvious, I suppose. I’d rather people focus on other things.”

“Could win you some public favor, though.”

“Then perhaps I should announce it when the public is not so happy with me.”

“I have a feeling that will never happen, Kathryn.”

“Fame is fleeting.”

The waiter came back with two house salads and took their order.

As they began eating, Beverly asked, “Are you ready for next week in Paris?”

“I believe so. We need to get the ball rolling with the council because the last four months have really hurt our momentum.”

“I seriously doubt that. After all, you’re as close to a martyr as anyone would want to become.”

Kathryn said softly, “I can assure you that I didn’t *want* any part of that ordeal.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Beverly said as she placed her hand over Kathryn’s.

“I know, but I feel like I shouldn’t use my ordeal to gain anything, as if I’m thankful that it happened.”

“Think of it as using the incident against those who were behind it.”

She thought about the suggestion for a moment. “They tried to do away with me and it only made my popularity greater.”

“Exactly. That which doesn’t kill us makes us stronger.”

“While that’s not the case with my health, I suppose it applies to my standing in the public eye.”

“Wasn’t it you who said something about taking advantages of opportunities?”

Kathryn rolled her eyes. “What? Did you memorize my speeches or something?”

“No, but that first interview you gave really stuck with me.”

She waved it off. “Let’s talk about something else. How is your son?”

“Wesley?”

“I heard he was back on Earth.”

“No, he came back to Starfleet, but he has been assigned to the Titan.”

“The Titan?”

“A Luna-class starship that’s being built at Utopia Planetia. Will Riker is taking command of it later this summer when it’s finished. Will’s there right now and we’ll pick him up on the way out of the solar system.”

“And Wesley is already onboard?”

“Yes,” Beverly said proudly. “He’s on the engineering team that is transitioning the ship from the building stage to the operations stage.”

“Well that’s exciting!” Kathryn reminisced, “Remember when we were young and eager, ready to explore? It would’ve been so exciting to do what your son is doing.”

“If I remember correctly, you had your own brand new ship a little over eight years ago.”

Kathryn smiled. “I still miss her sometimes.”

“But now you’ve got the ‘fringe benefits’ of not having Chakotay as your second in command.” She winked.

“Quite true,” she said with a sigh as she folded her hands in her lap. “Do you worry about the fraternization rules with Jean-Luc?”

“No.” Beverly set her fork down. “After serving together for fifteen years, I think we’ve earned the right to fraternize.”

“Long before now, I’m sure.” Kathryn looked up as the waiter took their salad plates and set down their meals. “Thank you.”

“You’re most welcome, Admiral, Doctor.”

When he left Beverly smothered a smile. “He seems almost smitten with you, Kathryn.”

“Does he?”

“Given the chance, I bet you could charm a Ferengi out of his third quarter profits.”

“I’m not sure the Ferengi are susceptible to charm.”

“You never know until you try.”

“Should I ever have a reason to, I’ll let you know how it goes.”

Beverly glanced out at the restaurant and said, “Your public seems to be clamoring for your attention.”

“Should I look?”

“Not until you’re finished eating. The clientele are casting glances in our direction, hoping to catch your eye.”

“I should probably think of something to say.”

“Need to talk through it?”

“They’ll either ask me about my personal life or my upcoming trip to Paris.”

“What would you tell them about your personal life?”

“Mind their own business?” she asked with a wink.

“I’m sure that would only increase your popularity.”

Kathryn laughed. “I’m pretty experienced with redirecting those questions. I give them just enough to keep their interest.”

“So they can feel like they know you.”

“Right. As for Paris, I’m not sure. What do you think they want to know right now?”

“Hmmm. Maybe that you’re ready to take the bull by the horns and whip the council into shape.”

Biting back her smile, she replied, “I’m sure that would go over really well, and Admiral Khurma would love it.”

“You’re rather sarcastic, aren’t you?”

“When I’m not in front of an audience.”

“That, I know. I knew your public persona long before I got to see this side of you.”

“And now that you know me better, do you have less confidence in my ability to straighten out our government?”

“More, actually.”

Kathryn clicked her tongue. “That’s not what I needed to hear.”

“Why not?”

“Because my public persona, as you call it, is that of a miracle worker. I’m just a person.”

“A real person who can charm...”

“Don’t say it.”

“...the spots off a trill.”

The two friends continued their lunch until Beverly was so distracted by the patrons in the restaurant that they couldn’t carry on their conversation.

Kathryn said, “Well, I guess we’d better get on with this. Do I have any spinach in my teeth?”

“Smile.” Beverly gave her the once over and nodded in approval. “You look great.”

Her eyes widened with amusement as they stood up to leave. As soon as Kathryn turned around, the restaurant became quiet again and everyone was staring at her. If not for her fame, she’d wonder if her hair had suddenly turned bright purple. Instead, she smoothed out the front of her tunic and began walking, nodding kindly to those who smiled at her.

A man suddenly stood up in front of her, startling Kathryn for a moment. Justin was there immediately and put his hand on the man’s shoulder.

The man look flustered as he said, “My apologies, Admiral. I was just... well, I... I wanted to talk to you.”

Kathryn looked at Justin and said, “Lieutenant Jarvin, I don’t think he means any harm.”

“No, no, of course not,” the man said. “I would never!”

“What do you want to ask me?”

“Oh, uh... I just wanted to say that I’m a huge supporter of yours, and that I appreciate everything you’re trying to do.”

“Thank you, sir. I’m grateful for your support.”

“And I wanted to tell you that I think you’re amazing.” He shook his head in awe. “You’re my idol.”

Kathryn felt her cheeks warm, knowing that everyone in the restaurant could hear what they were saying. “Your admiration and loyalty mean a great deal to me, but don’t forget that I’m only one human.”

“Yes, but...”

A woman next to the man stood up and said, “I’m his wife, and I think what he’s trying to say is that we believe in you. Everyone we know believes in you, and we wish you the best of luck next week.”

“Thank you, both.” Kathryn reached out to shake the man’s hand, but he seemed frozen, so his wife accepted Kathryn’s handshake instead. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I should get back to work.”

“Oh, of course, of course,” the man said nervously as he stepped aside. “An honor to meet you, Admiral. A real honor.”

“Thank you,” she smiled kindly as she walked past him. Kathryn glanced back at Beverly who was grinning with joy as they walked out of the restaurant.

Kathryn was instantly assaulted with flashes, cameras, and reporters clamoring to get her attention. She squared her shoulders and marched forward into the tumult where she raised her hands for them to stop shouting. It took a moment for them to quiet down, but once they did, she said, “Good afternoon, everyone. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen you last.”

She instantly recognized a young man, but forgot from where. “You, sir, what would you like to ask me?”

“Admiral, ma’am, I’m from the ‘Dine and Dash’ magazine.”

“Oh, that’s right. I believe I told you over a year ago that the next time you caught me coming out of a restaurant, I would tell you how much I enjoyed it.”

He lit up and nodded. “That’s right, ma’am. I’m surprised that you remember.”

Tapping her temple, she said, “I have a head for details. Luigi’s served us an outstanding lunch, and I highly recommend the restaurant to anyone who has an appetite for southern Italian cuisine.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“You’re welcome.” She smiled brightly and nodded to the only other reporter that looked like she wasn’t about to jump out of her skin with eagerness. “What’s your question?”

“Admiral Janeway, have you enjoyed being back at work?”

“Very much so. Four months is a long time to be away, and it’s my hope that we haven’t lost momentum in our efforts to improve the troubled situations throughout our quadrant.” She looked to another young reporter. “Your question, miss?”

“In your most recent press conference, you spoke about your upcoming week with the Federation Council. Is there anything else you’d like to tell us?”

“I believe I covered the gist of what we’ll be doing. We’re taking a specific set of issues and concerns to the Council for deliberation.”

“May we ask which issues?”

“Ones that are common concerns quadrant-wide. Some are requests to reinstate programs that were discontinued during the war. Others are policies and procedures that have affected many of our worlds. On Tuesday, these issues will be opened up for public debate, but it would be premature for me to do that at this time.”

A reporter blurted out, “Did your imprisonment impact your willingness to speak out against the current government, Admiral?”

Kathryn felt Beverly’s hand on her back in an offer of support. “No, it did not. I have never said anything derogatory about our current government because doing so would not support my efforts of affecting positive change. The members of the Federation Council are hard-working individuals who want the best for each of the worlds they represent.”

“I wasn’t referring to the council, Admiral.”

“Noted. Next question?” She felt her blood pressure starting to rise and willed herself to be calm, relying on Beverly’s quiet touch on her back as a source of strength.

Another reporter stated, “There are rumors that council members were coerced into making certain key decisions. Is this true?”

“I have no proof that would confirm that assumption.”

Someone asked, “Have you been coerced, Admiral?”

Kathryn was startled as she felt another hand on her shoulder. She turned to see that it was Admiral Khurma.

He said to the reporters, “It is not within Starfleet’s jurisdiction to speak for the Federation Council. I would like to encourage all members of the Federation to write to your representatives and share with them your concerns.”

Reporters began to shout questions at him, and he held up his hand to stop them. When they were quiet, he said, “If anyone has a question for Admiral Janeway that does not pertain to the council, you may ask it. One at a time.” He turned to Kathryn and looked at her carefully as if to ascertain her wellbeing.

She nodded confidently and gave him a reassuring smile before directing her attention to the reporters again. "Question?"

"Is there anything you would like to tell the Federation before next week, Admiral?"

"Absolutely. Take to heart what Admiral Khurma just said. Your Council representatives want to hear from you, and it is the goal of each and every one of us that we work together to bring strength and vitality back to the Federation by embracing peace, cooperation, mutual understanding, and compassion for others. Pointing fingers and casting blame will not bring resolution. Positive change will."

One of the negative reporters asked, "Do you really believe that, Admiral?"

"Yes, I really do. When issues are brought to you, keep an open mind. When changes are presented, don't dismiss them without giving them serious thought. It is my job to listen to concerns and communicate those to the council. It is the council's job to decide how to proceed from there."

Someone who hadn't spoken yet said, "Don't discount your ability to influence their decisions, Admiral."

Kathryn's mouth twitched, but she did not answer. "Thank you, everyone. It's time for me to return to my office so that I may prepare for next week."

The reporters continued shouting questions, but she turned and walked away, leaving it up to security to control them. When they were clear of other individuals, she, Beverly, Khurma, and Justin transported back to her office building.

Upon arrival, Kathryn turned to Khurma and said gently, "I didn't need to be rescued, Admiral."

"Hmph," he replied and signaled the transporter operator to leave them alone. "And how were you going to answer that question about being coerced?"

"No, of course."

"It was a dumb question," Beverly interjected. "Who, in their right mind, would actually reply with a yes?"

Khurma said, "The point wasn't to get an answer, the point was to cast doubt on Kathryn's character."

"Why would a reporter want to do that?" Beverly asked.

"Might not have been a reporter," Kathryn said with a sigh. "Regardless, the doubt is cast that I might be susceptible to coercion."

“Everyone is susceptible, Kathryn.” He looked at her carefully. “Feeling all right?”

“Do I not look well?”

When Justin pulled out the medical tri-corder, Beverly asked, “May I?”

“Of course, Doctor.”

“I feel fine,” Kathryn said.

Beverly scanned her and reported, “Nothing abnormal compared to your most recent medical exam.”

“You’ve been monitoring her records from the Enterprise?” Khurma asked.

“Yes, at her request.” Beverly smiled at Kathryn and handed the tri-corder back to Justin.

Kathryn explained, “I believe that two heads are better than one, especially when one holographic head has never had a child.”

“I can see that,” Khurma said as he squeezed Kathryn’s forearm. “I want you to get a lot of rest this weekend. Next week’s going to be stressful and I need you at your very best.”

Tilting her head, Kathryn asked, “Do you say that to all of the admirals?”

“Only the ones I feel fatherly towards.” He patted her arm and turned to Beverly. “A pleasure to see you, Doctor. Give Jean-Luc my best?”

“Of course, Admiral.”

“Good day to you both,” Khurma said as he left the room.

“Kathryn,” Beverly said.

“It’s time, isn’t it?”

“For me to go? I’m afraid so.” She held Kathryn’s arms and rubbed them gently. “It’s been wonderful to see you.”

Kathryn pulled Beverly into her arms. “Too many goodbyes today.”

Still hugging, Beverly asked, “Me and Commander Kim?”

“And Chakotay.” She held on for a moment longer before letting go. “Take care of yourself.”

“I will, and I’ll keep monitoring you to make sure you do the same.”

“I appreciate that.” Kathryn turned to Justin and said, “Would you call the transporter operator back in?”

Beverly pointed out, “If security on this building weren’t so high, I could just call the Enterprise.”

“They seem to think someone worth protecting works here.”

“Imagine that,” Beverly said with a laugh. She told the transporter operator, “Would you send me to the Enterprise in orbit?”

“As soon as you’re ready, Dr. Crusher.”

She stepped up onto the platform and looked down at Kathryn. “Show them who’s boss next week.”

“I intend to.” Kathryn winked and said, “Good bye, friend.”

“Good bye. Energize.”

She turned to Justin with a sad smile and said, “Two down, one to go.”

“Goodbyes?” He walked through the door first to check the corridor and then motioned for her to come through.

“Yes. It was good to see her, but I wish she could’ve stayed longer.”

“She’ll be back, and so will Harry and Chakotay.”

“Not soon enough.” She looked at Justin and said, “Thank you for arranging the lunch today. I know that was a lot of trouble.”

“You’re worth it.”

“Glad you think so, because next week is going to be even more trouble.”

“We’re ready,” he said as he opened the door to her office for her.

Kathryn met with Harry that afternoon before sending him off to board the Enterprise. She decided not to walk him to the transporter room since he had Amy standing by to bid him a proper farewell. After he left, Kathryn couldn’t help but think he might have been right about her needing him with her, but she also needed him representing her in space, and it was time that she stood on her own two feet again.

Deciding it was time to get home, Kathryn tidied up her desk and shoved all of her PADDs into her satchel. “Lights off,” she said as she walked out the door.

Her staff was gathered around Sue’s desk, speaking in hushed tones. As soon as they saw her, they instantly became all smiles.

Sue said, “Admiral! Are you ready to go?”

Kathryn gave them all a suspicious look as she tried to discern the reason behind their odd behavior. “You’re either planning a surprise, or there’s something you don’t want to tell me.”

“No, no, nothing’s wrong,” Judy said quickly. “Justin will be right back.”

Blinking slowly, Kathryn said, “I didn’t ask if something was wrong. Spill it.”

Judy, Sue, and Lydia all looked nervously at each other until Sue came forward. “You received a threat. Justin is discussing it with the rest of the security team.”

“And so it begins,” she said with a sigh as she put her satchel down on a chair. “Do you have a copy of it?”

“No, Justin confiscated it as soon as it arrived. He was not happy.”

“I’d be a little concerned if he was. What did it say and how did it arrive?”

“It was on a PADD in the afternoon mail delivery that the regular courier dropped off. Nothing unusual.”

“And the threat?” Kathryn prodded.

“Something about knowing your place if you want to keep your family.”

“And?”

“That was it.”

Kathryn looked at the ceiling, took a deep breath, and blew it out. She looked around absently and finally sat down next to her satchel. “Have a seat, ladies. The men will likely be discussing this for awhile.”

“Do you want to join them?” Judy asked.

“Not really. I’m sure Justin is on top of it, and I’m not about to let whoever sent that to intimidate me that easily.”

“Okay...,” Judy replied hesitantly.

Kathryn explained, “If it was just text on a PADD that wasn’t hand delivered by an infiltrator, it’s really not that much of a threat. There’s no proof that my family is in danger.”

Sue sat at her desk and began shutting off her terminal and putting things away. “I see your point. Would you like something to eat while we wait, Admiral?”

“No, but I probably should. Is that fruit basket still in the break room?”

Lydia said, “I’ll get something for you. An apple?”

“That would be nice. Thank you, Lieutenant.”

Sue called out after Lydia, “Make sure you scan it first.”

Kathryn rolled her eyes and started picking the lint off of her pants.

Changing the subject, Judy asked, “What are your plans for the weekend, Admiral?”

“Oh, not too much. Our friends, the Parises, are coming over tomorrow for awhile. Mostly, I want to acclimate myself to European time.”

Sue said, “I’ll use the time that they’re at your house to pack.”

Lydia returned and asked, “What did I miss?”

“My exciting weekend agenda of sleeping and talking to B’Elanna.”

“Oh,” Lydia said quickly as she handed the apple to Kathryn.

“What?”

“What what?” Lydia asked, and then grimaced. “Sorry, Admiral.”

“Relax, Lydia. May I call you by your first name?”

“Of course, Admiral. I just get anxious around B’Elanna. Tom is fine, but I guess I don’t relate to her.”

Kathryn took a bite of the apple and nodded her understanding. “Took me at least a year to become comfortable socializing with her, but once you find something in common, she’s very easy to talk to.”

“What do you talk about? If I may ask?”

“At first, we talked about engineering. You could try that. Ask her about her work.”

“What she does is so far above my head, I can’t even imagine.”

“Not really. Well, maybe on some levels, but she’s doing ship design. Ask her about the ops system they’re installing.”

“That could work.”

Kathryn smiled at the younger women who seemed to be hanging on her every word. She decided that she didn’t spend enough time with them on a personal level and made a promise to herself to change that. “Over the last year, my conversations with B’Elanna have included work, men, children, the wedding, decorating our houses... the usual things one would talk about with a friend.”

“You talk about men with her?”

“Well, sure. We know each other’s husbands quite well.”

Sue nodded. “That’s true. You knew Tom long before she did, and she knew Chakotay.”

Judy asked, “She has one child?”

“Miral is almost seventeen months now. I’ve been wanting to get together with B’Elanna to talk about motherhood. We haven’t told my family, yet, so I can’t talk to my sister.”

“So that’s the plan for tomorrow?” Sue asked.

“That it is. Babies, maternity clothes, and nursery decor.”

At that moment, Justin and Mark came in looking very serious. “Admiral,” Justin said with a nod.

“Am I secure?” she asked.

“For the moment. I assume Sue told you about the threat?”

Kathryn nodded. “And I have no intentions of changing my plans.”

“I don’t believe that will be necessary, Admiral. Not only did the assailant use an indirect method to deliver this to you, there’s no proof that he or she has access to your family.”

She looked at the three women with a slight smirk, and then asked Justin, “Would you check on adding security to my mother’s home?”

“Already done, Admiral. And your sister’s as well.”

“Good work, Lieutenant. Let’s head home, shall we?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’d like to let Chakotay know about this as well, but I wanted your permission to contact him.”

She pursed her lips and sighed as she thought. “There’s no way we can guarantee we’d have a secure channel when speaking to him, is there?”

“Not while he’s in transit, ma’am.”

“Then let’s hold off until this evening. I don’t want to keep him in the dark, but this is less of a threat than what we encountered in Greece.”

“As you wish, but he’ll want to know.”

“Yes, he will, but I don’t want to alarm him, either. He’s worried enough, and there’s nothing he can do from where he is. Let’s see how the week unfolds, shall we?”

“Aye, Admiral.”

She stood up, tossed the apple core into the recycler, and said, “I’m ready when you are.”

“Give me just a moment to alert security and we’ll be on our way. Still want lasagna?”

“I’m looking forward to it.” She turned her attention to Judy and Lydia. “Ladies, we’ll see you in a week?”

“Good luck in Paris, Admiral,” Judy said.

“And have fun tomorrow,” Lydia added.

“Adieu,” Kathryn replied with a smile.

That evening, Kathryn keyed up a connection with Chakotay. Once his image appeared, her shoulders dropped and she felt instantly more relaxed. “Hi.”

“Hey there, beautiful. You had a quite a day.”

“Fednews?”

“You were on all the news. During dinner in the officer’s mess, you were quite the topic of conversation.”

“I went out to lunch,” she said with barely contained joy. “It was so nice to be able to do that.”

“With Beverly,” he added happily. “Any problems other than with the press?”

“Some slightly disconcerting hero worship in the restaurant, but it was nothing compared to what happened outside.”

“I’m not sure if Khurma did you any favors by stepping in.”

She shrugged. “It could have escalated out of control, I guess, but I think I could’ve managed it.”

“I’ve heard that you’re not one to be trifled with.”

Grinning, she said, “Spread the word, would you?”

“I’ll make a note.” More serious, he asked, “How was your day otherwise?”

She took a deep breath, trying to decide how much to tell him. “How secure is this line?”

“Not one hundred percent. Did something happen?”

“I know you want to be kept informed, but I don’t think we should risk discussing it.”

His expression hardened and he leaned forward. “Try to tell me.”

Kathryn pressed her lips together as she tried to figure out what to say. Sighing, she said, “I’m too tired to try to think of a way to tell you without compromising security.”

Chakotay’s eyes narrowed. “Stand by. I have to request security’s approval, but I’m going to re-initialize this transmission on a secure channel.”

The screen went dark, and Kathryn let her head fall back with a groan. “I should not have said anything.”

A moment later, the comm terminal chimed and she keyed in her passcode. When she saw her husband, she shook her head in dismay. “I would’ve had no trouble whatsoever keeping this from you a year ago.”

“Then we’ve made progress. What’s going on?”

Slightly ruffled, she said, “Watch it, mister.”

“Sorry, I get terse when I’m worried.”

“I’m aware of that, but you’re about to step into something you don’t want to.” She gave him a warning look before asking, “Did you scan your quarters for listening devices?”

“Yes,” he said coolly.

She brushed her hand through her hair before focusing back on him. “A PADD was delivered by courier to my office with a threat.”

All business, he asked, “What kind of threat?”

“I didn’t see it. Justin took it from Sue and called a security meeting before I knew what was going on.”

“Do I need to call Justin?” he said almost accusingly. “I can’t believe he hasn’t called me, yet. We have an understanding.”

“Why? Don’t you trust me?”

“Of course I do. I just want to be kept apprised on your security.”

“I can appreciate your intentions, but unless you want a full-fledged argument with me, you might want to watch your tone.”

He opened his mouth to reply, but closed it before he said anything else. “I realize that you’re under a lot of stress...”

“Only you know how much.” She took a deep breath and then continued their conversation. “Justin wanted to contact you this afternoon, but he thought I should be the one to tell you.”

“Good, then he can keep his job.”

“Chakotay,” she admonished.

“Did you get the gist of the threat?”

“Something about knowing my place.”

“Sounds like Liyal.”

“That’s what I thought, but it seemed too obvious.”

He rubbed his chin. “What was the threat?”

“Sue said it was against my family, but I don’t have the specifics.”

“I want to talk to Justin. Is he there?”

“Yes, but he and Sue went to bed already.”

“I want him to fortify security at your mom’s and sister’s.”

“Already done,” she said with satisfaction.

“Any photos?”

“Text only.”

Chakotay tapped his fingers on the desk in front of him. “This seems pretty weak as far as threats go.”

“Yep.”

“I don’t think you should change any of your plans at this point.”

“Nope.”

He fought a smile. “You came to the same conclusion, I take it?”

“Yep.”

“So, you really don’t need my advice, do you,” he stated.

She clicked her tongue. “No, I just thought you’d want to be aware of the situation. From me.”

“Thank you, Kathryn.”

She nodded, but didn’t say anything.

“It’s possible that you’ll receive more threats.”

“True, but I can’t show weakness. Not right now.”

Sighing, he said, “I feel like I should come home.”

“If there’s nothing I can do, there’s nothing you can do, either.”

“I can protect you.”

“I still have a job to do.”

“I know,” he said sadly.

“It’s going to be okay. We just have to ride this out and not let it get to us.”

“You’re absolutely right,” he said with a sympathetic smile. “I love you.”

“Love you, too. Talk tomorrow night?”

“I can’t wait.” He blew her a kiss before closing the signal.

Kathryn shook her head in dismay, feeling more than a little annoyed with her husband. She decided to shake it off and get ready for bed.

An hour later when she was about to fall asleep, Kathryn’s comm terminal beeped again. She pulled on her robe and padded across the room to answer it. When she saw it was Chakotay, she wasn’t sure how she should feel.

“Kathryn...,” he said softly.

“Can’t sleep?”

“No. I’ve been lying here, replaying our conversation in my head. I need to say that I’m sorry.”

Her shoulders sagged and she felt her eyes grow hot. “Oh, honey. It’s okay.”

“It’s not. I was worried, and things came out all wrong. I made a promise to you, and I...” He got choked up.

“I know you’re worried, but I need to be strong.”

“And I want that for you. That’s been our goal for the last ten months.”

“It comes and goes,” she said quietly.

“It always has.”

Taking a shaky breath, she nodded. “I was just better at hiding it before, I guess.”

“Not really,” he said with a chuckle. “I was just smart enough not to point it out.”

She rolled her eyes and laughed. “Would I be picking a fight if I agreed with you?”

“No, but I would like you to remember that even when you’ve been unsure of yourself, you’ve still moved mountains.”

“Am I still that woman?”

“Absolutely. Remember confronting Liyal?”

She groaned.

“Case in point. You were really distressed, but it didn’t stop you.”

“In fact, my anxiety added fuel to the fire.”

“That’s right.” He looked at her with sadness. “I really want to hold you right now.”

Tears pricked at her eyes as she replied, “I’d like that.”

“Got your pillow?”

“Yes, and it smells like you.”

“I’m only a comm call away, and I’ll be back in just nine days.”

“Hopefully, I’ll be so busy that the time will fly by.”

“Get some rest, love.”

“You, too. Comm me your schedule tomorrow when you know it, so I can call.”

“I will. Goodnight, Kathryn.”

“Goodnight. I love you.”

“Love you, too.”

After the signal closed, she crawled back into bed, held the pillow tight, and let quiet tears fall as she drifted off to sleep.

Part 30 - “Hop Into My Pocket”

By Dawn

Summary: Kathryn goes to Paris to try to win over the Federation Council

Rated: PG

Kathryn and her entourage beamed directly into the transporter room of the Federation Council building in Paris. The last time she'd been there, she'd just returned to Earth at the end of the summer after the incident on Sirius IX. She hadn't been herself and had relied heavily on Harry and Khurma that week. But now, she was a stronger woman, and she was ready to get some work done.

Khurma stepped up to greet her. "Kathryn, how are you today?"

"I'm doing well, Admiral. How are you?"

"Oh, not too bad," he said as they started walking. "Adjusting to the time zone change is as challenging, as always. I feel like I should still be asleep."

"I know what you mean. This is about the time I usually go to bed."

"Are you ready for our first meeting?"

"I have a breakfast on my schedule. Is that correct?" she asked.

"Yes. Much like the reception that you hosted, it's with the chairs of each sub-council and task force. Just a chance for us to get started on the right note."

"Do you have a feel for how receptive they are to me being here?"

"I think feelings are mixed, but they did appoint you to do a job for them."

"And now they're uncertain about following up."

"Right." He pressed the call button on the elevator and turned to face her. "You need to win them over with your charm."

"I really hope the future of the Federation doesn't hinge on my charisma, Admiral."

"You say that as if it's not a sure bet, Kathryn." He winked at her.

Amused, she ducked into the elevator. "Let's just take it one conversation at a time and see what happens."

"A good idea, Kathryn. A very good idea."

The morning breakfast segued into a breakout session with the judiciary council to go over the petitions that Kathryn was bringing to the full council the following day. She spent most of the time listening intently to the conversation to learn more about the ins and outs of the council, and specifically, what was important to the people at the table.

Since the general session would be broadcast to the entire Federation, the council reworded some of the language to make it more acceptable for public consumption and more palatable to some of the council members. They decided to combine the issues of pardoning expired war-time agreements with establishing egalitarian policies, since they both dealt with the same set of policies.

They surprised her when they threw out her petition for the formation of a council oversight committee, stating that it should come from within, not from a Starfleet Admiral. Kathryn knew it was a hot issue with many planetary governments, but it was clear that the council would not permit her to bring it up. She decided that it was an issue that would not be quieted, so she let it drop for the time being.

As Kathryn and her entourage entered the building's cafe for lunch, Councilman M'niss came up to her.

"Admiral Janeway, won't you join us?"

She quirked a smile at the feline-like Caitian and replied, "That would be nice, thank you." Turning to Mark and Sue, she said, "I trust that you can manage by yourselves?"

Mark nodded. "We'll stay close."

"Just be sure to eat."

As he led Kathryn to a table, M'niss said, "I'm sure that it's difficult being among such a large group and unsure whom to call friend."

She chuckled lightly. "True, but with my entourage, I carry some friends around with me, wherever I go."

Once they were at the table, he said loud enough for the other two seated there to hear, "You are among friends today."

"Thank you," she said as she sat in the proffered chair. "Are you referring to the three of you or the judiciary council?"

Truov, a female Coridanite, said, "The members of the judiciary sub-council are appointed by a special committee outside the control of the executive branch. It took a great deal of planning over the last six months to put the right people in the room with you."

"I'm glad to hear that, but I suppose that if there'd been any dissenters among us, the meeting would've gotten a little more lively."

“That’s one way of describing it,” Truov replied before nodding at the menu in front of her. “I recommend the quiche or the cheese soufflé. Both are satisfactory entrees and native to this region of your planet.”

“Thank you for the suggestion. I’ll have to try the soufflé.”

Truov flagged down a waiter, placed their order, and then turned to Kathryn. “You were very quiet this morning.”

“Was I?”

“Yes, we expected substantially more debate from you as we were editing your proposals.”

Kathryn shrugged nonchalantly. “I’m here to bring the issues to your attention. What the council does with the petitions from here is entirely up to you.”

The third person at the table, a Grazerite named Sakish-Anar, said, “I find that surprising. You seem the type who would be exacting in your fight to get these pushed through in their original form.”

“The wording isn’t as important as the essence of the issues. After all, my staff compiled those proposals based on our conversations with dozens of planetary governments.”

“Your staff wrote them?” M’Niss asked.

“Yes, but I edited them, as did Admiral Khurma and Secretary General Dooha. They’ve been revised so many times that this morning’s changes didn’t faze me.”

Truov leaned forward and rested her arms on the table. “But you believe that the… essence?” She paused until Kathryn nodded. “Has remained the same?”

“Very much so. They are issues that we ran into time and time again throughout the Federation. In fact, the proposal that was dropped this morning is the most significant issue and will not go away quietly, but I suspect that if the other petitions go through, a council oversight committee would be the logical next step to ensure a better future for the Federation members.”

“You may have a point,” Sakish-Anar said quietly. “Some of the members are a little nervous to be seen even talking to you. That’s no way to conduct ourselves.”

“Agreed,” she said as she gratefully accepted the cup of coffee that Sue set down in front of her. “Thank you, Lieutenant.”

M’Niss commented, “I fear that the media has generated tension where there should be none.”

“The way I see it,” Kathryn stated. “The best way to handle being around me is to be open and honest when asked about what we discussed. Nothing that I say to any councilmember should be considered secretive or privileged.”

“A good suggestion, Admiral.” M’Niss changed the topic by asking, “How is your health now, if I may be so personal?”

“I appreciate your concern.” She took a sip of her coffee before saying, “Although I haven’t regained my strength or stamina, I think I’m doing well overall.”

“I’d say you are. Honestly, I didn’t expect you to return to work at all.”

She winked at him. “I’m not easily deterred, Councilman M’Niss.”

“What could possibly deter you, if not what happened this winter?”

“Are you hoping to find out or was that a rhetorical question?”

He held up a hand in apology. “Merely rhetorical, Admiral. I, we, everyone admires your courage and bravery. It’s an honor to have you here.”

“Thank you,” she said graciously. “But I must say that I’m the one who feels honored to be invited to speak at the General Session. Not many Starfleet officers would get an audience like that.”

“You’re right. As a matter of fact, only a few in Starfleet have ever been allowed to address the Council. James T. Kirk was one of them.”

“Well,” she said with a laugh. “That man did everything, so it’s no surprise that he showed up here with some problem.”

M’Niss continued, “We were probably facing the end of civilization as we knew it. We often were with him around.”

Kathryn laughed. “Then what we’re facing now pales in comparison.”

“Doesn’t everything?”

Sakish-Anar said, “Oh, I don’t know, Admiral. I think you just might outshine the great James Kirk.”

She held up her hand in protest. “No, thank you. I don’t want that kind of legacy.”

“No? I assumed you had your sights set pretty high.”

Shaking her head, Kathryn said, “Not at all. Once all of this settles down, I’m looking forward to a nice, long break. I’ve had a lot on my plate for a long time, and I’ll gladly let others take the reins for a little while.”

“You surprise me, Admiral,” Truov said.

“Do I?”

“Well, yes. It is a common belief that you want to run for election or be promoted to Fleet Admiral.”

“That’s a common misconception or perhaps wishful thinking on the part of some of the people I’ve spoken to. I fear they’ve put me on a higher pedestal than I deserve.”

“I disagree, Admiral,” Sakish-Anar said. “It appears to us that your ethics are indisputable and that you’ve gained the trust of not only the planetary governments, but the public at large. That is nearly impossible to do.”

“I believe I’m in a unique position and that my role is what makes it possible to bridge the gap between the many, divergent constituents. They all want me on their side, and to be honest, I can empathize with just about every viewpoint because of my experiences in the Delta Quadrant and with the former Maquis on my crew.”

Truov pursed her lips. “Now you just need to gain the trust of the Council. Once you do that, I wouldn’t be at all surprised if they approve you to run for the presidential election. Finding a good candidate that is known quadrant-wide is extremely challenging.”

“While that would be an honor, I don’t believe the timing would be right for me. I’m hesitant to cause this much upset and then officially step into politics.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” commented Sakish-Anar. “To quote one of your human phrases, I say hit the iron while it is hot.”

Kathryn smiled at the goat-like humanoid who looked so serious, yet so friendly at the same time. “Regardless, I think we’re jumping the gun. My proposals may just as easily fall apart as succeed, and Dooha could run me out of town on a rail.”

M’Niss asked, “A rail? What does this mean?”

“Oh, it’s just an expression for sending someone away in unfavorable circumstances. One of my former crewmen, Commander Tom Paris, was very fond of old-fashioned sayings. After spending seven years on the same bridge, I picked up on a few.”

“Interesting,” M’Niss replied as their lunch was brought to them.

As they began to eat, Kathryn said, “If there’s one thing that I’ve learned as a result of the last eight and half years, it’s that you never know what will happen tomorrow, so live for today. Let’s enjoy this wonderful lunch and talk about something else.”

“What would you like to discuss?” Truov asked.

Kathryn thought for a moment and then said, “Your home-worlds. I haven’t had the honor of visiting them.”

“An oversight we must fix as soon as possible,” Sakish-Anar said. “The people of Grazer would be very excited if I brought you home for a visit.”

Smiling, she replied, “Someday, perhaps.”

After lunch, Kathryn, Admiral Khurma, and Secretary-General Dooha had a meeting with all of their aides to finalize the proposals changed during the morning’s meeting. Then she stepped out to the coffee bar to get some much-needed caffeine.

As she was putting the lid on her cup, she stopped short at the sight of her former protégé. “Annika! What brings you to Paris?”

“My friend, Dr. Holmes, is here speaking to the Council. We decided that I would attend with him.”

“Oh? What is he speaking on?”

“Warp drive mechanics.”

Kathryn frowned. “I didn’t realize that was on the agenda this week, although it sounds a lot more interesting than trade agreements.”

“He’s not speaking to the full council, just the sub-council on technological developments.”

“Ah,” she nodded with understanding. “That’s probably the only group I’m not meeting with.”

“I knew you’d be here, and wanted to speak with you when you have some free time.”

Kathryn scratched the bridge of her nose with her thumb. “I’d love to, but my schedule is jam-packed as it is. Could we talk via com-link next week?”

Annika hesitated before she said, “I should have contacted you in advance.”

“I doubt that would’ve made a difference. How long will you be on Earth?”

“Just until tomorrow afternoon.”

Kathryn sighed and looked at the clock. Taking Annika’s arm, she said, “Come, sit with me for a few minutes. Tell me what’s on your mind.”

“I’m not sure this is the best location for our discussion.” She looked around nervously, glancing repeatedly at the hovering security team.

“They aren’t eavesdropping.” Kathryn signaled Mark to come closer and asked, “Would you ask the team to stand back so that Annika and I may have a private conversation?”

“Of course, Admiral.”

After they moved away, Annika said, “The subject I’d like to speak about is not appropriate in a public location.”

“Is this about Dr. Holmes?”

“No, it’s about one of my projects at the Institute.”

“Oh?”

Annika did a visual scan of their immediate vicinity and then leaned in closer. “Prior to returning to the Alpha Quadrant, you, or rather your future self, said something that I think about often.”

“What’s that?”

“She suggested that I should help you deal a devastating blow to the Borg in order to atone for the atrocities I participated in while I was a drone.”

Kathryn nodded slowly. “We’ve talked about that a few times.”

“Four times, to be exact. So, I requested time to work on a project that could identify Borg activity over long distances.”

“Have you detected any?”

“That’s what I wanted to discuss with you. My scans have shown zero activity, which cannot be accurate. I’d like to request permission to take Voyager closer to the Delta Quadrant, or to equip one of Starfleet’s other ships with the Borg sensor technology.”

Kathryn rubbed her hands together as she thought about the request. “Was this something you thought about doing while on Voyager?”

“Scanning for Borg activity was standard practice in the Delta Quadrant. The Daystrom Institute has superior technology than Voyager, but it is limited by its location. Taking a ship into deep space could provide more accurate results.”

“You’re doing nothing more than what would’ve been standard operating procedures on Voyager?”

“No, except that the scanner I’m working on would continually monitor and record the activity in an attempt to locate patterns.”

“Can this technology be used to track any other life form besides Borg?”

“Of course. Is there something you’d like to track?”

“Not at this time, but I think you should test it on another subject to see if they can detect the scans.”

“I’ve done that, and the scans have gone unnoticed. The device I’ve created has recorded all the movements in Cardassian space during the last month.”

Surprised, Kathryn asked, “Cardassian?”

“It’s the most unique species that I could isolate at a long distance, and I know them to be an enemy of the Federation. They seemed an appropriate test subject.”

“Does anyone at the Institute know you’re tracking that particular species?”

“Just Dr. Holmes. He argues with me about it, often.”

“Okay.” She paused as she rubbed her neck. “Two things... One, you need to stop scanning Cardassian space immediately. Choose an ally or a member of the Federation and, before you scan them, ask for their permission through appropriate channels.”

“But what purpose would it serve to scan an ally that is open with their information?”

“Your job, Annika, is to develop the technology, not provoke distrust or risk re-igniting a war by spying on former enemies of the Federation. Understood?”

“Yes, Admiral.”

Kathryn closed her eyes and shook her head. “I can’t even imagine what would happen if the Cardassians discovered that we have that kind of information. Heaven forbid if you’d turned that scanner in the direction of Romulus.”

“Would you like me to delete the data I collected, Admiral?”

“No, but cease your scans immediately. I’ll speak to Admiral Khurma about what to do with the information you do have. And tell no one that you have it. Have I made myself clear?”

“Yes, Admiral.”

Kathryn took a moment to let that conversation sit before she went on. “The second thing we should discuss is the Borg issue. Is it possible that Voyager’s actions eliminated all Borg activity within range?”

“I suppose it’s possible. If not, my scans should have picked up traces of transwarp signatures. The Borg won’t stay away forever.”

She studied her hands for just a moment while contemplating where to take this conversation. Coming to a conclusion, she asked, “Annika, you understand temporal mechanics better than anyone, correct?”

“That is correct.”

“A little over a year ago, I was involved in another time travel incident.”

“After Voyager returned to Earth?”

“Yes. I have knowledge of something that I shouldn’t know, but if I tell anyone, it will affect our actions.”

“You could endanger the timeline.”

“Precisely.” She leaned forward. “Listen to me carefully. I need you to continue developing the technology, but don’t be alarmed by not finding any transwarp signatures. Instead, I want you to find your atonement in the lack of Borg activity.”

“Are you saying…?”

Kathryn held up her hand. “I’m not saying anything except that the technology you’re developing is important. We can’t anticipate every species that we’ll come up against.”

Annika’s eyes were wide as she processed the information. “I understand, Admiral, and I have a lot to think about.”

“Good, but don’t discuss it with anyone. Not even your closest friend. Understood?”

“Understood,” she said nervously. “But I would like to know more about your experience.”

“I’m sure you would, but unfortunately, I can’t divulge any more than I already have.” Kathryn smiled at the young woman. “Now, I have just a couple more minutes. Tell me about your relationship with Dr. Holmes.”

Annika paused while she adjusted to the new direction of the conversation. “The relationship is progressing.”

“Are you enjoying yourself?”

She straightened her posture before she stated, “Yes. I find physical expressions of intimacy with him much more enjoyable than with Chakotay.”

Kathryn cleared her throat and blinked. “That’s good,” she said slowly.

“It is. We have progressed at a more satisfactory pace. As you suggested, we held hands. After two weeks, we proceeded to sitting close. Two weeks later, I allowed him to embrace me. We are now at the stage where he may put his arm around my shoulders. He calls it cuddling.”

“I see.” Kathryn rubbed her jaw. “Have you kissed?”

“No. I did not find that to be a favorable activity with Chakotay.”

“Dr. Holmes is a different man.”

“It is still an exchange of bodily fluids that I find repulsive. He has not pushed the issue.”

“What is his age, if I may ask?”

“Is that a factor in a successful relationship?”

“No, but I find it surprising that you’ve met a man with this much patience.”

“Dr. Holmes is fifty-seven in terran years.”

Sighing, Kathryn said, “I’d like to meet him.”

Annika tapped her commbadge before Kathryn could stop her. “Annika Hansen to Dr. Richard Holmes.”

“Hello, my dear. Did you find your friend?”

Annika shifted uncomfortably. “Yes, I am speaking with Admiral Janeway now. She would like to meet you. Is this a good time?”

Kathryn jumped in and said, “Actually, Dr. Holmes, I have a meeting starting in a little under ten minutes, but I would love to meet you later this evening.”

“I would enjoy that as well, Admiral. Annika has told me a great deal about you.”

“Not all bad, I hope,” Kathryn smiled.

“All good, actually. I will finish my conference at nineteen hundred. Is that a good time for you, Admiral?”

She checked her schedule on her PADD and said, “I’m finished thirty minutes later. Could we meet for a late meal at Fouquet’s on the corner of the Champs Elysees?”

“That would be delightful. I’ve wanted to try that restaurant.”

“Wonderful, I’ll have my security team arrange it for us. Unfortunately, we’ll have to eat inside, but I’m sure you can understand why.”

“Of course. The need for your security is of paramount importance. I wouldn’t want to do anything that might jeopardize it.”

“Thank you.”

“Annika,” he said. “I’ll speak to you soon. Holmes, out.”

Kathryn smiled. “He seems quite charming.”

“A true gentlemen according to my research.”

“Annika, I’m thrilled that you’ve found him, but may I make a suggestion?”

“Of course.”

“Relax.” She touched the younger woman’s hand. “He obviously cares a great deal for you, and if he’s waited this long, I’m sure he won’t push you into anything you’re not comfortable with.”

“I’m comfortable with our relationship as it is.”

“Yes, but it’s time to really embrace your humanity, Annika. Let him love you like you deserve to be loved. And if you’ll let down your guard, you just might be surprised with a relationship that is beyond anything you’ve imagined.”

“Admiral,” Mark interrupted. “It’s time to proceed to your next meeting.”

Kathryn nodded and then spoke to Annika again. “I’m looking forward to tonight.”

“I find myself feeling anxious about you meeting him.”

She shrugged. “I suppose it’s like introducing your boyfriend to your mother for the first time.”

“At least you have no designs on this boyfriend.”

Mark's mouth dropped open, and Kathryn quickly admonished, "Annika."

"I apologize if that was inappropriate, Admiral."

Kathryn glanced up at Mark before she said, "Well, you have a point. I did marry your last boyfriend."

Mark looked away and bit his lips to keep from laughing.

With a deep sigh, she said, "Annika, I never meant to hurt you, and with your eidetic memory, you should recall that you're the one who broke up with Chakotay."

"Of course I remember, but I also think you would've helped me more if you hadn't wanted him for yourself."

"You put me in a very difficult position, and now you're harboring resentment towards me. We need to talk about this sometime."

"Resentment? No. I merely feel sorry for you because you married him. Chakotay lacks the charm and attractiveness that are desirable in a mate."

She glanced up at Mark again and wanted to smack the expression off of his face. He was pressing his fist against his mouth, clearly trying not to guffaw. Picking a piece of lint off of her pants, Kathryn said, "Well, it's good that my standards are what they are because I find his charm and magnetism quite engaging."

"I suppose you must."

Kathryn stood and straightened her tunic. "I am *really* looking forward to meeting the man who, in your book, outshines my husband. We'll see you tonight, Annika."

Before leaving the café, Kathryn pulled Mark aside. "Lieutenant, I would appreciate..."

"Your conversations are completely confidential, ma'am."

With a sigh, she said, "Thank you."

"But if I may ask?"

Lacking any humor, Kathryn replied, "What?"

"Did she and Chakotay really have a... physical relationship? I just can't imagine."

With a click of her tongue, she said, "Mark, I realize that I've relaxed my formality around you and the rest of my staff, but that kind of question about my husband is quite inappropriate."

He sobered instantly. “My apologies, ma’am. I didn’t mean to... Admiral, please, I’m so sorry.”

Kathryn patted him on the back as she moved them out the door. “Apology accepted, but to answer your question, they realized they were incompatible before they got to that stage in their relationship. Something I am extremely grateful for.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m sure you are.”

“Mark, I’ve never discussed this with a member of Voyager’s crew outside of my senior staff, but did you know they were dating?”

“No, ma’am. It didn’t reach the rumor mill until the time of our placement interviews. At the end of that week, you remember what happened, don’t you?”

“He and I kissed in front of all of you.”

Mark chuckled. “We were all so relieved. Most of us had thought you and he had been a couple all along and were devastated to learn that he’d dumped you.”

“We weren’t, and he didn’t.”

“We know that now, but at the time, there was talk of a lynch mob.”

Laughing out loud, Kathryn said, “Glad to hear it.”

Following her afternoon meeting to discuss the status of re-integrating Ktaria, Joria, and four other planets into the Federation, Kathryn made a beeline to her day-room to change clothes. The evening’s meeting didn’t require a uniform, and she wanted to blend with the crowd at dinner with Annika and her friend.

Once Mark had secured her inside her room, she checked her comm unit and saw that Chakotay had called just minutes earlier. She immediately placed the connection as she took off her tunic.

“Kathryn!” he said with delight. “I wasn’t expecting you.”

“How was your first day?”

“Just fine. There were fewer questions about you than with the last group, but out here, our celebrity status isn’t quite as profound as it is on Earth.” He tilted his head as he watched her hang up her coat. “Do I see a bump?”

“On my slacks?” Kathryn said as she looked down at her pants. “Where?”

He rolled his eyes. “Not *on* your slacks. *In* your slacks.”

“Oh,” she said as her hands rose to her belly. “But you just saw me three days ago. If memory serves, you inspected me rather carefully.”

“That I did,” he said with a wink. “Are you changing clothes?”

“Yes, why?”

“Show me.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You want me to strip?”

“Indulge me. I miss you and your bump.”

As she unzipped her slacks, she said, “There is no bump. Not yet.”

“But you had to replicate larger clothes, right?”

“Yes, but...” She paused to step out of her pants and then turned sideways so he could see. “I think I'm just getting my normal body back. It's too soon to be showing.”

“Is your belly soft or hard?” Leaning, closer to his screen, he said, “Man, I really wish I were there.”

“Why, so you could see how ‘soft’ I am?”

“I know how soft you are, love,” he said with a laugh. “So?”

She pressed her fingers low into her belly and smiled. “It feels like the side of a ball.”

With a satisfied smile, he said, “I knew it. You're pregnant, Admiral.”

“Yeah, and you're the captain who knocked me up. What do you have to say for yourself?”

He made a show of polishing his fingernails against his lapel. “Not just any man could bed the most famous woman in the universe.”

After responding with an undignified snort, she sat down to talk to him seriously. “So, you're doing okay?”

“Of course. How are you holding up?”

With a sigh, she said, “Pretty well, overall. The petitions got reworded again, and one was dropped.”

“Which?”

“Oversight.”

“Really? That one’s not going to go away quietly.”

“No, but they think it’d be better coming from an internal source than from me. There’s really nothing to report, yet.”

“Are you worried about this line not being secure?”

“Would I have stripped down to my panties if I thought that?”

“Good point.”

“I do have one thing to tell you. I ran into Annika today.”

“Annika?” he said with complete surprise. “In Paris?”

“Her gentlemen friend is here speaking about warp theory, and she came with him because she knew I’d be here.”

“I hate to be rude, but do you have the time and energy to talk to her?”

“We talked for about fifteen minutes, and later tonight, I’m meeting her and Dr. Holmes for dinner.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” He instantly added, “I’m only asking because you don’t want to wear out.”

“She’s only here until tomorrow afternoon, and tonight is as good a time as any. I’m eager to meet this man of hers.”

“Why?”

“Because the way she describes their relationship, he almost sounds fictional. I want to see if he’s real.”

“Kathryn,” he admonished half-heartedly, and then with forced casualness, asked, “Did you see him?”

“Not yet, but I figure he must either have the patience of a saint, no experience with women, or he’s gay.”

He couldn’t hide his amusement. “Why do you say that?”

“They’ve been together for almost two months and she has allowed him to progress through each stage of physical intimacy in two week periods.”

“Sounds methodical.”

Kathryn frowned. “Yes, but after six or eight weeks, I lost track, they’ve progressed to cuddling. No kissing, mind you.”

With a loud snort, Chakotay tried desperately not to laugh outright. Wiping away a tear, he said, “I’ve ruined her for all men.”

Shaking her head with enjoyment over his reaction, she said, “Tonight should be interesting. Want me to call you when I get home?”

“I think I do. It’ll be the middle of the night, but I’ll go to bed early, so I won’t miss the sleep.” He looked down and then glanced back up. “I wonder what he looks like.”

“Don’t know, but I did learn that he’s fifty-seven.”

With disbelief, he asked, “Fifty-seven? Six years older than me?”

Kathryn reached out and touched the image of his cheek on the screen. “Do you trust me, Chakotay?”

“Of course I do,” he said, surprised at her question.

“Do you think I’m the smartest, cleverest and most intelligent woman you’ve ever met?”

“Why do I suspect that you’re leading the witness?”

“Answer the question.”

“Yes, Kathryn. Your intelligence is the stuff of legends.”

“Then you likely would take anything I say as fact, right?”

With a laugh, he said, “Right.”

She leaned in forward, trying to look as sultry as she could imagine being, and said, “Honey, you are an amazing man. You’re full of love, charm, wit, and have a generosity of spirit that is unparalleled. On top of all that, you’re damn sexy.”

Pink tinged his cheeks as he tugged on his ear. “Thank you.”

With a wink, she added, “The most famous woman in the universe wouldn’t allow just anyone to be her husband and the father of her children, now would she?”

“I suppose not.” His eyes were glowing with love as he said, “I want to kiss you so much right now.”

“I’ll be looking forward to it, one week from tonight. Although, I can’t decide if we should stay in or brave going out to dinner.”

“It’s your birthday. We should go out, especially since your lunch out on Friday went well.”

She nodded her approval. “I’ll set something up.”

“Let me take care of it.”

“Will you be giving me another scarf?”

“I thought that thing had a fancy name?”

“Pashmina.”

“Do you want another one?”

“Nooo,” she said very clearly. “I want something romantic and completely frivolous.”

He laughed. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Speaking of romantic, I was thinking about wearing the wedding jewelry tonight. What do you think?”

“Out to dinner with Seven? Annika, I mean?”

“Before that. I’m going to a cocktail party with Dooha. There are some people he wants me to meet.”

“On one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“After you’re dressed, call me back. I want to see you.”

“It’s a deal. I’m going to lie down for a bit before I get dressed. Call you in a couple hours?”

“I’ll do the same. Got a pillow?”

“Yes, do you?”

He nodded, “Mhmm. Hold onto it tight. I miss you.”

“Miss you, too, honey.” She blew him a kiss before closing the signal, feeling warmed by his affection for her. “Computer,” she said as she got up. “Set an alarm for one hour.” A quiet beep was her only acknowledgement.

She took off her turtleneck and crawled into bed where she wrapped her arms around the spare pillow. Snuggling in, she imagined that she was cuddled up against her husband’s warm chest and that his arms were holding her tight. Her mind drifted back over their conversation and she couldn’t help herself as her hand drifted down to lightly massage the slight bump that was her baby. A warm, beautiful feeling flooded her senses as she imagined herself rocking the infant while looking out the French doors in their bedroom at the Pacific Ocean.

Kathryn was craving that moment in time. All the stress would be over and she could revel in being a mother and a wife with nothing more to do than care for her family. She couldn’t imagine a better way to spend a much needed leave of absence.

After another short conversation with Chakotay, Kathryn left her room to attend the cocktail party.

When Justin saw her, he whistled in appreciation. “I hope I’m not offending you, Admiral.”

She waved his concern away. “Not in current company, but I suggest restraining yourself when Sue joins us downstairs.”

“I have a feeling she’ll be just as riveted, ma’am.”

“What? In this old thing?” she joked as she looked down at her black dress. It had a very modest neckline and was rather conservative overall, but since Chakotay had nearly drooled upon seeing her in it, she knew it must accent her features nicely. She felt confident and beautiful.

It wasn’t until they had arrived and Kathryn had begun mingling that Sue was able to join them. She rushed up and said, “Admiral, my apologies.”

Kathryn held up her hand. “Relax, Lieutenant. Nothing of importance has been said, yet. All I need is for you to be a second set of eyes and ears for me.”

“I’ll try to be discreet about taking notes.”

“I appreciate that.” Kathryn looked carefully at her assistant and asked, “Are you feeling all right?”

“Yes... Oh, yes, I'm fine. It's just that I felt like I was being followed, but Mark was with me and he said I was secure. We took an indirect path in an attempt to lose anyone who might've seen us.”

Kathryn fought against showing a reaction. “Did you notify Justin?”

“Yes, ma'am. He has doubled our security force tonight as a result.”

“Where were you coming from?”

“The Champs Elysses, where you'll be dining later.”

Kathryn nodded towards Justin, signaling that he join them. When he arrived, she said, “I think a change in venue for dinner is in order. Do you agree?”

“Yes, ma'am. I'll make arrangements and notify Annika and Dr. Holmes.”

“Thank you.” When he was gone, she told Sue, “I've learned that it's best to let him worry about my security so I can do the job that I need to do. Can you help me do that?”

“Yes, Admiral.” She looked past Kathryn's shoulder and said, “Admiral Khurma with Representative Gardi.”

Kathryn turned around and greeted them with her best diplomatic smile. “Admiral, Representative, it's good to see you.”

“And you, too, Kathryn,” Khurma replied. “You remember meeting Representative Gardi?”

“Of course, it's a pleasure to see you again, sir.” She accepted a warm handshake from the older man.

“The pleasure is all mine, Admiral. You look radiant tonight. I think the Paris lights serve you well.”

Khurma handed a PADD to Sue. “Lieutenant, would you take care of this for the Admiral? I'm sure it's nothing of importance right now.”

“What is it?” Kathryn asked as she watched Sue flip it on.

“Oh, I don't know,” Khurma said. “A courier handed it to me before you arrived. He said it was a memo of some kind.”

When Sue gasped, their attention was drawn to her. Kathryn asked, “Lieutenant?”

“I... uh... I... need...” Sue's hand was shaking and she started looking for Justin.

Kathryn asked with concern, "Sue?"

Justin joined them immediately. "Is everything all right?"

Sue handed him the PADD and asked, "Would you follow up on this?"

Kathryn immediately took it from him. "What's it say?" Immediately, her eyes widened and then she quickly recovered. "Admiral, Representative Gardi, would you excuse us for just a moment? There's a matter we need to attend to."

Khurma held out his hand for the PADD. "What's the problem, Kathryn?"

Gardi asked, "Is there anything we can do?"

"Oh, nothing too surprising, I suppose," Kathryn turned off the PADD's power and handed it to Justin. "It appears that my security has been compromised once again."

"What's on the PADD?" Khurma asked with insistence.

She glanced at Gardi, and seeing that he was genuinely concerned, decided to trust him. "A picture of me from two hours ago when I was speaking to my husband over the comm. I'd rather not show it to you, sir."

"Why not?"

"It's a private moment. The fewer people that see it, the better." Kathryn turned to Justin. "Please have my things removed from the room at the hotel and let's continue with our plans to return to my home tonight. We'll deal with tomorrow after you've had a chance to look into this."

"Aye, Admiral," he said, very seriously. "Since Pioneer is still in orbit, I'll ask for their assistance."

Kathryn nodded thoughtfully. "Let's keep this quiet. I don't want a full scale security alert."

"Why not?" Khurma asked. "Surely this is deserving of our full attention, Kathryn."

"Because we don't know who to trust." She nodded at Justin to signal him to get started. "Meanwhile, let's enjoy this party, shall we? I'm not about to let a bully stop me from doing what I came here to do."

Khurma shook his head in dismay, but followed her lead.

Gardi said, "You have no fear, Admiral. I'm not sure if that's good or bad."

“I have many fears, sir. I just won’t let them stand in the way of conquering my biggest fear – that the Federation may one day cease to exist unless we address its problems,” she said with a pointed look. “Tell me, Representative, what did you think about today’s council meetings?”

Sharing a wary look with Khurma, Gardi said, “I think she might actually do it.”

“Do what?” he asked.

“Save the Federation on her lunch break and still have time for a peace agreement with Romulus.”

“She might, but she’s going to need our help. What was your take on Curd’s response to her proposal at the breakfast this morning?”

“Nullifying the mining contracts?” He shrugged. “Seems harmless to me, but Curd sure wasn’t happy.”

Kathryn asked, “Do you think it’s a matter of pride with him?”

“Oh, I don’t know if it’s pride, per se. He went through a hell of a lot to get them negotiated in the first place.”

“I can’t put my finger on it,” Kathryn said, trying to prompt Gardi to say more. “But my intuition tells me that Curd isn’t the one who was forcing the raw deal.”

“No,” Gardi said carefully. “But he was put between a rock and a hard place. He’s just one of the few left on the Council that was involved.”

“Any idea who provided the rock?”

With a sigh, he replied, “Well, that is the ultimate question, isn’t it?”

Kathryn nodded. “Yes, it is. Even if we suspect that we know the answer, how do we get proof, and how do we deal with it?”

Gardi said, “I realize that you want to get straight to the source of the problem, Admiral, but I’ve been giving your agenda some serious thought over the last two weeks.”

“Oh? You have an idea?”

“In general, Council-members don’t like to have their opinions questioned by anyone but their constituents. Even then, it’s something they handle carefully if they want to be re-elected or if they want to be respected on their home planet.”

“I can understand that.”

“Nor do they like their past dredged up in order to explain why certain decisions were made, especially if anything untoward was involved.”

“Because it might call their integrity into question?”

“And it might create a new wave of the illicit behavior you’re trying to uncover.”

Kathryn’s chin rose a notch. “Do you suspect that might be happening?”

“Not yet. If anything, I fear that any coercion will be directed towards you.”

On guard, she asked, “Why me in particular?”

“That PADD you just received. I got one myself a few years back that provided false proof that I was having an extra-marital affair. May I ask if that’s the reason you don’t want others to see it?”

“Absolutely not,” she snapped.

“Only when we hide the truth, can we be coerced, Admiral. My advice is to come clean with whatever they are trying to blackmail you with. Otherwise, the game is in their court.”

Khurma asked, “Kathryn? What was on that PADD?”

“Nothing you don’t already know about,” she said as she discreetly laid her hand upon her belly. “What alarmed me was that there are images from a supposedly secure connection.”

Glancing down at her mid-section, Khurma asked, “How could they get that from an image?”

“Get what?” Gardi asked.

She closed her eyes and sighed.

Sue said, “Admiral, it’s possible that whoever circulated that image couldn’t tell.”

Kathryn squared her shoulders and told her commanding officer, “Chakotay wanted to see if he could detect a bump, yet. I was only wearing my undergarments.”

“A bump?” Gardi asked, and then it dawned on him what she was saying. “You’re with…”

“Child, yes.”

Gardi smiled brightly. “Well, that’s certainly not anything to be afraid to share. The entire Federation would be overjoyed.”

“I have no doubts that they would, but I’d rather they focus on other issues right now.”

He waved away her concern. “If they find out, they find out. You’ll ask for their support, and you’ll get it.”

“I appreciate your confidence in me, sir.”

More gently, he asked, “Is there anything in your past that could be fodder for blackmail? Any skeletons in your closet?”

“I don’t think so, but I understand what you’re saying. If someone should try to blackmail me, I need to come out with whatever the issue is publically.”

“It’s all about integrity, so don’t do anything that would risk that, especially in your personal life.”

“That is not an issue.” She took a deep breath and refocused the conversation. “You were saying something about an idea you had.”

“Hmmm, yes,” Gardi took a drink before continuing. “What I’d like to suggest is that we focus on the future. It’s a catch-phrase that sounds similar to something you might’ve said in some speech or another. All of the council-members that I’ve spoken with over the last year want to get behind you all the way, but there is fear and illicit baggage keeping them from doing so.”

“How do we get around that?” Khurma asked.

“Make us believe that you’re not digging around for information on the past. Don’t even hint that you might be looking for the reasons behind any suspected criminal activity.”

“I see your point, but how do we flush out those who are using coercion tactics without doing that?”

“That’s secondary, Admiral. What you need is for the council-members to believe in you just as much as all these planetary leaders you’ve met with do. Get us in your side pocket, make us part of your team.”

Kathryn nodded thoughtfully. “Peaceful cooperation.”

“The ideals of the Federation.”

“So, are you suggesting that we drop the issue on the expired mining contracts?”

“Not at all, just give it a new twist. Focus your agenda on a better future for the people of the Federation, not what the council might have done wrong.”

“That was my intention.”

“Then emphasize it. The council members need votes to get re-elected, and if their constituents see that they’re working side by side with you, they’ll get their votes. If their constituents think you don’t trust them, the people won’t trust the representatives either.”

“You’re suggesting that I have the power to sway the votes of the entire Federation.”

He widened his eyes. “You do.”

Back at home later that night, Kathryn centered herself before she placed the comm call to Chakotay.

When he answered, his hair was in disarray and he wore a sleepy smile. “Hi, beautiful.”

“Hi. Are you sure you want to talk right now? You need your sleep.”

“For a minute. How was your dinner?”

“Interesting,” she said carefully. “Annika and Dr. Holmes seem well suited for each other.”

“How so?”

“He is definitely a father figure. I suspect she is more comfortable with older men.”

“Because of our age-old wisdom?”

“Something like that,” she said with a barely-contained yawn. “I’ll give you details later, but for now, I think we should sleep.”

“ ‘m kay. Your reception go okay?”

“It did,” she said with a slow nod. “I believe I made some headway on a plan to win over the majority of the council.”

“Good,” he said sleepily. “I had no doubts you’d soon have them eating out of your hand.”

“I had some misgivings, but I came to the realization tonight that on most issues, it doesn’t matter what the outcome is to my proposals, just that the council members vote without any hint of coercion.”

“Are you going to change your speech for tomorrow morning?”

“No, it’s been carefully written and approved already. However, my answers to their questions aren’t scripted, so I hope to put a positive spin on everything.”

“The entire campus here is taking a break to watch. The Fednews has really been publicizing the broadcast and there’s a lot of supposition about what you might say. I’ve been asked repeatedly.”

“Did you answer?”

“Noooo,” he said as if it were a silly question. “Only to say that I’m sure it will be brilliant.”

Her eyes widened. “No pressure.”

“Think of it as support from the masses.”

She wanted to say more, but her instincts told her to keep quiet for security reasons. Her tone more serious, she asked, “Chakotay?”

“Yes?” He was instantly more alert.

“I’ve... I’m not going to keep the dayroom in Paris. I feel more comfortable transporting back home during my breaks.”

“Something happen?”

She hesitated for only a moment. “There was a security breach with my comm terminal, but I’ll tell you about it when you’re back. For now, I want to be careful about what we discuss.”

“All right,” he said hesitantly. “Did you receive another... note?”

“Yes. I assumed that my hotel room was secure, and although I’m more certain that this channel is private, I can’t be certain about your terminal. I’d rather wait to tell you everything when we can speak face to face. Justin is redoubling security and I’m being as careful as I can.”

“Should I be worried?”

“Yes and no. This one had a little more teeth, but not enough of a bite to affect my plans. It’s not like we didn’t expect some negative reactions.”

“There’s a difference between negativity and... this.”

She leaned forward and smiled to try to reassure him. “I promised you that I’d keep myself safe, and that’s exactly what I intend to do.”

He nodded with understanding. “Remember last fall when you’d send me daily messages so I knew you were okay?”

“Yes.”

“I’d appreciate them hourly.”

Laughing quietly, she said, “How about every six hours?”

“Whatever you can manage.” He held both sets of fingers to his lips and blew her a kiss. “Anything else you need to tell me?”

“Just...” She suddenly felt overcome with emotion and looked away to compose herself.

“Kathryn?”

“One of the council members told me tonight that he was once coerced with false proof of an extra-marital affair. If you should receive anything that...”

“No, love. I won’t believe it.”

She implored, “Just keep trusting me, no matter what.”

“No one is going to undermine us, I promise.”

“Thank you,” she said through a watery smile.

“Go sleep, love, and call me if you need my voice. All right?”

“I will.” She touched the screen. “I love you, honey.”

“I love you, too.

Part 31 - “These Are Not Simple Issues”

By Dawn

Summary: Kathryn addresses the general session of the Federation Council

Rated PG

Standing outside the council chamber door, Kathryn straightened her tunic and looked to Sue. “Are we ready for this?”

“You’ve faced the Borg Queen, Admiral. You can handle a bunch of politicians.”

She smirked. “Well, when you put it like that.” Holding out her hand, she said, “Shall we?”

“After you.”

When the two ladies and their security escorts walked into the noisy chamber, a silence spread instantly through the room. It lasted only a moment until Dooha's aide walked up to Kathryn.

"This way, Admiral." She led them to a table near the center podium.

Dooha approached her and said, "Admiral Janeway, welcome to General Session. Can I get you anything?"

"Sir," she said as she stood up to shake his hand. "A glass of water would be nice."

He nodded towards his aide to take care of it. "This morning, we'll go through our usual opening fanfare, and then allow you a moment to make your comments. We need to vote on the procedure, and then I'll open the floor for questions."

"Thank you for allowing me this opportunity, sir."

"We're honored to have you here." He smiled genuinely, and then looked around before adding, "Most of us, that is."

"I didn't expect this to be easy."

"Just remember that approximately 95% of the individuals in here support you. They may not do it openly, but they do appreciate what you're trying to accomplish."

"I'll keep that in mind," she said confidently. "Has Admiral Khurma arrived, yet?"

Dooha said discretely, "Don't be obvious about it, but look at the mezzanine level in the center."

Kathryn glanced up and she felt her heart thud heavily as a sickening chill spread through her body. She said to Dooha, "I didn't realize the President would be here."

"His prerogative. Unfortunately, he has invited Khurma to sit with him."

Swallowing past the lump in her throat, she said, "I would've expected Khurma to have given me some warning."

"He just found out when he arrived fifteen minutes ago, and he didn't have a chance to speak with me or anyone else because the President ushered him in here." Dooha gave Kathryn a meaningful look. "I suspect it was an attempt to unnerve you."

"Most likely." She gave him a confident smile. "But I won't be intimidated."

He chuckled quietly. "No doubt."

"Anything else I need to know?"

“Just that the President is here only as an observer. By law, he cannot comment or participate in the session in any way.”

“I’m less worried about him than I am his supporters.”

“I know,” he said supportively. “But you know that Admiral Khurma is behind you one hundred percent, as am I.”

“Thank you, sir.”

He secretly gave her a wink before leaving to start the proceedings.

Kathryn retook her seat and filled Sue in on Zife’s presence so that she wouldn’t be surprised when she happened to notice. Then she tried to appear completely at ease, hoping that her behavior would influence her state-of-mind.

That practically the entire Federation was watching both unnerved her and filled her with a sense of power and purpose. It was a surreal experience after being isolated from the Federation during their seven years exile in the Delta Quadrant. She wondered what the older Admiral Janeway would think about this, and then her mind drifted to Q and how he was probably hovering nearby, just wishing he could burst forth, prance around in front of the council, and gloat about his involvement in her success.

Her attention was drawn to the opening of the session as the Anthem of the Federation began to play. Everyone stood as a procession of flags from all the worlds that were represented in the room were paraded in. She imagined how grand this procession probably was before the Dominion War took its toll on the politicians and the politics of this great organization.

As the opening activities continued, she thought about how much she believed in the Federation. She reminded herself that the Temporal Review Board had said she’d become a very influential human in this timeline, and that they’d charged her with the responsibility to take advantage of that to ensure a positive future. She supposed that this was the moment that could make all the difference.

Dooha stated, “We now proceed to the primary agenda item for this opening General Session of Governing Council for the United Federation of Planets. Vice-Admiral Kathryn Janeway of Starfleet is our special guest and brings us a report from conferences she has held throughout the Alpha and Beta Quadrants on our behalf.

“This morning, you each received the formal petitions that she and her staff have prepared. At this time, all of the media partners are receiving their copy, and I urge everyone to read the text carefully, keeping all matters within context and debating the issues with care. Now, I invite Admiral Janeway to give her opening comments before we open the floor to discussion.” He turned to her and said, “Admiral?”

Kathryn nodded her thanks and stepped up to the podium. “Ladies, Gentlemen, and multi-gendered species, thank you for allowing me this opportunity. It is a true honor to speak before you, and one I do not take lightly.

“One year ago, President Zife,” she paused to nod at him in a gesture of recognition, “appointed me as envoy to the Federation Security Council. During my tenure, I have had the privilege of visiting with twenty-six governmental bodies on a great number of issues – far too many to be addressed in this forum. However, the judicial council and I have narrowed the list down to three major concerns that impact almost every world we visited. I come to you today with these petitions so that you may work towards a better future for all involved. I am asking this council to deliberate over these concerns with open hearts and open minds so that the needs of these worlds may be addressed in a sincere and amicable forum.

“The Federation has a long tradition of strength, fairness, and equity for all species. The petitions in front of you mark the next step in rebuilding the faith and trust that have been lost due to the recent war and the troubled times that followed it.

“The first petition is a plea to pardon undeliverable war-time trade agreements combined with a request to form egalitarian policies towards future trade agreements; the second is a request to reinstate or develop new programs to assist Federation members with scientific and medical research; and the third is a request to establish policies that safeguard the independence of Federation planets.

“These are not simple issues, and they will take a considerable amount of time and effort to address. However, billions of individuals are counting on us to act with integrity, wisdom, and courage to do what is right in the face of adversity. Thank you.”

Kathryn expected an enthusiastic round of applause when she finished, but tried not to show surprise as she walked gracefully back to her table amidst a polite murmur of appreciation for her words. She had an inkling that the boisterous response was prevalent in ninety-five percent of the venues across the Federation.

“Thank you, Admiral,” Dooha said as he stepped up to address the council again. “The judiciary sub-council has presented a motion that we appoint three task forces to address each of these petitions. Do I hear a second?”

Someone called out, “I second.”

“The floor is now open for discussion.”

Kathryn listened carefully as they debated the protocol for addressing the petitions. It seemed that, in recent history, no individual had brought forth a concern that didn’t fall neatly into an already-organized sub-council. She had expected certain council-members to start attacking the petitions immediately, but instead, Dooha was keeping the conversations focused on inane policies and procedures.

As she continued to listen, Kathryn was surprised that Dooha was letting the council go off on so many tangents. After thirty minutes of discussion on committee and task force structure, Kathryn realized that Dooha was purposely allowing the proceedings to focus on how to address the issues, rather than addressing them in general session where they all feared debate would get out of hand quickly.

Forty minutes into the discussion on policies, it appeared that the council had come to a decision. Kathryn thought that Dooha looked almost saddened by the general cooperation.

He said, "The motion stands as read. All in favor, say, 'aye.'"

A display panel behind Dooha's became lit with a large number of green lights.

"All opposed, say, 'nay.'"

A handful of dissenters registered their votes which were indicated with red lights. Dooha said, "The motion carries. Take a moment to consider which of your fellow council members would be best suited to address each petition and then register your nominations. We will have a tally in ten minutes when we return. I call for a recess."

Dooha came over to Kathryn's table to shake her hand. "Very nice opening remarks, Admiral."

She could see that some people were headed her way, so she quickly asked, "You were hoping that debate would take longer, weren't you?"

His eyes widened with amusement as an Andorian representative walked up. Dooha said, "Admiral, I'd like to introduce Representative Lenos of the Andorian Empire."

Kathryn spent the entire break shaking hands with council-members whom she hadn't yet met. Most told her that they appreciated her work, and the rest congratulated her on the speech and the petitions.

Towards the end of the break, an older man with Betazoid eyes came up to shake her hand. "Admiral, I am Reittan Grax of Betazed."

"A pleasure to meet you Mr. Grax."

He moved a little closer and spoke quietly as he said, "I'm a friend of the Troi family, whom I believe you've also had the pleasure of meeting?"

"Deanna Troi, yes."

"I would like you to know that there are rumors of an attempt to undermine your authority in the next portion of this session."

She gave him an understanding smile. “That doesn’t surprise me, but thank you for the warning.”

“If I see any opportunity to come to your aid, I will try to do so.”

“Thank you, but don’t worry if you can’t. I can hold my own.”

“I’m sure you can, Admiral. You should also know that most of the council supports your efforts, but there is a strong sense of fear and disquiet among those present this evening.”

“Fear?”

“When some begin to speak, yes.”

“Hopefully not when I speak?”

He paused before answering, “When you step up, I sense joy, anxiety, excitement, foreboding, hope, calm...just to name a few.”

“There’s more?”

Taking her hand, he kissed the back of it and said, “A pleasure to meet you Admiral. I hope to speak with you again.”

“I’ll look forward to it, Mr. Grax.”

While his description of the council’s mood was almost as amusing as it was ambiguous, Kathryn was glad for the warning that a personal attack was looming. It wouldn’t be the first time, nor the last. She took a deep breath, straightened her tunic, and asked for a cup of coffee. She knew she’d need it.

Once everyone was back from their break, Dooha called for a tally of the nominations. There would be seven members on each task force, so the top ten nominations selected for each were put forth for a vote. Each council member voted for seven, and the task forces were set.

Dooha spoke to the council. “Admiral Janeway will be available to each task force for the rest of the week to get further information and to clarify any concerns that the task force might have. We will now open the floor for any questions that are not specific to the proposals.” He turned to her, “Admiral?”

She put on her best smile and confidently stepped to the podium. “Thank you, Mr. Secretary. First question?”

A man she didn’t recognize stood and asked, “Admiral Janeway, as you talk with these task forces, how can we be sure that your judgment hasn’t been compromised by the attack against you?”

“That’s a valid question, councilman, because one can’t help but be affected by torture. However, my suffering was at the hands of terrorists, not the people of the Federation. There have been innumerable terrorist attacks since the war, and I firmly believe that all of them are a symptom of the problems that we are facing. As a result, I feel stronger in my vow to help the Federation resolve some of the problems that are harboring an environment in which terrorists feel they have no other choice but to use violence and coercion as tools for communicating.”

Another councilman asked, “Would you clarify, please? You are confident that you were attacked by terrorists, yet you want to help them?”

“Vastly different groups of terrorists, councilman. Those whom I want to help need a voice. Those whom attacked me want to quiet that voice.”

There was a quiet in the room until the next person standing at the microphone remembered to speak. “Admiral, since this session is being watched by many throughout the Federation, what can those from worlds which are not in jeopardy expect from these petitions?”

“The Federation charter challenges us to promote social progress and better standards of living on all worlds. Do we forsake some worlds because of economic reasons? Does it mean something that the Federation charter asks us to uphold equal rights of members both large and small? The way I see it, these worlds are still part of our Federation, even though they have renounced their membership out of desperation. I consider their actions an avenue for lodging their protest.”

Dooha stepped forward and asked, “Admiral, would you give an illustration of one of the many situations that relies on inter-planetary dependency? An illustration of how the current situation has a negative affect not just on the estranged worlds, but also on the worlds that are represented here?”

She nodded and took a moment to remember an applicable situation. “An example comes to mind that is affected by all three petitions. The astrophysics department of the national science institute on Algolia was studying the collisions of matter and radiation in an electrically charged atmosphere. Funding for that research was suspended when that planet withdrew its membership from the Federation. They withdrew because this council mandated that in order to be good citizens, they had to provide a considerable amount of nillimite alloy at one fourth the market price for the rebuilding of San Francisco on Earth. That mandate, if they had fulfilled it, would have depleted that planet of the most marketable resource they have. Meanwhile, the Napean homeworld, still a member of the Federation, experienced a devastating radiation leak during the rebuilding that they were trying to do themselves because Federation resources for post-war rebuilding were being spent elsewhere. Without going into the scientific details, if the research had been completed on Algolia, the radiation poisoning on Napea might have been treatable. Thousands of lives could have been saved.”

Liyal stepped forward for the next question, making the hair on the back of Kathryn’s neck stand on end. She hadn’t seen him since the reception at her home where she got into an argument

with him. Knowing that her voice likely sounded on edge, she asked, “Do you have a question about resource allocation, Councilman Liyal?”

“I will have many *facts* to share with you at the task-force meeting, Admiral, since I’m sure that I will be appointed to participate. My question for you now is in regards to your fascination with terrorists.”

“Fascination?” She forced herself to keep cool.

“A considerable portion of your staff are members of the Maquis, Admiral. That alone implies that you automatically have sympathy for rebels. But let us not forget that you are married to a known convict and terrorist.”

She decided to let her exasperation show. There was no harm in her showing annoyance with the question that likely, ninety-nine percent of the Federation would be just as annoyed with. Rather than trying to defend the Maquis, she chose to draw upon her words from the interview with Gayle Struthers a year before.

“My husband, Captain Chakotay, is professor of advanced tactics at Starfleet Academy. He is teaching the next generation of Starfleet officers new ways to defend our Federation from those who would attack it. One could name him a rebel, but he is not, nor was he ever, a terrorist. His rebellion was simply a choice to leave Starfleet when this Council allowed the Cardassians to murder over three thousand members of his tribe. I’m in love with a man who did what he could to get supplies to the surviving colonies after they were cut off by this Council. If that marks me as one who would show favoritism to those who would leave a corrupt Federation, then I will gladly own up to that description.”

A Moroppian was at the microphone next, and by the sneer on his face, Kathryn knew that she might be in trouble. “Next question?”

“Janeway, you just told the entire Federation that it was this Council’s fault that the colonies were destroyed, yet you’re here asking for our help.”

Her voice tense, she asked, “Was there a question in that statement?”

He looked annoyed. “Yes, Janeway. Do you believe that by attacking the Federation Council’s past decisions, you’re going to help save these worlds who have turned their backs on the Federation?”

“It is no secret that poor decisions have been made in the past, councilman. The petitions before you focus on the future with the hope that good decisions will be made from this point forward. They do not cast blame, nor do they name anyone in this room a terrorist.”

The Moroppian stayed for another question, and the Kazerite behind him did not balk. “Would you name anyone in this room a terrorist, Janeway?”

“I’m not here to do that.”

“If you were?”

“But I’m not.”

Dooha stepped up beside her and said, “Let’s move on. Councilman Lal, I believe you have the next question?”

The Kazerite anxiously looked at the hovering Moroppian and Bolian, and then glanced down at a PADD that he hadn’t been holding just moments earlier. “Admiral, I’ve...” He glanced back again and saw Liyal take a step forward. “I have a question here.”

“Is it your question, Councilman Lal?” Kathryn asked.

“Umm... yes, I believe it has become so.”

“Go ahead,” she encouraged.

“I find this a senseless question, but I will ask it. Do you believe the Federation is corrupt?”

“I believe whole-heartedly in the Federation. Just about every person that I’ve met during the last year has expressed concern for the Federation, and that tells me that each one of those individuals wants it to succeed and prosper as much as I do. Now, since the last speaker got two questions, I’d like to answer two for you as well. Do you have another?”

“I’m, uh, not sure you answered the first, but I did appreciate your response. My question for you is, ‘What can the council members who are not on a task force do to assist in the successful outcome of your petitions?’”

She tried really hard not to smile as it become completely obvious who was behind the corruption. They had just ‘outed’ themselves. “Thank you for that question, Mr. Lal. I believe the best thing that any council member can do is to follow the oath you took when you were elected. Do you remember that oath?”

“Absolutely,” Lal said. “I do solemnly affirm that I will to the...”

One by one, most of the members of the council stood and joined him in doing so. “...best of my ability, preserve, protect, and defend the Articles of the Federation; that I will impartially represent the needs of all Federation members; that I take this obligation freely, without any reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter.”

After a round of applause, Dooha asked, “Admiral, do you have any final comments before we close this session?”

Kathryn felt like she was about to burst with joy as she said, “Thank you. I know that what we are facing is not easy, but the Federation is worth fighting for. Our future requires stepping out of our comfort zone and taking risks to ensure that we uphold the Federation Charter to protect the fundamental rights of all sentient beings. There have been times in my career when it has been extremely painful to follow the prime directive, when the people serving under me have suffered because I chose to uphold the principles of the Federation, but I have stood my ground. In fact, I’m risking my life just to be here today because there are those who continually try to silence me. I ask you to find the courage to address the needs of the billions of individuals that you represent. Whatever the outcome of these petitions, my hope is that they are debated openly, honestly, and without anymore hints of coercion. You sent me to open a dialogue with those who are disgruntled. I went, and now I’m back. It’s your turn to take a stand and do what is right.”

After a long period of hand-shaking following the general session, Justin escorted Kathryn into a private conference room so that she could eat and have a few minutes of rest to maintain her stamina. Mark joined them as she was finishing her meal and reported that a security team from the Pioneer would be arriving soon to give them a report on their investigation into the security breach in her hotel room.

Now finished with her meal, she looked at both of her security officers and a grin tugged at her lips.

“What is it, Admiral?” Justin asked.

“Do you two know that my former fiancés were named Justin and Mark?”

“Yes, we did, Admiral,” Justin said with a chuckle. “If it makes you feel better, you can call me something else. Jason is pretty close.”

“Nah. Justin saved my life. You have, too.”

Mark asked, “Did your Mark ever save your life?”

She shook her head. “No, but he kept me grounded. He’s a philosopher.”

“It’s too bad Chakotay’s name is so rare. We could’ve brought another onto the team,” Justin said with amusement.

“I think one of him is about all I can handle.” She fiddled with her wedding ring, her thoughts drifting to the moment he’d given it to her.

“May I ask about your Justin, Admiral? I saw that he was a ranger, but there was nothing about how he died.”

Instantly sober, she replied, “A shuttle crash. My father and I were also involved.”

“Ah. Did your father survive?”

Kathryn shook her head and very quietly said, “No.”

“My apologies, Admiral. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

She waved off his concern. “It was twenty years ago, but I don’t think one ever gets over the loss of a parent or a loved one.”

“No, you don’t. My parents’ deaths still get to me, too. I had thought about looking for a wife from our colony, but I guess it’s good that I didn’t because I would’ve lost her, too.”

“No survivors?” she asked.

“No,” he whispered, and then took a deep breath and smiled. “But I’ve got Sue now.”

“Yes, you do,” she said proudly.

The door opened to admit Commander Moore. He extended his hand towards Kathryn and said, “It’s good to see you again, Admiral. How are you?”

“Improving every day, thank you. I appreciate you taking the time to help us on this investigation.”

He sat down and said, “I understand that you were expecting several members of my team, but knowing that your time is limited and that you prefer succinct reports, I thought I’d come alone.”

Nodding, she asked, “What have you got for us?”

“The breach was caused by a member of the cleaning staff who thought she was helping out a member of your security team.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No,” he said with a shake of his head. “She gave us a description of the man she let into your room, but it’s general enough that we can’t pinpoint it to any one individual. The likelihood that the infiltrator is someone recognizable is slim to none. He was wearing a Starfleet uniform, but that doesn’t mean he’s a Starfleet officer.”

“No, it doesn’t. The man who abducted me in Greece was posing as a Starfleet officer, too.”

“Right,” Justin said. “That one was paid handsomely for the job, but he won’t tell us who his benefactor was. Evidently, he’s more afraid of that individual than he is of a Federation prison.”

“And Pratin was a dead end, too,” Mark mused, and then grimaced. “Pardon the pun.”

Kathryn was uncomfortable with Mark’s attempt at humor, but chose not to reprimand him because he was unaware that the virus that had killed Pratin had almost killed her, too.

Moore continued with his report. “The surveillance device was a second lens attached to the camera on the computer interface. It was virtually undetectable if not for the very low frequency comm signal that it was transmitting.”

“Did it record audio as well as visual?” she asked.

“No, just the visual. Unless the recipient could read lips, they only got images. Unfortunately, they were very telling images.” He shifted in his chair before he said, “On a side note. Congratulations, Admiral.”

“Thank you, Commander.”

Justin asked, “So the comm line was secure?”

“Yes. The computer interface was not. The standard operating procedure is to scan continuously for listening devices, so the infiltrator had to use something that would fall under our radar.”

Kathryn nodded. “Well, that makes me feel a little better.”

“It does?” Mark asked.

“That my comm terminal at home couldn’t have been tampered with in the same way.”

Justin said, “Not likely, but we can increase the range of transmission frequencies that we scan for in your vicinity.”

Mark offered, “I suggest that we run a test on any comm equipment that you use outside of your home, in case there’s a piece of technology that doesn’t operate until the unit is used.”

“Good suggestion,” Moore said. “Meanwhile, I have some information that Captain Young asked me to pass along to you. Do you want to discuss it alone?”

“No, these two can stay. They might be able to help.”

He handed a PADD to her. “That’s a list of all the major supporters of Zife’s first and second campaigns. Although this information is not easily accessible, it is publically available by law, so our inside source did not commit any illegalities. We filtered the list by those who are Bolian, Moroppian, or Dolsian; those who contributed to both campaigns; and those who have done well economically in the last three years.”

Kathryn read the result and pointed out, "This is only five individuals."

"That's right. All five are officers of the Bank of Bolias, as noted by their brown uniforms. They are responsible for turning the bank around in the last four years, making it highly profitable with an impenetrable security system."

Justin asked, "Impenetrable? The Bolian bank? I don't think so."

Mark pointed out, "It used to be notorious for being broken into, but I don't think that's the case anymore, Justin."

"That's right," Moore said. "I don't know what you're looking for, Admiral, but it might be worth taking a closer look at the bank."

Kathryn asked, "You really don't know?"

He smirked. "Not specifically, no. But I can guess."

She made eye contact with each man in the room, saying, "What I'm about to tell you is to be kept quiet, understood?"

"Yes, ma'am," they all replied.

"We have a report that a Bolian bank officer was aboard the ship I was held captive on. I want to know how dependent that bank is on the current government."

Moore asked, "Would you like me to look into that?"

"Could you?" She leaned forward. "How would you go about it?"

"Who would you go to if you wanted to find out all you can about profit and loss in this quadrant?"

Justin asked, "The Ferengi?"

"Exactly," Moore said with assurance. "Admiral, do you think you can find an assignment for the Pioneer that will take us out towards Deep Space Nine?"

"I think that can be arranged." She looked at Justin and asked, "Would you work with Judy to make a list of planets in the former demilitarized zone that could use a little special attention?"

He sat up a little straighter. "Absolutely. I'd like to go."

Kathryn smiled with understanding. "I know, but I'd feel better if you were here."

“Then I'm here. However, I think it would be a good idea to send one or two former Maquis with the Pioneer.”

“All right. I'll leave that to you to set up.”

Moore offered, “There's a former crewman from DS9 teaching at the Academy, Miles O'Brien, and I hear he knows a little about the Bolian Bank. I suggest we contact him as well.”

“Can't hurt. Let's make sure we can trust him before we talk to him.”

Justin said, “O'Brien was aboard the Enterprise for a long time. You might ask Picard if he can be trusted.”

Kathryn nodded. “Good idea, although if he was enlisted, Picard might not know him well.”

“It's worth a call,” Mark said.

“Yes it is.” She turned back to Moore. “Good work, Commander. Would you keep me apprised?”

“Yes, Admiral.”

Kathryn was told by Dooha that the task-forces wanted to have one meeting without her, and suggested that she get some rest to prepare for the next day. Once home, she placed a call to Picard from her house. He answered immediately. “Good afternoon, my dear Admiral. How are you?”

“I'm doing quite well, actually. Busy with the council this week.”

“So I hear. Remarkable job today – I allowed our entire ship to watch the proceedings. Having rescued you, they were all quite interested in your success.”

She rubbed her neck and smiled. “I'm not sure I want to know how many people were watching that.”

“Billions, no doubt. I was quite impressed with how you stood your ground.”

“Thank you.” She took a deep breath. “I was a little worried there for a few minutes.”

“I thought you might be, but you didn't look it. I fully expect that you'll have the council cleaned up and new representatives elected within the week, correct?”

She shook her head in amusement. “Not quite, but I'm winning over a handful of them.”

“I’m sure,” he said with a laugh. “So, what can I do for you today?”

“I’d like to talk to a former Enterprise enlisted crewman, and was wondering how well you know him.”

He rubbed his chin with slight embarrassment. “I’m afraid that I don’t get to know the enlisted ranks as well as I should, but I can ask my officers.”

“Please do. His name is Miles O’Brien.”

“Ah,” Picard said with a grin. “Well, O’Brien is a special case. What would you like to know?”

“Can I trust him with information?”

“Absolutely. I trust him just as much as I would any member of my senior staff. One would never know that he didn’t graduate from the Academy. He’s even teaching there now – quite the coup for an enlisted.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” She narrowed her eyes in thought. “Now I need to convince him to talk to me.”

“If he seems skeptical, just tell him that I requested he do so. I don’t think you’ll run into any trouble.”

“Would it be better for me to talk to him, or one of my officers?”

“Depends on the circumstances and how private you want the conversation. I take it this would be a meeting you wouldn’t want certain parties to know about.”

“I don’t want anyone to know about it, both for his safety and my own.”

“Perhaps you should send someone not directly connected to you.” He raised his eyebrows. “Just in case you’re being followed.”

“Just in case?” She took a deep breath. “That’s a given, but I’ll see what I can do. Thank you.”

“While I’ve got you, may I speak about Commander Kim?”

“Of course. I trust everything is all right?”

“Yes and no.”

Alarmed, Kathryn sat up straighter. “What’s wrong?”

Picard pointed his finger at her. “You let the cat out of the bag, Admiral.”

“Oh.” She tried to cover her smile. “He was feeling anxious about leaving my side.”

“I wanted to surprise him.”

“Please, accept my apology.”

“No, I won’t,” he joked. “Call me whatever you like, but I love seeing the expression on young officers’ faces when I offer them a posting on the Enterprise.”

She leaned forward and rested her chin in her palm. “Did he accept?”

“He still doesn’t want to leave your side. I need you to wean him, my dear Admiral.”

“I’m trying. Can I help it that I’m so likeable and fun to work with? Besides, he’s really great to have around.”

Picard laughed. “I know what you mean. For years, I’ve thought I should get Riker to move on, but he’s just so darned dependable. Now that he’s running off to get married and find a ship of his own, I’m feeling like a parent facing an empty nest.”

“We’re proud of them, but as you know, it takes years to develop these kinds of relationships with our officers.”

“Yes, it most definitely does. At least I still get to keep Data, LaForge, and Beverly.”

More serious now, she said, “I’ll do what I can, but I do need Harry working on my behalf until we can bring most of this to closure.”

“I understand, and I promise you that I will give him that freedom. I would like him in place by September, and if we’re still doing errands for you, he can take point.”

“Thank you, Jean Luc. I appreciate that.”

“Now, I just need you to convince him to flee the nest.”

“I’ll work on it. He likes being needed.”

“Good to know. I’ll see if I can come up with a few needs of my own.”

“Has he briefed you on Sirius IX?”

“Thoroughly. He’s a little anxious about visiting that planet.”

“That’s to be expected, but he’ll do fine. I doubt there’s anything I can add to his report.”

“No, but you can make headway with the council before we get there. That would certainly help us convince Sirius to rejoin the Federation.”

She cocked her head in amusement. “I’ve only been here two days, Jean-Luc. Give me three, at least.” Her comm badge chirped, so she said, “I should answer. Give Beverly my best, would you?”

“I’d be delighted. Good luck, my dear Admiral.”

Once the signal was closed, she tapped her commbadge. “Janeway here.”

Khurma asked, “Kathryn, how are you feeling?”

She sat back in her chair and had to smile. “A little wiped out, but holding up. How are you feeling, sir?”

“Fine, Kathryn, just fine. Ran into Dooha and he told me he sent you home to rest. I was worried.”

“I might’ve appeared a bit lackluster.” She picked up the PADD with their itinerary on it. “He said I wouldn’t be needed until morning.”

“It is his agenda, so I’m sure that’s fine. I just wanted to check on you.”

“And maybe rake me over the coals for almost losing it this morning?”

He exhaled shakily. “This will have some repercussions. I’m not sure what they’ll be, yet.”

“I would offer to apologize, but it would do no good and mean nothing.”

“Our fault for putting you in that situation. President Zife was not happy.”

“I’d be surprised if he was.” She ran her fingers through her hair, loosening her bun. “But I feel that I’ve said what needed to be said, so what happens now is out of my control.”

“It was my hope that you would stay in control, but what’s done is done. Kathryn...”

When he didn’t continue, she asked, “What is it, Admiral?”

“The outcome of this may not be good, but on a personal note, I want you to know that I’m proud of what you’ve managed to accomplish.”

“Thank you, but what kind of outcome are you implying?”

“I don’t know what’s coming. For now, get some rest. I’ll keep you apprised if I learn anything that I can share with you.”

Hesitantly, she said, "I'd appreciate that, sir."

"Khurma out."

She leaned forward and rested her face in her hands, her heart beating heavily as a result of the stress and blood-pressure spike that she was feeling.

Someone knocked on her door and she mumbled, "Come in."

Sue peeked in to say, "Just checking on you."

As a powerful dizziness washed over her, she said, "I don't feel well."

She came further into the room and asked, "Need Justin or should I call Zimmerman?"

"Joe."

Sue tapped her commbadge. "Lieutenant Brooks to Dr. Zimmerman, Starfleet Medical."

"Go ahead, Brooks. How is the Admiral?"

"She isn't feeling well, but Justin hasn't scanned her, yet. She wanted me to call you."

"I'd be surprised if she weren't feeling a little drained. I'll be right there."

Once the line was closed, Sue put her hand on Kathryn's back and said, "Let's get you out of your uniform."

She felt fuzzy, as if the air around her had grown heavy with cotton. It was a very strange sensation and she was at least thankful that she was at home, that Sue was with her, and that Joe was on his way.

Joe arrived and asked, "Admiral? Can you describe your symptoms for me?"

When she said nothing, Sue answered, "She's growing more lethargic with each second. I can't even get her coat off."

"Hold her up for me," Joe instructed as he scanned her.

Justin walked in. "Is she ill?"

"Seems like she's about to faint," Sue said.

"Ah," Joe said while looking at his data. He set his equipment down and carefully lifted Kathryn into his arms. "Lieutenant, would you turn down her bed?"

“Of course!” Sue and Justin worked together to peel back the covers and move the large pillows.

“Leave a few of those. I’d like her elevated slightly.”

They got her settled, her boots and coat off, and drew the blankets up around her.

Joe requested some items from his nurse at Starfleet Medical and then sat on the side of Kathryn’s bed to treat her. “She’ll be fine. Just needs some electrolytes and balancing of her metabolism.”

“Oh, good,” Sue said with a relieved sigh.

“Did something happen to cause her stress?”

Justin answered, “Other than taking on the entire Federation Council?”

“Yes, because this would be a very delayed reaction if that was it.”

“She had come in here to place a call.”

“To whom?” Joe asked.

“I’m not at liberty to say. I’m sorry, Doctor.”

“No matter, I’ll get her sorted out here in a moment.” He hummed as he worked. “She was quite something this morning.”

“That she was.” Sue shook her head. “I can’t believe the Secretary-General let it go on as long as it did.”

Kathryn murmured something unintelligible.

“Admiral?” Sue asked as she unzipped the back of the turtleneck Kathryn was wearing.

Several moments later, Kathryn mumbled, “Seepy.”

“That’s good,” Joe replied. “Because I want you to sleep for awhile.”

Kathryn opened her eyes to see the worried faces of Justin and Sue. “Did I faint?”

Joe answered on their behalf. “Not quite, but you were close. I don’t believe you ever completely lost consciousness.”

“The Doctor asked us if something stressful had just happened. We didn’t know.”

Frowning, Kathryn asked, "If I say yes do I have to tell you what it was?"

"Not if you don't want to. I just need to know if this was a reaction to a specific stimulus."

She hummed tiredly. "Yes, there was a stressful conversation, but I've handled far worse."

"True, but not while this exhausted, pregnant, and low on blood-sugar."

"Mmmm. Justin, call Chakotay for me, would you? I'll call'm later."

"Sure, Admiral. Do you want him to know about this?"

"S'okay. He knows the other stuff, too."

"All right. Do you want me to arrange that meeting we talked about?"

Joe said, "I don't want her doing anything else stressful today."

"Not me," Kathryn said with a tired sigh. "Want Tom. Ask him by later?"

"Good idea. I'll give him a call."

"All right, Admiral," Joe said. "I want you to sleep now, and I'm leaving Justin with instructions to scan you every hour. I'll be back to check on you this evening."

"Thanks, Joe."

He straightened out her blanket and squeezed her shoulder. "You're welcome. Good job today, Admiral. I was very proud to call you my friend."

"Mmmm," she hummed with a sleepy smile.

Sue whispered, "I'll be nearby if you need me, Admiral."

"Mmmhmm. Seep now."

"Sleep well," she said as she closed the window shades to darken the room. After the men left, Sue shut the door, slipped off her boots, and braved lying down on the bed next to Kathryn. She figured it was such a huge bed that Kathryn wouldn't likely notice she was there, and she didn't feel right leaving her alone after such an incredible day.

As Sue watched Kathryn sleep, she found herself surprised that she was continually amazed by this woman. She seemed so normal, yet so remarkable. So fragile, yet so strong. She was kind-hearted, but would stop at nothing to protect those who couldn't protect themselves. It was an honor to get to work with her, and Sue knew she was only one of a select group of people that ever got to see the fragile side of Kathryn Janeway.

Kathryn felt the pull of consciousness draw her from peaceful sleep. Without opening her eyes, she could tell that she was in her bed, but something wasn't quite right. She popped open her eyes, and then a huge smile spread across her face as she saw Sue, sound asleep in Chakotay's place on the bed.

The younger woman looked so relaxed and peaceful that Kathryn didn't want to disturb her, so she moved as quietly as she could to sit up.

“Admiral!”

Kathryn cringed and turned back around to see Sue sitting up. “I didn't want to wake you.”

“Are you feeling all right, now? I was worried.”

Softly, Kathryn asked, “Is that why you were sleeping in my bed?”

“Well,” Sue said with hesitation. “Technically, I wasn't *in* your bed. I was *on* it.”

“Oh, I see,” she said with a laugh. “But to answer your question, yes, I think I feel all right. Do you know how long we've been asleep?”

Sue looked at the clock. “A little over four hours. It's dinner-time in Europe, so mid-morning here. Eighteen hundred for our schedule.”

“Which makes it what for Chakotay?” Kathryn scratched her head. “About twenty-one hundred?”

“About that, yes. A little later.”

She stood up slowly and stretched. “I should call him.”

“All right, I'll leave you alone so you can do that.”

“Thank you, Sue.” She caught the younger woman's arm as she walked past on her way out. Kathryn glanced at the bed as she said, “And thank you for staying with me.”

“My pleasure, Admiral.”

Kathryn changed into more comfortable clothes before she sat down to initiate the comm-link.

Sue popped her head in and set down a plate with peanut butter toast on it. “Orders from the Doctor.”

“Thank you.” She waved as Sue closed the door to give her some privacy.

Chakotay answered almost immediately. “Hello love, are you feeling better?”

“A lot. Did Justin tell you that I fainted?”

“No,” he said with concern. “Just that you were exhausted. Are you okay?”

“Sue was holding onto me, I think. I didn’t fall.”

“Well, that’s good. Do you know why?”

“Spike in blood-pressure probably, but Joe fixed me up.”

“I can imagine that if anything was going to affect your blood pressure, it would’ve been that general session.”

“Oddly enough, I was fine until my C.O. contacted me.”

“Was he not happy?”

“Zife wasn’t happy, and my guess is that he let Khurma know it.”

“But we don’t want Zife happy.”

“Khurma wanted me to stay in control of the situation.” Kathryn took a drink of water.

“And he thinks you’ve lost that?”

“I did, a little. But he did apologize for putting me in the position of having to defend myself in front of such a large audience.”

Chakotay tugged on his ear. “I think you were defending me. Thank you for that, by the way. I was very moved by what you said.”

“I couldn’t let that go without a rebuttal.” She took a bite of the toast.

“I know, and I think you would’ve lost ground with the public if you’d taken it lying down.”

“So, in the bigger picture, I pissed off the President of the Federation, but fed the wave of animosity towards him for billions of people. I think that should count under ‘the needs of the many,’ don’t you?”

“It was more than that, and you know it,” he said as he tapped his finger on the desktop. “You exposed the corruption.”

“They did it themselves,” she said flatly as she stuffed the last bite in her mouth.

“They played right into your hand – it was incredible. I can’t wait to see the evening Fednews report.”

She sighed. “This could’ve cost me my job, you know.”

“If it does, then you are definitely going out with a bang.”

“My commanding officer doesn’t agree.”

“But Kathryn, if you were relieved of duty right now, it would be blatantly obvious that the President wanted you silenced because you said the council is corrupt.”

“It is corrupt.”

“I know. Trust me, what happened today was a great thing, no matter what the fallout is.”

“I don’t know, honey.” She ran her hands over her face. “Maybe I just can’t see the forest for the trees.”

“Maybe it’s the briar patches you can’t see. Let them throw you into one.”

“Really?” she asked honestly.

“Really. Kathryn, it will be okay. I promise.”

“Even if I get sacked?”

“Especially if you get sacked.”

A smile tugged at her mouth. “Thanks for cheering me up.”

“Any time.”

“Did Justin fill you in on the security report?”

“Images only?”

“Yeah.” She rubbed her eyes. “Very telling images.”

“The method of tampering is pretty tame, and Justin is sure they can detect it in the future. He told me about the plans for increasing security a notch.”

“I was actually surprised that no one mentioned the baby this morning.”

“That would’ve been enough proof to put them under arrest.” He leaned forward. “Kathryn, if our secret gets out, it’s okay. Three months have passed, your petitions are in place, and the media has something else to chew on.”

She smiled appreciatively. “Did Justin go over anything else?”

“The list of five?”

“That’s it.”

“Tom is coming over tonight?”

“If that’s what Justin said. I think Tom is great at getting people to talk.”

“I agree. Justin and I also talked about the barkeep on DS9, and I helped Justin make some plans for the Pioneer’s trip out there.”

“Thanks for that. I don’t have the energy to think about it.”

“You’re welcome. I’m glad to have helped.” He hesitated before saying, “I’d also like to call Bernie. It’s time for Broken Circle to make a move.”

“To do what? ”

“I think a citizen group should latch on to what you said today, taking into account who taunted you. They could do their own bit of research, and expose a good deal of the dirt.”

“Just so I’m not the one exposing any.”

“No, I think you’re done talking for now. Provide answers for the task-forces, but don’t try to affect their decisions. Also, I think you should avoid any private conversations with council members that aren’t on record.”

She nodded. “Good idea. I’m glad you’re thinking through this because I’m a little foggy.”

“Have you eaten anything since lunch besides that toast?”

“No.”

Lovingly, he suggested, “Go eat. I’ll write up some notes and send them to you.”

“Encoded?”

“Of course. I love you.”

“Love you, too, honey.” She blew him a kiss and signed off.

As Kathryn was eating her dessert, the doorbell rang. She took the bowl to the sink and was just about to go into the great room when Tom and B'Elanna burst into the kitchen.

"You are so awesome!" Tom shouted as he pulled Kathryn into a bear hug.

B'Elanna looked ready to attack as she said, "You have no idea how much I wanted to go to Paris and knock some heads together."

Kathryn held Tom almost as tightly as he was holding her, taking solace in the physical contact of a friend. "I can always count on you two to tell me how great I am."

"Always?" B'Elanna laughed. "I can clearly remember..."

"Well, except for that one time," Kathryn replied quickly as she pulled out of one hug and went into another with B'Elanna. "This feels good."

"Who knew the great Admiral Janeway needs hugs?" Tom asked.

"You do," she said as she bent down to open her arms to Miral who was toddling into the kitchen. "Hi there, sweetheart."

"Up!" the little girl demanded as she held her arms out towards Kathryn.

Happily obliging, she picked up the little girl and rubbed foreheads with her. "I think you've grown in the last three days."

"Probably," B'Elanna said. "She's eaten enough."

"Let's go sit down," Tom said as he ushered the ladies into the great room. "You've had a stressful day, Kathryn."

"You could say that again."

Once they were seated and Kathryn was happily holding Miral on her lap, Tom said, "Not that we don't love seeing you, but we were surprised when Justin asked us to come over tonight. Did you just miss us or do you need something?"

"Both, actually." She looked directly at Tom. "I need your help."

"Absolutely," he said immediately, leaning forward with eagerness. "What would you like me to do?"

"I need you to go see someone at the academy. Get him talking over drinks."

“A student?”

“Faculty. Miles O’Brien.”

“Never heard of him.”

“Hopefully, he’ll have heard of you.”

Kathryn spent the better part of Wednesday in meetings about minor issues that were specific to just one or two worlds, as opposed to all twenty-six that she’d visited. The task forces were not meeting in order to give the individual council members time to read the proposals and do some of their own research.

As she walked out of her afternoon meeting with Sue and Justin by her side, Mark came up to them. “Admiral, I need to speak to you.”

“About?” She raised her chin and focused on him.

“We received another PADD with disturbing contents.”

Kathryn pursed her lips and motioned for them to go into a private room. They waited while Justin set up a dampening field so their conversation wouldn’t be overheard. “What does it say?” she asked as she held out her hand for it.

“It’s just pictures.”

“Of me? How?”

He shook his head. “Not of you... of your niece.”

Kathryn’s mouth dropped open in shock. “Katie?”

Mark handed her the PADD. “It’s images of her at school. We’ve already notified the headmaster, and the building is on lockdown.”

She saw that there were a few images of Katie playing on the playground, and one of Phoebe dropping her off. “Does my sister know?”

“I thought you might like to be the one to tell her.”

Kathryn blinked slowly and nodded her agreement. “Sue, what’s next on my schedule?”

“In thirty minutes, you have a private meeting with Dooha.”

“Can I fit him in tomorrow?”

“He wants to speak with you before the evening session that begins at nineteen-hundred.”

“All right.” Kathryn instructed, “Contact Dooha and ask if he’d reschedule for eighteen hundred with the understanding that I may be delayed. Mark, take the team to Phoebe’s home and secure it for my arrival. Justin, after I’ve transported there, take this PADD to Moore and see what his team can come up with. I know they leave tomorrow, but any help he could give us would be appreciated.”

As Mark and Sue left, Justin said, “Ma’am, it would be safer to have Mrs. Richards meet you at your home.”

“For this, I need to go to her.”

“Understood, Admiral.”

“Drop the dampening field, please.” Once the device was deactivated, Kathryn tapped her commbadge. “Janeway to Phoebe Richards, Indiana 647.”

Phoebe answered, “Katie? Aren’t you in Paris?”

“Yes, but I need to speak with you about a matter of some urgency. Are you at your home?”

“I’m headed to the market, but I can go back. What’s going on?”

“I’ll explain at your house. Be prepared to see Starfleet security there.”

“I’m always prepared to see them when you’re around, Katie.”

“Such is my life. How long will it take you to get home?”

“Just a couple minutes. Go ahead and transport there if you’d like.”

“I will as soon as my security team gives me the all clear.”

“All right, I’ll hurry back. I know your time is important.”

“Not more important than you. See you soon. Janeway out.”

Once the channel was closed, Justin said, “It’ll be a few minutes. How are you feeling?”

Kathryn rubbed her neck and sighed. “A little weak, but I’m not sure it has anything to do with my health.”

He pulled out the tri-corder and scanned her. “You’re doing a lot better overall than you were last week.”

Distractedly, she replied, “The Doctor’s visits have helped.”

“Here, eat this while we wait,” he said as he offered her a granola bar. “I’ll contact the Pioneer to let them know I’ll be transporting up.”

Kathryn took the snack and went over to the window to look down at the people passing by on the sidewalks. A sense of melancholy washed over her as she yearned for the freedom to walk down an open street again, and the despondence was only amplified by the knowledge that her actions had jeopardized her family’s freedom as well. She found it difficult to swallow the granola past the lump in her throat, but she forced it down knowing that she needed it to keep her strength up for the upcoming conversation.

Quietly, Justin said, “Admiral?”

Kathryn took a deep breath and straightened her back before turning to him. “Ready?”

“Yes, but…” He hesitated, and then seemed to change his mind about speaking.

“What is it, Justin?”

“I wanted to say something to reassure you, but I can’t think of what would help.”

Kathryn forced a smile. “We’ll get through this, and I appreciate everything you’re doing. You have the hardest job, looking after me.”

“No, ma’am. I’m quite sure that you have the hardest job, and it was my hope that I could take your mind off of your personal safety concerns.”

“You do, but the point of these threats is to undermine your efforts. We’ll do our best to make sure these people aren’t successful.”

He gave a reassuring nod. “After this trip to your sister’s home, it would help if you gave me more advance notice of your movements.”

Kathryn patted his shoulder as she stepped past him. “Of course, Lieutenant.”

They walked to the secure transporter room in the Federation Council building and beamed directly to Phoebe’s house. As soon as she arrived, Kathryn found herself in her sister’s arms.

“Katie, are you okay?”

Kathryn savored the hug for a moment before replying, “Yes and no.”

Pulling back so she could look at her sister, Phoebe said, “Talk to me. Is something wrong between you and Chakotay?”

“No... heavens no.” Kathryn took a deep breath and forged ahead. “Over the past few days, I’ve received three threats, more or less.”

“Threats?” Phoebe motioned to her couch and the two sat down. “To do what?”

“To stop what I’m doing or my family will suffer the consequences.”

Phoebe’s mouth dropped open for only a moment before her eyes flashed with anger. “How dare they threaten you!”

“That doesn’t bother me because I know whoever is behind these threats just wants to distract me. However, the PADD I received twenty minutes ago indicates that your family is at risk.”

“You’re my family.”

“The PADD has pictures of Katie at school, and of you dropping her off.”

“Katie!” Phoebe suddenly stood up and then couldn’t figure out what to do. “I need to get to her! I need to call Mike!”

Kathryn jumped up with her, and put her hands on her sister’s arms. Speaking with command authority, Kathryn said, “Phoebe, listen to me.”

“But...”

“Phoebe!” She waited until Phoebe made eye contact again. “We’ve already got a team at the school, and it’s on lockdown. No one is getting in or out.”

“But my daughter!”

“I know.” Kathryn squeezed Phoebe’s arms gently until she had her attention again. “The best thing is for us to remain calm. All right?”

“Oh, Katie,” Phoebe hugged her sister again. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Lieutenant Yosa has a plan in place.” She turned to Mark and invited him to speak.

“Yes, ma’am. Mrs. Richards, we have an officer waiting in the lobby of your husband’s office and a team of four with your daughter. We’ll set up a security perimeter here just as we have at the Admiral’s home. We’ll transport your family directly wherever you need to go, and have a security detail with you, your daughter, and your husband at all times.”

“For how long?”

Kathryn said, "I don't know, but I can't let these people bully me into backing off."

"No, you can't! No one intimidates my sister!"

"We'll work through a plan and see what we can do to give you as much freedom as possible."

"I don't care about my freedom, but you listen to me, Katie."

"Go on," Kathryn said gently.

"You bring them down. You hear me? No one threatens my family."

A smile tugged at Kathryn's lips and she hugged her sister again. "Thank you, Phobes."

After a long hug, Phoebe asked, "What other threats have you received? Are you okay?"

"I'm safe. So safe that I think the assailants are trying to get to me through you."

"Just... whatever you do, be careful."

"I certainly am trying to be." Kathryn rubbed her sister's arms. "Now, would you like security to bring Katie home or do you want to leave her at school until eleven thirty?"

"You're sure she's okay?"

Kathryn turned to Mark, and Mark pressed his commbadge. "Yosa to Larkin."

"Larkin here."

"Mrs. Richards would like confirmation of her daughter's safety. She is listening to this conversation."

Larkin said, "Mrs. Richards, your daughter is not aware of any danger. Currently, the class is seated in a circle and the teacher is reading a book."

Phoebe breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you. If it's okay, I'd still like to be the one to pick her up, and at the regular time."

Larkin replied, "I'll see about arranging that, but we might need to transport you directly inside the building."

"Whatever it takes."

"I'll be in touch, Mrs. Richards. Larkin out."

Kathryn said, "I need to get back to Paris, but only if you're sure that you're okay."

"Go on," Phoebe encouraged. "I trust that your security will take care of us, and I want you to go see what you can do about getting that asshole out of office."

"I doubt that'll happen tonight, but I'll see if I can make some headway." Kathryn gave her sister one last hug. "I'll contact you tonight after my council session is over. Okay?"

"We'll be fine. I'm going to go call Mike and let him know what's going on."

"All right, but let Lieutenant Yosa secure it first. He's going to stay here with you. Mark is my personal body guard so I know he'll take good care of you."

"Won't that leave you unprotected?"

Kathryn smiled with assurance. "I'll be fine in the council building, and then I'm going straight home."

"I love you, Katie."

"I love you, too." Kathryn blew her a kiss before calling for a beam out.

She went back to her house for a quick dinner and then transported to Paris for her meeting with Dooha. With Justin on the Pioneer, and Mark with Phoebe, she only had Sue by her side. However, she always had about three more security personnel that she tried not to notice.

After she walked into the private conference room, Dooha looked past her and asked, "Where is your security, Admiral?"

"There are a few outside the room. Why? Is your building not secure?" Khurma walked in at that point and Kathryn smiled at him in welcome.

Dooha continued, "I think there might be more of a threat to you within these walls than out there on the street."

"But the terrorists in here don't do the dirty work themselves. I bet I could drop any one of them on their rear ends, even in my weakened condition."

"Kathryn," Khurma admonished.

"Oh, don't worry so much Kamir. We're among friends here." He handed each of them a glass of white wine. "A toast is in order."

"Is it?" Kathryn asked.

“It is. We’ve had these task forces in place for two entire working days, and everyone is still talking to each other. I think that’s worth celebrating. Kamir, would you do the honors?”

Khurma glanced at Kathryn before saying, “A toast then, to the charisma of Kathryn Janeway. May the council never know what hit them.”

“Here, here!” Dooha said.

Kathryn took only a sip even though it tasted wonderful. “Now that we’ve celebrated, what would you like to talk about?”

“Our agenda.” He gestured for everyone to take a seat around the table. “For the reception tonight, we’ve opened it up to the press.”

“The press?” Kathryn asked anxiously.

Khurma asked, “Is there a problem?”

“I suppose not,” she said tiredly. “I’m just not sure I have the energy to deal with both the council and a bunch of reporters.”

“Not to worry,” Dooha said. “The news team assigned to the Council has very specific guidelines to follow for formal events. They will take pictures and report on who is seen with whom. It’ll be more of a social report than anything.”

“Should I be in a gown?”

“No, no, your uniform is fine. It makes you more recognizable.” Dooha looked at her carefully. “Although, you might want to freshen up. You look tired.”

“I am tired.”

Khurma asked with sincerity, “Kathryn, are you feeling up to this?”

“For a little while.”

Dooha said, “You’re still not quite recovered, are you?”

“Not entirely, but I can hold it together.”

Khurma put his hand on her back. “If, at any time, you need to step out, just go. We’ll make your excuses.”

“Good advice,” Dooha said. “The main point of the evening is to provide some of the council members a chance to be seen talking to you. It’s good for their publicity.”

“Sounds like something Gardi said to me Monday.”

“Gardi?” Dooha asked.

“He suggested that a little rubbing elbows with me might endear some of the council members to the public.”

“Quite true.” He nodded. “Just don’t overdo it. Tomorrow, you meet with all three task forces. Want to go over the agendas now?”

“Might as well,” she said tiredly. “But I’ll need coffee, and lots of it.”

Part 32 - “Connecting The Dots”

By Dawn

Summary: Kathryn meets with the task forces and things start falling into place.

Rated PG

The task force meeting to discuss the expired trade agreements was not going well. Everyone was on edge, and it didn’t help that Representative Jorl of Moroppa was on the committee. He said little, but everyone watched his reactions carefully, often clammng up when he all but twitched an eyebrow.

What frustrated Kathryn was the defensiveness that pervaded the room when she and Sue presented the information collected from each of the planets.

Sue began to respond to a question about the accuracy of the data. “Sir...”

Kathryn placed her hand on Sue’s arm. “Let’s stop for a moment.”

“Admiral, we’re on a tight schedule,” one councilman protested.

She nodded her understanding, but instead of continuing the conversation, she leaned back in her chair and folded her hands together in her lap. “This isn’t a battle, and the last thing I’m trying to do is point fingers or cast blame.”

“Is that so?” Jorl asked. “Every time I’ve seen you lately, you’ve been casting around quite a lot of blame. Seems to me like you want to blame us for the deaths of your lover’s family.”

Ignoring the bait, she spoke to the rest of the group. “We have nine so-called debts that will never be paid, which leaves nine governments in poor standing with the Federation. Do you want these planets in the Federation or not?”

Jorl asked, “What if I said, ‘no?’”

“Then I would ask on what grounds?”

“These nine planets provide no tangible contribution to the Federation. They never have.”

“Excuse me?” She was shocked with disbelief, and with one glance around the room, she could tell that she wasn’t the only one who felt that way. “Since when does the Federation make planets pay to be members?”

“It doesn’t, but it should. Every planet, colony, or space station that wants protection from Starfleet and the Federation should have to contribute to the greater good. Why should we break the rules just to let these planets slither back to us? It’s pathetic, and they’d be embarrassed to do it.”

She blinked slowly. “You do realize that these proceedings are being recorded, don’t you?”

He shrugged as if he didn’t care.

Rubbing the bridge of her nose, she said, “This is getting us nowhere. Let’s assume the answer is yes, we definitely want these planets back in the Federation. That being the case, it is my suggestion that we start fresh. Right here, right now. Terminate these contracts so we can have some movement towards re-uniting the Federation. It’s what your voters want.”

“Enough. This meeting is pointless, and it’s over.” Jorl stood and tossed a PADD to the middle of the table. “Those are the approved ‘minutes’ of this meeting.”

“What?” Janeway demanded.

He gave her a steely glare, and then deliberately dropped his eyes to her abdomen. “Watch yourself Janeway. Assuming you want to keep that.”

After he walked out of the room, no one said a word until Janeway demanded, “Who is recording this conversation?”

A clerk at the far end of the room stood. His voice trembled as he said, “Admiral, I’m sorry, but I had no other choice.”

“What do you mean?”

“I had to make the recording malfunction. He... he left me no other choice.”

With a sigh, she asked, “Blackmail?”

“I know I may lose my job over this, but I can’t lie to you, Admiral. They have pictures of my son.”

Kathryn closed her eyes and lowered her head in grief. “How old is your son?”

“He’s eight. I’m sorry.”

Councilman M’niss said, “You’re not alone.”

Kathryn’s head popped up. “How many of you would admit to being blackmailed?”

Most refused to meet her eyes, but M’niss said, “Whether or not we have been personally approached, Admiral, the control affects all of us.”

“Admiral?” Sue asked as she handed Kathryn a PADD

“Yes, Lieutenant?” One glance at it, and she tried not to smile. “It appears that we do have a recording of this, after all. And it’s still going.”

M’niss smiled with a feline ferocity. “Then I suggest we get on with this meeting. We have work to do.”

“Unless you’d like us to stop here, Admiral?” Lal asked. “For your own safety.”

Kathryn waved away his concern. “I’ve grown numb to the threats, actually.”

Sue said, “Torture will do that.”

Lal asked, “What did Jorl mean about keeping ‘that?’”

“Probably my hide,” she said casually. “Now, should we get on with it, as M’niss suggested?”

“Yes, we should.”

Kathryn picked up the PADD that Jorl left, skimmed through it, and rolled her eyes.

“What does it say?” Curd asked.

“The PADD that Jorl left,” she said for the benefit of the recording, “indicates that this task force should decide that the debts of the nine planets in question not be forgiven on the basis that it is not good for the Federation.”

M’niss said, “Well, this is it. This is when we have to stand up and be brave.”

Kathryn nodded. "If this is going to work, it's going to take everyone banding together. No one can fix these problems alone."

"While we may want to forgive the debts, wouldn't we be setting a precedent that contracts with the Federation aren't enforced?" Curd asked.

Lal pointed out, "That depends on how we phrase the resolution. According to all nine governments, these were signed under duress, during the war. This is unacceptable and the Federation is better than this."

Curd asked, "But what if we do end up in a wartime situation? I'm not sure it's within our jurisdiction to solve this."

M'niss said, "No, the buck stops here. We have to do something about this. I don't know about you, but I'm tired of all the lies and subterfuge."

When no one responded, Kathryn asked, "Does anyone have a suggestion for getting around this?"

Gisso, an expert at Federation law, offered, "The only legal way to terminate the contracts is to prove that they were signed under duress. If we do that, fingers will start pointing before you can say the word 'go.'"

Kathryn nodded towards the data that Sue had been sharing earlier. "We have the proof."

Curd corrected, "We have one side of the story. Need I remind you that it was Starfleet officers who were sent to negotiate those contracts? What will they say in order to protect their careers and families?"

Kathryn said, "It would be my hope that the Starfleet officers would do their duty, as I would expect from you as well. However, let's hear some options. It's time to get creative."

"Admiral," Gisso said, "We're limited by the policies under the Articles of the Federation."

"Then it's time to change those policies."

Curd said, "Agreed, but that would open this debate to the public."

"Then open it. The situation isn't exactly a secret."

"What if..." M'niss rubbed the whiskers on his ears. "What if we did?"

"Go on," Kathryn encouraged.

"We could let the press know that the task force is divided on the issue, and present two options in a formal statement. Present Jorl's as one."

“Can we attach his name to it?” Lal asked. “The more publicity we give to the problem areas, the better.”

Sue looked at the PADD. “It has his thumbprint.”

Curd continued, “And the other calls for an amendment to the Articles.”

Kathryn said, “If all of you get behind the amendment, I’m sure it will pass.”

Lal said, “Admiral, the amendment will pass if you’re the one behind it.”

M’niss interrupted, “No, Lal, we *all* need to get behind it. She can’t do this alone.”

Gisso added, “And it’s not the Admiral who can bring this resolution up for a vote. It’s us.”

“But, you can’t deny that her support will make it or break it,” Lal said.

“Quite true,” said M’niss. “And it’s no secret that you want to bring these planets back into the Federation.”

“No, it’s not.” Kathryn glanced at the clock. “I need to leave it to you to debate the wording of this resolution. Lieutenant Brooks and I have to get to another meeting.”

“This won’t be decided today, Admiral.”

“No, and something this important shouldn’t be rushed.” Kathryn handed Sue a data storage device and pointed to Jorl’s PADD. She held her finger in front of her mouth so that no one in the room would comment on what she was doing. As Sue made the copy, Kathryn said, “While I don’t know your policies for divulging the contents of your meetings, my suggestion is that you find a way to officially report that no decision was made. Stalling can work, and it may buy us some time for other things to get resolved.”

“If we make that statement to the press, Jorl won’t corroborate.”

She looked around the room at M’niss, Gisso, Curd, Lal, Brooks, and the clerk. “Seven to one in our favor.”

The task force on science and medical research funding was going about as well as the first meeting had. No one wanted to commit to anything, and Kathryn felt a tangible lack of trust in the room, even without any of the president’s supporters in the room. Liyal had wanted to be on the team, but did not get elected. Even so, his presence was felt because they knew they’d have to report back to him because he was the chair of the appropriations sub-council.

Kathryn interrupted a conversation that had gone off on a tangent by saying, “My proposal to this task-force was to reinstate the Federation sponsorship program for science and medical research to pre-war levels. For now, I think it’s perfectly acceptable to say that this would be limited to Federation members.”

Daal said, “A nice concept, but the funding just isn’t available. Cuts had to be made because of other needs.”

“Where are those resources being used now?” When Kathryn got only silence in response, she asked, “Rebuilding?”

No one said anything, but there were affirmative nods.

Gardi took a deep breath before saying, “The funds are tied up because of the contracts that your other task force is working on eliminating.”

“What? Why does that have anything to do with this?”

“It’s a loophole,” Daal admitted. “When the contracts weren’t filled by the deadline, the sub-council charged with the rebuilding effort was authorized, by Federation law, to purchase the needed resources from any vendor who could supply them in a timely manner in order to get the projects done.”

Kathryn opened her mouth to comment and then snapped it shut, took a look around at the shocked faces, and decided to go ahead and speak. “Tell me if I’ve got this right... Those contracts were made, knowing full well that they couldn’t be delivered, and this allowed for the purchase of materials at any price?”

“Right,” Daal said.

“And where are we getting them?”

Sakish-Anar said, “I believe you visited those planets, Admiral.”

“I did?”

Sue leaned in and whispered, “Last June.”

Kathryn closed her eyes and let her head fall back. “Of course. It’s the ones that are doing remarkably well coming out of the war. The ‘success’ stories.”

Segra offered, “They really are success stories, Admiral. Our president is very proud that he brought the economies of those worlds back on track.”

Sakish-Anar added, “And his speeches about bringing prosperity include the next planet to be the focus of that effort.”

“I haven’t paid attention,” Kathryn admitted. “Which world is next?”

“This one.”

Kathryn rolled her eyes. “Oh. I did hear that after all, but I’m of the opinion that Earth is doing just fine.”

“I’d say that your opinion is common, Admiral.”

“Anyone else connecting the dots here?” she asked.

“Dots?” Segra asked.

Gardi replied, “A child’s game, Segra. When one connects all the dots together in the right order, one can see the full picture.”

“Oh.”

Kathryn got no responses to her question. “I see.”

Daal said, “There’s nothing this task force can do but make suggestions. The resources just aren’t available to follow through, despite our recommendations.”

Sighing, she replied, “This was supposed to be the easy petition.”

Sakish-Anar asked, “Would you like us to create a proposal anyway?”

“In it, are you going to be assertive enough to connect a few of these dots?”

Daal replied, “I’d like to discuss it with Dooha, first.”

Gardi said, “Look, we’ve been tip-toeing around this issue for years in order to keep the status quo. If not now, when are we going to restore the balance in the Federation Council?”

“What do you propose we do, Gardi?” Sagra asked. “This issue is bigger than any of us.”

“I propose that we point out the facts. They’re incriminating all by themselves.”

Sakish-Anar slammed his hand on the desk. “Now, we’re getting somewhere. Let’s get this down in writing.”

Kathryn proudly said, “Excellent work. May I leave you to it?”

Gardi stood to help Kathryn from her chair. “Of course you may, Admiral. It has been a pleasure to have you with us.”

“Thank you, councilman. I’m sure that all of you can examine the pre-war programs to see where the priorities lie. My staff is available to you at any time in case you’d like more information from the planets we visited.”

Kathryn took another break for lunch, checked in with her husband, and then went into the last task force meeting to discuss maintaining the independence of all Federation planets. A good portion of the time was spent debating whether or not inter-dependency was a good thing. Kathryn’s energy had waned so much that she simply didn’t have the patience or desire to participate in much in the discussion. Sue conveyed all the pertinent data when asked, but Kathryn let the council members control the meeting. Afterwards, she went straight home, crawled into bed, and slept for three hours straight.

For dinner, Justin whipped up a fresh and very flavorful stir-fry, accompanied by spring rolls from one of their favorite Thai restaurants in San Francisco. Kathryn enjoyed the meal so much that she had three servings.

“I’ll have to make that for you again, Admiral.”

“Mmmmm.” She sat back in her chair, feeling stuffed. “I’d like that, although I’m afraid I didn’t leave any room for the cheesecake you made. When did you have the time to do that, by the way?”

“This morning.”

“You were supposed to be taking the time to rest.”

He shrugged. “Cooking helps me relax. I get a lot of thinking done.”

Sue asked, “And what did you think about?”

With a wink, he said, “You.”

His commbadge chirped, interrupting their conversation. “Jarvin here.”

Larkin said, “Commander Paris and his family have requested a visit. Is the Admiral open to accepting guests?”

Kathryn nodded as she stood up from the table and began to clear it. “That would be nice. Thank you, Commander.”

“My pleasure, Admiral. Stand by.”

Sue took the dirty plates from Kathryn. “Let me take care of that, Admiral.”

“Thank you.” The doorbell rang, and Kathryn went into the foyer to greet her guests. When she saw that Owen and Matt had accompanied Tom and B’Elanna, she was definitely surprised. “I didn’t expect all of you!”

Owen leaned in and gave Kathryn a kiss on the cheek. “We hoped you wouldn’t mind, but thought it a wonderful excuse to say hello.”

“You don’t need an excuse for that.” She hugged Matt and said, “It’s so good to see you.”

“Good to see you, too, Katie. And you do look good. Are you feeling it?”

Directing them into great room, she replied, “Off and on. I just had a long nap and a wonderful dinner, so I’ve got some energy at the moment.”

“But it’s in the middle of the morning,” Tom joked. “You and your European schedule.”

“I think I’m done with that schedule for now. Not sure it’s worth going back to Paris tomorrow.”

B’Elanna asked, “Run into problems?”

“A few, but less than I expected. Some encouraging conversations happened today, and I believe it’s the right time for me to get out of their way.”

Matt said, “When these two said they needed a second afternoon off to see you, I asked if Owen and I could tag along.”

“You want to know what they’re up to,” Kathryn mused.

“Well, yes. Tom said he was doing a favor for you and was so secretive about it, I knew something was up.”

Kathryn furrowed her brow at Tom. “You used to be a better liar than that.”

“Yes, well.” He scratched his jaw. “I can come back another time.”

B’Elanna elbowed her husband. “What he’s trying to say is that we think you need help, and we know you trust these two.”

Tom replied, “I’m not saying that at all. You’re saying that.”

Looking at her two father-figures, Kathryn opened her hands. “What do you want to do?”

Owen said, “I have no problem confiding in them. Do you?”

“Only to protect them, but they’re already in danger just by being my friends.”

“Danger?” they all asked in unison.

Kathryn looked over her shoulder at Justin. “You might as well join us.”

“If you’d like, Admiral,” he said as he sat down.

She explained, “I’ve received several threats to back off. One with images of me, one with images of members of my family. With our friendship as public as it is, it wouldn’t surprise me if at some point, you’ll be followed as well.”

“What’s being done about these threats?” Matt demanded.

Justin replied, “The threats don’t have much teeth, but security has been fortified for the admiral’s family.”

Tom commented, “Great time to send me on an errand for you.”

She gave him a knowing smile. “I have faith that you made it believable that you needed to speak to him.”

“Of course.” He sat back and pretended to rub his lapel. “O’Brien is an expert in the field of transporter technology. That’s what he teaches at the academy, you know?”

Nodding, she replied, “Yes, I did know that. Along with tactical systems and ship operations – all providing topics of conversation applicable to your station at Utopia Planetia.”

B’Elanna asked all three admirals, “What is it that you want to confide in us?”

Kathryn looked at Justin and shrugged. “I guess you can know this, too.”

“Brooks is within earshot,” Tom pointed out.

“So she is. Sue,” she called out.

“Yes, Admiral?”

“You can eavesdrop or you can join us.”

“Which would you prefer?”

They all laughed as Kathryn directed, “Have a seat.”

“Anyone else, Katie?” Matt asked. “This is getting larger than I expected.”

“We could’ve invited Young and Moore from the Pioneer if I hadn’t just sent them off on an errand.”

Owen sighed. “Is this getting out of hand?”

Kathryn shook her head. “I trust every one of these people, completely. You all know pieces to this big puzzle, and perhaps if we put our information together, you can help me decide on the next course of action. Unfortunately, there’s no way to have everyone in the same room without arousing suspicion.”

Justin said, “If we’re going to discuss this, Chakotay will want to be involved.”

“Would you see if he’s available?”

“Sure,” he said as he opened a computer terminal on the coffee table. “Want me to conference in the Pioneer, too?”

“No. I can send them on errands without them knowing the whole story.”

Justin keyed in the access code to make the secure connection, and while he was doing so, he nodded towards his bag on the counter. “B’Elanna, there’s a dampening field generator in there. Would you set it up?”

“You don’t already have one going?” she said as she got up.

“Not one that strong. If I did, we wouldn’t be able to receive a combadge signal.” He tapped his badge. “Jarvin to Larkin. We’re going on com silence for a little while.”

“Understood.” The com chirped that it was closed.

B’Elanna activated the generator and sat back down just as Chakotay’s image came up on the screen.

“Justin?” he said anxiously. “I wasn’t expecting to hear from you. Everything all right?”

Kathryn called out, “We’re having a little party and didn’t want you to feel left out.”

“Party?”

Justin said, “Let me switch the camera to wide angle so you can see all of us.”

“Then let me put on a shirt,” Chakotay mumbled. “Who’s at this party?”

Kathryn waved her hand in a circle to indicate that everyone should call out their name.

“B’Elanna.”

“Your best man.”

“Your best man’s father.”

“Your godfather-in-law.”

“Your wife.”

“Your wife’s lovely assistant.”

“And the guy keeping an eye on your wife.” Justin added, “You enabled the security protocols?”

“Always,” he said as he sat back down, looking a bit bed-ruffled. “Is this an impromptu-party?”

Kathryn waved to him and smiled, earning her a smile in return. “As you know, I sent Tom on that errand for me. When he asked for the afternoon off to report back, Owen and Matt decided to tag along. No one here knows everything that’s going on, so I thought this would be a good time to get everything out on the table so that you can all advise me on where to go from here.”

“Everything?” Chakotay asked. “Are you sure that’s wise?”

Matt commented, “That’s what I said. I don’t think it’s in anyone’s best interest to have all the details.”

Kathryn replied, “I’m of the opinion that at this point, you all know enough to realize that there’s a serious problem with our government, and we may be the only ones who have enough information to do something about it.”

Owen said, “I think we’ve all known there was a problem long before now.”

Tom asked, “What can three admirals, a professor, a pilot…”

“This sounds like the start of a bad joke,” B’Elanna interrupted.

“…a couple of engineers, and a tactical officer do about the government?”

Sue said, “One of those admirals has a little bit of influence.” When she got a look from Kathryn, she amended, “All of those admirals have a little influence.”

Kathryn sat forward and put her hands together. “What I’d like to do is figure out how to obtain enough evidence to go forward with an impeachment.”

Tom asked, “Do you have the authority to do that?”

“No, but I assume Khurma does. What I haven’t figured out is exactly how to bring charges against Zife and who would be the person to do that.”

Matt asked, “Do you trust Khurma?”

“Yes, I do.”

Owen shook his head. “I don’t know, Katie. I think he’s content waiting for the next election.”

“That’s possible, but I think we can also force his hand.”

“How?” Owen asked.

She nodded towards Chakotay. “I think it’s time to tell them about Broken Circle.”

Matt asked with surprise, “What?”

Chakotay looked askance at Kathryn, but did as she asked. “Broken Circle is the name of the organized group of rebels who have been responsible for the terrorist activities prior to Kathryn’s accepting her position. Before you ask, they were not responsible for any of the situations in which Kathryn has been injured.”

“What’s our connection?” Matt asked.

“We have two operatives in the group who are taking my advice, passed through Bernie, and again through a third party civilian contact.”

“How do we know we can trust this civilian?”

“His nephew is a member of Pioneer’s security team, and one of Kathryn’s poker partners.”

Owen asked, “What kind of advice are you giving them?”

Chakotay replied, “There have been nine peaceful anti-Zife protests in the last three months. We have directed them to remain calm in order to give Kathryn time to work her magic, and not to raise arms again. Their response has been positive because they are eager to do anything they can to help her. I’ve just sent word that they should jump on what happened during Kathryn’s general session Q&A, going so far as to give them publicly available facts about the voting records of the two councilmen that badgered her.”

B’Elanna said, “How many rebels are involved?”

“We’re not certain, but we suspect about 150 from eleven different species. They’re all young adults trying to get the Federation to notice that there are worlds out there in need of protection.”

She cringed. “Why does that sound familiar?”

Chakotay nodded. "That's why we're directing them to remain calm and from this point on, to keep their actions legal and above the law."

"How did you find out about them?" B'Elanna asked.

Kathryn said, "From Norvellen."

"Who?" Tom asked.

"One of the men from the cargo ship I was held captive on."

Sue shifted uncomfortably and B'Elanna asked incredulously, "And you're working with him?"

Owen said, "More like getting information from him and offering protection in return."

Kathryn said, "Okay, now let's talk about what we learned today. Sue, would you like to report?"

"Should I get my notes?"

"No. If you leave out anything pertinent, I'll fill in."

"Well, today, Jorl told us that we were not to forgive the debts on the basis that those nine planets didn't deserve Federation membership because they provided no tangible resources to the Federation. But after he stormed out of the meeting, we agreed to start working on an amendment to the Articles of the Federation that will be brought up for public vote."

"That's ballsy," Owen said. "Are you sure that was wise?"

Kathryn gave him a look. "Don't get me started on whose idea it was for me to get mixed up in all this in the first place. If the people of the Federation vote on this change, it can't be blamed on one person."

"Want to bet?" Owen replied.

Sue asked, "Should I continue?"

"Yes, to the research meeting."

"This is where it got really interesting. At first, no one would talk, but then they all seemed to open up. The nine contracts that we were discussing in the first meeting were all forced, knowing that they couldn't be delivered. This opened up a loophole in the law because then the materials could be purchased from any vendor who could deliver on time without need for an official contract."

Chakotay asked, "What?"

Kathryn nodded. "And the planets that were ready and waiting to supply the materials are the same five that I went on a song and dance tour of last June with Zife. This is why resources are depleted for science and medical research."

Owen said with disbelief, "The resources are limited because of the costs of the war, and because we've lost nineteen members."

"Surely those statistics are available," Kathryn said. "How do we get them?"

"I'll look into it," Owen replied.

Chakotay said, "Then we find out how those are accessible and leak that information to the press."

"I was thinking Broken Circle," Kathryn replied.

"If everything comes from them, it'll look suspicious."

"And the press have ways of finding things out," Sue said.

"Nor do they have to reveal their sources," Tom added.

Kathryn rubbed her neck and nodded. "All right. See what you can find, Owen, and get that information to a reporter that we trust."

Tom asked, "Want my report from my conversation with O'Brien?"

"Who's O'Brien?" Matt asked.

Tom replied, "Professor of transporter technology at the Academy. He was on the Enterprise for awhile, and spent seven years at DS9."

Justin said, "Before we go there, Tom, we should share with the admirals what we learned from the research done for us by Pioneer's senior staff."

"You've been busy, Katie."

"Yes, I have been, Matt." She glanced at Chakotay's image on the computer and they shared a smile. "Back in February, I asked Bernie to find out what he could about the people closest to Zife. It took awhile, but on Tuesday, Moore brought us a list of five who are all officers of the Bolian bank."

"Their significance?"

Justin said, “The list of supporters was filtered by those who were from the Bolius sector, contributed to both campaigns, and who have done well, economically in the last three years. Only these five were left.”

Owen and Matt shared a curious look and then Matt asked, “It was that easy?”

Kathryn replied, “I don’t know how easy it was, but it’s that specific. Also, we learned from Norvellan that he witnessed a Bolian bank officer going to see me while I was captive, and he also reported that the ship went to Bolius first after I was taken.”

“Right,” Owen said. “I remember that from the report.”

Sue said, “I didn’t realize that.”

Kathryn nodded. “So, we asked Tom to go talk to this O’Brien because Moore heard he knew a little about the Bolian bank.” She motioned for Tom to speak.

“He’s a great guy. Very suspicious at first, but when I told him that I was sent by Janeway via Picard, he opened right up. Back in ’74, he was forced to break into the Bolian Bank as part of an undercover operation, which he does not want in our reports.”

“All right,” Kathryn said.

“It’s been six years, but he’s had this incident on his conscience and, with the Bolian president under so much scrutiny, he’s been keeping his eye on the bank. He was thrilled to report what he’d learned.”

“Do tell, son.” Owen leaned forward intently.

All eyes were on Tom as he said, “The Bolian bank used to be extremely easy to break into, and most of their business was from off-worlders who wanted to hide their money. Ferengi, for example, could hide their profits there and the Ferengar government couldn’t access it. The Bolian citizens didn’t use the bank because they didn’t trust it.

“O’Brien says he has been reading articles about the prosperity on Boliias, and of course, the Fednews has reported that the President is living high on the hog.”

“Hog?” Sue asked.

Tom waved. “Euphemism. He’s been acting as if he is very wealthy. These articles report that the Bank has had record profits because of some major investors. I took the list of those five Boliias to O’Brien and while he didn’t recognize the names, he said if they were bank officers and campaign contributors, it would definitely be worth searching for a correlation with the major investors. I’d suggest starting with the mining companies who are getting rich.”

Matt said, “I’ll take that on.”

“Thank you,” Kathryn said. “Anything else, Tom?”

“Just that if you want to know more, talk to the Ferengi bartender at DS9. Will you send me?”

Kathryn shook her head. “Sorry, Tom. Pioneer is already on its way there.”

“Really?” he asked with disappointment.

“Moore knew about that connection, too,” Justin said.

Chakotay added, “I sent Dalby.”

“All right, fine,” Tom said, bummed. “I was really getting excited about blowing this ship out of the water.”

“Water?” Matt shook his head. “I should be used to this after working with you for a year.”

Kathryn commented, “It took me a couple years. Eventually, you might think it charming.”

“So, what other information do we have?” Owen asked.

Kathryn looked at Chakotay to see if he would say anything. He cocked his head in question, unsure of what she wanted to know.

Matt asked, “What is it, Katie?”

She sighed and blew out a breath. “We have some proof about the illegality of the negotiations on the contracts. Norvellen took notes.”

“But those were too damaged to interpret,” Owen said.

“Nope.”

Chakotay said, “Don’t turn them over, yet, Kathryn. You don’t know who to trust.”

“You don’t think I’m trustworthy?” Owen asked.

“Of course I do, Admiral,” Chakotay replied. “But this is the only incriminating piece of evidence we have, and it’s somewhere safe, not accessible by anyone at Starfleet Headquarters.”

“What does it say?” he asked.

Kathryn replied, “It contains threats by the Starfleet officer who was sent to get it signed. He is still on active duty, and I don’t want to destroy his career by bringing it to the table too early. We don’t know if he was coerced.”

Chakotay suggested, "Maybe one of them could look into his career and family."

"That's in my jurisdiction," Matt said. "I help captains find personnel for their new ships, and I'm in the middle of a project for Riker. He wouldn't mind if I added a name to the list of background checks if I told him it was for you."

"All right. I'll give you his name in private. Maybe you can help me research all the other officers who negotiated the rest of the contracts at the behest of the Council."

"Worth a try." Matt patted Kathryn on the bank. "This is great work, Katie. Really great work."

"Thanks." She sat back. "So now, I need suggestions for what to do tomorrow. I don't think I'm going to get any further with the Council until we put the President on trial."

Owen said, "That business with the amendment. It's got teeth."

"Yes, it does. The task force on resource allocation might also have something with a bite, but both need to get that information to the press without interference."

Matt asked Justin, "How strong is your security, Lieutenant?"

"As strong as we can make it."

"What are you suggesting?" Kathryn asked anxiously.

"I think you should take a walk down the street in Paris tomorrow. Maybe some reporters will be around."

"I'm not comfortable with that," Kathryn said, glancing at Chakotay. "The most recent threat was a little too... personal."

Justin asked, "The one with your sister?"

Kathryn shook her head. "Another one today, from Jorl. He alluded to something he should have no knowledge of."

"And you didn't think to tell me?" Justin asked.

Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath to control her temper before her blood pressure spiked.

Chakotay said, "Justin, I don't think this is the place. We'll talk later."

"Katie?" Matt put his hand on her back. "Are you okay?"

She rubbed her face and said, “As okay as I can be. So, if I were to run into the press tomorrow, what would you have me say?”

“I’m not putting you into a situation that would jeopardize your safety.”

Giving him an incredulous look, she said, “Same thing I told Owen earlier – don’t get me started.”

“All right,” he said carefully. “*If* you were to run into the press tomorrow, you might say that your conversations this week brought out more questions than answers, and nothing that you presented will have easy answers. It would let everyone know that you’re not giving up, nor is your job done.”

“Kathryn, if you’re not comfortable...,” Chakotay said gently.

Justin offered, “What if it’s a controlled environment? We could set up lunch with B’Elanna, and leak to a couple of the reporters that we trust won’t badger her.”

She thought about it for a moment and then nodded. “All right, but we do it in San Francisco at Luigi’s because it won’t look like a set-up. And, not during the lunch rush so it won’t be crowded. The reporters should just happen to be lunching there, or someone in the restaurant needs to have leaked my presence.”

Chakotay asked, “Are you expected in Paris tomorrow?”

“No one invited me.” She scratched her temple. “I think they want me to go away.”

Sue said, “Not everyone, Admiral.”

Chakotay said, “I hate to call an end to this party, but I need to sleep. It’s almost midnight here. Kathryn, could I speak to you privately for just a moment?”

She nodded. “Justin, would you transfer the connection up to my bedroom?”

“Sure, and we’ll see everyone out.”

“Thanks.”

“Kathryn?” B’Elanna called out.

“Yes, Lanna?”

“I’d like to talk to you, too. Alone.”

She sighed. “All right. I’ll be back down.”

As soon as she got upstairs and her door closed, tears welled in Kathryn's eyes. She tried to stop them, but it was fruitless so she sat at her desk and keyed on the computer.

Chakotay spoke softly as he said, "Oh, my love. I'm so sorry."

Grabbing a tissue, she muttered, "Damned hormones."

"I can't tell you how much I want to hold you."

"Sending you away was incredibly stupid of me."

"No," he said gently. "Just your wanting to be strong."

She waved at her face. "We see how well that turned out."

"I think you're doing great. This has been a hell of a week for you."

"Yeah," she smiled through her watery eyes. "I guess you want to know about today's threat?"

He nodded. "No pressure, though, and Justin shouldn't have asked in that venue."

"I set the tone too casual with him and Sue. It's been getting more out of line as the week goes on."

"I don't know if I'd call that out of line. After all, they are living with you and you need the friendly compassion they can offer. Set limits if you need to, but not strict ones."

"I'll sleep on it." She took a deep breath. "Jorl, as he walked out of the first meeting, told me to watch myself if I wanted to keep the baby."

"HE WHAT!?!?!" Chakotay shouted angrily.

She was taken aback by his volume, but recovered quickly. "He was being a bully. There's no other way to describe it."

Voice still loud, he stated, "He announced your pregnancy and threatened an unborn child?!?"

"He said to watch myself if I want to keep 'that.' He used the word, 'that,' and then dropped his eyes to my belly. Someone asked about it after he left, but I evaded."

Chakotay pounded the desk angrily. "That son of a bitch. Damn! I need to be there!"

"I don't want to go back to Paris tomorrow."

"No, you shouldn't. You've done enough for one week." He took a deep breath to try to calm down. "So much for getting sleep."

“I’m sorry.”

“No, don’t apologize. I need to know.”

“Look, I’ll just stay here in Oregon and catch up on sleep, get my body re-acclimated to this time zone. I want to make some notes and get my thoughts in order.” She pressed her fingers against her temples. “My mind is in a jumble.”

“You didn’t sound that way tonight.”

“Good,” she yawned. “I’m glad that was impromptu, because I would’ve stressed over it otherwise.”

“Go say goodbye to your guests. You should get some rest.”

“I will. Tom and B’Elanna are the only ones left, I think.”

“Kathryn?”

“Yes?”

“I love you,” he said in all seriousness.

“Thank you. I love you just as much.”

“I’m a very lucky man.” He leaned forward. “And our baby is safe. It’s going to be okay.”

“Goodnight, honey.”

“Goodnight.”

Kathryn closed the computer, rubbed her eyes, and went back downstairs. She found B’Elanna waiting in the great room by herself. “Hi Lanna.”

She stood up quickly. “Everyone else is out on the porch.”

“All right. What do you want to see me about?”

“Nothing,” B’Elanna said as she drew Kathryn into her arms. “I just thought you needed a hug.”

Kathryn almost sobbed as she held on tightly. “Oh, Lanna.”

“This whole situation stinks, and I hate every bit of it.”

“Me, too.”

The women continued to hold each other fiercely as B'Elanna rubbed Kathryn's back. "I can't believe Owen and Patterson put you up to all of this. I suspected that last August, but I really can't believe they did it."

"It wasn't just them. There must have been a dozen parties encouraging me to accept the job."

B'Elanna lifted her head and looked Kathryn in the eye. "I hope this gathering tonight means it's almost over, or that we're at least getting closer to sending that idiot to prison."

"I really hope so." She took B'Elanna's hands and held them tightly. "But I think a lot is going to change in the next week. Sure you're up for that lunch tomorrow?"

"Absolutely. Anything to help you get this tied up."

Kathryn gave her another quick hug and said, "I'll see you tomorrow, then."

"All right. Go on up and take a bath or something. I'll tell Justin you're up there."

"Thank you. I think I will."

"Goodnight, Kathryn."

"Goodnight."

When Kathryn and Justin transported to Luigi's the next day, the restaurant was empty except for a few staff and B'Elanna. She smoothed out the front of her blue blouse, feeling a little strange to be appearing in public without her uniform.

A handsome gentleman with dark hair came up to her. "Buongiorno, Signora Janeway!"

"Buongiorno, signore."

"Ah, tu sai l'italiano?"

She held her thumb and forefinger together. "Una piccolo. My Italian is a little rusty."

"Let me try... Sono Stefano Luigi. Il benvenuto al mio ristorante."

"Grazie, Signor Luigi." Kathryn motioned around to the empty room. "Sei chiuso?"

"Closed? Yes, in a manner of speaking. We've invited a select group of patrons to start arriving uno momento. They know that you'll be here, and will act as if it is a commonplace occurrence so that if you're caught on video, it will not be suspicious."

Kathryn looked to Justin. “Isn’t this a little overkill with the staging?”

“Admiral Patterson does not believe so, Ma’am.”

“Figures,” she said with a sigh. Smiling graciously, she extended her hand to their host. “Again, grazie, Signor Luigi, for being so accommodating.”

“Il mio piacere, Admiral. Anything I can do to help you is an honor.” He guided her to her seat. “Mrs. Torres tells me that your first meal following your recovery was from Luigi’s.”

“In a manner of speaking, that’s true. It was the first once my dietary restrictions were lifted.” Kathryn she sat across from B’Elanna and squeezed her hand in greeting.

Luigi asked, “And I understand that was our cannelloni?”

“Si, e magnifico. May I have the same today?”

“Certamente. And what may I get for you, Mrs. Torres?”

“Your rigatoni, please. It’s a favorite.”

“As you wish.” He took a bottle of white wine off ice and poured each of them a glass. “Our finest, for our most distinguished guests.”

“Oh, non si deve.” Kathryn held out her hand to protest.

“I insist, Admiral.” He was practically beaming with pride as he walked away to put in their order.

B’Elanna offered, “Want me to drink it for you?”

“Honestly, I don’t know which would be worse. Offending him, or anyone finding out that I had wine while in my condition.”

“In the great scheme of things, I don’t think you should worry about it, either way.”

“True,” she said with a sigh. “It’s not like I don’t have other things to worry about right now.”

“Are you ready for this?”

“No, but I will be when the moment arrives... quando arriva il momento,” Kathryn said with a laugh. “Makes me want to spend some time in Tuscany.”

“Maybe you’ll have some time before the... well, before the arrival.”

“Probably after. Things are too precarious to be planning any vacations right now.”

B’Elanna took a sip of her wine, then of Kathryn’s. “I don’t think I realized that you were so multi-lingual.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that. I’ve studied a few languages, but I’m only fluent in Federation Standard.”

“I’ve heard you speak French and Italian.”

“Yes, but I only know enough to be conversational. I wouldn’t be able to read a novel.”

“Any others?” she asked as their salads were set down before them.

“Chakotay wants to teach me his mother’s language.”

“Mayan?”

Kathryn nodded. “I should ask him to start with a lullaby.”

“Think he knows one?”

“If he doesn’t, he will.”

True to the Signor Luigi’s word, patrons had begun drifting in. Some smiled excitedly when they saw her and others acted obviously nonchalant. Kathryn rubbed her neck and gave B’Elanna a look of acceptance. “Well, I suppose we should enjoy this time together, structured though it may be.”

“We should. What would you like to talk about? I’d like to hear more details from our party last night, but I suppose that’s out of the question in such a public place.”

“Afraid so, just to be safe.” She took a sip of her water. “This morning, I was looking at the designs again for the... the new room.”

“Do you think anyone’s actually eavesdropping right now?”

Kathryn clicked her tongue. “Just because I’m paranoid doesn’t mean people aren’t following me.”

“True. So did you decide?”

“I’ve narrowed it down to three, but I need to break down and ask Joe about gender.”

B’Elanna shrugged. “You don’t have to make any decisions, yet.”

“I really like the space theme, but maybe that’s too predictable.”

“For the child of a woman with a doctorate in cosmology? I don’t know why you’d think that.”

“Well, when you put it that way.”

“And of the woman who has more space kilometers on her than any other human ever?”

“That’s a rather absolute statement, don’t you think?”

“Was in an article in the Fednews, so it’s fact, right?”

“They really said that about me?”

“It’s probably true. Before we ever got started on Voyager, you had more kilometers on you than any of the other humans. Well, maybe except for Chakotay.”

Kathryn frowned. “Is that supposed to be a compliment?”

B’Elanna made a face and then returned to the subject at hand. “If you go with the space theme, I can let you borrow our Voyager and bird-of-prey mobile.”

“Cute. I’m torn between space, bright flowers, and teddy bears, but I read that ba... that they like to look at bright colors.” Kathryn looked around at the now full restaurant. “I’ve really got to watch what I say.”

“Not around me, but the press just showed up.”

As their meals were served, Justin came over and asked, “Would you prefer for them to catch you now or after your meal?”

“After. It will be more natural, much like last week.”

“As you wish, Admiral.”

B’Elanna asked, “What did you think of the Council’s press statement this morning?”

Kathryn did a double take. “They made a press statement?”

“You didn’t know?”

She closed her eyes and sighed. “I didn’t think to check. Nothing was planned as far as I knew.”

“It was an end-of-week report on your visit.”

“And no one thought to tell me about it?”

“Maybe they all assumed someone else would, but don’t worry, it was evasive and very brief.”

“Do you recall the details, or should I ask Justin to get it for me? I should probably know before I face the press or I’m going to look really stupid.”

“It was the head guy, Doooha. He said that as they build the 2380 budget, they’ll try to expand funding for research, but with the rebuilding efforts, resources are tight.”

Kathryn pursed her lips. “I was hoping for a lot more.”

“And, let me think... With the independence one, he basically said that they’d have to look deeper to know what the worlds want, and he said something about people taking their concerns to their representatives.”

“You’re right. Evasive.” She reached for her wine and then remembered to drink the water instead. “I was exhausted by the time that meeting started so I didn’t put much into it.”

“The big one, though.” B’Elanna cringed.

“Did he say anything about the amendment?”

“Yeah, just what we were talking about last night. An amendment to the Articles of the Federation would be needed to pardon the old contracts.”

“That’s great!” Kathryn sat back, relieved. “I was worried they’d dismiss it publically.”

“You want an amendment?”

“Definitely.”

“And you think they’ll propose one? It didn’t sound like it.”

“It’ll require a vote, and it may not pass. However, if they get that far, it will buy us a lot of time and goodwill.”

“Sounded to me like it might not happen because of the red tape that would be involved.”

“That really doesn’t matter. Just getting them to talk about it is a huge step because the council has taken a stand against those who seem to be in control.”

“I’m glad I brought it up, then,” B’Elanna said with a grin.

“Me, too. I feel a lot more energized now.”

“Ready to take on the universe?”

Kathryn chuckled. “Maybe just a handful of bullies.”

“Let’s talk about something fun, then.”

“All right. What?”

“Men.”

“Do you have any specific men in mind?” she asked with a grin.

“Our men, of course. We haven’t been alone since your wedding. Is being married to Chakotay as great as you thought it’d be?”

With a happy sigh, Kathryn replied, “Even better.”

B’Elanna rolled her eyes. “Newlyweds.”

Kathryn refreshed her lipstick, checked her teeth in her small pocket mirror, and threaded her fingers through her hair. “I should’ve pinned it up.”

“You look beautiful, and you want people to see you as a real person.”

“Do I? I thought we wanted me to seem invincible.”

“You’ll be fine. Just act like them stumbling upon you is an accident.”

They stood up and there was an immediate scrambling in the front of the restaurant. Kathryn plowed forward as if she was in a hurry to get out, and tried to look inconvenienced when the cameras turned to her.

“Admiral Janeway! May we have a moment?” a reporter asked.

Kathryn smoothed out her blouse and took a deep breath. “I’m just out for a quiet lunch out with a friend today. I’m sure you understand that it’s been a very busy week.”

“Just a couple questions, ma’am, if you would?” they pressed.

She tucked her hair behind her ear and nodded her acceptance. “Just a couple.”

A reporter asked, “What do you hope will be the outcome of your week in Paris?”

“I believe I’ve already accomplished my primary objective – bringing awareness to the issues and getting the council to take proactive steps towards helping the worlds I have visited during the past year.”

Another asked, “Do you believe the council can put aside their differences and work cooperatively?”

“I don’t see that there are opposing sides. What I see are stumbling blocks that can be overcome.”

“Admiral, have you learned anything new this week that the people should know about?”

She scratched her neck and pretended to think about her answer. “I’m not at liberty to divulge any of my private conversations, nor would I want to do so. However, at the general session, I believe we all learned some new things just by participating in the proceedings. If there’s anything I want the people of the Federation to know, it’s that a substantial percentage of the Council is ready to take the next step to improve the situations that we find ourselves in following the Dominion War.”

“Were the council members willing to work with you?”

Genuinely surprised by the question, she said, “Of course they were. It was the council who appointed me to do this job, and they were eager to hear what my team had to say.”

“Now that the issues are on the table, so to speak, do you feel safe?”

She nodded at Justin. “I have an outstanding security team.”

“You said that there are those who want to silence you. Do you know who they are?”

Kathryn smiled secretly. “They haven’t been very successful, are they?”

“Do you have any proof of corruption inside the Federation council?”

“That issue would best be addressed by an oversight committee, not a Starfleet officer.”

“What did you think about the council’s press statement this morning?”

“I didn’t hear it directly, but I understand that Representative Dooha announced that to annul any expired war-time contracts, an amendment would need to be passed?”

“Yes, Admiral. How do you feel about this amendment?”

“I think it’s a step in the right direction.” She made a motion to leave as she said, “Thank you, but I must be going.”

“Admiral! Would you like the people of the Federation to support the amendment?”

She turned to reply. “There is one thing that I would like above all others in regards to the propositions my team made this week.”

“What’s that, Admiral?”

“I would like each citizen of the Federation to come to their own conclusions and make their representatives aware of their opinions in a peaceful forum. My role is to be a liaison between those who have no voice and the council. I’ve done that. Now it’s time for the council to do their part, and they can’t do that without knowing how their constituents feel.” She turned again to go.

“Would you clarify what issue you’d like the people to focus on?”

“All of them, but the amendment is the one that if proposed, will come to a public vote.”

“What is that amendment for, exactly?”

She folded her hands in front of her and pressed her lips together as she prepared to speak. “There are nine contracts for raw materials that were made with nine former Federation worlds. These contracts can not be fulfilled based on the terms of each agreement. This situation has resulted in these planets dropping their memberships, and my suggestion to the Council is to annul the contracts so that we may start with a clean slate. To do that would require an amendment.”

“Why can’t the contracts be filled?”

“Various reasons.”

“Can you be more specific?”

“I am sorry, but I cannot. The terms of the agreements are confidential. However,” she said with a pause. “If we can move past this stumbling block, it will free up some resources for funding the other proposals. President Zife has asked us to focus on rebuilding the strength of Federation worlds. This would be a huge step in that direction.”

“Will you continue to meet with the Federation Council?”

“If asked to. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have another appointment to get to.” She nodded to Justin signaling that she really was finished.

After they walked out of the restaurant, they walked down the street to the nearest transporter station and beamed back to Kathryn’s home. Justin went directly to the

viewscreen and turned on the Fednews to see what was transpiring, and it looked as if the interview was continuing as the same reporters interviewed patrons in the restaurant.

Kathryn smiled as she heard the restaurant patrons saying how excited they were to have run into her that day. But what warmed her heart the most was hearing them talk about making a positive change in the Federation, putting the past behind them, and embracing a better future.

Part 33 - "A Pain in the Neck"

By Dawn

Summary: Trouble

Rated PG-13

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“That it does.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Justin commented, “The President.”

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

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

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

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

“Well, let me have it.”

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

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

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

“What did the note say?”

“Teach your daughter to know her place.”

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

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

“A lesson?”

Sue was trying not to smile.

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

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

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

Kathryn couldn’t help but laugh. “Lesson learned. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

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

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

“Does she want me to call?”

“No, I don’t believe so. She was insistent that she didn’t want to add to your burdens.”

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

“Not a bad idea, actually,” Sue commented.

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

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

“You’re not easily scared,” Sue topped off everyone’s coffee.

Justin added, “And the more they push, the more desperate they sound.”

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

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

A chill spread through her. “I want it boosted. He’s too exposed.”

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

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

“Yes?”

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

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

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

“What helps?”

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

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

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

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

“I can cook, you know.”

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

“Thank you.”

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

“Good point.”

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

“Sounds wonderful. Thank you, Sue.”

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

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

“For what?”

“An impromptu meeting.”

“With whom?” she asked, slightly annoyed.

“Your staff.”

“The four of you called a meeting?”

“And some others.”

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

“Yes, Admiral.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I can’t think of a better gift.”

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

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

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

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

Joe asked, “Have you spoken to Harry? How’s he doing?”

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

“That’s great news!” Owen said. “Which ones?”

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

“Their idea or Harry’s?” Justin asked.

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

Foster asked, “Because of Commander Data?”

“That’s right,” Kathryn nodded. “They forged a strong relationship out there this week. I’m thrilled.”

“What’s next on your agenda?” Celes asked. “Are you going back into space?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What was the outcome?”

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

“That’s not going to happen.”

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

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

“I can understand that,” Bernie replied.

“Have you been to DS9 yet?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Young tapped his combadge. “Young to Dalby.”

“Dalby here, Captain.”

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

“Sure,” he said hesitantly.

“Report to the briefing room.”

“On my way.”

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

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

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

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

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

Judy said, “Happy Birthday, Admiral.”

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

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

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

“I appreciate that, but I didn’t want to open a can of worms that didn’t need to be opened.”

Dalby took a deep breath. “Oh, and Happy Birthday. I didn’t realize, although I should have.”

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

“Except perhaps your former first officer.”

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

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

“And when you did?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Is that who they are?” Dalby asked.

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

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

“Where?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Thanks, and enjoy your evening.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kathryn swirled around and yelled, "What happened?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kathryn rounded on the technician. "What do you know?"

"Sir, I'm new."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Go ahead, Admiral.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Khurma yelled, “What’s going on?!”

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

“Ka...”

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

His hands covered hers. “Lo... ve.”

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

Justin yelled, “I can’t get the transporter functioning!”

“Get the Excelsior to do it!” Khurma yelled.

Chakotay’s voice gurgled as he said, “So cold.”

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

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

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

Kathryn felt like she was about to faint. “Need...”

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

The nurse held her shoulders and assured her, “He’s going to be okay, Admiral.”

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

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

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

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

“But that’s my job.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Of course, Dr. Zimmerman.”

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

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

“He’s okay,” Kathryn said to herself.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I don’t want to keep it.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Thank you. I’m... not myself.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I didn’t mean to offend.”

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

“How long have you known?”

“Two months.”

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

“The baby is small, but doing well.”

“Doing quite well,” the nurse said reassuringly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What else?” She knew that look.

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

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

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

She was furious. Beyond furious.

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

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

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

She wondered if he’d been followed the entire time he was at the conference. The mere idea of it made the anger bubble up inside her again. The cruelty of these criminals was beyond comprehension. Attacking her could be expected, but hurting her family was abhorrent.

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

He opened his eyes in response. “Kathryn?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Let me hold you."

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

"What do you have to be sorry about?"

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

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

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

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

"Yes. Cease and desist or else."

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

She wasn’t sure she wanted to hear this, but knew she must. “Did you see anyone?”

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

“Did they say anything else?”

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

“Oh, Chakotay,” she caressed his chest to offer comfort.

“I’m okay.” He yawned as he added, “Sounds like we’re backing them into a corner.”

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

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

“Mmm hmm.”

“You can’t do that.”

“I’d lose all my credibility.”

“That’s what they want.”

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

“So, what are you doing here?”

“Is that a serious question?” She frowned.

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

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

“Do you have any ideas?”

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

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

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

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

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

“Yes?”

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

“Noted,” he said clearly.

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

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

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

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

“Of course, Admiral.”

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

“Yes, but so should you, Admiral.”

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

Mark asked, “How is Chakotay?”

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

“That’s a relief.” He visibly relaxed.

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

“Aye, Admiral.”

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

“You okay?” Chakotay’s voice was scratchy.

“Hmm?” she stood up. “I didn’t realize you were awake.”

“I was getting cold.”

“Sorry to abandon you, but my neck was hurting.”

“What time is it?”

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

“Throat’s a little sore, but okay.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Smiling guiltily, she finished off the banana.

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

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

“Better?”

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

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

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

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

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

“You’re supposed to be resting.”

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

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

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

“Where’s the fun in that?”

“I love you, Kathryn.”

“Love you, too.”

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

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

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

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

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

"Fleet Admiral's Office, Starfleet Headquarters."

Kathryn flew out of her office at a fast clip.

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

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

"But we haven't secured your movement!"

"I don't give a damn," she said as she pushed the double doors open.

"Admiral, your safety!"

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

"Yes, Ma'am."

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

"What is our destination, Admiral?"

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

When she got to Khurma's office, she told Ms. Randolph, "I need to see Admiral Khurma."

The patronizing woman said, "That won't be possible today. Admiral Khurma's schedule is full."

"This is not a request, Ms. Randolph."

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

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

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

Kathryn's eyes flared. “Why you...”

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

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

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

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

“I'm glad to hear it.”

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

“No.”

“What do you mean, ‘No!’?”

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

“But I...”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Kathryn,” he warned.

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

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

“Bullshit,” she interrupted.

“Excuse me, Admiral?”

“You know what has to be done.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You don’t?” he asked with surprise.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You sound like Zife.”

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

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

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

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

Khurma pursed his lips and finally admitted, "He says he wants you out of harm's way."

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

"Close to what?" His eyebrows were raised in expectation.

She realized immediately that she'd said too much and backpedaled. "So close to reuniting the Federation."

"You've done excellent work, but that's not what you're talking about."

"We're at the crux of beginning to regain trust."

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

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

He stood up and leaned forward over her desk. "Now it's my turn to say bullshit."

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

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

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

"They don't." He relaxed back in his chair. "Sit down, Kathryn. We need to talk."

The comm system interrupted, "Chakotay to Janeway."

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

"Janeway here. I'm in Admiral Khurma's office."

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

"Do you need someone with you?" She sat down.

Chakotay replied, "I've got a whole security entourage to keep me company. My new best friends."

She and Khurma exchanged glances as she said, "That's not what I meant."

"I know. I'm fine. Contact me when you're free."

"Will do. Janeway out."

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

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

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

"Who are all of the admirals involved?"

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

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

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

"Do I still have your trust?"

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

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

"Just a hunch."

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

He thought that over. "As I said, I trust you, as I do most of my admiralty staff. I've been letting you do your job in the hopes that you could find the information for me, because I'm under direct

orders not to look for it. However, I can't let these five admirals, nor you, follow through on this unless we have a smoking gun."

"And when we do?"

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

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

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

"I'm glad to hear it. So, what am I doing that has them spooked?"

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

"With all due respect, I'd like to make that decision myself."

"Is this more important to you than your family?"

"No, but I'm not about to be bullied around."

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

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

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

"You know who the puppeteers are?"

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

"Surely you could have told me that up front."

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

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

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

“Then this is coming together.”

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

“That’s not how it works.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“That’s my hope. Second, what we’re about to expose will put a handful of very wealthy, very powerful people in prison, and I want you protected. I’d put you into hiding, but I can’t be

confident that they wouldn't find out where you are. Your house is a fortress and I can't think of a safer place for you."

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

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

"Do you know what they intend to use me for?"

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

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

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

Kathryn shook her head. "You're using me, again."

"I don't think of it that way, but I understand how you feel."

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

Biting back a smile, he said, "I would've been surprised if you didn't."

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

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

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

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

She exhaled shakily. "You're sure this is a good idea?"

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

“How much authority do they have?”

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

“How do we know we can trust her?”

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

“Who would set an impeachment hearing in process?”

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

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

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

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

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

“Understood. Completely.”

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

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

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

“Sure, anything for you.”

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

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

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

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

“Nineteen hundred?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Did it?”

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

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

“You want to?” he asked with surprise.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It does? How so?”

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

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

“It wasn’t?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I did?”

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

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

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

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

“On leave?”

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

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

When she opened her eyes inside the lucid dream, she was sitting further out along the edge of the high cliff that their house was built on. It was a place that couldn’t be reached outside of

using a transporter, and even then, it wouldn't be safe. Here in a dream, however, it was perfectly fine. There was no way she could fall.

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

"Nice place."

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

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

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

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

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

"You picked a good spot."

"Chakotay found it."

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

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

"He's a damn good kisser."

"Yes, he is."

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

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

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

"Words of wisdom from my spirit guide?"

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

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

"You've really gotten yourself into a tricky situation, haven't you?"

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

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

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

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

Kathryn nodded. "He's a good sounding board."

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

"Think he'll have the answer?"

"I have no idea."

Kathryn asked, "Do you really think he can talk?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Joe told me about the talking iguana in Dr. Zimmerman's lab. I wonder if they're related."

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

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

"I'd be insulted if I were he."

"Dr. Zimmerman loves that Iguana." Kathryn reached over and stroked her finger down the gecko's back.

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

Kathryn said, "A man of few words."

"Just like your husband."

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

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

“Many, but only he knows everything.”

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

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

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

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

The Admiral laughed. “They probably gave you an earful.”

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

“I’m sure it’s all good.”

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

“Didn’t he?”

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

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

“Why is that ridiculous?”

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

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

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

“Him? You sound like Chakotay.”

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

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

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

“Hopefully not a politician.”

“I know what he’ll be.”

“Oh?” Kathryn asked.

“He’ll be proud of his mother.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Little more than half an hour.”

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

“Do you want to talk about it?”

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

“An interpreter?”

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

“What did he say?”

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

"You aren't alone."

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

"That you do." He kissed her forehead. "I'm glad you realize it."

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

"I hope they come. I'd love to have everyone where I can see that they are safe."

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

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

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

"I'd love to."

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

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

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

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

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

"Are you doing okay, sis?"

“Well, that depends on what we’re talking about.”

“The threats and Chakotay getting attacked.”

Kathryn sighed. “I’m coping. You?”

“I was okay ignoring them until…”

“I was, too.”

“Katie, I have something to tell you.”

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

Phoebe held up her hands, “No, no… nothing’s happened. Well, that’s not entirely true. *Something* has happened. I’m pregnant.”

“Pregnant?” Kathryn’s mouth dropped open for a split second before she clamped it shut and smiled.

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

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

“I am. We’ve been trying for over a year.”

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

“You have?”

Kathryn smiled. “The same exact one.”

“No!” Phoebe’s eyes widened in shock and she looked stricken. “You’re not!”

“You’re upset?”

“Of course I’m upset.” She covered her mouth. “Oh, Katie. Is this a good idea?”

“A good idea?” Kathryn was shocked. “It’s not an idea. It’s a baby!”

“I know, but...,” Phoebe touched Kathryn’s leg. “How far along are you?”

“Almost four months.”

Phoebe’s shoulders sagged. “I wish you would’ve told me. I would have carried it for you.”

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

“I don’t mean to offend you, but with your health and all, is the baby okay?”

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

“You’re sure?”

“Yes,” Kathryn was angry. “The Doctor checks on us twice a week. We’re fine.”

“Twice a week? I don’t know if that’s good or bad.”

“It’s what the Doctor believes is necessary.”

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

“Just because I’m too thin doesn’t mean that I can’t do this.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Phoebe.”

“Something wrong?”

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

“About her staying here?”

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

“You told her?”

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

“Phoebe, too?”

“Yes.”

“How far along?”

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

Chakotay asked, “She was shouting at you?”

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

“Kathryn, don’t…”

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

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

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

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

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

“Mums the word,” he said as he left.

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

He was halfway down the stairs. “Yes?”

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

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

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

“Thank you. I love you, too.” He kissed her softly. “Take some time to cool down and we’ll talk later.”

“We’re okay?” she asked.

“Always.” He pulled her into another hug. “When the whole world is against us, we’ll always have each other.”

“There goes the romantic in you again.”

He shrugged. “What can I say? I’m feeling sentimental.”

“I wish Phoebe had taken a page from your book.”

“She’ll come around.” He kissed her forehead. “I should go help your mom.”

“I’ll be down in a bit.”

“Take your time.”

Kathryn watched him go and felt better this time. She knew she had to be careful not to shut him out again, but every so often, that overly self-dependant streak of hers reared its ugly head. He seemed to understand, however, and openly accepted that she was at least acknowledging and apologizing for it. He had a good heart.

Part 34 - “Trouble At Home”

By Dawn

Summary: Tensions run high

Rated PG-13

Kathryn closed the French doors behind her and joined Owen outside on the deck. “Sorry for the delay.”

“Oh, please, don’t apologize, but I feel like we’re intruding on a family affair this evening.”

“No need to be concerned. I invited you before all this happened.” Kathryn waved towards the house. As she sat down at the patio table, she asked, “Are you aware of why they’re here?”

“You mentioned threats last week. What’s going on?”

“Just some pictures of me and the family with notes asking me to back off. I didn’t think they had any teeth until last night.”

“What, exactly, happened last night?”

“When Chakotay beamed down from the Excelsior, he was taken immediately by another beam. It’s being researched, but Chakotay identified his captors as Morropian.”

“They’re getting sloppy.”

“Yes, they are.”

Owen asked, “So you’re calling it quits? This isn’t like you.”

“I was worried that it might be perceived that way. Owen,” she said as she looked him in the eye, “there’s something else you should know. I’m pregnant.”

He did a double take. “Katie? Pregnant?”

“Yes, so I really need to tread carefully.”

“Are you and the baby okay?” He covered her hand. “I’m worried...”

“Don’t even start.” Kathryn squeezed his hand and then leaned back in her chair. “I’ve had enough of that from my sister today.”

“Ah, is that what the tension in there was about?” He nodded towards the house.

“You noticed?”

“Anyone would. You could cut the air in there with a knife.” He winced. “Sorry, bad metaphor considering last night.”

“Yes, well.” Kathryn waved it off. “Khurma knows about it, and is being a little over-protective.”

“For once, I completely agree with him.”

“I know you don’t see eye to eye with him, but he’s a good man.”

Owen dipped his chin. “A good man doesn’t make him a good fleet admiral. He’s letting Zife walk all over him.”

“No, he’s not. He’s gathering evidence, just like your group is trying to do.” Kathryn narrowed her eyes in thought. “You and I haven’t had a chance to talk freely since last summer. I’ve gotten to know Khurma a lot better in that time.”

“Last summer you said he was wasting your time.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “But I was wrong.”

“You? Wrong?” He winked. “I don’t believe it.”

“It happens. Just ask Chakotay, he’ll tell you.”

Owen laughed. “So, what was Khurma up to, if not kowtowing to the President?”

“Letting Zife think he had Starfleet under his thumb, and by doing so, letting him expose his special business partners in the process.”

“I don’t know, Katie. I think you trust him too much. What if he turns on you?”

Kathryn shook her head. “Zife is the one he’s going to turn on.”

“But if he can earn the trust of both you and Zife, how do you really know where his true allegiances lie?”

“Because our president is an idiot. Surely you’re not going to say the same thing about me?”

“Of course not, my dear. Just be careful what information you give him.”

“No, Owen. We have to start trusting each other, and my instincts tell me that he’s being straightforward with me.”

Owen rubbed his chin and sighed. “And now, Khurma believes that you’re stepping on toes because of these task forces you’ve stirred into action.”

“Right. Zife wants me out of the picture and his henchmen want the opposite so they can coerce me. Zife believes he can regain control over the council and over his supporters, but this is a can of worms that’s not going to be closed. There are council members who are ready to take control, and we’re going to stand back and let them. That’s the way it should be.”

“You don’t want the glory?” he joked.

“No, I want certain people taken to trial, and I want to walk safely down the street again. If the council can make decisions without any hint of coercion, I will have done what I set out to do.”

They continued to talk as the sun set, Kathryn bringing him up to speed, leaving out some details that he didn’t need to know.

Chakotay came outside and brought a tray of hot tea, cheese and crackers. “I thought you two might need a little something.”

“Thank you, this looks great,” Owen said.

“But we’ve just finished dinner,” Kathryn accepted a cup of tea.

“That was over two hours ago,” Chakotay pointed out. “Everyone’s gone up to bed now.”

Owen handed her a plate. “Eat up, Katie.”

She nodded towards Owen, telling Chakotay, “He knows now, too.”

“And don’t worry, the secret is safe with me,” Owen said.

Chakotay raised an eyebrow. “You’re really letting the cat out of the bag today.”

“She wouldn’t let me get in two words edgewise about it.” Owen looked sternly at Chakotay. “I trust that you’re coddling her as best you can?”

“Kathryn Janeway and ‘coddle’ don’t even belong in the same sentence.”

“Thank you,” she told Chakotay. “Is Marilyn getting bored in there?”

“No, we’re fine. We admiral spouses have to stick together.”

Kathryn said, “Well, you won’t need to continue suffering. We’re just hypothesizing now.”

With concern, Owen asked Chakotay, “How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine,” he said. “Not that it was pleasant, but I’ve been through worse. Honestly, of all the people they could’ve attacked, I’m glad it was me.”

Kathryn grimaced. “Why?”

“Because I’ll bounce back. If they had done that to a civilian, it could’ve caused life-long psychological trauma.”

Owen said, “Sounds like we’ve got them backed into a corner. I wasn’t happy about the leave announcement, but now that we’ve talked, I agree that it’s best thing to do right now.”

Chakotay nodded. “Yes, but I’m a little worried that with Kathryn out of the picture, publicly, the Council members are going to get skittish.”

Kathryn said, “That’s a good point. I’ll have to mention that to Khurma and see if we can let them know that I’m still at it.”

“Otherwise, we’ll get the same affect as if you’d met the terrorist demands.”

“Can’t have that,” she rubbed at the grit in her eyes.

Chakotay said, “Speaking of coddling. It’s almost ten.”

“That’s my cue.” Owen stood and picked up their snack tray to carry it back inside.

From the sofa, Marilyn said, “I’m watching the Fednews. You’re all over it.”

“I am?” Kathryn asked.

“There’s a lot of speculation as to why you’re backing off.”

“That’s to be expected,” Chakotay said.

Marilyn said, “The commentators are discussing it as if it were a major political upheaval. The biggest concern seems to be that you didn’t make a public statement like you usually do.”

“That was for my safety.”

“Exactly,” Marilyn said. “That’s where they’re headed. Seems they’re picking up on the fact that you might be in danger again or that your health is failing. The good news is that no one has mentioned anything about you abandoning your efforts. They’re all worried.”

Kathryn mulled that over for a moment. “You’re right. That’s not bad at all.” She had an idea. “Marilyn, if I could impose upon you?”

“Anything, dear.”

“Do you watch the news a lot?”

“Far too much,” Owen said.

Kathryn smiled. “Would you let me know if the overall sentiment of the media changes? I think I’d go stir-crazy if we were to listen to it much, but I should keep tabs on it, just the same.”

“I’d love to do that for you. I’ll even type up a summary of the day and send it to you, if you’d like.”

Waving that away, Kathryn said, “No, you don’t need to go to that much trouble. I just want to know if they stop being supportive.”

“All right.” Marilyn turned off the viewing screen. “We should be getting home.”

Kathryn and Chakotay walked their guests to the door and said goodnight. When they were gone, Chakotay ushered her up the stairs. “Time for bed.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Taking charge?”

“You like it when I do,” he smirked.

Her mouth dropped open and then she whispered, “Shhhh... My family could be listening.”

Kathryn spent most of the next day in the study. Beverly and Deanna both contacted her separately to make sure she was okay, and after talking to her dear new friends, she felt confident that she was doing the right thing.

She read through the reports and intelligence files that Khurma had sent her, perused the news articles for follow-ups to her trip to Paris, and looked carefully at the data her staff had sent to

her. There wasn't much that she didn't already know, but it helped her feel useful to make a list of things to follow up on. Chakotay was busy playing host to her family so she could keep reading. She supposed that she should feel guilty, but was so irritated with her sister that she relished giving her the silent treatment.

She took PADDs with her to both breakfast and lunch and didn't stop reading to take part in the conversation. Katie vied for her attention a few times, but Mike distracted the child so Kathryn could read. She was feeling guilty about that and made a mental note to put together a puzzle with Katie that evening.

Kathryn didn't bring work to dinner and sat next to Katie to make sure she felt welcome. The last thing Kathryn wanted was to be inhospitable. She was very glad that her family was there, she just wasn't happy with her sister's reaction to the pregnancy.

As they were clearing the table, Kathryn and Phoebe both made an effort not to run into each other and purposefully avoided speaking.

Gretchen stood in the center of the kitchen and threw a towel down forcefully on the counter. With steel in her voice, she put her hands on her hips and demanded, "I've had enough. Out with it, you two!"

Phoebe said, "Ask her. She's the one with the problem."

Kathryn's eyes narrowed. "Excuse me?"

"I have nothing more to say to her." Phoebe walked out of the room.

Gretchen yelled, "Get back here right now, Phoebe Marie!"

Both Chakotay and Mike acted like they wanted to blend into the woodwork, and Katie stood in the middle of the dining room wide-eyed and entranced.

Phoebe stopped at the doorway to the kitchen and stated, "This is between me and her."

"It may have been," Gretchen said, "But you two are making it miserable for the rest of us. I have no intention of being locked up in this house for God knows how long with the two of you fighting. This situation is bad enough without you two making it worse."

Kathryn crossed her arms and said, "I'll accept an apology."

Phoebe's mouth dropped open wide. "ACCEPT? How about OFFER?"

"You're the one who said I couldn't handle this. You're the one who called him a mistake!"

"I did not! I only said I was worried about you. That's no excuse for getting testy!"

Gretchen asked, "Who is a mistake?"

Kathryn said, "I wasn't looking for your approval, Phoebe. I was looking for a little joy. Is that so much to ask?"

"It's a lot to ask! In case you haven't noticed, I actually care about you!"

"Then you should understand why this is important to me! I can do this and it doesn't help to hear you say that I can't!"

"Do what?" Gretchen asked.

"What about me, Katie? Don't you think you could have offered me a little joy? You sure know how to throw a wrench in life!"

"You seem to be forgetting that I did tell you I was happy. I am happy, damn it!"

"STOP!" Gretchen yelled.

"WHAT?" Kathryn yelled back at her mom. "You wanted us to talk. We're talking!"

"No, you're not! You're fighting!" Gretchen put her hands on the side of her head. "This brings back memories of you two as teenagers."

Phoebe offered an olive branch. "Look, Katie, let's just agree to disagree."

"I don't want to disagree about this. I want you to be happy."

"You can't force someone to be happy!"

Kathryn's voice rose again. "I'm NOT trying to force you, Phoebe."

"That's a relief," Phoebe said with disdain. She walked across the room and picked up the coffee pot. "You're right, Mom. We need to find another alternative than to be locked up in here with her. Surely, Starfleet can put us somewhere else."

Mike spoke up. "Phoebes, don't."

"You could support me on this!" She yelled at her husband and slammed the pot back onto the counter without pouring any.

"Get between you and your sister? No thanks."

Gretchen asked, "Mike? You know what they're fighting about?"

"Yes, Ma'am." He was wise enough to answer.

“Chakotay?” Gretchen asked.

“Yes, Ma’am. I do, too.”

Gretchen yelled, “Would SOMEONE please clue me in?”

Both men left it to their wives. Kathryn and Phoebe seethed at each other, angry that the other was forcing them to tell their mother.

Kathryn said, “Let’s just tell her at the same time. Together.”

“Fine,” Phoebe said dismissively. “On the count of three. One. Two. Three.”

“We’re pregnant,” they said simultaneously.

Gretchen braced her hands on the counter in front of her. “Both of you?”

In unison, they responded, “Yes.”

They were all quiet while Gretchen absorbed the information.

Katie broke the silence. “What is pregnant?”

Phoebe’s jaw was tense. “Oh great. Now look what you made me do.”

“You haven’t told your daughter?”

Mike said, “Katie, let’s go outside.”

“No!” Phoebe said. “I don’t want her finding out like this.”

Katie’s lip started trembling and water filled her eyes. “I’m sorry, Mommy. I’m sorry Aunt Katie. I didn’t mean to.”

Deflated, Kathryn asked, “Didn’t mean to what?”

“I don’t know,” she sobbed. “Please don’t yell anymore.”

Mike picked her up. “Shhh, sweetheart. They’re not angry with you.”

Phoebe pushed past Kathryn to go to her daughter. “I’m sorry, pumpkin.”

Kathryn picked up the two remaining dirty dishes and carried them over to the sink. She felt horrible, both for trapping her family in this situation and for being the cause of so much pain in

their lives. She glanced over at Chakotay and saw that he was facing the window, but with eyes closed. His posture clearly showed that he was feeling bad, too.

Gretchen said quietly, “Girls, I can’t believe that you’ve turned what should be extremely happy news into such a huge fight.”

“Neither of us wanted you to find out this way, Mom.” Kathryn dried her hands off on a towel.

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell me. How far along are you?” Gretchen’s question was directly for Kathryn.

“Four months.”

Gretchen bit back whatever she was going to say. “And when did you find out?”

“March 30th.”

“Your wedding day.” Gretchen closed her eyes. “And you’ve kept it a secret because?”

“In case it didn’t survive the first trimester. We didn’t want the pain of having to tell everyone.”

“*You* didn’t want the pain. And you don’t think I’m hurt now because you’ve kept it a secret from me? Especially considering your health?”

“I’m sorry, Mom.”

Gretchen turned to Phoebe. “And you. How long have you known?”

“A week.”

“And with all that’s going on right now, you didn’t think it prudent to inform me?”

“I didn’t want to worry you,” Phoebe replied.

“Am I that delicate? You don’t think I can take it? After everything our family has been through, you think I’m so weak and fragile that I couldn’t know about one...” She turned to Kathryn and continued, “Two precious, wonderful pieces of news? You don’t think it would have lifted my spirits?”

“The timing wasn’t right,” Kathryn said, feeling worse.

“Well, this fight of yours isn’t what I’d call great timing, either.”

“No, I don’t suppose it is.”

“How could you do this to yourself, Katie? Couldn’t you have waited just a few months?”

“We didn’t plan it.”

Gretchen blinked slowly. “What? As brilliant as you are, you don’t know how…” She stopped herself before saying babies to avoid announcing it to Katie.

Kathryn did not answer her mother’s question. Annoyed that her mother wasn’t joyful about the news either, she stated, “As I told Phoebe yesterday, this is not a mistake. It’s a gift.”

“Is it okay? Are there any concerns?”

“Look, I don’t need this…”

“Don’t say that to me. I’m your mother and I have a right to be concerned about your health.”

Kathryn looked out the window, unwilling to bear her mother’s piercing look. Solemnly, she explained, “He is fine, for now. I need to eat as much as possible and closely monitor my blood sugar and blood pressure. My pancreas needs to be transplanted, but it’s too dangerous to do while pregnant. Complications will arise because the placenta is abnormal, and it’s possible that I might not be able to carry it to term. We’re planning for a low birth weight, and as he grows, I will likely have to go on bed rest because there’s a significant chance of placental abruption due to un-repairable damage to my uterus.”

The room was extremely quiet except for Katie’s sniffles. Phoebe said, “You didn’t tell me all of that.”

“What would have been the point? Prove that you’re right and that I can’t do this?”

Chakotay said, “Kathryn, don’t.”

She looked at him and saw the warning in his eyes. They’d talked often that her willpower and perseverance were her greatest strengths, and because of that, he didn’t want her to consider defeat at any point. She nodded her acceptance and said no more.

“Katie…” Gretchen put her hand on her daughter’s shoulder.

Their conversation came to an abrupt halt when all the lights in the house went out and a red glow infused the room from the hidden emergency lighting.

Chakotay announced, “The proximity alarm.”

“What’s going on?” Phoebe asked.

“The security perimeter has been compromised.” Kathryn commanded, “Everyone, huddle on the floor, behind the couch.”

As they moved into the next room, Katie said, "I'm scared."

Chakotay opened a drawer and pulled out two phasers. He tossed one across the room to Kathryn. She caught the weapon easily, having practiced the throw hundreds of times during Tuvok's endless security drills.

Justin came inside and reported, "You're on lockdown. Something has crossed the perimeter, but we can't identify it."

The three Starfleet officers took point around Kathryn's family. Chakotay asked, "Could it be an animal?"

"Sensors aren't picking up body heat. Remember not to fire your phasers unless someone is in the house. The windows are treated with a polaron energy barrier."

"Right," Chakotay said.

Kathryn felt the hairs on the back of her arms stand up. Intuition told her that there was definitely something or someone outside. From her vantage point, she could see around the side of the couch to the large windows overlooking the ocean. Even though it was pitch black outside, the red lighting allowed her to see the reflection of the entire room. She glanced at a mirror on the wall and realized she could also see into the study.

Phoebe whispered, "I'm sorry."

"Not now," Kathryn said, needing to focus. She refused to submit to fear, but if someone did come here, it was likely that their intention would be to force her into submission by torturing a member of her family. That was not an option.

They waited in the dark, Kathryn's steady hand on the trigger. She could hear Katie whimpering, but she couldn't afford to turn and offer comfort. Kathryn continually scanned the room, knowing that Chakotay and Justin were behind her doing the same.

The second she saw movement in the mirror, she aimed and fired. Her phaser beam bounced off the windows' reflective surfaces twice before stunning the intruder. Katie shrieked.

A voice commanded loudly, "Hold your fire! The assailant has been apprehended!"

Justin whispered, "Stay down. I'll confirm."

Chakotay shifted to cover Justin's point, since his was the most vulnerable of the three. "Nice shooting," he whispered.

Jaw clenched, she asked, "How did he get in the house?"

Justin returned, holstering his phaser. "Stand down red alert."

Larkin, the commander of the security force protecting them, came inside and said angrily, "Lieutenant, were you not instructed to hold your fire inside the house?"

Kathryn stood and turned to him. "Commander Larkin, direct your question to me. I fired the weapon, and I believe the instructions were to not fire a weapon unless someone was in the house."

Larkin looked at her oddly and then at the location of the fallen man who was being tended to. "From that position? That's not possible."

"It is," Chakotay said. "Using the barrier to reflect the beam twice." He turned to her and said, "What I don't understand is how you saw him."

Kathryn pointed to the mirror. "A simple matter of trajectories and physics, gentlemen." She then asked, "Who is he and how did he get in here?"

All the gathered security officers stared at her in awe. Larkin whistled. "Impressive. He's Ensign Corin, and he was securing the premises."

They looked to where the stunned man was being placed on a stretcher. Kathryn asked, "Is he okay?"

"He'll be fine. Sore, but fine," Larkin replied.

"You said the assailant was apprehended. Where?" Kathryn demanded.

"The north edge of the coastline, Admiral. He's a local and we're about to question him outside."

Disbelief struck her. "A local?" she asked, clearly demanding further explanation.

"A reporter, Admiral." Larkin's response lacked some of his earlier confidence.

"Bring him inside. Now." She was ticked.

"That's not a good idea, Admiral," Justin said.

"That wasn't a request, Lieutenant."

Justin looked to Chakotay for help, but got none since his anger was bubbling just beneath the surface.

"The dining room will suffice for an interrogation," Kathryn said. She turned to her family who was still huddled on the floor behind her. "I think it would be best for you to stay in here until I have a chance to question him."

Gretchen stood up first. “Katie, shouldn’t you let the security officers handle this?”

Kathryn wasn’t used to people questioning her orders and had to remember that this was her mother attempting to coddle her. “No.” She glanced at Justin. “Well intentioned as they might be, this is a serious security breach and I intend to find out exactly how it happened.”

“Aunt Katie?”

She kneeled down, finally able to give comfort to the child. “I’m sorry that you were scared.”

“Is it safe, now?”

“I’m going to make sure it is.”

Her little jaw shook. “Don’t let the bad people take you away again.”

Kathryn’s heart melted. She stroked the little girl’s face. “I’m going to do everything in my power to make sure that no one ever hurts our family ever again.”

Katie threw herself into Kathryn’s arms, saying, “I love you, Aunt Katie. Please don’t be mad at us anymore.”

Chakotay took the phaser out of Kathryn’s hand so she could safely return the little girl’s hug. “I’m not mad at you, Katie, and I never have been. I’m just a little scared, too.”

Justin said, “He’s ready whenever you are, Admiral.”

Kathryn pulled back from Katie and held her face. “You’ll be okay?”

Katie nodded bravely. “Yes.”

She stood up and told her family, “This should only take a few minutes.” She ordered, “Ensign Williams, stay with them. Chakotay, Jarvin, you’re with me.”

Kathryn walked into the dining room and saw a young man sitting at the table, his eyes as wide as saucers. He instantly reminded her of Jared Norvellen in the way her presence seemed to strike fear in him.

He stood up quickly, “Admiral Janeway!”

Larkin put a hand on his shoulder to push him back down. “Remain seated, Mr. Reyes.”

Kathryn nodded towards the holo-imager. “This is what he was carrying?”

“Yes, Admiral. Only the camera and his identification.”

She glanced at Chakotay. “Check it, please.”

Kathryn sat across from the man and looked him in the eye. She wanted to see what kind of backbone he had. It only took two seconds before he got fidgety and nervous. That told her a lot.

Chakotay reported, “Nothing hidden, but it contains pictures of the outside of our house, from last night.”

Kathryn turned her glare towards Larkin who had the grace to bow his head slightly and look away.

Reyes said, “I mean no disrespect, Admiral Janeway. I'm a huge fan.”

She returned her glare to the assailant. “No disrespect? Yet you violate my privacy?”

“I don't mean you any harm.”

Pointing at the camera, she said, “That tells me that you have absolutely no respect for me.”

“I was just taking pictures.” His wide-eyed expression returned.

Kathryn asked, “Who do you work for?”

“I'm a free-lance reporter for the Pacific Press Association.”

“Where do you live, Mr. Reyes?”

“In town.”

“Specifics, please,” she insisted.

“429 Summit Road, Apartment F, Gold Beach.”

Kathryn instructed Larkin, “Send Fitzgerald. No one is to enter the premises.”

“What's that mean?” Reyes looked back and forth between them, nervously.

“How long have you been taking pictures of this property?”

“Just a few days.”

Chakotay leaned forward. “How many days, exactly?”

“This is my third night, Sir.”

“Have you shown these images to anyone?” he asked.

“No,” he shook his head adamantly. “Of course not.”

Kathryn’s eyes narrowed. “Who did you show them to?”

“I... uh...” His lip began to quiver.

“I need an answer,” she demanded.

“I told the editor that I had some pictures for him, but he didn’t believe me. He didn’t give me a chance to show him.”

“You told him they were pictures of me?” Kathryn asked.

“Yes. I’m sorry, Admiral.”

“I need his name.”

“Ralph Chang.”

“Did you send him any of the images?”

“No.”

“Did you show them to a friend?”

“No.”

“Did you gloat or brag to anyone that you’d been successful?”

“No.” He began to tremble again. “I know you don’t believe me, but I really didn’t. I’m kind of a loner – I’m not around people much.”

Chakotay asked, “How did you know to come out here looking for us?”

“I used to work for the man who lived here. I did errands and odd jobs and things.”

“Go on,” Kathryn said. Her anger towards her security team was growing by the minute, although she was feeling a certain amount of relief that this man seemed to be who he claimed.

“Well, I knew that this house got sold, but didn’t know who bought it. And I saw in the news that you were getting married at your new house. When I saw Starfleet people hanging around in town, I figured someone important must be here, and I hoped it would be you.”

Kathryn glared at Larkin and Jarvin and figured that if looks could kill, they would be on the floor convulsing about now. She returned her attention to Reyes. “How did you get to the house?”

“What do you mean?”

“On foot? Transport in? What path did you take?”

“Oh,” he said sheepishly. “I guessed that I’d have to sneak in, so I came up the coastline and climbed up.”

“Climbed up?” Chakotay asked. “Did you have rappelling equipment?”

“Yeah. It’s a hobby.”

Kathryn was beyond annoyed with her security team. “I’ve heard enough.” She stood up and ordered, “Commander, either take this man into protective custody or enlist him to be on your team. He’s a security risk.”

“Custody?” Reyes asked. “Am I being charged with a crime?”

“Overnight custody, Mr. Reyes. We’re going to leave any charges up to the Judge Advocate General tomorrow, but I can’t let you go home tonight.”

“Why not? If I haven’t committed a crime, you can’t hold me.”

Chakotay asked, “You’re citing Habeus Corpus?”

“Haby what?”

Kathryn was glad she had turned away because she wouldn’t have wanted him to see her roll her eyes.

“Habeus Corpus, Mr. Reyes. You can be held for twenty-four hours for your protection and ours.”

Kathryn ordered, “Get him out of here. Commander Larkin, Lieutenant Jarvin, may I speak to you in the next room?”

The two officers followed her into the kitchen. Chakotay wasn’t far behind. Kathryn paced across the kitchen twice before turning to them, hands on hips, steel in her spine. “Gentlemen, I want you to thank Mr. Reyes next chance you get.”

“Ma’am?” Justin asked.

“That was rhetorical, Lieutenant.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” he said, snapping his mouth shut.

“A civilian cut through your security grid. A civilian has shown you an enormous weak spot.” She pointed out the window and raised her voice. “Did you not think to secure the coastline?”

Larkin said, “Admiral, the likelihood...”

“I don’t want your excuses, Commander. I want this fixed tonight. Have I made myself clear?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he replied immediately.

Chakotay’s voice was low and intense as he said, “Do we need to discuss the ramifications of this kind of security breach?”

“No, sir,” they both replied.

“I sure as hell hope not.”

Kathryn instructed, “I don’t care what it takes, but Mr. Reyes is not to return to his civilian life until this threat is over. I’ll be contacting Admiral Khurma in the morning so be prepared for his call. You need a search warrant and then I want every trace of evidence in his house seized and destroyed. Is that clear?”

“Crystal clear, Ma’am,” Justin said.

“Make sure you find a way to keep the editor he talked to quiet, and whatever it takes, do not let Mr. Reyes out of your site. Make him your best friend if you have to, I don’t give a damn. He will not be reporting this incident. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Larkin nodded succinctly.

“If Reyes had been a moderately competent reporter or a military operative, it is extremely likely that I, or a member of my family, would be dead right now. I want you both to take tonight, as you stand guard over us while we sleep, and think about whether you want to continue this job in the morning. Dismissed.”

After they left, Kathryn braced herself against the kitchen counter. She was feeling extremely light headed. Chakotay pulled out the medical tri-corder and took a reading of her blood pressure. He reported, “It’s within the limit.”

“Good. Now get me some peanut butter before I faint.” She knew she had to control her temper, but she was ready to hit something.

He opened the jar, stuck a spoon in it, and handed it to her.

Kathryn looked up and saw her family still sitting by the couch, staring at her wide-eyed and completely silent. Her adrenaline was still running on high as she said, “Now, if anyone has any qualms about me carrying this child, speak up now, because this marks the end of our previous discussion.”

She waited for anyone to give voice to their concerns and when they did not, she said, “I apologize for my lack of forthrightness and for not accepting your concerns in the spirit they were intended. As my family, I hope you’ll forgive my shortcomings and support me in this effort. This won’t be easy and I’ll need your help. But for now, I’m exhausted and I’m going to bed.” Not waiting for a response, she escaped up the stairs.

Kathryn was lying in bed, under the covers, licking peanut butter off her spoon when Chakotay came into the bedroom. She looked at him with a slight amount of guilt. “Have I completely traumatized them?”

He chuckled as he sat on the bed at her feet. Stretching his neck, he said, “Oh, I wouldn’t worry about it. I’d say that just about everyone you came in contact with tonight needed a good butt-kicking, your family included.”

“Poor Justin. Did you see the look on his face?”

“Oh yes, but he’s your chief of security. You had every right to pulverize him, and he’ll appreciate it once he’s recovered.”

“Pulverize?” Kathryn cringed.

“And Larkin is the one who designed the system here. I’m kicking myself that I didn’t inspect it more carefully.”

She shrugged. “We expected them to do their jobs.”

“In his defense, the perimeter of the deck is protected by a forcefield, and it is highly unlikely that someone would try to rappel up that cliff.” Chakotay pointed out the window.

“Agreed, but they’re supposed to be expecting the unexpected. There needs to be something in place down there at the shoreline.”

“I’ll follow up on it,” Chakotay said. “It’ll make me feel better. Reyes really did us a favor.”

“Yes, he did. Gave us a good drill, too.”

Chakotay caressed her leg. “If it makes you feel any better, your family is in awe of what you did tonight.”

“Dress down some officers?”

He nodded, “That and everything else. I suspect they haven’t seen you in command-mode.”

“No, they haven’t.” She dipped her spoon into the jar again.

“Mike can’t get over that shot you made, and Phoebe was repeating the word damn over and over again, clearly astonished with the way you handled everything.”

Kathryn laughed. “Guess I’m not as helpless as they think.”

“They’ve only seen their Katie without a clear concept of the Captain Janeway who trekked across the Delta Quadrant. Not one member of your former crew would question your ability to do anything you set your mind to.”

She sighed. “I really feel awful for not telling Mom.”

“Yes, perhaps that wasn’t the best decision we’ve ever made. And I do mean ‘we.’”

“I’ll talk to her more tomorrow. I’ve put her through hell and back and I should have known better.”

He picked at a fuzz ball on the blanket.

“What is it?”

Shrugging, he said, “I feel like I should apologize to all of them for my part in this.”

“For knocking me up, you mean?” She crooked a smile.

“Something like that.”

She sat up straighter and put her finger under his chin. “If I recall correctly, it takes two to tango.”

“Yeah, but if I’d remembered my reproductive biology, I would have seen the warning signs that you were very fertile that afternoon.”

“You knew?”

“Not at the time, but I’ve done some reading. If I’d known what to look for, it would’ve been as clear as day.”

“You’re making me warm, you know.”

“I am?”

“All this talk about reproduction and all this unused adrenaline running around inside me. I'm not the least bit sleepy.”

“You're not?” he asked as he licked his lips.

“Nope. Any ideas on what could help me get to sleep?”

“I've got several.” He grinned wickedly.

The next day, Kathryn came out of her study and announced to everyone who was in the great room, “We need to watch the Fednews.”

“What's going on?” Chakotay asked.

“A protest in Paris.” She turned the viewscreen on and stood back, watching intently with her arms folded across her chest.

“Today?”

Kathryn said, “Bernie just called to let me know. They moved it up in light of my leave.”

“You know these people?” Gretchen asked.

“Not directly, Mom.”

The viewscreen showed a mob of hundreds who were holding up signs and chanting the word, “Impeach,” over and over again. They were standing outside the gates of the presidential palace near Paris.

“Wow,” said Phoebe.

A reporter came onscreen. “Today, at the home of the Federation President Min Zife, protestors have gathered to express their opinions about what the next step should be in turning around the Federation government.” She pulled one man aside and asked, “Tell me about this protest. How was it organized?”

“My name is Gara, and I'm one of the founders of this group we call ‘Broken Circle.’”

“What does the name mean?”

“We believe that the Federation was once like a circle, everyone supporting and depending on each other. That circle was utterly destroyed by the current administration and it's time for a new leader to emerge and take over.”

“You believe that a new leader could fix all the problems?”

“We’ve had two bad presidents in a row – one who let the Cardassians walk all over us and then took us into a war. The other has undermined our democracy with lies, thievery, and deception. It’s time for a new approach to government, a new leader who can protect our borders, champion the underdog, protect the rights of the individual, and see the value of every world whether or not it’s a member of the Federation.”

Kathryn made a fist and whispered, “Yes!”

The reporter turned to another, “And you, young man, what do you hope to achieve with this protest today?”

“We want the Federation Council to get off their asses and impeach the President! He’s an idiot and he’s ruining us!”

Trying not to smile, the reporter walked away from him, speaking directly into the camera. “Exactly one week ago, Starfleet’s Vice Admiral Kathryn Janeway addressed the Council, asking them to take a stand and fight for the Federation. Today, these young people, seemingly from across the alpha quadrant, are doing just that.”

She turned to a woman and asked, “The sign you carry says its time to put the criminals behind bars. Who do you feel the criminals are?”

“They’re the ones who are getting rich off of the Federation’s resources.” She made a chopping motion with her hand. “Don’t you see that the funds that are needed for our security and medical research are being used to deepen the pockets of investors in the Bolius and Dolsian systems? The President made Janeway go to those planets last year to show them off. How much more obvious could it be?”

Another young man cut in. “Yeah, that’s right. They’re getting rich while they impose embargos on planets they don’t like. Is that the Federation they want? One where you have to fatten the pockets of the leaders to be a member?”

The reporter started speaking to the camera again. “Today’s protest is calling for an impeachment of the President of the Federation. The question remains whether or not there is evidence of criminal activity that can be tied directly to his office.”

Phoebe said, “He...llo!” to the reporter. “Wake up, lady!”

Kathryn smiled at her sister, shared a knowing look with Chakotay, and looked back at the viewscreen.

The reporter asked, “You, sir. Are you a member of the Broken Circle group?”

“Never heard of them,” the older man said. “But when I heard this protest was going on, I gathered up everyone I knew and transported right over. Are you with the Fednews?”

“Yes, sir, and we’re broadcasting live across the Federation.”

“Good, then I have something to say.”

“What would you like the Federation to hear?”

“President Zife and his cronies have been in power long enough. They have deceived us, made a mockery of our government, forced members out of our Federation, and to top it all off, they’ve chased away Admiral Janeway.”

“Chased her away?”

“What other explanation is there for her sudden leave after a triumphal week with the Council? She was our only hope, but I don’t blame her one bit for protecting herself and her family. It’s appalling that a hero as great as Janeway has to hide from the leader of the Federation just because she has the guts to stand up to him.”

Kathryn’s mouth dropped open, aghast. “I don’t hide.”

Chakotay put his arm around her shoulders and squeezed. “No, you secure yourself.”

The reporter said, “There are many strong emotions running through this crowd today. If you’ve just joined us, we’re live at the presidential palace outside Paris. The protest is a call for the Federation Council to impeach President Zife who just yesterday made a speech as if nothing were amiss in...”

Chakotay’s commbadge chirped and he slapped it. “Chakotay here.”

“It’s B’Elanna. You guys watching the fednews?”

“You bet we are.”

“Tell your wife that she’s awesome.”

Kathryn said, “Thank you, Lanna. We’ll call you later.”

“You bet.” The commline closed as the reporter started to interview the next person.

“Miss, I see that you’ve brought your children with you today. What do you want them to learn from this experience?”

“This is history being made. As far as I’m concerned, today is the end of Zife’s control over the people of the Federation.” The woman raised her voice as she said, “Zife, if you can hear this... resign and go home. We don’t want you hear anymore.”

Kathryn winced. “That’s not quite the lesson I’d want my children to learn.”

The crowd’s chanting had grown louder and had a different tone to it. Chakotay asked, “What are they chanting now?”

Gretchen replied, “Impeach Zife. Has a nice ring to it, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, it does,” Kathryn replied with relish.

The reporter continued, “Evening has arrived here on May 23rd at the capitol of the Federation and home of its president. A crowd that started with just a couple hundred has grown into thousands of individuals who are all asking for the same thing – a new leader.”

A young man jumped up behind the reporter and shouted, “He’s goin’ down! Yeaaa!”

She said, “It’s an enthusiastic crowd full of young people from all over the quadrant. Here with me is a group that traveled from Sirius IX for today’s rally. What message do you have for the people of the Federation?”

A woman replied, “We’re doing this for Admiral Janeway.” Looking into the camera, she continued, “Admiral, we know you’re watching this, and the people of Sirius IX want to thank you for all that you’ve done for us and apologize for what happened during your visit to our planet. Your bravery that day made an impact on us – one that we will never forget. To echo something you said in an interview over a year ago, if the time has come that you can no longer carry your load, we will step up in your place. The people of the Federation will NOT let him torment you any longer, and we will NOT sit by and let Zife destroy what has taken hundreds of years to build. You are loved by many, Admiral.”

“Oh, wow,” Kathryn said as she touched her own chest.

Chakotay held her close and whispered into her hair. “You were right, my love. They did need you that day – more than I could ever have understood.”

Kathryn shook her head and turned so she could hold her husband. “I’m so sorry.”

“Shhhh shhhhhh,” he whispered. “It’s okay. We’re okay now.”

Gretchen asked, “What’s wrong, Katie? That sounded wonderful to me.”

Kathryn replied, “It’s a long story, but Chakotay and I got into a pretty big fight after the explosion on Sirius. What that young woman just said brought it all back to us.”

On the viewscreen, another young woman had already started speaking. “So here we are, standing united. He can bully the Council, he can bully Starfleet, but he can’t bully the thousands of us here and the billions of people watching from home. It’s time for peace to prevail and we’re here to make sure it does.”

The reporter asked a young Ktarian, “Do you believe all the blame lies on the President?”

“Absolutely not. There’s a slew of people working for him and getting just as rich. Just last week at the General session, councilmembers Jorl and Liyal all but attacked Janeway. Their actions and statements were proof enough that their loyalties are with the President and his corrupt politics. I think it’s high time that we examined the voting records of the Council, the sudden success of the Bolian bank, and the reasons behind the good fortune of the planets that Zife is so damned proud of. There’s something fishy going on and it’s time the Federation did something about it.”

“Thank you, sir.” The reporter nodded to him and then faced the camera. “A profound statement to close this report. I’m Thaurise B’Nor, reporting for the Fednews.”

The image on the viewscreen switched back to the newsdesk in San Francisco where two reporters began remarking on the comments they’d heard.

Kathryn shook her head in awe as Chakotay turned off the screen. Beaming with joy, she said, “This calls for a celebration, don’t you think? What do you say we stop work for the afternoon, trust our new and improved security system, and have a picnic out on the patio?”

Gretchen hugged her daughter. “A wonderful idea, Katie. I am so proud of you.”

“That wasn’t me, Mom. That was the people finally speaking up.”

“Because you inspired them.” She shook her head in amazement. “I knew you were destined for great things, but this is far beyond anything I could’ve imagined.”

Phoebe said, “She’s not done, yet. I still think she’s going to be living in that presidential palace someday.”

Kathryn opened her arms wide. “And leave all this? Are you kidding?”

“What? This old place?” Phoebe joked.

Gretchen said, “Come on, Phoebe. Let’s see what we can throw together. Give these two a moment to talk.”

After her mom and sister walked into the kitchen, Kathryn turned to Chakotay and asked, “How much of that did you choreograph?”

“The protest?”

Kathryn rolled her eyes.

He shrugged. "I made a few suggestions."

"Such as," she goaded.

Putting his arm around her to walk her outside, he said, "I suggested they keep it peaceful, but energized. Let everyone participating know in advance what kinds of things to say to reporters and then find a way for the best people to get to the cameras. I believe they understood that publicity and numbers were their main goals, not results."

"And?"

"And what?"

She put her hands on her hips. "What kinds of things did you suggest they say to the reporters?"

"I didn't get that specific." He tilted his head at her. "You think I planted for them to sing your praises like that?"

"Didn't you?"

"No. They knew what message they needed to get across. And remember, I sent word days before I knew that you were going on leave or what the response from the Council would be. They came up with the content on their own, and I bet at least half of what we heard wasn't planned at all."

Kathryn stood up on her toes and put her arms around his neck. Stretching tall, she whispered against his lips, "I love you."

"I love you, too."

Chakotay came into the dining room. "Kathryn, Admiral Khurma is on the comm for you."

"This early?" she asked as she got up from the breakfast table, fastening her robe tighter.

"He looks concerned."

Kathryn frowned as she walked into the study and activated the screen. "Morning, Admiral."

"Kathryn," he said carefully. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine, why?"

“I have some... news. Can't say for sure whether it's good or bad, but it's likely to be stressful.”

“Has there been an attack?”

“An attack?” He blinked and then shook his head. “Oh, no. Sorry to alarm you. It's nothing like that.”

Kathryn took a deep breath and blew it out. “All right. What seems to be the problem?”

“Before I tell you, I want you to know that I have no intentions of allowing this to happen.”

“That sounds ominous.”

“President Zife has scheduled a mandatory hearing, but...”

“Hearing?”

“For you. It's not officially a court martial, and I've no...”

“What?!?!?” Kathryn stood up quickly and as a rush of vertigo came over her, she quickly sat back down.

Chakotay ran in and asked, “Everything okay?”

She held her hands against her face. “Give me a moment.”

Khurma said, “I've just given her a bit of a shock, Captain. Is she all right?”

“I'm fine.” She placed her hand on her chest and willed herself to regain control. “Just don't throw things like that at me from out of nowhere. My brain and heart aren't communicating well.”

“If a doctor could testify to your medical incapacity, it could make what I need to do a lot easier.”

Chakotay asked, “Testify?”

Kathryn held up her hand. “Don't over-react as much as I just did.”

Khurma said carefully, “I'm not allowing this to occur, but President Zife has scheduled a mandatory hearing to confront Kathryn about the rumors he believes she has started.”

“What the hell?” Chakotay asked. “Can he do that?”

“He is the President of the Federation, Captain. He thinks he can do just about anything he wants, but I will not allow this to take place.”

“Can you imagine how all hell would break loose if Kathryn and Zife were in the same room, hurtling accusations at each other?”

Kathryn frowned at her husband. “Hey!”

He softened his approach. “You know what I mean. If any kind of hearing is going to take place for either of you, it needs to be done with plenty of advance warning, lawyers, and a judge. This is huge.”

Khurma said, “Which is why I have no intentions of letting this happen. He believes that he is within his rights to demand that a Starfleet officer answer to him.”

“I’ll answer to my actions, but it will be to a Starfleet court, not a private meeting with the President.”

Chakotay said, “He’s trying to cast blame wherever he can. I bet his supporters are coming down on him, hard.”

Khurma asked, “Tell me more about this medical condition. Has it happened before with a doctor’s immediate response?”

“Yes, but I don’t want it in my official records that I am incapacitated in stressful situations.”

“Is it a temporary malady caused by your pregnancy?”

“You’re not using her health as an excuse,” Chakotay snapped. “This hearing is illegal on its own merits without trying to find a scapegoat.”

Kathryn laid her hand on Chakotay’s arm as she told Khurma. “I’m not participating in any inquiry, hearing, or deposition regarding charges against me without a defense attorney present.”

Khurma nodded. “All right. I’m in conversation with Starfleet’s JAG officer to see how we should proceed, but it’s my hope that we can prevent this from going to trial.”

“If it does, it does, but I do not permit you to use my health as a reason to avoid it. That gives the impression that you agree that this action can take place.”

“Of course not, Kathryn.”

She leaned forward. “What we need is get moving with some legal action against the President. When is this detective you told me about supposed to see me?”

“Tomorrow. Has she not made contact yet?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

“Hopefully, she hasn’t run into any trouble. I’ll touch base with her, but I believe she’s on her way to Earth from Betazed.”

“Is she a betazoid?”

“No, she’s human. She’s not what you’d expect, but she’s damn good at what she does. I’ll let her fill you in on as much as she wants you to know.”

“All right. Please, keep me informed.”

“I will, Kathryn. And again, sorry to bother you this early in the morning. Khurma out.”

She turned to Chakotay and stated, “This so-called ‘leave of absence’ isn’t turning out to be very relaxing.”

Cupping her cheek, he asked, “You okay?”

“Honestly? I have no idea.”

“What would you like to do about this?”

“I want to call Owen and Matt and ask for their help finding a lawyer, but I don’t want them to over-react.”

“Which one is more even-keeled?”

“Matt.” Kathryn sighed heavily. “I’ll give him a call.”

“Want me to stay?”

She shook her head. “I can handle it.”

Leaning down, he gave her a kiss. “Don’t worry, my love. You haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Hmph. Then I know nothing about how yesterday’s protest came about, do I?”

“No, you don’t.” He winked at her as he left the study.

Kathryn looked down at her robe and thought about changing clothes, but decided it didn’t matter for this one call. She keyed in Matt’s home code and waited until someone picked up.

“Katie?” he asked as he sat down at his terminal. “Is everything all right?”

“That’s a loaded question.”

“What can I do for you?”

“Is this line secure?” she asked.

“It is from my end. Are you in danger?”

“Always. Khurma just called, and before you get up in arms, hear me out.”

“All right,” he said, hesitantly.

“Zife appears to be grasping at straws and wants to start casting blame. His first victim appears to be me.”

“What’s he done?”

“Nothing, yet, but he’s pushing for a hearing of some kind. Khurma is fighting against it, but I feel the need to find a damn good trial lawyer and put him or her on retainer. Know one?”

Matt’s chin bobbed and it was clear that he was angry. “This has gone too far.”

“It hasn’t, yet. We wanted to put pressure on Zife, and now that we have, he’s fighting back. We should’ve anticipated this.”

“Have you called Owen?”

“No. I figure it’s easier for you two to keep each other apprised than for me to call both of you each time something comes up.”

“Mmmhmm, yes.” He blew out a puff of air. “Two names come to mind. Let me do some research and get back with you.”

Kathryn said, “There is one good thing that can come out of this little move.”

“What’s that?”

“If the best lawyer in the Federation is working for me, he or she can’t be working for anyone associated with the President.”

“Good point.” Matt rubbed his chin hard. “How are you handling this?”

“I’m not sure, yet. But if I can at least get legal representation, I know I won’t have to handle it alone.”

“Not a chance of that happening, Katie. You recall our little fireside chat last Thursday at your home?”

“Of course.”

“You’ve got that many people, and more on your side.” He nodded in determination. “Let me get to work on this and I’ll call you later this morning.”

“Thank you.”

“My pleasure, Katie. Now, go get dressed. You can’t be seen lounging about all day.”

“Oh... wait.”

“Yes?”

“Owen was here on Tuesday night. Did he tell you?”

“Yes, tried to convince me that you taking a leave of absence is a good thing, but all he could give me was that I should trust him.”

“So he didn’t tell you my news, then?”

“Other than the leave?”

“My personal news.”

Matt cocked his head. “Evidently not.”

“I’m pregnant.”

He did a double take. “You’re what?”

“With child. Four months along. That’s why the leave of absence is a good thing. I need to be out of the line of fire.”

“Katie...” he whispered. “That’s wonderful!”

Smiling brightly, she replied, “Thank you, Matt. You’re the first person who hasn’t asked me if this was a bad idea.”

“How can a baby be a bad idea? Ever?”

“I’m glad we agree.” She laid her hand on her belly. “But just so you don’t have to ask, the baby is healthy, and I’m under constant monitoring to make sure I stay healthy, too.”

“How many people know?”

“My staff, family, Khurma, and everyone that was here Thursday night.”

“Oh, good. I can talk to Tom and B’Elanna about it. Always great to share good news.”

“Thank you, again.”

“You’re welcome. I’m overjoyed. Talk to you later.”

Kathryn took a deep breath and sat back in her chair, feeling much better for having reached out to her godfather. He was right in that she wasn’t alone. Truthfully, she had billions of people on her side, and hundreds who would do anything for her. With those odds, she could face anything.

Part 35 - “Deposed”

By Dawn

Depose: *v* To remove from office; to testify or affirm under oath

Rated NC-17

A small, olive-skinned woman wearing a wrinkled pantsuit marched into Kathryn’s great room and extended her hand with enthusiasm. “Admiral Janeway, it’s good to finally meet you. I feel like I already know you, since I’ve been tracking your movements for the last year.”

Kathryn stood quickly to accept the woman’s vigorous handshake. “A pleasure to meet you as well, Detective Mouline.”

She waved her hand quickly between them. “Just call me Aicha.”

“Alicia?”

“No, no, no. A-sha. I’m Moroccan. Some say that our names are troublesome to pronounce. I don’t know why, seems perfectly clear to me.” She plopped down on the couch and dumped a satchel full of PADDs on the table in front of her.

“It’s a beautiful name.” Kathryn asked, “Can I get you anything?”

“No, no. I’d like to jump right into this. I’ve wanted to talk to you for months, but Khurma wouldn’t allow it. Don’t know why,” she shrugged.

Kathryn couldn't tell if Aicha was kidding, or not. "For awhile, he was trying to protect my privacy."

"Well, that's all blown to bits now, isn't it? What did he tell you about my work?"

Kathryn tried not to be amused by the diminutive woman's mannerisms. "Just that he's been in contact with you recently about some of the situations we're dealing with."

"Some?" she asked wide eyed. "Try all. And not just recently, either. I've been up to my earlobes in this muck and mire since the war ended. I hope you don't mind me saying this, but Min Zife is a pain in the ass."

Laughing out loud, Kathryn shook her head and said, "No, I... um... don't mind you saying that in the least."

Chakotay walked into the room with a curious look on his face.

Kathryn said, "Honey, let me introduce you to Detective Aicha Mouline of the Inter-Planetary Criminal Police Organization."

Aicha stood quickly and shook his hand with even more fervor than she had with Kathryn. "The famous, or should I say infamous, Captain Chakotay. Wow, this truly is an honor. I've been a fan of yours since I was a greenfoot in the interplanetary relations department."

Chakotay grinned broadly as he tried to withdraw his hand. "Infamous?"

"Oh, yeah," she said in complete awe. "I was on the team assigned to cover the Maquis situation. You did some outstanding work out there. Really terrific stuff. My favorite was when you took down that frigate in the beta sector of the Badlands. I don't think anyone could've pulled that off like you did."

"Thank you, but," he rubbed his jaw while he hesitated. "I didn't realize specific details about the Maquis were available."

"Well, not to just anyone. But it was our team's job to collect evidence on the Maquis, and let me tell you, I had a terraquad of data on you! A huge fan, really."

Chakotay pulled on his ear. "Evidence for whom?"

"The Federation, of course. But that's neither here nor there, now. The Maquis are vindicated, so that data isn't good for anything except taking up storage space. But you know..." She rubbed her hands together.

"What's that?"

She blushed a unique shade of dark olive that brought out some feminine qualities in her otherwise tomboyish appearance. “I take out your files every now and again just to reminisce. Your tactics were definitely the best of any Maquis. I can see why Starfleet put you to work teaching their people.”

“Well, thank you, Detective,” he said, stealing a glance at his wife.

Kathryn cleared her throat. “It would seem that you have a little bit of hero worship towards my husband.”

Aicha guffawed. “More than that, Admiral. I’ve got a full-blown crush on him. All that intelligence plus he looks like this? Of course I don’t have to tell you.”

“No, you don’t,” she replied carefully.

Chakotay tugged on his ear again. “I’d offer to stay and talk with you two, but I fear I’d be a distraction.”

Aicha replied quickly, “You’d be a distraction all right. Besides, this is confidential, anyway.”

“He’s got clearance, Aicha.”

“No, no, no. It’s not possible.” She sighed as she looked at him. “Oh, how I wish it were, though. I would truly enjoy getting inside your head.”

Kathryn put her fist over her mouth to avoid making a very inappropriate sound.

“Perhaps another time, Detective.”

“Aicha, please call me Aicha.”

“Aicha, it is.” He took her hand and kissed the back of it. “I’ll be in the study if you need me.”

Kathryn asked, “Don’t I get a kiss, too?”

Chakotay looked back at her and winked. “Later, my love.”

Once his door was closed, Aicha shook her head and blew out a puff of air. “I don’t know how you can get any work done around him.”

She clicked her tongue and said, “He’s a great conversationalist. So, Admiral Khurma tells me that you’ve been to Betazed?”

“Oh, I’ve been all over, following both you and Zife’s people around.”

“Following me?”

“Well, sure,” she said with surprise. “You didn’t know that?”

Kathryn furrowed her forehead. “Perhaps you could describe the scope of your assignment?”

“Sure. Khurma contacted me two years ago in regards to Zife and his business dealings. A lot of what Zife is doing is outside of Starfleet’s jurisdiction, but there’s enough overlap that we could either choose to work together or we could step on each other’s toes.

“It’s the IPC’s job to coordinate with the local police in criminal cases that cross jurisdictions. Zife has had dealings on so many planets that our agency has been turned on its ears trying to track it all. As a matter of fact, there are so many leads to follow, and so many parties involved, that we’ve got a team of five people working on it and we still can’t piece everything together.”

“So, why have you been following me, then?”

More serious now, Aicha said, “Because Khurma asked me, personally, to keep tabs on the investigations involving attacks against you.”

“Oh,” Kathryn said with surprise. “I didn’t realize that. Thank you.”

“Wow, he really was being discreet.”

“I didn’t even know your agency was involved in this until Tuesday.”

“Wonder why?”

“Don’t know. Perhaps Khurma was hoping that if we worked independently, we’d turn up different information.”

“Well, that’s why I’m here. You’re on leave, so I need to learn everything you know to keep this investigation going.”

“That’s... a lot.” Kathryn tapped her fingers on her arm as she thought. “Which planets, specifically, are part of the investigation?”

“Every planet that has gotten a special deal or a rotten one.”

“Including the ones he’s been getting raw materials from?”

“Yes, the ones he has forced illegal contracts with, and the ones he has... ah... bolstered the economies of.”

“I see. And you’re sure you’ve got all of them?”

“I’m quite thorough,” Aicha said without any hint of doubt. “And as I said earlier, I’ve also had input into the investigations involving attacks on you – Joria, Sirius IX, Ktaria, and Earth. That one on Monday... terrible.”

“To say the least.”

“And on your birthday.” She clicked her tongue and shook her head. “Rotten deal.”

“You knew it was my birthday?”

“It’s my job to know everything about you, Admiral.”

“That must be why you’re a good detective.”

Aicha pulled a computer out of her bag and set it on Kathryn’s coffee table. “I’m not just good, Admiral. I’m the best, and that’s why I’m on this case. It has taken me two years to gather all the pieces, and my hope is that, together, we can bring this to closure within the month. How does that sound?”

“Wonderful. I’ve been researching impeachment to try to figure out who has to initiate the process.”

“It’s complicated. First, any council member or committee may accuse the president of a crime as long as there is evidence to support it. The full council must then vote on whether or not to take the case before the judicial committee.”

“Do you think they have the evidence needed?”

“No, but we’ll give it to them as soon as a trustworthy person steps forward. I suspect they’ll come to you, first.”

“They might.”

“Has anyone mentioned anything?”

“Not as of yet. When I left them on Thursday, there was talk about taking a stand, but it was just a beginning.”

“Well, that’s something.”

“Can your organization bring charges against the President?”

“Oh, yes, we can. But they have to be charges against him, personally. Not charges against decisions he has made while in office.”

“Do you have anything on him?”

“Not enough to warrant the upset it would cause. That’s why we’ve let this go on as long as it has. He protects himself to the extreme.”

“Or his people protect him.”

“That, too. We’ve also left them alone in the hopes that they would lead us to him. We have thirty-four individuals under surveillance – not all of them are guilty, but we’re in the process of weeding that out.”

“Why didn’t Khurma tell me that?”

“Same reason he didn’t tell you about me, I guess. Regardless, what I do have plenty of is criminal evidence against sixteen individuals connected to the president. I’m ready to start making arrests.”

Kathryn’s mouth opened and quickly turned into a satisfied smile. “I like the sound of that.”

Aicha grinned. “I thought you might. Personally, this has been such a huge part of my life for the better part of two years, that I think I’ll feel lost when it’s over. Now, what I need from you is all of your evidence and official statements regarding your experiences.”

“Okay, which ones?”

“All of them. This might take us a couple of days, but we’ll get through it all.”

Kathryn blinked slowly. “A couple of days?”

“Yes. Now,” she paused as she typed something into her computer. “For creating your affidavits, I want three detectives from my team present, including me. Admiral Khurma wants to be involved, as well. Do you have anyone else you’d like to attend?”

“I want Chakotay present, and…” Kathryn took a deep breath. “I’ve got a call to make this afternoon about putting a lawyer on retainer.”

“Oh, no, no, no. We don’t want any civilian lawyers getting involved in this. We must proceed with the utmost caution regarding the confidentiality of this information.”

“I don’t trust just anyone, Detective.”

“A wise precaution, but why do you think you need a lawyer? You’re the victim and a key witness.”

Kathryn rubbed her forearms. “While that may be, I’ve also been acting as a very public detective. Any chance that I’ll be facing charges of slander?”

Aicha licked her lips. “Just answer the questions and don’t elaborate. I have studied every public appearance you have given in great detail. Not once have you said anything incriminating about the Federation, the Council, or the President. You have given general threats against those who are against us, but unless one has a guilty conscience, your words can’t be isolated to any specific individual.”

“That has been my intent, but I still want to seek counsel.” Kathryn scratched her eyebrow as she said, “I won’t breach confidentiality, but my concern stems from a call I received yesterday. Zife wants to bring me up on charges.”

“For what?”

“I don’t know, yet.”

Aicha shook her head in disgust. “Stall him, however you can. This is going to blow up in his face so fast, he won’t know what hit him.”

“While it would be nice to beat him to the punch, I’m not counting on it.”

“Then, if you’re feeling up to it, we should start today. We can put things in motion immediately.”

“Let’s do it.”

“Great. I need to make a few calls to get the ball rolling.” Aicha looked up and asked, “I assume we can do this here? I can’t think of a more secure location.”

Kathryn nodded. “That’s fine, but I’ll need to make other arrangements to keep my extended family out of our hair. They’re at work and school right now, but I’m expecting them back within the hour.”

“If you’ll take care of that, I’ll do the rest. Thirteen hundred?”

“Sure, and you’re welcome to continue working from here.”

Aicha glanced up from her computer. “I was planning on it.”

Kathryn shook her head in amusement as she got up and went into the study.

Chakotay asked, “How’s it going?”

“I have mixed feelings about her personality, but we’re getting somewhere.” Kathryn tugged on his hand until he was standing up and hugging her.

“She’s something else,” he said as he held her close.

“She was sexually harassing you.”

He chuckled. “Don’t worry about it, love. It’s not every day that one comes face to face with their hero. You’ve had people encounter you almost daily.”

“Yes, but it’s never been that overt.”

Shrugging, he said, “So, she lacks some social graces. I bet all of the men who idolize you also find you rather alluring.”

“An old broad like me?” she said with a laugh.

His hand dropped to slide over her rear as he dove in for a deep kiss.

Kathryn pulled back before he had a chance to really get something started. She admonished, “The detective is on the other side of the door, mister.”

“Want to ask if she’d like to join us?”

“Chakotay!” She swatted him playfully on the shoulder.

“Just kidding.” He grinned and placed a simple kiss on her lips. Suddenly all business, he pulled away and asked, “Can you tell me anything?”

“Yes. We’re gathering a group together here to create my affidavits at thirteen-hundred. I want you there. Is that okay?”

“Of course, it is. Assuming Aicha allows it, I guess.”

“I didn’t give her a choice. I just wanted to make sure you were okay with it.”

“Absolutely.” He rubbed her upper arms. “Who else will be involved?”

“Khurma, Aicha, two other detectives, and I assume a court reporter to record my statements. Whatever we come up with today will be submitted as testimony, whether or not this comes to trial. She has sixteen people she plans to arrest.”

“I’m glad to see that legal action has begun.” He turned and started shuffling through PADDs on his desk. “I’ll get our notes together, including the data that Matt and Owen sent yesterday.”

She watched him for just a second before she asked, “Chakotay?”

“Yes?” he said as he looked at her. “Something wrong?”

“I’m right in trusting her, aren’t I?”

“Do you trust Khurma?”

“Yes,” she said immediately.

“This had to be turned over to the legal authorities at some point. If he trusts her, and he’ll be here this afternoon, I believe you can trust her.”

Kathryn raised an eyebrow. “You’re not just saying that because she’s smitten with you, are you?”

He grinned and gave her a kiss on the cheek. “You’re funny.”

She tapped her commbadge. “Janeway to Jarvin.”

“Yes, Admiral?”

“Would you come into the study, please?”

“On my way.”

Once the channel closed, Kathryn nodded towards Chakotay’s shirt. “Honey, why don’t you change into your green pullover?”

“Why? You say that one looks bad on me.”

“I know.” She gave him a fake smile and then welcomed Justin into the room. “I need you to make arrangements for my family to be elsewhere this afternoon.”

As she was explaining, Chakotay answered an incoming transmission on their comm terminal. He put the caller on hold and waited until she was finished.

“Who is it?” Kathryn asked, noting his serious expression.

“Admiral Flynn.”

Her eyes bugged slightly. “The Judge Advocate General?”

Chakotay nodded. “Would you like me to leave the room?”

“Probably so. Would you be willing to make lunch for your two biggest fans?”

“I’ll fix lunch for my number one fan, and the other can have some, too.” He kissed her cheek. “Don’t forget, my love, you haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Thank you.” Once the door closed behind him, she squared her shoulders and sat down. With a tap of the key, Flynn’s image came up on the viewscreen. “Admiral Flynn, how are you today?”

“I’m curious.” His smile put her at ease immediately. “Call me James, would you?”

“Of course.”

“And may I address you by your given name as well?”

“Yes,” she said with her best diplomatic smile. “What is it that you’re curious about?”

“Over the last twenty-four hours, I’ve received six calls in regards to you.”

“Six?”

“Not that I’m surprised, mind you. I was sure that the efforts of your more,” he hesitated as he decided what word to use, “covert... activities would come to fruition soon, but it raised a few flags to get that many calls in such a short time span.”

“I’m sure it would. May I ask who the calls were from?”

“President Zife was one. You know that he has requested a hearing?”

“Yes,” she said with a sigh. “Do I need to start preparing for that?”

“Yes and no.” He folded his hands on the desk in front of him. “This is a secure line, Kathryn. First of all, you should know that I’m part of Matt and Owen’s group.”

Kathryn was taken aback. “You?”

“Yes, and I respect how much information you have and haven’t given to us. The data that has crossed my desk shows significant discernment on your part.”

“Thank you... I think.”

He gave her another disarming smile. “Relax, Kathryn. What I’m trying to tell you is that I’m on your side and I want to help you in every way I can.”

“I appreciate that, James. What I’d like to do is stall Zife as long as I can. Khurma suggested using my health as an excuse, but I’d really like to avoid that. We don’t want to set a precedent that the President can do this.”

“Unfortunately, the precedent is already set that he can subpoena a Starfleet officer. However, there are certain restrictions.”

“Such as?”

“The Starfleet court has absolute jurisdiction over active duty personnel, so you cannot be brought up on charges in any court that’s not mine.”

“Is a court martial what the President is asking for?”

“Not, exactly. He wants to confront you face-to-face, which I’m not going to let happen. You are protected by this court, Kathryn.”

“That’s good to know. I’m wary of discussing anything directly with him.”

“As you should be. The only legal recourse is to call you in for a preliminary hearing to gather evidence against a criminal complaint. However, he hasn’t made one. Until he does that, I’m not taking any action.”

Kathryn nodded slowly. “And are you going to tell him what he needs to do?”

“I know for a fact that the President has lawyers on his staff whom he can consult.”

“Did he indicate what complaint he might have?”

“Defamation of some sort, but I don’t want you to worry about it at this point.”

“That’s easier said than done, James.”

“Bear with me. I haven’t pulled all of the rabbits out of my hat.”

She sat back and narrowed her eyes. “Who were the other calls from?”

“Matt and Owen both called to ask about legal representation for you. Rest assured that if this gets that far, you will get the best in Starfleet.”

“Thank you.”

“The other calls were from Khurma, a detective from the IPC Police, and a Federation Council member.”

“Council member? Who?”

“One who was curious about the impeachment process and asked if you could initiate it. I told them it needed to come from within the council itself and how to go about it.”

“You’re not going to tell me who?”

“No, I’m not. But don’t worry, the individual is a friend. If he or she wants you to know, they’ll come to you. I just wanted to inform you that the council is looking into the possibility.”

Kathryn relaxed. “Feels like things are falling into place.”

He smiled in return. “Yes, it does. And I believe the IPC detective came to visit you this morning?”

“She’s still here, and we’re creating my affidavits in less than an hour. Do we need to do it under your supervision?”

“Affidavits?” He appeared irritated and started shuffling things on his desk. “She was merely to open a dialogue with you and compare notes. Yes, I need to be there. Where and when?”

“My home at thirteen hundred. Mouline is calling Admiral Khurma to be here – perhaps you could come with him?”

“All right, I’ll clear my calendar for the afternoon. Tell her I’m bringing a court reporter to transcribe it. She can have one, too, but I want an official documentation of this for our own records.”

She blew out a slow breath. “I hope I have enough to say to make it worth your while.”

He stopped what he was doing and looked at her. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Yes and no. I have a lot of information, but I don’t know how much of it is new.”

“Ah,” he said with a caring tone. “I can understand why you’re nervous, Kathryn, but our goal is to turn everything you know into evidence that we can use to press charges against the criminals that are undermining the very fabric of our Federation. Whether we already know what you’re going to say or not is beside the point. We’re going to document it, take it off your shoulders, and use it.”

“Thank you, James. I feel significantly more at ease now that I’ve spoken with you.”

“It is truly my pleasure, Kathryn. I’ll see you in about thirty minutes.”

After terminating the link, she sat at her desk for a moment and tried to order her thoughts. “All right, Katie... you can do this,” she told herself.

She gathered up her things and confidently strode into the main room of her house to see Chakotay putting lunch on the table and Aicha still busily working on her computer.

Without looking up, Aicha said, “Everyone will be here in thirty-five minutes. You ready?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” she replied. “Admiral Flynn and a court reporter from his office will be joining us.”

The detective paused to look at Kathryn. “Did you call him?”

“He called me, but I told him what we were doing and he wants to be involved. He said that you could bring a transcriber as well, but he wants to document it for Starfleet’s purposes.”

“Oh, okay.” She scratched the top of her head, further mussing her already messy hair. “I, uh, didn’t exactly clear this with him. S’pose I should’ve.”

“Probably, but he didn’t seem upset.”

Aicha scrunched up her shoulders and looked apologetic. “His office is supposed to represent all Starfleet personnel in legal proceedings.”

“You didn’t think that any of this could incriminate me. That’s his job to think about those things. We’re fine, Aicha.”

Chakotay interrupted. “Incriminate you?”

“My words, not his,” she assured. “I’m just anxious about Zife. Flynn told me that our president wants to call me in for a preliminary hearing to determine if there is probable cause for a criminal investigation.”

“He’s grasping at straws, Kathryn.”

Aicha shook her head. “He doesn’t have anything on you. He can’t because I don’t. Believe me, if there was something, I’d know about it.”

“While I appreciate your confidence, that doesn’t mean he hasn’t fabricated evidence. Regardless, Flynn is stalling the process with red tape. We’re fine, for now.”

Chakotay asked, “Did Flynn give you anything to worry about?”

“Quite the opposite, actually,” Kathryn said as she walked up to Chakotay and gave him a hug. “He’s got my back.”

Holding her close, he whispered, “So do I.”

“Me, too,” Aicha said as she walked into the dining area.

Chakotay and Kathryn shared a secret smile before acknowledging their new friend. He said, “Lunch is ready, ladies.”

During the quick meal, they talked more about what to expect that afternoon so that by the time her guests were due to arrive, Kathryn felt ready to go.

As she paced across the great room, a thought came to her. "I should be in uniform."

Aicha said, "We're recording visuals, but what you're wearing doesn't matter."

"I'd feel more comfortable," she said as she went upstairs. "Be back in a few."

When she was gone, Aicha remarked, "Comfortable in a uniform?"

"It's kind of like her battle armor. She feels more in control when she looks the part."

The first guests to arrive were the two admirals and the Starfleet court reporter. Chakotay greeted them at the door. "Admiral Khurma, Admiral Flynn, welcome to our home."

"Always a pleasure, Captain," Khurma replied, shaking Chakotay's hand.

Flynn took Chakotay's hand next. "I'm honored to finally meet you in person, Captain. This is Lieutenant Crawford, my aide."

"A pleasure, Lieutenant. I'll show you where to get set up."

As they left, Flynn addressed Aicha. "Detective Mouline, we need to have a chat about protocol."

"You're absolutely right. I got so excited about the prospect of getting into Janeway's head that I didn't consider there might be other parties who would use this information."

He quietly said, "While I'm just as interested in what she has to say, this is not what we agreed on."

"My apologies, sir. I'll remember to follow procedure in the future."

"Thank you." He smiled politely and asked, "Where is she?"

"Changing into her uniform. She'll be down in a minute."

Khurma said, "Let's follow the others. Do you know where we're holding this?"

"Her living area is big enough. The captain and I moved their dining table for the reporters to use."

As Flynn entered the main living room of the house and said, "Wow, this is impressive."

Chakotay smiled. "Make yourself at home. Can I get you anything?"

"Oh, you don't need to serve us, Captain. I'll make some coffee if you have a pot. We might need it."

He smirked as he went into the kitchen and poured Flynn a cup. “It’s decaffeinated, but I’m guessing that you haven’t spent much time with my wife, have you?”

“No, why?”

Khurma said, “She drinks coffee by the liter.”

“I do not,” Kathryn said as she walked into the room wearing her uniform jacket and a long, black skirt. “I drink it one cup at a time, just like anyone else.”

Chakotay said, “I’ll refrain from commenting.”

“Smart man,” she said with a barely concealed smile and then turned to the other admirals. “Thank you for coming on such short notice. I didn’t think this would turn into such an operation when I suggested we get started today.”

“No problem, Kathryn,” Khurma said as he took her hand and patted the back of it. “How are you feeling?”

“I feel ready to make some changes in our government.”

Aicha commented, “I didn’t realize that skirts were part of the Starfleet uniform.”

“No, but I’m hoping any video of me can be shot from the waist up. Can you believe that after only four days, I’ve gained enough that none of my slacks fit?”

“I was wondering,” Chakotay said as he set out a full coffee service on the counter.

“That’s good, isn’t it?” Khurma asked. “I don’t mean to be rude.”

Aicha asked, “You don’t think it’s rude to tell a woman that it’s good she’s gaining weight?”

“I’m surprised, Detective,” Kathryn mused. “I thought you knew everything about me.”

Flynn said, “It’s her health. You look great, Kathryn.”

“Thank you, but it’s more than that. I’m just over four months pregnant, and I think it’s about time that I start letting people know.”

“Pregnant?” Aicha asked, stunned. “Wow. This is a surprise.”

“Glad to hear that everyone has done a great job of keeping the secret.”

Flynn said, “Congratulations. I see why you’re eager to bring things to closure.”

“Yes, and as my legal advisor, you should know that in another two months, I may be on bed rest for the duration.”

Khurma gasped. “Kathryn? I wasn’t aware of that.”

“We won’t know until we see how my health holds out, but I believe all of you should know in case I’m needed for any official proceedings.”

“Not that I’d want to use this as a ploy against Zife,” Flynn started to say.

“But the timing is pretty good, isn’t it?” Khurma finished.

Chakotay said, “I was thinking the same thing.”

Kathryn nodded. “If Zife pursues this, I could gain a lot of public support by letting my condition be known before any negative press hits.”

“Oh, good idea!” Aicha said with excitement. “I can’t wait to see how all of this plays out, especially with you getting even more pity from the public, Admiral.”

Flynn admonished, “Detective…”

“Sorry, sorry.” Aicha busied herself with setting things up in the living area, just out of earshot from where the rest were standing in the kitchen.

Khurma said, “She’s damn good at what she does, but I tried to keep her away from you as long as I could, Kathryn.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Kathryn said with a wave of dismissal.

Chakotay asked, “Can I get anyone something besides coffee?”

“I’d love a glass of water if you’ll point me in the right direction,” Khurma said.

Kathryn looked on with quiet resolve as everyone scuttled around getting things set up. She wondered if maybe she should call Sue in, but to spring it on her assistant with such short notice wouldn’t be fair. Sue liked to be well prepared, and Kathryn figured that if they needed any follow-up information, they could always subpoena Sue and Harry for further testimony.

Chakotay came over and handed her a cup of coffee. “Doing okay, love?”

She nodded her thanks. “I’ll be fine. This isn’t a deposition, so it’s not like anyone will be cross examining me.”

“That comes later.”

“So this will be good practice.”

He nodded towards her skirt. “You want to replicate new slacks?”

“No, this will be fine. The replicator was down here and as Aicha said, what I’m wearing doesn’t matter.” Looking up at her husband, she said, “Thank you for being here.”

“I wouldn’t be anywhere else.” He rubbed her back and nodded towards the couch. “Looks like they’re ready to get started.”

Kathryn sat down and neatly crossed her legs, giant mug of coffee cradled between her hands. “Where would you like me to begin?”

Aicha said, “Let’s discuss one person and event at a time, starting with Liyal of Dolsia. Please tell us about your interactions with him, in addition to any data you’ve found implicating him in illegal activities.”

She took a long draw of coffee and glanced at Khurma before replying, “I hope you’re all comfortable. This will be a long afternoon.”

Kathryn spent most of Saturday glued to the Fednews, watching anxiously for something to happen. Gretchen tried to distract her with idle gossip, Phoebe tried to discuss nursery décor, but only Katie had a modicum of success with attracting Kathryn’s attention by asking her aunt to help with a puzzle.

She found a news program in which a couple of correspondents were discussing what they called the ‘Janeway Factor’ in the current political climate. They pontificated that her arrival on the political scene had provided a significant catalyst for change.

Later on, when she grew tired of hearing them speculate on the cause of her leave of absence, she decided to cook dinner for everyone.

After she got out the ingredients, she chopped up the onions and started sautéing them in a skillet. While they were cooking, she chopped the peppers and opened the containers for the sauce. She went back to check on the onions and saw that they were scorched. “Damn it!”

“What’s wrong?” Gretchen asked.

“I burned the onions,” she shouted, extremely frustrated.

Her mom came into the kitchen and said, “It’s all right, honey. I’m sure there’s another onion in here. We’ll just start over.”

“I don’t want to start over, mom. I wanted to do it right the first time.”

“A bit late for that. However, all we need to do is dump those out and wash the skillet.”

Kathryn ran her fingers through her long hair and said, “I need some fresh air.” She saw that Chakotay was looking at her with concern, but pretended not to notice and went outside onto the deck.

She leaned her forearms on the railing and looked down at the ocean waves crashing on the rocky shore below, concentrating on the rhythm of the water. She tried to let the sound wash over and surround her, hoping to bring calm to her addled mind.

When she heard the back door slide open and closed, she didn't have to look to see who it was.

He put a shawl around her shoulders, wrapped his arms around her, and kissed the side of her head. “Your mom only wanted to help you, not take over.”

“I'm a real bear today, aren't I?” She sighed and leaned against him.

“With good reason, but your family might like to know why.”

“It's confidential. You know that.”

“I don't think they'll be running to the press, and it's not too hard to figure out that you're waiting for something major to happen.”

She nodded and closed her eyes, relishing the feel of his arms surrounding her. After a long moment, she shared, “I came out here to look for some peace, but didn't find any until you showed up.”

Nuzzling her hair, he said, “In you, I found the true meaning of peace.”

“Your angry warrior legend. It's been a long time.”

“Yes, it has. I should make up a new one.”

“Nah, that would dispel its magic.” She snuggled further into his arms. “I thought of something this week that I've been meaning to talk to you about.”

“What's that?”

“I think we're a better couple when we're working together.”

“You do?” he asked, surprised.

“Mmmhmm. I feel energized when we’ve got a common goal. For example, when we used to put our heads together on Voyager to develop a game plan – those were my favorite times to be in command.”

“We make a good team.”

“It’s more than that. I believe that I’m a better commander, officer, or what have you, when I’ve got you as my wingman. You give me confidence, you spark my imagination, and you remind me that I’m never alone.”

“Thank you. That’s quite a compliment.”

She turned in his arms to look up at him. “Whatever we decide to do next in our careers, could we do it together? Even if it’s just writing that textbook we talked about.”

His eyes grew bright as he said, “I’d like that a lot.”

“I don’t know if it’ll work out, but whenever one of us travels, I think both of us should. I really miss you when we’re not together.”

“So do I.” He cradled her cheek in his hand and gave her a soft kiss. “Besides, we’ll have a child to take care of, soon. He might just be a little hellion that will take every last scrap of our combined patience.”

She laughed heartily. “True. The likelihood that you and I will have a perfectly balanced and well-mannered child is slim to none.”

“Why do you say that?” he asked with amusement. “Just because I’m a rebel and you’re a spitfire?”

“A spitfire who was ready to toss a frying pan out the window just because of a burned onion.”

He chuckled and then drew in a deep sigh as he looked out over the ocean.

A moment later, she asked, “What are you thinking about?”

“I’m not sure, really.”

“Tell me,” she urged.

Staring at the waves, he said, “It feels like everything’s about to change, but it also feels like we’re finally coming home. I don’t know how to describe it.”

“We came home to a pretty messed up Federation, and I was voted the one most likely to fix it.”

“And soon, your work will be done.”

Kathryn laid her head on his chest and snuggled into his warmth. “Can I admit that I’m a little scared?”

“Yes, you can. But what are you scared of?”

“Losing all of this.”

He looked down at her. “All of what?”

“Our home. Our life together. What if I took it one step too far with the President? They almost killed you this week.”

Caressing her hair, he said, “Don’t let them get to you, love. We won’t lose any of this – not now. You’re safe, I’m safe, and all the people who have threatened us are about to face the music.”

“And if I end up in prison, too?”

“You won’t. We have enough friends, enough connections in some terrifically high places, that whatever happens, we will be okay.”

Closing her eyes and concentrating on the warmth of him, she said, “Make me believe it.”

He rubbed her back with long, soothing strokes. “Kathryn, I’m not leaving your side, no matter what happens. You are not alone, and if the time comes when you’re hanging onto the last thread, I’ll be there to catch you, and I’ll bring every person I know with me. Want me to name all the people who would do anything for you?”

She finally looked up at him and couldn’t help but smile. “Think you could?”

“Honestly?” he asked. “Probably not. Maybe we should start a Janeway fan club so you could have a roster of all the people who think you’re the top banana.”

“You’re reminding me of something that Deanna told me on Wednesday.”

“Oh?”

“It’s human nature to remember every negative comment that anyone has ever said, but to easily brush off all the positive reinforcement that our friends and loved ones tell us every day.”

“That’s true.” He lightly gasped. “I have an idea!”

“What’s that?”

“Tonight, you should make a list of all the people you’ve met over the last two years who are honorary members of your fan club.”

She rolled her eyes.

“I’m serious. Think about all the world leaders, the council members, the press, the crews of both Voyager and Pioneer, your family, your peers amongst the admiralty... who could you call in a pinch?”

Shrugging, she offered, “All of them?”

“That’s right. And would any of those leaders allow you to go to prison because you had the guts to stand up for the Federation?”

She scratched her eyebrow. “I can think of about sixteen, but it’s my hope that they’ll go to prison before me.”

“There you go.” He gave her a tight hug and said, “Come on. Let’s go tell your family what’s going on.”

“I suppose.”

Arm in arm, they walked inside the house to find Phoebe, Mike, and Gretchen all busily making dinner. Katie was setting the table, deciding exactly who would be sitting where and what color napkin they’d get.

Gretchen said, “I didn’t mean to upset you, Katie.”

“I know, mom. I’m just feeling a little out of sorts right now.”

“We can tell,” Phoebe said gently. “Anything we can do to help?”

Kathryn raised her chin and explained, “I’d like to tell you what’s going on, and why I’m being difficult today.”

They all stopped moving, except for Katie who had started making place cards. Gretchen asked, “Can you? I don’t want you to breach security.”

She shrugged and said, “I don’t think any of you will run out and tell anyone.”

Mike said, “You have my word, Kathryn.”

Phoebe and Gretchen nodded, as well.

Kathryn pointed to the viewscreen in the great room. “The Inter-planetary police are about to arrest over a dozen people tied to illegal activities including my abduction, illegal government contracts, treason, and fraud.”

Phoebe ran over and hugged Kathryn. “Oh, wow, sis! This is fantastic news! Finally!”

Kathryn looked over Phoebe’s shoulder at her mom and saw that she was dabbing at her eyes. Mike had made a fist and was practically dancing as he said, “Yes!” over and over again.

Chakotay laughed. “Kathryn, I think this is indicative of what type of reaction you can expect from the entire Federation.”

“I sure hope so,” she said as she gave her sister another squeeze and then stepped back. “Thank you.”

Mike asked, “What are you worried about? Isn’t this what you’ve wanted?”

“Yes, but I’m concerned that they’re going to point fingers back at me, accusing me of slander.”

Gretchen offered, “Cornered animals will always lash out, but it’s a smart trainer who knows how to stay out of their reach.”

“That’s good advice, mom.” She started pacing. “And this leave of absence is one way I’m trying to do that. Also, we’re stalling the President in a mire of red tape because he’s ready to bring me up on charges. I just hope all of this hits the fan soon.”

“It will, my love.” Chakotay kissed the top of her head as he walked by her to go into the kitchen. “What can I do to help?”

“You can go sit with your wife,” Gretchen instructed.

“You sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure.” She waved him out of the kitchen. “I’ve never seen a world leader look so forlorn. I dare say she needs about all the tender loving care you can dish out.”

“Mom,” Kathryn chided. “For starters, I am not forlorn, I’m anxious. And second, I am not a world leader.”

“Could’ve fooled me.” Gretchen fought against smiling. “Just last week I saw someone who bears a striking resemblance to you addressing the Federation Council.”

She shook her head, slightly amused. “Fine. Call me whatever you like.”

Chakotay tugged on her arm until she was curled up next to him on the sofa.

Phoebe asked, “What is it about being around family that reduces the indomitable Admiral Janeway to a petulant brat?”

Kathryn replied, “The brattiness of her baby sister.”

“Take it as a compliment,” Chakotay said as he rubbed the tight muscles on his wife’s back. “She’s not wearing her command façade around us.”

“I do not have a special façade.”

“Of course not, dear.”

Mike laughed. “I’ve seen her fight, Chakotay. You might want to be careful.”

“Oh, I think I can risk it. She’d miss my backrubs if she knocked me out.”

“True,” Kathryn said with a sigh as she resituated her body to give him better access to her shoulders. “This feels really good.”

“I think what might help you relax is a long soak in the tub. You haven’t done that for a few days.”

“Mmmmm, yes. I might fall asleep though.”

“I’ll keep watch, and the sleep would do you good.”

“I’ll sleep after these arrests happen.”

Chakotay waited until the rest of her family had gone back into the kitchen before he leaned close and whispered into her ear, “I’ve got ways of making you relax, my love.”

With a deep hum, she replied, “That would certainly do the trick, even if for just a little while.”

He kissed the side of her neck, just behind her ear, drawing a tiny shiver out of her. “It’s a date.”

Kathryn looked up from her bath to see Chakotay walk into the bathroom. “Don’t worry, I haven’t fallen asleep yet.”

“Are you even trying to relax?”

She twisted the big sponge, nearly in danger of tearing it in half. “My mind won’t stop.”

“What are you thinking about?”

Tossing the sponge into the water, she leaned back and closed her eyes. “Patience, and how I have none.”

He leaned over and kissed the top of her head. “Stop worrying. It doesn’t do any good.”

“I suppose you’re right.” Kathryn watched as he left the bathroom and then relaxed into the deep, warm water.

An idea about how to gain a little public support popped into her mind. “Honey?” she called out.

A moment later he stood in the doorway, wearing only his slacks and an undershirt. “Yes, my love?”

“I think I should go shopping for clothes tomorrow.”

“All right. What do we need to do?”

“I could just replicate what I need, but this is an opportunity to let my condition leak out.”

He nodded. “And just before all hell breaks loose in the media, too.”

“Also might be nice to have something to wear this week should I need it.”

With a wink, he replied, “No need to wear anything on my account.”

Kathryn rolled her eyes. “Good thing you’re out of my reach or you’d get splashed again. Would you do something for me?”

“Anything.”

Smiling, she asked, “Would you talk to Mark about arranging my little shopping excursion? I think he’s the one on duty right now.”

“Yes, he is. Where do you want to go?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe Phoebe has an idea. Think she’s still up?”

“I’ll check. Want to go after lunch?”

“Sure, and don’t let them make it so secure that I beam into a closed store. For this to work, I have to be seen.”

“All right.” Before he walked away, he added, “Now relax, would you?”

She called after him, “You’re gonna have to make me.”

“You can count on it,” he called back.

By the time Chakotay returned to the bedroom, Kathryn was completely naked, stretched out in the middle of the bed, propped up on her elbows, and bathed in moonlight.

He said, “My, my, my. What do we have here?”

“You said not to wear any clothes on your account, so here I am.”

“So I see,” he noted as he peeled off his undershirt. “Your baby bump is quite noticeable like that.”

Looking down at her belly, she said, “It has definitely grown a lot this week. I now look obviously pregnant.”

“Yes, you do, Mrs. Janeway.” As he dropped his pants and climbed onto the large, white bed to join her, he asked, “What do you have to say for yourself?”

“It seems that I was a little promiscuous, Mr. Chakotay.”

“Mmmhmm,” he hummed as he caressed her rounded, swollen tummy. “This is amazing.”

“Think so?”

“Our baby is in here. We created a little human.”

“Yesterday, Joe said he’s about sixteen centimeters long.”

Chakotay looked up at her and smiled. “You’ve started referring to him as a male.”

“After my vision quest.” She crooked her finger and said, “Come here, honey.”

He scooted up higher on the bed and cradled her face in his palm. “Hi there.”

“Hi,” she said with a soft smile. “Come here often?”

“Every time I’m with you, babe.”

“Babe?” She laughed. “You’re calling Vice-Admiral Kathryn Janeway a babe?”

“A babe is a babe, regardless of rank, but I’ll bet that I’m not the only one who thinks so. I hear that she’s easy on the eyes.”

“Mmmhmm, and who do you hear that from?”

“A guy hears these things about promiscuous female celebrities.” He leaned in and planted a soft kiss on her lips.

She moaned at the intimate touch, letting him lower her to the bed. Her arms enfolded him, holding him close as the unhurried kiss grew deeper and more sensual.

Chakotay was stretched out along side her, cuddling close, but being careful not to lie on top of her. His lips wandered from her mouth down to her neck, eliciting a gasp as she gave him further access to her neck.

“You know right where to kiss me, don’t you?”

“Practice makes perfect.” He nibbled gently along her collar bone, taking her wrists and holding them lovingly down to the bed.

“Ooooh.” Kathryn arched her chest towards him as his mouth found her breast.

“Your nipples are growing darker, my love.”

“I noticed. Looks strange.” She watched as he suckled her, alternating between licking and taking her full aureole into his mouth.

“Looks incredibly sensual, Kathryn. You’re a woman heavy with child, a fertile body of sexuality. Nothing could be more erotic.”

“Sounds like something you’d say,” she said with a laugh.

He stopped suckling for a moment to look up at her. “You’re not into this, are you?”

“Quite the opposite, actually. Carry on.”

“You’re sure?”

“Do I need to ask my husband twice to make love to me?”

“No,” he admonished lightly. “Of course not. You just seem distracted.”

“I am, and that’s why we’re doing this. Remember?”

“Then I need to figure out what focuses your attention the most.”

“Penetration.”

He started to say something and then closed his mouth, smiling.

“What?”

“That’s not what I was thinking of, but I hate to disagree because that’s my favorite part, too.”

“Oh? What were you going to suggest?”

“Oral sex.”

“Mmmm, yes, that is nice. Were you thinking of me giving or receiving?”

“Receiving. I don’t think you get off on giving it.”

Her eyes widened suggestively. “Not always, but it definitely focuses my thoughts. We could try doing it at the same time, you know.”

He did a double take. “Kathryn?”

Laughing nervously, she replied, “It would definitely take concentration.”

“Um, yes, it would.” Chakotay blinked rapidly and took a deep breath. “Wow, that turns me on.”

“Then, let’s try it.”

“I’d love to, but not tonight. I’d want to shower first.”

“Oh, yeah,” she frowned. “You have a point.”

“You continually surprise me.”

She winked at him. “Good, because you’re stuck with me for the rest of your life.”

“Something I am truly thrilled about.” His mouth hovered over hers again. “If I keep kissing you, you won’t have any choice but to focus on that.”

“Then before you start, let me tell you that I don’t want you to be gentle.”

He pulled his head back a little. “You don’t? You’re four months pregnant.”

“I’m sturdy enough. Make me forget about everything else, command my attention.”

“I… think I can handle that.”

“You’re not sure?” She rubbed his muscular biceps. “You seem pretty tough. I hear you’re a capable soldier.”

“Oh? And who do you hear that from?”

She shrugged. “Women talk about these things, especially when they involve sexy male celebrities.”

“Would you believe me if I said it was all luck? Being in the right place at the right time, serving under the right captain?”

“Not a chance.” She tapped his chest. “I happen to know that captain and she thinks you’re the tops.”

“Only she would know,” he said as he nibbled along her lips. “I find myself wanting to treat you with loving reverence, not be rough with you.”

“All right,” she acquiesced gently. “Probably a better idea anyway.”

“I didn’t say that I would, though.” He grabbed hold of her wrists again and pinned them to the bed as he took her mouth firmly and forced his tongue between her lips.

She gasped under his assault, but quickly responded by kissing him as hard as he was kissing her.

Chakotay rose up and straddled her legs, positioning his body to give the baby some breathing room. Kathryn, however, didn’t receive the same courtesy as he compressed his body tightly against her chest, effectually trapping her body under the power of his muscular frame.

Kathryn made a show of fighting against him, but he knew she wasn’t being earnest about it. He closed his hands around her wrists and continued to ravage her mouth, insinuating one knee between her legs and then the other, forcing her legs to spread apart. She moaned loudly as his penis made contact with her mons.

Loudly, he whispered, “Quiet, Kathryn!”

“It’s been over a week since we’ve done this!” she complained.

“We have guests,” he said before he dove in and suckled her breast hard.

She felt a rush of wetness between her legs as his mouth tormented her breast. “Can’t we erect a dampening field?”

“Oh, I’ll give you an erection, Admiral,” he said as he pressed his penis firmly against her. “But if you moan, I’ll stop moving.”

“You’d torment me like that?”

“You’d better believe it.” He pushed her hands together above her head so he could hold them with only one of his, and then he used his free hand to grab hold of her breast. Sucking and licking, he stirred up an intense fire within her belly.

She opened her mouth wide as if to make sounds, but managed to keep quiet. Her pelvis thrust up, even as he pressed her legs open wider, opening her most intimate areas to him.

His mouth switched breasts and his free hand dropped to plunge his fingers into her dampness. Almost roughly, he thrust them in and out a few times and then began to spread her lubrication all over her vulva. “I hope you’re ready, woman, because you’re about to get stuffed full of my dick.”

“Oh,” she couldn’t say anything more as he coated her clitoris with her own juices.

“Quiet!” he ordered.

She nodded earnestly, her eyes clamped shut as he positioned his penis at the opening of her vagina.

Barely penetrating, he held his position and asked, “You like that, Admiral?”

Nodding, she tried to lift her pelvis further to bring him deeper, but he had her spread so wide that she had no leverage to move. “Please,” she begged.

He gave her a centimeter more and demanded, “Beg for it.”

“Please, Captain. I need you.”

“What you need is a good fuck, Admiral,” he said as he gave her a tiny bit more.

“Yessssss,” she practically hissed as she tried to draw him in further.

He withdrew and plunged hard, all the way inside her, causing her to moan uncontrollably. Once she did, he stopped all movement and said, “I can see we’re going to have a problem here.”

“Sorry, sir.” She squirmed on the impaled penis, trying to get what she needed.

Chakotay took both of her wrists again, this time bringing them to lie on each side of her head. “Don’t move your hands.”

“But…”

“I need to hold up my own weight and I don’t want to hurt you, love. Just pretend I’m holding them down, all right?”

“All right,” she said as she made two fists and stuffed her hands under her pillow.

He braced his hands on either side of her and said, back in character, “I can see the only way I’m going to keep you quiet is to fill up your mouth, woman.”

“I’ll be quiet, captain. I promise.”

“Oh you will, will you?” He pulled out, inched in slightly, withdrew, inched in again, pulled out, and then plunged deep, causing her to moan in pleasure at the intense intrusion.

“That’s what I thought,” he said with a smirk.

“I didn’t make a sound!”

Getting up in her face, he said, “Don’t lie to your lover, Admiral.”

“Did I?” she asked earnestly.

He raised his eyebrows as he repeated his early movements, barely moving inside her and then giving her an all-out penetration.

She started to moan and then caught herself. “Damn!”

“I warned you.” He leaned forward, spreading her legs even wider. “Now I’m going to have to gag you.”

“With what?” she asked, pretending to be nervous.

“My tongue.”

“Oh!” she gasped and then realized too late her mistake as his lips clamped over hers and his tongue swept through her mouth.

As his penis began to move, his tongue did too, thrusting in and out of her in irregular and unexpected patterns. He varied the depth and angle of his penetration, stirring her higher and higher into what felt like another plane of existence.

Kathryn was out of her mind with uncontrollable arousal, exactly where she wanted and needed to be. Just when she was about to come, he’d change his motion and prolong the ecstasy, bringing her down before forcing her back up to another high. He repeated this several times until she was shaking and trembling with unrelenting need.

She couldn’t help but moan into his mouth and forget that her hands were to stay put. They tangled into his hair, rubbed over his back and arms, held his face, and then remembered where they were supposed to be.

The stimulation of his thrusts against the front wall of her vagina was her undoing. She tried to keep from coming, but nothing she could do would stop it. An orgasm the size of an earthquake flowed over her from deep within her center, rippled out to her fingers and toes, and then flowed back again, causing her body to spasm and shudder uncontrollably with pleasure, all of it focusing on her vagina, his penis, and an unusual hardness within her belly.

She felt him spurt within her just as he ceased kissing her. His face contorted in pleasure for his last few, unhurried thrusts. Finally, he exhaled in relief as he rested his forehead against hers and gave her cheek a soft kiss.

“Feel the baby, honey.”

“What?”

Her hands flew to her stomach. “Feel it. Wow, that’s... something.”

He withdrew and did as she asked, caressing her baby bump. “It’s so hard,” he said in wonder.

“The uterus has contracted.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“God, no.” She closed her eyes, enjoying the pleasurable feeling. “It feels amazing.”

“I did that?”

“Mmmhmm. You definitely did that. My uterus always contracts from an orgasm, but because of its size right now, the sensation is really strong.”

He smiled and kissed her belly. “I love you.”

“Love you, too. And thank you for that.”

“You’re welcome. It was kind of fun to role-play.”

Nodding, she stretched and said, “Now, I’m sleepy.”

He pulled the covers up over her and said, “Then sleep.”

“Mmmhmm, but I’m sticky.”

Chuckling, he slid out of bed. “Be right back. Don’t move.”

“Don’t think I could if I tried.”

He wet a washcloth with warm water and returned to the bed where he peeled down the covers and used it to wipe their combined juices off her legs.

“Aww, you didn’t need to do that.”

“I like to clean up my messes,” he said as he covered her back up and tucked her in.

“Mmmhmm,” she hummed sleepily.

By the time he used the bathroom and crawled back into bed, she was sound asleep. He cuddled up close, kissed her temple, and whispered, “Sweet dreams, my love.”

Phoebe asked, “Are you sure that’s what you want to wear?”

Kathryn looked down at her knit dress. “What’s wrong with this?”

“It doesn’t like very admiral-like.”

“I only look admiral-like in my uniform, and the coat hides the baby bump too much for what we’re trying to accomplish today.”

Phoebe clicked her tongue. “Well, that dress makes it more than obvious, and not in a good way.”

Mark walked into the great room. “Are you ready to go shopping, ladies?”

Phoebe rubbed her hands together and blew out a deep breath. “This will be my first public outing with my venerated sister. Can anyone ever be ready for that?”

“Phoebes!” Kathryn rolled her eyes at her sister, and then turned to Chakotay. “Are you sure you don’t want to come?”

He made a face and asked, “Do you really need me to?”

“No, just thought you might have fun.”

“I’ll just watch you on the news,” he said as he pointed to the viewscreen. “Can’t wait to hear what you have to say.”

“I’m not entirely sure myself,” she mumbled. “All right, Mark. Let’s get this show on the road.”

Chakotay waved. “Have fun, ladies.”

Mark said, “Your estimation of a show is about right, Admiral. We have several uniformed security officers standing outside the shop attracting attention.”

“Let’s do it.”

He called for a beamout. They rematerialized on the sidewalk amidst stares and gasps from the nearby pedestrians.

Kathryn smiled and waved at the onlookers, trying to act as if it was a perfectly normal occurrence for her to beam onto a semi-crowded city sidewalk in the middle of a Sunday afternoon. She patted Phoebe’s back and asked, “Shall we?”

“Don’t we need to wait for the press or something?”

“They’ll be here when we leave. They always are.”

The two sisters walked inside the store and the five people inside were frozen in place as they gawked at the new arrivals.

Kathryn said with amusement, “Carry on, ladies. We’re just here to shop.”

The clerk at the counter stuttered, “Ad...Ad...Ad...miral!”

With her best smile, Kathryn walked up and touched the young lady’s arm. “Would you be able to help me?”

“With what?” she asked in near shock.

“I need a new wardrobe,” Kathryn said as she touched her baby bump. “My sister here tells me this is the best maternity shop on the west coast.”

The young lady swallowed hard. “I... I should call the owner.”

“What’s your name, dear?”

“Rebecca, ma’am,” she said as she touched her personal communicator. “She’ll want to be here for this.”

“I’m sure you’ll do fine, Rebecca, but whatever makes you feel most comfortable. We’ll just look around a bit, if that’s okay?”

“Oh, yeah! Of course!”

Kathryn shared a smile with her sister as they started looking at the clothes while listening to the exchange the young lady had with the owner.

Rebecca whispered, "You should get down here, right now!"

"I'm sure you can handle it, whatever it is."

"Jodie! We have a celebrity in the store!"

"Who?"

Rebecca whispered, "Admiral Janeway."

"Who? I can't hear you."

"Admiral Janeway!" she whispered as loud as she could.

Kathryn tried not to laugh, and shared an amused look with another customer.

"In my store?" Jodie asked.

"Yes!" the young clerk replied with clenched teeth. "Now get down here!"

"That means she's...?"

Kathryn turned and, in her distinctively husky voice, said, "Yes, Jodie. I am."

"Admiral! I'll be right there, ma'am."

An hour later, they were finished and Kathryn was wearing a new outfit that accentuated her condition quite beautifully. They let Mark make arrangements to have their new clothes transported back to the house while she and Phoebe made plans to walk half a block to a pastry shop for dessert.

Kathryn shook hands with both Jodie and Rebecca, saying, "Thank you so much for your help today. It'll be nice to have some clothes that fit me again."

"And you'll look beautiful in them, Admiral," Jodie replied. "If you need anything else, an outfit for a special occasion or whatever, let us know and we'll be happy to help."

"I will definitely do that. Have a wonderful afternoon."

"We already have!" Rebecca said with a grin.

Kathryn laughed and waved to the other ladies in the store. "Good luck with your shopping."

Justin met her at the door. "Guess what?"

“Press?”

“Of course. We attracted quite the crowd. They’ve all been asking me for comments, but I haven’t given them anything.”

Kathryn licked her lips and said, “Let’s go.”

Phoebe said, “I’m kind of nervous.”

“Come on, it’s not that bad,” Kathryn said as she looped arms with her sister.

As soon as Justin opened the door, cameras started snapping holoimages. She waved at everyone and started walking down the sidewalk.

“Admiral! Admiral! A comment, please?! Is it true that you’ve taken a leave of absence? Are you on maternity leave? A moment of your time, Admiral! Are you carrying Captain Chakotay’s baby? Admiral, do you have a statement for us?”

She whispered to her sister. “Whose child do they think I’m carrying?”

Phoebe shrugged. “You’d better tell them or there will be rumors flying.”

Kathryn turned to the reporters and held up her hands for them to stop. They quieted immediately and waited for her to speak.

“To answer some of your questions... Yes, Captain Chakotay and I are expecting a child, and yes, I have taken a leave of absence from Starfleet.” She pointed to a reporter. “Your question?”

“Why did you take leave just as the Council was starting to address your concerns, Admiral?”

“As I’ve said before, my job was to take information back to the Council. What they do with it is up to them.” She pointed to another. “Your question?”

“Can you tell us what prompted your leave?”

“Concerns about my health and well-being, which I will not explain further. Next question?”

There was momentary silence until someone asked, “If your safety is at risk, why are you here today?”

“Because I needed new clothes and I’m not about to go into hiding. I did, however, enjoy my week of rest.”

“Does that mean you’re returning to work?” someone asked.

“No, I’m afraid not. The issues facing the Federation are entirely in the hands of the Council now. Fleet Admiral Khurma will let me know if they need me again.”

An older gentleman who was not a member of the press asked, “Admiral? Have you addressed the biggest issue facing our Federation yet?”

Gently, Kathryn asked, “What issue is that, sir?”

“Our President,” he said as if it was obvious.

“As a Starfleet officer, I’m sworn to uphold the Constitution of the Federation, the decisions of the Council, the orders of our commander-in-chief, and the rights of the citizens.”

“So, you’re giving up?”

Clicking her tongue, she shook her head. “As I said before, the issues facing the Federation are entirely in the hands of the Council. I have provided them and my commanding officer all of the information that I have gathered from the planets that I visited. I am only one human voice, albeit a very loud one,” she said with a wink. “I believe that we should just let the system work.”

A reporter asked, “What are you going to do now, Admiral?”

Kathryn pointed down the sidewalk and said, “I’m going to have a pastry. I hear that they are wonderful.”

It wasn’t until late Tuesday afternoon that she got a call from Admiral Flynn. She was tense as she sat down in front of her comm terminal.

“Kathryn,” he said with delight. “It’s happening right now.”

“What, exactly?”

“The IPC is making arrests.”

“Zife?”

“Not yet. That’s in Dooha’s hands, but we definitely expect a strong reaction.”

“Have you notified Starfleet Command?”

“Well, no. Why?”

She took a shaky breath. “I have a gut feeling that reaction might be a violent one.”

“Whose reaction?”

“The President’s of course.” She scratched an imaginary itch on her arm and then tapped the desktop repeatedly with her fingertips. “Although, I guess that he’s not prone to violence himself. That’s why these sixteen arrests are taking place, because they’re the ones who’ve done his dirty work.”

“Kathryn,” he said patiently.

“What?”

“Are you usually this nervous before a mission?”

“No, but the people who have made my life a living hell are about to be exposed. I don’t know what to expect.”

“They’ll probably not say anything except, ‘no comment.’ At least, that’s what I’d advise them if I were their lawyer.”

She took a deep breath. “Put me on the bridge of a starship during a battle and I know exactly what to do. This is an entirely different animal.”

“Is your husband with you?”

“Yes, why?”

“I just want to make sure you’re not alone.”

“I’m never alone, James, because of the people about to be arrested.”

“Then this should put you at ease. The Federation has designated D’Al Sagra as the Attorney General for these proceedings, and he’ll be giving a press conference in thirty minutes. Following that, I’ll be answering any questions in regards to your involvement.”

“Good, I don’t want to speak. It would look like I planned this.”

“Right. Now go sit in that beautiful living room of yours and put your feet up. I’d suggest a bottle of champagne or carafe of coffee, but I don’t think either would be a good idea.”

“No, not exactly what the doctor would prescribe.”

He smiled with understanding. “Listen, call me if you get nervous about anything you see or hear on the news. I’m going to be putting out public relations fires, but you’re my top priority.”

“I appreciate that, James.”

“You’re welcome. Now relax.”

She harrumphed and closed the connection. Walking into the great room, she activated the viewscreen and announced, “I’m turning on the Fednews. All hell is about to break loose, probably is already.”

Gretchen looked up from her book, Phoebe and Katie stopped coloring, and Chakotay came out of the kitchen, asking, “Will the arrests be caught on camera?”

“Not sure, but there’s a press conference in thirty minutes.” She blew out a frustrated breath when she couldn’t find any broadcasts that were related.

“It’ll probably take a few minutes for the press to catch up,” Gretchen noted.

Kathryn rubbed her arms as she paced back and forth in front of the windows. “We should call Tom and Lanna – they’ll want to watch, too.”

Gently, Chakotay said, “Kathryn.”

“Maybe Owen and Matt? Who else needs to know? The news will probably replay it incessantly so it probably doesn’t matter who sees it live. After the press conference will be questions. I’ll assume the commentary will go on for hours...”

“Kathryn, I’ll call them, but you need to sit down before your blood pressure spikes.” He gave her a stern look before heading to the study to use the comm.

Phoebe asked, “It’s really happening?”

“Yes, it is.” She kept glancing at the viewscreen where a program on the terraforming activities in the beta quadrant was being played. “Damn, I wish I knew what was going on.”

Gretchen stood up and walked over to her older daughter. Taking her arm, she said, “Katie, sit with me.”

“I’m worried, Mom.”

“I know,” she said as they sat down together, their arms linked. “But worrying doesn’t solve anything. Tell me a story about the Delta Quadrant – a time when someone accused you of a falsehood.”

“That happened more often than I care to remember.”

Chakotay came back in and asked, “What did?”

Gretchen said, “I’ve asked her to tell me a story from Voyager when she was falsely accused.”

Kathryn explained, “It was different out there, mom. What alien races thought of us didn’t matter because we could just move on. I can’t do that here.”

Phoebe asked, “Does it really matter what people think of you?”

“No, of course not.” Kathryn frowned. “Unless I decide go into politics, but that’s going to depend a lot on how this turns out.”

Chakotay offered, “There was the time when the three aliens were impersonating us. You cared what people thought of us, then.”

“Impersonating you?” Phoebe asked with a laugh. “That sounds like a good story.”

“It is,” Chakotay replied with a smirk. “I’ll tell you sometime. But an even better example of false accusation was when Annika overdosed herself on data and had Kathryn and me convinced that we were conspiring against each other.”

Kathryn said, “I was much more concerned about how you’d lied to me than I was about what you thought of me.”

“You lied to her?” Gretchen asked.

“No,” Chakotay replied, giving his wife a disparaging look. “Annika convinced each of us that the other had some sort of crazy master plan of deception regarding Voyager’s presence in the Delta Quadrant.”

“Don’t forget, honey.” Kathryn held up her thumb and forefinger. “I was this close to throwing you in the brig.”

“For bringing the Maquis rebellion into the farthest reaches of the galaxy?”

“No, because my best friend had made a fool out of me. That kind of thing doesn’t sit well with this woman.”

He held up his hands in mock surrender. “Truce.”

Kathryn winked at him and said, “The one accusation that affected me the most had some truth to it. It was Joe’s accusation of conspiracy when I erased a portion of his memory.”

“Ah.” Chakotay nodded with understanding and sat down near little Katie. “That was a difficult situation.”

“Your doctor, Joe?” Gretchen asked.

Kathryn nodded. “His program went into a causality loop because he had to choose between saving the lives of two people with the exact same injury, the exact same chance of survival.

When his subroutines couldn't handle the fact that he'd allowed one patient to die in order to save another, I made the decision to erase his memory of the incident."

Patting her daughter's knee, Gretchen said, "Sounds reasonable."

Phoebe said, "Choosing one life over another... that's a little too close to home, isn't it?"

Kathryn rubbed her mouth and nodded. "A choice I couldn't make with Dad and Justin, letting them both die."

Chakotay inhaled quickly and then, with sudden realization, said, "Oh, wow. That makes a lot more sense now."

She nodded. "I couldn't take listening to the Doctor's tirade when I'd had the same argument with myself for years."

"Oh, Katie," Gretchen said to her daughter. "The situation with your father was out of your control."

Kathryn ran her fingers through her hair. "In the case with Joe, there were too many clues that we couldn't erase, and he kept rediscovering what I'd done. He made some pretty strong accusations."

"What did you do?" Phoebe asked.

"Eventually, I decided to let nature take its course... as much as you can call a hologram's internal diatribe part of nature."

Chakotay said, "It was remarkable how much he advanced in what could be considered sentience during that situation. He had to cope with the fact that, sometimes, there are no-win situations that result in death."

"Wouldn't that be something that all Starfleet officers would have to understand?"

"All commanders, yes," Kathryn replied. "But he wasn't programmed with that ability. He developed it through experience, and that's why he is so rare and so much more than just a computer program."

Gretchen tucked Kathryn's hair behind her ear. "Good things can come out of bad situations, sweetheart, and I believe that's going to happen today, too."

"Mom, your faith in the good of all people amazes me."

"You've got the same faith, Katie. I see it in you."

"Thank you, but like you said yesterday, a cornered animal will attack."

Chakotay announced, “Here it is,” and they all focused on the viewscreen.

A reporter said, “We’re broadcasting live from Earth at the Federation Headquarters building in San Francisco. Taking the podium now is UFP Attorney Sagra.”

An Efrosian male set a PADD down on the podium and looked intently at the gathered members of the press. “Ladies and gentlemen, my name is D’Al Sagra, and I am the UFP Attorney presiding over Sector 001 through Sector 020. I have been appointed as interim Attorney General in order to prosecute sixteen individuals who have been accused of crimes against the Federation.

“The infractions have taken place in multiple jurisdictions with the majority occurring here on Earth or against Earth citizens. Because of the extensive scope of the situation, the Inter-Planetary Criminal Police Organization has been involved and they have just completed a two-year investigation that has uncovered a substantial amount of evidence.

“Over the last three hours, sixteen individuals have been taken into custody and are being held at various locations throughout the Alpha Quadrant. The names of the individuals are as follows: from Bolarus IX, Zim Haro, Lin Walgot, Unter Dryx, Lysia Harth, Gan Wreth, Arlin Gerni, Dirx Lelec, and Representative Chal Sympor; from Dolsia, Povlin, Letro, and Representative Liyal; from Moropa, Yinnec, Kreshil, Taric, Erdo, and Representative Jorl.”

The press began shouting questions until Sagra gave them a look that clearly showed impatience before he continued with his prepared statement. “The charges against these individuals include Fraud, Embezzlement, Treason, Malfeasance, Murder, Kidnapping, Aggravated Assault and Battery, Torture, Extortion, Blackmail, Harassment, Conspiracy, and Obstruction of Justice.”

Sagra set the PADD down and said, “Trial dates for the detainees will be set at individual hearings to take place over the next ten days. Further details on these charges will be made available to the press following this conference. I am not at liberty to make any further comments at this time; however, I will turn this podium over to Secretary General Dooha of the Federation Council who has another announcement.”

While they were waiting for Dooha, Kathryn looked at Chakotay and exhaled an unsteady breath. “I’d like a copy of those details.”

“I’m sure it’ll be in the evening news report.”

“I should ask James for the unabridged version.”

Dooha took his place and said, “Thank you, Mr. Sagra.” He raised his chin as he began to speak. “Today at fourteen hundred, Federation Standard Time, a closed general session of the Federation Council passed an order to initiate impeachment proceedings against President Min Zife.”

The press gasped and started shouting questions. While Dooha waited for them to quiet down, Kathryn pressed her fist against her mouth, suddenly feeling nauseous.

Chakotay asked, “Kathryn? Are you all right?”

“I’m okay.”

“You’re pale.”

“Mhmm,” she replied and pointed to the viewscreen. “Let’s listen.”

Dooha continued, “A legislative hearing will convene starting next week to hear the evidence and deliberate on the charges against President Zife. Until a final decision is reached, the President has been placed on suspension.

“Because of the number of individuals involved in today’s arrests and the positions they hold within the Federation government, it is the Council’s decision to appoint an Interim President to assume all responsibilities therein. Madame Truov of Coridan will take office at an official ceremony in just under one hour.

“I am unable to make further comments until after the Council has reached a verdict. Until that time, I have asked Starfleet’s Judge Advocate General, Admiral James Flynn, to answer questions and guide the Federation citizens through the process.”

Kathryn took a shaky breath as James took center stage. “You could’ve warned me,” she muttered to the viewscreen.

James said, “Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I will answer your questions to the best of my ability, but know that I cannot divulge confidential information. First question?”

A reporter asked, “What can you tell us about the impeachment process, Admiral? Has Zife been arrested?”

“President Zife has not been arrested, but he has been notified of the potential charges he faces. At this point, I suspect that he is meeting with his lawyers to prepare a defense.”

Another member of the press asked, “Do we know how long Truov will be in office?”

“I would say that depends on a number of factors. However, if the Federation needs a new president, an election will take place.”

“Are there any rumors about who might run for office?”

“None that I’ve heard. Next question?”

“Have the council members who’ve been arrested been removed from office?”

James turned to Dooha. “Can you answer that?”

“I can,” the older man said as he stepped up. “Representatives Liyal, Jorl, and Sympor have not officially been removed from office, but in order to vote, they have to be present.”

“What is the process for removing them?”

Dooha replied, “That is up to the worlds they represent, as each has their own method for appointing or electing their representatives.”

A reporter asked, “Have either of you spoken to Admiral Janeway, and if so, what is her response?”

Kathryn crossed her arms and dipped her chin.

James answered, “Admiral Janeway is watching us from her home. I spoke to her earlier today and her response was that of quiet anticipation. As I’m sure you realize, some of the charges are for crimes committed against her and her family. She does not take any of this lightly and has some very specific concerns about the outcomes of the upcoming hearings.”

“Admiral, can you elaborate on the crimes committed against Janeway’s family?”

He picked up the PADD, skimmed it and nodded. “The information you will be receiving details that the charges of kidnapping and assault include both Admiral Janeway and her husband, Captain Chakotay.”

One young reporter butted in with, “Captain Chakotay was kidnapped?”

James replied carefully, “Yes, and the only details that he has given us permission to share are that the incident happened on May 20th and that he was returned within five minutes.”

“They day before the Admiral took her leave of absence?”

“That’s correct,” James replied. “It was Starfleet’s decision that she and her family be secured for their protection.”

Casually, a reporter asked, “Then why was she out shopping over the weekend?”

James chuckled. “Because she is Kathryn Janeway, and to paraphrase her, she’s not about to be locked up indefinitely.”

They all joined him in quiet laughter until another question was asked. “What has her involvement been in these arrests and the impeachment process?”

“Admiral Janeway has done her job.”

“Does that mean she provided evidence?”

James elaborated, “She wrote reports based on her conversations with planetary leaders and she gave statements about her interactions with some of the individuals.”

“Is she relieved that these arrests have been made?”

“I certainly hope so.” James looked at the camera as if he was looking directly at Kathryn, and then told the press, “Thank you all for your time. The information packets you receive will have instructions for how to reach me for further inquiries. Good day.”

The Federation logo came up on the view screen for only a moment before two commentators started dissecting all that had just been said. Chakotay immediately turned it off and everyone in the room focused on Kathryn.

She rubbed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose, staring blankly out the window.

Phoebe broke the silence. “Well?”

“Well what?” Kathryn replied, her eyes shifting to look at her sister.

“Why aren’t you dancing around the room with joy?”

“I’m waiting.”

“For what?”

She glanced at Chakotay to see him watching her with quiet understanding. “The other shoe to drop.”

“Why?” Phoebe asked. “This is what you’ve been working towards, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” She looked around at everyone before explaining, “It’s just that I expected it to end more dramatically. There should’ve been a showdown or an explosion, maybe a battle of some kind. I was a starship captain for so long that I’m used to resolving major conflicts with a fight.”

Chakotay asked, “This is too anti-climactic for you?”

“Not in my condition, but it doesn’t feel resolved.”

Gretchen said, “We could turn the Fednews back on. I’m sure someone is fighting about all of this.”

“Most likely,” Kathryn said with a sigh. “I feel the need to ‘do’ something.”

Chakotay asked, "What have you wanted to do since last summer that you haven't been able to?"

"Walk down the street."

He nodded. "So maybe we should go do that."

Shaking her head, Kathryn replied, "I wouldn't make it ten meters before someone told a reporter."

Phoebe offered, "We could throw a party."

Kathryn raised her eyebrows and then nodded. "A small one."

Katie asked, "A party?"

Gretchen jumped up with excitement. "I'd better get cooking! How many people do you think?"

"Not many," Kathryn reiterated.

Ignoring her, Phoebe and Katie followed Gretchen into the kitchen, leaving Kathryn and Chakotay staring at each other.

It wasn't more than a moment before Kathryn quirked a smile and stood up. She sauntered over to her husband, sat down astride his lap, and gave him a soft kiss. With her eyes still closed, she rested her forehead against his.

"That was nice," he said as he caressed her legs.

"Mmmmmm." She basked in their closeness, inhaling the intoxicating scent of him. "Have I ever told you how good you smell?"

He chuckled. "A few times. The first time was when we went sailing on the holographic Lake George. Since then, I've never changed my cologne."

"I'm glad. The scent tickles my nose and makes me feel at peace."

"A smell makes you feel at peace?"

"Only because that smell is you." She nestled closer to him so they could hug each other tightly. After a long moment, she asked, "Is it really over?"

"Not completely, but it is definitely the beginning of the end."

"I really like the sound of that."

“Me, too,” he whispered. “Me, too.”

Two days later, Kathryn was stretched out on a lounge chair on her deck, reading a book when Chakotay came outside.

She asked, “Did my mother call again?”

“No,” he replied with a slight chuckle. “Not since first thing this morning. I think she’s finally settled back in to her house.”

“She only lived here for a week. I don’t see how she could have become so accustomed to sharing every moment of her day with us.”

He shrugged as he leaned against the railing. “You’re easy to get attached to.”

Kathryn closed her book and set it in her lap. “What’s up?”

“Owen just called. The other shoe has dropped.”

Sitting up, she asked, “What’s happened?”

“Zife is dead.”

“What? When? How?”

He took a deep breath and replied, “Looks like assassination or suicide, they’re not sure. He went to Bolarus to prepare for the trial next week and was found dead in his house last night.”

“Cause of death?”

“Poison, they believe.” He tilted his head and looked carefully at her. “You okay?”

“Me?” she asked, taken aback. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I don’t want you to think that you’re the cause of his untimely death.”

She rolled her eyes. “Only thing untimely about it is that it’s about eight months too late.”

“Kathryn!” he admonished and then tried not to smile. “Although you make a good point.”

“Honestly, I expected something like this to happen. It seemed too neat and tidy the way it was going.”

“Don’t say that to anyone else.”

“I won’t.” She patted the seat. “Come here.”

He nodded, talking as he sat down by her legs. “Owen expects a public announcement this afternoon, but he wanted you to know in advance.”

“I’ll have to thank him, but I’m not sure I want to watch.”

“Why not?”

She sighed and looked out over the ocean. “I feel like hibernating for a little while, starting now.”

“Hibernating?”

“I’m tired. I will testify if needed, but other than that, I’m ready to take this leave of absence to focus on our baby.”

Chakotay leaned forward, took her face in his hands, and placed a gentle kiss on her lips. “Let’s make that happen, then.”

“Think we’ll get bored?”

“Maybe, but I’m sure we can find something to do. Write a book, perhaps.”

“Let’s do it.”

Part 36 - “A New Power”

By Dawn

Summary: A new president, a new life, and new opportunities

Rated: NC-17

Finally able to take a break, Kathryn decided to remain on leave for the foreseeable future. However, she found that every so often, a member of the admiralty or the Federation Council would contact her for input on managing the relationships she’d forged the year prior.

It was a month after the political shake-up when Kathryn and Justin were in the sitting room of the presidential palace. A young woman walked into the room and asked, “Admiral Janeway?”

“Yes?”

“President Truov will see you now.”

“Thank you.” Kathryn nodded and then asked Justin, “Would you wait for me out here?”

He smiled. “Wasn’t too long ago that I was protecting you from the president, not letting you walk into the lion’s den alone.”

Patting his arm, she said, “And you did an excellent job.” Kathryn followed the young woman through the foyer and into another room that looked to be an assistant’s office. They paused in front of a set of large, wooden doors that two security guards opened for them.

The young woman held out her hand and said, “Right this way.”

“Thank you.” As Kathryn walked in, she was instantly greeted by the interim president.

“Come on in and make yourself at home. Can I pour you some coffee?” Truov asked as she waved Kathryn over to a small sitting area.

“That would be nice, thank you.”

A welcoming smile on her face, she said, “I took the liberty of requesting the decaffeinated variety because of the baby. I hope that’s okay?”

“It’s not okay, but it’s what the doctor ordered,” Kathryn joked as she accepted a cup. “Thank you, Madame President.”

The older Coridanite woman paused and chuckled softly. “I was just trying to decide if I should call you Admiral Janeway or if my new station means that I should use your given name. You surprised me by using my title.”

Kathryn sat down on a comfortable-looking settee. “It’s my experience that one should always use a title until given permission otherwise. And yes, you may definitely call me Kathryn.”

“Thank you, Kathryn. Please call me Isela, because I’d like for us to become friends.”

“I’d like that as well. One can never have too many.”

Isela nodded her agreement as she sat across from Kathryn. “I want to thank you for coming to France today. I’d planned to call on you at your home, but my aide insisted that it would be more appropriate to ask you to travel. I’m not sure it matters, but I’m trying to abide by the proper decorum that this job demands.”

“How are you liking the job so far?”

“May I be honest with you?”

“Of course, Isela.” Kathryn gave her what she hoped was a reassuring smile. “That’s what friends are for.”

“Right you are,” she said, appearing instantly more relaxed. “I’m a little on edge and feeling out of my element with this position, although I haven’t told anyone else that.”

“Your secret is safe with me.” She took a sip of coffee before saying, “I’ve read some about your background. You’ve been a council member for a few years, and before that, you were a government official on Coridan. Is that right?”

“That’s correct. I was a senator for my province – a moderately populated area on the main continent of the planet. My mentor nominated me to the Federation Council based on my expertise of writing legislation, and because she believed that my ideas were exactly what the Federation needed. I was appointed quickly because we were having trouble finding a Coridanite willing to go.”

“Why was that?”

“Same reason that so many other planets have left the Federation. There was a strong movement among my people that we should withdraw our membership along with the other planets in our sector. The position I find myself in now is far from what I ever imagined myself doing.”

“I can imagine, but now that you’re here, you can make the best of it by helping planets like your own.”

“You’re right.” Isela nodded. “I haven’t decided if I want to run for this office. The council wants my decision by the end of the week.”

“It’s a big decision.”

“Yes, but I think you should be the one throwing her name into the hat. Not me.”

Kathryn shook her head. “Not right now.”

“Does that imply a ‘someday?’”

“I don’t know,” she said thoughtfully. “We’ll see what life brings my way. So far, my path has been chosen by circumstances out of my control. I’d be naïve to think that I can somehow direct my fate at this point.”

“And you’re going to be a mother soon.”

“That’s right.” Kathryn caressed her swollen belly. “This child is a miracle, and I don’t want to miss a moment of his young life.”

“As a woman, I’m pleased you feel that way. My children are adults now and I wish that I’d had more time with them when they were young. But as you say, circumstances affect priorities. I was a widow and I needed to provide for my family.”

Sympathetically, Kathryn said, “Oh, Isela, I’m so sorry.”

“Thank you for your concern, but now I’m happily remarried and my children have grown up to be wonderful people.”

“You seem very proud of them.”

“Oh, I am. They’re thrilled about my temporary assignment and want me to continue.”

“You have an extraordinary opportunity here.”

“Do I?” Isela shook her head dismissively. “I’m sorry, Kathryn. This is not what I called you here to talk about.”

“It’s all right,” she said kindly. “I suspect you don’t have many you can talk openly to, do you?”

“Not who would truly understand, but if I’m to be a competent president, I should try to act confident around everyone.”

Kathryn couldn’t help but laugh. “I thought the exact same thing about my role as captain of Voyager.”

“And how did that work for you?”

“I found out that it’s lonely at the top.” She tilted her head and asked, “May I offer you some advice?”

“I would love some,” Isela replied earnestly.

“You have a unique opportunity to be the leader of a team that can set the Federation back on the right path. You don’t have to do it alone, and in fact, I believe that most of the leaders and council members I’ve spoken to would love the opportunity to work together to rebuild the trust that we’ve lost.”

“But they need a strong leader.”

“Yes, they do, and as long as you don’t pretend to be something you’re not, they will follow you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that you should be yourself. For example, if your intuition tells you that the best way to meet with someone is to call upon them at their home, just go. Don’t let an aide tell you that it’s not proper.”

“You have a point.” She nodded. “I am the president, after all.”

Kathryn chuckled. “Yes, you are, and you have natural abilities that are your strengths. In the meetings I attended with you, I noticed that you were quiet until everyone else had their say, and then you combined what had been said with your own ideas to present an alternative that at least two thirds of the room could stand behind. Keep doing that.”

“Assuming I can figure out an alternative that works.”

“Not necessary. A good leader listens to their constituents and decides on a course of action that is best for all. That action may simply be that the group needs to do more research before coming to a conclusion.”

Isela nodded thoughtfully. “I see your point, and I know for a fact that we’re all tired of a leader who pushes his own agenda.”

“Precisely. This Federation, as it stands now, wants reassurance that they’ll be heard, that they’re all important, and that there’s not even a hint of dishonesty in the Council. I don’t think it’s all that important how the Council makes a decision as long as they’re representing the needs of their people.”

“Your original proposal was to request an oversight committee. How important is that to reuniting the Federation?”

“That was to keep the previous administration from doing any more damage, and while I trust that you have significantly higher ethical standards, we don’t know what the future holds.”

Isela nodded. “And right now, we know who to trust. We should put safeties in place while we can.”

“Right. The people want to trust the government again.”

“I agree, and you and your staff have made great strides in that direction. They’ve been a blessing to have around over the last month. Do you think they’d be interested in continuing while you’re on leave?”

“Some might. Commander Kim will be taking a new assignment in August.”

“Oh, I hate to lose him.”

“He’s a good man.”

“Yes, he seems to be. As for the rest of your group, I plan to ask Admiral Khurma about putting them on your flagship to continue your work. What do you think?”

Kathryn took a moment to think before replying, “Bernie Young, captain of the Pioneer, would be the one to lead any diplomatic conversations, and my staff would need to report to him.”

“That should be easy enough to arrange, wouldn’t it?”

“Should be, if they want to go back into space. The choice would be up to them.”

“I’ll mention it to Khurma,” Isela said. “And as for you, do you plan to officially resign from Starfleet?”

“No, I’m just on an indefinite leave of absence.”

“Would you be interested in an assignment from me every so often? Assuming I’m elected, that is.”

“Depends on what’s involved.”

“I can understand that.” Isela topped off their coffees as she said, “When you’re ready, perhaps you can let me know what your stipulations are.”

“Do you have something specific in mind or do you just want to keep me on the back burner?”

“The Romulans are having an election for a new praetor. I spoke to Khurma about the situation and he said you might know something.”

“Oh, that.” Kathryn gently scratched her temple. “Do we have any intelligence about the candidates?”

“No, but when I find out, should I contact you?”

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean I’ll want to get involved.” She tapped her coffee cup for a moment while she thought. “I can tell you that if the new praetor is someone besides a Romulan named Rabom, then we need to proceed with the utmost caution. If he is elected, then he may want to talk to me about a diplomatic or scientific partnership.”

Isela leaned forward, rapt with attention. “So choice A is really good for the Federation and choice B could be really bad?”

“That’s my understanding.”

“This election may be happening within the month. I think that would be too soon to ask you to go.”

Kathryn nodded. "I'm not traveling again until after this baby is born, and even then, I have no desire to go to Romulus. However, if you want to pick my brain, don't hesitate to contact me."

"Thank you, Kathryn. I'll rest easier knowing that."

She smiled graciously. "It helps to have a sounding board, I know."

"If you wouldn't mind, I'd like to use you as one for awhile."

"Sure, but I think for your image, we should keep it private. I'm ready to bow out of the public eye for awhile and I don't want anyone thinking that I'm influencing you."

"I appreciate that. Should I let Admiral Khurma know?"

"If you want, although if we're just a couple of friends getting together for coffee, that doesn't involve him." Kathryn raised her index finger. "One more piece of business..."

"What's that?"

"If the Romulans want to talk to me, don't send the Pioneer in my place. They're not equipped for that."

"Who would you send, then?"

"Enterprise, but ultimately, that's Khurma's decision."

"I really do appreciate your advice, Kathryn. More than you know."

"Call me any time, but I'm sure that if you just step back from any conflict and listen, you'll do the right thing. In a democratic government such as ours, you don't have to stand alone and you'll never run out of opportunities to hear opposing views. Our council will never fail to point out every possible side to any issue."

Isela laughed. "Only you could make that sound like a positive thing."

"No," Kathryn replied with insistence. "You can too, and you will. I have the utmost faith in you."

Kathryn had the bathwater running and was about to take off her robe when Chakotay stepped into the doorway. "Hi there, handsome," she said as she went to give him a soft kiss.

"Mmmm, that's nice," he said as he drew her into his arms. "I missed you today."

“That’s what you get for going to work.” She pulled away to turn the water off. “Did you get your curriculum planned?”

“Pretty much, but I’m sure it wasn’t as exciting as your trip to France.”

“France was... interesting.” Kathryn opened a container of bath salt and poured some into the hot water.

“What’s that for?”

“Soothes achy muscles and makes my skin beautiful.” She untied her belt as the water began fizzing with bubbles. “And it’s fun.”

“Feel like some company in there?”

“I’d love some, but you’ll smell like a girl.”

As he started undressing, he said, “I can always take a shower afterwards.”

“All right, then.” She took off her robe and waited for him.

He licked his lips as he gazed at her. “Wow, you look amazing, Kathryn.”

“You just saw me this morning, honey.”

“Yeah, but you were in bed. I rarely see you standing up when you’re completely nude.”

Turning to the side to show him her profile, she caressed her swollen belly. “We’re nearing five months now. I’m getting big.”

“Yes, you are.” He kneeled down and placed a kiss on her stomach. His hands caressed up her legs as he added, “Your thighs are filling out, too.”

“They feel stronger.” She gasped as his touch went a little higher than she expected. “You keep doing that and we won’t make it to the tub.”

“And we’d hate to miss out on those salts, right?” he asked as he continued to caress her inner thigh.

“Well, they are nice.” She moaned softly under his touch and backed up until she was against the wall. “Have I told you how much I love being married to you?”

“Not today.” Pressing her legs firmly against the cold tile, he feathered his lips up to her bikini line where he left a hot, wet kiss.

“An over...sssss... ahhhhh.” She spread her legs a little as he stroked over her mons.

He chuckled as he stood up and took her hand. “Come on, let’s enjoy this nice bath.”

“Tease,” she said as she watched him get in.

“Come on.” Holding his hand out, he steadied her as she stepped into the tub and slid down between his legs.

With the two of them in the bath, the water was so deep that Kathryn was immersed up to her neck in the luxurious warmth. She snuggled back against Chakotay and closed her eyes, sighing with contentment as he wrapped his arms around her waist.

He quietly asked, “Comfortable?”

“Mmmhmm.” She resituated her head against his shoulder and asked, “Want to hear about my trip?”

“Not just yet,” he whispered into her ear before his lips began nuzzling the side of her neck.

“That’s nice,” she mumbled as she gave him better access.

His hands caressed over her belly, the bath salts making her skin soft and slick. “I love this so much, Kathryn.”

“Me pregnant?”

“Oh, yes,” he said with intensity. “I feel like I can’t get enough of looking at you and touching you.”

“You’re in luck, then, because I can’t get enough of you ogling and touching me.”

“Is that so?” His hands slid down to her thighs and resumed their earlier intimate caress.

She moaned as his fingers parted her feminine folds. “Ohhhh.”

“You’re wet, my love.”

“In…” Her hips rocked forward to give him better access. “…the bath.”

“Not that kind of wet,” he whispered as he used only the tip of his middle finger to rub back and forth across the opening of her vagina.

Kathryn’s entire body tensed with the pleasure he was stirring up inside her, gasping loudly as his free hand slid up to cup her breast. His fingers closed around her nipple, pinching it ever so slightly. She arched her back to thrust her chest up, and then when he brought her attention back to her vagina, she lifted her hips.

“You are so sexy,” he said with no small amount of desire in his voice.

“Wanna take me to bed?”

“Not just yet.” Kissing her neck again, he continued his ministrations on the most intimate areas of her body. As she squirmed under his touch, he said, “I want you to come for me right here.”

A soft little moan escaped her lips as Chakotay’s long finger slid up to her clitoris, coating it with her slippery juices. Another finger joined the action, and together, they toyed with her hardened nub, circling, rubbing, and gently pinching to stir her higher and higher into ecstasy. Her body grew rigid with tension, manifesting in pointed toes, hands clenching his arms, and her legs folded as tightly as she could make them until she finally exploded under his touch. Tremors rocked her body as her orgasm spread through her like a wildfire.

His fingers drew up to caress her hardened belly and she went completely limp in his arms. He kissed the side of her head and whispered, “I love you.”

“Love you... too.” She wanted to fall asleep, but couldn’t help but join him in feeling the wonderful hardness of her distended womb. “This really is remarkable, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is. Does it hurt?”

“No, not really.”

“Not really?”

She moved his hand to her right side and pressed his fingers into the soft tissue. “This has been feeling sore all day, and it’s stronger now. I did a little research and I believe it’s the ligaments being strained by the weight of the pregnancy.”

“You might mention it to Dr. Joe, just in case.”

“Did he ever say where the damage to my uterus is located?”

“Not that I recall, except that it would be where the placenta would eventually grow.”

“I see him on Friday.” She looked up at her husband. “Do we need to take care of you, now?”

“Not, yet. This was just for you. I couldn’t let all that arousal I stirred up go to waste.”

“Thank you. I’m certainly not going to complain.”

He lathered up her sponge and began washing her. “So, tell me about your visit.”

“Truov asked to use me as a sounding board, especially on a situation that is stirring with Romulus.”

Chakotay froze. “You’re not...”

“No,” she flicked him in the arm. “Trust me.”

“Ow!” He rubbed the sore spot as he said, “I do trust you. Really.”

She grumbled under her breath before continuing, “Sounding board only. There’s an election taking place and Khurma told her that I might know something.”

“I don’t think you ever did tell me what you learned from the Romulan went to see.”

“Hmmm,” she said as she thought about it. “No, I don’t suppose I did. Communications were so poor out there that I wasn’t sure it was safe. Remind me later to ask Harry about Enterprise’s communications system, would you?”

“Sure. Are they going out there?”

“Not at this time, but I did recommend that if anyone should need to go, it should be Picard. Truov wants to put my staff on the Pioneer and send them out to continue my work.”

“I like Bernie a lot, but he’s not savvy enough to deal with an adversary as intimidating as the Romulans.”

“Agreed. And Picard has experience with them. I read about his interactions when I was on my way out there to meet with Rabom.”

“And who is Rabom?”

“Influential Romulan who wants to be Praetor. He asked to meet because he believed me to be Earth’s most influential human.”

Chakotay nodded. “During the past year, I can see how an outsider would have that perception.”

“He wanted to establish a cooperative relationship and warn me about some rumors involving another Romulan who was seeking power. If the other one is elected, we will need to be on our toes.”

“Go on,” he encouraged.

“There’s really not much more to it. Rabom and I hit it off really well, but his vagueness regarding this other Romulan was disconcerting. Harry and Justin spent a couple of weeks trying to dig up information, but without a name, there wasn’t enough to go on.”

“I guess we just stay on alert.”

“That’s basically what I told Truov.” Kathryn leaned her head back so she could catch Chakotay’s eyes. “If we do learn something soon, I’d like to go back on limited duty.”

“To do what?”

“Participate in conversations about to handle the situation.”

“Whatever you feel like you need to do.” He covered his arm where she’d flicked it. “Because I trust you.”

She quirked a smile. “Smart man.”

A few weeks later, Kathryn and Chakotay held hands as they walked up to Tom and B’Elanna’s door. She said, “It’s nice to be able to do this again.”

“Have dinner with friends?” Chakotay asked.

“To be able to walk up the sidewalk without a four-point security team. I’ve missed the freedom to just be able to go to a friend’s house without an advance perimeter sweep”

He pulled on his ear and ducked his head in embarrassment. “I was just thinking about what happened last time you and I were both here.”

“When was that?”

“The night when I did what was possibly the second most stupid thing I’ve ever done.”

She stopped and looked at him curiously. “We haven’t been here since that night we fought?”

“I have, but you haven’t.” He scratched his jaw. “Funny how you knew exactly what the second stupidest thing was.”

Kathryn tilted her head in sympathy as she stepped into his arms. “I want you to remember two things.”

“What’re those?” he asked as his lips grazed her forehead.

“I was clinically depressed and you won me back.”

“I’m incredibly thankful for the second thing, but the other makes me feel like a heel for not having recognized it and for having instigated it.”

“Shhhh,” she soothed. “Don’t you go getting depressed on me, now.”

“How could I possibly be depressed with you in my arms, swollen with my child?”

Kathryn stretched up onto her toes and kissed him, but it was short-lived because Tom came outside.

“Would you two stop making out on my sidewalk?”

Chakotay gave her another quick squeeze and said, “I guess we’d better finish this later.”

“Might be for the best.” She turned in his arms and put her arm around his waist to walk the rest of the way. “Tom, you have impeccable timing, as always.”

“How so? Were things about to get really interesting?”

Her eyes widened as she joked, “I guess you’ll never know.”

“Get in here, you two,” B’Elanna called out from the kitchen. “Chakotay, I need your help.”

“With what?” he asked as he followed her voice.

“Dinner. Tom is busy with Miral and I’m not even going to ask your wife.”

“Hey!” Kathryn said, her hands on her hips. “I’m getting much better in the kitchen.”

“Yes you are,” Chakotay noted. “But I know that you’d much rather help with Miral than throw a salad together.”

Miral yelled, “Cookie!”

Tom replied, “Eat your green beans first, little one.”

“Cookie!”

“Green beans.”

“Cookie!”

Tom shook his head. “Green beans.”

Kathryn tried not to smile. “How long do you two usually go at this?”

“As long as it takes.”

B’Elanna said, “Until he gives in, which perpetuates the problem.”

“I don’t give in.”

She rolled her eyes. “Whatever.”

Kathryn looked down at the tray and noted, “Looks to me like she’s smashing them, not eating them.”

Tom said, “She wouldn’t eat them at lunch, either. Last week, she couldn’t get enough.”

B’Elanna said, “At lunch, she wanted Tom’s food, not her own.”

“What were you eating?” Chakotay asked.

“Leftover tuna steak,” Tom said as he cleaned up the green bean mess. “Not exactly kid friendly, but she was in scavenger-mode.”

“And at breakfast, she didn’t want her applesauce, she wanted my bagel,” B’Elanna said.

Kathryn fingered one of Miral’s curly locks. “Not that I have any expertise with children, but sounds like she wants to sink her teeth into something hearty. Enough of the mushy stuff.”

“Hmmm,” Tom said as he walked over to the pantry, pulled out a bagel, and handed a chunk of it to his daughter. “Bagel?”

Miral’s face lit up as she grabbed it and yelled, “Cookie!”

They all laughed and Kathryn said, “Well, she thinks she won, but maybe a cookie is anything other than what she’s currently eating.”

“Or just something chewy,” Chakotay pointed out.

Kathryn pulled up a chair and put her elbows on the table near Miral. “Is that yummy?”

“Cookie,” the little girl said as she gummed the big chunk of bread.

“Yummy.” She smiled as she helped clean the bits of green beans off the little girl’s shirt.

Tom asked, “Are you ready for one of these?”

“Oh, yes. I can’t wait.” Kathryn added, “But I do want to try to hold onto the pregnancy until the end of September. Joe thinks it’s do-able if I take it easy.”

“You’re only five months. Are you showing signs of pre-term labor?”

“No, but he’s had to repair the placenta once already. It’s in a vulnerable location.”

B'Elanna said, "Then I'd better move up my plans for a baby shower."

"A shower? You don't need to do that, Lanna."

"Of course I do. Phoebe and I've already been talking about it."

A slow smile spread across Kathryn's face. "I'm happy to hear that. Did she tell you she's expecting, too?"

"No, really?"

"In January." Kathryn turned in her chair to face B'Elanna. "For the shower, my staff would probably like to attend, and most of them will be heading out on the Pioneer on August 20th. Think you could swing a party that quickly?"

"Sure! We'll get right on it. How big a party do you want?"

"That's up to you."

Chakotay asked, "Can the men attend?"

"Of course," B'Elanna replied. "Can't wait to see what Harry gives you guys."

"What did he give you?" Kathryn asked.

"Cloth diapers with a Starfleet insignia," Tom replied. "We used them as burp cloths."

"Oh yeah," Kathryn said with a chuckle. "I remember now."

As B'Elanna set the vegetables and potatoes on the table, she asked, "Any dates we should avoid?"

"Only August 8th. We're attending a wedding in Alaska."

"Whose?" Tom asked.

"Will Riker and Deanna Troi, from the Enterprise."

B'Elanna asked, "Speaking of the Enterprise, what is it with that ship and Harry? He mentioned that he's going out again in September, but you said your staff is going on the Pioneer."

Tom added, "Yeah, he's been on the Enterprise more lately than he's been with you."

Kathryn shared a look with Chakotay and then asked, "What did Harry say about his departure in September, exactly?"

“Just that he’d be headed out and wanted to spend some time with us before he went. Why do you ask?”

Kathryn tapped her comm badge. “Janeway to Commander Kim, San Francisco 974.”

“Kim here. What can I do for you, Admiral?”

“What’s your current location?”

“I’m at my parent’s house, but we haven’t started dinner, yet. Do you need something?”

“We’re at Tom and B’Elanna’s, and they seem in the dark about your upcoming adventure on the Enterprise.”

Tom asked, “Was it supposed to be confidential or something?”

“Not exactly,” Harry replied. “Kathryn, didn’t you tell them about it?”

“Nooo,” she said carefully.

“Oh, well, that would certainly explain their lack of reaction. I assumed that as often as they see you, they already knew.”

“Knew what, Starfleet?” B’Elanna demanded.

Harry said, “I’ve been assigned to the Enterprise permanently, and I’m shipping out September 1st.”

“Wow!” Tom replied. “What position?”

“I’m replacing Commander Data who is being promoted to first officer.”

“Seriously?” B’Elanna asked. “Bridge officer on the Federation flagship?”

Harry chuckled. “Now that is the reaction I was looking for.”

Tom said, “This calls for a party. Wow, I think we need a huge one. A real blow out.”

“Sounds good,” Harry replied. “Listen, I need to go, but we’ll talk some more tomorrow.”

Kathryn asked, “Apple pie tonight, Harry?”

“Oh, you bet,” he replied, sounding less than thrilled. “I’ll call you on Monday, Kathryn. There are a few things I want to go over with you before I speak to the security commission next week.”

“Looking forward to it, Janeway out.”

Once the line was closed, Tom asked, “Our little Harry? Second officer on the Enterprise?”

Chakotay set the baked chicken down on the table as he replied, “No, he’ll just be ops. Second officer goes to the third highest ranking bridge officer, regardless of their post.”

“Oh,” Tom replied, seemingly confused. “I figured a ship as large as the Enterprise would have ops and a second officer.”

“Every ship has a second officer, Tom,” Kathryn replied.

“But Voyager didn’t.”

“Remember the guy with the pointy ears?” Chakotay asked as he sat down beside his wife. “Or have you blocked him from your memory?”

Tom rolled his eyes as they started passing the food. “You never referred to him as your second officer.”

“Chief of Security has a nicer ring to it, don’t you think?” Kathryn asked.

“Still,” B’Elanna said. “Ops on the Enterprise. That’s quite a coup for our Harry.”

Kathryn nodded. “He really impressed Picard on several occasions. First time was in finding me.”

“How was Harry involved, other than being onboard the Pioneer?”

Chakotay replied, “He was the one who found her. Didn’t you all know that?”

“No,” Tom said as she shared a look with B’Elanna. “Wow, this is a night for surprises.”

“The way Picard tells it,” Kathryn described, “Harry calculated the frequency of a transmission faster than Data, and because of the improvements Harry made to both ships’ sensors, they were able to track the location of the freighter where I was being held.”

B’Elanna asked, “Let me guess... Borg sensor technology?”

“I’m sure that Annika would know which species it came from,” Chakotay noted.

“Amazing,” Tom said. “Just amazing.”

“What’s Harry going to do about his relationship with his doctor friend?” B’Elanna asked.

“Amy?” When they nodded, Kathryn continued, “Dr. Crusher is taking her under her wing, but Amy will be doing some additional training at Starfleet Medical this fall before joining the Enterprise in January.”

“Doesn’t that work out nicely?” Tom winked. “I don’t suppose you had any pull in arranging that?”

“Not as much as you would think. Amy has to earn the right to stay on the Enterprise, but at least she’ll have the opportunity.”

Miral threw her chewed up bagel chunk onto Kathryn’s plate and announced, “Done!”

“I’m so sorry!” B’Elanna said as she tried to grab the disgusting object.

Kathryn held up her hand. “It’s fine, Lanna.” She simply moved the slimy bagel to the edge of her plate. “It’s not like a well-loved piece of food is the worst thing I’ve ever had to contend with.”

“Still, that’s a slobbery mess,” Tom said as he reached across and plucked it off of her plate.

Kathryn looked at the sweet little toddler with a forehead full of ridges and smiled. “You really are a mess, you know that?”

“Play!”

“I’ll be happy to play after dinner.”

“Play!”

Kathryn shook her head in amusement. “How about a cookie?”

“Play!”

“Here you go,” Tom said as he put a wafer cookie down on Miral’s tray.

She immediately threw it on the floor. “Play!”

Tom unhooked the tray and picked her up. “Miral is a girl who knows what she wants. Remind you of anyone?”

Kathryn smiled at B’Elanna who was eyeing her husband with annoyance. “Lanna, I have a feeling people will say the same thing about my child.”

“People always say that about the children of strong-willed parents.”

Chakotay added, “Just remember, ladies, that it’s the strong-willed parents who make the best leaders.”

B’Elanna asked, “Have you two decided on a name, yet?”

“We’ve tossed a few around, but haven’t come to any decisions. You have any suggestions?”

“You *want* suggestions?”

“Sure, if you’ve got a good one,” Chakotay replied.

B’Elanna sat back in her chair, completely surprised. “I got about ten a day on Voyager. I was so sick of baby names that I would’ve liked to have throw a well-loved piece of food in a few faces.”

Kathryn and Chakotay exchanged looks and together, said, “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it. After all, we used your suggestion, Kathryn.”

“My suggestion and my name.”

“I guess we should’ve asked your permission, first.”

“Of course not,” she said earnestly. “I’m truly honored.”

“So, what names have you come up with? Are you sure it’s a boy?”

Chakotay answered, “Dr. Joe has confirmed it. We are definitely having a boy.”

Kathryn said, “We’ve thought about both Indian and traditional names.”

“But we’re torn,” Chakotay finished. “It’s not necessary to have a special name to acknowledge one’s heritage, and I think we’d be giving the kid a leg up if we gave him a normal name.”

B’Elanna said, “I understand, what with having a Klingon name all my life. However, we went with mom’s name for Miral because of my experiences on the Barge of the Dead. I want her to ask about her name some day.”

“I can see the value in that, but in my father’s tribal tradition, his name goes to the first born grandson. Sekaya already used Kolopak.”

Kathryn asked, “Have you given anymore thought to naming him after one of the fallen Maquis?”

“Bendara?” B’Elanna asked. “You two were very close.”

Chakotay shook his head. “He died because of Seska, and I don’t want to be reminded about that, especially when I look at my son.”

Kathryn said, “I thought about Scott, but I don’t want to rule out an Indian name, yet.”

Tom returned and asked, “Scott?”

“Possible name for our son.”

“Scott Janeway. Has a nice ring to it.”

“Yes it does,” Chakotay said. “I like it a lot.”

B’Elanna asked, “What are your ideas for Indian names?”

“Anthwara was my grandfather, Kotawa was his grandfather. Kulkulkan was the name of the sky spirit, which we could possibly shorten to Kulkan. Tokala is a cunning fox, Cheveyo was a spirit warrior.”

“What about using one of those as a middle name?” Tom asked.

“That idea has some merit.”

Kathryn squeezed her husband’s hand and said, “We’ll have to give it some thought.”

It was a cool August day when Kathryn and Chakotay arrived in Alaska for Will and Deanna’s wedding. They were ushered into the garden where the guests were gathered for the ceremony.

Beverly walked up and drew Kathryn into a hug. “It’s so wonderful to see you!”

“You, too. I was hoping we’d get a chance to visit more while you’re here.”

“I know, but we barely made it back to Earth as it is.” Beverly held Kathryn at arm’s length and gave her a good once over. “You look wonderful! Radiant!”

“You’re supposed to say that to the bride, not the guests.”

“Don’t you worry. Deanna looks gorgeous, too.” Beverly turned to Chakotay and gave him a quick hug as well. “Good to see you. Kathryn tells me that you’re taking good care of her.”

“As much as she’ll let me,” he joked.

“Hey, now,” Kathryn playfully jabbed his ribs. “I’ve been good.”

“Yes, but we have to keep up the pretense of you being stubborn, don’t we?”

Kathryn rolled her eyes and turned back to Beverly. “Is Deanna nervous?”

“Not at all. She’s more than ready to be married.”

“How long have they been together?” Chakotay asked.

Jean-Luc walked up and asked, “Will and Deanna? They’ve been dancing around each other since the day I met them twenty years ago!”

“Hello, Jean-Luc, good to see you.” Kathryn took his hand for a handshake, but she was surprised when he pulled her into a quick hug.

“You look positively wonderful, my dear Admiral.”

“Thank you. Despite being almost six months pregnant, I feel better than I have in a long time.”

“I’m so glad to hear it.” He offered his hand to Chakotay. “Good to see you again as well.”

“You, too, Captain.”

“Please, call me Jean-Luc. I feel we’re going to be old friends, soon.”

Kathryn raised an eyebrow. “In that case, one of these days, you’re going to have to use my given name, too.”

“We’ll see, we’ll see.” He leaned towards her and asked, “Could I have a moment alone, Admiral?”

Beverly gave him a look. “No business today, remember?”

He kissed the back of Beverly’s hand and said, “We’ll only be a moment.”

As they walked away, Kathryn mentioned, “I’m not up to date on much. Believe it or not, I really am on sabbatical.”

“Oh, this isn’t about business. I just want Beverly to think it is.”

“Why?” Kathryn asked with amusement.

Once they’d arrived in a far corner of the garden, he turned to her and said, “I have a personal request.”

“All right.” She smiled softly. “What can I do for you?”

“This, uh, is... Well, let me just come out and say it. I want to surprise Beverly when we return to Earth at the end of the month.”

“What kind of surprise?”

“I want to ask her to marry me.”

Kathryn’s eyes widened in surprise. “Wow!”

“Now, now, dear Admiral. Don’t give me away. She’s likely watching us.”

“All right,” she said with a chuckle as she schooled her features. “Might I make a suggestion, though?”

“Of course,” he encouraged.

“As romantic as that is, a woman likes to make plans for these types of occasions.”

“Hmmm, I see your point,” he said as he rubbed his chin. “Well, if she wants to, we’ll put it off, but I’m not prepared to propose until then. Of course, there’s no guarantee that she’ll accept.”

Kathryn laid her hand on his forearm. “I doubt that’ll be a problem.”

“Oh, I don’t know. We have gotten rather stuck in our ways.” Jean-Luc patted Kathryn’s hand. “Regardless, I’d like to ask you to officiate. I think it would mean a lot to her.”

“If that’s what she would like, then I’d love to.”

“You have reservations?”

“Her family is from Scotland. What if she wants a traditional Scottish wedding?”

He nodded with interest. “That would be lovely, too.”

“Just let me know. I’m happy to be a guest, an attendant, or an officiate.”

“Will do.” He tilted his head and asked with sincerity, “How are you feeling these days?”

“I’m doing pretty well.”

“Finding enough projects to keep you busy, I hope?”

“Many,” she laughed. “Mostly, I’ve been writing. Chakotay and I are working on a text book for Delta Quadrant Studies and I’m finally getting a chance to do some follow-up accounts from a few of Voyager’s more remarkable adventures.”

Very interested, he said, "I'll look forward to reading them."

"Actually..."

"Yes?"

"I've been approached to write a book about the Q."

He tried to cover his laugh. "A whole book? It's just one letter!"

"It would be a short one. Are you interested in co-authoring?"

Running his hand over his bald head, he replied, "I'm not sure, but let's talk more about it next week. I'd love to know what direction you're taking the book."

"None, yet. I haven't gotten that far, nor have I agreed to do it."

"You might not want to, because 'he' would enjoy it a little too much."

"Good point," she smirked. "Stroking that ego might not be wise."

He put a hand on her elbow and guided her back to the others. "Now, I must attend to my duties as best man and see if Will needs any last minute advice."

"You're going to advise him on marriage?"

"Heavens, no. I was thinking more in terms of how to make a quick escape!"

Kathryn laughed with him. "I doubt there's much of a chance he'd want to."

"Me, either," he said as they returned to Beverly and Chakotay.

Beverly asked, "Did you solve all of Starfleet's problems?"

"No," Jean-Luc replied. "But we might be collaborating on a book in the near future."

"About?"

Kathryn replied, "The Q."

Chakotay cringed. "Must you?"

"No, but it might be fun."

"Then I suggest you use the title I've come up with..."

“Must *you*?” Kathryn interrupted.

Jean-Luc said with barely contained amusement, “I really want to hear this.”

Kathryn cleared her throat. “It’s not polite.”

“Neither is Q,” Beverly pointed out. “Let’s hear it.”

Chakotay tugged on his ear and announced, “Omnipotent or Just Impotent.”

Beverly and Jean-Luc laughed heartily, Kathryn rolled her eyes, and Chakotay turned a charming shade of pink.

“That’s perfect,” Jean-Luc replied as he patted Chakotay’s back. “Absolutely perfect.”

Kathryn made a shooping motion with her hand towards Jean-Luc. “Weren’t you going to check on Will?”

He laughed again and kissed Beverly on the cheek. “And you should be tending to the bride, my dear.”

Beverly’s eyes widened at the unusual public display of affection. “Aren’t you being the romantic one?”

“It’s a wedding. When in Rome…” he tossed over his shoulder as he walked away.

When he was out of ear shot, Beverly shook her head in amusement. “I don’t know what’s gotten into him over the last few weeks.”

Kathryn noted, “He seems very happy.”

“Yes, and that’s strange considering he’s losing two members of his senior staff.”

“Perhaps he’s just embracing change.”

“Perhaps,” Beverly said with a sigh. “But I don’t know whether to be happy along with him or to keep watch for the other shoe to drop.”

Chakotay said, “I say enjoy the good times while they’re here.”

“Good idea.” Beverly nodded towards the back of the garden. “I’d better go check on Deanna. I hope you’re staying for the reception?”

“I’m looking forward to it,” Kathryn replied.

Once Beverly was gone, Chakotay took Kathryn's hand to escort her to their seats. He said, "I hope you're not too sore at me for telling a dirty joke."

She chuckled. "No, honey. It was fine."

As they sat, he noted, "Seems like it was only a few days ago that we were the ones getting married."

"I know." Cozying up next to him, she sighed happily. "Feels like we've been together forever, and that you just showed up on my bridge pointing a phaser at me a few days ago."

He placed a kiss on her hair and said, "Well, it was just a few days ago that my *phaser* was pointing at you."

Slowly turning her head to look at him, she noted, "I'm thinking that someone has sex on the brain *this* afternoon."

"Who? Me?"

"No, the tooth fairy." She rolled her eyes and took his hand between both of hers. Lazily drawing circles on the underside of his wrist, she whispered, "What I would like to know is whether this is all talk or are you going to do something about it?"

He leaned in and whispered into her ear, "Oh, don't you worry, my love. I've got plans for you tonight. Big plans."

Kathryn shivered in response. "I'm looking forward to it already."

"Is your body ready for it already?" he asked, his breath tickling her neck.

"Mmmhmm," she said as she pressed her thighs together.

"Good. Now open your legs, just a little, and don't close them again until I tell you to."

She played along, but only because they were sitting in the back and no one was paying any attention to them.

"Very nice," he whispered. "Now, I want you to clench those certain muscles and keep them that way for the entire ceremony."

"Aye, captain," she replied with a smirk, having fun playing his little game. Not only was he making her body hum with pleasure, she knew that his demanding playfulness would continue all afternoon and evening. And if there was one thing her husband knew how to do, it was how to make her body hum.

“Duty,” Jean-Luc stated. “A starship captain’s life is filled with solemn duty. I have commanded men in battle. I have negotiated peace treaties between implacable enemies. I have represented the Federation in First Contact with twenty-seven alien species. But none of this compares with my solemn duty today as best man.”

Kathryn stole a quick glance at Chakotay and laughed, but instead of paying attention to the best man’s toast, Chakotay was focused on Kathryn’s leg under the table. He was drawing tantalizing circles on her thigh while making sure she kept her legs parted per his earlier request.

Jean-Luc continued, “Now, I know on an occasion such as this it is expected that I be gracious and fulsome in my praise on the wonders of this blessed union.” He paused and looked at the happy couple. “But have the two of you considered what you are doing to me? Of course, you’re happy, but what about *my* needs? This is all a damned inconvenience.”

Everyone chuckled as he continued. “I mean, while you are happily settling in on the Titan, I will be training my new First Officer. You all know him. He’s a tyrannical martinet who will never, *ever* allow me to go on away missions.”

Kathryn shifted slightly in her seat to give her husband more access to her thigh as Data replied, “That is the regulation, sir. Starfleet Code Section 12, Paragraph Four...”

“Mr. Data?”

“Sir?”

“Shut up.”

“Yes, Sir.”

The audience laughed as Chakotay leaned in and whispered, “Sit up straighter, my love.”

Knowing that he wanted to see more of her chest, she casually dropped her shoulders, making it look as if she was just getting more comfortable.

Jean-Luc said, “Fifteen years I’ve been waiting to say that.”

During another moment of laughter, Chakotay whispered, “More.”

Kathryn stretched her neck and took a deep breath to give her chest a reason to rise, but she left it there as Jean-Luc addressed the bride and groom.

“No, seriously. Will, Deanna, there’s still time to reconsider. Yes?”

The happy couple looked at each other and shook their heads. “No.”

“No?” Picard patted Will on the shoulder. “Oh, very well, then.”

He picked up a champagne flute. “Will Riker, you have been my trusted right arm for fifteen years. You have kept my course true and steady. Deanna Troi, you have been my guide and my conscience. You have helped me recognize the better parts of myself. You are my family.”

Speaking loudly so the audience could hear, he said, “And in best maritime tradition, I wish you both clear horizons. My good friends... make it so.” Jean-Luc raised his flute and toasted, “The bride and groom!”

Everyone echoed, “To the bride and groom!”

After taking a drink, Kathryn turned to Chakotay. “That’s you, you know.”

“Me?” he asked softly.

“My trusted right arm, my guide, and my conscience.”

He winked at her and smiled lovingly. “And you are the same for me.”

“A perfect match, then,” she replied, patting his hand.

As they watched the bride and groom dance, Chakotay cleared his throat and whispered into her ear, “You know what else you are?”

“I am many things, but do tell,” she encouraged.

“You’re mine.”

“Yes, I am, and thank you for not letting me forget it.” She elbowed him playfully. “You’re having fun with this, aren’t you?”

“Aren’t you?” he asked with amusement.

“You haven’t been so... bossy... in public before.”

“We rarely blend into the background like this.”

She hummed and nodded. “Perhaps we should get tickets to the symphony sometime. Back row seats.”

He laughed. “They’d be more likely to give you box seats, but I’ll see what I can do.”

“And that could be interesting, too,” she mused as they watched the guests start to mingle.

“Speaking of that,” he said as he stood and tugged on her hand. “Come with me for a moment, if you would.”

She followed, but asked, “Speaking of what, exactly?”

“You’ll see.” Chakotay led her into a private bathroom and closed the door. Once they were alone, he turned to her, eyebrow raised. “You have not been completely forthcoming with me, my dear.”

Recognizing his playful tone, she asked, “I haven’t?”

He shook his head as he backed her against the wall. “No, you haven’t.”

“In what way have I not been *coming* for you, captain?”

Amused at her play on words, he fished into his pocket and drew out three soft, pink circles, two large and one small. “I found these in the bottom of your closet, among other things.”

Tilting her head, she asked, “What are those?”

“You tell me.”

“Bottom of my closet?” She picked up one and turned it over, trying to remember. When it hit her, she dropped it back into his hand and inhaled quickly. “Oh... bachelorette party gifts. I forgot all about them.”

“Did you? Or did you just not want me to find them?”

Amused, she cupped his cheek. “You excite me plenty without things like this.”

“Glad to hear it.” He pushed back the edge of her neckline and lifted out one breast.

“You do realize that the bride is empathic, don’t you?”

“Mmmhmm,” he hummed as he took her nipple into his mouth and sucked until it was a hard pebble.

The strong sensation went straight to her groin and she held his head in place, not sure if she wanted more or not.

Once he licked around the entire aureole, he said, “These adhere to moisture.”

As he affixed one circle to her breast, she said, “Promise me that if I faint, you’ll remove these before I get carted off to Starfleet Medical.”

“You’ll have to remember not to faint,” he said as he tucked her breast back in place and pulled out the other.

As he wet the second breast, she moaned softly in response. “Oh, my.”

Chuckling, he affixed the second one in place. “Are you wet enough for number three?”

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

“Why not?” he asked as he kneeled to pull down her slacks and whistled appreciatively at her hairless skin. “You didn’t tell me that you were doing this today.”

“It was supposed to be a surprise when we got home. I really don’t think it would be appropriate for me to come in front of all these people. I do outrank most of them.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” he said as his fingers delved into her wetness, spreading it up towards her clitoris. “I have no intentions of letting you come for quite awhile.”

A warm heat spread through her as he touched her most intimate areas. “Mmmmm... I’m really not sure I can hide this from Deanna.”

He made sure the small circle was wet with her juices and then firmly affixed it over her sensitive nub. “Perhaps she’ll feel your arousal and get aroused herself. I doubt the groom will mind.”

Closing her eyes, she tried to brace herself against the intense sensations of the circles adhering to her three most sensitive points.

Once he got her slacks back in place and her blouse smoothed down, he fished another device out of his pocket. “Shall we give it a try?”

“Lowest possible setting,” she demanded.

He nodded. “For now.”

Once he clicked it on, she felt an instant warmth that made her want to melt into a puddle. “Oh, wow.”

“What does it feel like?”

“Warm, and delicious. Are these just for heat?”

“I don’t know. Let’s try the next setting.” He clicked it again and her mouth dropped open in pleasure.

“That vibrates. Can you hear it?”

He leaned close and listened. “Nope, completely silent.”

“Good.” She took a deep breath and blew it out. “I can’t believe we’re doing this.”

Chuckling, he switched it back to the first setting and gave her a soft kiss. “Let me wash my hands and we’ll go have some fun, shall we?”

Once he was done, they walked out and she said, “I need a glass of water or something.”

Before they got to the drink table, Wesley Crusher came up and said, “Admiral Janeway, allow me to introduce myself. I’m Wesley…”

“...Crusher, I know,” she said with a big smile as she shook his hand. “I’ve heard a lot about you from your mother.”

Chakotay said, “If you’ll excuse me for just a moment, I’ll get you a drink, Kathryn.”

They nodded at Chakotay and then Wesley said, “Hopefully, Mom didn’t bore you with singing my praises. She tends to do that.”

“No, not at all. I love hearing about your adventures. In fact, some time, I’d love to talk with you at length regarding your experiences with the traveler.”

Sympathetically, he said, “I’m afraid that’s confidential, ma’am.”

“Confidential in Starfleet or with the traveler’s species?”

“The traveler. What I discovered is beyond human comprehension – I don’t mean to sound condescending.”

Chakotay returned and handed her a glass of water.

“Thank you. Have you met Lieutenant Wesley Crusher?”

“No, I haven’t.” He shook the young man’s hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Lieutenant.”

“A pleasure to meet you, as well, Captain. I also had the honor of meeting your grandfather, Anthwara.”

“Did you?” he asked in surprise.

“Yes, when the Enterprise was sent to evacuate Dorvan V in 2370.”

“Ah,” Chakotay said with a sigh. “Yes.”

Kathryn rubbed his back and said, "I wish I had known him, too."

Wesley commented, "He did what he thought was honorable."

"Oh, I know. When my tribe relocated to Dorvan, they worked very hard to build what they had there. In my opinion, they were a little too proud of it."

"You were born and raised on Trebus, right?"

"That's right," Chakotay replied, clearly impressed.

"Have you thought about rebuilding your tribe there? That planet is still habitable."

"No, I haven't." He nodded towards Kathryn. "My life is here, and my sister is happily settled on Banora. That, and we'd need a lot more people to build a colony. I don't know that I'm up to that."

"I understand."

Kathryn felt that the conversation had come to a lull, so she said, "Wesley was just telling me about some of his adventures. You returned to Starfleet during the war, right?"

"That's correct. I felt the need to fight for my home, and once the war was over, I decided to return to my normal life for the time being. You know that I'm stationed on the Titan?"

"In engineering, I believe?"

"Yes, I'm leading a team that is testing a new warp propulsion design out of the Daystrom Institute."

"Oh?" Kathryn asked. "What's new about it?"

"Are you familiar with Dr. Holmes' work?"

"Yes, I did a little reading on him because he's dating a young woman from Voyager."

Wesley furrowed his brow and shook his head. "No, he's dating a woman who is new to his team, Janet Willow. She's not in Starfleet."

Kathryn exchanged a look with Chakotay and then asked Wesley, "Dr. Richard Holmes?"

"That's the one. Who was he dating from Voyager?"

"Annika Hansen," she frowned. "I guess I need to call her."

“Oh!” Wesley said with a smile. “Yes, he and Annika used to spend a lot of time together, but I didn’t think they were dating. I haven’t seen her around in the last couple of months.”

Chakotay rubbed his jaw. “Yeah, sounds like we definitely need to check on her.”

Kathryn sighed. “Regardless, I’d love to hear about this new design. Does B’Elanna Torres from Utopia Planetia know about it?”

Wesley nodded. “Yes, she does. B’Elanna is amazing. I love talking to her.”

“As do I,” Kathryn replied as Beverly came over. “Perhaps I’ll make a trip out to see both of you sometime soon.”

Beverly said, “I see you’ve met my son.”

“Yes, we have. I’m eager to hear more about this new warp design he’s working on.”

“It’s over my head,” Beverly mused as she squeezed her son’s shoulder. “I couldn’t be prouder of him.”

Wesley shrugged and told Kathryn, “See?”

Laughing, she replied, “A mother has the right to dote on her son.”

Chakotay said to the Crushers, “If you’ll excuse us, I’d like to take Kathryn for a spin on the dance floor.”

“By all means,” Beverly said happily. “Enjoy yourselves.”

As they walked away, Kathryn said, “I’m a little nervous about what you’re going to do out here.”

“I’m going to dance with you, my love,” he said as he took her in his arms.

“Mmmhmm,” she said, rolling her eyes.

He asked, “Do they still feel warm?”

“Quite warm,” she replied with a sigh.

“The way you were interacting with Lt. Crusher, I wasn’t sure you even noticed them.”

“Oh, I noticed. I’m just good at focusing in the midst of distractions.”

“Ready for more, then?” he asked and then pulled her close against his body.

“Noooo,” she said with amusement. “But I have a feeling I don’t get a choice in the matter.”

He shrugged and put his hand in his pocket. “When and if you talk to Picard, Deanna, or your C.O., I’ll turn it off.”

“How gracious of you.”

“If you’re going to be a smartass about it, I could easily be not so gracious about it.” He pressed the switch and held onto her tightly.

Kathryn closed her eyes against the intense sensation and focused on anything but the way her body was feeling. “I, uh, think I can refrain from sarcasm.”

“I thought you might.”

She looked up at him and saw merriment in his sparkling eyes. “You’re really enjoying this.”

“Oh, yes, definitely. I love watching you try to manage it, and I adore the trust you’re placing in me.”

“I do trust you.” She laid her head on his shoulder and basked in the intimacy of the moment, trying her best to contain her reaction against the intense arousal that was coursing through her body.

“How does it feel?”

“Pretty intense. How many levels are there?”

“Seven, I believe. I probably should’ve read the instructions more carefully.”

“Probably?” she said with smirk.

He fished in his pocket and pressed the button again, when she gasped in surprise, he spun them around to try to disguise it. “That’s for your continued sarcasm.”

“It’s stronger.”

“I wonder if it keeps getting more intense.” He clicked again and twirled her at the same time.

As she nestled back into his arms, Kathryn took a deep breath and explained, “The same intensity, but it gradually comes and goes.”

“That’s fun,” he chuckled.

“Mmmhmm.” As they danced, she couldn’t help but press her body against his. Connecting with him was a difficult urge to fight, and she was afraid she was going to break out in a sweat

while trying to contain her reaction. “Chakotay? I need you to take it down a couple of notches. It’s too much.”

He did as she asked and put it back on the first warm setting. Kissing the side of her head, he asked, “Better?”

“Mmmhmm. If we were by ourselves, it would be different.”

“Good news,” he whispered. “The day isn’t over, yet.”

She smiled against his neck and replied, “No, it’s not.”

“Meanwhile, those are staying put right where they’re at and I want you to keep clenching your inner muscles.”

“Aye, Captain,” she said happily as she focused on how provocative and sexy she felt in that moment.

They stayed for most of the reception, Kathryn enjoying the social interaction she’d missed over the last couple of months and Chakotay enjoying watching her handle the arousal that she continued to feel. He found it humorous that Deanna kept looking towards his wife with an almost fascinated look of interest.

However, as the sun began to set, she and Chakotay called it a night and bade the wedding party safe travels to Betazed. As they walked out of the reception hall, Chakotay tapped one of his buttons and Kathryn paused mid-step at the unexpected change. Taking it in stride, she licked her lips and whispered, “Did you check to see if this gives off any energy transmissions detectable by tri-corders?”

He looked ahead towards Mark who was waiting to secure their transport home. “Oh. Perhaps I’ll just...”

“Yeah,” she said as he turned it off. Taking his arm, she chuckled. “But he no longer monitors low-level frequencies inside our house.”

“Good to know.”

“I got tired of him worrying whenever I turned on a scanning device.”

“Why have you been scanning?”

She shrugged. “I like my toys, and there are some fascinating rocks around our yard.”

“Well, I won’t argue about your toys, because you definitely seem to be enjoying them tonight,” he mused.

Kathryn elbowed him as they walked up to Mark. “Ready for us, Lieutenant?”

“Yes, Admiral.” He turned on his tri-corder and began the process of securing their movement.

She looked at Chakotay and nodded towards the tri-corder, raising her eyebrow. He merely winked in return, taking her hand and repositioning it more securely in the crook of his elbow.

Once the front door was locked behind them, Chakotay turned off the entry lights and then with a hungry glint in his eye, turned towards his wife.

Kathryn’s eyes widened and she instinctively backed away from him until he had her pinned against the large, wooden door. “Hi,” was all she could think of to say.

His hands were flat against the door, one on each side of her shoulders. A calculating grin on his face, he lowered his mouth until he captured her lips in a searing kiss.

As his tongue delved into her mouth, Kathryn felt the three disks heat up again and recognized that he must have the remote in his hand. She felt like she was melting, and if not for his knee between her legs, she thought she might slip to the floor. Her arms went around his neck to deepen the kiss, getting as much of his warm, succulent mouth as she could.

He broke the kiss and whispered, “Need anything before I have my way with you?”

“Hmmm?” she asked as she kissed up his rough jaw and then down his neck.

“Hungry? Thirsty? Need to relieve yourself?”

Pulling her head back until it was against the door, she asked, “I’m hungry for you, but you might have a point.” Smiling, she ducked under his arm and went upstairs, yelping as he gave her a playful swat on her rear-end.

When she came out of the bathroom, she wasn’t wearing anything except her little disks, and she had brushed out her hair so that it hung loosely around her shoulders. One arm against the door jamb, she asked, “What shall I wear, Captain?”

He looked up from where he’d been undressing. Bare-chested and wearing only his dark slacks, he said, “I think you’re dressed perfectly for what I have planned.”

“Oh? I feel a little underdressed.”

His voice deep, he moved towards her as he asked, “Do you now? I’ll have to fix that.”

Kathryn lowered her hand, a little nervous about the obvious heat in his expression. “How?”

“Turn around,” he commanded.

She did as he asked, looking over her shoulder to see what he was doing.

“I didn’t say look at me.”

“Bossy much?” she said as she looked straight ahead. While waiting, her stomach clenched in anxious knots. She gasped as she felt him lower a blindfold over her eyes. “Chakotay?”

“If this makes you too uncomfortable, take it off,” he said as he tied it in back.

“Okay,” she said as she adjusted it over her eyes. Butterflies were doing somersaults in her stomach as she felt his hands caress down her back.

“My goal is not to scare you, just focus your senses.”

“I don’t scare easily.” She quickly added, “Normally.”

“I know.” He gathered up her hair and laid it over one shoulder. Kissing the back of her neck, he whispered, “I love you, Kathryn.”

The intensity of his declaration and the whisper of his lips against her sensitive skin caused a shudder to ripple down her entire body. He slid his hands from her shoulders down to her elbows and then gently guided her to turn around and walk forward a few steps.

“Are you taking me to the bed?”

“Shhh... don’t think, just feel,” he said as moved her so that her shins were touching the sideboard of the bed. “Now, bend forward and put your elbows on the mattress. I want you to get comfortable and relax.”

She did as he asked, feeling exposed with her tush in the air. “Like this?”

“Mmmhmm,” he said as he messed with something on the dresser. “Spread your feet about half a meter apart.”

As soon as she’d positioned her feet, the three disks came to life with the low level vibration and she gasped in surprise. The buzzing sensation turned her to pudding and she wanted nothing more than to crawl up onto the bed and have a nice, long orgasm.

He said, “Now, on our honeymoon, you told me about a little secret fantasy you had involving being kept aroused for a long period of time. We’re going to try that and see if we can make your erotic dreams come true.”

“Oh, God,” she moaned.

“I went searching for the little device you talked about,” he said as he caressed her back and down over her bottom. “Although I didn’t find anything that stimulated several places down here at once, I found a couple other things that I thought we’d enjoy even more.”

Kathryn moaned as he inserted what felt like two fingers into her well of moisture. “What did you replicate?”

“You’ll see,” he said as he spread her juices back to her tight bud. When she clenched tightly in response, he added, “Or rather, you’ll feel. Relax.”

“What are you doing?”

“I’m preparing to keep you aroused for awhile. Now, relax, my love. I won’t hurt you.”

“I’m pretty sure I told you not to stick anything up my ass.”

“And I’m pretty sure that you requested no vegetables up your ass.” He pressed the button on her remote twice.

She arched her chest into the mattress as the intense vibrations rolled in and back again through the disks still on her nipples and clit. When she felt a warm substance on her bottom, she tried her best to relax for him, trusting him to know what he was doing. She figured if it hurt, she’d just turn around and call an end to this whole thing.

His fingertip pressed against her tight hole until it sunk inside up to the nail bed. The sensations rolling over her were extremely intense, and although she felt like she’d been an adventurous lover, she hadn’t yet allowed him to try anal stimulation.

Nervously, she asked, “You aren’t going to try to go in there are you?”

Turning and pressing his finger against the tight rim, he said, “Not unless you can handle me. I doubt that’ll be today.”

“Okay,” she said, finally relaxing.

“That’s it, sweetheart.”

“Sweetheart?” she said with a small laugh.

“I thought you might like that better than ‘good girl.’”

“Both are a little patronizing, actually.”

“Yes, I know.” He removed his finger and patted her bottom gently.

She heard him doing something, but couldn't tell what it was. Her curiosity was a welcome distraction from the vibrations that continued to roll over her. When he touched her bottom again, she relaxed and tried to spread her feet a little wider.

“This is very small, so don't worry,” he said as he touched something warm to her hole.

Kathryn willed herself to relax as he gently inserted an object into her anus. If she hadn't been so aroused, she thought she might've found this extremely degrading. However, knowing his intentions were to give her pleasure, she stopped thinking about it and tried to do as he suggested and just feel.

“There we go,” he said as he gave it one more tiny push. “This probe is intelligent so it will change with your body. If at any time, it becomes painful and you want it removed, just tell me.”

“Okay. Is this the first time you've used it?”

“I tried it out by squeezing my fingers around it, but I don't think it worked like it was supposed to.”

As the probe began expanding, Kathryn let out a deep, low moan and pushed her bottom further into the air. “Mmmmmmmmm.”

He gave her rear a playful swat and said, “Very nice, sweetheart.”

“Have you ever had anal sex before?”

“Shhhhh,” he said. “Just concentrate on what you're feeling, love.”

Kathryn felt like the probe in her bottom was about to pop out, but before she even completed that thought, it sank in further and pressed against the walls of her rectum. The sensation was extremely intense and she couldn't remember a time when she'd felt so completely aroused. With no pubic hair to contain it, her moisture was dripping down her legs.

She felt Chakotay's fingers touch her bottom again and tensed in anticipation. He said nothing, but she was sure that he was smiling as he pushed something inside her vagina.

“What's that?” she asked quickly.

“Just something to make you feel full. Try not to think about it.”

“Chakotay...,” she said with a warning tone in her voice.

“It’s a sexual device. Now stop talking or I’m going to gag you.”

She sighed heavily to communicate her annoyance, but he merely patted her bottom in response.

“Good girl.”

Under her blindfold, Kathryn seethed in pretend annoyance. It was hard to be really irritated at him because she had asked for it, and the sensations traveling through her body were so incredibly delicious. Whatever he had just put inside her was expanding just like the device in her anus and made her feel incredible.

He took her hand and said, “Stand up, slowly. Don’t want you to get dizzy.”

Knowing that she really might fall over if she moved too fast, she accepted his help until she was on her feet. Much to her surprise, the devices inside her stayed put.

He guided her to the center of the room where a chair was waiting. “Hold onto the back of it with one hand so you don’t fall over, but I want you to stand up straight and show me how beautiful you feel.”

Despite his feigned patronizing tone, she did as ordered and waited. And waited, and waited, the arousal flowing over her in unrelenting waves that weren’t ever quite strong enough to make her come. She couldn’t hear Chakotay, but she could sense that he was in the room. He had told her not to talk, and since she really did not want to be gagged, so she said nothing.

Suddenly she felt a change in the three little disks – the one on her clitoris returned to heat only and the ones on her nipples stopped vibrating and starting tightening. She opened her mouth and gasped as they tightened almost painfully. Wanting to take them off, she let go of the chair to touch them.

“Kathryn!” he warned. “Hands off!”

“Hurts,” she gasped.

“How bad?”

She stamped her foot and moaned against the pleasure-pain that was radiating from her chest. “Tolerable, I guess.”

“Good girl,” he whispered into her ear, surprising her that he was so close. He chuckled as he cupped her mound and stroked his fingers through her overly abundant juices. “Beautiful, my love. Just beautiful.”

He took her hands and led her away from the chair. When she heard the French doors unlatch, she gasped, “Security!”

“I made a point of going over the surveillance in detail yesterday. As far as sensors are concerned, this area is part of our bedroom.” He guided her out onto the deck and she took a deep breath of the salty air, the sound of the ocean waves below filling her ears.

“Okay, I trust you.” The nervous butterflies were back as he placed her hands on the railing, facing the ocean. He then positioned her feet, wider than they had been in the bedroom. As the ocean breeze hit her wet pubis, she shuddered uncontrollably. “You’re going to stay with me, right?”

“Mmmhmm,” he mumbled as he laid something across her wrist. “This is a strap with a panic release. If you pull hard enough, it will break.”

“Okay,” she said nervously.

“May I bind your wrists to the rail?”

“Do I get a choice?”

“Yes, in this, you do. I don’t want to upset you.”

“Oh,” she replied, suddenly realizing that he was worried about memories of her ordeal. “I’ll be okay as long as you don’t fasten them together. And the panic release is a good idea.”

“I thought so, too.” He kissed her cheek as he started to fasten her in place. “I’m so proud of your recovery.”

She couldn’t help but smile as he tied the straps in such a way that she couldn’t pull her hands out, but they weren’t the least bit tight. “Thank you, honey.”

“If you’ll make fists, they’ll feel tighter,” he said as if reading her mind. When she did as suggested, he patted her bottom. “Very nice.”

“Are you trying to patronize me?”

“Yes, I sure am,” he said with a chuckle. “I’ve been doing some reading about sexual domination, and this was suggested. How’s it feel?”

“If I weren’t so aroused, and if my hands were free, I’d take you down, mister.”

“Good to know.” He swatted her bottom, and then slid his fingers along her bottom cleft, through her abundant moisture, and then down her leg to her ankle where he fastened it to the bottom railing as well. “How do your nipples feel?”

“Tight. Aroused. Hot.”

“Oh good,” he said with a smile as he gave her other leg the same treatment. “Can they take a little more?”

“I’m... I’m not sure.”

He replied, “Let’s give it a try. I’ve read the instructions now.”

As they tightened more, she clenched her teeth and threw her chest out, moaning loudly. “Ooooh!”

In response, he ran his hands over her body, stopping to press on the disk covering her clitoris and spread some more of her moisture. “Now, I’m going to reset the controls on all these toys you’ve got attached to you. They’re going to adjust to your body’s impulses and do what they need to do.”

Anxiously, she said, “I’d rather have you inside me.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. You will.” He tapped her anal probe three times, stuck his fingers in her vagina and tapped against that, and then she figured that he must have touched a control the remote because in sync, all three devices started buzzing.

She felt like she was about to come out of her skin, the sensations were so strong. Her legs were trembling and her body was shaking as waves of pleasure rolled through her. The probe in her bottom expanded almost painfully and then it started to swell and retract rhythmically as the disk on her clitoris tightened and released in an alternating rhythm. Whatever was in her vagina felt like it was moving up and down, and the disks on her nipples were tight, hot, and vibrating.

She was wound up so tight that she felt like she was about to burst, but when she felt like the orgasm should be cresting, the buzzing on her clitoris stopped completely and the other devices brought her back down from her high. Groaning in disappointment, she leaned forward in frustration.

The feeling of discontent only lasted for a moment as she felt everything start to move again. This time, all intensity seemed to be focused on her anus as the probe grew even larger with ripples of movement going up and down its length. “Cha...ko...” she groaned, needing him desperately.

“I’m right here,” he whispered as he stood behind her and caressed her sides. “You’re doing great, sweetheart.”

“I want you inside of me. Now.”

“I can tell,” he said with a chuckle, cupping her breasts. “Can you imagine yourself tied to the railing in your ready room like this?”

“Mmmmmmm,” she moaned as the anal probe felt like it was moving in and out. “Damn, this makes me want you in my ass.”

“Good,” he replied as he squeezed her breasts again. “Because someday, I want to fuck that pretty little ass of yours.”

“Not today?” She shuddered as the device in her vagina grew in size again.

“You want it today?” He ran his hands over her bottom. “It does look inviting.”

“I want you now!” she demanded as her body was taken to the precipice again. Ready to come, she almost screamed when the devices didn’t let her.

“Shhh, shhh,” he soothed as he ran his fingers through her hair. Coming up beside her, he tilted her head back and held her face as he kissed her.

She couldn’t keep her body still, even as his tongue delved inside her mouth and one of his hands dropped to fondle her breast over the pink disk that had a tight hold on her nipple. He asked, “How many times have you almost come today?”

“Four, I think.”

“Once at the wedding?”

“Mmmhmm... once inside and twice out here.”

“Not quite enough.” When she groaned, he added, “But I'm willing to appease you a little.”

He kneeled down and detached her ankle bindings. When he was finished, he smacked her rear and said, “Scoot back and bend over.”

“Oh!” she exclaimed as she threw her head back in response to his smack.

“Did you like that?” he asked in surprise.

“I think so,” she said with a gasp as the buzzing on her clitoris came on strong.

“Hmmm, I wouldn’t have thought you’d like to be spanked.”

“I don’t,” she stated emphatically as her body shook. “It’s... degrading.”

“Precisely the point.” He helped her move back until her head was almost lying on the railing. Placing a pillow under her cheek, he said, “Relax, if you can.”

“Relax???” she said as her body moved towards another climax that quickly faded away unfulfilled. “Aaaaahhhh,” she cried out in anguish.

Chakotay tapped the end of the anal probe four times and it slowly deflated until Kathryn couldn't feel it anymore. Meanwhile, the device in her vagina felt like it was rolling around inside her. She couldn't keep still because she wanted it to be thrusting hard into her, not tormenting her with whatever it was doing.

“Hold still, sweetheart.”

She heard paper tearing and wanted to see, but the blindfold had her in almost pitch black.

“What are you doing?”

“Just a little protection from bacteria so I can use both holes today.” He spread something warm on her bottom again and then she felt the tip of his penis press against her tight opening.

At the moment he pushed inside, the disk on her clitoris seemed to go into overdrive. She was near climax when he easily glided into her, but the toys would not let her go over the edge. Stamping on the deck, she cried out, “Nooo!”

Chakotay froze. “Does it hurt?”

“Yes, no, mmmmm,” she pushed back to get him to go deeper. “I've lost track.”

He gripped her hips and sank all the way in, moaning as he did so. “Oh man, Kathryn. This is good.”

“I feel like I'm coming apart!”

“Your bottom? Want me out?”

“No!” she yelled, her body trembling with need. “I'm not sure how much more of these vibrations I can take!”

He moved his hands around to her front and felt for the disk on her clitoris. “Tell me when you're on the precipice again.”

Kathryn was in blissful agony as he slid in and out of her. Over and over, he thrust and retracted, stretching and filling her in the most delicious way she could've ever imagined. All the while, the toys were building her up to another crescendo. “Almost there,” she cried out.

Chakotay tugged at the circle over her clit and ripped it off, causing Kathryn to cry out.

“Aaaaaaah! Damn it!” she yelled as the pain of what he'd done was completely overshadowed by the pleasure rolling through her. The device in her vagina seemed to bloom, pressing against her cervix and vibrating intensely as it moved in concert with Chakotay's driving penis.

“Did you come?” he asked.

“No!” Her hands balled into fists. “Did you think about what this must be doing to my blood pressure!?”

He chuckled. “Well, you said Joe knew too much about our sex life. I did my research.”

“WHAT!?” She would have rounded on him if not for the fact that her hands were bound and his dick was in her ass.

“Relax, sweetheart.” He grabbed hold of her hips and picked up the pace. “Trust me.”

Laying her head down again on the railing, she focused on the sensation of him thrusting in and out, and the fullness threatening to overwhelm her. Only the device in her vagina was buzzing now, but it held her on a plateau of arousal so strong that she felt like she was flying.

Chakotay reached around and suddenly pulled the vaginal device out of her. “All right, love, time to bring this home.”

“Oh, God,” she groaned as he unfastened her wrists, his penis still buried to the hilt inside her. Reaching for her breasts, she wanted to touch her nipples, but the disks kept her from what she really wanted. They felt like they were on fire, in a surprisingly fantastic way.

He pulled out of her with a pop and steadied her as he turned them around. Discarding the condom, he walked them over to the house.

Kathryn was expecting to be taken inside and laid out on the bed, so she was really surprised when he backed her against the wall. Leaving her alone for a second, he retrieved a cushion from a nearby chair and put it behind her back. “Keep your body pressed against that.”

“Aye, Captain.”

He patted her cheek. “Good girl.”

“I’d tell you to go fuck yourself, but I don’t think that’s what you’ve got planned.”

“You’d be right,” he said as he pressed his entire body against her and took her mouth in a deep kiss. It only lasted for a moment before he lifted her by the backs of her knees, pressing her against the wall for leverage and sinking deeply in one smooth thrust.

Kathryn laid her head against the house and clenched the muscles that she’d been holding onto so tightly all day, massaging his penis as he thrust inside her over and over.

He angled the thrusts so that he wasn't squishing the baby, but so that he was definitely taking her against the wall. Any control she had over the situation was gone as he held her legs open and tormented her in every way he could think.

An internal orgasm started building as she felt her body shuddering and quaking. With a cry of relief, she knew that she could enjoy it because nothing could possibly stop it except her husband, and if he did, she was going to take it out of his hide. A deep heat washed over her in a wave of pleasure, her body shaking from the intensity.

Chakotay cried out as he filled her with his seed, hot bursts coating the inside of her. He paused for only a moment before he knelt down and put her legs over his shoulders.

Tearing off her blindfold, she looked down at him in shock. "What are you doing?"

"You're coming again, sweetheart," he said as he spread her open and slowly licked her clitoris.

"Ohhhh," she tried to grip the house, anything she could, but there was nothing to hold onto so she settled for making fists and curling her toes against the onslaught of pleasure. About thirty seconds later, she felt the build-up of energy washing over her from her clitoris, down to her toes, up through her torso and focusing on her tightly pinched nipples.

Her body shook hard as the disks on the nipples suddenly released, sending a new wash of intensity over her. She was convulsing as he slowly lowered her feet to the ground and held her body close to his. "Good girl, that's it, my love. I've got you."

Feeling dizzy from the exertion of the orgasms, she went limp in his arms. "Can't walk."

"I bet not." He picked her up and carried her into the bathroom, setting her in the bathtub already filled with warm water.

"When did you run this?"

He smiled, "While you were standing in the middle of the room looking lost."

"I didn't hear it," she said with a happy sigh as the warmth infused her.

"I was sneaky, and then the heaters kept it warm for you." He picked up a cloth and knelt next to the tub. Washing her, he said, "Let's get you cleaned up. I'm afraid you made a mess."

"Going to have to power wash the deck."

Chuckling, he said, "You might have even dripped down below. I can't believe how wet you were."

"Amazing," she said with a shudder as he ran the washcloth over her pubic area.

“Still sensitive?”

“I think I will be for a month.” She reached down and cupped her mons, dipping her fingers inside to feel the slippery fluids.

Chakotay pushed his fingers in as well, and then drew them out to her clitoris, coating it with her juices. “Can you take this?”

She moaned and spread her legs wide, holding onto his arm as he toyed with her. Her body tightened immediately and an orgasm quickly washed over her, leaving her completely sated and relaxed. “Wow.”

“That’s different.” He quickly rinsed her off and then helped her out of the tub. “Let’s get you to bed.”

She was barely able to stand so they didn’t bother with pajamas. In no time at all, she was curled up under the covers.

When he got in next to her, she reached for him and brought their mouths together for a deep kiss.

She felt like she couldn’t get enough of touching him, feeling his body next to hers. Her hands slid down his sides, over his bottom, up his strong back. If there was one thing for certain, it was that she loved her man. When she felt his arousal come to life between them, she smiled against his lips. “You want more?”

“Hard to resist with your hands all over me.”

He dipped his head down to capture a nipple in his mouth. When she gasped in surprise, he asked, “Does it hurt?”

“They’re a little sore, yes. Those disks weren’t exactly nice to them.”

Very gently, he kissed each nipple. “But did you enjoy those little toys?”

“In a sadistic little way.” She smiled as she watched him give her breasts special care. “I’m afraid that I’ve become a little kinky, captain.”

“You think so?” Looking up at her, he winked. “You might be right.”

“Do you enjoy it?”

“Oh, yes. I like it very much.”

“What turns you on?”

“About becoming domineering with you?”

She nodded. “Are you just doing it because you think I like it?”

“No, but I would if that were the case.” Running his fingers over and around her breasts, he said, “What I loved about today was that I had to strategize in advance. Researching the things I used on you, for example.”

“Yeah, what was that thing inside me?”

“My secret. As long as you don’t know exactly what it is, you’ll be even more turned on by it.”

She licked her lips and grinned. “Go on.”

“I had to check with security, get the props ready, ensure that there were safeties, talk to Dr. Joe...”

“You really talked to him about what we did tonight?”

“I did.” He caressed her rounded belly. “I asked him general questions about intercourse with you, citing that I wanted to know if it was safe for baby. When he assured me that it is safe right now, I asked about pro-longed arousal.”

“And what did he say?”

“That if you were to get nauseous or dizzy, that I should stop.” Chakotay kissed around her breast, avoiding her nipple. “I felt confident that if you weren’t feeling well, you would’ve told me.”

Kathryn nodded. “But beyond strategy, do you like sitting by, watching me squirm?”

Laughing, he replied, “Oh yeah. First of all, I have to be very in tune with what you’re feeling. It’s not like I can go have a snack while you’re in a vulnerable position. You trust me to take care of you, and that’s exactly where I’m focused.”

She threaded her fingers through his thick, black hair, holding his head to her chest. “I appreciate that.”

“And second, like I told you earlier, I love watching you try to handle it.” He pressed kisses into the valley between her breasts. “The invincible Admiral Janeway trying to keep her composure while trembling with need and standing around with her rear in the air.”

Kathryn smiled as she drew her finger down to tease his nipples. “But I think you’re not sure about how far to take it with the humiliation.”

He arched his chest into her touch, quietly sighing with pleasure. “That’s true. The last thing I want to do is make you feel that way.”

“Nothing you said or did tonight was crossing the line.” She put her finger under his chin until he looked at her. “I’m not sure I can explain it, but it helps me surrender to the moment.”

“So I shouldn’t worry?”

Shaking her head, she said, “No. As long as it’s private between us, I trust you. However, I will draw the line at the extent of spanking we did tonight. I can’t imagine how any more than that would be pleasurable.”

He shrugged. “I might read up on it. Who knows what you’ll be able to handle in another year or so.”

“Might have to soundproof our room.”

He smiled as he curved his hand around her bottom and drew her leg towards him. “Speaking of pleasurable sounds, seems like you enjoyed anal sex.”

“It was quite different. I’m not sure how to explain it.”

Dipping his fingers between her legs from behind, he asked, “So we should try that again?”

“Only if I’m incredibly aroused and you’ve loosened me up.” She tilted her pelvis up to give him better access. “Whatever that thing was, hurt at first.”

“But it must have been pleasurable pain,” he suggested as he lightly rubbed his finger across her vaginal opening.

“I think the pain was tolerable because I was aroused. But it all worked and I definitely had a love/hate relationship with all those devices.”

He chuckled as he kissed her breasts again. “I can see how you would.”

Kathryn crooked her finger and said, “Come here. I want you to make love to me again.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m always sure,” she said as she urged him to lie on top of her. “My body is so wired that I think I could keep this up all night.”

He grinned as he gently penetrated her, this time taking it slow and loving her tenderly.

Kathryn moaned softly as she bent her knees to meet his thrusts, tilting her pelvis forward to get a better angle. “Ooooooh, right there.”

“You like that?” he asked as he reduced his movements so that he concentrated on stimulating her g-spot. “I think you do.”

Kathryn’s mouth dropped open as she relished the sensations running through her. “Ooooooh,” she said as he moved within her, just the way she liked it.

Chakotay’s movements stilled and then he thrust hard a few times, his seed releasing inside her. His body trembled and he held his breath until it passed, then relaxed and sighed happily. “That felt good.”

“I would certainly hope so, sweetheart,” she joked.

He laughed as he stretched out along side her, his long fingers penetrating her and rubbing the front wall of her vagina. “So, there we go. Codeword for kinky sex is that we call each other sweetheart.”

Kathryn reached down and touched her own clitoris as his fingers moved inside her. It only took a few seconds to stir herself into a very pleasant little climax.

Once sated, she snuggled up into his arms. “Hold me.”

“Always,” he said as he kissed the top of her head. “I love you so much, Kathryn.”

“Love you, too. And thank you for bringing my sexual fantasy too life, insane though it might be.”

He laughed and gave her a soft kiss. “Time to dream up a new one.”

“Hmmm... we’ll see. I kind of like the one I’ve got.”

Part 37 - “Benched”

By Dawn

Summary: An invitation from Romulus brings Kathryn back to the table.

Rated: PG

Outside the door to a conference room in Paris, Khurma extended his hand and said, “Kathryn, thank you for coming. It’s so good to see you.”

“My pleasure, Admiral. What’s the situation?”

He ushered her inside. "I'll let President Truov explain the details. She's eager to have you involved in this situation, but I want you to let me know if we're asking too much."

"I'll be fine," she said with a wave of dismissal.

Isela Truov looked up from the table and was all business. "Kathryn, thank you for coming on such short notice."

"I'm happy to help. May I assume this has something to do with Romulus?"

She nodded. "Yes. We're waiting for just a couple other people to join us."

Kathryn took the seat that Khurma held out for her, just two spots to the left of Isela. When an aide poured her some water, Kathryn smiled her thanks.

Two council-members whom Kathryn recognized, but didn't know came in and promptly took their seats, looking surprised to see her.

Isela said, "Thank you all for coming today. We've received an invitation from the new Romulan Praetor. His name is Shinzon. Does that name ring a bell with anyone?"

Kathryn took a slow breath to avoid showing her disappointment, but spoke up when Isela looked directly at her. "In my travels last year, I met a couple of Romulans, but that's not a name I recognize."

Nodding her understanding, Isela said, "The only intelligence that we have on him is that he was a distinguished military officer from Remus."

"Remus!" one of the council members yelled out.

Another council member nodded. "The sister planet to Romulus. It is rich in dilithium, but its orbit is locked and one side stays permanently in the sun while the other is always in the dark."

Khurma asked, "Admiral Janeway, could you tell us what you learned from the Romulan you met with almost a year ago?"

Someone asked, "You went to Romulus?"

"No, a Romulan named Rabom requested the meeting which took place on the edge of the neutral zone. At the time, he had political aspirations and an interest in establishing a relationship with the Federation should he be elected. He also gave me a warning that should he not be elected, we should be on guard."

"Did he tell you about Shinzon, specifically?" asked Isela.

“No, but he hinted heavily that another candidate for Praetor wasn’t loyal to Romulus. Now that you’ve said he’s Reman, it makes sense.” Kathryn tapped her fingertip on the table as she thought. “He believed that should the Romulans choose this other candidate, that they’d be making a grave mistake.”

A council-member said, “Any candidate running for office would say that, especially when the opposition is a member of an enslaved portion of the population.”

“Yes, that is true,” Kathryn nodded thoughtfully. “But he wasn’t boasting or mud-slinging. It was a genuine, albeit veiled, warning.”

Khurma spoke again. “I have met with Mr. Rabom as well, and he is remarkable in that he truly believes in the possibility of a Federation/Romulan Empire peace agreement.”

“But this Praetor is Reman,” someone said. “They may not hold the same disdain for the Federation that the Romulans do.”

“That’s an optimistic point of view,” another noted. “But the fact is that we know little to nothing about Remans.”

A young lieutenant at the far end of the table asked, “True, but can we turn down an invitation?”

Khurma replied, “I don’t believe we’re considering turning it down, but we do need to know what we’re walking into.”

Isela asked Kathryn and Khurma, “Any chance that either of you could make contact with Robam again?”

“Not unless he initiates it,” Khurma replied.

Kathryn added, “And if he opposes this Shinzon, it may be dangerous for him to make any contact with us right now.”

Khurma said, “What is also troubling is that we haven’t heard anything from our usual contacts in the Romulan Senate.”

“We have contacts in the Senate?” someone asked.

“Yes,” Khurma replied. “There are two who keep us apprised of the latest political developments in an effort to break down some of the barriers. We’ve heard nothing, and that’s highly unusual.”

Isela rubbed her chin in thought for a moment and then asked, “How many ships do we have within a day’s travel to Romulus?”

“Three,” Khurma replied. “Two small science vessels and the Enterprise which is en route to Betazed from Kolarus III.”

“If we could have our choice of anyone to send as a diplomatic envoy, who would we send?”

One of the council members suggested, “Admiral Janeway?”

Kathryn shook her head, but Khurma replied before she got a chance. “She’s on leave. I think our first choice would be Picard, especially since he’s already out there. However,” he said as he turned to Kathryn. “If you’re up to it, I’d like you and Jean-Luc to put your heads together on this.”

“I’d like to help as much as I am physically able.”

Isela said, “All right, then. Kathryn, you’ll contact Picard. Everyone else, let’s see if we can gather some intelligence on this Shinzon and the Remans. We’ll reconvene if we find anything pertinent. Thank you.”

Picard’s image appeared on Kathryn’s comm station. “Admiral Janeway, how good to see you again. It’s been what, a week?”

“Just about. I think we’re going to have put that book on hold because I have something else for you to do.”

“Oh? What’s that?”

“How would you like a trip to Romulus?”

He dipped his chin. “With or without the rest of the fleet?”

“A diplomatic mission. We’ve been invited, believe it or not. Seems there’s been some kind of internal political shakeup. The new Praetor, someone called Shinzon, has requested a Federation envoy.”

“New Praetor?”

“There’s more. He’s Reman.”

Jean-Luc did a double take. “How can that be?”

She held up a hand. “Believe me, we don’t understand it either. Our contacts in the Romulan senate have been unusually silent, which alarms us further.”

“I can see why.”

“You’re the closest ship, so I want you to go and hear what he has to say. Get the lay of the land. If the Star Empire becomes unstable, it could mean trouble for the entire Quadrant.”

“Understood.”

“We’re sending you all the intelligence we have, but it’s not much. I don’t need to tell you to watch your back, Jean-Luc.”

“Hardly. This has the marks of a rather thorny situation.”

“Will and Deanna aren’t going to be happy about missing their honeymoon,” she said sympathetically.

“No, but I’ll tell them it’s your fault,” he said with a wink.

“Thanks,” she replied with a laugh. “Give Deanna my apologies, would you?”

“Of course.”

“Save travels, Jean-Luc. Contact me if I can help with anything. Janeway out.”

After the comm closed, Kathryn sat back in her chair and closed her eyes. She was fighting with her conscience about where her proper place was. There was no question that she needed to keep herself safe because of the baby, but a part of her wanted to be in the middle of the action, not watching the game from the bench. Perhaps it was just her spirit of adventure or a hangover from so many years as a captain, but she felt guilty sending someone else into a dangerous situation rather than going herself.

Kathryn picked up her coffee mug and stared at nothing as she thought about the situation. A Reman Praetor on Romulus wasn’t just unusual, it was extremely unlikely. It meant that they’d elected a slave as their leader and that just didn’t compute with what they knew about the Romulans. Combine that with silence from their usual contacts, and all signs indicated that those people might be in trouble. Was there a hostage situation? A civil war? An uprising of the slaves?

She had an urge to board the Pioneer and get a little closer to the situation, but she kept herself in check because she knew it would be a bad idea. Regardless of her pregnancy, her health issues, and her promise to her husband, she’d realized during her counseling sessions with Deanna that when the time came for her to venture back out into space, she’d need to proceed carefully. Heading into Romulan territory during a volatile situation would be jumping into the deep end.

While Kathryn was reading about the history of Remus and Romulus, she had the uncanny sensation that she was being watched. Forcing her eyes away from the computer screen, she looked up to see her husband leaning against the door jamb.

“How long have you been standing there?”

“About half a minute.”

She nodded towards her screen. “For a Reman to become Praetor, he must have overthrown the senate. There’s no other way around it.”

“Mmmhmm,” Chakotay replied as he nodded slowly. “That’s what you said this morning.”

“That was just supposition, but now I’m reading the Romulan constitution and I can tell you for a fact that it’s not possible.”

“How did you get that?”

“Intelligence.” She winked and then added, “It’s good to be Admiral.”

He tried not to smile as he asked, “And you find it enjoyable to read an alien constitution?”

“Well, not enjoyable. This isn’t exactly on par with Jane Austen, but it is fascinating.” She sat back in her chair and continued. “They don’t designate the Remans as slaves like we assumed, but rather a second class of citizens. They are part of the Romulan Star Empire, but they don’t have the right to vote. The fact that this Shinzon was commander of a contingent during the war is unheard of because they don’t allow Remans in the military.”

“How did that happen, then?”

Kathryn shrugged. “Beats me. He’s either got friends in high places or he’s holding a phaser to someone’s head.”

“What does your intuition say?”

“Both. I get the feeling that he’s a very dangerous man with an agenda, and whatever he’s doing right now by inviting us to Romulus is a ploy.”

“But to what end? Is he trying to make peace with us to show up the Romulans or is he luring us into a trap?”

“I fear that it’s more likely to be a trap.”

“Have you shared your thoughts with Picard?”

“Yes.” She rubbed her neck and sighed. “We’ve been sending text messages back and forth as he and I gather facts. Commander Data is also finding information – more quickly than I can, of course.”

“But he doesn’t have access to the constitution.”

“No, and I’m not sure it’s entirely useful except to know that major upheaval has to have taken place. We still don’t know what has transpired.” She closed her hands together and pressed her knuckles against her mouth. “It is so hard to sit here knowing that I’ve sent a ship into a dangerous situation.”

“You’ve gotten used to being the one in the line of fire.”

“Mmhmm,” she nodded without saying anything more.

He tilted his head. “You want to go, don’t you?”

“Can’t.”

“But you want to.”

“Chakotay, don’t.”

He gave her an understanding smile. “Love, just because you made a promise to keep yourself safe doesn’t mean that you don’t have the desire to be in the thick of things. I know you, and I know this can’t be easy.”

“Promises aside, I’m six months pregnant and not cleared for active duty.”

“That just means there’s more than one thing holding you back.”

Rubbing her face, she said, “I don’t know if I feel so helpless because I’m not out there or because this Shinzon character has the Enterprise twiddling their thumbs while he waits to make an appearance. And maybe it’s because I’ve sent over a thousand people, including children, into what could be a deadly situation.”

Chakotay nodded thoughtfully, and then narrowed his eyes. “You know…”

“What?”

“Hypothetically speaking, if this is a trap, and we lose the Enterprise…”

“Don’t say that.”

“Hear me out,” he said softly.

She sighed and indicated that he should continue.

“What happens next? Do the Remans celebrate their little victory and then go on about their isolated lives?”

“I highly doubt that.”

“Me, too. So, then it becomes a matter of security for the entire Federation. You, Khurma, and Picard are the three best diplomats in the Federation.”

“This is not the time for flattery.”

“I know,” he said seriously. “I’ve met the other admirals, and I’m saying this as a fact. My guess is that if we lose the Enterprise, Picard will take Shinzon out with him. Then we’re going to need both you and Khurma to pick up the pieces.”

She looked at him blankly for a moment and then noted, “So you’re saying that only one of us can be on the front line.”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

“And I’m going to have to get used to being in this role unless I am downgraded to a captain.”

“That’s right.”

“So... why did I accept this promotion?”

Hesitantly, he asked, “You don’t remember?”

“Remind me,” she demanded.

“Kathryn...”

Getting angrier, she asked, “Why am I not in command of a starship right now?”

He gave her a moment before he said, “Because you were needed in a different role.”

“Bull shit.”

“Kathryn...” he pleaded.

“I’m not on the front lines because they don’t think I can handle it.”

“No, I don’t believe they think that at all. You’re much too valuable to send out there.”

“And Picard isn’t?”

“Don’t.”

She looked away and closed her eyes. “We’ve got to stop this. My blood pressure is rising.”

Kneeling down in front of her, he said, “Kathryn, you just have to accept that your role is not on the bridge right now. I’m not saying that it never can be again, but it can’t be right now.”

“This is so damned hard.”

“I know.” He picked up her hand and kissed her knuckles. “I won’t offer you any platitudes, but I will say that you are very gifted at seeing the bigger picture. If you’ll take my advice, I suggest that you focus on doing whatever you can to help Picard. He has to focus on anticipating Shinzon’s actions while keeping the people on his ship safe, and doesn’t have time to research Romulan election laws or the history of Remus.”

She opened her eyes and looked down at him. “Thank you for understanding.”

“I know you and how hard it is for you to be laid up.”

Kathryn leaned forward and kissed his head. “Even if I was healthy enough to be on active duty, they wouldn’t let an Admiral go out there. I’m just frustrated to be sitting on the side-lines.”

“I know that, too.” He squeezed her hand and gave her a smile. “I came in here to let you know that lunch is ready.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Her shoulders dropped. “And I’ve been going on and on…”

He held a finger against her mouth. “Shhhhh. It’s just sandwiches.”

Kathryn took his face between both of her hands and brought their lips together for a kiss. After she pulled back, she said, “For future reference, the preferable method of shushing me is with a kiss. Next time you put your finger on my lips, I’m going to bite it off.”

Chakotay laughed. “I don’t doubt it.” Standing up, he extended his hand and said, “Come on, love. Let’s get you some food.”

“Kathryn?” Chakotay called from the study.

She sighed in frustration because she’d just distracted herself from endless pacing by sitting down with a Jane Austen novel. “Yes?”

“You have an incoming transmission from the Enterprise.”

Tossing the book away, she jumped up quickly and then cringed as a pain tore through her side. She ignored it best she could as she went to her comm terminal. "I hope Picard has something."

Chakotay noticed where she was rubbing her belly. "Hurts again?"

"Not now." She tapped the keys on her screen and was surprised to see Riker. "Commander?"

"Yes, Admiral. Captain Picard asked me to update you on the situation."

"Did Shinzon make contact with you, yet?"

"Yes." Will's jaw was set firm. "He's human, not Reman."

"Human!?"

"To be more precise, a clone of Picard."

"What?" she asked in disbelief.

"We were just as shocked as you are." Will was clearly angry as he explained, "Seems that the Romulans had a plot to replace Picard with an imposter. At some point, they abandoned that plan and sent the clone to die as a slave in the Reman dilithium mines."

"But he survived," she noted.

"And now he wants to build some kind of peaceful cooperation between the Empire and the Federation. I tell you what, Admiral – I don't buy it, not for an instant."

"I tend to agree with you. Any communication from the Senate?"

"Not a peep from anyone except Shinzon and the Remans on his ship. We have neither seen nor heard from even one Romulan."

"That's... odd, considering you're in orbit of their planet."

"It's more than odd. It's disturbing."

Kathryn nodded. "Agreed. What's the next step?"

"Picard wants you to do some research – find out anything you can. I'll send you the stardates that Shinzon gave us, although I don't expect you to have much luck. Oh, and I'll have Dr. Crusher send you the blood test results."

"I'll see what I can do."

“Meanwhile, Picard plans to meet with Shinzon again for dinner.” Will shook his head. “I know he has to go, but I don’t trust this guy. Not one bit.”

“I’m sure that I don’t have to tell you to keep a transporter lock on him.”

“No, you don’t.” He rubbed his chin. “I think it might be a good idea to send some backup our way. I just don’t know how this is going to play out.”

“We can definitely do that. As you learn any more details about this clone, send them to me. We’ll get to work on finding whatever information we can.”

“Yes, ma’am. Riker out.”

Kathryn ran her fingers through her hair and made a comm call to Khurma to fill him in. The conversation didn’t take long, she forwarded him the data, and then she stood up to go into the great room to find Chakotay. The pain in her side intensified and she suddenly felt dizzy.

“Honey?” she called out in alarm.

He came immediately. “Are you in pain?”

Kathryn nodded and felt his arms go around her. She heard a medical tri-corder beeping and opened her eyes to see Joe. “When did you get here?”

“He called me about five minutes ago. We’ve been waiting for you to finish.” Joe closed the tri-corder and said, “She needs to lie down. The sofa will suffice.”

“I feel like I’m going to faint,” she mumbled.

“You might,” Joe replied.

Chakotay picked her up and carried her across the room to gently lay her down.

As Joe began to treat her, he said, “The tear in your placenta is back. What were you doing when it happened?”

“Got up too quick,” she managed to say.

“Kathryn?” Chakotay asked. “Is there anything I need to know or do for you?”

“Already informed Khurma.”

“Good,” Joe said as he pressed a hypo against her neck. “For now, I want you to rest.”

She thought about protesting, but was asleep before she got the chance.

Kathryn's eyes felt sticky and heavy as she forced them open. It took a long moment for her to register where she was and then to remember what had transpired to bring about a nap on the sofa. Raising her head, Kathryn's gaze swept the room until it landed on her husband who was sitting on the other sofa reading a PADD.

He looked up and smiled. "Hello there. Feel better?"

She blinked out the grit and then laid her head back down. "He sedated me."

"He did surgery on you."

"Mmmmmmm," she moaned groggily. "Was it a bad tear?"

"Pretty severe, yes. He said to expect some spotting over the next day or two."

"That's nothing new."

"No, but it might be heavier than usual." Chakotay got up and kneeled next to her. Stroking her hair, he asked, "Prefer to be harangued by him or by me?"

"Neither. You need to be more careful about alarming me so I don't jump up."

"Oh, so this is my fault?" he asked with amusement.

"Sure." Smiling sleepily, she asked, "Anything pertinent I should know?"

"Yes." Chakotay reached behind him and held up a light brown piece of stretchy fabric. "You get to wear this. It's called a maternity belt."

"Charming." She took it out of his hands and turned it around in her hands. "I meant anything about Shinzon and his merry band."

"Khurma called, and he wants you to call him back when you're awake." Chakotay placed his hand on her hip. "Take it slowly if you're getting up."

"Too sleepy, still."

He leaned forward and placed a kiss on her cheek. "Then sleep a little longer."

"M'kay." Kathryn reached out for him as he stood up, and added, "Love you."

"I love you, too."

“Chakotay...,” she said as she came out of the study, both hands covering her mouth.

One look at her and he came right over. “Are you sick?”

“No, yes, not sick, but... Picard has uncovered Shinzon’s plot.”

“What is it?”

“Ever heard of thalargon radiation?”

“Thalargon?” he asked quizzically. “No, is that ionizing or non-ionizing?”

She reached for the back of a chair to steady herself. “Oh, it’s definitely ionizing.”

“I thought there were only three types? Alpha, beta, and gamma, right?”

“For years, thalargon was thought to be theoretical, but it was banned years ago due to its possible use as a weapon.”

“And let me guess... The Romulans have figured out how to do just that?”

“Not the Romulans. Shinzon.” Kathryn looked up at the ceiling and sighed. “This type of radiation petrifies living tissue almost instantly, consuming organic material at the subatomic level causing complete cell necrosis.”

“A deadly radiation.”

Kathryn nodded. “Extremely. Its properties allow its range and area of affect to be precisely controlled, and that ship that Shinzon and his Reman friends have created is one giant thalargon generator. The Scimitar is a biogenic weapon of mass destruction that has a perfect cloak, seemingly impenetrable shields, and it’s as fast as Voyager.”

“So, how do we stop them?”

“Shinzon is after Jean-Luc. Something happened with the cloning process, and he requires a complete transfusion from the original source as soon as possible.”

“Is Enterprise still in orbit of Romulus?” Chakotay asked.

“No, they’re en route to rendezvous with the rest of the fleet in sector 1045, knowing that the Scimitar is hot on their tail.”

“Who is coordinating the attack?”

“Picard, once he arrives, but Nechayev is taking control of this situation. She was already onboard a nearby ship, and the President wants Khurma to stay here.”

“A smart choice,” said softly.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea to put our entire fleet on the front line against that ship. What if the radiation takes out all of them?”

“Did you convey your concerns to Khurma?”

“No, just to Nechayev. She wants to make sure that ship doesn’t reach any Federation planets.”

Chakotay rubbed her back. “Alyna Nechayev is one of our best strategists.”

“I know.” Kathryn swallowed hard and put her hand on her forehead. “This could get bad. Very, very bad.”

“How do we counteract this type of radiation?”

“We don’t.”

“That’s not like you, Kathryn.”

“It’s not possible. There’s nothing else to it.”

“I see,” he said as he began pacing in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows. “So, if we had encountered this biogenic weapon while on Voyager, you would have...”

“Turned tail and run.” When he didn’t respond, she turned her head to catch his eyes. “What? You don’t believe me?”

“No, I think, like with the Omega particle, you would have tried to rid the galaxy of the threat.”

“How... heroic,” she said with a roll of her eyes. “There are times when there is no solution, no way to get rid of the threat. The only way to address this one is to destroy that ship, and if the entire fleet can’t do it, I don’t know what can.”

“Perhaps, but if I may make a suggestion?”

She raised her chin. “What?”

“Go do some reading on it. Call B’Elanna and talk through it. See if there’s anything you can come up with.”

“I can assure you that Starfleet’s best scientific minds are already working on it.”

“Yours isn’t.”

“Flattery? At a time like this?”

“Just... go, Kathryn. Give it some thought. It’ll at least make you feel better.”

“Distraction by immersion.” She straightened her back and returned to the study, calling out, “Fine, you win.”

“I often do,” he mumbled.

“I heard that.”

Hours later, Chakotay turned the lights out in the kitchen and went outside onto the deck to check on Kathryn. “Any word, yet?”

She tapped her fingers on the table next to her com terminal and shook her head. “Nothing. Enterprise hasn’t shown up at the designated coordinates.”

“Scans of the region?”

“Inconclusive, and Nechayev is afraid to break up the fleet to search for them.”

Chakotay put his hands on his hips and thought about the situation. “Scans should give some indication. Is the Pioneer out there? It has enhanced scanners.”

“No, it’s still here.” Kathryn stood up and began to pace. “Remember, there are dense nebulas between Sector 1045 and Romulus that knock out subspace communications.”

He jerked his head towards her. “The Bassen Rift.”

“I believe that’s where they are.”

Chakotay dashed to her computer and said, “I used to hide in there.”

“What are you doing?”

“Sending a message to Nechayev. They’ve got to search for baryons.”

“From that distance?” She stood behind his shoulder and watched what he was typing.

“B’Elanna came up with it. She used deflector technology to pinpoint the location of other ships in the rift. Starfleet vessels have such a build-up of the baryonic particles that the nuclear hadrons stand out in contrast to the theta-xenon gases.”

She squeezed his shoulder. "Impressive, Captain."

"Congratulate B'Elanna."

"I will, but it's fantastic that you remembered the science involved after all these years."

"Yeah," he laughed as he exchanged messages with the ship that Nechayev was on. "Usually, I just nod and trust the two of you to figure out that kind of thing."

"You're the one who was teaching creative tactics."

Chakotay got quiet again and said, "They want to know how to configure the deflector. I think we need to bring B'Elanna in on this conversation."

"Hang on." Kathryn leaned forward and looked at the exchange on the screen. "Tell them to use a nucleonic beam charged with ferric ions. Start at four millicrons per nano-second and increase the field strength from there until they've got a stable magnetic field."

He typed it in and got an immediate response indicating that they would proceed. "They sound desperate to try anything."

"They've been sitting on their hands for hours, waiting for any word from Enterprise." Kathryn walked over to the edge of the deck and braced her arms against the railing, carefully arching her back. "We're all worried that she's been destroyed and the Scimitar is on its way to its next target."

"And what do your instincts tell you is the next target?" he asked as he came up behind her and started rubbing her lower back.

Arching further into his massage, she replied, "You're standing on it."

"That makes me want to jump on a starship."

She turned and gave him a disparaging look. "To run away?"

"No!" he said defensively. "To defend Earth. Man, if this planet was destroyed, I'd want to be on it, not watching."

"Mmmm... I don't even want to consider it."

Chakotay drew her back against him, one arm wrapped around her waist, the other hand holding the baby. His voice caught as he said, "Kathryn, when you were in the midst of your heart transplant, B'Elanna told me something that has stuck with me, something I will never forget."

"What's that?" she asked as she rested her head against him.

“Kathryn Janeway is the heroine in the story that is our lives, and the heroine doesn’t die in the middle of it.”

Turning her neck so she could see her husband’s face, Kathryn replied, “She was right, you know. I didn’t.”

“And you’re not going to now, either.”

“Is that foreshadowing or are you giving away the end?”

“Oh, definitely giving away the end. You and I... we’re going to die simultaneously when we’re a hundred and ten years old while making love.”

“I believe it.”

“We’ll be surrounded by our loved ones, our children, our grandchildren...”

“While making love?” She couldn’t help but be amused.

When he realized what he was saying, he smiled back. “Umm, sure. Why the hell not?”

Nestled in each other’s arms, they gazed out at the ocean and listened to the waves crash upon the shore below. Kathryn yawned and said, “If he’s going to destroy us, I wish he’d get on with it. I’m getting sleepy.”

“Why don’t you go to bed? I’ll keep watch on the comm.”

“Because if our lives are about to end, I don’t want to miss a moment of it.”

“Now, that’s logic I don’t think even Tuvok would argue with.” He unfolded his arms and took her hand. “Come on, let’s at least sit on a chaise.”

They set the computer on a side table before Chakotay made himself comfortable on the lounge chair. Once he was set, he held out his hand and drew her down between his legs.

She grabbed a throw from the next chair and joked, “Now this is how we should’ve handled the gamma shift on Voyager.”

“I certainly wouldn’t have minded.” He helped her get situated with the blanket and then turned his attention toward the computer to see if they’d missed any messages.

“Anything?”

“Your instructions for the deflector worked. They’re having every ship scan for the particles.”

“How many ships?”

“Eleven.”

She asked, “If Shinzon were hell bent on destroying humanity, I would think he would’ve taken out those ships along the way.”

“Maybe.”

“Oh?”

“It would certainly add to our fears which he might relish, but it would also take away the element of surprise.”

“With his ship, doesn’t sound like he’d need to worry about having that advantage.”

“You’re probably right.”

When he typed more on the computer, she asked out of curiosity, “What are you doing?”

“Nechayev is sending us scans with the message that the more eyes on this situation, the better.”

“That doesn’t sound like her.”

“There’s really no need for secrecy. At least not with us.” Chakotay rubbed Kathryn’s arm as he continued, “She has a fantastic mind for tactics.”

“She has the personality of a prune.”

He chuckled and kissed the top of her head. “Charm while engaged in battle is your specialty.”

Tiredly, she replied, “Just give me my Bessie.”

“Janeway’s personal phaser rifle. At least when you’re carrying it around, no one messes with you.”

Kathryn felt the heaviness of sleep wash over her, and try as she might, she couldn’t fight it. The sounds of the ocean waves, the crickets chirping in the distance, the quiet tapping of Chakotay’s fingers, and the wind rustling in the trees were like a lullaby singing her to sleep.

She felt like she had just dozed off when he whispered, “Kathryn?”

“Hmmm?”

“Wake up, love.”

“Just fell asleep,” she mumbled.

“Over an hour ago.” He rubbed her arms. “Wake up, just for a moment.”

Still groggy, she looked up at him. “What?”

“They found the Enterprise. I thought you’d want to know.”

“And?” she said as she sat up, instantly awake.

“They took heavy damage, but destroyed the Scimitar. It’s over.”

“Casualties?”

“Doesn’t say. All I got was a rushed message from the first officer on Nechayev’s ship. We’ll know more tomorrow.”

Kathryn put her hand over her heart. “I hate not knowing.”

Leaning forward, he kissed her forehead. “Let’s go inside.”

She nodded and ran her fingers through her hair. “I was really out for an hour?”

“A little longer.”

“Hmmm.” She groaned as she carefully stood up, trying not to move quickly. “I’ve felt better.”

“Probably just tired. It’s after midnight and you’ve been going to bed by twenty-two hundred.”

She smiled despite how drained she felt. “You’re so sexy when you use military time, you know that?”

“Oh, am I?” he asked with a laugh as he led her inside and locked up behind them. “When you’re feeling better, I’ll have to dictate my entire schedule to you, then.”

Rolling her eyes, she replied, “Better than roses any day.”

Kathryn had read the report on the Enterprise’s damage, but nothing could’ve prepared her for the sight in front of her as her shuttle moved into visual range of Utopia Planetia. She had to remind herself to take a breath as her heart went out to the ship’s captain and crew. They’d lost over fifty officers and civilians in the battle with the Scimitar, including their second officer, Commander Data. It was a miracle that all of the children survived relatively unscathed, and that was due to the precautions they had taken to put them in a secure area of the ship.

As soon as the shuttle docked, Kathryn stepped out and was surprised to see Will and Deanna coming to greet her.

“Kathryn, it’s so good to see you,” Deanna said as the two women embraced.

“Forget me,” she said as she looked worriedly at her two friends. “How are you?”

“We’re…” Deanna looked at Will before replying. “We’re coping. Data was a good friend, but this could have turned out so much worse. We weren’t close to the others that were lost, but any loss of life is difficult to bear.”

Will added, “We’re trying to look on the bright side and remember that our mission was a success.”

“We could easily have lost all of you,” Kathryn said as she absently rubbed her pregnant belly. “I’m sorry about your honeymoon.”

“Don’t be,” Will replied. “We can reschedule the Betazed ceremony and take that trip later. We were where we needed to be.”

“That’s true. And now, you’re off to your new ship.”

“Yes,” he said proudly. “Taking her out for a test spin in the morning.”

“Don’t go too far,” Kathryn said with a smile. “We might need you for the next part of this.”

“I’m at your service, Admiral.”

She held out her hand. “Congratulations, Captain Riker.”

“Thank you.” He shared a look with his wife and then said, “Now, if you two will excuse me. I’m going to go check on a few things before we board our shuttle.”

“Of course.” Kathryn looked at Deanna. “Are you ready for the Titan?”

“I think I am,” she said, taking a deep breath. “It feels right to be making this change now that we’re married and starting our life together.”

“Not that you haven’t been together for quite some time.”

“True, but you’ve recently been through this. Didn’t you feel that your new life started after the honeymoon?”

“Yes, once we got settled back into our house.”

Deanna glanced at the security guards and then asked, “Could we have a word in private? On your shuttle, perhaps?”

“Sure.” Kathryn held out hand for Deanna to go in first and then waddled in after her. Once the ladies were seated in the ops and security stations, she rubbed her side and asked, “What can I do for you?”

“I want to know how you’re doing,” Deanna replied.

“Me? You’re the one who just went through a devastating battle.”

“Yes, that’s true, and I’m coping. But I’m asking as your counselor, not your friend.”

Kathryn waved off her concern. “I’m fine. Anything I’m dealing with is minor compared to the bigger picture.”

“That’s not true, Kathryn, and you know it. Correct me if I’m wrong, but wasn’t this your first time as an Admiral sending a ship out on a mission?”

“I’ve sent the Pioneer and the Enterprise both out.”

“On diplomatic missions, yes.”

“That’s what this was supposed to be, too. All missions start with diplomacy.”

Deanna gave her an incredulous look. “Stop avoiding this, because we haven’t got all day.”

“I’m not avoiding. I’m handling it. Seeing the damage to the Enterprise is sobering enough to put my worries into perspective.”

“What are your worries?”

“They’re minor.”

“Glad to hear it. What are your minor worries that are now in perspective?”

Kathryn frowned. “I wasn’t prepared for a counseling session today.”

“I wasn’t planning on it, either, but I seized the moment.” Deanna leaned forward and gently said, “I can sense that you are troubled, and I’d like to help.”

“Empaths,” Kathryn sighed. Deciding to lay her concerns out on the table, she said, “If you must know, Chakotay and I got into a very minor argument because I was stressed.”

“Very minor is good. How did you get out of it?”

“The argument?”

Deanna nodded. “You’ve told me that was your primary fear about marrying him. That you’d argue and not be able to recover from it.”

“I know, but he’s been great. True to his promise, he hasn’t blown anything out of proportion and he doesn’t rise to the bait I throw at him.”

“And you? Have you done what you promised yourself?”

Kathryn studied her well-manicured nails. “Not entirely. It’s hard not to get testy when I’m worried. It’s how I react to stress.”

“No, it’s how you used to react to stress.”

“But I can’t throw anything, hit anything, or exercise in my current condition.”

“Why not? Is everything okay with the baby?”

“My doctor is threatening bed rest if I don’t take it easy. The placenta has torn twice already.”

Deanna grimaced and then shook her head. “I have a feeling that you’re not going to be a very good patient if that’s the route you have to take.”

“I hope I don’t wear out Chakotay’s patience.” Kathryn rubbed the back of her neck.

“Have you told him that?”

“Haven’t felt it was necessary.”

“You should,” Deanna stated plainly. “Then when you get irritable, he’ll be prepared, and you won’t feel as guilty because you talked about it in advance.”

“I suppose.”

“Now, tell me more about this argument of yours. What was it about?”

Pinching her brow, she said, “Oh, it’s not even worth singling out. There have been minor disagreements every few days, but they don’t amount to anything. The man has grown a lot of tolerance over the last year.”

“Yes, but during that year, he’s also faced losing you several times. That can change a man.”

Kathryn looked out the front window of the shuttle to see the people bustling around the bay. “I was frustrated to be on the sidelines and not able to help.”

“But you were helping, were you not?”

“Yes, but knowing that I’ve been benched and not cleared for command is hard to get past.”

“You’re not cleared because of your health,” Deanna pointed out.

“Not just that. Over a year ago, before I was promoted, the review board wouldn’t give me a ship again because of some disputed command decisions. This was the first time since then that I felt the need to be in command of a vessel, and it hit me hard. I’ve told you about this before.”

Deanna asked, “Do I need to point out all the good you’ve done as an admiral?”

“No,” she replied softly. “But don’t worry. I’m dealing with it.”

“Remember what I told you. Your past does not decide your future, it only tells what happened in another time, another place. It’s a new day. Let it go, Kathryn.”

Clicking her tongue, she said, “That’s not as simple as it sounds.”

“No, it’s not. But you’ll be happier once you do.” Deanna took Kathryn’s hand. “The opinions of a few people on a review board do not matter. Kathryn Janeway knows what she is capable of. No one is going to knock her down.”

With a smirk, she replied, “You sound like my husband.”

“Good,” Deanna said with delight. “Then he’s saying the right things to you. Anything else you need to tell me?”

“I think we’ve covered just about as much as one can for a spur of the moment counseling session.”

Deanna stood up and helped Kathryn to her feet as well. “I’ll contact you next week to check on you.”

Arching her back to stretch the sore muscles, she replied, “With the sound advice you just gave me, I doubt I’ll need you again.”

Laughing, Deanna replied, “That assumes you actually take it.”

They walked out of the shuttle and then hugged again. Kathryn said, “I’m so glad you’re okay.”

“Me, too. I’ve crashed two Enterprises now.”

“You’ve survived two crashes.”

“Nope.” Deanna looked out the view port at the Enterprise’s shattered bow. “Captain Picard may have ordered it, but I was at the helm. Same thing with Enterprise D.”

Kathryn tried not to smile. “No wonder they’re putting you off the ship.”

“Thanks,” she replied with a wink, and then got serious. “Take care of yourself, Kathryn.”

“I will. And congratulations on your new husband and your new ship.”

“Thank you,” she said as she walked away.

Kathryn watched her go and then turned to Justin. “Ready to find our favorite engineer?”

“If you are, Admiral.” He looked closely at her. “Feeling all right?”

She looped her arm through his and said, “I’m managing. B’Elanna is on the team assigned to repair the Enterprise. I’d like to touch base with her, and then talk to Picard.”

“Harry should be there working on it, too,” Justin added.

“Mmmhmm. His transfer goes into effect tomorrow.”

“It’s going to be hard not having him around.”

Kathryn noted, “Will be hard not having you and Sue around either.”

“We’re just taking a little tour on the Pioneer. As soon as you’re ready, we’ll be right back where you want us.”

As they rounded a corner, she asked, “You okay with me sending you out and having Mark stay here?”

“I assume you did that for Sue and me.”

“Only part of the reason. You sat in on as many meetings as Harry did. I thought you might be an asset to Captain Young as he continues to build those relationships.”

“I’ll certainly try to be.”

She patted his hand. “I know you will.”

Jean-Luc handed Kathryn a cup of his favorite tea as they sat down together in his ready room. “Shinzon was a troubled man.”

“That’s putting it mildly,” she replied. “He murdered the entire Romulan Senate.”

“I was standing there, in the middle of the Senate chambers, and I had no idea.”

“You weren’t supposed to know.”

Shaking his head, he said, “There were clues. We just didn’t see them.”

“Twenty/twenty hindsight.” Kathryn took a sip of her tea. “President Truov has been in contact with the highest ranking Romulan, Commander Sulat. The Federation has offered aid, but of course, they’re not accepting it.”

“This situation is probably embarrassing for them.”

“Probably so.” She studied his face. “How are you handling it, from a personal perspective?”

“Is that an official question, Admiral?”

“No, I’m here as a friend. I’m not on active duty.”

He hummed a smile at her response. “Then as a friend, I’ll tell you that I feel just plain numb. Deanna tells me this is the fourth stage of grief and that it’s perfectly normal.”

“I’ve found that I’m perfectly happy remaining in the numb stage as long as possible.”

“Quite right. And when a counselor tells you what you’re feeling is normal, do you want to throttle them?”

“Usually,” Kathryn replied with a slow nod. “But if you were to carry through on that, you’d have to start the grief process all over again.”

“Also true. And then the counselor’s new husband would probably want to throttle me. It would get messy around here.”

Kathryn sighed. “I’d say you’ve already got quite a mess.”

They were quiet for a few minutes until Jean-Luc asked, “You lost a good portion of your bridge crew at the same time, did you not?”

“I did.”

“How difficult, if I may ask, was it to be on the bridge without them?”

She blew out a slow breath. “Well, there was so much to deal with that I really didn’t have time to grieve their loss.”

“Understandable.” He turned to face her. “May I bend your ear for a moment?”

“Of course.”

He hesitated before he explained, “Data isn’t the first of my officers to die saving my life. His efforts also saved this ship and ultimately Earth from a deadly threat. Any one of us would have sacrificed our lives to do the same.”

Kathryn nodded, encouraging him to continue. “And although he was an android…”

“It doesn’t make his friendship any less real. He’s not any more replaceable in our hearts than if he were fully human. In fact, in his dying, I believe that he achieved his highest goal, which was to be human. He once said that he’d outlive all of his friends and that was his biggest concern about immortality.”

“I feel the same about Voyager’s holographic doctor.”

“Oh, yes. I’d forgotten about him.” Jean Luc turned the tea cup around in his hand, seemingly mesmerized by it. “I suddenly feel old. You see, I fully intended on being the one to die saving humanity.”

“Mmmhmm. I once made the decision to sacrifice myself for my crew, but they didn’t let me. I felt deflated afterwards – a strange reaction since I should’ve felt relieved and thankful to be alive.”

“But one I can fully identify with. When someone takes your place in death, it’s harder, don’t you think? Have you encountered that?”

“I’ve had many people die to protect me. Survivor’s guilt is a tough nut.”

“Death,” he said with a sigh. “In any relationship, I suppose that it’s probably easier to be the one who dies, rather than to be the one left behind.”

“In the long term, of course, but after you know the end is near, there’s an awful lot of pain knowing how much grief you’ll cause your loved ones.”

“But they’ll know you died to save them, and you can take solace in that.”

“Sure, so long as that’s the reason you’re dying. My recent near-death experiences were quite the opposite.”

“Oh, yes. You have an entirely different perspective on the matter.”

“Not a day goes by when I don’t think about the fact that I could just as easily be dead.” She patted the rounded swell of her belly. “Our lives are to be treasured, Jean-Luc. Carpe diem.”

“Seize the day,” he said with understanding. After a moment of silence, he announced, “I can’t propose to Beverly now. Not after all of this.”

“Sure you can. Perhaps right now is when you need each other most, when you need to gather your loved ones close. Data died so you could live, so don’t get so caught up in your grief that you don’t take his gift for what it is.”

He sighed. “I’ll give it some thought.”

Kathryn waited a moment to see if he’d say anything more before giving him an opportunity to end the conversation. “Is Beverly onboard? I’d like to see her.”

“She’s putting sickbay back together.” He recycled their cups and helped Kathryn stand. “Come on, I’ll take you.”

As they walked through the Enterprise, he stopped to greet crew members that were working on repairs, asked how they were doing, and introduced them to Kathryn.

She glanced back at Justin and then commented to Picard, “I miss this part of being a captain.”

“Repairing a damaged ship?”

“No, the sense of family and the closeness that is garnered after surviving a tragedy.”

“I’m sure you had your share.”

“I doubt I had more than you. We only had seven years together; you’ve had fifteen as captain of the Enterprise crew.”

“Yes, but except for my senior officers, the others have come and gone. I don’t know my crew as well as you knew yours.” They stepped into a turbolift and he called out, “Deck nine.”

“There are pros and cons to that, but the sense of family is strong.”

He sighed deeply. “Family is a good word for it.”

Kathryn patted him on the back as they exited the turbolift. “Let’s hope that Beverly will cheer you up.”

“She usually does, Admiral. She usually does.” He gave her an affirming nod just before the doors opened to sickbay.

There were a handful of people tending to various tasks, but overall, the atmosphere in the room was unhurried and peaceful. As soon as Beverly spotted them, she lit up with a beautiful smile, but signaled that she’d be with them in a moment.

Kathryn turned to Jean-Luc and said, "That smile was for you."

He chuckled and shook his head. "Not this time, my dear Admiral. But I love seeing it, just the same."

Beverly came over and opened her arms when she saw Kathryn. "Look at you! It's only been three weeks and look how you've grown!"

Begrudgingly, Kathryn gave her friend a hug and asked, "Is that supposed to be a compliment?"

"Of course it is," she said as she pulled back to get a better look.

Jean-Luc interrupted with, "I'll leave the two of you to catch up, shall I?"

Beverly squeezed his hand and said, "Thank you for walking her down."

"You're most welcome." He nodded towards Kathryn and said, "It was lovely chatting with you. Perhaps since I'll be around for awhile, we can do it again?"

"I'd love to. Thank you."

He inclined his head and bowed out of the medical bay.

Beverly said, "Either that baby has had a huge growth spurt or your dress at the wedding hid the baby bump a little too well."

"I think you're right about the growth spurt. He's been feeling heavier with each passing day."

"May I take a look?" Beverly asked hopefully.

"If you'd like, but I came for a visit, not an exam."

"We can do both," she said as she had Kathryn walk over to the main biobed.

"I hope you're not expecting me to get up on that thing."

"No, of course not," Beverly said as she opened a tri-corder and started scanning.

Kathryn noted, "I've always had to jump a little to get on these beds, and as precarious as this baby's placenta is, I don't think that's such a good idea."

Beverly's expression changed from joyful to serious as she continued to scan. "When did Dr. Zimmerman see you last?"

"Four days ago, but he's making a call to my house tomorrow morning. Why?"

“You shouldn’t be on your feet, Kathryn.” Beverly looked up, worried. “Have you had any spotting today?”

“Yes, but I do every day.”

“And pain?”

Kathryn rubbed the ever-present soreness in her side. “It’s not sharp like when the placenta has torn.”

“Regardless, it has separated again.” Beverly motioned for a male nurse to come over. “Would you help me get the Admiral onto the bed, lying on her left?”

“Of course, doctor.”

Kathryn grimaced as Justin and the nurse gently lifted her up and helped her lie on her side. “A step-stool would have sufficed.”

Beverly nodded as she stood at a terminal at the end of the biobed. She was keying in a connection to Starfleet medical, and when Joe’s image appeared on the other end, she said, “Good afternoon, Dr. Zimmerman.”

“Dr. Crusher, a pleasant surprise. To what do I owe the honor?”

“*Our* patient is visiting the Enterprise at Utopia Planetia, and she’s in need of medical attention.”

“Oh? I don’t recall having cleared her to travel off planet.”

Kathryn rolled her eyes.

“I’d be surprised if you had. The placenta shows a five percent perforation. Before I send her home, may I have your permission to do surgery?”

“You don’t need my permission, doctor. But perhaps if you tell her to stay off her feet, she’ll actually listen.”

“I’ll certainly try.” Beverly cast a glance over at Kathryn before turning back to the screen. “I’ll send you a report when I’m finished, and you may want to follow up with her this evening. I’m not sure this is going to hold.”

“Thank you. I’ll be sure to see her as soon as her shuttle arrives. Zimmerman out.”

Kathryn complained, “Now he’s going to be even more on my case, just because he knows I’m outnumbered.”

Beverly picked up a medical instrument and pointed it at the womb. “Why is it that people in high-ranking positions are the most difficult patients?”

“Simple. It’s because we’re impervious to anything that might weaken us.”

“Mmhmm,” Beverly hummed as she fought a smile. “I’m not even going to dignify that with a response.”

Kathryn watched for a moment and then asked, “Why don’t you think it’ll hold? It has the last two times.”

“The uterus is so thin in this one area that it can’t handle the weight of the placenta. The best thing you can do for it is to take the strain off of it, and the only way to do that is to lie on your right side.”

“I’m wearing the maternity belt that Dr. Zimmerman suggested.”

“That helps with the weight of the baby on your ligaments and your back muscles, but not for the internal pull that’s causing this recurring tear.”

“We’d hoped that we could keep this pregnancy going for another month. Is that going to be possible?”

“If you stay in bed. Otherwise, the bleeding is going to put both you and the baby in jeopardy.” Beverly clicked off the tool and called out to the nurse, “We need to turn her over.”

As they moved her, Kathryn tried not to be petulant about it. “What else do you need to do?”

“You’re anemic and your blood sugar is low. Have you noticed a drop in energy?”

“My energy is down so much that I usually only notice a change when it’s up.”

Beverly shook her head. “Kathryn, this is not good.”

She glanced up at Justin who was watching her. “You can say it.”

“What’s that?” he asked.

“That you were right. Evidently, I did not look well.”

“No, you didn’t, but it wouldn’t have been the first time you’ve almost fainted on me. I was prepared to catch you.”

As Beverly administered a series of hyposprays and ran various medical instruments over her, Kathryn asked, “Find anything new?”

“I’m worried that it has only taken four days for your body chemistry to get into such a state.”

“So you’re saying I need to see Dr. Zimmerman more often?”

“If this is normal, then, yes.”

“Chakotay hasn’t been checking me as often lately because I’ve been doing better.”

Beverly frowned at her readings. “Dr. Zimmerman will be able to tell for sure, but I’m going to suggest he check on you daily for a week to chart the changes. If you were my patient, I’d ask you to wear a monitor.”

“He’s asked to put one on me, but... well, I’m married.”

Beverly froze and then asked Justin, “Would you excuse us for a moment, Lieutenant?”

“Of course, doctor,” he said as he went to another part of sickbay.

“Kathryn, when was the last time you had sexual relations?”

“That’s really none...”

“Just answer the question.”

“Yesterday.”

She sighed and rubbed her forehead. “That needs to stop. Now.”

“It hasn’t hurt anything before.”

“As the baby grows larger, the uterus is stretched, and yours is already weak on your right side. Plus, you’ve already lost your mucous plug and you’re dilated two centimeters.”

“Dilated?” she asked, completely surprised.

“Most women are during their last month of pregnancy, but you’re only seven months along.”

She took a sobering breath. “All right, no sex.”

“No matter how careful you are, the contractions and the physical motion involved are not good for your placenta.

“I’ve got it,” she replied, showing her irritation.

Beverly laid her hand on her patient’s hip. “Kathryn, I know this is hard to hear.”

“Don’t worry about it. I knew this was coming, but things were going so well that I hoped it would turn out to be a normal pregnancy after all.”

“I’m afraid not,” she said sympathetically. “My advice as both your friend and a doctor is that you need to go home, crawl in bed, and let that handsome husband of yours take care of you for the next month.”

“He’s been taking care of me for the better part of the last year.”

“From what I’ve seen, he’s very good at it.”

Kathryn sighed. “Some marriage.”

“If it’s too much for him, you can always request another home nurse.”

“He’d never admit that it was too much, and I don’t know that I’d like having someone around all the time.”

“Well, think about it. Dr. Zimmerman will give you instructions on what ‘bed rest’ entails, and I urge you to follow his instructions down to the letter. Within a month, I suspect that your uterus will show signs of rupturing and then it’ll be time to have this baby.”

Kathryn closed her eyes and nodded, fighting off the emotional weight she felt upon hearing this news.

Beverly took her hand and quietly asked, “Are you okay?”

“No... yes... I don’t know. I’m worried and excited and scared and...”

“And those are perfectly normal emotions for an expectant mother.”

Kathryn opened her eyes and gave Beverly an exasperated look.

“What?”

“I was just listening to Jean-Luc describe how annoying it is to be told that what we’re feeling is *normal*.”

“Oh, okay.” Beverly rolled her eyes. “Then let me assure you that you’re the only woman who has ever felt excited and worried about a new baby.”

Kathryn pushed herself up and said with sincerity, “Thanks for your help.”

“You’re welcome.” She helped Kathryn slide down off the bed. “I’m going to walk with you to the shuttle. Lieutenant?”

Justin came back and asked, "Ready to go?"

"Yeah," she said tiredly. "We should get back."

Beverly packed up a med-kit and tapped her combadge. "Crusher to Picard."

Jean-Luc's voice came over the com system. "Go ahead, Beverly."

"Permission to leave the ship? I'm going to walk with the Admiral to her shuttle."

"Granted. When you return, would you stop by my quarters for a moment?"

"Of course. Crusher out."

Kathryn secretly hoped he'd talk to Beverly about marriage, but she also felt saddened that her impending bed rest would mean she wouldn't be able to attend a wedding. However, the health and wellbeing of her child took precedence, and Kathryn knew she was blessed to have been able to do all that she had.

Part 38 - "Bump"

By Dawn

Summary:

Rated: PG

As soon as her shuttle set down in their front yard, Kathryn breathed a sigh of relief. Beverly had given Justin implicit instructions about making the shuttle ride as smooth as possible to avoid jostling her patient. Kathryn had been sequestered to the back so she could lie down and avoid any undue stress on her weakened uterus from the gravitational changes.

The hatch opened and Chakotay rushed inside. "Are you okay? Dr. Joe is here."

She held up her hand to forestall his concerns. "I'm fine, but I've been directed to go to bed and not get up until this baby is coming out."

Joe came into the shuttle and said, "That's not exactly how I'd put it, but that's the basic idea."

"Should I carry her into the house?" Chakotay asked.

"No," she replied, "But you can help me to my feet."

“Of course.” He put his arm around her back as they walked up to the house, Chakotay and Joe talking about her care.

Instead of listening, Kathryn tried to get an eyeful of her front yard and of her beautiful rose garden because she knew she wouldn’t be seeing them for awhile. She acknowledged Chakotay when he spoke to her, but otherwise, she let them fuss over her as they got her out of her uniform, into pajamas, and settled in bed.

After Joe left, Chakotay went downstairs to prepare dinner, and Kathryn closed her eyes, letting a few tears fall. It wasn’t that she minded doing what was best for the baby, she was just sad that her ordeal so many months earlier continued to impact her life to such a degree.

“Hey,” Chakotay said softly as he sat next to her on the bed.

She pushed the tears away. “Thought you were downstairs.”

Gently, he asked, “You didn’t want me to see this?”

“There’s no reason for me to be upset.”

He leaned forward and placed a kiss on her cheek. “There are a lot of reasons for you to be upset, and it’s okay for you to show it.”

“Thanks.” She took a shuddering breath and said, “I think we should get a nurse.”

“Okay.”

Looking up at him, she asked, “That’s all? No argument?”

“Do you want an argument?”

“Of course not. I just don’t want to burden you, and I expected you to say you could handle it.”

He tucked a lock of hair behind her ear and smiled. “I can definitely handle your care, and any whining, complaining, and arguing that you can dish out. But if a nurse will help you be more comfortable with this, then we can get one.”

“I feel like an invalid.”

“It’s temporary, and you happen to be the coziest incapacitated admiral I’ve ever seen.”

“Oh? How many incapacitated admirals have you seen?”

He thought for a moment. “Probably just the one.”

“At least I like this room.”

“You don’t have to stay in here. Didn’t you hear what Joe said?”

“Honestly, I wasn’t listening,” she confessed.

“For now, you can walk to anywhere in the house, but once you arrive, you need to be still.”

“On my right side.”

“Correct.”

“Beverly said we can’t have sex anymore.”

“Well, she’s wrong,” he noted.

“How do you figure?”

Drawing his finger along the edge of her top, he replied, “We can’t have it for a couple of months.”

“That’s what I said.”

“No, you said ‘anymore.’ That implies ever.”

Kathryn rolled her eyes and said, “Shouldn’t you go check on dinner?”

He winked at her and planted a kiss on her lips. “I’ll be back soon. Don’t go anywhere.”

As he left, Kathryn muttered, “Cheeky.”

“I heard that.”

Before the Pioneer left orbit, Kathryn put in a call to their sickbay and asked Lieutenant Fields if she’d like to be reassigned. She jumped at the chance to be Kathryn’s personal nurse again and was at the house within the hour.

They got into a good rhythm of caring for her, Chakotay and Patty dividing up the tasks in a way that made Kathryn feel most comfortable. But after a week of lying around in her pajamas, she decided that she’d had enough.

When Monday morning arrived, Kathryn rolled out of bed and stated, “I’m getting dressed.”

Patty put her hands on her hips. “And what are your plans after that?”

“I don’t know, but I’m not staying in this bed.”

“Fair enough. Want to take a bath first?”

“No, I’m going to take a shower. Alert Starfleet Medical, would you? Admiral Janeway is about to stand on her own two feet for fifteen entire minutes.”

“As you wish,” she replied as Kathryn walked into the bathroom.

Chakotay came into the bedroom and asked, “What’s up?”

“She’s taking a shower.”

“Really? Not a bath?”

Patty nodded. “That’s what she said.”

“Does she need help?”

Kathryn stuck her head out the bathroom door and stated emphatically, “No, I do not need help, thank you very much.”

He held up his hands in surrender. “Okay, I’ll go make your breakfast.”

“Thank you,” she grumbled, and then paused to add, “Good morning.”

“Good morning to you, too.” With a wink, he said, “See you downstairs.”

Patty began to pull the sheets off the bed. “Since you won’t need these today, I thought I’d throw them in the refresher.”

With a sigh, Kathryn replied, “A good idea. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, dear.”

Kathryn started to close the bathroom door, and then thought better of it, leaving it open a crack. After turning on the water, she shed her robe and stepped under the warm spray. It felt wonderful and she relished every moment of it.

Later, when she and Patty came downstairs, Kathryn saw that Chakotay had rearranged the furniture and pillows to make a comfortable spot for her. She smiled and said, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He gave her a soft kiss and whispered, “You look beautiful.”

“And you’re biased,” she said as she gingerly sat down and had Patty help her scoot back into the spot he’d arranged for her. “After this is over, I’m never lying on my right side again.”

With barely contained excitement, Chakotay announced, “I have a surprise for you.”

“Oh? I kind of like surprises.”

“I’ll be right back.” He went into the kitchen and returned with a tray of food, a very odd looking tray in the shape of an amoeba.

“Where’d you find this?”

His eyes brightened. “I made it.”

“When?”

“While you’ve been sleeping.” He slid it right up next to her so that it extended over her belly and made everything on the tray within reach.

“Impressive,” she said as she situated it. “This is perfect.”

“I’m glad you like it. I’m going to make a book stand for it next.”

A vibrant warmth infused her from her chest all the way down to her toes. “This is almost as thoughtful as the bathtub.”

He grinned as he made a final adjustment to its placement. “I aim to please. Enjoy your breakfast.”

“Thank you, honey.”

“You’re welcome,” he said as he walked back over to the kitchen. “There’s a comm message from Beverly waiting for you.”

After eating a bite, she asked, “Did you listen to it?”

“No, it’s for you.” He brought her computer terminal over and held it since there was no room on the tray.

“Thanks.” She keyed in her code and played the message.

Beverly said, “Kathryn, I’m sending you a recorded message so that I don’t accidentally wake you. If you don’t have any plans today, I was hoping I could come see you. Play some cards? Do some knitting? I have the day off and not a thing to do. Plus, there’s something I need to talk to you about. Crusher out.”

“I wonder if he finally asked.”

Chakotay replied, “Wonder if who asked what?”

“Remember the so-called business that Jean-Luc wanted to talk to me about at the wedding?”

“Yes.”

“He wanted to know if I’d officiate at a wedding. His wedding, to be precise.”

“And he hadn’t talked to Beverly, yet?”

“Nope,” she said as she took a bite of toast. “Mum’s the word.”

“Of course. Not a peep.”

“I don’t have my commbadge. Would you call up for me?”

“Sure.” He tapped his badge and said, “Captain Chakotay to Starfleet Command.”

“Go ahead, Captain.”

“Please connect me with Dr. Beverly Crusher on the Enterprise.”

“Right away, sir. Stand by.”

While they waited, Chakotay said, “It’s nice to have these privileges, don’t you think?”

“No doubt,” Kathryn said with a laugh.

Beverly’s voice said, “Crusher here, Captain. How is your wife today?”

“She’s fine, but not wearing her badge.”

Kathryn said, “I would love to have some company today. Are you sure it’s no trouble?”

“Of course not. I only wished I could’ve come sooner.”

“Well, come on down whenever you’re ready. Have you had breakfast?”

“It’s almost ten,” Beverly replied.

“Is it?” Kathryn asked. “My schedule is off. All this lounging around.”

“Well, pour me a cup of coffee. I’ll be right there. Crusher out.”

Chakotay said, "I'll go meet her outside."

Only a few minutes later, Beverly came in and plopped down near Kathryn's feet. "I have a bone to pick with you."

"And hello to you, too." Glancing up as Patty took her tray, she said, "Thank you."

"You're welcome, dear."

Beverly smiled at Patty. "Nice to see you again, Lieutenant."

"And you, as well, Doctor." Patty bit back a smile and said, "I'll just leave the two of you alone."

Once they were by themselves, Beverly drummed her fingers on the back of the couch. "So, last week after you left, I went to Jean-Luc's quarters. He hemmed and hawed around, showed me a new picture of the vineyard, asked how my day was, and eventually kissed me goodnight. I thought it was odd, but considering what he's been through, I dismissed it."

"I see," Kathryn replied with her best poker face. "And how is his odd behavior my fault?"

"I'm getting to that." She cleared her throat and gave Kathryn a stern look. "So the next night, he invited me over for dinner. I show up and he's got soft music playing, candles, casual attire, and I think maybe he wants... well, you know... what I told you not to do for the time being."

"And did he?"

"No!" Leaning forward, she said, "The conversation was as dull as it was the night before, but with a huge elephant in the room in the shape of a romantic dinner."

"Not even a simple kiss goodnight?"

Beverly shrugged and looked away. "Well, it was a little less simple than the night before."

Kathryn smirked. "Go on."

"All week, he's been doing such odd little things, like inviting me to join him in checking the condition of the arboretum. He never checks on the arboretum, and the whole time, he chattered on and on about the most inconsequential of things. This went on for days, Kathryn," she said while narrowing her eyes at her friend.

"Again, why is this my fault?"

"Because if you'd been straight with me, I could've helped the poor man along! Have you any idea how long I've been waiting for this?"

“No, can’t say that I do.”

“Eleven Years!” she stated. “Our relationship has stopped and started so many times that I can’t count them all. I’d just about had enough with his dalliances when about a year ago, he came to me and said that regardless of the many women he’s been fond of, his heart belongs to me.”

“That’s really sweet.”

“A Year Ago!”

“Well, he’s a man who doesn’t like to rush into things.”

Beverly gave her the evil eye, and then continued, “So, yesterday, he invites me to accompany him to his vineyard. We had a wonderful day together, and just when we were about to leave, he told me that there was something he wanted to talk to me about and that he wasn’t sure how to start.”

“And you didn’t figure it out?”

“No. I thought maybe he was trying to tell me that he was going to retire. You know, this latest mission really affected him. With the way he’d been acting, I thought anything was possible.”

“So...?” Kathryn urged her to continue.

“He started rambling about timing and stability and family. I had no idea what he was talking about until he blurted out, ‘Would you marry me?’ It came out of nowhere!”

“And your response?”

“Well, I was dumbfounded, and then, like an idiot, I asked him to repeat the question.”

Kathryn grinned. “Did he?”

“Yes, and the second time, he got down on one knee and did it properly.” Beverly couldn’t help but smile. “And I said, ‘Yes.’”

“Ohhhh,” Kathryn gushed. “You’re going to have to come here so I can hug you.”

Beverly laughed and they carefully embraced. “So, will you help me plan a wedding?”

“I’d love to.”

“I thought it might give you something to do, and it seems that you’ve already been asked to officiate.”

“Only if you want me to, and I’m surprised he told you that part.”

“Once I agreed, he told me all about how he’d talked to you at Deanna’s wedding and how he wasn’t going to follow through, but you urged him to. Thank you for that, by the way. You have no idea how easily he gets derailed on all things romantic.”

“After eleven years, I can imagine.”

“I can’t believe you didn’t even give me a hint.”

“And destroy the romance?”

Sincerely, Beverly said, “Thank you, Kathryn.”

“You’re welcome. Do you think you can wait until after this baby is born to have the wedding?”

“Absolutely. Enterprise will be in space dock for a few months. Plus, I’d love to have Will and Deanna here for it. I don’t know how long they’ll be at Romulus.”

“Romulus?” she asked with surprise. “When did they leave?”

“Three days ago. I assumed that Admiral Khurma would’ve told you.”

“No,” she sighed. “I’ve been waiting for his call regarding the next step.”

“Would you not have sent Titan?”

“Will would’ve been my first choice. It’s just frustrating to be stuck here and to not know what’s going on.”

“How are you feeling, by the way?”

“Sore, achy, crabby.”

Beverly patted Kathryn’s leg. “Well, let’s see what I can do to cheer you up. I brought a wedding planning guide, my rather pathetic knitting project, and a deck of cards.”

“Wedding, first.”

Smiling brightly, Beverly replied, “I was hoping you’d say that.”

Over the next couple of days, Kathryn threw herself into working with Beverly on catering, flowers, and music, but once she’d done all she could do, she was left with nothing to distract her again. She tried reading a book, but ended up staring off into nothingness.

Chakotay moved into her sightline. “Are you awake?”

“Unfortunately.”

He sat down and put her feet in his lap, gently caressing her calves. “I think we’ve got to take some action before things become dire around here.”

“Dire?” She furrowed her eyebrows at him.

“You’re getting depressed.”

She rolled her eyes. “No, I’m not. I’m bored.”

Tilting his head, he asked, “You sure?”

“Aren’t I always?”

“I have a suggestion, if you’re interested.”

“I’m all ears... and belly,” she added, rubbing the baby bump.

He smiled and joined her in rubbing the bump. “I think we need some visitors. Someone you can look forward to seeing each day, just like when you were in the hospital.”

She shrugged. “I suppose. It was good to have Beverly here.”

“Most of our friends are worried about bothering you.”

“They needn’t be concerned.”

“I know.” He squeezed her toes affectionately. “I took the liberty of making arrangements. Phoebe is coming over for lunch and will stay for a few hours.”

“Katie, too?”

“She’s spending the afternoon with Gretchen.”

“All right. What does Phoebe want to do?”

“Talk? Whatever you want, I suppose.”

Kathryn wiggled her toes against his stomach and smiled. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” The doorbell rang and he said, “That must be her, now.”

Patty called out, “I’ll get it.”

Chakotay noted, "Patty's nice to have around. A good idea."

"I have one of those every now and again."

"Yes, you do." He got up and said, "I'll put lunch on the table."

Phoebe walked in and plopped down in a chair. "So, Katie. What's new with you?"

"Oh, nothing much. Just lying around like a bump on a log."

"That's my sister – the laziest bump in the galaxy. Too bad she's not some famous admiral who saved mankind from the bad guys."

"Nah, you don't want someone like that in your family. Too risky."

"Who says I don't like a little risk?"

Kathryn raised her eyebrows. "Your junior high gymnastics coach."

"Pffft," Phoebe waved it off. "I much preferred painting to jumping around on a trampoline."

"Did I tell you I tried a little painting on Voyager?"

"No. How'd you do?"

"Eh," Kathryn shrugged. "It was fun, but the finished project wasn't anything to write home about."

"Obviously, or I would've known."

Chakotay had returned and said, "I thought it was a lovely picture of some very interesting flowers and was not at all happy that you recycled it."

"They were supposed to be roses."

He gave her a wink. "Lunch is ready. Would you like to eat at the table or in here?"

"At the table. I'm getting stiff."

Patty came over and helped her move. Once Kathryn was re-settled, the nurse said, "I'll be in my room if you need me."

"Aren't you going to have lunch?" Chakotay asked.

"I'll eat later. I don't want to interrupt."

Kathryn pointed to a chair and said, “Sit. You’re more than welcome to eat with us anytime, even when we have guests.”

“Are you sure?” Patty said hesitantly.

“I’ll let you know when we need privacy.”

“All right. Thank you.”

They talked about Katie’s precociousness for awhile, and then about the painting that Phoebe was currently working on – a commissioned piece for the lobby of an office building in Chicago.

Towards the end of lunch, Phoebe asked, “So, have you got all the baby shower gifts put away? Are you ready?”

Kathryn replied, “They’re in the nursery, but I haven’t done anything with them.”

Chakotay said, “It’s on my list of things to do.”

“When the Romulan situation arose, I set it all aside.”

Phoebe asked, “May I help?”

“Of course,” Kathryn said, noticing that Patty looked eager to help. “And I take it you’d like to help, too?”

“Only if I wouldn’t be in the way.”

“Not a bit,” Phoebe smiled. “Is the glider rocker put together, Katie? Maybe you could sit and order us around?”

“I’m sure you could handle it without me.”

Chakotay elbowed his wife. “She’s here to visit with you, not be another room while you continue your imitation of a bump on a log.”

“You heard that, did you?” Kathryn asked with a slight smirk.

He squeezed her shoulder and placed a kiss on the side of her head. “I did, and you’re a lovely bump if I do say so myself.”

Kathryn asked, “Patty, what do you think? Can I sit up for a little while longer without damaging anything?”

“We’ll position you to take the pressure off.”

“I wonder if I’ll be able to stand up straight after this is over.” She leaned to the right. “I might be developing a permanent list to starboard.”

“Don’t you worry, love,” Chakotay replied as he stood up to clear the table. “I’ll get you straightened out, one way or another.”

Kathryn almost choked on her water and Phoebe laughed.

After lunch, the three women moved upstairs and got started working on the nursery. Kathryn had chosen a teddy bear theme, and B’Elanna had given her a giant teddy bear wearing an environmental suit to work in a little of the space theme as well.

From her contorted, yet surprisingly comfortable position in the glider, Kathryn watched as Patty and Phoebe took the gifts out of their bags and put things away. She made note of where they placed things, but for the most part, let the two other ladies make the decisions.

After Patty put the bedding on the crib and situated a couple of small bears and stuffed planets in the corner, Kathryn found herself gazing at the crib with affection. She caressed her ever-growing belly and smiled as she felt her son moving around, having just gotten a dose of energy from her lunch.

She thought back to when she’d felt the first flutter of life within. It had been in late June, and she had been standing on the deck, watching the sunset when a ripple of movement had taken her by surprise. Chakotay had come right over and, although he hadn’t felt what she had, it had been a wonderful moment of love between them – a memory she’d cherish forever.

“Katie? Did you hear me?” Phoebe asked.

“Hmm?” She moved her gaze to her sister.

“I just asked where the other stuff is.”

“What other stuff?”

“The diapers and other things you need. Are they in one of the guest rooms?” she asked as she went to look.

Kathryn called out, “The list you made is in the kitchen by the replicator.”

Phoebe appeared in the doorway, along with Chakotay carrying his tool bag. She put her hands on her hips and asked, “You haven’t gotten all of that stuff, yet?”

Chakotay asked, “What stuff?”

Kathryn replied, “She gave me a list of things for the baby, and I put it by the replicator. I figure we’ll replicate it when we need it.”

Looking around, Chakotay said, “I thought you got all the stuff you needed at the shower.”

Phoebe looked at Patty and the two women shook their heads. “No, I gave her a list after the shower that had everything she didn’t receive.”

“Oh,” he replied as he came inside. “Well, it’s no problem. I’ll put this curtain up and then I’ll go get whatever we need.”

With a patient sigh, Phoebe asked, “May I go look for the list?”

“Sure. It should be right there on a civilian PADD.”

Kathryn looked up at her husband, admiring his physique as he worked on putting up the curtain rod. With his arms extended above his head, his short sleeves had slid back just enough that she could see his strong triceps flexing with the slight exertion.

He glanced down and noticed her staring at him. “Hi.”

“Hi,” she replied, openly adoring him. “I love you, you know.”

“I’m a very lucky man.”

“I’m glad you think so.”

Patty cleared her throat and attracted their attention. “Would you like me to press the wrinkles out of the curtain before we hang it?”

“Sure, thank you,” Kathryn replied.

After Patty left the room, Chakotay whispered, “I think it’s good to have her around – makes it easier to avoid making love to you.”

She tapped the hard plastic monitor attached to her side. “Don’t forget Joe is watching us, too.”

“True.” He leaned down and gave her a lingering kiss. “And in case you didn’t know, I love you, too.”

“You have a thing for bumps, do you?”

His gaze dropped to her breasts. “I can think of two in particular.”

Shooing him away, she laughed. “You’re a trouble-maker.”

“You’re right. I helped make that baby, and I bet you he’s going to be in trouble a lot. I sure was as a kid.”

“That doesn’t surprise me in the least.”

Phoebe came back into the room with her list and was ready to make notes. “All right, let’s go through this and you can decide what you want. Chakotay, I’m happy to shop for her if you’d like.”

“You wouldn’t mind?” he asked.

“Not in the least. I’ll take Katie and Mom and we’ll make a day of it.” As soon as she finished her sentence, she bit her lips and looked at Kathryn. “Or maybe I’ll just get it done by myself.”

Kathryn frowned. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t want you to miss out on a girl’s day, so I’ll just get the necessities and we can all go together after baby arrives.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. Katie will probably have a lot of fun with it.”

Patty came back in and asked, “Are you ready for the curtain, Chakotay?”

“Yes, thank you,” he replied as he took it from her.

Phoebe asked, “Are you going to breast feed or go the bottle route?”

“Breast feed,” she replied.

“All right. That means I can cross a lot of this off. You’ve got everything you need for bathing him, but nothing for grooming.”

“Grooming?” Chakotay asked. “He won’t be shaving for a few years, Phoebe.”

Patty said, “A baby’s fingernails grow fast, and they tend to scratch up their little faces. Also, you’ll want a thermometer, gas relief drops, diaper rash cream, and dry skin ointment.”

“I’ll add the ointment,” Phoebe said. “What color do you want for your crib sheets and receiving blankets?”

“We already have a sheet and a blanket,” Kathryn said as she pointed to the crib.

“You’ve got one of each. You’ll need a lot more than that, especially if he spits up much. Katie sure did. I was going through blankets and burp cloths like nobody’s business.”

Kathryn shrugged. “Whatever you think is fine.”

“You’ve got four outfits, but I think we can go shopping for more once he’s born and we know how big he is.”

Patty added, “He’ll be a preemie, so we’re going to need smaller sizes than these.”

“That includes smaller diapers, too. I didn’t think of that,” Phoebe noted.

Kathryn felt a sudden surge of sadness, but tried to hide it. She closed her eyes and ran her fingers into her hair. “I really think we can replicate this stuff as needed.”

“Oh, there’s no doubt you’ll need these things, Katie. Might as well save on replicator usage.”

“Is that a concern?” Chakotay asked.

“Oh, yeah,” Phoebe replied. “I read an article that overuse of replicators may be harmful in the long run.”

“That doesn’t compute,” Kathryn said with a frown. “Replicators produce no harmful emissions, and, if they’re functioning as they should be, the food and other items they produce are perfectly fine.”

“It’s just something I read,” she said with an air of dismissal. “What about onesies and sleepers? Any special requests?”

“No,” Kathryn replied.

“I’m guessing you don’t care about style of pacifiers, either?”

“There’s more than one?” Chakotay asked.

While looking out the window, Kathryn quietly replied, “Whatever you think, Phoebe. Or get what Katie used.”

“Okay,” Phoebe said hesitantly. “I’ll see what I can find with bears or stars.”

She smiled at her sister and then went back to looking out at her rose garden.

Phoebe stayed for a little while longer to play cards and tell her sister about what to expect after childbirth. Kathryn asked a few questions, but mostly just listened to stories about Katie. Afterwards, she took a two hour nap in bed and then came downstairs for dinner.

“Hi there, beautiful. Sleep well?”

“Mostly,” she replied with a warm smile. “I’ll sleep better tonight in your arms, though.”

He pulled her into a hug and said, “I’m already looking forward to it.”

Patty waited until they were finished and said, “Admiral, you’d better lie back down since you’re sore.”

Chakotay asked, “Placenta?”

Kathryn nodded as she carefully slid into her spot on the couch. “There just might be something to this weakened uterus diagnosis.”

He stood over the back of the couch and stroked her hair away from her forehead. “How bad is it?”

“Oh, not too bad, but it’s not something I can ignore.”

Patty said, “There’s no tearing, but we’re keeping an eye on it because she’s a little weak. Dr. Zimmerman will be here in the morning to check on her, although he wants us to contact him if the pain gets worse.”

Chakotay squeezed Kathryn’s shoulder and said, “All right, then. I think we’ll have dinner in here tonight. Patty, would you get the trays?”

“I’d be happy to.”

Once they were settled with their meals, Chakotay asked, “Is there anything else we should do to get ready for baby’s arrival?”

Kathryn looked at him and decided to share what was on her mind. “He’s going to be very small.”

“Yes,” he replied patiently.

“I’ve known that, of course, but it just hit me this afternoon that, as tiny as the clothes we have are, he’s going to be even smaller.”

With care, Patty said, “Admiral, he’s going to be just fine.”

“I know he will be,” she stated with certainty. “But it got me thinking about that big crib. It’s too large for him, and I want him closer. At least in the beginning.”

Chakotay smiled. “A smaller crib in our room?”

“A bassinet,” Patty suggested.

“I think so,” Kathryn said, feeling a little better. “This house is so big. I think he’d like being with us.”

Patty asked, “Is his size why you were uncertain about what clothes to get for him?”

“Hmm?” Once she realized what the question was, she shook her head. “No, it just seems unimportant whether his pajamas are blue or yellow or green.”

“I suppose not,” she replied.

Kathryn caught Chakotay sharing a look with Patty and asked, “What’s going on?”

He didn’t hesitate before explaining, “We’re just worried that you seemed detached. I wanted to make sure you’re okay.”

“I’m not detached. I just can’t get excited about the color of onesies. I mean, it’s good to have them, and I’m glad we’ll be well supplied, but it’s just a shirt.”

“You make a good point,” Chakotay agreed.

“And if the pacifier doesn’t work, we’ll replicate another. I can’t say what type he’s going to want, and it’s not like he’ll be able to tell us, either.”

Patty said, “I apologize if I was too forward, Admiral.”

Kathryn waved off her concern. “I’m fine leaving you and Phoebe to it. You’re quite capable, and I’m happy to delegate. Maybe it’s the former starship captain in me, but I don’t need to be involved in the running of the ship just so long as I know that the supplies are on board.”

Chakotay nodded his approval. “Now you sound more like yourself. I’m glad we cleared that up.”

“Always good to get to the bottom of these things,” she asserted. “So, remind me to contact Phoebe after we’re finished eating. I’m hoping that she won’t mind choosing a bassinet.”

“I think she’d like that a lot,” Patty sighed happily. “I’d suggest a functional one with storage underneath rather than a frilly one.”

“Fantastic idea.” Kathryn pointed her fork in Patty’s direction. “If you’d like the job of picking one out, it’s yours.”

“Oh, may I?” she asked eagerly.

“Absolutely.” She looked at her husband and said, “Now, did you say something earlier about brownies?”

“As a matter of fact, I did.”

After Dr. Joe left the next morning, Kathryn felt a lot better and was ready to plan her day. However, Chakotay wouldn't tell her who was coming over to visit. He thought she'd have more to anticipate that way, but instead, she was getting particularly annoyed with him and didn't hesitate to point that out.

When the doorbell rang, he smiled mischievously as he went to answer it.

As soon as their guest appeared, Kathryn sighed with relief. “Lanna, I was hoping it'd be you.”

“Now that's a greeting I could get used to,” B'Elanna said as she sat down. “Why do you want to see me?”

“I want to know everything that's going on. Don't leave a thing out.”

She laughed. “Getting bored, are we?”

“I'm feeling cut off from the action. How are repairs going for the Enterprise? Is it going to take a complete rebuild of the hull?”

“We're removing the outer hull plating on most of the bow and installing a new frame forward of the beam. The tricky part is that the compression of the impact affected the mid-line beam as well. We might end up rebuilding that from the inside.”

“You're right, that will be tricky. You'd have to gut, what? Three or four decks?”

“Yeah. Sometimes I wonder if we'd be better off starting with a new frame from scratch, but as long as we don't get ahead of ourselves, I think we'll enjoy the challenge of it.”

“Mhmm.” Kathryn rubbed her chin as she gave it serious thought. “The first step would be to reroute the power relays.”

“I've been studying the schematics. Want me to draw a picture?”

“Great idea,” she replied enthusiastically. “Maybe I can help in some way.”

B'Elanna came into the kitchen to get what she needed for the illustration. Looking at Chakotay, she stuck her thumb up and then down in a request for feedback. He immediately gave her a thumbs up and a wink.

Once B'Elanna was back with Kathryn, Patty quietly asked, “What was the thumb for?”

He answered while chopping vegetables. “Before she came over, I asked B’Elanna if she could distract Kathryn for a little while. Get her mind on something besides the baby.”

“Ah, well, it seems to be working.” Patty listened to the ladies for a moment and then asked, “Do you understand what they’re talking about?”

He smiled with amusement. “Bits and pieces. When those two get their heads together, I usually steer clear because I know they’re way out of my league.”

“I’ve never seen her so animated.”

“She thrives on this kind of thing. Warp power, quantum mechanics, and stellar phenomenon in particular.”

Patty nodded thoughtfully, and then asked, “How long before she goes stir crazy without working?”

“I’m giving it a month after the baby is born.”

“But she plans to stay home until he starts grammar school.”

“Oh, I know what she’s planning. Once she’s got her mind set, she goes full speed ahead.”

“Can’t you talk her out of trying it?”

“No, but I can support whatever decision she has currently made, and then be responsive and understanding when she changes her mind.”

“You’re a patient man.”

“Maybe, but I’ve been by her side for almost nine years. I know her. The best thing to do right now is support her current goal and make sure she is aware of her options.”

“Would I be out of line if I offered to help with the baby?”

“Not at all, but don’t you want to go back to the Pioneer?”

“No, not really. The new doctor is a little brusque, and I was thinking about retiring anyway. I just turned sixty-five, and I’ve decided that I want to find something a little more enjoyable to fill my days. I really like working for you and the Admiral.”

Chakotay nodded. “I’m glad you do. If I may make a suggestion?”

“Of course.”

“Don’t retire, yet. The baby might need a nurse for awhile, and if Kathryn decides to return to work, Starfleet would provide a care-giver. It’d be more convenient to have someone with the rank of lieutenant than to have a civilian.”

“Good point.” Patty smiled. “I like the way you think.”

“Thank you, but don’t suggest anything to her right now. I’ll know when the time is right to introduce the idea.”

“I’m happy to leave it in your hands. Thank you.”

“No, Patty. Thank you. This might just work out best for all of us.”

Kathryn woke up to the sensation of someone touching her leg. She cracked her eyes open to see her husband sitting on the side of the bed and gazing at her with love in his eyes.

He said, “Good morning, beautiful.”

“Morning,” she yawned. “What time is it?”

“Not quite ten. How are you feeling?”

She repositioned her head and took inventory of her body. “A little weak, but breakfast will help.”

“What would you like?”

“I don’t care. Food doesn’t sound good, but I know I’ve got to eat.”

“Nauseous?”

“It’s not bad.” She held out her hand. “Help me up?”

“Gladly.” Once she was on her feet, he helped her to the bathroom. “After you’re dressed, Khurma would like to speak to you.”

“In person?”

“On the comm. I think he wants you to do something for him.”

“I wonder what?”

He shrugged. “Wouldn’t tell me, and believe me, I asked.”

“I’ve no doubt,” she gave him a wink in the reflection of the mirror as she washed her hands.
“Now, how about that breakfast?”

“I’ll get right on it. Do you want to get dressed while I get it ready?”

“Sure. Send Patty up, would you?”

“Right away.” He smiled at her as he left the room.

Twenty minutes later, Kathryn eased her way downstairs with Patty’s help. She gave Chakotay a tired smile as she scooted into her spot on the sofa.

He set the tray down in front of her. “Try the toast and eggs first to see if that helps your nausea. If it does, I’ll get you some yogurt and granola.”

“Thanks.” She squeezed his hand and said, “Patty gave me an anti-nausea hypo, but I’m not sure it’s working.”

Patty noted, “You’re nauseous because you’re hungry.”

Kathryn hummed an acknowledgement as she ate. It took her about half an hour, but once she finished, she felt a lot better. Chakotay brought a computer to her and then he and Patty left the room in case the content of the call was confidential.

As soon as his image came up, Khurma said with delight, “Kathryn! It’s good to see you. How are you feeling?”

“I’ve been better, but I’ve also been a lot worse.”

“With you, that gamut is extremely wide. Can you be more specific?”

She shrugged a little. “I don’t do well with inactivity, and although we anticipated this period of bed rest, it hasn’t exactly been an easy adjustment.”

“And physically?”

“A little weak, sore from inactivity, but my health is about the same.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“Chakotay thought you might need me for something?”

“Yes, ah... we have a little problem with the Romulans.”

“How little?”

“Very,” he nodded. “It doesn’t amount to much in the grander scheme of things, but there’s something you could do to smooth the waters.”

“All right, shoot.”

“Remember our friend Robam?”

“Has he resurfaced?”

“He has,” Khurma rubbed his neck. “And he wants to talk to you, not our people on the Titan.”

“Did you explain that I can’t come to Romulus right now?”

“Yes, but I’m not sure he believes me. He’s giving Riker the runaround, indirectly, and I think it’s because he doesn’t believe that this new captain has the authority to make decisions on behalf of the Federation.”

“I see. He wants an admiral.”

“Specifically, he wants you.” Khurma sighed. “Are you willing to have a com conversation with him?”

“If it’ll help.”

“I really think it would. If nothing else, you could put him at ease about your welfare.”

“All right,” she said with an understanding smile.

“I try to avoid suggesting to a woman how to handle her appearance, but in this case...”

“You don’t want me to look my best.”

He nodded. “You’ve read my mind.”

“And you’d like me to give Riker a glowing recommendation.”

Looking apologetic, he explained, “Robam hasn’t been elected as Praetor, but Riker says that he has asserted himself as an unofficial authority. The citizens appear to be following him and they’ll have an election within the month to re-establish the senate.”

Kathryn said, “Rabom is going to want it known that he and I have spoken... that we’re friends.”

“How would you like to handle that?”

“If needed, you can issue a press release with my name on it. Other than that, I’m not prepared to make any public appearances.”

“Agreed. I think that’s a reasonable solution.”

She held up a hand to indicate that she wasn’t done, yet. “However, I suspect that he’s going to ask for my involvement once I’m physically able to travel.”

“And what are your thoughts about that? We haven’t really talked.”

“I know,” she said with a sigh. “I haven’t talked to Chakotay about it, either, but I’m vacillating on whether or not I’d like to return to duty part time. Regardless, I’m not willing to travel in the near future.”

“Your diplomatic skills would be very useful to the Federation, even if done from Earth.”

“And I want Truov or whoever the new president is to establish his or her leadership without the public thinking that she’s relying on my advice.”

“I believe we could handle that,” he said with barely contained enthusiasm.

“My title would need to change. I can’t be an envoy if I’m not willing to travel.”

Khurma shrugged. “Oh, I don’t know about that. You’d still be representing the Federation. Once you’ve decided on your plans for sure, I’ll talk to President Truov and the rest of the admiralty about it. We’ll figure something out.”

“All right,” she said with a sigh. “I’d like to talk to Chakotay before we link up a conversation with Romulus. I assume we can do a live link?”

“Yes, we can. We made sure the Titan had the enhanced communication system before we sent it out there. I wish we’d done that on the Pioneer before you went.”

“As do I, Admiral.” She gave him an understanding nod. “I’ll call you back within the hour, and you can tell me how sickly I look before initiating the connection.”

He shook his head in amusement. “Talk to you then, Kathryn. Khurma out.”

Kathryn sighed to herself and then called out, “Honey?”

Chakotay poked his head out of the study. “Yes?”

“How much of that did you hear?”

He walked over slowly and asked, “How much of it did you want me to hear?”

“All of it.”

Sitting down with her, he said, “Then you’re in luck.”

Kathryn studied his expression for a clue about how he felt, but found nothing of note. “You’re not angry, so that’s good.”

“Angry?” he asked in surprise. “Why would I be angry?”

“Because I’m talking about going back to work, and I promised you that my commitment would be to motherhood.”

He took her hand and held it between both of his. “Kathryn, you promised yourself that, not me. I never asked you to become a stay-at-home mom.”

Her mouth dropped open slightly and then turned into a quirky smile. “I’m relieved.”

With a chuckle, he shook his head in amazement. “I love that you’re insisting on staying on Earth for awhile, but I know that can’t be a permanent arrangement. When the time comes that you go back into space, we’ll reassess our situation and decide how to manage our family together. I’d say that it all depends on the timing.”

“I like the way you think.” She squeezed his fingers and added softly, “But I’m not ready to go any time soon.”

“I know. We’ve still got some work to do to get you back to where you were, but try not to worry.”

“It’s been eight months.”

“Don’t forget that you’ve accomplished a lot this year. The Federation is in a better place because of your involvement, and I believe that if you continue to charm your way into the hearts of planetary leaders, things can only get better.”

“I read that enrollment at the academy this fall is up by fourteen percent,” she noted.

With a smile, he replied, “Yes, it is. You’ve done what you set out to do... consider this Federation re-energized.”

Cupping his cheek in her hand, she whispered, “Thank you for helping me do it.”

“My pleasure.” He leaned forward and kissed her tenderly. “Now, we need to make you look less vibrant, right?”

“I think if I just take off the light make-up I put on this morning, we’ll call it good.”

Chakotay reached up and pulled out the clip holding her ponytail. Arranging her hair in a relaxed manner on her shoulders, he said, “This makes you look more like a civilian.”

“More maternal?”

He shrugged. “Not necessarily. You’re going to be a great mother, no matter how you wear your hair.”

Laughing, she said, “Go get me a washcloth, would you? I’ve got a rather tenacious and determined Romulan to call.”

“Be right back.” He went into the downstairs bathroom and returned almost immediately with a warm cloth.

She began to wipe her face and asked, “Do you think Patty would be interested in staying with us to help with the baby?”

“Yes, I do, but you should talk to her.” He studied what she was doing. “Don’t you use some kind of special goop to get the make-up off?”

“Yes, it’s in our bathroom,” she replied as she wiped her face. “A pink bottle next to my cleanser by the sink.”

“Be right back.”

While he was gone, Kathryn took a moment to collect her thoughts regarding the call she was about to make. She almost expected Q to show up considering he was behind their first meeting, but there were no startling flashes of light, nor were there any haughty omnipotent beings lounging about in her great room.

Once Chakotay returned, she got herself looking as natural as she could, and then placed the call to Khurma. He approved of her appearance, but quickly added that she was still quite beautiful in her relaxed state.

She was placed on standby while the com-link with Romulus was set-up. While waiting, she changed her mind twice about whether she wanted Chakotay in the room or not. He had just returned and was staring out the window when the comm signaled that the uplink was being established.

“Admiral Janeway, a pleasure to see you,” Rabom said as the link came through.

“Mr. Rabom,” she said with a bow of her head. “It’s been too long since we spoke.”

“A year of Earth time, I believe.” He dipped his chin. “Admiral Khurma said that you are not well, and I must say that it appears he was correct.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Did you think he was hiding me?”

“The thought occurred to me because he was particularly evasive about your illness.”

“Well, it’s not exactly an illness. Have you been following the news media from Earth as much as you used to?”

“What I can of it.”

“I’m expecting a child within the month.”

“Oh,” he said with surprise and sat up a little straighter. “And for human females, does this impair your ability to function normally?”

“It can vary depending on each woman’s situation,” she replied. “Admiral Khurma conveyed your wish to have me lead the diplomatic team that is there with you.”

“Yes, I believe you and I established a nice friendship that I want to continue. Is it not possible for you to give birth on a starship?”

“Not for me,” she said with feigned regret. “Are you aware that I was abducted nine Earth months ago?”

“Oh, yes. I was heartbroken to hear about your suffering.”

Nodding her gratitude, she continued, “My injuries from that ordeal were quite extensive and are impairing my ability to function normally while pregnant. Therefore, I’m taking a leave of absence from Starfleet until my health has improved. I’m sure you understand.”

“I don’t like it, but I understand.”

“I don’t particularly like it, either, but for the sake of my son, I’m doing what is necessary.”

“Ah, yes. Family is very important. I have two sons myself.” He leaned forward as if getting a juicy piece of gossip. “Is that why you didn’t become President of the Federation?”

She smiled, but ignored the question. “Have you met President Truov?”

“Hmmm,” he shrugged. “She seems fair.”

“She is, and the people of the Federation respect her. You can trust her, too, Mr. Rabom.”

“And what about this new captain they’ve sent me? Riker? Surely your Federation could’ve placed a higher priority on this particular relationship?”

“Captain Riker is a dear friend of mine, and it was I who suggested that he be appointed to this mission. While he is a new captain, he has been the first officer on the Enterprise, our flagship, for fifteen years. There’s not a better man for the job.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m absolutely sure. Will and I have been colleagues since we were students at Starfleet Academy, and his wife and I are close, personal friends. You can trust him.”

“That may be, but the Romulan people have heard of you. They respect what you’ve done in turning the tide in your Federation.”

“Well, you can tell the Romulan people that I have sent my dear friend, Captain Will Riker, to establish the groundwork of a peaceful co-existence between the Star Empire and the Federation. When I am able, you and I can continue our conversations about ending the conflict with Vulcan and about establishing scientific partnerships.”

“Will you be coming to Romulus?” he asked hopefully.

“Not for awhile, but perhaps someday. My place is on Earth for awhile, but as we are doing today, we can continue to build our friendship from a distance.”

“I would enjoy that, Admiral. You are a delightful human.”

“And you are a delightful Romulan.” She smiled graciously. “May I contact you when I return to duty in a few months?”

“You may call me any time. And as a favor to you, I’ll get to know this Captain Riker. Any suggestions for getting the conversation with him off to a good start?”

“No, just be straightforward with him and he will do the same. You can let him know that you and I have spoken and that you’ve got my ear. On a personal note, Captain Riker is a fan of a type of music called American Jazz. I’ll have Admiral Khurma send you a sample.”

“Jolan tru, Admiral.” He bowed his head. “I look forward to hearing that your son is healthy and full of your spirit.”

“Thank you, Mr. Rabom. Julian tru.” She closed the connection and then closed her eyes, laying her head back on the pillow.

Chakotay set the computer aside and took her hand. “Kathryn?”

“I’m okay,” she sighed. “Just tired.”

“Sleep, then. I’ll fill Khurma in.”

“Thanks.” She curled up on her side and snuggled into the pillow. “Send him some jazz?”

“I’ll take care of it,” he said as he covered her with a blanket and placed a kiss on her temple.
“You were terrific.”

Part 39 - “A New Life”

By Dawn

Summary:

Rated:

Over the next few days, Kathryn had more visitors, but it was clear that her patience and stamina was waning. Three weeks into her convalescence, she found that it was nearly impossible to remain awake for more than two hours at a time.

One night, she was awakened by movement around her and opened her eyes to find the lamps on, Chakotay holding her hand, and Patty taking readings on the other side of her. “What’s...?” she started to ask.

Patty replied, “You and the baby weren’t getting enough oxygen so we had to turn you and give you tri-ox.”

Chakotay smoothed Kathryn’s hair back and whispered, “He’s okay now. You can go back to sleep.”

“M’kay,” she murmured and then closed her eyes. It seemed like only a few minutes went by before she opened them again and saw that it was daylight and Dr. Joe was there. Confused, she asked, “How long was I asleep?”

Patty replied, “This last time? About four and a half hours.”

Joe looked at her with an expression that Kathryn had learned to recognize as one that preceded bad news. With foreboding, she mumbled, “Whas wrong?”

“We need to make some decisions,” Joe said.

Closing her eyes, she whispered, “Is time?”

“No, not yet, but your body can’t handle the pregnancy any more on its own.”

She forced her eyes open to look at Chakotay’s face and was relieved to see that he wasn’t worried or upset. “Need Starfleet Medical?”

“That’s one option,” Joe replied. “But I think you’ll be more comfortable here. I want you on oxygen because the placenta isn’t functioning as well as it should. I also want to add an intravenous nutritional supplement. Regardless of how much you eat, your ability to draw calories and nutrients isn’t sufficient.”

“ ‘Kay.” She blinked slowly, feeling too tired to argue.

“You’ll need to keep walking to a minimum, and we’re going to attach a few more monitors so we can keep a closer watch on you and the baby.”

Kathryn thought about nodding, but wasn’t sure if she actually carried through. She heard Joe say, “She can barely stay awake. We need to get these nutrients started.”

She felt movement of the sheets, a prick in her leg, and then something cool laid against it. Next thing she felt was an oxygen tube against her nose and looped over her ears. She could tell that Chakotay was situating it by the way he was lovingly arranging her hair. Forcing her eyes open again, she was happy to see his return smile in her line of vision.

He said, “Hi there.”

“Okay with this?”

“I’m just fine. Relieved, actually.”

“Why?” she whispered.

“We’re finally bolstering your strength. I thought we needed it a couple days ago.”

Joe replied, “Perhaps so, but she was managing.”

Kathryn squeezed Chakotay’s hand and closed her eyes again. “Just sleepy.”

“Then you should sleep.” He caressed her forehead to lull her into a relaxed slumber.

Kathryn’s energy ebbed and flowed as often as her visitors did. She had two doctors monitoring her condition and a host of friends stopping by to sit with her. They were happy to keep her amused during her wakeful moments and happy to visit with Chakotay while she slept.

After another week and a half, she found it difficult to breathe while lying on her back. The uterine wall and placenta were strained if she laid on her left, and the umbilical cord was compressed if she laid on her right. She was decidedly uncomfortable with constant heartburn, nausea, hunger, and the continuous need to go to the bathroom.

After a particularly long night of insomnia and severe discomfort, Kathryn couldn't face another day in bed. When she returned from the bathroom, she announced, "I can't do it."

"Do what?" Patty asked.

"Get back in bed. I need to walk around."

"That's not a good idea, Admiral."

"Why?" she asked as she paced over to the sitting area in her bedroom. "What's the worst that could happen if I move around for a few minutes?"

"You could go into labor."

"And that's bad because?"

"You're not due for a few more weeks."

"I'm not sure I can handle a few more weeks of this. We knew he was going to be premature."

"Yes, but he's underweight. We should try to keep him in your womb for as long as possible."

She continued to pace. "Not sure I can handle him getting any bigger. How much does he weigh?"

"Two and a half kilograms."

"And a normal birth weight is closer to three and a half," she noted.

"Or more," Patty tried to stop Kathryn mid-pace, but was unsuccessful. "Admiral, get in bed."

"Not, yet."

"I should get your husband."

"Then go," Kathryn motioned as she made another lap across the bedroom.

Patty was hesitant to leave her, but decided she needed to go. She ran into the hallway and called downstairs, "Chakotay... We need you."

"Coming," he called out.

Kathryn felt pressure building in her lower back and thought that she should be wearing her maternity belt. Her back wasn't used to the weight of the child.

Patty implored, "Admiral, you really need to get back into bed."

“What do you need?” Chakotay asked as he came in. Once he saw Kathryn, he said, “Oh. What are you doing?”

“I’m moving around.” She cocked her head towards the bed. “I’m too uncomfortable, and I’m hoping that if I wear myself out, I’ll be able to get some sleep.”

Patty said, “If you get that much exercise, you really will have this kid today.”

“Well, we need to change something because this isn’t working for me.”

Chakotay got in Kathryn’s way and held her arms. “I know you’re frustrated, but…”

“Get out of my way,” she said while glaring at him.

“At least let us scan you.”

She sighed and motioned for the nurse to come over. “Fine. Don’t know what good that will do.”

Patty ran the tri-corder across her belly and shook her head. “You’re dilated to five, Admiral.”

“And?”

“And by the time most women get that far, they’ve been in labor for hours.”

“Get a doctor, then. I need to know what my options are.”

Patty tapped her combadge. “Fields to Dr. Zimmerman, Starfleet Medical.”

After a moment’s silence, a female voice replied, “Dr. Zimmerman is in surgery. Is this an emergency?”

“Not yet, but we have a rather headstrong patient who wants to have a discussion.”

“Admiral Janeway?”

“Yes,” Patty replied and received a glare from the patient in question.

“Dr. Zimmerman suggests contacting Dr. Crusher, and he’ll be with you when he’s finished.”

“Will do, thank you.” Patty tapped her combadge twice and said, “Lieutenant Fields to Starfleet Command.”

“Command here.”

“This is Lieutenant Fields, aide to Admiral Janeway. I need a link with Dr. Crusher on the Enterprise.”

“Patching you through.”

Only a moment later, Beverly replied, “Good morning, Lieutenant. What can I do for you?”

“If you’re free, Admiral Janeway would like to speak with you.”

“I can stop by this afternoon.”

Patty said, “She might be having a baby by then.”

“What?” Beverly replied.

Kathryn interrupted. “I’m not getting back in that bed, Beverly.”

“I see. And Dr. Zimmerman’s opinion?”

“He’s busy,” Kathryn stated. “And sounds like you are, too. I’ll be fine. I’m just going to walk around a bit.”

Patty interjected, “She’s at five centimeters.”

Beverly commanded, “Get back in bed, Kathryn. Now.”

“In a few minutes.”

They heard Jean-Luc’s voice say, “You’d better get down there, Beverly. We can handle the rest of this briefing without you.”

Kathryn closed her eyes and groaned. “We interrupted a meeting?”

Jean-Luc replied, “Only a small one, my dear Admiral.”

“My apologies.”

Harry’s voice came through next. “We could all come down and get you back into bed.”

Before Kathryn had a chance to respond, Chakotay said, “Thank you, Harry, but that won’t be necessary. I think we can handle her.”

Beverly said, “I’ll be right down. Crusher out.”

Chakotay took Kathryn’s hand on her next pass. “Come on. You don’t want to do this.”

“Don’t I?” She snapped her hand back. “Standing up is a hell of a lot more comfortable than anything else.”

“You can handle it.”

She glared at him. “I can’t breathe, he can’t breathe. Neither one of us is handling it.”

“Let’s arrange the pillows differently, then.”

“I don’t care how you arrange the damned pillows, my back hurts and I can’t breathe.”

“Then I’ll give you a massage.”

“We’ve tried that. This body just wasn’t made to be still for this long, especially not while eight months pregnant.”

Beverly walked in and pointed to the bed. “Lie down, now.”

“No.”

Patty said, “She wants to discuss her options.”

“Fine,” Beverly said. “We’ll discuss your options when you’re lying down. You haven’t spent the last five weeks in bed just to go into premature labor now.”

Kathryn put her hands on her hips. “We’ve had five weeks of letting this baby’s lungs mature. I want to know where he stands.”

“You want to hear what his chances for survival are just because you’re a little uncomfortable?”

“More than a little,” she grumbled as she returned to the bed, fully chagrined.

While Chakotay helped Kathryn put the oxygen tube back on, Beverly took scans with the tricorder. Shaking her head, she said, “5.2 centimeters.”

“How is he?” Kathryn asked.

“He’s fine.” She did a deeper internal scan of the womb and then reported, “His heart and lung function are advanced enough that he’ll be fine as long as you have him at a hospital.”

“And the uterus?”

“It doesn’t look good, but it seems to be holding. I want to take a look at your recent scans here in a moment.” Beverly set the tool down and took Kathryn’s hand. “I know this is hard and you’ve done great.”

“I can’t sleep.”

Chakotay pointed out, “Before, you couldn’t stay awake.”

“I’d rather have that.” She took the oxygen tube off to blow her nose and then put it back on again. “This thing is really getting on my nerves.”

Beverly asked, “Would you prefer a face mask or a hypo of tri-ox every five minutes?”

With a deep sigh, Kathryn replied, “No.”

“Tell you what, if you’ll eat a good breakfast, I’ll give you a light sedative to help you get some rest.”

“Fine,” she acquiesced.

As Chakotay started to get up, Patty said, “I’ll get her breakfast. She needs you here.”

“Thank you,” he replied and sat back down.

Kathryn mumbled, “I’m really not happy.”

“I never would have guessed.” He smoothed her hair back. “You can do this, love.”

“Doesn’t mean I have to be happy about it.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

Beverly got up and plugged Patty’s tri-corder into the medical console that had been temporarily placed in Kathryn’s room.

“What are you looking for?” Kathryn asked.

“Rate of dilation, hormone levels, and a few other things.”

Chakotay said, “Let’s arrange these pillows to see if we can make breathing easier.”

Kathryn let him maneuver her body until she was as comfortable as she could be, but she still felt like she needed to be walking around. Her belly didn’t feel right, her hips hurt, she couldn’t breathe, and her back pain was verging on intolerable.

Patty returned with toast and a banana, and then helped Beverly study the readings while Chakotay helped Kathryn eat.

Beverly was intent as she took another tri-corder reading and showed Patty. “5.4 cm.”

“What does that mean?” Chakotay asked.

“It means she needs to stop eating and we need to go to Starfleet Medical.”

Kathryn looked down at her belly. “I’m in labor?”

“Yes and no. Your uterus isn’t contracting but your body is ready to have this baby.” Beverly downloaded the data back into the tri-corder in preparation to leave. “It’s no wonder you weren’t able to sleep last night.”

“So me walking around...”

“Was just your intuition telling you what you needed to be doing.” Beverly tapped her commbadge. “Beverly Crusher to Starfleet Medical Obstetrics.”

“Go ahead, doctor.”

“I’m bringing in a patient for Dr. Zimmerman. We need to prepare for fetal transport and NICU.”

“Is the patient Admiral Janeway?”

“Yes, it is. Give us a few minutes to prepare for transport.”

“We’re ready for her. Dr. Zimmerman warned us.”

Kathryn closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “This is really happening.”

Chakotay kissed her forehead. “You’re in good hands.”

Patty grabbed the overnight bag they’d already packed and rounded up the medical equipment that they’d need. Chakotay talked to Mark Yosa and put their plan in motion, alerting command of the need to transport the entire group from inside the house. Beverly took the monitors off of Kathryn and detached the oxygen tube from the tank.

“Do we need to carry her?” Chakotay asked.

Beverly shook her head. “She wants to walk around, let her walk.”

They helped Kathryn out of bed, and she instantly began to pace again. Chakotay caught her on her return trip and nodded to Beverly.

“Crusher to Starfleet Command, initiate transport.”

They rematerialized inside a labor and delivery room and the staff immediately went to work. A nurse said, “Dr. Zimmerman has been notified and will be here as soon as he can.”

Beverly nodded. "Tell him not to rush. I'd like to induce labor and let it progress a little and see how the baby reacts."

"I'll let him know," the nurse said as she left the room.

Kathryn started pacing again while the staff tried to attach monitors to her. Finally, Patty said, "You need to stop moving, Admiral."

She nodded and did as they asked, right in the middle of the room. Arching her back, she tried to figure out what felt like regular back pain and what might be different.

Chakotay took her hands and led her to the inclined bed. "Sit back for just a few minutes and then you can walk around again."

"Why?" she asked.

"Because Beverly and the nurses asked you to."

"They did?" Looking around, they nodded as she slid onto the tilted bed. "I didn't hear you."

Beverly said, "It's normal for you to tune everyone else out. Your body thinks it's in labor."

She watched them attach various sensors to her body, and then her eyes followed Patty who was reattaching her to oxygen. For the tube being so annoying, she was surprised that she hadn't noticed that she was still wearing it. "This doesn't hurt like I expected."

"That's because you aren't having contractions." Beverly pressed a hypo into a vein on her leg. "But let's see if we can get that to change."

"What did you just do?"

"A very light dose of a medication that should get you going."

"Should I prepare for pain?"

"Strong cramping and discomfort," she replied. "I meant it when I said light. Your uterus isn't going to be able to withstand much, but I want to see if we can get a few contractions at least."

Chakotay asked, "Why not just do a fetal transport? That's what we'd planned."

"Because the contractions stimulate the baby. He'll do better if he gets some squeezing now."

Another lady was scanning Kathryn's belly and said, "I'm the neonatologist, Doctor Sims. We want labor to progress as long as possible before we transport."

Beverly said to Sims, “Her uterus is in danger of rupturing, but we’ll go until just before.”

Kathryn’s eyes popped open. “You’ll what?”

She put her hand on Kathryn’s arm. “Don’t worry. We’ll see it happening and we’ll do the hysterectomy immediately.”

“Hysterectomy?”

Beverly looked between Kathryn and Chakotay. “Did he not discuss it with you?”

She felt her heart sink. “No,” she shook her head and begged, “Please don’t do that.”

“Kathryn,” she said softly. “It’s already beyond a point that you could have another child.”

Chakotay said, “I don’t think this is the best time to discuss this.”

“All right,” Beverly squeezed Kathryn’s hand. “We’ll do what we can to avoid it.”

She closed her eyes and tried to stop the tears that were building. Unable to control them, she laid her forearm over her face and tried to take deep breaths.

Chakotay held her as much as he could. “It’s okay, Kathryn. We’re here for you, and we’re going to figure out what’s best.”

She shook her head. “I’m so angry that I just want to throw something.”

“At me?” Beverly asked lightly.

“No,” she sniffed and pulled the tube out of her nose. “At the idiots who hurt me. They took too damned much.”

Chakotay handed her a box of tissue. “Yes, they did, but don’t let them take the joy out of having a child. Focus on that right now.”

She nodded and blew her nose. “You’re right.”

Patty cleaned off the tube and tried to put it back on her. Kathryn got annoyed and pulled her head away to blow her nose again. Once she was finished, she took the tube and put it on herself. “Sorry.”

Smiling, Patty said, “It’s okay, Admiral. I’ve been through childbirth, and I know what it’s like to not want people messing with you.”

Kathryn felt a sudden tightening all the way around her middle and leaned forward to try to cope with the intense sensation. She grabbed Chakotay's hand and cried out as the tightening morphed into a deep, painful cramp like nothing she'd felt before.

Beverly said, "Breathe through it, Kathryn."

She tried to breathe, but wasn't entirely successful until the pain receded. Chakotay held onto her, guiding her to sit back again, and soothing her as best he could.

Once she'd recovered her breath, Kathryn glared at Beverly. "You said it would be light."

"That was light," Beverly replied as she focused on her scans. "Baby is responding well, but to get the full effect of the contraction, we should break your water."

Joe walked in and asked, "How are we doing?"

Kathryn replied, "Not good."

"She's doing great." Beverly said with an encouraging smile and then caught Joe up to speed.

He took some of his own scans, and said, "I agree. We should accelerate the labor because she won't be able to do it for long. Care to do the honors?"

Taking the hook off the surgical tray, Beverly touched Kathryn's knee and said, "Open for me. This won't hurt at all."

"You're just breaking the amniotic sac, right?" Kathryn asked and then clamped together as another wave of tightness came over her.

Beverly said, "Breathe through it, Kathryn. Deep, even breaths."

Since she knew what to expect this time, she was able to tolerate it better and found her breath before the contraction passed. Once it was over, she parted her legs for Beverly.

"You're correct, Kathryn. I'm just breaking the sac and then you can stand up if you'd prefer."

"M'kay." As Beverly touched her most intimate areas, Kathryn thought she should feel exposed, but found that she didn't care in the least.

Chakotay came into her sightline and gently held her chin so she'd focus on him. "I love you."

She relaxed some and said, "Love you, too."

"Nurse," Beverly called out as Kathryn felt a warm gush between her legs.

"Got it!"

“Ugh,” Kathryn groaned as she felt the fluid.

Joe noted, “Childbirth is very messy, but you’ll skip the worst of it.

Once they got her cleaned up, Beverly asked, “Standing or sitting?”

“I’ll try standing. This is not the least bit comfortable.”

Chakotay helped her up and Joe showed her how to stand with her hands resting on the bed. The men got her in position just in time for the next contraction.

“Mmmmm,” Kathryn moaned as her uterus cramped down on the baby.

Joe put Chakotay’s hands on Kathryn’s lower back. “Try massage to take her mind off the pain. Just avoid her kidneys.”

He did as suggested and asked her, “Does this help?”

Kathryn gave him no answer as she focused on her breathing and arched into his hands. Once the contraction passed, she said, “I suppose.”

“How can I do it differently?”

“I have no idea, but massaging my back takes my mind off of contractions about as much as a level one forcefield could contain a warp core breach.” She straightened up and tried to arch her back in the opposite direction.

Dr. Sims chuckled. “That’s an analogy I’ve never heard before.”

Joe mused, “Starship captains have their very own outlook on any given situation.”

Kathryn stated, “I need water.”

“Ice chips,” Patty said as she handed her a cup.

She glared at them, but as soon as she put a few chips on her tongue, she sighed in relief.
“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

Her fist came down on the bed as the next contraction rolled over her unexpectedly. Chakotay did his part and someone else took the ice as she curled into the pain, breathing as best she could.

Once it was over, a nurse said, “I’ve often wondered why Starfleet doesn’t include childbirth pain in a course about how to endure torture.”

Kathryn looked up and calmly stated, "This is nothing like torture."

She gasped and turned bright red. "Oh, Admiral. I'm so sorry."

"Let it go." Closing her eyes, she said, "It's a good reminder, actually. Unlike cruelly inflicted pain, this serves a purpose, my body knows how to handle it, there's an end in sight, and I'm surrounded by people who care about me."

Chakotay made long, soothing strokes down her back. "You're doing great."

She nodded and braced herself as she felt the next one coming. Focusing on her breathing and Chakotay's loving touch made all the difference as she realized how thankful she was to be alive and able to do this.

After the pain receded, Kathryn asked, "I need a time frame. How many more of these?"

"Just a little while longer," Beverly said as she gathered Kathryn's long hair and tied it back into a ponytail.

"I need more information than that."

"I can't tell you, exactly." She handed Chakotay a cool, damp washcloth. "Forehead and neck."

He started towards her forehead and she shooed him away. "Just my back."

"You want me to put this on your back?"

Another contraction hit and she grunted, lowering herself onto her elbows so her head was touching the bed. When Chakotay put the wet washcloth up under her gown, she yelled, "DON'T!!" He yanked it back too fast, surprising her, and causing her to inhale too quickly. To recover, she started breathing quick and shallow.

Beverly rubbed Kathryn's back and said, "Slow down. Deep in, slow out. Shhhhhhh."

"Can't," she gasped.

Joe said, "Her blood/oxygen is dropping. Admiral, try to breath through your nose."

"Give her triox," Beverly said. "She's doing the best she can."

When she calmed, she told Chakotay, "I meant, just rub my back."

"I'm so sorry," he said as he tried to make up for his stupidity by doing long, soothing strokes down her back.

“Not your fault. I can’t communicate during these contractions.” She took the cloth from him and rubbed her own face. “I feel gross.”

With understanding, Joe said, “Your body is working hard. Try to think of it as a workout.”

“Maybe, but with workouts, I stop when it hurts.” She straightened up and took a deep breath, trying to fill her lungs. “Damn, it burns.”

“Burns?” Beverly asked as she adjusted the monitor to get a different reading.

Kathryn grabbed Chakotay’s hand. “Don’t let me fall.”

“Do you feel like you’re going to?” Beverly asked with concern.

“Maybe.” She turned towards Chakotay and leaned against him. “Don’t let me go.”

“Not a chance,” he said as he wrapped her in his arms. “I’ve got you.”

Beverly announced, “Get her back on the bed. Dr. Sims, prepare for fetal transport.”

“It’s coming,” Kathryn cried out as she started breathing deeply.

Chakotay held his wife as she focused on the labor, but asked the doctors, “What do I do?”

Joe said, “Hold her until it passes. We’ll get ready.”

Nodding, Beverly said, “Kathryn, you’re losing a lot of blood, but you’re going to be just fine.”

Joe said to a nurse, “Increase oxygen saturation.”

“Yes, Doctor.”

The contraction lightened and Kathryn moved back to the bed. While they were lifting her up, she felt something give way in her belly and an unexpected sharp pain lanced up from her left hip to her breast. “Aaaaaahhhh!” she cried out.

“Hang on Kathryn,” Beverly said calmly. “Dr. Sims, get ready.”

“Ready, Doctor.”

Kathryn laid her head back and closed her eyes as they reclined the bed into a horizontal position. Everything seemed to be going in slow motion and she couldn’t quite understand what anyone was saying. She could guess what was happening, but decided not to worry. There wasn’t anything she could do but let the doctors do their job.

Chakotay's hands were on her head, stroking the damp hair away from her face. He leaned over and said, "It's almost over, my love."

All she could see and hear was him. "It hurts."

"Beverly's taking care of you."

The burning intensified and she told him, "If they have to take the uterus, it's okay."

"Are you sure?"

"Just save my eggs."

"All right." He pressed a kiss to her forehead and watched as the doctors initiated the transport. One moment, Kathryn's belly was full and ripe, and the next minute, it flattened out like a deflated balloon. Across the room, he saw his tiny son materialize to be immediately surrounded by medical personnel in a flurry of quiet, intense activity.

Beverly said, "Kathryn, I need to sedate you."

She didn't react as a hypo delivered the medication into her jugular vein. Only seconds later, an alarm sounded and Beverly began calling out orders.

Chakotay looked between the bed in front of him and the one on the far side of the room, and said a quiet prayer to protect his family.

Kathryn felt the heaviness of sleep holding her in the bed, and she wanted nothing more than to stay right where she was. However, the quiet hum of medical equipment and the scent of antiseptic alerted her that she wasn't at home. She forced her eyes open only to have them close again.

Chakotay caressed her arm and asked, "Kathryn?"

"Mmmmm." She tried to open her eyes again with only a modicum of progress.

"You're safe, my love." His fingers stroked along her forehead. "It's okay to sleep."

Kathryn wanted to, but something was niggling at her, something she needed to know. "'kotay?"

"I'm here."

"Can't... 'member." She frowned in frustration at not being able to wake up or figure out what was going on.

“Our son is in intensive care, and you can go see him as soon as you’re able.”

“Mmh.” Now she remembered. She’d just had a baby. “m’kay.”

As he kissed her fingers, she drifted off to sleep again.

A short time later, Kathryn woke again and this time, she was instantly more alert. She touched her flat stomach and searched the room for her husband. When she saw that it was empty, she got up and then immediately thought better of it as she swayed with dizziness. To keep from fainting, she did her best to lower herself to the floor.

“Kathryn!” Chakotay called out as he came into the room and saw her sprawled on the floor. He was with her in a flash, gently holding her trembling body in his arms. “Kathryn?! Did you fall?”

“Got up too quick,” she muttered. “You weren’t here.”

He held her close and pressed a kiss to her hair. “You scared me.”

“Sss...sorry.”

Chakotay reached up and pressed the call button. When a nurse answered, he asked, “Is Dr. Crusher still here?”

“No, but Dr. Zimmerman is. Do you need him?”

“Yes, and a nurse. She has fallen.”

“We’ll be right there, Captain.”

After the channel closed, she stated, “Didn’t fall.”

“How’d you end up on the floor, then?”

“Gracefully swooned.”

He shook his head in amusement as Joe ran into the room, a nurse hot on his tail. Chakotay looked up and explained, “She seems to be fine, but I found her on the floor. I was only gone for a minute.”

Joe knelt down and scanned her with a tri-corder. “I don’t see any injuries. Are you in pain, Admiral?”

“Sore.”

“That’s not surprising. Chakotay, can you lift her back onto the bed?”

“Yeah,” he said as he gathered her up into his arms. “She said she didn’t fall, she swooned.”

Kathryn muttered, “Gracefully swooned.”

Joe gave her a more thorough examination, administered a couple of hypos, and said, “You’re fine, Admiral.”

“How’s my son?”

“He’s stable.” Joe looked to Chakotay and asked, “Have you told her anything, yet?”

“Just that he’s in intensive care.”

Kathryn looked between the two men, and asked, “Do I have to demand a report?”

Chakotay sat down on the side of the bed and took her hand. “He’s 2.5 kilograms and his heart is doing great. We’re worried about his lungs, but his condition is pretty typical of a premature baby.”

Joe added, “It’s exactly what we anticipated, and with treatment, I am confident that he’s going to be breathing on his own in just a day or two.”

Kathryn pursed her lips and nodded, trying to keep control over her emotions. “All right, is he okay otherwise?”

Chakotay was almost hoarse as he said, “He’s beautiful, Kathryn. Would you like to go see him?”

“Yes,” she said as she cradled his jaw in her palm. “I’d like that very much.”

Joe nodded. “This time, let’s take it slow and use a hoverchair. You lost a lot of blood today and you already know that your body needs a great deal of healing.”

As they moved her, she asked, “Am I due for a pancreas transplant now?”

“Yes, you are, but we’ll just take it one thing at a time and see how you do.” Joe patted her shoulder as they moved her out of the room.

“I like that plan.” As they went down the short corridor, Kathryn asked, “How long was I unconscious?”

Chakotay replied, “About three hours.”

“Have you held him, yet?”

“No, but I’ve touched him. The NICU staff believes that you should hold him first.”

“Why?”

Joe answered, “To establish a bond that will promote successful breastfeeding.”

Kathryn was anxious about how small he’d be. She remembered lying back on the bed to prepare for fetal transport, but she didn’t remember it actually happening and didn’t see him after he was born.

When they rolled her into the room, Kathryn’s eyes were drawn immediately to the right. Even before she was turned in that direction, she knew the tiny infant was her son.

A nurse she recognized from the delivery room said, “Would you like to hold him?”

She leaned forward and saw him in the temperature controlled incubator. He looked more helpless than she could have imagined with the tiny oxygen tube attached to his nose and the near translucence of his skin. She worried that he might get cold or that she might hurt him if she picked him up. “Is that a good idea? He’s so small.”

Joe said, “It’s a very good idea, Admiral. All babies, but especially those that are premature, thrive with skin-to-skin contact.”

The nurse helped Kathryn untie her hospital gown and then very carefully set the baby on Kathryn’s chest. “He’s been rooting around for you. I think he’s hungry.”

She gasped as they touched for the first time and his little body snuggled right up against her. The pure softness of his skin and the way his delicate fingers reached for her were so wonderful that an instant warmth and love spread through her entire body all the way down to her toes. “He’s so precious,” she whispered in awe.

Chakotay wiped his eyes and sniffed. “You both are.”

The baby rooted around until they got him to Kathryn’s breast, and when his little mouth found her nipple, she gasped in surprise at the intense sensation. “Wow, he’s got quite a bite.”

“It’s pure instinct,” Joe said. “But babies are very efficient little pumps.”

Chakotay sat down next to them and watched with adoration as mother and child bonded. “I never want to forget this moment.”

Kathryn tore her eyes away from the baby and looked at her husband. Smiling at the pure love in his eyes, she said, “He’s here.”

“Yes, he is. You’re amazing, Kathryn.”

They looked at him together, and she asked, “I know this isn’t the time, but I have to know... do I still have a uterus?”

Chakotay’s jaw quivered slightly and replied, “Partial.”

Kathryn swallowed hard and did what she had to do... accept it and move on. “I understand.”

“You were hemorrhaging severely. Beverly had to save your life.”

“I understand,” she said again. “Phoebe offered to carry this one, maybe...”

“We’ll find a way, Kathryn.”

Looking up at Chakotay again, she whispered, “We’ve been given an amazing gift here.”

“Yes.” He put his hand on the baby’s back and said, “We need to give him a name.”

“The choice is yours, honey.”

He kissed the baby’s head and said, “For the brave man who gave his life for your mother, for my great-great-grandfather who led our people in a time of great abundance, and for your courageous mother who gave you life, I name you Scott Katowa Janeway. May you embrace your heritage and be proud of those who came before you.”

Moisture in her eyes, she whispered, “A beautiful name, thank you.”

He kissed the side of her head. “Thank you, Kathryn, for bringing peace to my life. When I met you nine years ago, I knew that we were destined for a remarkable journey.”

Looking at him with a sly smile, she said, “That journey is far from over.”

“Oh, I have no doubt.” Nodding towards Scott, he added, “This one is going to be a handful.”

Kathryn put her hand over Chakotay’s on the baby’s little back and said, “A handful is about all he is right now.”

With a smile, he replied, “You’re right about that.”

They watched him as he fell asleep, still suckling at his mother’s breast. Kathryn looked up for the nurse and saw that they’d been left alone. “I guess I get to keep holding him.”

“Are you comfortable?”

“If there’s a pillow or two handy, they might help.”

Chakotay looked around and saw a cart of linens. He grabbed what he needed and returned.
“Where do you want them?”

She leaned forward. “One against my low back and one under my elbow.”

After getting her situated, he tucked a blanket up around her and the baby to keep them warm.
“How’s that?”

Huskily, she replied, “Perfect, thank you.”

He sat down again and together, they looked their baby over, taking inventory of his fingers and his toes, looking inside his diaper, touching his full head of dark hair, and wondering what kind of personality he’d have.

Kathryn asked, “Did you see his eyes?”

“No, he hasn’t opened them, yet. I’m guessing brown, though.”

“They might be blue for awhile.”

“With my genes? Kol’s were brown.”

Kathryn smiled. “Hard to know for sure. Phoebe’s eyes are brown, but mom said they started off blue.”

“I didn’t realize they could change colors.”

“Sometimes.” She looked at her husband and noticed how tired he looked. “How are you doing?”

“Me?” he asked in surprise.

“I doubt you slept well last night with all my tossing and turning, and I’m guessing today has taken a toll on you.”

“Yeah, but,” he said as he shook his head in wonder. “The way it’s turned out – This is incredible.”

Her head tilted with affection. “I’d kiss you, but I don’t want to disturb little Scott, here.”

“Then allow me,” he said with a chuckle as he rose up a little and pressed his lips against hers.

As a tingle spread through her, she pulled back and gasped, “Oh!”

“What?” he asked, a little amused.

“It’s... strange to be kissed with his little mouth on my breast.”

Chakotay grinned. “I’ll have to remember that a couple months from now.”

“You are deliciously naughty, you know that?”

“Is that a problem?”

“Not in my book,” she said with a wink.

He licked his lips in pure delight as he sat back in his chair. After a moment, his smile faded and he dipped his chin. “I, um...”

“Hmmm?”

“I wanted to ask if you’re okay after what happened in the delivery room.”

Her eyebrows furrowed. “You mean labor?”

“No, what the young nurse said to you.”

She thought back and then remembered. “Oh, torture.”

“I can’t believe she’d say that to you, of all people.”

“Don’t let it bother you, honey. It’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing. I’m thinking of pulling her aside.”

“No,” she requested. “Please don’t. She knew the instant she said it that it was a mistake. I’m sure she’s beating herself up over it enough without you adding to her angst.”

“Maybe her supervisor should be notified.”

“Chakotay,” Kathryn said sternly. “Don’t. Haven’t you ever had reason to stick your foot in your mouth?”

“Of course, and in Starfleet, I was always called to the carpet on it.”

“Not always,” she said with a click of her tongue. “I never did that to you.”

“Sure you did.”

“When?”

“When Annika had us thinking that we were conspiring against each other. You pointed it out to me that I didn’t trust you.”

Kathryn rolled her eyes. “I don’t think you needed that pointed out to you. It was obvious with the phaser in your pants.”

“*On* my pants, Kathryn.”

She shrugged mischievously. “Whatever.”

Laughing, he said, “I love you. Everything about you.”

“I certainly hope so, because now,” she nodded towards their son, “you’re really stuck with me.”

Dr. Sims said, “Sorry to interrupt your fun, but I thought I’d check on our little boy.”

“He’s asleep,” Kathryn said as she pulled the blanket down a little. “But he’s still sucking. Think he’s getting anything?”

“Not yet, but it’s a reflex to suck. If he likes to do that while he sleeps, he’ll probably suck his fingers or his thumb.”

Kathryn smiled at the image that created. “He just might.”

“Are you getting sleepy, Admiral?”

“Yes, but I don’t want to put him down. I don’t want him to be alone.”

“Not to worry. We’ll be right here with him.”

Kathryn looked at Chakotay’s tired eyes and nodded. “All right, maybe all three of us could do with some rest.”

Dr. Sims carefully took the baby and placed him back in the incubator. “Does he have a name, yet?”

“Scott,” Chakotay replied. “Do you need the full name for his records?”

“You can fill those out, later. We just like to have a name other than Baby Boy, and Scott is a lovely one.”

“Named after a good man,” Kathryn added quietly as she watched the doctor tend to her son.

Chakotay took the pillow out from under Kathryn’s arm and set it on a nearby table. Before turning back to her, he stopped to look down into the incubator. He kissed his fingertips and then touched Scott’s hair. “Sleep well, my son. We’ll be back a little later.”

Kathryn smiled at her husband and said, "Now that was precious."

It was mid-October in LaBarre, France at the Picard Vineyards. Friends and loved ones were gathered in the large yard between the grapevines and the house, joyfully watching the wedding of Beverly Crusher and Jean-Luc Picard.

Kathryn was wearing her dress whites as she stood before the happy couple and pronounced them husband and wife. "You may now kiss the bride."

Jean-Luc's eyes were alight as he placed his hand on his wife's cheek to draw her close. "Beverly," he whispered as he gave her a simple kiss.

Kathryn addressed everyone, "It is my distinct pleasure to introduce Captain Jean-Luc and Doctor Beverly Picard."

As soon as the applause ended, the newly married couple walked across the yard to the reception area for the first dance. A team of caterers had set out a beautiful display of food and bartenders were pouring glasses of champagne.

Deanna turned to Kathryn and embraced her in a firm hug. "Sorry I didn't get a chance to say hello earlier. You look wonderful!"

"Thank you, I feel wonderful," she said as she walked with her friend towards the reception. "How are things on the Titan?"

"Pretty good, actually. Negotiations with Romulus are coming along."

"That's what I hear. Did you have a chance to meet Commander Tuvok before you left?"

"I did, but only briefly. He and T'Pol boarded the same day that Wesley and I left to come here."

Kathryn picked up a glass of champagne and handed one to Deanna, and then asked for a glass of ginger ale for herself. "Well, I wish him luck with the Romulan/Vulcan alliance. That's a big job."

"Did I hear correctly that you might come out at some point?"

With a shrug she replied, "Perhaps over Chakotay's spring break. Praetor Rabom would like to take me on a tour of the capital city."

"He seems quite interested in garnering as much positive publicity as he can. I'm not sure what to think of it."

“Oh, don’t worry too much. He recognizes that a positive public image can be an important tool.”

Chakotay came over with Scott in his arms and said, “Hello, Counselor. Would you like to meet the newest addition?”

“Oh, would I!?” Deanna exclaimed as she set her glass down and took the tiny infant into her arms. “He’s so precious!”

Kathryn looked at her son and nodded appreciatively. “I think so, but I’m a little biased.”

“He looks just like his father, doesn’t he?”

Chakotay smiled. “Has my coloring, at least. But I think he has his mother’s bone structure.”

Kathryn touched Scott’s forehead as she remarked, “I don’t know how you can tell at this age.”

Jean-Luc came over and said, “Pardon the interruption, but I’m told that I must dance with the maid-of-honor. Deanna, would you do me the pleasure?”

“Of course, Captain,” she said as she handed the baby to his mother. “But may I hold him again later?”

“He’s already looking forward to it,” Kathryn replied with a laugh.

Once they were dancing, Chakotay said, “Lovely wedding, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is. Beverly looks beautiful in that blue dress, don’t you think?”

He shrugged. “You may call me biased, but I think the most beautiful woman here is standing next to me.”

Kathryn looked around him and nodded towards an Al-Aurian woman standing nearby. “She is quite handsome, but I didn’t think you had a thing for aliens.”

Shooing his wife along, Chakotay said, “Now who’s being cheeky?”

Worf raised a glass to the bride and groom. “May this union bring you great honor, and may your wedding night be voracious enough to break a clavicle, for that will be a blessing upon your marriage.”

“Hear! Hear!” was heard throughout the yard.

Beverly kissed her new husband and then addressed everyone around them. “Then I guess it’s a good thing one of us is a doctor.”

The group laughed and at that moment, Scott started crying. Kathryn set her drink down and returned to her husband with an understanding smile.

Apologetically, he said, “If I could feed him, I would.”

“I know,” she said as she accepted her son from his father. “We knew he’d get hungry about this time.”

They went to one of the reception tables near the house and Kathryn made herself comfortable. Chakotay put a receiving blanket over her shoulder as she unfastened her coat and lifted her shirt. He asked, “Can I get you anything?”

“Sure,” she said with a flinch as Scott latched on. “An iced tea?”

“Be right back.”

As soon as Chakotay left, Harry came over and asked, “May I join you?”

“Please do,” she said with a smile. “How are you, Harry?”

“Doing great, actually. Are you loving motherhood?”

Kathryn looked down at the blanket that covered her and asked, “What’s not to love? He’s amazing.”

“Well, he has amazing parents, so what else would he be?”

With a wink, she asked, “So, do you have the Enterprise ready to disembark?”

“Just about. We’re doing a full systems check while Captain Picard and Doctor Crusher are on their honeymoon.”

“While in space-dock or are you taking it out for a test flight?”

“Test flight. Commander Madden wants to bring her up to warp nine and see how structural integrity holds.”

“Is there a concern that it won’t?”

“Not in my opinion, but I know what B’Elanna is capable of. Her team has done a remarkable job with the rebuilding.”

“And how are you? Ready for this?”

He blushed a little and said, “Tom keeps ribbing me that I’m finally fleeing the nest.”

“You’ve been on board that ship for the better part of six months now.”

“More or less.”

“I’m sure you’ll be fine. You already make me proud.”

“Thank you, but to answer your question, I think I’m ready. I know the ship, I feel comfortable with the senior staff, I have a top-notch operations team, and, thanks to working with you over the past year and a half, I feel good about my knowledge of the quadrant.”

“Just remember to keep your eyes sharp and don’t pretend to know anything you don’t.”

“Good advice.”

“What is?” Chakotay asked as he returned with Kathryn’s tea and sat down.

“Staying sharp.” Harry acknowledged Chakotay with a nod. “How are you handling fatherhood?”

“I’ve never been happier and more sleep deprived.”

Kathryn laughed. “And you’re not the one feeding him at all hours of the night.”

“No, but I’m holding him when you’re so sleepy that you can’t keep your eyes open.”

“Thank you,” she said with a wink and then spoke to Harry again. “Not that I want to talk about work today, but did Judy send you an update?”

“On the situation with Eridani IV? Sounds like they just need a little handholding. Their concerns aren’t as demanding as they think.”

“I’m glad to hear it. We could certainly benefit from having their Federation membership restored. It’s been far too long.”

“Speaking of that, are you still planning to return to work in January?”

“On a limited basis.” She smiled at her husband. “I’ll try to work from home as much as possible, and, since I’m already participating in meetings every so often, I doubt it’ll be much of a change.”

Harry asked, “And Lt. Fields is going to help you with Scott?”

Chakotay nodded. “During the day, but she’s going to live in our guest house at night. Between my classes and Kathryn’s meetings, we’ll need a third set of hands to keep Scott happy. He’s quite taken with her.”

“How are your classes going?” Harry asked. “You have three this semester, right?”

“Feels like more since we’re getting used to parenthood at the same time, but yeah, three fourth-year tactics courses.”

Kathryn suggested, “Tell him about your plans for next semester.”

“Oh? Something new in the works?”

Chakotay frowned at his wife. “It’s not been announced, yet.”

“He’s family,” she encouraged.

“I’m one of many involved, so it’s not really that big of a deal, but Tactical Command has asked me to participate in a task force to do a SWOT analysis of the fleet.”

Harry looked between the two of them and said, “I, um, feel like I should know what that means.”

Kathryn licked her lips. “Analyzing the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.”

“Ah,” Harry said with a nod. “Did I learn that in school at some point?”

“Evidently not,” Chakotay replied with a chuckle. “But after we do this analysis, the task force will be coming up with strategies and goals to strengthen the fleet. I’m representing the academy and command school.”

“I think it’s important,” Kathryn continued, “because we have only a few ships we can count on in really heated situations.”

“Like with Romulus,” Harry offered.

Chakotay nodded, “Exactly.”

Kathryn added, “When Chakotay was the only one who could come up with a plan to find the Enterprise in the Bassen Rift, Nechayev took notice. She wants to make some changes to strengthen the fleet.”

“I’ll be looking forward to hearing more about it,” Harry said with enthusiasm. “And kudos to you for getting Nechayev’s respect. That’s no easy feat.”

“She’s really not as bad as everyone assumes,” Chakotay glanced at his wife with a pointed look.

Kathryn clicked her tongue and changed the subject. "So, Harry, tell me more about the enhancements you've made to the Enterprise while she's been docked. Jean-Luc was telling me about your new sensor grid last week."

Later, when they were standing alone, Kathryn noticed a familiar-looking admiral standing by the drink table. She asked Chakotay, "Casually look at the Admiral behind you getting a drink. Have you seen him before?"

He did as she asked and said, "There's no one there."

"He's holding a martini glass and seems quite fascinated with the olive."

"I don't see anyone."

Kathryn handed Scott to Chakotay. "Watch my back, would you?"

Raising his eyebrows, he asked, "Should we alert security?"

"No," she said. "I recognize him from somewhere and he looks anything but threatening. Maybe he's a Q. I'll give you a signal if I need you."

Before she got too far away, he said, "If you strike up a conversation, you might want to lead him behind that tall hedge. I could still see you and you won't look like you're talking to yourself."

"Thanks," she said over her shoulder as she made her way over the table. Casually, she nodded towards his drink and asked, "Does he make a good martini?"

"Martini?" the older man asked. He looked at his glass and said, "Oh, martini. Yes, this is quite good."

The barkeep said, "I can make several types of martini, Admiral. Would you care for a pink one?"

"On second thought, I'm standing in the midst of a vineyard. I'll have a glass of the Picard sparkling grape juice, please." As the drink was being poured, she asked the older man, "Did you enjoy the wedding?"

Both the barkeep and the unknown admiral answered at the same time. The barkeep said, "Yes, Admiral. It was very nice."

The older man said, "It was just as I expected. Quite remarkable to watch history in the making."

Kathryn accepted the glass. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Admiral.”

She smiled and then looked at the older man, raised her eyebrows and turned to walk towards the hedge Chakotay had suggested. As suspected, he followed her.

Acting nonchalant, Kathryn casually mentioned, “This is a beautiful time of year to visit a vineyard, don’t you think?”

He chuckled. “You don’t recognize me, do you?”

“Yes and no. There’s something familiar about you, but you’re either out of time or out of place.”

“How can you tell?”

She quirked a smile. “Two things.”

“Which are?”

“One... I’m the only one who can see you, and two... your uniform is not quite right.”

“It’s not?” He looked down and glanced between hers and his. “It should be an exact replica.”

She pointed at his buckle. “The bullseye on your belt is too small.”

Laughing, he asked, “Can’t get much by you, can we?”

“We?”

He extended his hand. “I’m Admiral Jenkins from the 29th century temporal review board.”

“Ah,” she said in relieved surprise. “That’s right. You were a lot angrier when I saw you last.”

“And it’s been a year and half for you.”

Taking a sip of her drink, she asked, “And how long has it been for you?”

“A few months. Since you can’t travel through time anymore, I’ve come to you.”

She blinked slowly. “Don’t tell me you have another assignment for me.”

“No, actually. A few of us thought you needed affirmation.”

“Affirmation?” she asked with a smirk. “Do I strike you as the type?”

“Not exactly, but we’ve read your memoirs.”

“I write memoirs?” she asked with disbelief.

“You might,” he grimaced at his slip. “Anyway... I... we... just wanted you to know that you’ve accomplished what you set out to do. Timelines A and B have merged and we’ve got the best of both.”

A sense of relief washed over her and she relaxed. “Maybe there’s something to be said about affirmation after all.”

“Good work, Admiral. We still expect great things from you, but time has been restored.”

Kathryn asked in jest, “Am I high profile enough for you?”

He laughed and bowed his head. “Good day, Admiral. It has been an honor and a treat to work with you.”

“Thank you, sir.” She watched as he dissolved away in a transporter beam. Feeling much lighter, Kathryn turned to walk back towards the group and then practically jumped out of her skin to see Q sitting on the ground, legs stretched out as he gazed up at the sky. “Q!”

“Is that any way to welcome an old friend, my dear Kathy? I have, after all, come such a long way to see you.”

“Friend?” She put her hand on her hip. “I’ve been talking to Jean-Luc about you.”

“So I’ve heard,” he jumped up with excitement. “You’re planning to write a little book about yours truly.”

“Honestly, I don’t think we will because you’re too unpredictable. We cannot figure out what your ultimate motivation is.”

“It’s quite simple, even for your miniscule minds.”

“Then enlighten me, please.”

“Humanity is fun to play with. Why not put you through a few tests and watch how you dance? Jean-Luc is a man who likes to debate human nature and the mistakes of humanity. You’re a woman who likes to pursue compassion and a utopian way of life – a yearning to share your vaunted Starfleet ideals with the entire galaxy.” He grinned. “I’ve given you both exactly what you want.”

She stared at him blankly for a moment and then sighed. “Where is my godson?”

“Over there,” he waved casually. “Making plans to liven up this rather dull wedding.”

Whipping her head around, she admonished, “Q! You’re supposed to keep an eye on him!”

He laughed. “Just a little joke, dear Kathy. You’re entirely too nervous.”

“No, I know what your son is capable of, and this is not a Betazoid wedding!”

“Ooooooh, now there’s an idea!”

“Q!” she admonished. “I expect you to control your son.”

“Or what?” he asked with a pouty taunt. “You’ll throw me out? Not a problem, I can assure you. While your wedding may have been nauseatingly romantic, at least the food was tolerable.”

“Thanks, I think.” She frowned. “What, exactly, is my godson planning?”

“Try not to worry. You wouldn’t be able to do a thing about it.” He got in her face and was practically salivating as he asked, “Now, tell me, what are your plans now?”

“I have no idea.”

“Don’t you, Kathy?” His eyes widened and he was gone with a flash.

Chakotay walked up, no longer holding Scott, and asked, “So, he was Q? I just saw the flash.”

“Two visitors in a row,” she said with a sigh. “One was our Q and the other was from 29th century temporal review board.”

“Oh?” He held her elbows. “New orders?”

“No,” she said with a relieved chuckle. “Just an affirmation of a job well done.”

“Really?”

“Really.” With a deep sigh, she wrapped her arms around Chakotay and hugged him tightly. “The future is ours and it feels really, really good.”

Epilogue

TFIO Timeline:

2378 – Voyager travels through a transwarp conduit and returns to Earth; Miral Kathryn Paris is born
2379 – Kathryn Janeway is promoted to Vice-Admiral, Chakotay is promoted to Captain
2380 – Chakotay and Kathryn Janeway are married, and their son, Scott Katowa Janeway is born
2381 – The Romulan Empire and The United Federation of Planets sign the Regulus Accord under the direction of Captain Will Riker and Praetor Rabom; Tina Richards, daughter of Mike and Phoebe Richards is born.
2382 – Eric Paris, son of B’Elanna Torres and Tom Paris is born
2383 – Harry Kim and Amy Murphy are married
2384 – Melissa Kim is born to Harry and Amy Kim; Annika Hansen and Dr. Joe Zimmerman make a formal commitment to enjoy each other’s company.
2385 – Phoebe Richards gives birth to Chakotay and Kathryn’s daughter, Maya Kes Janeway; and the Romulan/Vulcan peace accord is signed under the direction of Captain Tuvok, Admiral Janeway, and Praetor Rabom
2387 – Kathryn Janeway is promoted to full Admiral and appointed Chief of Staff, Starfleet Operations
2389 – Chakotay is promoted to Rear Admiral and is appointed as Supervisor of Curriculum at Starfleet Academy
2393 – Chakotay is appointed as Commandant of Starfleet Academy
2396 – Scott Janeway enters Starfleet Academy
2399 – Chakotay returns to teaching Advanced Tactics in order to support his wife’s political ambitions
2400 – Kathryn Janeway is elected President of the Federation; Scott Janeway enters Starfleet Medical School
2401 – Kathryn Janeway is inaugurated

It was late spring in the year 2401 when Federation President Janeway bade goodnight to her security detail and entered her Oregon home to find the wonderful scent of something spicy on the stove. It had been three days since she’d been home, and when she walked into the kitchen and saw her husband chopping vegetables, he was a sight for sore eyes.

He gave her a kiss on the cheek and tucked a few loose strands of her beautiful white hair behind her ear. “Hello, my love. Feel like a little jambalaya tonight?”

She rubbed circles on his back while looking into the large pot. “Smells delicious. Thank you for cooking.”

“Well, I’m sure not letting you near the kitchen.” He winked, their joke as comfortable as old sneakers. “How did the sessions go today?”

“They were good, actually,” she mused. “After you and I spoke this morning, Representative M’Ness came up with a proposal that most everyone agreed on.”

“Do you have to go back to Paris next week?”

“No, my meetings are scheduled in San Francisco. I think the Council is getting used to the idea of me not living in Paris. They’re more accepting of having afternoon and evening meetings.”

“Sue sent word that you’ll be traveling the week after, so if you have time, I think we should catch up with some of the Voyagers. They’re anxious to see you.”

Kathryn smiled. “I’d like that. Are Joe and Annika on Earth? I haven’t seen them in awhile.”

“Jupiter Station, but they’d come back to see you.” He finished what he was doing, wiped his hands off, and pulled her into his arms. “I missed you, too.”

Wrapping her arms around his neck, she said, “Have I told you today that I love you?”

“Only once,” he smiled.

“Well, then, let me correct that before I get in trouble.”

“You’re in trouble, regardless.”

“Why’s that?” she asked with a laugh.

He licked his lips and winked. “Just because.”

She whispered against his lips, “I love you,” and then gave him a deep kiss.

Twenty-one year-old Scott came downstairs and joked, “Come on you two, can’t you do that somewhere else?”

They ended the kiss, smiling at each other. Chakotay answered, “We thought we were alone, son.”

Kathryn let go of Chakotay and joined Scott at the table. “How did the exam go?”

“It was a little rough, but I think I did all right. We’ll see when the scores come in.”

Chakotay said, “It’s good you inherited your mom’s scientific mind.” He said to Kathryn, “I tried to quiz him last night, and I was lost.”

“Surely the former Commandant of the Academy knows a little advanced biology?”

Scott answered, “He says that he didn’t have to know it to make sure the cadets did.”

She smirked at her husband’s lack of biological knowledge, loving him all the same.

More seriously, Scott said, “Mom, you might want to check on Maya. She’s really upset.”

“She is?” Kathryn glanced at Chakotay. “About what?”

Chakotay shrugged. “I didn’t realize she was. She was short with me when she got home, but that’s not unusual.”

Scott suggested, “Could be that you have no idea how to relate to teenage girls, Dad.” Looking at his mom, he explained, “She got in a big fight with Chad and they broke up.”

“What!?” Kathryn exclaimed. “But prom is this weekend!”

“Hence the reason she’s upset.”

Kathryn walked through the great room and said, “We may be awhile. Eat without us if you need to.” She went up the stairs and knocked on her daughter’s bedroom door. “Maya?”

“Come in,” Maya said from the other side.

Kathryn opened the door and smiled warmly, “Hey there, Scott said you were upset?”

Maya shrugged. “I’m over it.”

“Over it?” Kathryn leaned against the door jamb, watching her daughter type at the computer terminal on her desk.

“Yea. Chad and I had a fight. It’s over. His loss.”

Kathryn nodded slowly. “Definitely his loss, but do you want to talk about it?”

“No,” Maya said, without making eye contact. “It’s not important.”

Kathryn could tell she was putting on a brave face. She picked up a hairbrush off the dresser and stepped behind her daughter to brush out her long, black hair. “I’m sorry that I wasn’t here for you the last few nights.”

“It just happened today. We were fine even last night – I talked to him for over an hour.”

“So, why the sudden change? What did you fight about?”

“Nothing,” Maya shrugged and then put on a smile for her mom. “How was your trip? Make any monumental decisions this week?”

Kathryn looked at her daughter’s reflection in the mirror and gathered the hair into a ponytail to braid it. “We had a lot of security briefings and made some headway on a terra-forming policy. Not very interesting, but they had to be done. The only thing exciting was that the representative from Talgia lost his wig.”

Maya handed her mom a hair band to secure the braid. “Is that the species with the white hair?”

“No, that one’s from Andoria. This one’s wig is green.”

Maya glanced over at her dark green prom dress and she took a deep breath. “Chad said he never liked green.”

“That’s what you fought over?”

“Not exactly.” Maya looked at her mom’s reflection again and jaw startled trembling. “I’m sorry, mom.”

“Sorry for what?” Kathryn leaned down and hugged Maya’s shoulders from behind.

“We went to all that trouble to go shopping for a dress, and now I’m not going to wear it.”

She kissed the side of Maya’s head and said, “You know what my favorite part of that day was?”

“Getting finished?” she asked with a sniff.

“No,” she said with an understanding smile. “It was spending time with you. That’s not something I get to do as often as I’d like.”

“You know what I’d like?”

“What’s that?”

“This summer, if you go out in space, could I travel with you?”

Kathryn chuckled and said, “I’d like that. Maybe Dad will come, too.”

“And I *know* he’d like that.”

“Yes, he would. We’ve also been talking about living in Paris for a month, if you’re interested.”

“Really? Think we could go shopping?”

“Maybe.” Kathryn sat down on the bed and scooted back until she was supported by the wall. Patting the seat next to her, she said, “This looks like a comfortable spot.”

“You always say that,” Maya replied, pretending to be annoyed as she wiggled back until she was against the wall, too.

Holding her daughter against her side, Kathryn asked, “Why break with tradition?”

After a moment of quiet, Maya admitted, “I don’t want you to make you feel bad.”

“About the dress?”

“No, about why I broke up with Chad. We fought about you.”

“Me? Did I do something wrong?” Kathryn asked with surprise.

“Yeah, you became the President of the Federation and Chad’s dad thinks you’re a fake.” She scowled. “I’m so mad at him, I could throw something!”

“Ah…” Kathryn sighed. “He made you choose between respecting me and respecting him.”

She opened her hands wide. “How could he even ask that of me?”

“Even in this day and age, there are some men who are intimidated by powerful women. I’m just sorry to hear that Chad might be one of them. Does he share his father’s opinion about my legitimacy?”

“Yes,” Maya sighed. “I didn’t realize that he was so stupid.”

“Well, I hope that he can form his own opinions at some point in his life, because it seems to me that he’s easily swayed. When he had dinner here last week, he seemed rather interested in hearing all about what I’m doing.”

“A little too interested, if you ask me. I think he went home and told his Dad everything you said.”

“I didn’t say anything controversial.”

“No, but for a dipwad, it was enough.” Maya looked dejected. “I just can’t believe there’s anyone who doesn’t think having you as the President is the coolest thing ever.”

Kathryn kissed the top of Maya’s head. “I appreciate your confidence in me, but there are a lot of people who think I shouldn’t have traded in my pips for politics. Although during the two decades that I was an Admiral, I heard the exact opposite.”

“Then they’re all dipwads.”

“They’re entitled to their opinions.”

Petulantly, Maya said, “Well, their opinion is wrong.”

Biting back a smile, Kathryn asked, “Why did this come up today?”

“History class,” Maya said with a groan.

“But you love history.”

“Yeah, but we’re nearing the end of the semester, so history has turned into current events. All week, Mr. Hardesty has been talking about the Cardassians and the Dominion War, and it was bad enough that he went on and on about the Maquis and reminding everyone that my Dad had a lot to do with that.”

“What does that have to do with me?”

She sighed. “Our homework last night was to bring in notable news articles from the last twenty-five years. *Everyone* else except me and Chad brought in something about you.”

Kathryn tried not to smile. “They do have my daughter in their class. It’s possible they feel a connection.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

She waited a moment to see if Maya would say more, but then offered, “You and Chad must have talked about that if you both chose something that I wasn’t involved in?”

“Well, I didn’t want people to think I was bragging on my mom. After everyone went on and on about you, he told the class that you didn’t single-handedly save the Federation.”

“I didn’t.”

“I know that, and so does everyone else, but he didn’t have to be so rude about it.”

“No, I supposed not. Which article did you take?”

“One about Admiral Riker when he was first promoted to captain – the Regulus Accord with the Romulans.” She continued to explain, “I mean, the Romulan Empire and the Federation had been enemies for centuries! That has got to be the most amazing thing and Will...” Maya laid her head back and sighed. “The articles I found... he’s just so dreamy.”

She frowned. “He’s sixty-six, a year older than I am, and I even went on a date with him while we were at the Academy.”

“You did?” Maya gasped. “Oh, wow. Do you think you could introduce me to him, sometime?”

“You’ve already met him,” Kathryn said with a laugh. “He was at the ball.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure.” Kathryn scooted off the bed and picked up the computer. She pulled up his picture as she returned to her daughter’s side. “Recognize him?”

“Eww! He looks ancient in that image!”

“Hey now,” she admonished playfully. “If you’d really like to meet him, we’ll invite the Rikers over for dinner sometime. I’ll just have to warn Deanna that my daughter is infatuated with her husband.”

“Mom! Don’t you dare! She’d tell him!”

Holding her hands up in surrender, Kathryn said, “All right. Maybe we ask him over to see if he’ll sponsor you for the Academy.”

“No, mom. I already told you I’m not going.”

“But Maya…”

“No!”

“Would you let me finish?”

“Fine,” she sat back and crossed her arms.

“You don’t have to have a career in Starfleet just because you go to the Academy.”

“Yeah, but if I don’t, people would think I’m a drop out. You know I want to go into journalism.”

“A reporter,” Kathryn said with a sigh.

“No, a writer.”

“But you’re the daughter of the Federation President and the former Commandant of the Academy.”

“Yeah, and so I have a lot to write about. People will think I have an inside scoop.”

“It’s not like you’d have access to top secret information.”

“No, but you could tell me things.”

“No,” she said strongly. “I couldn’t tell you any more than I could tell any other civilian reporter.”

“Writer, Mom. You could introduce me to people, and my name is famous.”

Kathryn rubbed her face as she looked at her daughter with the bittersweet realization that she was growing up. With understanding, she asked, “You really want to do this?”

“I really do. I know it won’t be easy, but it’s not like I could ever live up to your name as a Starfleet officer anyway. I need to do something different.”

After a long moment’s pause, Kathryn finally said, “All right. Then let’s make you the very best writer you can be.”

“Really?!” Maya jumped to her knees and threw her arms around her mom’s neck.

“Really.” Kathryn relished the feel of her daughter’s hug.

“I love you!”

“I love you, too, sweetie.” Fingering her long braid, she asked, “Are you going to be okay about the prom?”

She pulled back and shrugged. “I’ll be fine. It’s not like I haven’t been to a formal dance before.”

“I know, but those have been with me.” Cupping Maya’s cheek, she said, “This is your junior prom.”

“All the security would be a pain anyway.”

Kathryn sighed, hating that her job limited her daughter’s social life. “I know, but it’s necessary.”

“I know, mom. And really, it’ll be okay if I don’t go. We could spend the evening together, and there’s always next year.”

“Maybe you could tag along with friends. I bet Jeannie would love to have you along.”

“The last thing I want is to be a third nacelle.”

“All right,” she said as she hugged her daughter again. “Feel like eating? Dad made jambalaya.”

“Sure,” Maya stood up and Kathryn followed. Before they left the room, Maya turned and pulled her mom into a bear hug. “Thanks for... well, for being a great mom.”

“You’re welcome.”

“After all, you’ve not only great to shop with, you’re also the President of the Federation – and that is beyond awesome.”

Kathryn laughed as they walked downstairs. “Some days, maybe.”

Chakotay looked up and smiled at his wife and daughter. “How are the two most beautiful women in my world?”

Maya walked up and hugged him. “I’m sorry I was a bear when I came home.”

“It’s all right, angel. Are you feeling better now?”

She shrugged and said, “I guess. I broke up with Chad.”

“I heard,” he said sympathetically. “I’m sure that’s heart-breaking.”

“Not really – he’s an idiot.” She lifted a cloth that was draped over a basket. “You made your famous cornbread?”

“With extra honey, just like you like it.” He kissed his daughter’s forehead and asked, “Would you help me put the food on the table?”

“Sure.”

After they started eating, Kathryn announced, “Maya has decided to pursue a writing career.”

Chakotay’s fork froze mid-way to his mouth. He set it back down and looked at his daughter. “You want to be a reporter?”

“No,” Maya said. “A writer. I could write editorials, in-depth stories, books...”

He glanced at his wife and said, “I see.”

Kathryn said, “And since she only has one more year of high-school left, we should start looking into universities with a track-record for developing *distinguished* authors. If she’s going to do this, we should help her get the credentials to go with her name.”

Chakotay caught on to Kathryn’s hint. “Maya, would you like me to help you do some research on schools?”

“Would you?” she asked with barely concealed joy.

“I’d love to. We should find a school that will focus on developing you, not exploiting you.”

“Why would they do that?”

Scott ruffled his sister's hair, "Because you're famous, My. I think you should look at one of the Ivy League schools."

Chakotay nodded. "That's where I was going to suggest starting."

Maya shrugged. "Just so it's not Starfleet Academy."

"Speaking of the academy," Scott said. "Next week, I'm being tested on the basic functions of the new generations of medical tri-corders. Can I practice on all of you this weekend?"

"Sure," Chakotay replied. "You'll have fun trying to make heads or tails of your mom's readings."

"Why's that?"

Kathryn looked at her husband and it dawned on her that they'd never told their children about her heart. "Maybe you should just practice on your Dad and sister."

Scott set down his fork and stared at his mom. "Now you've got me curious. May I take a look?"

Glaring at her husband, she replied, "I could have avoided him all weekend, you know."

"He's in medical school, my love. No time like the present."

Kathryn sighed and nodded towards her son. "Go ahead."

Scott wasted no time in getting the tri-corder out of his satchel, sitting down next to his mom, and turning it on.

While he was scanning, Kathryn said, "You may not discuss these readings with your professor."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm entrusting you with doctor/patient confidentiality. If you want to study my scans further, you may talk to Dr. Zimmerman, Dr. Picard, or Dr. Pulaski."

Maya asked, "Is something wrong with you, mom?"

"Not anymore." She looked at Scott and asked, "What do you see?"

A little frustrated, he said, "Dad was right. I can't make it out."

Chakotay suggested, "If I remember correctly, you need to change your settings to detect omicron waves, and that'll give you her heart rate."

“Omicron waves?” he asked as he made the change. “But that’s how you measure the energy output of energy circuits.”

Kathryn nodded. “Bio-neural circuitry, to be exact.”

The tri-corder started emitting the beeps consistent with heart rate. Scott set it down and asked, “What does this mean? You’ve got some kind of artificial circuitry?”

“That’s exactly what it means. My heart.”

“What?” Scott asked. “You’ve had a transplant and you didn’t tell us?”

“It was before you were born,” she said as an excuse. “Although, I had a pancreatic transplant a week after you were born. Since you were only a week old, we didn’t think to tell you about it.”

Scott looked at his mother with deep concern. “Mom? What happened?”

Chakotay reached across the table and squeezed Kathryn’s hand and she rubbed his fingers in response.

Kathryn asked, “You know that I was abducted for a few weeks about a year after Voyager got home, and that I got very sick during my incarceration?”

“Yeah,” Maya nodded.

She continued, “What is not public knowledge is that the doctors had to replace the organ to save my life.”

Scott said, “When Dr. Picard gave the opening speech to all the new students, she suggested that we think about an area to specialize in. I think you’ve just told me what that needs to be.”

“Cardiology?”

He shook his head. “Whatever the field is that develops and maintains artificial organs.”

Kathryn pulled her son into a hug. “I love you, Scott, but you choose whatever interests you, not what you think I need.”

“Well,” he said with a crack in his voice. “I’d have to say that pro-longing your life definitely interests me.”

She held his face between her hands and kissed his forehead. Smiling with watery eyes, she replied, “Trust me when I say that my health is just fine. Joe and Beverly have made sure of that over the years.”

“You said I can talk to her about it?”

“Yes, you can.”

“I don’t think I’d be over-stepping my bounds by talking to the head of Starfleet Medical, would I? Especially since she has reminded me numerous times that she used to change my diapers.”

Kathryn laughed. “I’m sure she’d love to talk to you. I’ll give her a call later and let her know that you can have access to some of my medical records.”

“Thank you.” He looked at his dad and asked, “Has there ever been a time when you haven’t been worried sick about mom?”

Chakotay shared a loving look with his wife. “Not to worry, Scott, she’s the strongest, most capable woman I’ve ever met.”

Kathryn winked at him in return.

The civilian comm unit signaled an incoming call and Scott said, “I’ll, uh, get that... before I have to watch you two kiss at the dinner table.”

Maya said, “That better not be Chad.”

Chakotay asked, “What would you tell him if it were?”

“That he can go suck eggs on Vulcan, for all I care.”

Scott returned. “Maya, it’s Eric Paris for you.”

“Eric?” she asked, a little shocked. She quickly undid her braid and fluffed up her hair. “What do you think he wants?”

“To talk to you, I would presume,” Kathryn noted.

Maya took a deep breath and went into the study to take the call.

Kathryn looked at Chakotay and Scott to determine which of them had called Eric, and she decided that they both looked guilty. “What did you do?”

The men shrugged, not saying anything. Eric Paris had escorted Maya to Kathryn’s inauguration ball a couple months before, and although he was two and a half years older than Maya, they’d been good friends for a long time. During the past year, that friendship had taken on an entirely different tone.

Narrowing her eyes at her husband, she said, “You know, it’s highly possible that your daughter may really date the son of Tom Paris some day.”

His eyes widened with amusement. “Then I guess it’s a good thing you didn’t accept Lanna’s offer to be a surrogate.”

Scott mused, “I wonder if that would’ve made them brother and sister.”

“I don’t know, but it’d get pretty complicated,” Kathryn replied.

“Mom?” Scott asked.

“Yes?”

“Were your transplants the reason you needed Aunt Phoebe to carry Maya?”

She shook her head. “There was more to my health problems. We can talk about it in more depth before you talk to Beverly.”

“You said your pancreatic transplant was when I was a week old?”

“That’s right.”

“Did your pregnancy with me cause the problem?”

“No,” she said as she squeezed Scott’s hand. “But it exacerbated it.”

Maya returned and sat down nonchalantly. “Mom, if you’ve cancelled security for Saturday night, you can tell them it’s back on.”

“Oh, will Eric be going with you?”

“I informed him that I didn’t need rescuing,” she insisted.

“Of course not,” Chakotay replied.

“But I told him that if he really wanted to attend a high school function, I’d let him go with me.”

Scott shrugged. “I remember that he didn’t get to go to his own prom because his parents were testing a new engine design in deep space. Maybe he thinks he can relive his youth through you.”

Kathryn mouthed, “Thank you,” over her coffee cup to Chakotay. He winked in return.

Commander Mark Yosa came into the Janeway home and told Chakotay, “Young Mr. Paris is standing by for transport as soon as Maya is ready.”

“I hope he remembered her wrist corsage.”

Mark smiled. “I doubt B’Elanna would let him forget.”

“You’re probably right.”

Maya appeared in her dark green dress at the top of the stairs, looking more beautiful than Chakotay had ever seen her, and definitely far beyond her years in the strapless gown. Her hair was pinned up with soft wisps framing her delicate face, reminding him of her mother on their wedding day. His heart yearned to hold his baby girl, but she was becoming a woman right before his eyes. As she gracefully stepped down the stairs, Chakotay was speechless.

Once at the bottom, Kathryn followed and said to Maya, “I think your father is mesmerized.”

“What?” Chakotay asked, suddenly aware that she was talking to him. When he looked at his wife, his heart melted again, seeing her bright smile.

Kathryn nodded towards their daughter, and prompted, “How does Maya look?”

“Beautiful,” he said in awe. “I’m taken aback, really. Eric won’t be able to look at anyone else.”

“I hope not,” Maya said with a giggle that told Chakotay his little girl was still in there somewhere.

Kathryn held up the slightly iridescent jacket that accompanied the gown and said, “I cut off the dangling threads.”

Chakotay asked, “There’s more to the dress?”

“Of course,” Kathryn replied.

“That’s a relief,” he said, blowing out a breath.

Maya said, “I don’t think I’ll wear it.”

Kathryn asked, “What do you mean?”

“I mean what I said. I like the dress better without.”

Scott came in and whistled at his sister. “Wow, that’s...” He shook his head. “That’s quite a dress.”

“This is not an option, Maya,” Kathryn stated. “I wouldn’t have let you select this dress if not for the jacket.”

“Daddy said I looked beautiful. He doesn’t care.”

“Oh, I care all right, angel. The last thing I want to do is make you feel insecure about your appearance, so I let your mom handle decisions regarding modesty.”

“It’s not her decision to make.”

“Excuse me, young lady,” Kathryn said, her hands on her hips. “If you want people to respect you for your intelligence, then you need not show off your female assets.”

Scott asked, “You don’t think Eric will notice your assets under that little jacket? He’s a guy.”

“Scott!!!!” Maya yelled.

Both parents glared at their son and Chakotay said, “That’s not appropriate.”

“Sorry, but I’m just saying that she doesn’t need to impress him.” He spoke to his sister, “My, you just need to get a few years older – he adores you whether you’re wearing some fancy dress or just a pair of grungy old sweats.”

Maya explained, “Eric is part Klingon, and Klingon women...” She pointed to her bare shoulders, “...show themselves off.”

Chakotay stepped in. “That may be, but as the daughter of the Federation President, you’ll get a lot of publicity. Trust me when I say that you want the Federation talking about how beautiful you are, not how risqué your dress is.”

“Dad!” she yelled, her mouth open. “You said I looked beautiful! Now you’re calling me trashy????”

“I’m not saying that, but reporters will.”

Looking dejected, she said, “Sometimes I wish you two weren’t so famous.”

Kathryn nodded. “I know, but then you wouldn’t have the inside scoop when you’re a writer.”

With a dramatic sigh, Maya said, “Fine. I’ll wear the stupid jacket.”

“Thank you.” Kathryn helped her into the jacket and straightened the sleeves. “Keep in mind that there are a lot of young ladies in your class who want to be just like you. If you’re poised and graceful, that is also what they’ll strive to be.”

She rolled her eyes. “Maybe I want to be like them and stay out all night and get really smashed.”

Kathryn pursed her lips and glared at her daughter. “Chakotay, call the Paris’s and tell Eric no thank you.”

“Moouoom!!!!”

“If that’s your plan, we’re going to intervene right now.”

“I was jo-king! How can I possibly do that with all your security goons following me around?”

Mark Yosa cleared his throat.

Kathryn said, “Listen to me, young lady. Mark and his security team continually put their lives on the line to protect ours. You will treat them with respect.”

Maya’s chin dipped and she said, “Sorry, Mark.”

“It’s all right, Maya,” he replied.

After a moment of quiet, Kathryn relaxed and took Maya’s hands. “It’s just because we care about you.”

Maya nodded but didn’t say anything.

She squeezed her daughter’s fingers. “Public opinion is a tool that we can use to change the galaxy because when people respect us, they listen. As a writer with famous parents, you will have an incredibly powerful conduit for getting your message out there, because people are going to seek out your articles and your books. My advice is to not let any careless behavior in your youth impact people’s opinion of you.”

Chakotay added, “People flock to self-assured, graceful women. Be confident about who you are, and don’t try to become what you think other people want you to be. As Scott said, Eric doesn’t need to see your bare shoulders to find you beautiful.”

Maya looked at both of her parents and then at Scott. “Their lectures are killer, aren’t they?”

“Don’t you know it,” he replied. As if telling a secret, he loudly whispered, “They think it makes us better people.”

Chakotay playfully elbowed his son. “You’re already fantastic people. Lectures just allow us to grace you with our years and years and years of wisdom.”

Maya took a shaky breath and sadly held out her arms. “I’m sorry, mom.”

Kathryn pulled her into a hug and held on tight. “I love you, Maya”

She sniffed. “I think I’d better wear this dumb jacket for a week.”

Pulling back, Kathryn laughed. She tenderly held Maya's chin as she said, "Now, don't cry or we'll have to start over with your make-up."

Mark cleared his throat. "Are you ready for Mr. Paris?"

Maya took a deep breath and smoothed out her dress. Looking at her dad, she asked, "Do I really look beautiful?"

"I haven't seen a woman look more beautiful since the day I married your mother. Now, have fun and don't cause too much trouble for Mark."

Maya hugged her dad and said, "Thank you."

Kathryn nodded to Mark, and less than a minute later, Eric rang the doorbell. Everyone stood back as Chakotay answered the door.

"Good evening, Eric," he said as he welcomed the young man inside. "You're looking very handsome tonight."

"Thank you, sir." Eric looked directly at Maya and his mouth opened slightly in surprise. He caught himself and then blushed a little, his faint Klingon ridges growing just a shade darker. "Maya, you look so... well, so great."

"Thank you, Eric," she said as she confidently walked over to him. "I hope you didn't mind waiting. We had a minor problem with my dress."

"Of course not." He looked at her gown. "Whatever the problem was, I'm glad you fixed it, because it's very nice." Touching her arm, he said, "I like the little sparkles on your jacket."

Chakotay and Kathryn shared a look, but did not say anything.

Scott cleared his throat and said, "I think that corsage will match it nicely."

"Oh," Eric said quickly as he opened the clear box. "My mother suggested I bring this, but I wasn't sure what kind to pick out."

"Thank you, it's perfect."

"I chose one of the smallest ones because I thought it wouldn't get in the way. We have a lot of dancing to do tonight."

Maya chuckled as her mom helped her put the flower on her wrist. "I hope you wore comfortable shoes."

"Don't you worry. We're going to show that dipwad Chad just how much fun you can have without him. Personally, I'm glad you dumped him."

“Why’s that?”

“Because now I get to take you.” He turned to Chakotay and asked, “Sir, I know that she’s only sixteen, but may I have your permission to ask her on another date?”

Chakotay looked at his daughter who was barely containing her excitement and he couldn’t help but say, “I trust you, Eric. As long as you keep it casual, and if its what Maya wants, then yes, you may.”

Eric was grinning as he replied, “Can’t help but keep it casual with security watching us.”

Mark said, “Just pretend we’re not here. Our eyes are usually on everyone else.”

When Eric turned back to Maya, she was cool and laid-back. “Yeah, I kind of think it’d be fun to hang out with you a little more often.”

“Great!” He took her hand and said to Kathryn, “I’ll have her home at a reasonable hour, Madame President. I promise.”

She shook her head in amusement at Eric’s use of her title. “I’m not worried. As long as you’re sober and give Mark advance notice of your movements, you have my permission to stay as long as you like.”

Maya asked, “Really? Some of my friends have reserved a hotel room so they can stay out all night. They’re going to have breakfast at the hotel.”

Kathryn looked at Mark. “Find out what hotel, secure the room, and stay with her.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Eric and Maya said, “Thank you,” and walked out to the porch.

Mark stayed back and asked discretely, “If they start kissing, should I interrupt?”

Chakotay coughed and said, “Yes!”

Kathryn gave him a look and then told Mark, “No. Be as incognito as possible.” She quickly added, “But if that damn jacket comes off, you have permission to park yourself right between them.”

Mark laughed and said, “Good night, Madame President, Admiral.”

Once they were gone, Kathryn turned to her husband and son. “Was I out of line?”

Scott said, “You just gave her permission to stay out all night, albeit with a security chaperone.”

Chakotay added, “She needs parameters, love. You did fine.”

Shaking her head at Scott, she said, “Well, you seemed to have turned out all right, so we can’t be totally off base as parents.”

“We’re resilient, mom.” He gave her a quick hug and said, “If it’s all right with you, I’m going to give Jennifer a call and see if she’d like to go out with our own security chaperone.”

“Why wouldn’t that be all right?”

“Well,” he shrugged. “I don’t want you two getting all sad that both of your babies are growing up too fast.”

“You’re funny,” she said as she shooed him along. “Really, I’m just thinking about how we’re going to get the house to ourselves.”

Chakotay joked, “We could kiss in any room we want.”

“Scott’s room has a nice view of the ocean,” she mused.

He rolled his eyes and said, “Mom, Dad, I *really* don’t need that image in my head when I’m about to call my girlfriend.”

Kathryn winked. “Tell Jennifer we said hello.”

Thirty minutes later, Chakotay joined Kathryn out on the deck with a bottle of wine and two glasses. “Thirsty?”

She turned from where she was watching the tide roll in. “Is that the new Picard Riesling?”

“If you mean to say that a ten year old wine is new, then yes. We are quite tardy in giving him an opinion.”

“It’s only been a month.”

The cork came out with a resounding pop and then he poured a little in each glass. “It sure smells good.”

She took her glass and sipped the crisp wine, clicking her tongue in response. “That’s... really dry for a Riesling.”

“It’s supposed to be.” He leaned against the railing next to her and looked down below. “I’ll never get tired of this view.”

“As beautiful as the Presidential Mansion is, I much prefer it here.”

He nudged her playfully. “It’s because I’m here, isn’t it?”

“Of course,” she said with a wink. “Actually, I wanted to talk to you about that.”

“Oh?”

“An idea came to me in the bath today.” She glanced at him and asked, “If we could talk Maya into attending The Sorbonne in Paris, would you be interested in teaching at the Marseilles campus for a little while?”

“I could do that, regardless of where she decides to go to school. If they don’t want to offer tactics there, perhaps there’s an administrative position I could take.”

“You’d do that for me?”

“Of course. I’d do anything for you, especially if it means seeing you more often.”

She caressed his arm. “Thank you. As for Maya, I’d feel better about her security if she lived with us. Living on the Academy campus next to Headquarters is one thing, but a civilian university? I would worry about her.”

“True, the safeties just aren’t in place. If not The Sorbonne, there are several on the British Isles that we could encourage her to look into – Oxford, King’s College, Trinity in Dublin.”

Kathryn nodded. “Could we explore the possibility of temporarily relocating in a year?”

“Yes, we can.”

She looked up at their home and said, “I want to keep this house, though. I’m guessing that the Council is tolerant of my desire to live at home because I’m new and because they were eager to have me in office, but there may come a time when I need to be in Paris more often than not.”

“We’ll make it work, love. Don’t worry.”

“I know,” she said as she leaned into him. “I just don’t want to be away from my family.”

He put his arm around her and kissed the top of her head. “Your family likes having you around, too.”

“I wonder when it’s going to hit me that I’m the President of the Federation.”

Chuckling, he asked, “It hasn’t yet? You’ve been at it for four months.”

“When Eric called me ‘madame president,’ it surprised me. I keep expecting to hear ‘admiral.’”

“Do you regret retiring?”

“Yes and no. I think I left Starfleet in good hands, but I don’t like not being a part of the organization, officially.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that. You are very much a part of it, and always will be. If anything, your critics think you’re too much a part of Starfleet to hold the office of President.”

She was quiet for a few minutes, enjoying the warmth of his arm around her. Thinking about her former career, she said, “I really like the idea of a small Voyager get-together next week. I think it would lift my spirits.”

With concern, Chakotay rubbed her arm and asked, “Your spirits need lifting?”

“Maybe a little. It’s hard not to get discouraged in the midst of politics and cynicism. I think I’m actually looking forward to heading out in space week after next – not that I want to be away from you.”

“I didn’t think that at all.”

Nuzzling against his neck, she continued, “It’ll be good to visit with some other leaders about real concerns instead of listening to the squabbling between my cabinet members over my schedule and their budgets.”

“Can’t you just tell them to work it out?”

“Sounds like something I could say to Starfleet officers, but I don’t know that it would work with this group.”

“I don’t see any reason why it wouldn’t. You’ve never tolerated petty bickering, and your time is more valuable than that.”

Kathryn nodded slowly. “You make a good point.”

The clock inside their house chimed the hour, making her think about her daughter. “Was I wrong to let Maya stay out all night?”

“If she were with Chad, I’d have reservations. I got the impression that he was just interested in the status of dating her, and would think it quite the achievement to get into her pants.”

Kathryn grimaced. “Now I’m even more glad that she dumped him.”

“Not only is Mark and his team with her, but Eric is a second year academy cadet. He’ll keep her safe.”

Looking at her husband, she asked, “Do you think she and Chad ever kissed?”

“I don’t know. I assume they did.”

“Hmm, she never mentioned it. I think it would be nice if Eric were the first boy she kissed – he’s a good kid.”

“Yes, he is. And who knows, maybe she and Eric kissed years ago.”

“Not a *real* kiss.”

A low rumble came from within Chakotay’s broad chest. “And what, Madame President, constitutes a *real* kiss?”

“Have you forgotten? I explained it to you in great detail over twenty years ago.”

He set both of their glasses down on a nearby table and returned to take her into his arms. “If I remember correctly, we need the proper placement of our bodies.”

“Extremely important,” she said as she pressed against him and threaded her fingers up into his peppery hair. “Without that, it wouldn’t do.”

“Not at all.” He pressed her body against the deck railing while his fingers caressed her face. “And I believe you prefer an open mouthed kiss? Correct?”

She smirked, “As if you don’t know.”

“Come here,” he whispered as he brought them together.

As soon as the warmth of his lips touched hers, Kathryn instantly melted into his touch. The firm tenderness of his mouth was her undoing as he gently persuaded her to open for him, the flavor of him bursting across her senses. His hands moved to support her head and her shoulders, holding onto her as she pressed further into him.

When his tongue slowly swept across her lips, she whimpered with arousal, feeling soft and pliant as he deepened the kiss by thrusting into her mouth. A gush of warmth settled low in her belly as she matched his passion in a duel of wet heat, two powerful souls merging in an expression of love.

He teased and stirred her higher and higher with only the possessiveness of his kiss and the strength of his hold on her soft body. Kathryn found herself overflowing with desire and pulled her lips away long enough to say, “I need you to make love to me. Now.”

“Out here?” he asked between kisses along the underside of her jaw.

“What if Scott comes back?”

He offered, “I could always strip you naked and take you on the upper deck.”

Moaning as he kissed the side of her neck, she asked, “What makes you think the President of the Federation would allow that?”

Hotly, he whispered into her ear, “Because I have intimate knowledge about the President, and I know that I can make her do just about anything I want by turning her into a puddle of desire.”

“I’d like to see you try,” she breathed huskily.

Chuckling, he took her hand and led her inside, picking up the wine and glasses on the way. “Right this way, madame.”

As soon as Kathryn walked into Tom and B’Elanna’s house, she heard what sounded like an old-fashioned marching band. As she came into the living room, she had to laugh as her former senior staff were all standing at attention.

Over the music, she said, “At ease, people.”

They all smiled and Chakotay came over to give her a quick kiss. “They’ve been planning that for a week.”

When Tom turned down the stereo, he asked, “Recognize that song?”

“No,” she said slowly as she hugged B’Elanna. “Should I?”

B’Elanna told her, “Something my nostalgic husband found in the database.”

Harry announced, “It’s ‘Hail to the Chief,’ the song that used to be played every time the United States President walked into the room.”

Kathryn nearly burst with happiness at seeing him. “Harry! I didn’t know you’d be here!”

“Only for a couple of days.” He drew her into his arms for a bear hug. “But I did come back ahead of schedule when Tom told me about this get-together. It’s so good to see you, Kathryn.”

She cupped his cheek and proudly said, “Wonderful to see you, too, Captain.”

“Captain?” he laughed. “Are we going by ranks now, Madame President?”

“I’m just thrilled that you got your own ship. I take it you got my gift?”

“Yes, I did.” Grinning, he asked, “But a battered old coffee cup?”

“You didn’t recognize it?” she asked with surprise.

He frowned and shook his head. “Where did it come from?”

Chakotay cleared his throat and explained, “That was her ‘lucky’ coffee cup from Voyager. She rarely drank out of anything else.”

Harry’s mouth dropped open. “Really?”

Kathryn smiled brightly and nodded. “I thought it a good luck charm. You’re the first member of Voyager’s crew to have your own ship.”

Tom interrupted, “Hey now, I was captain of a ship for a little while.”

B’Elanna elbowed him. “A three-week tour as captain of a prototype model doesn’t count.”

Kathryn looked past Harry to see his wife, and took her hand between both of her own. “And how are you doing as CMO, Amy?”

“Doing just fine. After all these years working with Dr. Picard and Dr. Sanders, I think I was more than ready to have my own sickbay.”

Joe commented, “It’s nice to be able to put the hyposprays right where you want them, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” she laughed. “It sure is.”

Kathryn took Joe’s and Annika’s hands and smiled at both of them. “How are you two? It’s been ages.”

Annika looked pleased as she noted, “Four-hundred and seventy days, to be precise.”

Laughing, Kathryn said, “Leave it to you to be so precise.”

“You would be worried if I was anything, but.”

“Very true.” She looked between them and asked, “I keep wondering if you two are going to ask me to do a wedding for you someday. Any plans to formalize this?”

Joe noted, “Why change it when what we have works out so nicely?”

“Our relationship doesn’t need documentation to be considered established,” Annika added.

“No, I suppose not.” Kathryn smiled at them and chuckled. “I must say that I was surprised twenty years ago when I heard you two were dating, but I’m thrilled that you are still together.”

Joe replied, "When one finds perfection in a mate, one does not look elsewhere."

"You are absolutely right," Kathryn said as she looked at her husband. "Although in some cases, it may take a little while to figure it out."

Tuvok stepped forward and said, "From the moment you and Chakotay beamed over to the Caretaker's array, one only needed to watch the two of you together to know that harmony had found a home."

Kathryn opened her arms and hugged him. "My dear, old friend. How are you?"

He allowed the hug and replied, "I am doing well."

"And T'Pel?" she asked as she held him at arm's length.

"She is fully enjoying her role as great-grandmother, and she asked me to give you her regards. T'Pel has much respect for you."

"Thank you, Tuvok. Would you give her my regards as well, and convey that I wish her happiness with little V'lara?"

"I most certainly will. She will be pleased."

Tom asked, "Don't I get a hug, Madame President?"

"Oh, you," she said with a laugh and gave him a very firm hug, rubbing his back firmly. "We need to have a conversation about your son, very soon."

"Chakotay has already talked to me about that, so you have nothing to worry about."

"I have plenty to worry about."

Harry asked, "Why? What's going on with Eric?"

Chakotay answered, "He's dating my daughter, that's what."

"But, isn't there a notable age difference?" Harry asked.

Tom held up his hands. "Hey, Eric says he asked Chakotay's permission."

Kathryn smiled and patted Tom's shoulder. "If there were any young man I'd trust with my daughter, it would be your son."

B'Elanna noted, "With the constant security chaperone, I really don't think it's an issue."

“They had fun at her prom, though,” Tom noted. “Although Eric said when Maya took off her shoes and jacket at the after party, Commander Yosa became a lot more noticeable.”

Kathryn laughed. “That’s funny. He didn’t tell me about that.”

“Well, everyone, come fix a plate,” B’Elanna announced. “Since our guest of honor was fashionably late, I’m afraid the food might’ve gotten cold.”

“Oh, Lanna, I’m sorry,” Kathryn said as she touched her chest. “I really tried to get away sooner.”

She waved away Kathryn’s concern. “Don’t be silly. We know perfectly well that your schedule is not your own.”

“Still, I’m sorry for the delay. Two of my cabinet members were pulling at me and I’d had enough.”

“Pulling at you?” Annika asked as they gathered in the kitchen.

“Demanding my attention. I gave them each ten minutes, which turned into about half an hour, total.”

“Only fifteen each?” Chakotay asked. “That’s not bad at all.”

Kathryn clicked her tongue. “You’re right about that.”

Tom handed Kathryn a full plate. “For you, Madame President.”

“Thank you, but you don’t need to wait on me.”

“Of course we do. You’re the President of the Federation.”

Rolling her eyes, she said, “Not tonight, I’m not.”

“Oh?” Joe asked. “Is that something you can take a night off from?”

“About as much as I could take a night off as captain of Voyager while we were in the Delta Quadrant.”

Tuvok said, “Let’s hope there won’t be any cause for a red alert tonight, then.”

“I’m with you on that one,” Kathryn said as she sat down to eat. “If the Federation were at red alert, it wouldn’t be a pleasant night for anyone.”

Harry asked, “Have you had any emergency situations while you’ve been in office?”

“Just one, but it was a false alarm. There was a report of a border skirmish in the beta quadrant, but it was just the Romulans doing a munitions test that they didn’t tell us about.”

“Well, I for one,” Tom noted as he sat down, “can’t imagine any of our recent presidents who could handle an emergency situation better than you.”

“I’ll second that,” Harry said.

Chakotay added, “Me, too. Even though the critics think she’s too ‘Starfleet’ for the job, I think the Federation is safer right now than it has been in a half century.”

Kathryn pointed a fork at her husband as she spoke, “I may be able to handle a border conflict just fine, but a room full of arguing politicians is another thing altogether. It’s enough to give me a migraine.”

Joe said, “Perhaps I should prescribe an analgesic for you, then.”

“Thank you. I’d take you up on that, but Beverly has me fully stocked.”

Harry bit his lip for a moment and finally said, “I knew this would happen someday, you know.”

Chakotay asked, “What would?”

“Kathryn as President. The citizens have been pushing her into it since ’79. She was just being stubborn.”

“I was not stubborn,” she insisted. “How could I possibly have run for office in ’80 when I’d just uncovered that huge mess?”

“Not to mention Scott’s birth,” Joe noted.

“That, too. It was an eventful year.”

Tom asked, “What about ’84 when Truov stepped down. Surely you would’ve been a better option than C’Sarin.”

“Phoebe was carrying Maya, and Tuvok and I were in the middle of negotiating the Romulan/Vulcan peace accord. Besides, C’Sarin did fine – he lasted for two terms.”

Tuvok said, “And in ’92?”

“Chakotay was about to become Commandant of the Academy and my children needed me. We couldn’t both have highly demanding jobs at the same time.”

B’Elanna chuckled. “Good thing Head of Starfleet Operations is a fluff job.”

Chakotay said, "It's not too demanding when things are going well, and you all know that she runs a tight ship."

Kathryn winked at her husband. "But my gracious husband agreed to step down when the council asked me to run this last time."

Harry asked, "Could any of you have imagined thirty years ago, that we'd be sitting here, having this conversation?"

"Annika, Joe?" Kathryn asked. "Do either of you have Voyager's ship logs from exactly thirty years ago today?"

"Yes," Annika replied. "A Romulan Astrophysicist named Telek Ramor transported from Voyager to the Alpha Quadrant through a temporal micro wormhole."

The room became silent and Kathryn set her fork down. "Wow," she said, taking a deep breath.

Tuvok noted, "I distinctly recall something you said that day, Madame President."

Smiling at his use of her title, Kathryn asked, "And what was that?"

"You said, 'We will get back.' It appears that you were prophetic."

Shaking her head, she said, "No, I was determined to keep hope alive when it felt like the bulkheads were closing in on me. I was trying to avoid thinking about how the deck plating had just gone out from under me."

"You never showed anything but determination, Kathryn," Harry pointed out.

She gave him an appreciative look. "Remember that as a new captain, would you? At the time, I was doing my best to try to play the part, be what the crew needed me to be."

Chakotay said, "My love, you're doing the same thing right now."

"Am I?" she asked with a bemused smile.

"Playing the part of the President, being what the Federation needs you to be."

"Perhaps," she said with a slow nod. "Maybe that's all life is – just one big part being played in a drama that is unfolding before us."

Tom said, "That may be, but I know for certain that the future we dreamed about thirty years ago did not in any way, have us sitting around with Kathryn as the Federation President."

"Oh? What would you have had me doing instead?"

“In your mid-sixties as captain of Voyager?”

She narrowed her eyes playfully, “Watch yourself, Mr. Paris.”

Smirking, he continued, “I think you’d be sitting around the messhall knitting baby blankets and rearing our replacement crew while the rest of us ran your ship.”

Everyone started laughing, unable to stop themselves, Kathryn included. She said, “Yeah, like I’d let all of you have the fun. I could just as easily knit from my command chair.”

Chakotay picked up Kathryn’s hand and kissed her fingers. “Look at you, now. The future has you knitting in the Presidential Mansion.”

“That it does.” She nodded. “That it does.”

The End

